

Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism: A Comment

JOHN MCILROY

Bryan Palmer's critical commentary on the historiography of American Communism is eloquent and persuasive and I fully endorse the core components of his argument. Absent or insubstantial in many studies, both traditional and revisionist, a singular casualty of historical amnesia, Stalinism matters. A proper understanding of American Communism demands an account of its political refashioning from the mid-1920s.¹ Moreover, Palmer's important rehabilitation of the centrality of programmatic disjuncture opens up what a simplistic dissolution of Stalinism into a timeless, ahistorical official Communism closes down: the existence of and the need to historicize *different* Communisms, the reality of an "anti-Communism" of the left as well as of the right, the possibility of rediscovering yesterday and tomorrow a revolutionary internationalism liberated from Stalinism which threatened not only capital but organized labor, working-class freedoms and any prospect of socialism. In this note I can touch tersely on only two points: the issue of continuity and rupture in the relationship between the Russians and the American Party in the 1920s and the question of how alternative Communisms handled the problem of international organization.

Russian Domination and Political Rupture

My emphasis on the continuity of Moscow control of US Communism is different from Palmer's. What I find striking is the degree to which Russian domination of the Comintern and thus of the politics of its American section was sustained from 1920, even if the political content of that domination changed significantly as Stalinism developed. Here I find myself in agreement with Draper. Palmer surely exaggerates in claiming that Draper characterizes the relationship in the early 1920s as "pure and simple Comintern dictation." Draper certainly emphasizes peremptory decision-making by the Comintern as when, for example, Moscow ruled against Ballam's American majority in early

Jim McIlroy is Reader in Sociology at the University of Manchester (UK). He has recently co-edited two collections dealing with aspects of British Communism: *Party People, Communist Lives: Explorations in Biography* (2001) and *Industrial Politics and the 1926b Mining Lockout* (2004).

¹Of pioneering work cited but not discussed by Palmer, perhaps the most forthright and fecund address of Stalinism is still Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History (1919–1957)* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957). See also Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984).

1922. But he also suggests that overall “it was not merely a simple matter of handing down decisions in Moscow” and he stresses that “American Communists gave themselves freely to the Comintern because they agreed on a certain conception of the movement”.² Draper evokes a combination of relative openness and freedom in these years, but it was an openness and freedom circumscribed almost *ab initio* by Russian hegemony: the Comintern, more specifically its Russian leaders, was from 1920 the key actor and the final arbiter of all important issues.³ We should plausibly allow for a certain plasticity, flexibility, indeed confusion, in the relationship at a time when both parties were finding their feet and feeling each other out. Nevertheless, what stands out between 1920 and 1923 is that the development of American Communism and all the key decisions in it were managed through a dialogue in which the Comintern and the Russians had the final word. Unlike later periods, there was meaningful exchange of views, controversy and factionalism. That must be registered. The disputes over the unification of the warring American Communists, over legal and underground organization, the united front, the trade union question, the Labor Party tactic, and support for Lafollette all demonstrated that although the Americans were far from puppets, Moscow’s voice was decisive.⁴

Palmer is right to bring out Draper’s determinism. The future of American Communism was not, as he believed, set in stone in 1920, the establishment of the Comintern did not lead inevitably to the Stalintern nor, as Draper suggested, did Stalin simply continue the system established under Zinoviev in 1920.⁵ At times Draper fell prey to writing history backwards. Stalin’s path was but one path and the distance between the International of 1920 and that of a decade later was significant. But there were tendencies there, even in 1920, that would later be developed by Stalin. Centrally, the world party’s pretensions to *democratic* centralism were always restricted by Russian ascendancy. This had good and bad sides. From a revolutionary perspective, Moscow played a primary role in forging a united party in the USA and furnishing its politics. But the united Party emerged within a tradition of looking to Moscow

²Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1985), 357, 381, 263.

³*Ibid.*, 257–258, 267–270.

⁴See, for example, Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York: Viking Press, 1960); Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 1–58; Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes and Kyrill M. Anderson, *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New York: Yale University Press, 1998), 14–30. On the question of Russian domination, I find the work of the traditionalists convincing.

