

Communism and the American Intellectuals

from the Thirties to the Eighties

Sidney Hook

In the fall of 1932, an interesting event occurred of profound symbolic significance for the development of radical political thought and activity in the United States. A pamphlet was published entitled *Culture and the Crisis*, in which about thirty leading literary and cultural figures, of whom perhaps Edmund Wilson, Sherwood Anderson, and John Dos Passos were the best known, endorsed the candidacy of William Z. Foster and James W. Ford, the presidential and vice-presidential nominees of the American Communist Party. This was the first time in the history of American thought that an organized group of intellectuals had committed themselves to the support of a social philosophy totally at variance with the American democratic system. To be sure, early in the century a number of literary figures had associated themselves with the Intercollegiate Socialist Society, which later developed into the League for Industrial Democracy. But they were not regarded as fundamentally alien to American radical traditions and did not suffer from association with a foreign country whose openly declared purpose was the overthrow of democratic regimes.

The direct political effects of *Culture and the Crisis*, together with the League for Professional Groups that grew out of it, which generously estimated numbered several hundred members, was negligible. But it did establish a pattern of cultural organization and penetration of American life in the mid-thirties. To the leaders of the American Communist Party, it meant that their movement had broken out of its isolation from American cultural life.

The American Communist Party was a small sectarian party embracing hardly a hundred thousand men and women in its heyday. Nonetheless, through a network of organizations like the League of American Writers, the American Artists

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Congress, the Theatre Arts Union, and the League Against War and Fascism, renamed the League for Peace and Democracy after the Seventh Congress of the Communist International, it was able to dominate the cultural life of the country, split the socialist and labor movement, and make a shambles of the union of liberal forces in the nation. More indicative of the deceptive way they operated than symbolic of their influence was the fact that they were able, through fellow-traveling intermediaries, according to Donald Ogden Stewart, to line up none other than Franklin Delano Roosevelt as a member of the League of American Writers. The Communists and their vast peripheral organizations suffered a severe setback during the period of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, but after Hitler invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, and after Pearl Harbor, they regrouped and regained much of their influence among a new generation of intellectuals. Their second setback occurred when the Kremlin ditched Earl Browder, the American Communist leader who had served it faithfully, when Stalin openly resumed the cold war against the West. It was finally eclipsed after the butchery of the Hungarian revolutionists and Khrushchev's revelations of the monstrous crimes of Stalin, which exceeded by far the worst accusations of the severest critics of the Soviet Union.

From the very outset, the American Communist movement was not a mass movement of the working class but primarily, after it overcame its factional struggles and immigrant base, a movement of lower- and middle-class intellectuals and professionals. The questions one must ask are: What were the appeals of the Communist movement to American intellectuals? What were the sources or grounds of its influence at a time when it was not safe or respectable to profess Communist allegiance or to enter into associations with Communists?

To begin with, it must be pointed out that there was something rather anomalous from the conventional ideological point of view about the identification of the intellectuals with the interests of the working class. Marx and Engels, in the

Communist Manifesto, had proclaimed that consciousness does not determine social existence but that social existence determines consciousness. But no more than in the case of Marx and Engels and the leaders of the working classes throughout the world did the social existence or professional status of the American intellectuals determine their political allegiance.

1. This brings me to my first major point about the intellectuals' conversion to the Communist faith. They were not moved by narrow self-interest. If Communism is an aberration or a disease, it is a disease of idealism. Originally, what inspired the political orientation of these intellectuals was the mass misery and suffering produced by the greatest economic crisis in American history—the most prolonged period of widespread disasters, culminating in 16 million unemployed—at a time when there were no social welfare programs to serve as a safety net for those who through no fault of their own found themselves bereft of the means to keep themselves and their families from the breadlines. Nineteen-thirty-two was a year of mass despair, one without hope. Everything had apparently been tried. Few seem to recall that the electoral programs of *both* the Republican and the Democratic parties in 1932 called for the balancing of the federal budget. During the week after Roosevelt's inauguration in 1933—a period I remember well because my book *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* came from the press that week with no buyers in view—a bank holiday was declared. Everyone thought that capitalism was finished. I am convinced that, if Roosevelt had decided to nationalize the banks or even some major industries at that time, there would have been no strong opposition. The situation was absolutely unprecedented—and extremely difficult for anyone who did not directly experience it to understand.

