

Poison or Cancer? Stalinism and American Communism

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Bryan Palmer's thoughtful and scholarly essay focuses needed attention on the origins and first decade of the Communist movement in the United States. He contends that this period determined the essential nature of the movement and not its experiences in its heyday of the 1930s or later, the period examined by the overwhelming bulk of historical studies; and on his chief point Palmer is surely correct. There was, to be sure, a great deal more going on in the 1930s and later and, consequently, much more material for doctoral dissertations and journal articles. Even so, the origins and first decade of the movement have been neglected by any measure; and in terms of determining the essential nature of the American Communist movement, whatever struggle, debate, and doubt there was existed only in this earlier period. After the ouster of Lovestone, Gitlow, and their followers in 1929, the direction of the CPUSA had been set and the changes in bearing that followed were only zig-zags about the base course. The CPUSA had its greatest impact on American history in the 1930s and 1940s, but what it did and how it did it in this later period was decisively shaped by the prior decade.

Palmer also takes the view that the development of the American movement in the 1920s must be understood in direct connection with "a transformation of the Soviet revolutionary process over the course of the 1920s" that resulted in "a Stalinization that reversed the very meaning of revolution not only in Russia but around the world." He writes from a Trotskyist or, perhaps more precisely, a Cannonist point of view. The malign nature of capitalism in general and in America is taken as a premise and revolution is assumed as a historical and moral necessity. In his view the Bolshevik seizure of power in November of 1917 was not a coup but a matter of Lenin, Trotsky, and the other Bolsheviks having "made a revolution." Regretfully, however, a variety of factors combined to frustrate the promise of a new socialist society which would, quoting Joseph Freeman, "abolish poverty, ignorance, war, the exploitation of class by class, the oppression of man by man." Palmer points to the difficulties Bolsheviks faced in making revolution in an economically backward society, the Tsarist heritage of autocracy, the "class dominance of the peasantry," the drain on resources of World War I, the hostility of capitalist nations, the civil war, the "necessity of institutionalizing an apparatus of re-

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pression ... in order to preserve the revolution and its advances,” the failure of the revolution in Europe, and, of course, the rise of Stalin. Despite the heady promise of Bolshevik revolution, as Stalin consolidated his power over the course of the 1920s he brought about “the decimation of the Leninist Party” and produced a situation where “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 through the world, and a narrowing of agendas to the most defensive and mundane.” In the end, “the ruthless elevation of the *lider maximo*, Joseph Stalin, produced an autocratic state eventually governed by terror.”

This tragedy, however, was more than a Soviet calamity in Palmer’s eyes. Communism was an international movement, and the Stalinist poison at the heart of the movement spread inexorably to its extremities, including the movement in the United States. Palmer quotes James Cannon on the Stalinist destruction of “the magnificent left-wing movement” in the United States and on how “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.” Palmer sums up:

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.

Palmer argues that both “New Left-influenced” revisionists, as well as the traditionalists such as Theodore Draper, have misunderstood what happened in the 1920s, although their errors are of different qualities.

He holds that most revisionists “never wrestled adequately” with Stalinism’s rise. Palmer notes that this failure constitutes “an initial irony”: while the New Left sought “an oppositional politics untainted with ... Stalinism,” in their historical writings the New-Left, influenced historians “championed as a ‘distinctively American’ voice of revolutionary authenticity” those American Communists who embraced Stalinism, and also looked back on the CPUSA’s Popular Front era, a period of fervent Stalinism, as a radical golden age that would be “a wellspring for radicalism’s American revival.”

He also notes that the revisionist embrace of social history and highly localized studies, while enriching knowledge of little-known activities, also led, quoting Geoff Eley, “in extreme cases ... to a history of Communism with the

Communism left out.” He observes further that this ostensibly non-political social history analysis was paralleled by “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” but could do so only by neglecting the impact of Stalinism on American radicalism. He writes of the extreme case of Michael Denning’s “cultural front,” where politics fade to the rear and “Frank Sinatra and Louis Armstrong” come to the fore, where the periphery becomes the center. Palmer comments that, despite its strength as a work of cultural recovery, “*The Cultural Front* is conceptually flawed in its refusal to recognize that Stalinism did indeed matter.”