⁵Draper, *Roots of American Communism*, 260. As Palmer suggests, there are similarities between Draper’s work and that of the British historian, Henry Pelling. Draper’s work might also be usefully compared with Walter Kendall’s *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 1900–1921: The Origins of British Communism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969). Kendall argues that the foundation of the British Party was a mistake. It fatally and finally secured Russian control and stifled a burgeoning national Communism. For recent attempts to briefly re-introduce Stalinism into the history of British Communism, see John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, “Histories of the British Communist Party: a user’s guide,” *Labour History Review*, 68 (April, 2003), Special Issue on “International Communism,” 33–59; John McIlroy, Barry McLoughlin, Alan Campbell and John Halstead, “Forging the faithful: the British at the International Lenin School,” *Labour History Review*, 68 (April, 2003), 99–128.

for decisions and accepting them, a practice which became almost instinctive. American Communists were never forced to stand on their own feet, think for themselves, develop theory, and make their own strategic calculations. This hindered their ability to understand and to resist Stalinism.

Moreover, we should add to Palmer's analysis the fact that this uneven relationship was formed in the context of revolutionary retreat in the Soviet Union itself. In excavating the roots of Stalinism we have to note the failure of revolution in Europe but additionally the consequent political decisions that the Bolsheviks took in Russia between 1920 and 1923 and the political alternatives they refused. In assessing Moscow's impact on the infant American party, we should not remember Moscow in a roseate revolutionary glow. We should rather recall the decline of democracy in party and state, the demise of workers' control in industry, the emergence of economic voluntarism and *realpolitik*, as well as at least the occasional preference for Russian state interests over those of world revolution. There was no golden age of Russian or American Communism encompassing the first four congresses of the Comintern.⁶

If Draper was wrong to suggest that the Comintern of 1920 represented embryonic Stalinism, by 1924 Zinoviev, in alliance with Stalin, was sponsoring a Bolshevization which Palmer does not mention. He was developing a harsher, more capricious Russian regime in the International, one which played prematurely with important ingredients of early Stalinism such as social fascism and the "united front from below" although not "socialism in one country." In the USA the assault on Ludwig Lore as a surrogate Trotskyist and the eviction of the Foster–Cannon leadership in favour of Ruthenberg–Lovestone by the Comintern representative and Stalin supporter, Sergei Gusev, constituted significant landmarks. Zinoviev's prosecution of Bolshevization and a Leninism which ignored Lenin's warnings against Russification, his drive to suppress all opposition, institutionalize discipline and conformity with Comintern directives, and create a monolithic world party with all sections subservient to the Russian leadership were accepted and echoed by the American leaders.⁷

While welcoming Palmer's restoration of political rupture—the move from world revolution to "socialism in one country"—I find his characterization and

⁶For a critical treatment of these issues, which maintains a troubled commitment to a democratic, revolutionary socialism, see Samuel Farber, *Before Stalinism: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990). On the Comintern, see Fernando Claudin, *The Communist Movement from Comintern to Cominform* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 250–254.

⁷See, for example, Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 41–67; Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 106–109; James P. Cannon, *The First Ten Years of American Communism: Report of a Participant* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), 135–138, 188–190; Klehr, Haynes and Anderson, *Soviet World of American Communism*, 166–167. Aspects of Bolshevization such as the restructuring of the American Party on a workplace cell basis and its consequences in terms of disorganization, atomization and economism, which facilitated subordination and Stalinism, have attracted insufficient attention from historians. See, for example, Osip Piatnitsky, "Achievements and tasks in factory and trade union work," *Communist International*, (May 30, 1927), 52 and *Communist International*, June 15, 1927, 174–178. The significant role that Moscow's ambassadors to the USA, John Pepper and Gusev, were able to play in American politics starkly symbolizes Russian hegemony.

alignment of different kinds of Russian–American relationships, generally positive before 1925, negative after 1925, over-schematic. Palmer makes a distinction “between advice and 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 ... and a Comintern drifting into bureaucratisation by 1925.” My reading of the evidence is that by 1925 the Comintern was substantially and consciously bureaucratized as an instrument of Russian policy based on the subordination of national parties. However, the relationship in 1920–25 never involved a simple dialogue—the conversation was always characterized by an imbalance of power between Russians and Americans; it never simply involved advice and guidance; it was never based on equality. From the very beginning, there was a disequilibrium of power and legitimacy and politics between Russians and Americans, and directives and instructions from the former to the latter which were largely and ultimately adhered to. The Russians made a revolution, wielded state power, and influenced millions across the globe; the Americans enjoyed little prestige even among American workers.