2. A second reason for the political option of the intellectuals who supported the Communist position was their belief that there was a viable alternative to the anarchy and chaos of the capitalist system. This was their conception of a planned and planning society that made full use of the resources of society and which avoided the periodic boom and bust of the market economy. It was an alternative presumably illustrated in the functioning of the Soviet Union. The perception of Soviet society was largely based on illusion, cultivated by tales of visitors who judged Soviet society by its programs and propaganda, not by the realities that were carefully shielded from their eyes by supervised tours and a succession of Potemkin Village effects. Actually, during the very years in which American intellectuals were crying up the virtues of the Soviet economic system over those of the American system, Russia was in the throes of a mass famine that resulted from the enforced collectivization of agriculture. When Lincoln Steffens announced with respect to the Soviet Union that he had seen the future and that it worked, he soon showed that he had not the slightest inkling of *how* it worked. Confronted by the evidence of savage cultural and political repression in the USSR, he dismissed it as the cost of progress. In addition, by 1932-1933, the menace of Nazism had become very grave and was threatening another world war. The future appeared as a choice between Communism, with all its drawbacks, and the barbarities of Fascism. There were some, like myself, who

although critical of the doctrinal orthodoxies of Marxism-Leninism were prepared to swallow their political doubts in the hope that the Communists would prevent Hitler from coming to power and unleashing the program of war and conquest that he had outlined in *Mein Kampf*.

The dominant mood of the intellectuals at the time was one of impatience. This explained their allergy and hostility to a whole array of reform movements—technocracy, the single tax, state capitalism, consumer cooperatives, democratic socialism—with their programs of piecemeal change. All were characterized and rejected as half-hearted. Communism as a system of total opposition had an emotional and romantic appeal. It was against religion, against the class system in all its expressions, against the existing family, and against the profit system and the vulgarities of mass culture that the profit motive allegedly bred. Every intellectual's pet peeve and spite against the system found gratification in the expectation of a total and permanent revolution. The English language itself would be purged of its class bias!

3. The third source of the attraction of Communism was the ideology, or mythology, of Marxism that prided itself on its scientific grasp of the laws of development in society and history and which in the dogmatic form it was propagated provided an easy explanation for anything that happened. It sought to unravel the secrets not only of politics but of art, literature, religion, even of science, by reference to the roles of the social classes in the mode of production and to the struggle between classes that these roles generated.

The relations between Marxism and Communism, as we shall see, are quite complex, and one could make a good case for the thesis that the Communism of the Soviet Union (and, for that matter, of every other Communist country today) is incompatible with the principles and predictions of classical Marxism. But the American intellectuals as a whole were devoid of any knowledge of Marxist theory. They accepted their Marxism as it was interpreted for them by the Kremlin and its official representatives in the United States. They were impatient with scholars, even those politically sympathetic, who sought actually to test Marx's analysis and predictions by the scientific methods that Marx himself proudly professed to follow when he stressed the scientific character of his Socialism. Most of these intellectuals took Marx's economic analysis on faith. It was sufficient for them to observe the collapse of the capitalist economic system, a collapse that they assumed confirmed the

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truth not only of Marx's economic theories but of his theories of history and of the state as well. They read that the state was the executive committee of the ruling dominant economic class. That was enough for them. They refused to make an empirical analysis of how the state actually operated. If the U.S. government issued injunctions against the organization of labor unions, that revealed its class character. On the other hand, when it facilitated such organization through the Wagner

Labor Relations Act, it did so out of fear of revolution. In either case, it was serving the interests of the dominant economic class.

4. Another factor that contributed to American intellectuals' support of the Communist cause was the optimistic assurance—central to the Communist faith—that the struggle for human betterment and the fulfillment of age-old dreams of universal peace and prosperity would be victorious. It breathed hope and confidence that things would get better at a time of widespread despair. It taught that science and history and the laws of dialectic were on the side of the emerging worldwide classless society in which the division of labor would disappear and a new age of new men and women would appear. Although opposed to supernaturalism, Communism functioned more and more as a religion in the lives of its intellectual adherents, in that they believed that there was a kind of historical and cosmic support for their generous ideals. The language of “inevitability” was not metaphorical for the intellectual true believers. The advent of Communism was inevitable regardless of the evidence of its setbacks.

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5. Finally, I want to stress the presence and importance of these generous ideals among the intellectuals drawn to the Communist movement, partly because of their subsequent erosion among those who remained faithful to the Communist Party and partly because of the subsequent disaffection from the Communist Party and all its works by those who remained faithful to their ideals. What were these ideals? Briefly, a strong sense of social justice and a passionate opposition to social inequalities rooted in irrational tradition and arbitrary power. And underlying this complex of ideals was a vague but strong commitment to equal opportunity and to the belief that all human beings had a right to develop themselves to the full reach of their potential power to live a life of individual freedom under just laws.