But damning as Palmer’s comments on the interpretive stance of New Left-influenced historians are, they are not the chief target of his historiographic criticism. One gets the impression that he regards their depiction of the Stalinized CPUSA as an expression of indigenous radicalism not worthy of a serious critique. Instead, the most strongly argued portion of Palmer’s essay is directed at Theodore Draper. Draper, of course, shares with Palmer a view that Stalinism lies at the heart of the history of American Communism. Palmer’s quarrel is that Draper only partly got it right; and precisely because Draper got it partly right he must be taken with more seriousness than those who produce “a history of Communism with the Communism left out.”

Palmer sees three Drapers. The first, of *The Roots of American Communism*, came close to being right. He quotes the first Draper emphasis that “Communism was not merely what happened in Russia; it was just as much what was happening in the United States.” And Palmer agreed with Draper’s point regarding the leadership struggle in the USSR after Lenin “poisoned the life of the Comintern and seeped into the bloodstream of every Communist party in the world.” But despite having been “in fact more right than wrong,” the first Draper still fell short in Palmer’s view:

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.

The flaw Palmer saw in the first Draper became full-fledged failure in the second Draper of *American Communism and Soviet Russia*. Draper had become a “historian blinkered by an ideological shortsightedness that incapacitated

him” and who produced “a distortingly dismissive, almost biologically determinative, understanding of revolutionary internationalism as pure and simple communist dictation.” The possibilities of Communism taking another path that Palmer saw in the first Draper were replaced by an “inevitable reduction to Russian domination” in the second. And the third Draper of the 1980s was a cranky version of the second, a “liberal Cold War warrior ‘gone ballistic’.”

Palmer’s three Drapers, however, are an exaggerated reading of different emphases a single Draper gave when writing about three different eras of CPUSA history. The first Draper was describing the origins of the movement up to 1923, a chaotic period when a great many people with very different views of the future and of the nature of a revolutionary party came into the movement, when Soviet rule in Russia was not yet firmly established, when the Comintern had to construct a mechanism for international coordination of the movement from scratch, and, of course, a period prior to Stalin’s rise. Inherently this situation requires a description where possibilities, contingencies, and alternative paths appear. The second Draper, however, dealt with a different era. Soviet power was stable, the Comintern had created a bureaucracy capable of supervising the international movement and was moving steadily to remove those foreign leaders who did not accept discipline, and Stalin was in the final stages of achieving total power. The contingencies of the earlier period are rapidly disappearing and those who might have taken the American movement down other paths had departed or been expelled. Palmer’s view that “the first and second Drapers thus struggled with one another” is to confuse a single interpretive stance being applied to different eras for two different interpretive stances. As for the third Draper, here again there is a different era under review. Palmer’s third Draper is harshly criticizing the revisionist histories of Communism in the 1930s and 1940s for seeing the CPUSA as an expression of autonomous indigenous radicalism. Yet this is a period that Palmer himself sees as an era of a thoroughly Stalinized CPUSA and he also takes those histories to task, albeit in less exasperated tones.

But to get back to the root of the matter, where Palmer differs with Draper is over the nature of the movement created by the Bolshevik seizure of power. Palmer sees it as a healthy movement, a genuine workers revolution, but one weakened by adverse circumstances and then poisoned with Stalinism and deformed into something abhorrent. Draper never offered the sort of theoretical analysis that Palmer put forward, but certainly Palmer is right that Draper treated the Bolshevik creation as “an organically flawed project” and that some bad end was likely. Palmer does not explain Draper’s antagonism, aside from a passing remark that it had something to do with the Nazi–Soviet Pact, and is satisfied simply to label it as anti-Communist and of a liberal rather than reactionary or the currently dreaded neoconservative variety.