There is a need to distinguish between Russian domination—which tightened after 1924 and again after 1929—and its political content and political consequences which, as Palmer convincingly argues, changed dramatically. The redemption of the programmatic break does not dissolve the reality of Russian domination from 1920. Indeed, it was that domination which facilitated political lesion and the success of Stalinization. The conquest of Stalinism can only be dated from 1929. But without slipping into determinism, we need to acknowledge the bureaucratization and domination that existed in the early 1920s and the prefiguring developments of 1924–25. If by that time Zinoviev was not making a mockery of revolutionary internationalism in terms of its objectives, he was certainly doing so in terms of his entrenchment of Russian control and his curtailment of equality and democracy in decision-making.⁸

Finally, in welcoming the project of putting Stalinism back where it belongs, at the very heart of American Communism, we need to dig deep to fully expose its roots. It cannot be equated with Bolshevism. As Victor Serge remarked in rejecting this crude essentialism, Stalinism was one, but only one, of the germs in Bolshevism, and there is a distance between germs and the disease which requires the right environment to flourish. But we do need to consider Stalin-

⁸See McDermott and Agnew, *Comintern*. For examples of the support for Comintern initiatives on Bolshevization by American leaders, see *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism* (New York: Prometheus Research Library, 1992), 232–243, 392–426. An instructive example of the relationship between Zinoviev’s leadership of the Comintern and the later regime of Stalin is the predicament of the Polish Communist Party. As Palmer notes, it was disbanded by Stalin in 1938. But its leadership was removed and detained in Moscow by Zinoviev and Stalin as early as 1924: see McDermott and Agnew, *Comintern*, 46. I am not implying that the Stalin revolution was secure or complete by 1929: see Graeme Gall, *The Origins of the Stalinist Political System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

ism in the context of a malleable, multi-faceted Bolshevism which could be made to assume a variety of political guises. As Palmer suggests, we also need to glance back to America before 1919 to explore alternative possibilities and, I would add, look forward beyond 1929 to construct a political sociology of American Stalinism which goes beyond much of traditionalist writing's emphasis on high politics by examining the activities of party members in the unions and community while reaching beyond revisionist myopia to stare cultures of manipulation, control and contempt for the workers as they were, in the face.⁹

Here I have no disagreement with Palmer's comments on the importance of biography and the value of the volumes he cites. But precisely because they do not, as he argues, place Stalinism at their analytical center, they do not capture adequately the process of metamorphosis and the Stalinization of the individual, an issue which is central to historical understanding and which lies at the heart of the lives of the Browders and the Fosters. In biographical terms, they fail to fully realize their subjects. Authors who shy away from Stalinism or whose mistaken notions of empathy diminish it, can prove, as I know from the experience of editing such work in Britain, fallible chroniclers of lost lives. Perhaps we have something to learn here from the penetrating approach of the novelist.

Internationalism and Alternative Communism

The Stalinization of the American Party 1928–30 is highlighted by the extinction of long-surviving factions, the extirpation of heresy and serious debate, and the exit of Cannon and Lovestone and their supporters. The future adventures of these two contrasting Communists chart the failures of revolutionary internationalism in America beyond Stalinism. Palmer's paper begins and ends with Cannon whose continuing political career until the 1960s demonstrates the reality of an alternative revolutionary internationalism.¹⁰ Cannon's trajectory after 1928 illuminates both the limits of Draper's assertion that Communist internationalism—certainly if liberated from Stalinism—was incompatible with an American revolutionary left as well as the difficulties even profoundly committed anti-Stalinists found in satisfactorily combining a revolutionary practice in America with creating an international organization. A life-long admirer of Zinoviev, Cannon came to Trotskyism as Zinoviev capitulated to Stalin. Born in Rosedale, Kansas in 1890 and a veteran of the IWW and the Socialist Party, he was perhaps the most American of the early Party leaders. Yet his break with the Comintern was motivated by international questions, by studying Trotsky's re-assertion of world revolution against "socialism in one country" in his *Criticism of the Draft Programme of the*

⁹Peter Sedgwick, "Introduction" to Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), xv–xvi.