There are some who will say that I have left out one of the most powerful sources of the attraction of Communism for intellectuals, namely, the prospect that the triumph of Communism would give them the opportunity to exercise power as a new managerial ruling class or as bureaucratic aides to such a class. My own experience gives little warrant for such a view. It may have been true for those few intellectuals who joined the Communist Party, but most intellectuals did not join. The best among them already enjoyed status, reputation, influence, and a comfortable standard of living, which were placed in jeopardy by their new allegiances. Perhaps if they had sought political power more avidly they would have been cured of their political illusions more readily. If they had been better schooled in the social philosophy of Marx, they would have been more sensitive to the realities of power in the new societies calling themselves socialist.

The great tragedy of the American intellectuals drawn to Communism was that in the intensity of their faith they ceased

to function as intellectuals. The Communist Party very cleverly built up within them a sense of their relative unworthiness as authentic revolutionaries because of their nonproletarian class origins. They were made to believe and to feel that any intellectual doubt was the occupational stigmata of the petty bourgeoisie. The proletariat, disciplined by its work, was predisposed to accept the intellectual discipline of party directives. The intellectual, pursuing his wayward course, tended toward egocentricity and anarchism. The result was that the intellectuals who remained in the ambience of the Communist Party and its multiple peripheral organizations became eloquent, articulate, and *completely uncritical* spokesmen for the Communist Party line. The transformation was startling. They no longer thought as professional intellectuals. They turned with indignation against fellow intellectuals who raised doubts or questions about the validity or wisdom of any position taken by the Communist Party. “Who are you,” I would be heatedly rebuked, “to take issue with William Foster on dual trade unions?” I recall variations of this question on a number of occasions by individuals who had been proud of their independent judgment before they had seen the great light from the East. To question the leaders of the American Communist Party might be overlooked as an excusable temporary lapse in the process of Communist acculturation. But to question or criticize Stalin or Lenin on any subject on which they had taken a stand was to put oneself forever beyond the pale. “Only a Social Fascist would disagree with Stalin’s thesis that Social Fascism and Fascism were equally dangerous to the working class,” I was solemnly told. And, since I was one who disagreed, this made me a Social Fascist, too.

Those American intellectuals who tried to function as intellectuals in pursuit of their revolutionary faith—a comparative handful—soon found themselves in opposition to the Communist Party and the major body of Communist-oriented intellectuals on a succession of issues. In time, because of the developments of the American economy and of the Soviet Union, these individuals modified their views but not their ideals.

The mass of the American intellectuals who followed the American Communist Party line soon made the startling discovery that there was no American Communist Party line; that the line in every field was laid down by the Kremlin, whose leaders relayed it to their subordinates in the United States. In their blind faith in the Kremlin, the credulous American intellectuals overlooked the fact that whatever the ultimate purposes of the leaders of the Soviet Union were, they in fact were using the Communist Parties of the world as “fifth-columns” in their own countries, making them serve as border guards of the Soviet Union to resist its alleged encirclement. “Defend the Soviet Union at all costs by any means” became the operating maxim. The result was to transform a group of idealistic heretics into fanatical and, in time, cynical conspirators.

Many illustrations of the slavish dependence of the American Communist Party on the Kremlin can be cited. For example, the revolutionary strategists of the Kremlin discovered that the American Negroes were an ethnic minority like their own minorities. (When I was in Moscow in 1929, leading Communists kept pressing me to tell them what the native

language of the American Negro was!) In order to exploit this revolutionary potential, they commanded the American Communists to make a central political demand for “self-determination for the Black Belt,” i.e., the right of a block of southern American states with black majorities to secede from the Union and to establish their own Black Confederate Republic—as if the American Civil War were to be fought all over again. In their rigorous piety, the American intellectual proletariat went along. Stalin could do no wrong. Nor could his representatives!

Much more serious in its consequences was the uncritical acceptance of the theory of Social Fascism, according to which the Socialists were just as much an enemy of the workers as the Fascists. This split the working class, in Germany especially, where it enabled Hitler to come to power. In this country it led to the Communists’ breaking up a Socialist protest meeting, at Madison Square Garden, against the suppression of the Austrian Socialists in 1934. We were able to split away a handful of distinguished intellectuals at that time, but the bulk remained faithful.

