

Communist History: Seeing it Whole. A Reply to Critics

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If beauty is indeed in the eye of the beholder, writing on Communism and its history is clearly an aesthetic feast. There is of course a transparent political accounting for the variety of tastes in this area, but there is no denying their divergences, as the responses to my “Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism” indicate.

Both Melvyn Dubofsky, an old friend and former teacher, and James Barrett, whose company and commitments I have shared since we were both graduate students, find me hard on New Left-inspired historical writing on Communism and kinder to an older traditionalist/institutionalist school, the originator of which was Theodore Draper. But they both sidestep why it is that I have accented certain texts and react to them the way I do, coming at this question of seeming “preference” from a very different set of sensibilities and political judgements.

John Earl Haynes, associated with the 1990s revitalization of the Draper project, does not spend time splitting hairs about my likes and dislikes. He sees my essay as an exploration of how both so-called New Left revisionist and Draperesque traditionalist orientations have misunderstood the nature of Communist history in the US. In this he is quite right. That said, Haynes insists, unlike Dubofsky and Barrett, that the “chief target” of my “historiographic criticism” is Theodore Draper, and that I avoid serious critique of New Left-inspired scholarship because it is “not worthy” of the effort. In this I think he has misread me.

The only offshore comment, that of John McIlroy, who writes as a somewhat unorthodox Trotskyist, seems rather uninterested in the New Left vs. traditionalist opposition that preoccupies US scholars. But he tilts discernibly toward a defense of Draper. Finally, if Dubofsky insists in seeing in my essay a devil discovery of Stalin, McIlroy wants to expand the naming of evil by placing Zinoviev at Uncle Joe’s side.

So the cartography of critique to which I must reply is one in which the boundaries of difference criss-cross and the terrain shifts. No short response can do justice to this rough mapping of positions, but let me start with what I perceive to be the most common area of concerned skepticism regarding my article. It is of course a highly charged and obviously politicized realm,

and one interesting precisely because it unites my critics, scholars who are in so many ways quite dissimilar. My views on one foundational issue are clearly very much out of step with the conventional political wisdoms of our time.

Almost nobody in academic circles in the year 2003 is willing to stand the ground of the original Bolshevik tradition. The study of US Communism is no exception to this. Recognition of the colossal and overwhelmingly positive accomplishments of the Russian Revolution of 1917 are side-stepped. The immense contribution of Lenin and Trotsky in actually implementing a Marxist program, advancing theoretical premises in a changed 20th-century context, building a revolutionary movement and, above all, a disciplined party capable of establishing the proletariat in power, holding, for a time, the transitional reins of state power, is glossed over. Understanding that all of this had been undertaken in conditions of extreme adversity, and that unfortunate decisions and actions had sometimes to be taken in the face of acute threats to the world's first socialist experiment, is thin at best. The immense resources and programmatic guidance of this Bolshevism, willingly given to the cause of the only force that could sustain the gains of October, the world revolution and its armies of proletarian internationalism, are quibbled about, as if the early Communist International's motivation was nothing more than "domination" and "foreign control."

In terms of the beginnings of US Communism, reaching from the post-1917 underground into the early 1920s of initial Party formation, revolutionaries who embraced the Soviet example and looked to the Bolsheviks did so for tangible reasons. Pre-World War I social democracy had revealed its compromised hand. The Wobbly creed and the Socialist Party's programmatic limitations were obvious to many. Those repelled from such left quarters formed their own revolutionary movement at the same time as they looked to Bolshevik leaders in Russia for advice and aid. The Comintern was invested with a powerful and justified authority, but it was not, before 1923, regarded as some sacrosanct deity.

Those who joined the Communist movement in America in these initial years did not see the issue posed as one of "democracy" and the rights of national autonomy. The problem was not that Moscow provided some material support, but that it did not have more to give, and the US forces to whom it was entrusted were weak and fragmented. Certainly Bolshevism in the United States prior to 1923 was not marked by a governance—internal or external—of a dictatorial and undemocratic nature. Rather, early US communism was characterized by a cacophony of discussion, and there was a plethora of difference over the revolutionary tactics and strategies best applicable in the United States. No one can read seriously the record of this political period on the left and suggest there was a stifling of positions and a rigid top-down authoritarianism.

