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“Let Us Save China”: Gertrude Stein and Politics

GERTRUDE STEIN

INTRODUCTION BY BIRGIT
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Introduction

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT STEIN'S POLITICS EVER SINCE IT WAS REVEALED, IN 1996, THAT STEIN HAD TRANSLATED MANY OF PHILIPPE Pétain's speeches (Burns and Dydo, "Gertrude Stein"; Van Dusen).¹ If some critics accuse Stein of collaboration with Vichy France, others defend her by pointing out contradictory evidence regarding her behavior during the war years. Barbara Will, in *Unlikely Collaboration: Gertrude Stein, Bernard Faÿ, and the Vichy Dilemma* (2011), casts Stein in the role of pro-Vichy thinker whose support of Pétain was "heartfelt and dogged" (118). In addition to translating Pétain's speeches, Stein was a close friend of Bernard Faÿ, who, as head of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, was an official high up in the administration of Vichy France. Charles Bernstein, Edward Burns, and Joan Retallack take up Stein's defense in *Jacket2's* online dossier *Gertrude Stein's War Years: Setting the Record Straight* (2012). They argue that no conclusive evidence ties Stein explicitly to Vichy France (Burns) and highlight the irony in some of her statements—for instance, that Hitler deserved the Nobel Peace Prize (Bernstein, "Gertrude Stein"; Retallack). Furthermore, Stein published her writing in both the Vichy-sponsored magazine *Patrie* ("Fatherland") and the anti-Nazi and anti-Vichy journals *Confluences*, *Fontaine* ("Fountain"), and *L'arbalète* ("The Cross-Bow") during the war years (Burns and Dydo, "Three Lives"; Burns). She sympathizes with the French maquis in her postwar memoir *Wars I Have Seen* and writes about the inner workings of the Resistance in her play *In Savoy; or, Yes Is for a Very Young Man* (Wagner-Martin).

Stein's style and language play make it difficult to infer a political position from her writings. For Will, Stein's conservative politics is antithetical to her progressive experimental texts, and John Whittier-Ferguson argues that "Stein energetically and ingeniously displaces both politics and history from a great deal of her work" (117). Her little-known, undated, and hitherto unpublished article "Let Us Save China" suggests otherwise. Written against the background of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the article demonstrates how Stein conflates politics and aesthetics in her writings of the 1930s. "Let Us Save China" shows that despite Stein's alleged political naïveté, some of her writings of the 1930s and 1940s were politically inspired. It not only takes

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a historical event (Japan's invasion of China) as a starting point but also makes a political statement by emphasizing the power of the United States and its responsibility to "save China."

The relation between politics and aesthetics in Stein's writings has been researched before. For many feminist scholars, Stein's writing exemplifies a nonhierarchical and antipatriarchal style. It moves in circles instead of leading up to a culmination. Marianne DeKoven characterizes Stein's style as anarchic: it subverts traditional hierarchical structures of "dominance-subordination" (16–17). Juliana Spahr nuances this view by stating that Stein's works not only subvert these structures but also "connect with readers" in the process of meaning making (41). For many critics and readers, Stein's writing symbolizes new forms of community that extend beyond traditional power relations. Some recent scholarship, however, has examined Stein's complex connection to authority and authoritarian figures. In her 2011 book *Women Modernists and Fascism*, Annalisa Zox-Weaver highlights Stein's fascination with male political leaders and dictators, including Napoléon Bonaparte, Ulysses S. Grant, George Washington, Pétain, and Adolf Hitler. She describes the relation between Stein's writing and her political conservatism as "a story fraught with irreconcilabilities, moments of counterintuitive insight, and not a little consternation" (66). Stein's melding of politics and aesthetics generates a complex matrix of associations and contradictions. It juxtaposes and combines various frameworks and discourses.

