

Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism

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Questioning American Radicalism

We ask questions of radicalism in the United States. Many are driven by high expectations and preconceived notions of what such radicalism should look like. Our queries reflect this: Why is there no socialism in America? Why are workers in the world's most advanced capitalist nation not "class conscious"? Why has no "third party" of laboring people emerged to challenge the established political formations of money, privilege, and business power? Such interrogation is by no means altogether wrongheaded, although some would prefer to jettison it entirely. Yet these and other related questions continue to exercise considerable interest, and periodically spark debate and efforts to reformulate and redefine analytic agendas for the study of American labor radicals, their diversity, ideas, and practical activities.¹ Socialism, syndicalism, anarchism, and communism have been minority traditions in US life, just as they often are in other national cultures and political economies. The revolutionary left is, and always has been, a vanguard of minorities. But minorities often make history, if seldom in ways that prove to be exactly as they pleased.

Life in a minority is not, however, an isolated, or inevitably an isolating, experience. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the US gave rise to a significant left, rooted in what many felt was a transition from the Old World to a New Order. Populists, anarchists, Christian Socialists, early feminists, bohemian intellectuals, trade unionists, immigrant Marxists, exiles from failed European revolutions, Wobblies, co-operators, and countless other stripes of radical rubbed shoulders in metropolitan centers, in the towns of middle America, and in frontier settings, all of which sustained varied institutional and

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¹Among many studies that might be cited: Werner Sombart, *Why is there no Socialism in the United States?* (White Plains, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1976), a reprint of the original 1906 German publication; John H.M. Laslett and Seymour Martin Lipset (eds.), *Failure of a Dream? Essays in the History of American Socialism* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1974); Sean Wilentz, "Against exceptionalism: class consciousness and the American Labor Movement, 1790-1920," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 26 (1984), 1-24; Eric Foner, "Why is there no socialism in the United States," *History Workshop Journal*, 17 (Spring, 1984), 57-80; Neville Kirk, "American, exceptionalism' revisited: the case of Samuel Gompers," *Socialist History*, 16 (2000), 1-26.

cultural spaces in which the sociability and politics of the left were generated and regenerated over time. It was a heady time for those who thought themselves revolutionaries, although it would not be without its dangers, most evident in the wave of repression that engulfed radicalism in the 1917–21 period. Many on the US left emerged from the turmoil of these post-World War I years convinced that the newly-established Soviet workers' state was a revolutionary breakthrough of unparalleled significance, and that a Communist Party was precisely what was needed in America.²

Joseph Freeman, whose *An American Testament* (1936) was praised by Theodore Draper as “one of the few Communist human documents worth preserving,” and by Max Eastman as the “best and most engaging book written by an American communist,”³ vividly recalls the developing radical politics of the US in the early 20th century. He captures a sense of its disruptive, destabilizing impact on all aspects of life:

Socialism was an aspect of the American scene long before the war, and I felt its impact in my daily experience. But it was so sharp a break with the prevailing order, that you had to adjust yourself to it at every point of your existence.... [Y]ou were caught in the conflict between the old world and the new, and felt you had to choose between them.... The American generation of which I am a member had neither the catastrophe of capitalist economy in this country, nor the rise of fascism in western Europe, nor the astounding successes of the Soviet Union to guide its choices. Its development was consequently confused and painful ... For we were compelled to be conscious of every step when we grappled with unprecedented problems raised by the war, the October Revolution, the American class struggle, the melancholy capitals of postwar Europe, the frank and free life of Greenwich Village, the rise of the Communist Party in this country, the critical relations between art and society, the transformation of love, marriage, and the family.

Writing in 1934–36, Freeman, like most radicals who gravitated to the revolutionary left in the period associated with World War I and the Russian Revolution, came to regard the Communist Party of the United States (CP), for a time at least, as the place where the struggle for the new radical order was to be carried out to best effect: “Every day brings a living testament to the nobility and heroism of the vast majority of men and women in [the] movement, whether they are fighting for liberty on the barricades of Barcelona, building socialism in the Soviet Union, distributing strike leaflets south of the Mason and Dixon line or repelling the encroachments of Japanese imperialism

²As an introduction only see James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912–1925* (NY: Vintage, 1969); Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (NY: Henry Holt, 2000); Alan Dawley, *Struggles for Justice: Social Responsibility and the Liberal State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 139–294; Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (NY: Viking, 1957).

³Draper, *Roots of American Communism*, 129; Max Eastman, *Love and Revolution: My Journey Through an Epoch* (NY: Random House, 1964), 604.

in China.” Freeman, an editor of the Communist magazine *New Masses* and a teacher at the CP Workers’ School when he penned these words, wrote compellingly of the idealism that mobilized the revolutionary left in the 1920s and 1930s. He was drawn particularly to the inspiration of the Party ranks, “selfless, incorruptible.” From them he learned, and for them and for himself, he worked: “To abolish poverty, ignorance, war, the exploitation of class by class, the oppression of man by man.” Freeman saw in socialism “the utmost imaginable freedom for the mass of humanity,” and he lived for the realization of this glorious end.⁴

Freeman’s passionate Communist commitment was not to survive the 1930s Red Decade of economic depression and social upheaval which had done so much to steel his anti-capitalist convictions and dedication to socialist humanity. His *American Testament* was insufficiently critical of Leon Trotsky, whom the American cultural radical had witnessed first-hand in one of the last Comintern debates of the 1920s. As a consequence, Freeman was, in his word, “excommunicated,”—Moscow demanding that he self-censor his own publication by barring mention or advertisement of it in *New Masses*, call off a promotional speaking tour, and cancel a large order for the book placed by the Workers’ Bookshop. That accomplished, the seemingly well-ensconced “captain of cultural activities” of the Party sufficiently humbled, the Comintern then insisted that Freeman’s CP affiliation be terminated. The ex-Communist’s next novel, *Never Call Retreat* (1943), sounded the inspirational cry of ongoing struggle with a predictable awkwardness, but Freeman’s loud voice of radicalism was essentially quieted.⁵

Another American Communist, James P. Cannon, would be harder to sideline and impossible to silence. He had been drummed out of the CP a decade before Freeman was given his walking papers, expelled for embracing Trotsky’s views late in 1928. Cannon never relinquished his attachment to the original Workers Party, later renamed the Workers (Communist) Party (and, a few years after, subsequent to Cannon’s expulsion, the Communist Party, USA). Like Freeman, Cannon expressed considerable regard for the “thousands of courageous and devoted revolutionists [who were] willing to make sacrifices and take risks for the movement.” Long after he himself had broken with this Party, Cannon saw those won to its struggles through their sincere desire to create a better, socialist, world, as victims, a radical generation motivated by the best of intentions, but misguided by a leadership that he characterized as squandering and Stalinist. Reflecting on the labor upheavals of the 1930s from the disillusioning height of the Cold War, Cannon wrote in 1951:

The chief victim of Stalinism in this country was the magnificent left-wing movement, which rose up on the yeast of the economic crisis

⁴Joseph Freeman, *An American Testament: A Narrative of Rebels and Romantics* (NY: Farrar & Rinehart, 1936), vii–viii, x, 667–668.

⁵Eastman, *Love and Revolution*, 599–605; James D. Bloom, *Left Letters: The Culture Wars of Mike Gold and Joseph Freeman* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1992), 71–110.

in the early Thirties and eventually took form in the CIO through a series of veritable labor uprisings. Such a movement, instinctively aimed against American capitalism, ... [was] ready for the most radical solutions. The Stalinists, who appeared to represent the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union, almost automatically gained the dominating position in the movement.... The story of what happened to these young militants; what was done to them, how their faith was abused and their confidence betrayed by the cynical American agents of the Kremlin gang—that is just about the most tragic story in the long history of the American labor movement. The best young militants with independent minds, who wanted to think and learn and act consistently according to principle, were ruthlessly expelled. Others were cowed into silence and acquiescence, befuddled into the sadly mistaken belief that by all the lies and treachery they were somehow or other serving a good cause.⁶

How radicals like Cannon and Freeman came to embrace Communism, and how that Communism repudiated so much of itself in the 1920s, is a subject worthy of reconsideration. Such a treatment of the origins of the American revolutionary left necessarily concerns itself with another question historians have often wrestled with: whether or not US Communism was a *genuine* expression of American radicalism.

In assessing the historiography of communism in the United States with an eye to such questions,⁷ I begin where many others have perhaps not wanted to

⁶James P. Cannon, *The History of American Trotskyism: From Its Origins (1928) to the Founding of the Socialist Workers Party (1938)* (NY: Pathfinder, 1972); 13–14; James P. Cannon, *Notebook of an Agitator* (NY: Pathfinder, 1973), 294–297. On Cannon see *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism, 1920–1928* (NY: Prometheus Research Library, 1992); Les Evans (ed.), *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him: By Thirty-Three Comrades, Friends, and Relatives* (NY: Pathfinder, 1976). Of leading figures in the Workers (Communist) Party in the United States in the 1920s, Cannon rivaled key figures C.E. Ruthenberg, who died in 1927, Jay Lovestone, and William Z. Foster. No other leaders were as significant. Note Harvey E. Klehr, *Communist Cadre: The Social Background of the American Communist Party Elite* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), 110–111, which presents tables that rank Party leaders with respect to their years served on the Central Committee and other committees. Because Cannon was only in the Party from 1921 to 1928, he does not rank among the top 24 leaders for the entire period 1921–61. But if Cannon's time in the Party is taken into consideration, his rank is first, with only J. Louis Engdahl and Jay Lovestone of comparable stature. Engdahl, however significant, was never an independent force within the Central Committee, owing his allegiance to the Ruthenberg–Lovestone faction, which also secured his editorship of the *Daily Worker*, and later posts of significance. If the pre-1921 underground years could be accounted for in such a committee tabulation, it is likely the case that Ruthenberg and Cannon would rank very near the top. Draper had particularly high regard for Cannon's capacity to recall the details of Communist history in the 1920s, stating that his memory on events in the early history of the American revolutionary left was far superior to others that he interviewed. See Theodore Draper, "Preface," in James P. Cannon, *The First Ten Years of American Communism—Report of a Participant* (NY: Pathfinder, 1973), 9–12.

⁷Because of these questions I focus selectively on the historiography of communism, and this essay does not purport to survey the field in its entirety. Its concern is largely with the original foundational studies of the 1920s by Theodore Draper, tangentially with the institutional/political school of "traditionalist" liberal anti-communism associated with Harvey E. Klehr and John Earl Haynes, and, perhaps most decisively, with the New Left-inspired histories that commenced, in part, as a response to Communist published memoirs of the 1970s and 1980s. For these reasons I accent the significance

go. The history of America's revolutionary left, in its origins and in the uneasy formative years of Communism's US birth, can not be understood, I suggest, without attention to the ways in which it was transformed by Stalinism in the 1920s. Moreover, the varied historiographies that chart developments, accent particulars, and lay interpretive stress on specific parts of the left experience in America are also understandable only if we begin to grapple openly with Stalinism's forceful historical presence. As the words and experiences of Cannon and Freeman would suggest, Stalinism matters in what happened to 20th-century American radicalism.⁸

Stalinism: What's in a Name

As a short-hand term "Stalinism" is not so much a personalized denunciation as it is a designation of political defeat. The aspirations and expansive potential of revolutionary Communism were suffocated in bureaucratization, compromise of political principle, abandonment of theoretical and programmatic consistency, waning of commitment to socialism and its spread throughout the world, and a narrowing of agendas to the most defensive and mundane. "Stalinism" was, of course, guided in part by the subjective agenda of the individual Trotsky would come to conclude was capable of proclaiming "I am Society." But Stalinism was also determined to some extent by objective historical conditions and developments detrimental to sustaining the revolutionary cause, much of which took place in situations once-removed from Stalin's direct influence. These included the revolutionary Soviet State's "backwardness," with its history of Czarist autocracy and the class dominance of the peasantry; the immense drain on the resources of the Russian/Soviet social formation during World War I and the subsequent containment of the first workers' state by a hostile grouping of powerful capitalist nations, all of

Footnote continued

of the 1920s, as a decade of Stalinization, and address works that tend to concentrate on the 1930s and 1940s. This slights older, and useful, social-democratic accounts, including James Oneal and G.A. Werner, *American Communism: A Critical Analysis of its Origins, Development and Programs* (NY: E.P. Dutton, 1947) and Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History (1919-1957)* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957). It also bypasses the eight non-Draper volumes in the Clinton Rossiter-edited "Communism in American Life" series commissioned by the Fund for the Republic in the late 1950s, as well as earlier scholarly accounts, among them the sociological and survey-based studies: Harold D. Lasswell and Dorothy Blumenstock, *World Revolutionary Propaganda: A Chicago Study* (NY: Knopf, 1939); Gabriel A. Almond, *The Appeals of Communism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954). Important "confessional" literature is also not considered, the prime example of which is undoubtedly Benjamin Gitlow, *I Confess: The Truth About American Communism* (NY: Dutton, 1940), nor do I address early works of recollection from former Communists or those on the margins of the CP, such as Fred Beal, *Proletarian Journey: New England, Gastonia, Moscow* (NY: Hillman-Curl, 1937). For one recent survey of the field see John Earl Haynes, "The Cold War debate continues: a traditionalist view of historical writing on domestic communism and anti-communism," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 2 (2000), 76-115, which contains a statement on the Fund for the Republic books, 77-80.