What repression there was came from the "democratic" state. Deportations of alien socialists and anarchists; the Palmer Raids and the incarceration of

almost the entirety of various wings of the Bolshevik cadre; criminal syndicalist trials; and local police and vigilante terror—all took an incredible toll.

My critics, I think, are too distanced from all of this, especially in terms of their unwillingness to cut either the Bolsheviks in leadership positions in the Comintern, or the men and women of early US Communism, especially a critical layer of leaders, much slack. Dubofsky—the reasoned social democrat, Barrett—the unrepentant New Leftist, Haynes—the liberal anti-Communist traditionalist, and McIlroy—the anti-Bolshevization Trotskyist, all question this formative period of US Communism and the Comintern and, nuances of difference aside, point to what they consider serious errors and deficiencies. My own orientation is to be less judgmental, and more positive in my evaluation, acknowledging difficulties but seeing them as in some sense pressured by the unpropitious climate and the atmosphere of coercion. While it is true that the environment improved only marginally and coercion's continuities can be stressed, I place more emphasis on the problematic aspects of a post-1923 Comintern bureaucratization and, ultimately, Stalinist abandonment of the original Bolshevik program of world revolution.

These developments, commencing faintly in 1923 and gaining obvious ground more forcefully as the decade progressed, had reverberations throughout the Communist International. It was, however, the programmatic reversals of Stalinism that were the critically important factor in the reverse of the Revolution's direction, and had they not taken place it is possible that Comintern bureaucratism could have been righted and the arbitrary authoritarianism, indeed tyranny, that came to be commonplace in the governance of the Soviet Union, resisted and thwarted. All of this registered quite obviously in the US, although it was little understood in the mid-1920s and not resisted until very late in the decade.

To McIlroy, with whom I am likely to be rightly most closely associated, there was "no golden age of American Communism encompassing the first four congresses of the Comintern." Well, of course not, but then who said there was? Not I. To endorse the politics of this period, and to insist that the role of the early Soviets was, all things considered, quite positive, is not, of course, to create a mythical and romanticized fiction of golden age "perfection". It is simply to balance interpretation of one period, and its significant contributions and generally positive features, against the drift of later years, in which the current of political crisis ran increasingly swift. McIlroy recognizes that after the first four congresses, things went seriously awry. This point is overwhelmed, however, by McIlroy's insistence that, "American Communists were never forced to stand on their own feet, think for themselves, develop theory, and make their own strategic calculations." He sees this as what hindered US revolutionaries in their ability to understand and resist Stalinism.

There is in this position a kind of abstracted ultimatism that runs throughout McIlroy's presentation. It simplifies the history to the point of distortion. As I hope to show in my book, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, there was indeed a lot more theoretical development,

organizational initiative, and standing on indigenous feet within early US Communism than scholars have adequately credited. More to the point, what kind of “tough love” position is McIlroy advocating? Should the Comintern, in its first years and during the awkward beginnings of the US revolutionary left, have pushed out of the nest its advocates in New York, Chicago, and elsewhere, the better to make them fly like truly proletarian American eagles? They might well have ended up on hard ground, wings broken, and beaks smashed. That would not have been much of a material base from which to challenge capitalism or oppose the mid-1920s acceleration of Comintern bureaucratism and, later, the sharp programmatic reverses of Stalinization.

Dubofsky, too, refuses a balanced assessment of the pre-Stalinist Comintern, accepting at face value the critique of Soviet repression put forward by Emma Goldman, without contextualizing it vis-a-vis War Communism, the threatening acts of anti-Bolshevik social revolutionaries, the “Fifth Column” role of “White” reaction, Ataman Makhno’s intransigent—and often quite brutalizing—guerilla partisans, and a transformed Kronstadt, in which the ideology of the petty proprietorial peasantry had come to override the “soviet” mentality of revolutionary sailors and soldiers. He uses this to somewhat bluntly caricature my position on Stalinism as a cultivation of the personality: “For Palmer, Stalin explains all.” Yet, as both Haynes and McIlroy suggest, I do indeed range far more broadly than this, both in introducing the objective forces that undermined revolutionary possibility in the Soviet Union and in outlining the significance of critical programmatic disjunctures that were the most telling, if not the most violent, Stalinist repudiation of the Bolshevik legacy.