I cannot speak for Draper, but as one of those identified by Palmer as a member of the “institutional/political school of ‘traditionalist’ liberal anti-Communism” I can offer a summary case against Palmer’s analysis. As to the

source of antagonism, to simplify, it is a matter of democracy. Certainly Communists, Trotskyists, and revolutionary socialists of various sorts also claim to be advancing democracy; but in the eyes of liberal anti-Communists, social democrats, neoconservatives, and, for that matter, the overwhelming majority of Americans, the claim is fraudulent. Democracy encompasses more than political democracy, but political democracy is of its essence. A movement is not democratic if it does not accept that those who govern must be responsible to the governed through periodic elections conducted in an environment of free speech, free press, freedom of religious conscience, freedom of assembly along with multiple competing political parties or other political formations. The Bolshevik movement not only never accepted, it explicitly rejected political democracy and the freedoms that came with it. The Communist movement founded by the Bolshevik revolution was tyrannical both in theory and practice.

The issue of Communism's rejection of political democracy doesn't get much attention in Palmer's essay. He dismisses American political democracy as little more than demonstrating "the stark face of capitalist hegemony's capacity to mask autocracy in the ideology of 'equal opportunity'." But most Americans, and most American workers, didn't see it that way. Nothing so doomed Communism in America than its contempt for democratic liberties. And any history of American Communism that fails to recognize this fundamental point will never understand why America was so inhospitable a place for Communism.

At one point Palmer writes, "For Draper, then, the notion that the 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." And what was the experience that the Russian Bolshevik cadre could bring to Americans? David Remnick succinctly summarized the early years of Soviet Communism:

Lenin came to power in November, 1917, and the Bolsheviks practiced terror from the first days of the regime. They shuttered the Constituent Assembly and murdered leaders of rival parties such as the Kadets and the Left Socialist Revolutionaries. Yet, as early as January of 1918, Lenin complained that his secret police, originally known as the Cheka, were "inordinately soft, at every step more like jelly than iron." Lenin cast an iron example. In September, 1918, he ordered the authorities in Nizhni Novgorod to "introduce at once mass terror, execute and deport hundreds of prostitutes, drunken soldiers, ex-officers, etc." Trotsky, for his part, warned that if soldiers drafted into the Red Army defied their officers "nothing will remain of them but a wet spot."

Thus began the Red Terror, which helped win the civil war for the Bolsheviks and defined the nature of Communist power. At a meeting

of Communists, Grigori Zinoviev, one of Lenin's lieutenants, declared that the Party had to carry with it ninety million of the country's hundred million people: "As for the rest, we have nothing to say to them. They must be annihilated." This edict, the historian Richard Pipes has pointed out, was, in effect, "a death sentence on 10 million."¹

What American Communists needed was advice on operating in a democratic polity offering a dizzying array of choices and where elected officials did respond to voters, on how to create a Party press that could compete in America's cacophonous media market, and on how to offer an appealing face to collectivism in a culture that valued individualism and personal freedom, all tasks in which Bolshevik cadre had little experience. What they did not need was advice on how to disperse a freely elected assembly at gun point, how to set up a secret political police with authority to murder opponents at will, or how to suppress all opposition newspapers and rival political parties.

Continuing, Palmers states: "Draper thus proved unable to draw a necessary 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 in the early years of the 1920s and a Comintern drifting into bureaucratization by 1925." This invocation of a golden age of the Comintern prior to 1925 is exaggerated. From the beginning, Moscow was not merely dominant in the Comintern but commanding. As Fridrikh Firsov has written, as early as 1920 "all principal questions of the Comintern's activities were discussed and tentatively resolved in the RKP(b) Central Committee" prior to their consideration by the Comintern itself.² To be sure, Moscow's hand in the early Comintern was not as heavy as later and some genuine elements of "consultation" and "dialogue" existed that were not purely for show. New to power and largely consumed with winning the civil war and establishing their supremacy over the old Russian empire, Soviet leaders for a few years did not yet have firm opinions and a consistent policy on many issues involving the new parties in the West. On matters where their own views were tentative or nonexistent, Soviet leaders did welcome advice and dialogue from Western radicals. But this period was only transitional; once they gained their footing and were more confident of their power, dialogue ended. And even in this early period, when an American Communist argued with Soviet leaders, the results could be unfortunate for the American. Nicholas Hourwich, one of the leading figures in the founding of the American Party, had the temerity to argue with

¹ David Remnick, "Seasons in hell," *New Yorker* (April 4, 2003), http://www.newyorker.com/critics/books/?030414crbo_books.