⁸A useful recent documentary collection is Albert Fried (ed.), *Communism in America: A History in Documents* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1997).

which continued to oppose what Lenin and the Bolsheviks stood for well after the end of hostilities in 1918; the crucible of civil war, in which the practice of governance in the world's first socialist state was inevitably hardened over the course of the 1917–21 years, as many Bolsheviks faced the necessity of institutionalizing an apparatus of repression, centered in the Cheka, in order to preserve the revolution and its advances; the failure of the socialist revolution in Europe, on which the healthy continuity of the Russian Revolution depended, first in 1919 and then in 1923; and a series of misplayed hands at the table of Russian revolutionary politics, all of which consolidated Stalin's power, weakened and marginalized his potential opponents, and, ultimately, culminated in the decimation of the Leninist Party that had registered such gains in 1917 and the immediate post-Revolution years.⁹

The practical consequence of these inhibitions and steps backward inside and outside the Soviet Union was formidable. Within the degenerating revolutionary Soviet society, the ruthless elevation of Joseph Stalin produced an autocratic state eventually governed by terror. Stalin ordered the first Bolshevik shot in 1923, and between 1927 and 1940 he orchestrated the trial, exile, or execution of virtually the entire revolutionary leadership. Beyond the boundaries of "socialism in one country" a series of defeats and international misadventures, beginning with the routing of the Chinese Revolution in 1926, and reaching through the debacles of fascism's rise to power in Germany and the bloodletting of the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, haunted the revolutionary Communist conscience in decades that might well have witnessed pivotal political advances and radical successes.

This dismal record of opportunities wasted was eventually blunted with the Stalinist brokering of a reconfigured Europe in the aftermath of World War II, a buffer zone of "socialist" economies being established in Eastern and Central Europe as the price the capitalist world was willing to pay for the monumental losses the Soviets sustained in helping to "liberate" Europe from Hitler's awful designs. But such Iron Curtain socialism was born deformed, as were the postcolonial regimes of national liberation, such as Cuba and Vietnam, that ended up taking both material aid and political inspiration from the Soviet Union.¹⁰

From possibly as early as 1926, then, and certainly from the late 1920s and 1930s on, the forces of the international left faced not only the resolute opposition of global capital and its considerable power, vested in nation states and their militaries as well as the widening material and ideological reach of hegemonic capitalist markets and cultures, but also the constraining defeatism of leaderships, structures of power, and political orientations committed, in their Stalinism, to anything but world revolution. Specific communist parties

⁹The Trotsky quote is from Leon Trotsky, *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and His Influence* (NY: Harper & Brothers, 1941), 421. For a succinct interpretive introduction to Stalinism's historical emergence and meaning see Alec Nove, *Stalinism and After* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1975).

¹⁰See, for instance, Michael Lowy, *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development: The Theory of Permanent Revolution* (London: Verso, 1981).

paid dearly in the process, as evidenced in Isaac Deutscher's and Pincus Minc's recollections of the sacrifice and destruction of the Polish Communist Party (KPP) which, in 1938, was "dissolved" by Comintern dictate. The KPP, born of the Russian Revolution, was ultimately destroyed by its degeneration: its leaders' heads were delivered on a platter to fascist terror, its mass base squandered with cynical abandon.¹¹ This is not, of course, to say that varied struggles and campaigns conducted within Stalinized Communist parties, the Communist International, and other venues where the disciplined apparatus of a Leninist vanguard exercised an impact, throughout Europe and Asia, Latin America and Africa, were without their significances, often heroic sacrifices, and important victories.¹²

American Communism: Histories of Ambivalence and Accomplishment

In the US, from Harlem to southern sharecropping plots,¹³ within the communities of arts and letters associated with writers' congresses and left-wing theatre troupes,¹⁴ in the Abraham Lincoln brigade mobilized to fight in the

¹¹Isaac Deutscher, "The tragedy of the Polish Communist Party," in Isaac Deutscher, *Marxism, Wars & Revolutions: Essays from Four Decades* (London: Verso, 1984), 91–127; P. Minc (Aleksander), *The History of a False Illusion: Memoirs on the Communist Movement in Poland 1918–1938*, translated and edited by Robert Michaels (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002).

¹²As an introduction only see the collection of essays in Deutscher, *Marxism, Wars & Revolutions: Essays from Four Decades*; Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed: What is the Soviet Union and Where is it Going?* (NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1937); Trotsky, *Stalin*; Ernest Mandel (ed.), *50 Years of World Revolution, 1917–1967* (NY: Merit, 1968); Susan Weissman, *Victor Serge: The Course is Set on Hope* (London: Verso, 2001); Milorad M. Drachkovitch, *The Revolutionary Internationals, 1864–1943* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), 159–224; Ruth Fischer, *Stalin and German Communism: A Study in the Origins of State Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948); Fernando Claudin, *The Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975); E.H. Carr, *Twilight of the Comintern, 1930–1935* (NY: Pantheon, 1982); Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 139–164, 249–260.

¹³See, for instance, Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (NY: Alfred Knopf, 1974); Nell Irvin Painter, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson, His Life as a Negro Communist in the South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

¹⁴Much is written on Communists and the arts; the original Fund for the Republic statement, Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959), was particularly strong. But note the recent extensive overview in Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1996). On African Americans and culture see Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 103–122; Gerald Horne, "The red and the black: the Communist Party and African Americans in historical perspective," in Michael E. Brown, et al. (eds), *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism* (NY: Monthly Review, 1993), 199–237. In the same volume Alan M. Wald, whose writing has consistently addressed issues of culture within a framework sensitive to race, class, and gender, offers an overview: "Culture and commitment: U.S. Communist writers reconsidered," 281–305. Other accounts include Bloom, *Left Letters*; Lawrence Schwartz, *Marxism and Culture: The CPUSA and Aesthetics in the 1930s* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1980); Laura Browder, *Rousing the Nation: Radical Culture in Depression America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).

Spanish Civil War and through peace and anti-war movements,¹⁵ as well as among housewives' organizations,¹⁶ labor defense bodies, industrial unions and unemployed protests,¹⁷ Communists fought for much that was honorable and achieved not a little that was necessary and humane. If one realm of special oppression, women's subordination, has been regarded as "the question seldom asked"¹⁸ on the American communist left, there is still no denying that women in the ranks of the revolutionary Party promoted progressive, feminist causes and struck important blows not only for female emancipation, but for women's public involvement in political struggle.¹⁹ It is striking how much US history in the 20th century that is associated with eradicating racism is inextricably entwined with the Communist Party, whatever its programmatic

¹⁵The Abraham Lincoln Brigade, a communist battalion of Americans fighting on the republican side during the Spanish Civil War, is the subject of much writing, including Arthur Landis, *The Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (NY: Citadel Press, 1967); James Yates, *Mississippi to Madrid: Memoir of a Black American in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (Seattle: Open Hand Publishers, 1989); Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 123–158.

¹⁶See, for instance, Van Gosse, "To organize in every neighborhood, in every home: the gender politics of American Communists between the wars," *Radical History Review*, 50 (1991), 110–141; Elsa Jane Dixler, "The woman question: Women and the American Communist Party, 1929–1941" (unpublished PhD thesis, Yale University, 1974), 127–195.

¹⁷Again, the writing that touches down on such mobilizations is extensive, but see, for examples, Roger Keeran, *The Communist Party and the Auto Workers Unions* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980); Harvey Levenstein, *Communism, Anticommunism and the CIO* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981); Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: The Conflict that Shaped American Unions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977); Steve Rosswurm (ed.), *The CIO's Left-Led Unions* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Roy Rosenzweig, "Organizing the unemployed: the early years of the Great Depression," *Radical America*, 10 (July–August, 1976), 37–62; Dan Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1971).

¹⁸Rosalyn Baxandall, "The question seldom asked: women and the CPUSA," in Brown, *et al.*, *New Studies*, 141–162, raises a number of issues that are further addressed and extended in emphasis on "the personal" in Kathleen A. Brown and Elizabeth Faue, "Social bonds, sexual politics, and political community in the U.S. left, 1920s–1940s," *Left History*, 7 (Spring, 2000), 9–45; Kathleen A. Brown, "The 'savagely fathered and unmothered' world of the Communist Party, U.S.A.: feminism, maternalism, and 'Mother' Bloor," *Feminist Studies*, 25 (Fall, 1999), 537–570; Dixler, "The woman question." See, as well, Robert Shaffer, "Women and the Communist Party, USA: 1930–1940," *Socialist Review*, (May–June, 1979), 73–118.

¹⁹In the case of US Communism consider Mary Inman, *In Woman's Defense* (Los Angeles: Committee to Organize the Advancement of Women, 1941). Early Communist feminists included Clara Zetkin (Germany), Alexandra Kollontai (Russia), and Dora Montefiore (Britain). For this international history of women and communism see Philip S. Foner (ed.), *Clara Zetkin: Selected Writings* (NY: International, 1984); Cathy Porter, *Alexandra Kollontai* (London: Virago, 1980); Karen Hunt, "Dora Montefiore: a different Communist," in John McIlroy, Kevin Morgan, and Alan Campbell (eds.), *Party People: Communist Lives: Exploration in Biography* (London: Laurence and Wishart, 2001), 29–50.

and practical lapses.²⁰ Internationalism, too, was undoubtedly fostered by Communist parties and their members.²¹

But the histories of these “just” accomplishments were paralleled by an early bureaucratization, political retreat, and ultimate reversal of revolutionary programs that gradually, from the mid-to-late 1920s, stifled Communist commitment in varied subordinations, leaving the gleam of a socially transformative idealism tarnished, souring the principles of socialism in the mouths of many of its most ardent advocates. This unease has been reproduced in the writing on American Communism. When we look to why this has indeed been the case, answers invariably converge on the important, if problematic, role of Stalinism, an historical and political process that has received a dearth of interpretive commentary in the writing on the US left.²²

The Tension-Ridden Communist Memoir

Communist memoirs, often written in years when Stalin’s atrocities and the debasements of Soviet-style socialism were difficult not to acknowledge, are permeated with the tensions of this fundamental unease. “We lived in the center of the world’s first successful socialist revolution,” wrote Peggy Dennis, adding that the complexities of that allegiance were “pre-digested for us and reduced into Stalin’s edict that the achievements were ‘to the glory of the Party’ and ‘behind our difficulties are concealed our enemies’.” As Dennis noted, in

²⁰For an early overview see Wilson Record, *The Negro and the Communist Party* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1951). A major autobiography, Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago: Liberator Press, 1978) conveys something of the sweep of Communist and African-American experience. Intellectual histories of merit include Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (NY: Morrow, 1964); Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed, 1983). A recent study of significance is Mark Solomon, *The Cry was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917–1936* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998). On the relational significance of the Communist Party, black Americans, and the development of the US left see Michael Goldfield, “Recent historiography of the Communist Party, U.S.A.,” in Mike Davis, Fred Pfeil and Michael Sprinker (eds), *The Year Left: An American Socialist Yearbook, 1985* (London: Verso, 1985), 315–356, which places stress on the importance of Communist work among black Americans in the programmatically skewed “Third Period” (1929–34). For a documentary collection detailing these years see Philip S. Foner and Herbert Shapiro (eds), *American Communism and Black Americans: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

²¹See R.W. Postgate, *The Workers’ International* (NY: Harcourt, Brace & Howe, 1920); Lewis L. Lorwin, *Labor and Internationalism* (NY: Macmillan, 1929); Victor Silverman, *Imagining Internationalism in American and British Labor* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois, 1999).