For his part Haynes is so given to a visceral repudiation of original Bolshevik sin/tyranny (again, premised on a decontextualized reading of early Communism, compounded by an exaggerated portrayal of ugliness) that he offers up statements that either understate what was happening in the beginning period of US Communism or are wildly inaccurate historically. Haynes suggests that what American Communists needed from Bolshevik leaders 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.”

If we can peel off of this admonition its ideological skin about elected officials responding to voters, which US Communists suffering through Palmer Raids, vigilante terror, and the local “Red hunts” of countless thoroughly American political machines would have rightly regarded as cruelly ironic, it is possible to see that much of what Haynes is advocating was indeed happening. The contribution in the early years of US Communism of a James Cannon–Jay Lovestone–William Weinstone–Alexander Bittelman alliance, that fused elements of the Communist underground, the Workers Council group, and much of the Jewish left-wing, did indeed relate directly and unmistakably to the

project of “Americanizing” the party and the revolutionary movement. These “liquidators” insisted on the need to get out of the cul-de-sacs of undergroundism, often referred to as “the subway.” They pressed the need to form a legal, above-ground organization and, in Cannon’s case, put an accent on precisely the possibilities present in a “democratic” polity that Haynes stresses, including electoral activity, which was seen by many in the nascent Communist movement as having a possible salutary educational effect.

Cannon also rubbed shoulders with Communism’s original “cultural front,” advocating writings and cultural work that spoke, not to some idealized construction of the revolutionary working class, but to the class as it actually existed. I could cite countless details (enough, I think, even for my teacher, Mel Dubofsky) relating how Cannon did this, and how it sometimes even produced the desired results. Certainly Cannon’s work in founding and leading the International Labor Defense from 1926 to 1929 offered a non-sectarian, united front that constituted nothing less than an “appealing face to collectivism” through the auspices of acting on behalf of political prisoners.

In this ongoing endeavor, Cannon and all proponents of a “legal” Party had been supported, early in the 1920s, by leading Soviet Bolsheviks. The quite bitter struggle inside US Communism against the Goose Caucus and its ultraleft penchant for programmatic extremism, political marginality, and a counterproductive fetish of clandestine organization, met with Lenin’s, Trotsky’s, Radek’s, Zinoviev’s, and Bukharin’s endorsement. When Rose Pastor Stokes, on behalf of the Geese, insisted before the American Commission of the Comintern in 1922 that the Communist Party must remain underground, her arguments were posed in terms of the necessity of being able to promote “armed insurrection.” In the view of Stokes and the advocates of an “illegal” Party, Communists needed a press that could violate bourgeois law at will, calling the workers to arms. Zinoviev responded bluntly and negatively, undercutting undergroundism’s supposed need to proclaim the Revolution’s insurrection, with a curt: “Alright, leave it out.” Cannon’s insistence in Comintern circles that “there was a difference between Czarist Russia and Harding’s America” had borne programmatic fruit that would have positive organizational implications, allowing the US Party to break out of isolation.

Even granting the extremism of the Geese, including their pre-1921 insistence on peppering the Communist press with calls to found the dictatorship of the proletariat, take up arms against the capitalist enemy, and proclaim unrealizable General Strikes, Haynes’ comment on what the Bolsheviks did not need presents an entirely false impression of the role of early Soviet leaders. They were anything but adventurist in their suggestions of what the revolutionary left in the US should be doing. Haynes’s cavalier caricature of “advice on how to disperse a freely elected assembly at gunpoint, 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,” is nothing if not crude ideological hyperbole. No such missives to American Communists ever came

from Moscow. Cannon premised his leading position as the first National Chairman of the Workers Party, as well as his influence in the Central Executive Committee, on getting past far less egregious nonsense than this. For an historian who has premised his reputation on the need to address evidence, this statement of Haynes is an extraordinary plunge into the strange fantasy world of anti-Communism. It is a disappointment to read it in print.