Perhaps the nadir in the spiritual degradation and Byzantine servility of American intellectuals was reached at the time of the Moscow Trials, when together with a few others I helped organize the John Dewey Commission of Inquiry into the Truth of the Moscow Trials. Not only did hundreds of fellow-traveling American intellectuals—many of them distinguished in their professional fields—unqualifiedly endorse the verdicts of the Moscow Trials, according to which all of Lenin’s lieutenants and trusted companions, with the exception of Stalin, were from the very beginning of the October Revolution agents of foreign powers who ended up as collaborators of Hitler, they viciously attacked even the effort to make an inquiry into the evidence in order to give Leon Trotsky a hearing and a chance to state his case. The very efforts to discover the truth were dubbed activities of “Trotskyite Fascists.”

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After that there was no infamy committed by Stalin within or without the Soviet Union that the American intellectuals did not swallow. The shock of the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the intimate collaboration between Hitler and Stalin, until Hitler double-crossed his partner, restored many American intellectuals to some semblance of political sobriety. They faded out of public activities only to be replaced by a new crop of intellectual political innocents who regarded the heroic resistance of Russian soldiers at Stalingrad and the military defeat of Hitler as evidence of the superiority of the Soviet social system. This made as much sense as the contention that the defeat of Napoleon’s army by the Czarist troops in 1812 demonstrated the progressive character of Russian serfdom!

Meanwhile, there were changes going on in the social fabric of both the non-Communist and the Communist worlds that should have been the primary concern of intellectuals professionally interested in general ideas and the realities they reflected and partly modified. These intellectuals failed to

observe that historical events more and more called into question the adequacy of the Marxist analysis. The capitalist economy had recovered from its crisis and by virtue of the effects of political democracy on that economy a new form of society—neither purely capitalist nor purely socialist—had developed that became known as the welfare state. This had not been anticipated by Marx. Nor had Marx foreseen the rise of Fascism, which in turn contributed to undermining the validity of his monistic view of historical materialism. The spectacle of capitalist nations like England, France, and the United States aligned with the Soviet Union and its socialized economy against capitalist nations like Germany, Japan, and Italy suggested that in the twentieth century the mode of political decision was as decisive in determining the character of our time and culture—if not more decisive—as the mode of economic production. If this were true, then the basic issue of our time was not to choose between capitalism and socialism but to choose *more* or *less* of either as the means of furthering the complex of human freedoms that constitutes democracy as a way of life. Not only were these events and the continuing relative prosperity challenging the principles of Marxism, but the renewed growth and intensification of nationalism were fatal to the old Marxist contention that the workers had no fatherland.

The developments within the Soviet Union instead of confirming the Marxist theory of history actually had invalidated it. Marx had maintained that a Socialist society could develop only when all the material, technological, and psychological presuppositions for it had been established under capitalism. That is why he predicted that socialism would come first in England and the United States and that the attempt to introduce it in a backward economy of scarcity would socialize poverty. Instead, his followers seized power in one of the most backward and primitive countries in the world and built by terrorist political means a materialist, collectivist economic foundation under its culture. In other words, they achieved what according to the theory of historical materialism was impossible. Truly we are confronted here by one of the great ironies of history: Marxism in key respects has been refuted by those claiming to be its pious heirs.

Further, the glorification and cult of Lenin was a recognition of his indispensable role in the transition to the new society. Even Leon Trotsky, whose Marxist orthodoxy few could doubt on scholarly grounds, reluctantly admitted that without Lenin there would have been no October Revolution. But this was attributing to the role of personality a causal influence in history utterly incompatible with historical materialism. The “greatest phenomenon in human history” could hardly be attributed to the contingency or chance of an event-making personality being present on the Russian scene in 1917. In passing, it should be noted that the attempt of Soviet apologists, after Khrushchev’s speech, to explain away the horrendous evils of the Soviet system as due to the cult of Stalin’s personality likewise departs from strict Marxist historical principles, which explain the limits and achievements of historical characters by the social and economic forces operating at the time. The system that produced Stalin, or made it possible for him to emerge, cannot be absolved of responsibil-

ity for his horrible misdeeds.

Even more striking was the American intellectuals' obliviousness to what was developing within the social structure of the Soviet Union itself—the transformation of the dream of a new commonwealth into a nightmare of total terror. In area after area, from art to zoology, the iron clamp of suppression was screwed down more tightly by a Political Committee utterly unqualified to pronounce judgment. A new Soviet class emerged with differential living standards equaling or surpassing in their invidious dimensions that of the West. Step by step the American intellectuals who remained within the orbit of the Communist Party became apologists for the power structure of the Soviet regime, slandering the defectors from the system who bore witness to the existence of inhuman concentration camps in which millions of innocent human beings perished. Gone were their idealist pretensions; the fine flowers of their rhetoric withered before the grim realities of the Gulag Archipelago. They became defenders of the most oppressive police state in the postwar world, perhaps in all history. What Camus wrote about Sartre and the French intellectuals whose talents had been put at the service of the Kremlin remained true for them, too: "The will to power came to take the place of the will to justice, pretending at first to be identified with it and then relegating it to a place somewhere at the end of history, waiting until such time as nothing remains on earth to dominate."