²²Possibly the one area where Stalinism is addressed most frontally is in the cultural realm, where the studies of literary radicalism undertaken by Alan M. Wald have persistently engaged with the meaning of Stalinism and anti-Stalinism. See, for instance, Wald, *James T. Farrell: The Revolutionary Socialist Years* (NY: New York University Press, 1978); *The Revolutionary Imagination: The Poetry and Politics of John Wheelwright and Sherry Mangan* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); *The Responsibility of Intellectuals: Selected Essays on Marxist Traditions in Cultural Commitment* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ and London: Humanities Press, 1992); *Writing from the Left: New Essays on Radical Culture and Politics* (London: Verso, 1994).

this atmosphere it was “difficult to understand” the “unquestioning beliefs” that guided most communists.²³

Indeed, many accounts of life in the US CP convey an almost otherworldly defensiveness, evident in George Charney’s “explanation” of how, upon becoming a Communist, he ceased to exercise the critical capacities that had in fact brought him into the movement: “it was not long after I joined the party that I came to accept each doctrine promulgated by the party as an ‘article of faith’, never to be questioned. Somehow, somewhere, the element of faith extricated itself from its scientific embodiment to dominate our outlook and ultimately prove our undoing.”²⁴

The black Bolshevik, Harry Haywood, perhaps exemplified the staying power of this problematic continuity of belief over actuality. In the 1970s he was still able to proclaim: “Those today who use the term ‘Stalinist’ as an epithet evade the real question: that is, were Stalin and the Central Committee correct? I believe history has proven that they were correct.”²⁵ Lacking unease, some clearly lacked perspective.

One of California’s leading Communist women, Dorothy Healey, suggested that the rank-and-file often knew so little about “theoretical” issues which related directly to Stalinization because they were overwhelmed by activist commitments: “the great majority of Communists, maybe 60 to 70 percent of the Party, never got around to reading much of Marx or Lenin. The Trotskyists were so good at theoretical debates because they had more time to read.”²⁶ No doubt there were Trotskyists who would challenge this notion that they had spare hours to pore over the fine print of Marxist doctrine because they spent less of their days and nights on picket lines, in demonstrations, and building various mobilizations.

In striking contrast to Healey, Steve Nelson claims that as a young rank-and-file Communist in the 1920s he followed Party polemics and theoretical discussions on “socialism in one country” vs. “permanent revolution” zealously, and was convinced that Stalin had the better case. Nelson’s claims seem to have benefitted from hindsight’s capacity to rationalize past behavior. The actual record of debate and discussion among US Communists in the 1924–28 period, and the availability of documents and substantive exchange of views, especially concerning Trotskyist positions, was quite limited. Indeed, Nelson contradictorily asserts that he “didn’t really give the Trotskyist point of view serious consideration until [he] left the Party” in the aftermath of the 1956 Khrushchev revelations and the Soviet repression of workers’ uprisings in Poland and Hungary. It was then that he faced most acutely the confusions and

²³Peggy Dennis, *The Autobiography of an American Communist: A Personal View of a Political Life, 1925–1975* (Westport/Berkeley: Lawrence Hill/Creative Arts, 1977), 70–71.

²⁴George Charney, *A Long Journey* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1968), 29.

²⁵Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 184. For another black Communist’s views of “never rais[ing] questions prematurely,” see Painter, *Hosea Hudson*, esp. 25.

²⁶Dorothy Healey and Maurice Isserman, *Dorothy Healey Remembers: A Life in the American Communist Party* (NY and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 29.

unease that his commitment to the Communist cause engendered in the shock atmosphere of the mid-to-late 1950s.²⁷

Al Richmond, a mere high-school youth of 15 when he joined the Young Communist League in 1928, was “bewildered and fascinated by the factional debate” of that time, and confessed an essential “unpreparedness for coping with theoretical concepts in dispute.... I succumbed to a common failing: attributing profundity to something simply because you cannot understand it.” Not knowing what the arguments were about, Richmond took the path of least resistance: siding with the majority. “It is the easier way out,” Richmond wrote, “and you have the handy rationale of the democratic premise that the greater wisdom is more likely to reside in the greater number.”²⁸ Such thinking would, of course, have justified a politics of accommodation if extended out of the CP and into wider circles of society. Recollections from the Third Period (1929–34) and Popular Front agitations of the 1930s and 1940s, such as those of John Gates, whose imprisonment under the Smith Act caused him to rethink his allegiance and leave the CP in 1956, sometimes recall with specific pain the costs that were exacted among Communists who, if they had it to do all over again, would, they claim, refuse certain Party codes of political conduct, in which dissidents on the revolutionary left who declined to bend the knee to Stalinist dictate were written out of the workers’ movement.²⁹

Receiving the Oral Record: The New Left and the Ironic Attractions of History

Most of the Communist “oral histories” that were published in the post-1956 years are thus documents of a certain political ambivalence or, more rarely, a blinkered commitment to positions long entrenched and equally long discredited.³⁰ They reflect the life course of a generation that came to political

²⁷Steve Nelson, James R. Barrett and Rob Ruck, *Steve Nelson: American Radical* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981), 48–49, 386–387.

²⁸Al Richmond, *A Long View from the Left: Memoirs of an American Revolutionary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 71–72.

²⁹See, for instance, the comments of Herbert Benjamin, who occupied a prominent position in the Communist Party in Philadelphia and was an activist in the unemployed agitations of the 1930s, on the treatment of James Cannon in Herbert Benjamin, “Outline of unpublished manuscript: a history of the unemployed movement and its struggles during the Great Depression,” 70–71, 107–112, 150–152, 213–214, deposited in Columbia Oral History Project, Columbia University, New York, NY. Both Dorothy Healey and John Gates recalled with shame the Communist Party’s failure to come to the defense of Trotskyists attacked and imprisoned during the 1940s in the first Smith Act prosecutions. Gates would be jailed under the same Act a few years later. See Healey and Isserman, *Dorothy Healey Remembers*, 114–115; John Gates, *The Story of an American Communist* (NY: Thomas Nelson, 1958), 127.

³⁰My own experience on working through an oral biography of a communist suggests that only those who actually broke with the Communist Party over political differences were capable of articulating a forthright recollection of what happened historically. But this did not necessarily insure that Stalinism’s meaning would be addressed. See Bryan D. Palmer, *A Communist Life: Jack Scott and the Canadian Workers’ Movement, 1927–1985* (St. John’s, Newfoundland: Committee on Canadian Labour History, 1988).

maturity in the late 1920s or 1930s, and remained committed to anti-capitalist/pro-Communist ideals through the traumas of the 1950s and, often, beyond. Their audience was, at least in part, a later generation of scholars that emerged in the shadows of the New Left, for whom the Communist past was an often uneasy fit with commitments and sensibilities rife with ambivalence. On the one hand, many New Leftists had been either “red diaper babies,” their family lives and childhood/adolescent years reflective of a close connection to US Communism, or those influenced by figures with a past link to the Old (often non-Communist Party) Left.³¹

On the other, the New Left consciously constructed itself as something of a mirror image of the Communist Party. Uncomfortable with all bureaucracy, consciously hostile to the very notion of an all-authoritative “vanguard,” and unencumbered with much of the baggage associated with defense of the Soviet Union, New Leftists schooled themselves in the movement atmosphere of anti-war, civil rights, and early feminist agitations, separating their thought and action, in many ways, from the legacies of Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin, if not of Marx. This willed to the New Left-influenced historians of the 1970s a conflicted radicalism and, with the failure of the oppositional momentum of the 1960s to sustain itself, insured that the scholarly rebirth of American Communism’s assessment would be characterized not only by deep commitments and passions, but by specific limitations.

An initial irony of this revival of interest in the CP among New Left-influenced historians was that the typical Communist memoir that began to appear in the 1970s and 1980s was quickly championed as a “distinctively American” voice of revolutionary authenticity.³² Historians embedded in the context of the 1960s, one part of which was a heady search for an oppositional politics untainted with the problematic lapses of Stalinism, would, oddly enough, return to the experience of Stalinism “in one country” as a wellspring for radicalism’s American revival. That they were able to do so, it might be suggested, was precisely because the New Left in the US, for all its strengths, never wrestled adequately with issues that were central to the Communist milieu in the 1920s, when the ideology of Stalinism (its programmatic wheels

³¹See Judy Kaplan and Linn Shapiro (eds.), *Red Diapers: Growing Up in the Communist Left* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Paul Buhle (ed.), *History and the New Left: Madison, Wisconsin, 1950–1970* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Maurice Isserman, *If I Had A Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); Max Gordon, “The Communist Party of the 1930s and the New Left,” *Socialist Revolution*, 6 (January–March, 1976), 11–66. For another perspective on growing up Communist see Ann Kimmage, *An Un-American Childhood: A Young Woman’s Secret Life Behind the Iron Curtain* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1996). It is critical to note that I am referring to the United States New Left, a different phenomenon than the British New Left that preceded it and that had a much different relationship to the international Communist movement. See, for a brief introduction to the relevant political scene in Britain, David Widgery (ed.), *The Left in Britain, 1956–1968* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).

³²See the argument in Roy Rosenzweig, “Oral history and the Old Left,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 24 (Fall, 1983), esp. 32–33.

greased by a powerful bureaucratic apparatus) triumphed over Trotsky's Left Opposition and its advocacy of "permanent revolution."³³

One part of this avoidance of specific issues of theory and programmatic direction was historiographic. With the turn to a social history of rank-and-file experience, characteristic of the intellectual climate of the 1970s,³⁴ questions of leadership and of ideas assumed, initially at least, an almost inconsequential status. New Left-influenced studies carved out appreciations of Communist history that highlighted discrete experiences and particular locales, and in so doing added immeasurably to the scholarship of the revolutionary left.³⁵ Secondary cadre, on whom could never be placed the blame of decision-making and the responsibility for the direction of politics, but who were the recipients of an understandable reverence due "lives in the struggle," were often feted, their remembrances of activist pasts especially attractive to New Left historians and writers drawn to those who had taken life's meaning to be defined by unyielding opposition to oppression.³⁶

As Geoff Eley has suggested with respect to this historiographic trend: "The pull towards social history can sometimes diminish the significance of formal communist affiliations, leading in extreme cases (mainly in the literature of the CPUSA) to a history of communism with the Communism left out."³⁷ When ideas were somewhat later taken seriously, as in Paul Buhle's creative account of *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Left* (1987), Communism's Comintern program was seldom highlighted, and the depiction of the formative years of the CP tilted noticeably toward the cultural

³³Aside from the Rosenzweig article cited above see, among other statements, Gary Gerstle, "Mission from Moscow: American Communism in the 1930s," *Reviews in American History*, 12 (December, 1984), 559–566; Paul Buhle, "Historians and American Communism: an Agenda," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 20 (Fall, 1981), 38–45; Kenneth Walzer, "The new history of American Communism," *Reviews in American History*, 11 (June, 1983), 259–267; Maurice Isserman, "Three generations: historians view American Communism," *Labor History*, 26 (Fall, 1985), 538–545. An historiographical exception is Goldfield, "Recent historiography of the Communist Party USA," 315–356.

³⁴As Paul Berman and Paul Buhle have noted, the 1960s was arguably a decade whose radicalism was associated with social history, as the novel was linked to the bohemian radicalism of the 1910s, or literary criticism associated with the proletarian currents of the 1930s. See Paul Berman, "The world of the radical historian," *Village Voice* (March 18, 1981), cited in Paul Buhle, "Madison: an introduction," in Buhle (ed.), *History and the New Left: Madison, Wisconsin, 1950–1970* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 2.

³⁵Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, is a particularly well-researched and significant book. Less successful is Paul Lyons, *Philadelphia Communists, 1936–1956* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982).

³⁶This was certainly the tenor of Vivian Gornick's consciously personalized/popularizing and uncritical account, premised on a series of oral histories, in *The Romance of American Communism* (New York: Basic Books, 1977). More useful, and more understandable given its focus on individuals associated with Hollywood, is Patrick McGilligan and Paul Buhle (eds), *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997).