²Friedrich Firsov, "Mechanism of power realization in the Comintern," paper presented at Centenaire Jules Humbert-Droz: Colloque sur l'Internationale communiste (La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland, 1991). The "RKP(b)" was the acronym of the Soviet party, then entitled the "Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik)."

Lenin at the Third Comintern Congress in 1921. For this, he was simply not allowed to leave the Soviet Union and disappeared from the history of American Communism. This, as Draper observed, “was one way of solving the problem,” but it wasn’t consultation and dialogue.³

Palmer argues, “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.” But factionalism of the 1920s demonstrated the movement’s organic readiness for Stalinization. When anyone attempted to defy the Comintern, their support within the American movement disappeared, and they were dispatched with ease. There were in some sense theoretical “critical questions” involved in these expulsions but the expulsions were not the result of any heated internal American debate over these critical questions. They were exercises in organizational discipline that subordinated ideology to Moscow’s direction. James Cannon had been a major figure in the Party since its origins, yet when he adopted a Trotskyist stance, his influence vanished. There was no widespread or painful ideological debate within the Party about the expulsion of Cannon and his few followers, except in their own minds. Certainly Cannon cared about the ideological issues involved, but it was for that reason that there was no room for him in the Stalinized American Communist Party. The overwhelming majority of Communists accepted the anathema against Trotskyism quickly and without needing prolonged persuasion. Party leaders burglarized Cannon’s apartment to get documents documenting his Trotskyist treason. When he tried to reach out to the rank-and-file, Party strong-arm squads physically broke up meetings organized by Cannon’s few followers. None of these tactics aroused outrage in the movement. Or, to put it another way, anyone who was outraged quickly left or was tossed out. Only 100 or so Party members followed Cannon into the Communist League of America (Opposition). Similarly, the Lovestoneists, who dominated the entire Party leadership, simply melted away when Stalin’s ire became manifest, and barely 200 activists followed Lovestone, Benjamin Gitlow, and Bertram Wolfe into opposition. Again there was little serious ideological debate within the Party over the views of Bukharin or the doctrine of American exceptionalism, Lovestone’s alleged ideological errors. For that matter, even Lovestone repudiated Bukharin, to no avail. The expulsions were exercises in Moscow discipline. The ideological reasons given were rationalizations and window-dressing.

At several points Palmer refers to Stalinism as a poison. This metaphor fits with his view that Soviet Communism was basically a healthy body into which came a toxic element from the outside. I do not wish to push a metaphor too far, but what happened does not fit the poison metaphor. A healthy body usually responds to a poison with a vigorous, even violent response, attempting to expel the poison or reacting to the toxic effects, but Soviet Communism did

³Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (Chicago: I.R. Dee, 1989), 280.

not react to Stalinism in that way. Instead of producing internal convulsions, Stalin's accruing of power in the 1920s and establishing of his rule proceeded calmly and with little adverse reaction. By the time his competitors realized that he sought not to be just the first leader but the sole and total ruler of the Party and the State, it was too late. The only convulsions came after he had power and he unleashed it to exterminate his already defeated enemies and any potential future opponents. A better metaphor is that of a cancer. A body cannot fight off a cancer because its defense mechanisms do not recognize it as a foreign invader. A cancer is, in fact, not a foreign invader and is of the body's own unique organic nature and there is no violent response or attempt to throw it off. Just as the Soviet Party had no natural defense against Stalinism, neither did the American. When Stalinism came to America in the late 1920s, the American Communist movement did not react to it as to a poison or as to an invading bacillus; there was no violent reaction and no natural anti-bodies rushed to fight the foreign invader. Instead, it was welcomed.

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