This anti-Communism blinds Haynes. His Stalinism as cancer metaphor is not one I accept, and it needs to be pointed out that I did not utilize the term poison with respect to Stalinism; rather, I was responding to the actual use of this word by Draper. Haynes ends his comments with the categorical statement that, "When Stalinism came to America in the late 1920s, the American Communist movement did not react to it as a poison or as an invading bacillus; there was no violent reaction and no natural anti-bodies rushed to fight the foreign invader. Instead it was welcomed." Actually, the coming of Stalinism was indeed reacted to in the factionalism of the Workers (Communist) Party, relentlessly so. And, in the end, Cannon and a contingent of other dissidents, including Canada's Maurice Spector, did move to fight Stalinism. Haynes cannot bring himself to see this. It is an unfortunate myopia.

Finally, Jim Barrett arrives at his separation from the original Bolshevik undertaking by seeing in Leninism and the vanguard party an ill wind that blew no good for US Communists and their struggles in the unions, the proliferation of progressive arts and letters, and through involvement in various social movements. In this he is true to his New Left roots. It is indeed ironic that to take this approach, however, he must embrace Draper and a model of "foreign domination." For New Left scholarship on US Communism was in part born of opposition to precisely this kind of reading of the relations of indigenous radicals/revolutionaries and Soviet leadership.

But the critical problem with Barrett's call for more studies of local situations in which the rank-and-file of the revolutionary left seemed to operate outside of its international and national leadership, doing creative work in labor and other progressive movements, urgings to study Communist personal and domestic life, and suggestions of the importance of exploring the daily life of the left-wing individual, is that this does indeed come perilously close to advocacy of a history of Communists with *Communism* left out. How can we study the people of Communism and leave aside their singular commitment to a Party, its program, and its leadership? That inevitably entails grappling with Comintern bureaucratism and Stalinism. It is not really possible to bifurcate life/politics in the name of a social history "from the bottom up."

Undoubtedly Barrett is right on my being too hard on the New Left-inspired historians. They have, as he insists, done much to produce a social history of American Communism that I agree is needed. My original essay granted that insightful work had come from this quarter. That said, I pointed to troubling silences and a failure to look Stalinism directly in its historical eye. Why tilt in this critical direction? Obviously because it seems to me there is a possibility of engagement with this New Left quarter over Communist possibility, past and

present, and the ways in which Stalinism has functioned to erode this, and will, if unchallenged, continue to do so.

Barrett's comment reflects too much intransigence to this reasonable purpose. He circles the New Left wagons in defensive demand that we produce a social history of the "everyday" Communist. To be sure, Barrett raises important questions of method and analysis, offering important prods to think through how particular research modes such as oral history and local/thematic study overdetermine interpretive accounts, structuring narratives and the outcome of analysis in particular directions. I would of course welcome any serious discussion of how method in history relates to subject, and I think more of this kind of reflection is necessary. I agree that Comintern (and any other) sources recently available, orchestrated almost exclusively by Klehr and Haynes to grind a particular anti-Communist political axe, should be used more broadly to explore a range of questions other than those to which they have up to this point been used to address. This goes without saying, and is cause for agreement. But there is also a basis for disagreement with Barrett. For in the end he reproduces the New Left avoidance of Stalinism. This is done explicitly, as well as implicitly.

At the former level, Barrett declares that the daily experience of being a Communist in the United States is in need of historical examination, posing a series of pivotal questions which "a focus on Stalinism *per se* will not necessarily answer." First, Barrett knows well that in calling on historians to seriously contend with Stalinism (which he seems to agree they have not), I am hardly advocating reducing every study of Communism to a ledger-like listing of Stalinist programmatic and practical lapses. Why push this either/or dichotomization, especially when my article made serious efforts to recognize the significance of Communist accomplishment in labor and left circles? Second, what is gained by arguing that attention to Stalinism, as it gradually expanded its place in the lives of Communist militants, should be downgraded as not "necessarily" telling us a great deal?