³⁷Geoff Eley, "International Communism in the heyday of Stalin," *New Left Review*, 157 (January–February, 1986), 92. See, as well, Raphael Samuel, "The lost world of British Communism," *New Left Review*, 154 (November–December, 1985), 3–53; Samuel, "Staying power: the lost world of British Communism" (Part II) *New Left Review*, 156 (March–April, 1986), 63–133; Samuel, "Class politics: the lost world of British Communism" (Part III) *New Left Review*, 165 (September–October, 1987), 52–91.

and distanced itself from the political.³⁸ But paralleling this historiographic initiative was a politics that consciously strove to promote American Communism as an indigenous radicalism that both grew in the social soil of the US during the 1930s and 1940s and influenced the wider political environment.

A Palatable Periodization and Popular Frontism

These were also times when Stalinism was most palatable to Americans who were either out of work, intent on supporting mass production unionism, or at war with a declared enemy of the Soviet Union, fascist Germany. “Home-grown” Communists struggled to improve the lot of the American people, and were often in the forefront of democratic initiatives, opposing racism, favoring trade unionism, and standing firm in the war effort.³⁹ As a consequence, outside of small contingents of the anti-Stalinist left,⁴⁰ and placing aside the few years of the Hitler–Stalin pact (when state repression of Communists and vigilante-like popular hostility did indeed run high), the Communist Party had a relatively easy ride through the political culture of the late 1930s and early-to-mid 1940s.

In its American guise, Stalinism’s agenda understated the need for socio-economic transformation. Whether this deflected the combative demands of workers is something of an open question, but there is no doubt that in “making the political turn” to Popular Frontism and Browder’s equation of Communism with 20th-century Americanism, Stalinism within the US conditioned specific accommodations, especially in the 1941–45 years. Browder would later recall with boastful pride that the CP in the later 1930s and 1940s

moved out of its extreme left sectarianism ... toward the broadest united front tactics of reformism for strictly limited immediate gains. It delegated its revolutionary socialist goals to the ritual of the chapel and Sundays on the pattern followed by the Christian Church. On week-days it became the most single-minded practical reformist party that America ever produced.

In Browder’s admittedly self-serving judgement, the Communist Party of this period “buttressed the Roosevelt New Deal and postponed revolutionary prospects immediately.” Max Shachtman agreed: “The CP announced that socialism was not at all the goal, or even the issue in American politics; indeed,

³⁸Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Left* (London: Verso, 1991, 2nd ed.). Comparing Buhle to Stuart Macintyre, *A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain, 1917–1933* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980) is instructive because it poses a contrast between historiographies of ideas that are ordered by political as opposed to cultural concerns.

³⁹For a brief introduction see the discussion in Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 33, 45–46, 77–78; and the strained case of the CP as a cutting edge of American freedom presented in Eric Foner’s laudatory appraisal of the Popular Front in *The Story of American Freedom* (NY: Norton, 1999), 210–218.

⁴⁰See Alan M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), esp. 101–198; Judy Kutulas, *The Long War: The Intellectual People’s Front and Anti-Stalinism, 1930–1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

that the demand for socialism stood in the way of real progress.” The Party “became at first a tacit and then an open supporter of the Democratic party and the New Deal as the arena for a new political alignment for the country.”

One side of this was reformist commitment to a “progressive” bourgeois politics in which the rise of industrial unionism and the emergence of the welfare state loomed large domestically, and this accent figures prominently in the classical Popular Front history of the later 1930s. But this cannot be divorced from the Stalinized Comintern’s appreciation, given the disastrous consequences of Third Period sectarianism in making Hitler’s rise to power in Germany much easier, that national domestic “fronts” cultivating close ties with bourgeois democratic governments in the west would garner the Soviet state much needed support in its battle to beat back fascism.

This dawned on Stalin and other Comintern leaders strikingly in the post-1941 years, necessity being something of a mother of “programmatic” invention, the sordid non-aggression alliance of Russia and Germany implemented in 1939 proving predictably short-lived. Domestic politics pursued by various national Communist sections, including that of the US, were thus cut from the same cloth as Communist International policies. Indeed, the pattern had been set in the “socialist fatherland” at the Seventh Congress of the Communist International (1935) in Moscow, which codified the new People’s Front policy that all Communist Parties functioning under its leadership take as their guiding slogan the need to wage “The fight for peace and for the defense of the USSR.”

This broad approach to unity aligned class forces traditionally understood to be irreconcilable, even to the point of positing umbrella-like *national* coalitions under which class struggle was internationally subsumed in the interests of turning back the fascist threat to the Communist fatherland:

The concentration of forces against the chief instigators of war at any given moment (at the present time Fascist Germany ...) constitutes *the most important* tactical task of the Communist parties ... [T]he mutual relations between the Soviet Union and the capitalist countries have *entered a new phase* ... [making necessary] cooperation in the cause of the preservation of peace with the small states to whom war represents a special danger, as well as with *those governments which at the present moment are interested in the preservation of peace.*⁴¹

Whether the Popular Front was conceived in Moscow, Paris, or some other metropolitan center is far less significant than that it would never have been

⁴¹See Earl Browder, *The People’s Front* (New York: International, 1938); Browder, “The American Communist Party in the Thirties,” in Rita James Simon (ed.), *As We Saw the Thirties: Essays on Social and Political Movements of a Decade* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1967), 237, 246, quoted in part in Paul Le Blanc, “The rise of American Communism,” unpublished manuscript; Max Shachtman, “Radicalism in the Thirties: the Trotskyist view,” in Simon (ed.), *As We Saw the Thirties*, 33; Claudin, *Communist Movement*, 182–187. Eley, *Forging Democracy*, 261–298 presents an overview of developments in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s.

implemented had it not suited to a tee the needs of the political program of “socialism in one country.” Such a politics garnered something akin to mass support in America in the early-to-mid 1940s precisely because it had so little revolutionary content, and meshed well with the mainstream needs of US foreign/domestic policy.⁴² It could even justify the repression of other revolutionary leftists, for whom capitalist jail sentences were rationalized if such dissidents were judged insufficiently committed to the “patriotic cause.” Thus Earl Browder, the leading US Communist of the early-to-mid 1940s and a figure not without a high profile in international circles of the left, penned a 24-page typescript, “The Fifth Column Role of the Trotskyites in the United States,” that would be used in the prosecution of James P. Cannon and other Minneapolis-based members of the Socialist Workers Party [SWP] under the Smith Act (a 1941 conviction being upheld in a 1943 appeal). The Communist *Daily Worker* castigated Cannon and the SWP as little better than “the Nazis who camouflage their Party under the false name, National Socialist Workers Party.”⁴³

Maurice Isserman’s *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (1982) is perhaps the single text that captures best this political trajectory, attempting to revive somewhat the fortunes of that champion of acclimatizing United States national identity and the politics of Communism, Earl Browder. Here was a figure who popularized Jefferson rather than Lenin, a leader on the left whose fortunes rose and fell with the Popular Front and American involvement in World War II. But in resurrecting Browder and the Popular Front, Isserman rationalizes subduing the revolutionary content of US Communism, precisely because that had been Browder’s role during the 1930s and 1940s. Stalinism had some necessity to don small fig leaves of revolutionary intent, the better to keep alive the illusion that it retained a commitment to world revolution this meant that, in the aftermath of World War II, Browder was quickly displaced to the ranks of disillusioned ex-Communists and crank commentators on political economy.⁴⁴ So, too, would capitalism move on to more aggressive ground in its crystallizing Cold War opposition to a Communism that was now constructed, not as a wartime ally, but as a demonic evil intent on conquering the “free world.”

The political accommodations evident in Isserman’s attraction to Browder and the Communist experience in wartime are at work as well in Michael

⁴²Consider, for instance, Eric Hobsbawm’s account of the Popular Front and, especially, his admiration for Franklin D. Roosevelt in Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), 322–323, 388, as well as the extraordinarily perceptive review by Perry Anderson, “The age of E.J.H.,” *London Review of Books*, 24 (3 October, 2002).

⁴³Philip J. Jaffe, *The Rise and Fall of American Communism* (NY: Horizon Press, 1975), 50–52.

⁴⁴Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1982); Jaffe, *The Rise and Fall of American Communism*; Joseph R. Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis, 1943–1957* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972). See also Fraser M. Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States: From the Depression to World War II* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1991); James G. Ryan, *Earl Browder: The Failure of American Communism* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1997).

Denning's exhaustive accounting of "the cultural front." In this reading, the Popular Front, a programmatic dictate/direction of the Communist International, is reconfigured as a left progressive "culturalism." Denning sees the Popular Front as vastly more significant than a Comintern policy, baptizing it with the sanctified Gramscian nomenclature of a "historic bloc," a social movement composed of non-Communist socialists and independent leftists, working with CP members, "a broad and tenuous left-wing alliance of fractions of the subaltern classes" that encompassed Frank Sinatra and Louis Armstrong as well as Paul Robeson. "[T]he rank-and-file of the Popular Front were the fellow travelers, the large periphery," asserts Denning, and "the periphery was in many cases the center, the 'fellow travelers' were the Popular Front." Eschewing what he regards as an antiquated fixation on *the Party*, Denning focuses not on politics but on prose and poetry, visual and theatrical productions, and varied genres. He offers an encyclopedic view of "progressive" culture in the 1930s and 1940s, sweeping across ballads and cartoons, ghetto pastorals and jazz. As a project of cultural recovery Denning's work is a *tour de force*, albeit one lacking in some necessary discrimination. But as an analytic contribution to the history of the left, *The Cultural Front* is conceptually flawed in its refusal to recognize that Stalinism did indeed matter, not only in the gestation of the Popular Front, but through its cultural manifestations as well.

Denning inevitably assimilates and congeals when there is a need to separate with discernment. C.L.R. James, in a 1938 publication such as *The Black Jacobins*, can not easily be molded to the same politics or aesthetics as Herbert Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts*. Nor can the art and mobilizing commitment of the International Labor Defense organization's work on the campaign to free Sacco and Vanzetti in the 1925–27 years be discussed in the same way as that body's meaning in the defense of the Scottsboro Boys in the early 1930s. If James accounts for the ways in which the struggle for emancipation—"national and racial"—intersected with a politics of the 1790s world-historic transformations that linked revolutions in France and Haiti, Aptheker's empirical accounting of slave uprisings, for all its strengths, makes few such connections.⁴⁵ And while ILD work in the mid-1920s was premised on genuine commitment to united front struggles, in which all segments of the left could march under their separate understandings of what constituted oppositional politics, the better to strike together on single issue campaigns in which the freedom of political prisoners was at stake, by the early 1930s this kind of non-sectarian activity was all too rare, and seldom was it initiated by the CP.

The most famous ILD work in the early 1930s, associated with a relatively successful defense campaign geared to save nine African American Alabama youths from being railroaded to the electric chair on groundless charges of

⁴⁵Consider the discussion in Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1979).

raping two white women, is highly complicated. An ultraleft swing in Comintern policy in the Third Period (1929–34) was paralleled in the CPUSA's commitment to the fight for racial equality, including its embrace of the nationalist "Black Belt Nation" thesis. This posited the right of national self-determination for American blacks in a specific cotton-producing region of the Deep South, a programmatic departure from both a Marxist materialist analysis of social relations in the US and from a politics of class struggle that would have bound black and white labor together as a leading force in the creation of a proletarian state.

Yet, there is no denying the unflinching nature of the CP's anti-racist work in the early 1930s; its characteristic Third Period sectarianism and willingness to espouse ultraleft positions were, ironically, a critical ladder on which could be scaffolded an audacious and genuinely revolutionary ascent into mass activity among American blacks. This registered in significant gains in organizing southern workers, particularly sharecroppers, whose unionization was a potential lever in prying apart the tight grip exercised by racism, debt peonage, and the open shop throughout the American South. So few were alternative anti-racist voices in the South, and so timid (and at times rabidly anti-communist) were organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, that the CP stepped very much into a void in its open espousal of racial equality and aggressive defense of blacks victimized by racist courts. As the case of the Scottsboro Boys showed clearly, rape charges were a tried and true method of publicly showcasing white power, the inviolable sanctity of a defense of white womanhood assailed by African-American "animal sensuality" being the standard by which ultimate race rule was often paraded before the public, and blacks terrorized into submission.