I discovered Stein's article, which exists in both holograph and typescript, among Gertrude Stein's writings in Yale University's Collection of American Literature at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. It is unclear whether Stein ever tried to publish the piece, or why it has not been published before.² The article is not mentioned in her published correspondence, nor has it been previously discussed. Stein's article can be placed in the context of a series of short articles that she published in American newspapers and magazines in the mid- and late 1930s. After the success of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, published in 1933, and her American lecture tour,

in 1934 and 1935, Stein published a series of articles on "America" in the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1935. These included pieces on American capitals, American states and cities, American food and houses, American newspapers, American education, and American crimes. In 1936 she published a series of short essays on money in *The Saturday Evening Post* that indirectly deal with the Roosevelt administration and the Great Depression. She also published several articles in *The Atlantic Monthly*, including, in 1937, "Butter Will Melt" and "Your United States" and, in 1940, "The Winner Loses," originally titled "Mondays and Tuesdays," about life in France during the phony war.³

"Let Us Save China" is representative of Stein's writing of the 1930s. It engages with world politics, like much writing of the decade, and uses her signature style of repetition and variation, which Stein calls "insistence."⁴ The piece is both serious and humorous. If it does not directly refer to a historical event, it draws on a political vocabulary and conveys a sense of urgency: "Is there any possible reason why they should not just rise up and save China, except that they have not realised how necessary it is for them all to save China." At the same time, the article has a playful tone. Stein uses a relatively simple vocabulary and adopts a faux-naïf style of circular reasoning: "There are so many reasons why we should save China. In the first place China is interesting and so it would be interesting to save China." Stein's concern with the United States is indicated by the title, which refers to both *us*, the pronoun, and *US*, the United States of America. In addition, she cites the Declaration of Independence in the opening paragraph: "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."⁵

Historical and intertextual evidence suggests that Stein wrote "Let Us Save China" in 1937. China declared war on Japan on 7 July 1937, after a decade in which Japan aimed to expand its political and military power. On 19 September 1931 Japan had invaded Northeast China, or Manchuria, provoking an international conflict that the League of Nations sought to end, ordering Japan to pull its troops out of China.⁶ Refusing to do so, Japan installed a puppet government in what it called the

state of Manchukuo in 1932 and withdrew from the League of Nations in 1933. The Sino-Japanese conflict had two important consequences: it led to the Second Sino-Japanese War, which ran from 1937 to 1945, and it showed the ineffectiveness of the League of Nations in dealing with a powerful country that violated international agreements. This may have influenced Mussolini's and Hitler's decisions to invade Abyssinia, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, precipitating the Second World War. Stein refers to the Sino-Japanese conflict only obliquely in her correspondence. On 13 September 1937 she writes to her friend Thornton Wilder that she has "just had a letter from Francis Rose," a British painter and champion of Stein who was traveling in Asia, and that "Pekin seems to be placid under Japan" (Stein and Wilder 173).

"Let Us Save China" echoes phrases and ideas from *The Geographical History of America; or, The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind* (1936) and *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937). It repeats two motifs from these works: first, it combines the individual and the collective; second, it interrelates philosophical, aesthetic, and political discourses. In *The Geographical History of America* Stein discusses the relation between what she calls "human nature" and "the human mind." "Human nature" stands for a particular identity while "the human mind" indicates the whole of humanity. Stein comments on the relation, "Not solve it but be in it, that is what one can say of the problem of the relation of human nature to the human mind, which does not exist because there is none there is no relation, because when you are in the human mind you are in it, and when you are in human nature you are of it" (455). For Stein "human nature" and "the human mind," the specific and the general, are always part of each other: "Man is man was man will be gregarious and solitary" and "[i]ndividualism and communism . . . are not separate they are the same" (368, 369). Stein considers the individual and the collective to be in a dialectical relation, and she uses a philosophical, social, and political vocabulary to explain the problem of the specific and the general, the part and the whole, the individual and the collective.

In *Everybody's Autobiography* Stein likewise combines the individual and the collective. She writes of her friend Elisabeth de Gramont, the duchess of Clermont-Tonnerre, that "she has what always charms us in the mixture of peasant and duchess. The earth is the earth as a peasant sees it, the world is the world as a duchess sees it, and anyway a duchess would be nothing if the earth was not there as the peasant tills it" (65). Peasant, or everywoman, and duchess, a singular figure, are inextricably linked in the personality of Stein's friend.⁷ Later in the text, Stein observes that "there is too much fathering going on just now. . . . There is father Mussolini and father Hitler and father Roosevelt and father Stalin and father Trotzky and father Blum and father Franco is just commencing now. . . . Fathers are depressing" (137). Mixing right- and left-wing leaders, she opposes an accumulation of power on either end of the political spectrum. In addition, she rejects a patriarchal system: "Fathers are depressing" (137).