Will we ever know the full history of the rank and file? Probably not, but like Barrett I agree that this should not be for lack of trying. It won't hurt, in this diligent effort, to look at the ways in which the cult of Stalin's personality infused cultural and domestic life on the revolutionary left. Should we simply bypass the tough and unfortunate issue of what motivated a minority of ordinary CPUSA members to be the shock troops of Stalinist thuggery in 1929 and the early 1930s, wielding furriers' knives and brass knuckles on those who sold the Trotskyist *Militant* in the streets or tried to discuss the political failings of the Comintern in public forums? What did it mean for ordinary Communists to be told that they could not read an alternative revolutionary press, that they should shun former comrades and friends, and that their freedom of association (to attend political meetings, discuss revolutionary politics on the street, or participate in specific demonstrations) was curtailed? How did Stalinist modes of thought and action structure the sectarianism of anti-racist and anti-fascist denunciation so common in the Third Period, and how did this

register in rank-and-file circles, even if it was, at times, transcended in local mobilizing activity? Was the impact of programmatic “line turns” that imploded organizing and education efforts at the base significant or not?

Barrett can not claim that this political record of Stalinism was irrelevant or insignificant in the “lives” of everyday Communists and then cite the 1956–57 reform generation’s efforts as “the last great struggle in the party’s history,” the defeat of which sealed the fate of Communism in the US. For 1956–57 was nothing if not an attempt, albeit partial and inadequate, to address a history of Stalinist political deformation.

More often Barrett’s sidestepping of all of this takes implicit forms. He is rather uninterested in programmatic issues: “socialism in one country” matters little, apparently, to him. His reading and mine of the 1923 farmer-labor fiascos in the Workers Party differ greatly, in part because I see problems in the policy direction of Zinoviev’s Comintern at this time that were not unrelated to farmer-laborism in the US. And, consequently, we judge Foster, who as early as 1923 was in my view exhibiting warning signs of nascent Stalinism, in ways that diverge. I, of course, have had the great benefit of reading Jim’s biography of Foster, which helped me immensely on this and other issues, but there is no mistaking that events and personages will appear in our respective writings in ways that are not quite the same.

To consider one figure whom Barrett mentions in his critical response to my paper, John Pepper, in this context, it is noteworthy how limited is Barrett’s treatment of Pepper in his 1999 biography of Foster, compared to how Pepper will be discussed in my book on Cannon. This is not unrelated to a differential sensitivity to Stalinism, which is something much more significant than a Draper-identified “Moscow domination.” Pepper is so central in the history of US Communism, not as McIlroy suggests, because as a Moscow “ambassador” he “starkly symbolizes Russian hegemony,” but because he actually predates Stalinism while anticipating its programmatic opportunism and adventurism, revealing the depths to which Stalinism could plummet *before* Stalinism actually consolidated. To argue that Pepper was the expression of Russian hegemony in the US is, however, quite simply wrong.

Pepper commanded early respect in American Communist circles, to be sure, because he was assumed to carry Comintern authority. But this respect faded rather quickly, and in the end Pepper’s support in the US came from his Stalin-like cultivation of factional allies, and some seeming, if eventually transient, “protections” from the Comintern that were less programmatic than personal (again, a mark of Stalinism). This was because Pepper, unlike Gusev, who ended up, not surprisingly, aligned with the same forces that Pepper had cultivated in the Ruthenberg–Lovestone camp, was more of a “free lance” than a committed Comintern representative, however talented an individual aggrandizer and operator he may have been. His wildly posed American “theses” flowed seemingly effortlessly from his pen, but they could hardly be considered as the gospel according to Moscow. Over time he consolidated a factional base within the US, to be sure, and, like Stalin, struggled to commandeer the entire party.

But he failed, and if Russian hegemony à la Pepper is what historians must look at, they will miss a great deal if they do not encounter the persistent, impassioned, and unrelenting opposition, indeed hated antagonism, to Pepper that developed, and stuck, among a cross-section of US Communism. Pepper was opposed more vehemently and long before Comintern bureaucratism/Stalinism was recognized by anyone in the United States Workers (Communist) Party. The indefatigable Pepper was thus an individual articulation of a social process, a political hustler who raced ahead of a debilitating Stalinist historical evolution much larger than he could ever have hoped to be, even in his most grandiose political dreams. That Lovestone hitched his cart to this wagon is not surprising; that Cannon, Foster, Browder, and many others in the leadership of American Communism despised Pepper tells us both that there was something healthy in the Workers (Communist) Party and that “Russian authority” pure, simple, and uncomplicated, was never as decisive as some would like to suggest.