Communism in its Soviet form lost its attractiveness for American intellectuals after Khrushchev's speech, the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution, and the invasion of Czechoslovakia. For a while, some of the disillusioned American intellectuals pinned their hopes on Mao, then Castro, and then Ho Chi Minh; Peking, Havana, and Hanoi became the new intellectual Meccas, but not for long. With minor variations, the same police state patterns appeared in all the Communist states—the greatest difference being the outpouring of refugees in such numbers that even the apologists for these regimes have lapsed into silence, leaving it to Noam Chomsky—who heralded Hanoi's victory in Vietnam as a new birth of freedom—to contest the exact number of the hapless victims of the Communist dictatorships. (His initial response was to dismiss the report of Communist atrocities in Vietnam and Cambodia as mere propaganda.)

As for the future, there is no danger that American intellectuals will be lured by the promise of Soviet Communism again. The roadblocks typified by the fate of Solzhenitsyn, Sakharov, and Soviet anti-Semitism stand in the way—not to mention Afghanistan and Poland. However, the disillusioned fellow-traveling American intellectuals have bequeathed anti-Americanism rather than pro-Communism to the contemporary generation of disaffected intellectuals. This anti-Americanism is manifest on every issue in which there is a conflict between the Soviet Union or one of its proxies and American national interests, whether in Central America, Africa, or Western Europe. This anti-American animus, which systematically ignores the geopolitical and ideological threats of Soviet Communism, is the dominant mood on American campuses, or at least among its most articulate spokesmen. This raises another theme that cannot be pursued here. But I would like to

conclude with a few words about the role of intellectuals who are dedicated to political and cultural freedom in our troubled world today.

To begin with, the function of intellectuals is never to serve as poet laureates of the status quo. They are, or should be, always a part of the "adversary culture," exercising their critical judgment with courage and responsibility to further human freedom. There is always a gap between what things are and what they should be, since the tasks of defending and extending human freedom are never completed. But there is a tendency, when we keep our eyes only on what should be, to overlook the extent of the progress that has been made by progressive incremental steps in the past. There is a danger that we take for granted the democratic system that has made progress possible and, in the light of the absolute ideals of what should be, turn against the system itself or become indifferent to the challengers who would destroy it.

Today, by and large, the mainstream of American intellectuals is either indifferent to the challenges of the Communist world to the relatively free world of the West or hostile to the very conception of such a challenge as a manifestation of cold war sentiment. Some even maintain that in the light of Vietnam and Watergate the United States represents a mode of life and civilization not worth defending. In effect, they have become neutralists in the global struggle between democracy and totalitarianism.

This is very strange when we consider the attitude of American intellectuals to the threat of Fascism forty or fifty years ago, at a time when, with respect to civil, social, and economic rights, and especially the freedom of dissent, conditions in the United States were far worse, far more removed from the decencies of a humane society than they are today. I remember Goebbels and other Nazi Gauleiters mocking America's hypocrisy in criticizing Nazi racialism in the light of its own racist practices. Reference would be made to lynchings in America in an attempt to stop the mouths of critics of Nazi crimes. Nonetheless, American intellectuals, except for a minuscule obsessed minority, repudiated the attempt to undermine the struggle against Fascism because of the imperfection and betrayals of America's own democratic ideals. Today, compared with what existed forty years ago and despite the evils that still exist, the culture of the United States and the culture of the West are far healthier and contain more promise, not of realization, but of approximation to the ideals of equality and freedom under law. Why, then, should American intellectuals be more alienated from the critical defense of Western culture and the open society in the looming presence of the totalitarian Communist threat than they were before the hovering threat of Fascism a generation or two ago?

Until now, peace has been kept by virtue of the balance of terror. But, in the long run, more important than potential fire power is the will and resolution to defend the basic values of the society its weapons are supposed to defend. The responsibility of intellectuals today in the United States and the West, as they remain critical of the functioning of their institutions, is to rethink the significance of these values, the alternatives opposed to them, the costs of upholding them, and the methods of ensuring their survival. ●