"Let Us Save China" draws on both motifs. Stein notes that "capitalists and workmen"—that is, those who are concerned with the individual and those who are concerned with the collective—"should agree to save China." She argues that one cannot be separated from the other, since "you cant prime a pump by pulling yourself up by your own boot-straps"—that is, you cannot get the job done by relying solely on your own strength. And as she does in her observation about "fathering," she mixes various political orientations, declaring that "the communists," "the capitalists," "the artists," "the liberals," "the radicals," and "the religious people" ought to want to "save China." All ideologies appear to be equivalent in her enumeration. Moreover, Stein mentions "the artists" among the politicians, hinting at a close relation between politics and art.

"Counting like Chinamen"

In her essay Stein cites three reasons the United States should "save China." First, China, like the United States, "is a big country and big countries should stand by each other" when their territorial

integrity is violated, as China's was by Japan. Second, "China" refers to a particular economic system that determined the relation between China and the United States in the early twentieth century. As Glenn Hastedt notes in the *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy*, the United States initiated its Open Door policy in the late nineteenth century to "preserve Chinese territorial and administrative integrity" as well as safeguard the principle of free trade" (367). Third, "China" stands for "the human mind," a concept that includes "everybody," combining the individual and the communal, and transcends political differences. Stein plays with the meaning of "China" in *The Geographical History of America*, noting that "China in America is not an earthen ware" (379). When viewed through American eyes, it is an abstract concept rather than a concrete object.⁸

In her essay "An Instant Answer; or, A Hundred Prominent Men," published in *Useful Knowledge*, Stein distinguishes between counting like "kings" and counting like "Chinamen" (144). Kings count, "One, two, three, four, five." They add up the parts to achieve the whole. In other words, they count by accretion. Counting like kings assumes a fixed order or hierarchy: three is more than two but less than four. Each element refers to a predecessor and a successor, thus creating a lineage. The Chinese, by contrast, count, "One, one, one, one, one." They do not add up the parts to achieve the whole but presuppose the whole, which they fill with individual parts. That is, they count by abstraction. This more flexible approach presumes equality among the parts, as one is equivalent to one regardless of its position in the composition. As Jennifer Ashton points out in "Gertrude Stein for Anyone," Stein shifts from a model of counting by accretion in *The Making of Americans* (1925) to a model of counting by abstraction in *Lucy Church Amiably* (1930), a model she increasingly incorporates into her writing.

Stein refers to "counting like Chinamen" throughout her texts of the 1930s. In *Everybody's Autobiography*, she notes that "Chinamen . . . count with pebbles"—that is, one and one and one (124). In her lecture "Poetry and Grammar," she similarly

states that "the natural way to count is not that one and one make two but to go on counting by one and one as chinamen do" (324). Stein writes in "Let Us Save China" that "the Chinese are convertible religiously speaking," since "one" can be substituted for "one" in the system of counting one and one and one. When she maintains, in *Everybody's Autobiography*, that "[c]ounting is the religion of this generation it is its hope and its salvation" (124), she may be referring to the oriental system of yin and yang, in which all elements are considered equivalent if not the same. Her notion of Chinese counting is abstract, since she writes that the Chinese have "borrowed or gambled away their reference" (10). They are free-floating signifiers in the system of one and one and one. Stein's notion of "counting like Chinamen," however, also has a political connotation. She considers that "Chinamen" do not have individual properties and can be replaced one by the other.

Despite her derogatory use of the term "Chinamen," Stein characterizes Chinese counting as antipatriarchal and antiexpansionist.⁹ In *Everybody's Autobiography* she writes that "China was more a land of mothers than it was a land of fathers. Mothers may not be cheering but they are not as depressing as fathers" (136–37). In Stein's associative system, mothers do not pass on their names from one generation to the next as fathers do in a patriarchy. They do not create a lineage but consider each element as equivalent to another. Chinese counting is therefore associated not with fathers or kings, who count by accretion, but with mothers and aunts, who count by abstraction. In "Poetry and Grammar," Stein writes, "the natural way to count is . . . to go on counting by one and one as chinamen do as anybody does . . . as my little aunts did" (324). Stein's system of counting one and one and one further opposes a politics of accumulation and expansion. It not only presupposes the whole, challenging the logic of expansion, but also allows for autonomy among the parts, unlike a cumulative system. It is not far-fetched to draw a parallel between the antiexpansionist connotations of Stein's system of noncumulative counting and the Open Door policy of the United States in