In the case of the ILD defense of the Scottsboro defendants, then, it is ultimately impossible to separate the extent to which the militancy of the CP raised the voice of African American protest in the South and won over black support from the extent to which its ultra-left sectarianism isolated Communists and possibly kept the movement to free victims such as the Scottsboro Boys shackled to an unnecessarily rigid and inflexible agenda. Certainly the CP adopted a sectarian stand toward the NAACP, leading one liberal to ask how it was possible to build a common struggle to free victimized African Americans when Communists were quick to castigate those not in their ranks as guilty of " 'treason,' alliance with the Ku Klux Klan, 'lyncher boss' tactics and anything else they see fit." Communists so dominated events like the 1933 "March on Washington," spearheaded by *Amsterdam News* publisher, William Davis (who found himself quickly shunted to the sidelines by the ILD machine), that some African American activists thought the Party was "polishing up the electric chair" for the Scottsboro Boys, so blatant were the calls to link the defense mobilization to the overall program of the Communist Party.

The ILD responded with a blanket condemnation of all segments of the "traitorous middle class," from Harlem ministers to the Socialist Party, accusing a wide array of individuals, black newspapers, and political organiza-

tions of everything from “Hitlerism to petty larceny.” Nevertheless, that said, there is no denying the important and militantly uncompromising steps forward taken by the ILD in the early 1930s, evidence of which is presented tellingly in Robin D. G. Kelley’s stimulating study of Alabama Communists and Mark Naison’s discussion of developments in Harlem. Yet it must also be remembered what happened when the Comintern “line” shifted in mid-decade: organized black sharecroppers found their unions liquidated by the CP in 1936, and there were troubling ramifications within the ILD as well.

With the proclamation of the Popular Front, the ILD lurched from its ultraleft sectarian stand to an abstentionist capitulation willing to hand the Scottsboro mobilization over to any and all comers. Now welcoming formerly designated “social fascists” with open arms, indeed withdrawing deeper and deeper into a background surprisingly devoid of left politics so that others could lead, the Communists of the ILD abandoned any pretense of an independent Communist defense stand built through a united front with all others committed to freedom for victims of racist repression such as the Scottsboro Boys. Predictably, having faced the contemptuous political assaults of CPers for a number of years, many in the defense milieu were having none of it. As a consequence much invaluable Communist work with black Americans was discarded as years of paced inactivity left the activism of the early 1930s little more than a distant memory. Whatever the difficulties Communists working in the ILD confronted in the 1920s, nothing approaching this twisted political experience of the 1930s, in which an isolating sectarianism was replaced by an accommodating abstentionism, took place.⁴⁶ To lump such dissimilar developments on the left together is possible only *if* the powerful politic of Stalinization is ignored.⁴⁷

At the Point of Embattled Historiographic Production: The Meanings of Theodore Draper

A further irony in the historiography of American Communism is that the New Left historians were, in their original engagement with memoir and in their further development of specific slices of CP history, almost always bumping up against the ghost of other memoir/scholarship. But that bumping would be of a particular kind. The central figure was Theodore Draper, who joined the

⁴⁶The above paragraphs on Scottsboro, the ILD, and the Communist Party draw on the brief discussions in Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 64–69, 251, 330–331; Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 78–91, with the entire book containing commentary on the wider struggles of the CP and African Americans in Alabama; Naison, *Communists in Harlem*; and for a sensitive account balancing Third Period problems and possibilities vis-a-vis work with African Americans, Mike Goldfield, “Recent historiography of the Communist Party, USA,” in Mike Davis, Fred Pfiel, and Michael Sprinker, (eds), *The Year Left: An American Socialist Yearbook* (New York: Verso, 1985), esp. 328–330. For a useful commentary on Kelley’s important work see Wald, *Writing from the Left*, 171–177. A recent state study of the Third Period is Robert W. Cherny, “Prelude to the Popular Front: the Communist Party in California, 1931–1935,” *American Communist History*, 1 (2002), 5–42.

⁴⁷Denning, *The Cultural Front*, esp. 4–13.

Communist student movement in the 1930s, but left this milieu after he thought through the full implications of the 1939 Hitler–Stalin pact. Thereafter, as with many ex-Communists who witnessed the revolutionary left as a “God that failed,”⁴⁸ Draper experienced something of a political transformation. His anti-Communism, however, was “liberal” rather than “reactionary,” let alone “neoconservative.” Over the course of the 1960s through the 1980s, Draper remained critical of much of US foreign policy in ways that differentiated him from the likes of Norman Podhoretz, Midge Decter, and Sidney Hook.

Draper’s obvious strengths as an historian were that he knew the CP well and had an eye for detail as well as a keen sense of archival preservation, gathering sources diligently and compiling extensive dossiers of communications/interviews with as many of the major figures in the formative years of US Communism as would engage with him. The former Communist eventually produced two impressive volumes, researched and written over the course of the mid-to-late 1950s, that addressed the founding years of US Communism in the 1920s. They are distinguished by their careful scholarship as well as their relentless interpretive insistence that American Communism, like all post-1921 Communist experience, was a “made in Moscow” affair.⁴⁹

Draper proved a convenient target for the “new” histories of US Communism that emerged in the 1980s. His perspective flew directly in the face of those who placed the accent on social histories of rank-and-file particularity, emphasized the indigenous roots and Americanized character of Communism, or asserted some kind of blend of international influence and national experience.⁵⁰ Few were the book prefaces or historiographic articles in the New Left revival of American Communism’s significance that did not dissent from Draper’s characterizations of the CP and its meaning. That Draper refused to lie down and politically die, and that he had, by the 1980s, access to the pages of some rather significant literary venues, such as the liberal-establishment publication, *The New York Review of Books*, insured that a debate over the interpretation of American Communism unfolded with vehemence.⁵¹

⁴⁸See Richard Crossman (ed.), *The God that Failed: A Confession* (NY: Harper & Brothers, 1949); Deutscher, “The ex-Communist’s conscience,” in *Marxisms, Wars & Revolution*, 49–59.

⁴⁹Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking, 1957); Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (NY: Viking, 1960).

⁵⁰Draper’s equivalent in Great Britain, perhaps, would be Henry Pelling, *The British Communist Party: A Historical Profile* (London: A. & C. Black, 1958). Recent revisionist historiography on the British CP rejects Pelling’s stress on the Party’s subordination to Moscow, and argues, albeit not from a social history/rank-and-file perspective, that the British Party was a master of its own fate. For an example of this scholarship see Andrew Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920–1943* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), and for a critical response see John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, “‘Nina Ponomareva’s hats’: the new revisionism, the Communist International, and the Communist Party of Great Britain,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 49 (Spring, 2002), 147–187; John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, “‘For a revolutionary workers’ government’: Moscow, British Communism and revisionist interpretations of the Third Period, 1927–1934,” *European Historical Quarterly*, 32 (2002), 535–569.

⁵¹See, for example, Isserman, *Which Side Are You On?*, vii–viii; Isserman, “Three generations”; Rosenzweig, “Oral history and the Old Left,” 32–33; Gerstle, “Mission from Moscow,” 559–566;

Draper rapidly became the key figure in a school of Communist studies labeled “political” or “institutional,” a pioneer who inspired advocates in a revived 1970s “traditionalist” anti-Communist cohort of writers headed by Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes.⁵² Klehr and Haynes were as out-of-favor with the New Left-influenced historians as was Draper, but like their detractors they usually took as their subject discrete periods or aspects of Communist studies that post-dated Draper’s attentiveness to the origins of US Bolshevism. When, in a Klehr–Haynes jointly-authored 1992 overview, *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself*, the duo ranged broadly if rather brusquely over 70 years of Communist history, Draper utilized the back cover of the book to declare that it would tell readers “as much as we are likely to know or care to know” about the tortured development of the CP.

Haynes, in particular, continued the useful bibliographic initiatives that flowed from the original Fund for the Republic-financed “communist problem” Clinton Rossiter-edited series that spawned Draper’s volumes.⁵³ In the 1990s aftermath of the Cold War, Klehr, Haynes, and others found further ammunition for their cause in the opening of the Soviet archives, which proved a boon for books on spies and “the secret world” of that age-old shibboleth, “Moscow gold,” or the financing of revolutionary activity by the Communist International, all of which merely confirmed the notion of Soviet “dominance.”⁵⁴

As the New Left waned and the political climate turned decisively to the right in the 1980s and 1990s, some 1960s scholars shifted sides and lined up more directly with the growing ranks of academic anti-Communism. Early bale-outs included Ronald Radosh, whose growing conviction of the guilt of the Rosenbergs moved him directly into the anti-Communism of the Klehr–

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Walzer, “New history of American Communism,” 259–267. Draper responded to the New Left-influenced histories in a two-part essay originally published in the *New York Review of Books* and later consolidated as an afterword to the 1986 republication of his *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York: Vintage, 1986), 445–482. See Draper, “American Communism revisited,” *NYRB*, 32 (May 9, 1985), 35–43; Draper, “Popular Front revisited,” *NYRB*, 32 (May 30, 1985), 38–47. Subsequent issues of the *NYRB* (August 15, 1985 and September 26, 1985) contained a series of letter exchanges that pitted Draper against almost all of the New Left-influenced combatants. Note as well Sean Wilentz, “Red herrings revisited: Theodore Draper blows his cool,” *Voice Literary Supplement* (June, 1986), 6. A further installment appeared in Draper, “The life of the party,” *NYRB*, 41 (January 13, 1994), 47.

⁵²Among their earlier writings see Harvey E. Klehr, *Communist Cadre: The Social Background of the American Communist Party Elite* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1978); Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic, 1984); Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself* (New York: Twayne, 1992); John Earl Haynes, *Dubious Alliance: The Making of Minnesota’s DFL Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

⁵³*Bibliography on the Communist Problem in the United States* (New York: Fund for the Republic, 1955); John Earl Haynes, *Communism and Anti-Communism in the United States: An Annotated Guide to Historical Writing* (New York and London: Garland, 1987).

⁵⁴See especially Harvey Klehr and Ronald Radosh, *The Amerasia Spy Case: Prelude to McCarthyism* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); John Earl Haynes, *Red Scare or*

Haynes camp.⁵⁵ More subtle, because they refused somewhat the binary oppositions and cloistered positionings of blunt Communist/anti-Communist designations, were the responses of New Left-inspired historians such as Maurice Isserman and Sean Wilentz, who were now far more willing to entertain the prospect that not all in the anti-Communist tradition was to be written out of a left-liberal coalition that increasingly wanted less and less to do with the belated discoveries of Stalinism's tainted past.⁵⁶

As much as the Cold War was at least militarily over, it thus continued among historians of American communism, where attachments to and repudiations of the Old Left remained strong as the 20th century closed. But the war had been de-escalated to a skirmish. Most commentators on the Communist past, whether they aligned themselves with the Communists (in part) or against them (in whole), had been drawn closer together by contemporary political events. Few New Leftists were as staunch in their willingness to embrace US Communism in the 1990s as they had been in the 1970s, while the once-beleaguered "traditionalists," following in Draper's footsteps but glossing over the period of the 1920s that their mentor had cultivated so closely, seemed buoyed by new evidence and a reconfigured political climate, in which Communism's reduction to an anachronism allowed longer-standing hostilities to the revolutionary project an increasingly free rein.⁵⁷

At issue was a deep historiographic irony in which Draper and the original New Left-inspired historians (now fragmenting into varied positions) shared a certain reverse reciprocity vis-a-vis their understandings of Stalinism. For the American New Left, Stalinism was, for the most part, the association of Communism and Comintern domination of American radicalism that their histories of locale, particularity, secondary cadre, and Browderesque Popular Frontism were at pains to deny. As such, these New Left historians engaged with Stalinism, ironically, by not engaging with it: they simply reversed Draper's construction of Communism = Moscow domination by declaring that

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Red Menace? American Communism and Anti-Communism in the Cold War Era (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996); Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes and Fridrikh Irorevich Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995); Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes and Kryill M. Anderson, *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998); Haynes and Klehr, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); James G. Ryan, "Socialist triumph as a family value: Earl Browder and Soviet espionage," *American Communist History*, 2 (2002), 125-142. Of course the "spy" phenomenon cut both ways. See, for instance, Daniel J. Leab, *I Was A Communist for the FBI: The Unhappy Life and Times of Matt Cvetic* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).