¹⁰For Lovestone, see 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).

Communist International. Moreover, his initial thoughts after his expulsion were international: "Our very first impulse when we found ourselves out on the street in 1928," he remembered, "was to begin searching for international allies with whom we could collaborate."¹¹

Throughout the 1930s as a leader of the Communist League of America, the Workers' Party with A. J. Muste, and the Trotskyist faction in Norman Thomas's Socialist Party, Cannon strove to maintain the program of international Communism and world revolution. His unrelenting efforts in the USA, his voluminous foreign correspondence and his visits to Europe to build Trotskyist organizations received some reward in January 1938 with the creation of the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) and in the same year the establishment of the new, tiny Fourth International, seeking somewhat grandiosely to emulate the healthier Comintern.¹²

As far as can be gathered, throughout his career as an official Communist, Cannon stood out from his fellow American cadres as an honest and sincere follower of the Russian leaders who believed implicitly in the wisdom and fairness of the Comintern. Even when their faction was deprived of party power by the Russians in 1925, he criticized Foster's brief flash of rebellion. In succeeding years he sought to dissolve any differences between Moscow and the American Party, arguing for the termination of factionalism based on vying for the favors of the Russians, and its replacement by an organic unity between Moscow and New York.¹³ His conversion was dramatic and programmatic: by 1929 he believed that 1925 had constituted a corrupting watershed in the history of American Communism.¹⁴ Nonetheless, Cannon was frequently identified by his Trotskyist opponents from the early 1930s as well as by some later historians as permanently marked by Zinoviev's reign in the International and a continuing advocate of a *commandiste* party conceived as a military machine renewed by periodic factional maneuvers.¹⁵ Certainly his attitude to internationalism after 1938, while theoretically impeccable, seems less resolute in practice. It proved ambiguous under the challenge of events and ultimately bounded by the imperatives of American autonomy and the requirements of his own leadership of the SWP. It flaked under pressure.

¹¹James P. Cannon, *Speeches to the Party* (NY: Pathfinder Press, 1973), 67.

¹²See, for example, James P. Cannon, *The Left Opposition in the US, 1928–1931* (NY: Monad Press, 1981); James P. Cannon, *The Communist League of America, 1932–1934* (NY: Monad Press, 1985); *Dog Days: James P. Cannon vs Max Shachtman in the Communist League of America* (NY: Prometheus Research Library, 2002); *Documents of the Fourth International: The Formative Years* (NY: Pathfinder Press, 1973).

¹³Cannon, *First Ten Years*, 136–138; Edward P. Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 223.

¹⁴Cannon, *Left Opposition in the US*, 108–110.

¹⁵See the comments and sources cited in Al Richardson, "Introduction" to Alfred Rosmer, *Trotsky and the Origins of Trotskyism* (London: Francis Boutle, 2002), 11–18. Cannon was undoubtedly an organization man who placed a profound emphasis on the centrality of the revolutionary party. "For the proletarian revolutionist the party is the concentrated expression of his life purpose, and he is bound to it for life and death ... the crime of crimes is disloyalty or irresponsibility towards the party": James P. Cannon, *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party* (NY: Pathfinder Press, 1972), 15.