China. As Hastedt notes, the United States proposed a system of free trade with China to prevent the accumulation of power by European and Asian countries—namely, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and Japan (366). When read against the background of the late 1930s, Stein's article reveals a complex set of associations between an abstract system of counting, a political philosophy, and a concrete historical situation.

"Peaceful Penetration"

"Let Us Save China" explicitly connects China and the United States in the late 1930s. In the opening paragraph Stein refers to the United States as a "republic" and asserts the values of freedom and equality. She argues for a variety of political ideologies and indicates a slight preference for "the liberals": "A republic where there is a fair balance between conservatives and radicals and where the liberals are quite often in power is one where the greatest number have life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Stein's article suggests an intrinsic link between China and the United States. China, like the United States, is a "big country" that transcends individual differences. "China" describes the relation between the individual and the collective and comprises a variety of political ideologies. Stein's article, however, also reveals an imperialist politics. Although "China" itself stands for an anti-imperial system of freedom and exchange, Stein highlights the primary role of the United States in maintaining that system. Her call to "save China" is both playful and forceful: "it would take some courage to romp right in and save China," she writes; "[w]hat a pleasure to save China, to begin, to go over there in the way a big country can go." By identifying the values of freedom and equality as primarily American, Stein characterizes the United States as the first among equals. Her politics of exchange associated with counting one and one and one serves American interests. The Open Door policy, Hastedt notes, "represented an attempt on the part of the United States to involve itself in world affairs without becoming entangled in alliances" (366).

"Let Us Save China" contributes to the understanding of Stein's complex political position in the late 1930s. According to Stein, the United States should save China because saving China is an opportunity for the United States to assert the politics of freedom and exchange. This is signaled in the article by her concept of "beginning," which corresponds to counting one and one and one. To begin is to start counting at "one" and to do this over and over again. Stein writes that "in saving China the great thing is beginning, nobody has to do anything but just begin but if everybody just began just think how it would run if everybody ran to save China." Stein identifies "beginning" as typically American in her article: "We have done that again and again, not begun and then suddenly, apparently suddenly but really because it was the only thing to do, we began and then everything ran." For her, America has no history other than a history of beginnings. In *The Geographical History of America*, she regards this history as both American and universal by identifying it with the "human mind": "Nothing should follow something because in this way there will come to be a middle and a beginning and an end and of course that does make identity but not the human mind" (430). The emphasis on beginning is also represented in Stein's language: she continuously restarts her sentences, creating an effect of repetition and variation.

In the 1930s Stein associates the logic of beginning with an American rather than a European way of thinking. In *Everybody's Autobiography* she repeatedly refers to the "Oriental peaceful penetration of the West" as signifying the decline of Europe: "the tendency for this generation that is for the twentieth century [is] to be no longer European because perhaps Europe is finished" (21). In other words, a nineteenth-century politics of military expansion associated with Europe has given way to an American Open Door policy of economic exchange: "It is the peaceful penetration that is important not wars"—that is, exchange not expansion, abstraction not accumulation.¹⁰ She continues that "[f]or peaceful penetration there may be pacific defense," described as "a larger flow of water and the more frequent placing of openings for

large rubber hose" (10–11). In addition to its literal meaning, "pacific defense" contains an allusion to the Pacific Ocean; the phrase may thereby refer to the Open Door policy of the United States. By using the term "penetration," with its sexual connotations, Stein almost literally links East and West, "mothers" and "fathers," China and the United States. She replaces hard power with soft power by championing a politics of economic exchange. Stein's politics, however, is not as disinterested as it may seem. As she maintains in *Everybody's Autobiography*, "Einstein was the creative philosophic mind of the century and I have been the creative literary mind of the century also with the Oriental mixing with the European" (22). Here, Stein refers not to China and the United States but to Europe and the Orient. She combines a system of exchange (associated with "the Oriental") with a system of expansion (associated with "the European"). For Stein, the Orient and Europe, like exchange and expansion, ultimately go together.