⁵⁵See Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton, *The Rosenberg File: A Search for the Truth* ((NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983).

⁵⁶Maurice Isserman, "Notes from the underground," *The Nation* (June 12, 1995), 846; Isserman, "Guess what—they really were spies," *Forward* (January 29, 1999); Isserman, "They led two lives," *New York Times Book Review* (May 9, 1999), 35; Sean Wilentz, "Seeing red," *New York Times Book Review* (January 21, 1996), 15-17.

⁵⁷Note the discussion in John Earl Haynes, "The Cold War debate continues: a traditionalist view of historical writing on domestic Communism and anti-Communism," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 2 (2000), 76-115.

American Communism = genuine, native-born radicalism. If they were able to recognize, as some indeed did abstractly, that the Communist Party of the United States was inevitably a blend of national and international developments, they looked incompletely at Comintern influences and, perhaps most importantly, they skipped almost entirely over the actual period of Stalinism's development by largely ignoring the 1920s and concentrating their researches in the 1930s and 1940s of the Popular Front and World War II.⁵⁸ Their gaze narrowly national, the American New Left largely averted its eyes from the show trials, repression, and terror of Stalin's USSR in the same period that it saw Communism mobilize the masses in a democratic US.⁵⁹ This insured that the New Left in the US missed not only the meaning of Stalinism, but the kernel of substantive research and a misnamed, bluntly formulated, "truth" that lay at the heart of Draper's problematic histories.⁶⁰

⁵⁸Fraser M. Ottanelli, *The Communist Party in the United States: From the Depression to World War II* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1991), seems to fit this pattern. It stresses (3–4) the need to balance rank-and-file-oriented histories of US Communism with appreciation of Comintern influences, crediting Draper with some insights and acknowledging the importance of social history findings. But the resulting book is very much premised on avoidance of the significance of Stalinism, and this is possible because Ottanelli misunderstands developments of the 1920s. In spite of characterizing the decade according to a periodization drawn from James P. Cannon's understandings of the period (outlined in *The First Ten Years of American Communism—Report of a Participant* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 16–19), Ottanelli misses Cannon's grasp of the relationship of factionalism and Stalinization within the linked histories of the Communist International and the United States Party. Ottanelli thus skims the surface of the 1920s, and claims that, "By 1930 the factionalism that had caused havoc in the Party throughout most of its short existence had ended. The Party was united around a new leadership which was to head it for the next fifteen years.... The new decade presented Communists with new challenges and opportunities which, having put factional strife behind them, they felt ready to seize" (9, 15–16). Harvey E. Klehr, *Communist Cadre: The Social Background of the American Communist Party Elite* (Stanford: Hoover Institute Press, 1978), 89, captures the significance of the ending of factionalism more correctly and more succinctly: "The Stalinization of the CPUSA was complete, and organized opposition to the party leadership ceased."

⁵⁹As an introduction only see Weissman, *Victor Serge: The Course is Set on Hope*; Christopher Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook: Marxist and Pragmatist* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), esp. 140–233; Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, 128–163; Alan Wald, *James T. Farrell: The Revolutionary Socialist Years* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 61–75; Preliminary Commission of Inquiry, *The Case of Leon Trotsky* (New York: Harper, 1937); Commission of Inquiry, *Not Guilty* (New York: Harper, 1938); Albert Glotzer, *Trotsky: Memoir & Critique* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1989), 235–281.

⁶⁰Perhaps the clearest example of this emerges in a text that, because of its focus on McCarthyism and the 1950s, falls largely outside of my discussion of mainstream Communist historiography, with its emphasis on the 1930s and 1940s. Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), contains a justifiable attack on the McCarthyite witch-hunt that nevertheless manages to evade discussion of Stalinism by congealing *all* elements of the highly differentiated anti-Stalinist left and assimilating them to a generalized "intelligence service" for McCarthyism's repressive anti-Communist network. That elements of what had been an anti-Stalinist left in the 1930s moved decidedly to the right (Lovestone is perhaps the best example) and by the 1950s had made common cause with "official anti-communism," including the CIA and the State Department, is undeniable. But to claim that *all* on the anti-Stalinist left had such a trajectory is intellectually and politically irresponsible. See *Many Are the Crimes*, xii, 75–76, 81, and the criticism of Schrecker in Julius Jacobson, "Revising the history of Cold War liberals," *New Politics*, 7 (Winter, 2000). Note, for the Lovestoneite "Right opposition," Robert J. Alexander, *The Right Opposition: The Lovestoneites and the International Communist Opposition of the 1930s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1981); Ted Morgan, *A Covert Life: Jay Lovestone—Communist, Anti-Communist, and Spymaster* (New York: Random House, 1999).

The Three Drapers

This is evident in Draper's *development*, which few New Left-influenced social historians and none of Draper's so-called institutional followers address. In the interpretive canon of Communist historiography, *the* central strand of which can be dated from Draper's foundational contribution to the Fund for the Republic studies of the 1950s, there are in actuality three historically situated Drapers. Following his break from the politics of the organized left, Draper, for all his anti-Communism, shifted gears historiographically, working through his two volumes in the mid-to-late 1950s, seemingly in ways that ground down some of his original sensibilities, a process that became louder with his response to New Left history and commentary on Communist memoirs in the 1980s and 1990s.

First was the historian's Draper, a commentator who, whatever his anti-Communism tilt, could be counted on to scrutinize evidence and present it. Draper's first volume, *The Roots of American Communism* (1957) commenced with statements of analytic direction that many New Left-influenced historians (not to mention others) could well have accepted, or should have. Draper concluded his introduction to this initial study of the origins of the American revolutionary left with the improbable (in hindsight), if unchallengeably balanced, claim that, "Even in the days of Lenin" the period dealt with in this book, "Communism was not merely what happened in Russia; it was just as much what was happening in the United States." He ended his account of the early 1920s grappling with the seed of a degeneration he could not name—Stalinism: "For Moscow in 1923 was just entering on a period of fierce and ugly fratricidal struggle to determine the succession to Lenin's leadership in Russia. This struggle poisoned the life of the Comintern and seeped into the bloodstream of every Communist party in the world." Precisely because Draper's anti-Communism was, at the time of his writing *The Roots of American Communism*, already sufficiently entrenched, the ex-Communist could not address the possibility that Communism *per se* was not the original problem in this poison, but that the poison was a transformation of the Soviet revolutionary process over the course of the 1920s, a Stalinization that reversed the very meaning of revolution not only in Russia but around the world. Unable to accept that a Stalinism he could neither conceptualize as distinct from Leninist Communism nor address substantively on these terms of distinction was *not* simply a more universal politics of timeless "Moscow domination," Draper saw inevitability where historical contingency should have appeared.

This was the second Draper, the historian blinkered by an ideological shortsightedness that incapacitated him. He read the contests of 1923, when Comintern bureaucratization and Stalinist machination were in their nascent beginnings, in an exaggerated way, and he projected them both backwards in time and forward into the mid-to-late 1920s, which he was embarking on reconstructing in what would later appear as *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (1960). The result was a distortingly dismissive, almost biologically

determinative, understanding of revolutionary internationalism as pure and simple Communist dictation:

The first change of line was every other change of line in embryo. A rhythmic rotation from Communist sectarianism to Americanized opportunism was set in motion at the outset and has been going on ever since. The periodic rediscovery of “Americanization” by the American Communists has only superficially represented a more independent policy; it has been in reality merely another type of American response to a Russian stimulus. A Russian initiative has always effectively begun and ended it.

Draper’s ideological antagonism to Communism thus overwhelmed his scholarly insights. *The Roots of American Communism* ended on a note of premature judgement that would nevertheless capture a part of the future trajectory of Comintern–US–Communism relations: “something crucially important did happen to this movement in its infancy. It was transformed from a new expression of American radicalism to the American appendage of a Russian revolutionary power. Nothing else so important ever happened to it again.” Draper might well have reread the first two sentences of his book: “It is possible to say many true things about the American Communist movement and yet not the whole truth. It is possible to be right about a part and yet wrong about the whole.” A judicious reading of *The Roots of American Communism* would suggest that Draper was in fact more right than wrong, that he had many true things to say about the uneasy birth of American Communism, but that, ultimately, he succumbed to his own ideological blindspots and proved incapable of seeing the interpretive possibilities that an analysis of Stalinization would have provided, opting instead for an overly deterministic assertion of Communism’s inevitable reduction to Russian domination of the forces of world revolution, the American revolutionary left among them. The first and second Drapers thus struggled with one another in the publications of these two original Fund for the Republic volumes.⁶¹

The second Draper would of course win out. Stalin figured barely at all in *The Roots of American Communism*, understandably so given his less than central role in Russian revolutionary developments in the 1917–22 years which formed the core of Draper’s study. But in Draper’s sequel, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, it was inevitable that Lenin’s successor would enter more prominently onto the stage of Comintern politics and their meaning for the United States revolutionary left. Yet because Draper had concluded that Moscow domination of American and other Communist parties was an inherent feature of the Communist International, there proved no great need to analyze the nature of Stalinism, which, as a term used in this second of Draper’s volumes, is more of a description of the wielding of Communist power than an analytic lever used to pry open an interpretation of revolutionary degeneration.

⁶¹The above paragraphs quote from Draper, *Roots of American Communism*, 3, 10, 394–395.

Moreover, in *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, Draper tends increasingly toward a reductionist view of US Communism, highlighting factionalism in a disembodied way and understating the extent to which such factional struggle involved critical questions of programmatic direction, some of which related directly to mass struggles in the US, and all of which figured in whether or not American Communism would reach out to a wider constituency. For Draper, the meaning of American Communism was now settled, decisively and forever: “nothing and no one could alter the fact that the American Communist Party had become an instrument of the Russian Communist Party.... American Communism would continue above all to serve the interests of Soviet Russia.” This was not so much a product of Stalinist degeneration for Draper as it was a political *essence*: “Whatever has changed from time to time, one thing has never changed: the relation of American Communism to Soviet Russia. This relation has expressed itself in different ways, sometimes glaring and strident, sometimes masked and muted. But it has always been the determining factor, the essential element.”⁶²

It was precisely for this reason, Draper’s predetermined judgement that Communism was an organically flawed project destined to reproduce time and time again a subordination of American to Russian interests, that some Communists who lived through the struggles of the 1920s rejected Draper’s account. They recognized its strengths, but insisted that its weakness was a failure to grasp that there was more to US Communism’s uneasy formative years than Draper’s “cocksure interpretations and summary judgements” implied. Even ex-Communists with a profound, and rightward-leaning, aversion to Stalinism, prone to accept implicitly Draper’s interpretive stamping of Comintern–American relations with a “Made in Moscow” finality, recalled the early-to-mid 1920s differently.

Bertram Wolfe, for instance, suggested that prior to 1926, young US Communists, though inspired by the success of Lenin’s Bolsheviks, had “no thought of becoming a mere adjunct and agency of the Russian Communist Party.” Instructions from Moscow were never perceived as cast in authoritarian stone, but as “helpful suggestions, often exciting ones, and as successful examples to imitate, after adapting them to American conditions.” Improvising from day to day, Wolfe insisted, was the way in which the revolutionary left in the US worked. “Ours was an interesting game,” Wolfe claimed and, quoting Draper himself, he posited that the “rules had not yet been invented.” The Workers (Communist) Party that Wolfe and others were building was thus being shaped according to the will and commitment of American revolutionaries, albeit often in ways that struggled to “overcome those who wished to shape it according to their European traditions and loyalties,” many of whom, of course, were displaced, emigrant Marxists who found themselves uncomfortably living in the present US, when their thoughts and perspectives were rooted

⁶²Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 5, 440.

in an “alien” past. “It was still a time when nothing had taken permanent shape in our movement,” Wolfe argued.