Despite its questionable viability in 1938, as in later decades, the Fourth International formally adopted democratic centralism and its affiliates, on the model of the Comintern, were bound to observe the decisions of its congresses and its executive. However, Cannon soon found difficulty in reconciling his own political aspirations with subordination to international discipline. When the SWP split in two in 1940 and Cannon's opponents, led by Max Shachtman, secured a majority on the executive of the Fourth International, Cannon and Trotsky did not hesitate to convene a congress of their supporters and substitute an international executive more to their liking.¹⁶ When the post-war leadership of a decimated organization held together by the SWP between 1940 and 1945, a leadership which Cannon had fostered around Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel in Paris, took controversial decisions, resisted by national majorities, over the entry of the British Trotskyists to the Labour Party (1947) and the entry of the French Trotskyists into the Communist Party (1951), Cannon backed them. In the late 1940s, however, he also shrugged off, with barely suppressed irritation, their initiatives in relation to the SWP which he perceived as troublesome interference in American affairs.¹⁷

In 1953 Cannon saw himself threatened by the International leadership's support for the opposition faction led by George Clarke and Bert Cochran which, he remarked, had gone Parisian on him. He quickly discovered hitherto unacknowledged but fundamental political differences with Pablo, asserting that democratic centralism could not function in a weak international movement. With minimal political debate with its leaders, Cannon unilaterally and peremptorily split the movement he had struggled so hard to build. In his 63rd year Cannon railed against his opponents but he was also railing against the ghosts of the Comintern which he had so enthusiastically espoused in his youth:

We don't consider ourselves an American branch office of an international business firm that receives orders from the boss ... That's what we got in the Comintern. We don't want any orders ... No orders for the Socialist Workers' Party. Advice, counsel, collaboration—fine. But Cominternist instructions will never be accepted ... we are not going to accept it from anywhere, from anyone, under any circumstances. We regard the International Secretariat—a group of comrades we esteem—we regard them as collaborators but *not as masters and not as popes* (original emphasis).¹⁸

In its rejection not only of Zinoviev but of democratic centralism this was an internationalism which, in Leninist terms, was substantially qualified. The SWP was reconciled with its estranged international co-thinkers in 1963. But the re-unified organization followed the path of persistent, intractable faction-

¹⁶*Documents of the Fourth International*, 177–179, 351–355.

¹⁷John Callaghan, *British Trotskyism: Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 40; Cannon, *Speeches to the Party*, 75–80.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 68, 87, 89.

alism which limited internationalism in practice. Of course, there were immense problems of isolation, lack of resources, witch-hunting, and the pressures of Stalinism. Nonetheless, the history of the Fourth International in America affirms the complexities and the stubborn problems of revolutionary internationalism illustrated by the history of the Comintern. It suggests that the obstacles to building a revolutionary international, the difficulties of reconciling very different national conjunctures and concerns with global direction, competing political perceptions and prescriptions, contending leaders with united action, and democracy with centralism, are not simply the product of the development of Stalinism and "socialism in one country".¹⁹ These issues need more detailed and rounded treatment than can be afforded them here in the context of the history not only of Stalinism but also of anti-Stalinist communisms such as Trotskyism and Lovestoneism.²⁰ Resources are now becoming available for serious research and further address of these dissident traditions might usefully constitute at least a subordinate, future concern of this journal.²¹

¹⁹A further issue which cannot be dealt with here is the extent to which the Trotskyists' positions on Russia, Eastern Europe, and China in the post-war period, and their continuing support for "the gains of October" and, critically, the expansion of Stalinism after 1945, ensured that they never quite escaped the shadow of Stalinism. See, for example, Peter Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left: A Socialist Odyssey through the "American Century"* (NJ: Humanities Press, 1994).

²⁰In this context, we can look forward to Palmer's forthcoming biography of Cannon.

²¹To take the case of Trotskyism, an extensive range of archival sources has become available in recent years. The SWP's international records, together with Cannon's papers, are in the Wisconsin State Archives, while the Party's American records are at the Hoover Institute, Stanford. There are a wide variety of relevant documents covering the SWP, the Shachtmanites and the Revolutionary Workers' League at the Tamiment Library, New York University, and the Wayne State University, Detroit. The Prometheus publications are extremely useful, while a conference on American Trotskyism at the Tamiment Library in September 2000 heard a wide range of papers from distinguished scholars including Pierre Broué, Peter Drucker, Maurice Isserman, Kim Moody, Bryan Palmer, Alan Wald, and Suzi Weissman.

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