"Let Us Save China" demonstrates that Stein's poetics of one and one and one translates into a political commentary. As Astrid Lorange notes in *How Reading Is Written: A Brief Index to Gertrude Stein*, "Stein celebrated, perhaps uncritically, a correspondence between the ontological equality of all the parts of language and the subjects of a democratic state" (100).¹¹

NOTES

1. Starting in 1941, Stein translated twenty-nine of the speeches that Pétain gave in the 1930s and early 1940s. She abandoned the project in January 1943 (Paris).

2. Ulla E. Dydo and Edward Burns, scholars with extensive knowledge of Stein's writing from the war years, have told me they were not familiar with this hitherto unpublished essay (qtd. in Tilles). Burns notes that the piece does not appear in the list of manuscripts that Robert Bartlett Haas and Donald Gallup compiled for an exhibition of Stein's writings at Yale University in 1941, nor is it included in the eight-volume collection *Unpublished Writings of Gertrude Stein* (qtd. in Tilles). Burns does not think the piece was intentionally excluded from the collection; it was probably misfiled or overlooked.

3. Some of these pieces have been collected in *How Writing Is Written*, edited by Haas. For Stein's dealings with *The Atlantic Monthly*, see Gallup.

4. For the difference between repetition and insistence, see Stein, "Portraits" 290–91.

5. The typescript contains several typos, like "livery."

6. On the history of Japanese involvement in North-east China, see Matsusaka.

7. I discuss the relationship between Stein and Elisabeth de Gramont in "Triangular Politics: Stein, Bernard Fay and Elisabeth de Gramont."

8. According to Shawn H. Alfrey, *China* stands for the "exotic or esoteric" and for "all of knowledge" in Stein's writing; it is "alternately a loose confederation of place names and even a state of being" (407–08).

9. The term *Chinamen* was contentious in the United States of the early twentieth century, when Chinese culture and mannerisms were denigrated. In *Wars I Have Seen*, Stein uses the terms *Chinamen* and *Japs* alongside each other (4).

10. "Peaceful penetration" also refers to a military strategy used during the First World War, whereby one aims to gradually gain territory instead of forcing a breakthrough (Pope and Wheal).

11. Lorange explains the uncritical aspect: "I say 'perhaps uncritically' since clearly not everybody had the right to vote when Stein was writing, and furthermore, her insistence on ontological equality is not articulated as a position against social and political inequality" (100).

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Let Us Save China

A REPUBLIC WHERE THERE IS A FAIR BALANCE between conservatives and radicals and where the liberals are quite often in power is

one where the greatest number have life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. All agreeable things. So let us save China.

There are so many reasons why we should save China. In the first place China

is interesting and so it would be interesting to save China. Then China is a big country and big countries should stand by each other and we are a big country and so we ought to save China. And then capitalists and workmen should agree to save China because you cant prime a pump by pulling yourself up by your own boot-straps however much you might like to and by saving China you can prime the pump, so everybody ought to want to save China. Everybody ought to want to. And then it would take some courage to romp right in and save China, and everybody would like everybody to be courageous so do let everybody want everybody to save China. The communists ought to want to save China, the capitalists ought to want to save China, the artists ought to want to save China, the liberals, the radicals, the religeous people ought to want to save China because the Chinese are convertible religeously speaking and so why why why does not America just go to it and save China.

Is there any possible reason why they should not just rise up and save China, except

that they have not realised how necessary it is for them all to save China.

After all, being courageous is difficult. You have to begin and beginning is always difficult. Most people not having the habit of being courageous it never does occur to them to begin. Now in saving China the great thing is beginning, nobody has to do anything but just begin but if everybody just began just think how it would run if everybody ran to save China. Just think.

What a pleasure to save China, to begin, to go over there in the way a big country can go. A big country is slow but once it begins, being slow makes them go just that much faster. We have done that again and again, not begun and then suddenly, apparently suddenly but really because it was the only thing to do, we began and then everything ran. And that is the way we must save China.

Now everybody all together knows that this is so.

To save everything there is only one way to begin and that is to save China.

Go to it, everybody sing, Let us save China.