Jay Lovestone echoed such views in his insistence that the Russian revolutionary leaders treated early American Communists “as equals, with equal respect: ... They were big men, and because they were big men they did not act in little or small ways.” If Russian influence was “decisive” and veneration of the Comintern leaders undeniable, Lovestone was adamant that Lenin, Zinoviev, Trotsky, and Radek never advocated or nurtured this. When Max Eastman later questioned Trotsky brusquely about the Comintern’s inclination to offer directives to American revolutionaries rather than treating “potential leaders of the world revolution” as independent thinkers, Trotsky’s somewhat nonchalant response undoubtedly reflected his recognition that, as Zinoviev’s bureaucratism gave way to Stalinization, and US Communist leaders sidestepped issues raised by the early Left Opposition, the question of national autonomy cut two ways: “In general,” Trotsky replied to Eastman, “we treat each of them according to what he deserves.”⁶³

For Draper, then, the notion that a Russian Bolshevik cadre, experienced in having made a revolution and dedicated to seeing that revolution spread around the world, might have something to contribute to American Communism was, in the aftermath of his departure from the Communist movement, anathema. Draper, his understanding of world Communism squeezed into the narrow confines of antagonism by the experience of Stalinism on the left *and* the Cold War pressures of the 1950s on the right, could only interpret the origins of the American revolutionary left with a telescoped hostility. He came to see narrowly, into a tunnel that began and ended with Moscow domination. Draper thus proved unable to draw a necessary distinction between advice and

⁶³See James P. Cannon, “A critical review of Theodore Draper’s history,” in Cannon, *The First Ten Years of American Communism: Report of a Participant* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 311–333. I read Cannon’s reviews of the two volumes, originally published separately, as being far more drawn to *The Roots of American Communism*, where Cannon’s praise is effusive, than to *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, where Cannon tackles more vociferously Draper’s problematic argument that American Communism’s “original sin” of attaching itself to the Russian Revolution “led it inexorably, from one calamity to another, and to eventual defeat and disgrace” (329). Although Cannon never drew a distinction between Draper’s two volumes, it is implicit in the differences in tone and substantive critique that characterize the two separate reviews. This is merited, I would suggest, because there is a shift in Draper’s tone and substantive argument between the two volumes. Moreover, it is surely not accidental that Draper, in the face of New Left histories, historiographic articles, and Communist memoirs of the 1970s and 1980s, republished his more aggressively critical and hostile volume, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (reprinted 1986), riposte to a historiography “soft” on Bolshevism. He did not reprint *The Roots of American Communism*, a book that could rightly have seen as more sympathetic to Communism until much later, when the post-1989 historical tide had turned. For other former Communists’ critiques of Draper see Herbert Benjamin, “Outline,” 108; and Earl Browder, quoted in Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?* ix; Browder to Draper, 16 March 1959, Series III, Box 18, Browder Papers. Wolfe is quoted in Bertram Wolfe, *A Life in Two Centuries: An Autobiography* (New York: Stein and Day, 1981), 229; Lovestone in Paul Le Blanc, “The rise of American Communism,” unpublished manuscript, citing Jay Lovestone, “Testimony of Jay Lovestone, Secretary, Independent Labor League of America,” *Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities in the United States: Hearings Before a Special Committee on Un-American Activities (Dies Committee), House of Representatives, 75th–76th Congresses* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1939–1940); and Trotsky in Eastman, *Love and Revolution*, 348–349.

guidance from a Comintern healthy in its commitment to world revolution, developed through consultation and genuine regard for the advancement of the revolutionary forces in the West, as existed in the dialogue between US Communists and their Soviet comrades in the early years of the 1920s, and a Comintern drifting into bureaucratization by 1925. This mid-1920s change, accelerating in the latter half of the decade, insured that the Comintern succumbed to the machinations and maneuvers characteristic of a Stalinization that made a mockery of revolutionary internationalism, caring only for the entrenched power of a new caste of Soviet officialdom and the material propping up of socialism's degeneration into a planned economy in one country.

When a former Communist such as Steve Nelson, who developed from a youthful rank-and-file figure in the CP in the 1920s to a major influence in the Party's New York leadership in the 1940s and 1950s, sidestepped the issue of American Communism's degeneration by referring to Communist "discipline" as perhaps making CP members "more vulnerable to Stalinism" (as if, over the course of the 1930s and 1940s, Stalinism was not an established foundation of Party life and politics), Draper saw more than red. This was the birth of the third Draper, the liberal Cold War warrior "gone ballistic." As historical writings in the 1980s increasingly castigated earlier accounts for their depiction of the CP as "a monolithic totalitarian organization whose history reflected the shifts and turns in the Comintern line," instead positing the need for histories of US Communism as "an authentic expression of American radicalism," Draper moved into a crankier articulation of his hostility to the Communist Party and its meaning. If his critical engagement with so-called "new" histories of Communism did indeed strike appropriately at many vulnerabilities, over time Draper grew more and more likely to slip into attacks that, in their demand that Stalinist foibles and much worse be resolutely identified, often lapsed into complacent acquiescence with respect to the unsavoriness of the Cold War right, all too evident in the 1950s. His barbs were now flung as much at the New Left as against the Old. Something had been sacrificed as the first Draper gave way to the third.⁶⁴

⁶⁴Steve Nelson, *American Radical*, 246. The problem with Nelson's formulation of issues of Communist discipline and their relation to Stalinism is not so much conceptual as historical. Lenin's development of Party discipline and the emergence of a "machinery" of Bolshevism in the pre-Revolution and immediate post-1917 years undoubtedly presented opportunities for Stalin to seize that "machinery" and change its meaning by severing the Party from its historic relation to revolutionary ideas. In this sense, as Trotsky noted, Stalin was in part a creation of the Bolshevik "machine," which in turn came to be taken over by an individual who personified its negation. To pose the issue of the revolutionary Party and its degeneration in this way, in the Soviet Union of 1921–26, is one thing, but to suggest that this interpretation is easily transferable to the experience of US Communism in the 1930s ignores the extent to which the Soviet Party, the Comintern, and the US Communist Party had already succumbed to Stalinization by this late date. See Trotsky, *Stalin*, xv. Note on Draper and the New Left, Walzer, "New history of American Communism," 259–260, 266; Gerstle, "Mission from Moscow," 561, 563–564. Draper's broadside rejoinder, a two-part NYRB essay, is republished in the 1986 edition of *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 445–482. Draper's later attack on Eric Foner's *The Story of American Freedom*, "Freedom and its discontents," *New York Review of Books* (September

Making the Communist Biographical Turn: Stalinism Sidestepped

Scholarship in the 1990s that addressed US Communism has relied very much on Draper's original contribution. Much of this work, where it has not drawn somewhat mechanically from Draper's "Soviet domination" argument, as in the writing of the Klehr–Haynes "traditionalist" cohort, with its fixation on the "secret" and "soviet" worlds of US Communism as revealed in newly-released Moscow documents,⁶⁵ has taken individual Communists of longstanding significance in the American movement as its subject.

Close examinations of the "making" of Communists, their origins in specific kinds of class struggles and attractions to the ideas, disciplines, and potential of a revolutionary party linked to the first successful proletarian state, illuminate the experience of Communism with a sense of development and detail that is often lacking in more general studies. Such disciplined, archival-based, biographical study, reaching well beyond "memoir," is relatively new within Communist historiography, and is beginning to register both internationally and within the US.⁶⁶ This is especially evident in what are undoubtedly the best recent contributions to American Communist studies, sophisticated biographies of the syndicalist turned Communist, William Z. Foster, by Edward P.

Footnote continued

23, 1999), may have been prompted by some legitimate concerns, but it seemed shrill given the limited treatment Foner afforded the Popular Front (210–218), and it exposed how Draper was now capable of overreaching himself in rejecting all arguments that claimed the need for a critical engagement with the deficiencies evident in American democracy. This led Draper to whitewash the role of Sidney Hook and the American Committee for Cultural Freedom in the ugliness of 1950s anti-communism. See Jacobson, "Revising the history of Cold War liberals."

⁶⁵The central texts here are Klehr, Haynes, and Firsov, *Secret World of American Communism*; and Klehr, Haynes, and Anderson, *Soviet World of American Communism*.

⁶⁶John McIlroy, Kevin Morgan and Alan Campbell (eds), *Party People, Communist Lives: Exploration in Biography* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2001), commence with the statement that "Communist historiography has in the main been impoverished by its disregard of biography" (5). Kevin Morgan's opening chapter, "Parts of people and Communist lives," (9–28) makes a case for biography's contribution, and subsequent chapters provide glimpses of biographical potential. In Canada the first truly sophisticated biographical treatment appeared only recently, David Frank, *J.B. McLachlan: A Biography* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1999). On the lack of biography in international Communist historiography, note especially Perry Anderson, "Communist Party history," in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 150–156; and the essays in E.J. Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries: Contemporary Essays* (NY: Pantheon, 1973), 3–54. In the *Bibliography on the Communist Problem in the United States* (New York: Fund for the Republic, 1955), the entry on biography constituted slightly more than one page in a 474-page text. Other bibliographies, such as Joel Seidman, *Communism in the United States: A Bibliography* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1969), are not organized in such a way as to access biographical material. John Earl Haynes, *Communism and Anticommunism in the United States: An Annotated Guide to Historical Writings* (New York and London: Garland, 1987), repeats entries throughout various sections, but, even allowing for this exaggeration in the biographical realm, contains a total of 50 pages out of 321 that relate in the most loose way to biographical writing. Extremely useful are recent compilations such as Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas (eds), *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992). For a psychological discussion that refuses a crude antihumanism and posits the need for a scientific Marxist humanism, in which the accent on forms of individuality and a theory of the individual could well be developed to sustain a biographical approach to the origins of the revolutionary left, see Lucien Seve, *Man in Marxist Theory and the Psychology of Personality* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1978).

Johanningsmeier and James R. Barrett. Each text, moreover, addresses seriously the formative decade of American communism, the 1920s, Foster's history necessitating a return to this critical period upon which Draper concentrated but few New Left histories probed. These histories now stand as the most accomplished accounts of the origins of the American revolutionary left. Yet it would be fair to say that neither places Stalinism at their analytic core, although it is difficult not to see what they regard as the tragic dimensions of Foster's revolutionary life as in some senses framed by the political defeat that Stalinism designates. This takes us, inevitably, into an appreciation of the international meaning and making of Communism, and the particularities of its expressions in the US.

Both books literally begin with Draper. (Johanningsmeier acknowledges Draper's volumes as the most thorough and insightful of all Party histories, where Barrett quotes Draper on the first page of his study.) Foster, whose impressive early years as a labor organizer encompassed pre-Communist mass production union drives in the meatpacking and steelworking industries, joined the Communist (Workers) Party late in 1921, although his membership was kept under wraps for some time. One of Bolshevism's most celebrated "trade union" catches, Foster was a committed revolutionary, and in his legendary exploits in the mining districts or among needle trade workers he exhibited the kinds of courage, tenacity, and commitment that earned him the respect, even reverence, of militants in countless US workplaces, where enclaves of radicalism survived throughout the deadening political climate of the mid-to-late 1920s.

Yet for all of this, Foster was destined to be battered from political pillar to proverbial post in the Stalinist factional machinations that dominated his first decade in the Communist movement. The experience, coupled with the constant harassment provided by the forces of US anti-Communism, a grueling early-1930s Presidential campaign and, possibly, the frustration of his vain ambitions, brought Foster to a debilitating 1932 nervous breakdown that sidelined him for 3 years. It no doubt accommodated the once defiant revolutionary to whatever the thoroughly Stalinized Comintern had in store for him, the feisty mass leader reduced to an unseemly supplicant, waiting on Moscow's decisions to haul him out of the shadows and place him, once again, in the forefront of revolutionary agitation.⁶⁷ Stalinism, as the defeat of proletarian internationalism, is central to this Fosterian tragedy. Johanningsmeier and Barrett chart a sure interpretive course toward just this kind of analysis, although neither author addresses Stalinism frontally, and they diverge in their

⁶⁷Edward P. Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); James R. Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999). The advances of these texts over a past treatment of Foster, written by his secretary and research assistant over the course of the 1950s, are monumental. See Arthur Zipster, *Workingclass Giant: The Life of William Z. Foster* (NY: International, 1981).

understandings of what is at stake in grasping Foster's, and Communism's, failures.

Johanningsmeier concludes his assessment of Foster on a highly subjective note, suggesting that "it was finally his voiceless rage that formed the inviolable core of his identity ... because his anger always survived the test of his skepticism." Alienated always, Foster was capable of holding "many convictions ... their multifariousness and the ease with which he embraced, abandoned, or renounced them ... defin[ing] his career for most observers." This ostensibly pragmatic outlook, which christened Foster with the nickname "Zig-Zag" in some non-Stalinist left circles was, for Johanningsmeier, "adaptive, experimental, and innovative" at its best, an "aggressive modernism" that marked Foster as "a truly American radical," albeit one that ironically and tragically did not ever quite come to understand himself as "fully the product of the society he so despised."⁶⁸

Foster's failures thus lay within his complex and cross-purposed subjective identity. On one level this is a truism, in as much as all individuals choose specific life/political courses, but on another it bypasses *political* explanation, in as much as it thoroughly marginalizes the very Stalinism that conditioned the jettisoning of Marxist principle and program in varied and oscillating adaptations, opportunisms, and underminings of principle. The culmination of these would be the repudiation of revolution's ultimate project and, in the case of figures such as Foster, a bartering of revolutionary possibility for the security of a lesser, personally aggrandizing, "place" in the movement that claimed to be something other than what it was. To be sure, that process of exchange was not without its individual costs, ironies, and tragedies, but it could not have happened outside of the larger structure of subordinating political defeat that was evident in Stalinism's consolidation throughout the latter half of the 1920s, and that then proved the sad continuity within which Foster lived out his remaining decades as a compromised revolutionary.

Barrett reaches for a more political reading of the tragedy of American radicalism and, ironically, it is one that he comes to by blending the counterposed views of Draper and the New Left. Insistent that the lessons to be learned from Foster's life are not those of radicalism's inevitable defeat, but the "importance of rooting ... politics in everyday life, in the political and cultural traditions of our own society, and in the democratic aspirations of our own society," Barrett speaks in the language of the New Left. But in acknowledging that Foster himself was a product of the US industrial and political environment, a revolutionary who assimilated the lessons of American conditions, Barrett also confronts the extent to which Foster adapted his organizational strategies and capacities to lead effectively to Comintern influences, bending his will and his creative class impulses to that of the Party. On this terrain, Barrett crosses over to Draper's turf, his vocabulary becoming one of "Soviet domination." The tragedy of Foster, in Barrett's presentation, is that

⁶⁸Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism*, 353–354.

he could not sustain his American-born revolutionary talents and dedications without sacrificing them before the altar of Party exigencies, the determinations of which took place in the Soviet Union. “The Communist prescription,” for Barrett, failed “the vision of a more just and democratic American society” that had originally animated Foster and that must, according to Barrett, continue to be the foundation of efforts to create our history anew.⁶⁹

This attractively-argued assessment of Foster and the US Communist experience appeals to the radicalisms of our time because it raises a series of critical questions. How are revolutionary experiences situated in what Eric J. Hobsbawm has referred to as the universal experience of Communist Party formation, the marriage of “a national left and the October Revolution?” This was a union, according to the British Marxist historian that, in earlier times such as the pivotal 1920s, proved to be one of both love and convenience, precisely because 1917 was still very much a galvanizing, inspirational force on the left, and was widely perceived as an authoritative center of revolutionary accomplishment.⁷⁰

How does this historical actuality mesh with democratic aspirations, struggling to be fulfilled in the stark face of capitalist hegemony’s capacity to mask autocracy in the ideology of “equal opportunity,” the counter to which many militants have believed, and continue to claim up to this day, is a disciplined collectivism? Foster is himself an excellent case study of an American radical who came to believe fervently that political solutions to these and other dilemmas were nowhere to be found if not through the defeat of capitalism, which, surely, has never been going to relinquish itself without a fight. What all of this boils down to, bluntly put, is a basic question: is there now, and has there ever been, a necessity for a Communist Party? Foster came to answer in the affirmative, but because the experience of American Communism was an uneasy affair from its inception, his history is a troubled one, as indeed is the development of any figure of importance in the history of the revolutionary ranks in that most inhospitable of climates for the political left, the United States.

To probe that uneasiness in its formative period, the 1920s, it is necessary to return to the origins of the American revolutionary left, to trace the tributaries of diverse origins that fed this swift river of early anti-capitalist sentiment and militant practice, and to explore the current that eventually drove it forward and, ultimately, diverted its direction, the relationship of the Comintern and American Bolshevism. Was Communist internationalism, as Draper always insisted, and increasingly so in his more truculent later writing, inherently incompatible with an indigenous American revolutionary left? Barrett suggests as much, but he does so by sidestepping the possibility that “Communist prescription” had, in a larger international tragedy, been turned into its opposite by the degenerating politics of 1920s Stalinization, a defeat it is

⁶⁹Barrett, *Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism*, 273–277. See, as well, Barrett, “William Z. Foster,” in Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle and Harvey J. Kaye (eds.), *The American Radical* (NY and London: Routledge, 1994), 197–203.

⁷⁰Eric J. Hobsbawm, “Problems of Communist history,” in Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries*, 3.

possible to reverse in our time only by beginning with the need to address its constitution and its meaning historically.⁷¹

A central concern of Communist scholarship in the United States, the fixation on “foreign domination,” can thus only be addressed substantively when the historical significance of Stalinization is appreciated. This issue has vexed writing on the American revolutionary left for decades, now no less so than in the 1950s. Only if we are capable of seeing Stalinism’s degenerations, and how they registered in the transformation of Soviet politics and the role of the Comintern over the course of the 1920s can we appreciate what was the foundational premise of the American revolutionary left. Figures such as James Cannon invested their revolutionary lives of sacrifice in the genuine, and not misguided, belief that a healthy and victorious proletarian state, and the arm it created to sustain revolution abroad, the Communist International, could well advise national sections of the Communist movement in various matters.

But crude dictation and unassailable directives were not generally the mode of political interchange in this original give-and-take among revolutionaries. Influence and rational argument through instruction, justified by experience, and willingly acceded to by foreign Communists who looked to the Russian revolutionaries for guidance, can by no means be comparable to the bureaucratized and, later, thoroughly Stalinized, practices of the Comintern, in which “orders” were conveyed from Moscow to various Communist Parties around the world. At issue was not so much the formal separation of Communist discussion, debate, and decision, arrived at often in Moscow in the early years of the revolutionary Comintern, and the method of ultimate Stalinist authority typical of the post-1928 years, but the *programmatic* divide that ran

⁷¹A similar theme of tragedy is trumpeted in James G. Ryan, *Earl Browder: The Failure of American Communism* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1997). Ryan refers to historians utilizing the term *Stalinist* with considerable care, as if the very concept of Stalinism was somehow suspect (2). This echoes arguments made in Kevin Morgan, “Parts of people and Communist lives,” which posits the existence of a post-Stalinist left. I am unconvinced by this kind of argument, which was in some ways refuted by E.P. Thompson in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Merlin, 1978), 328–331. Works such as Ryan’s, capable of evading Stalinist terror on the grounds that it did not happen in Browder’s America, indicate that Stalinism within the Communist International and various national Communist Parties can be glossed over rather easily. Browder’s elevation to a position of leadership is nevertheless unintelligible in the absence of Stalinization, one part of which was juggling party factions in foreign sections in order to destabilize leading cadre, so that a sustained challenge to the Comintern’s oscillating program, orchestrated by a commitment to secure Stalin and the politics of “socialism in one country” dominance, could never arise. The failure to grapple with this Stalinism mars Ryan’s treatment of Browder, as well as the discussion of another major Communist figure of the 1920s, Jay Lovestone. Ted Morgan, *A Covert Life: Jay Lovestone—Communist, Anti-Communist, and Spymaster* (New York: Random House, 1999) is perhaps the most disappointing of recent biographies from the standpoint of sophistication of Communist scholarship. Isaac Deutscher addressed the issue of post-Stalinism far more convincingly than Morgan, who largely seems to want to drop contemporary reference to the phenomenon. Deutscher wrote in 1953, reflecting on Stalin’s death and the “moral climate” of a post-Stalin Russia: “As society’s guardian Stalin exercised control so tyrannically that he deprived his ward of any intrinsic political identity. In time Soviet society grew tired of the harness of Stalinism and was anxious to throw it off; but it had also grown so accustomed to the harness that it could take no step without it.” See Deutscher, *Russia After Stalin* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953), esp. 95–96; and also Deutscher, *Heretics and Renegades and Other Essays* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969).

through a politics of revolution, in which the content of that politics was forever changed, as Stalinism hardened the arteries of the beating heart of proletarian revolution.

This shifts our concerns, recasting issues of national domination and refocusing our attention on Communism's potential, thwarted by Stalinism, to build revolutionary internationalism. Few national sections of the Comintern have experienced "tragedy" more pointedly than the Polish KPP, and fewer still have found sorrier, if passionate, refuge in nationalist mythologies. Yet as Deutscher concluded his 1958 discussion of this unfortunate history, revolutionary Marxism can never find comfort in a program of parochial national self-determination:

Poland ... absorbed from the Russian Revolution its shadows as well as its lights and took over from it, together with the blessings of a progressive upheaval in social relationships, the curse of bureaucratic terror and the Stalin cult.... History so far has not always been a good and sensible teacher. The lessons in internationalism which it attempted to teach the Polish masses were singularly involved, badly thought out, and ineffective. During almost every one of these "lessons," history mocked and insulted Poland's national dignity and, in the first place, the dignity and independence of the Polish revolutionary movement. Is it surprising then, that the "pupil" has not been very receptive, and, trying to escape the peculiar "teacher," has sought refuge in the jungle of our nationalist legends? The Polish masses will understand that the bonds which unite their destiny with that of the Russian and other revolutions are indissoluble, but only after they have recovered from the blows and shocks inflicted on them in the past, and when they feel that nothing can ever again threaten their independence and national dignity. Marxists, however, must rise above the shocks and the traumas from which the masses suffer; and they must even now be deeply and thoroughly aware of the common destiny of Poland and other nations advancing towards socialism. Marxists have no right to nourish themselves, nor to feed others, on the spiritual diet of stale and warmed-up myths and legends. Socialism does not aim at the perpetuation of the nation state; its aim is international society. It is based not on national self-centredness and self-sufficiency, but on international division of labour and co-operation. This almost forgotten truth is the very ABC of Marxism.... [W]hat is at stake this time is the "organic integration" of Poland into international socialism, not her incorporation into a Russian Empire.⁷²

These words, with their reference to the indissoluble bonds of revolution, are more difficult to appreciate in 2003 than they were in 1958. Our attention is not now fixed on dissident Communist uprisings in Eastern Europe. Rather, what looms before us is the final, decisive 1989 defeat of the Soviet Revolution,

⁷²Deutscher, "The Tragedy of the Polish Communist Party," 126–127.

a world historic event as earth-shattering in its consequences as that of its predecessor, the Bolshevik seizure of state power in 1917.

It is this final “death” of a Communism long-ago stifled and suffocated by Stalinism that has dominated international relations in our times, establishing a new Russian regime of capitalist restoration feeding brutally off the primitive accumulations of past socialist attainment and unleashing a threatening period of global destabilization and imperialist aggression, the catastrophic implications of which have yet to run their final destructive course. Yet such a defeat, however telling its blows, must not be allowed, intellectually or politically, to condition defeatism. Against the events of our time, anything but propitious for socialists and socialism, it is critical to reestablish the parameters of possibility in which a new and just world can be, first, envisioned, and second, made.

A small blow can be struck in resurrecting the history of the revolutionary left, wherein lie, often obscured and buried under the debris of previous misinterpretations, the programmatic orientations that direct the more substantial and mandatory interventions and struggles of political activity.⁷³ In this undertaking the revolutionary internationalism that Deutscher championed 45 years ago is as necessary and obvious a strategic direction for the left now as it was then. This organic Communist integration, whereby national “self-determination” in the sphere of revolutionary politics is constructed within a healthy dialogue among international sections united on a principled programmatic basis, constitutes a globalization of the left, in which the rebirth of a Communist International is of fundamental importance. For all the roadblocks barring easy entry to this end, it remains the surest route through and past what many historians of US Communism designate the “tragedies” of American radicalism.

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⁷³See, for example, the recent collection of documents associated with a struggle for programmatic clarity within the early Trotskyist movement in the United States: *Dog Days: James P. Cannon vs. Max Shachtman in the Communist League of America, 1931–1933* (NY: Prometheus Research Library, 2002).

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