To appreciate this requires actually addressing Stalinism. Barrett prefers to reduce the complexity of the problem to a pat phrase. It is difficult to know how to respond to charges that I have implied, with my critique of Stalinism, “that the game was over by the late 1920s.” Surely my necessarily brief, but two-sided, discussion of the ILD, Scottsboro, and the significance of questions associated with the CPUSA and anti-racism could have suggested this. But Barrett prefers the one-liner: “problems did not begin with the expulsion of Trotsky—or James Cannon.” Certainly not, and I never suggested they did. But with those expulsions (one of which would end in murder) something of American Communism’s revolutionary age of innocence was lost. They were important milestones in the ending of a pivotal phase in international and US Communism, and there were those on the revolutionary left who knew this at the time. We gain nothing, and lose much, by understating it now.

Reading Barrett is thus too often to confront the suggestion that we do not really deal with Stalinism. It is a peripheral, if not distracting, matter in assimilating Communists to the class struggle and progressive politics of America, *sans* Leninist vanguardism. Those who dirty their hands with a critique of Stalinization fail to be on the proper popular frontist side. Nowhere is this more evident than in Jim’s suggestion that I am too easy on Klehr and Haynes and too hard on Ellen Schrecker because, ostensibly, I fail to make my credentials as a leftist opposed to state repression of radicals clear.

In actuality, as my paper stated unambiguously, I had no intention of dealing extensively with the historiography of anti-Communism and the 1950s. I criticized Schrecker’s *Many Are The Crimes* (1998) because it offers an overgeneralization that relates directly to the issue of studying Stalinism, which was the subject of my essay. Schrecker makes the politically and intellectually irresponsible claim that anti-Stalinists in the 1950s were, *tout court*, an “intelligence service” for the McCarthyite network of anti-Communism. Barrett ignores this quite specifically-focused critique. Indeed, he opts for a benign version of Schrecker’s typecasting, suggesting that because I have not sufficiently clearly

rejected Haynes and Klehr, and repudiated the extent to which their scholarship feeds into a current popular utilization of their work that justifies state repression of the left, I, too, am somewhat suspect. I hold no brief for the McCarthyite repression, then or now. Both Schrecker's history of anti-Communism and the writing of Klehr and Haynes make contributions. All leftists necessarily and properly appreciate Schrecker's strong stand against the witch-hunts of the 1950s and their destructive consequences for US society, just as they separate themselves from the liberal anti-Communism of what has come to be designated "traditionist" writing on the CP. But we are not faced with only with either/or choices, in which we must choose Schrecker over Klehr-Haynes. This relates to the meaning of Stalinism, which, as I suggested in my article, Schrecker discusses in some dubiously problematic ways, most egregiously in her unfortunate and historically inaccurate comments on the anti-Stalinist left. To pose matters in the way that Barrett does—for/against—is not, I would suggest, helpful. One significant contribution historians can actually make in rehabilitating the struggle for socialism is to refuse to wager all in the battle against capitalism on the necessity of suppressing an accounting with the Stalinism that gutted the revolutionary potential of the working class and squandered a heroic generation of militants. To the extent that New Left-inspired historians compress all anti-Stalinist politics into a bulwark of reaction they deserve to be called to account for their views.

There is a final bone of another sort to pick with John McIlroy. If Barrett backs too far away from a consideration of Stalinism, McIlroy leans dangerously in the opposite direction. He betrays a kind of Stalinophobia evident in sections of the Trotskyist milieu since the days of the famous Shachtman-Burnham split from Cannon's Socialist Workers Party in 1940. In this politics a justifiable critique of Stalinism goes over to a recoil in which hostility clouds judgement and programmatic affiliation. So resistant to "Soviet domination" is McIlroy that he is too quick to abandon the Bolshevik baby as he throws out the bath water of Comintern bureaucratism and Stalinization. This precipitous act of disposal leaves McIlroy too deep in an embrace of Draper and his traditionalist followers.

This registers in McIlroy's off-the-cuff allusion to the Comintern "ruling" against the so-called "majority" of John Ballam in the US Party controversies of 1921–22. But what does McIlroy actually know of Ballam, his politics, and his behavior? Ballam in this period was the archetypal "loose cannon," notable for his indefensible, and repeated, violation of even the loosest of notions of Leninist party discipline. His much-vaunted "majority" was little more than a fiction incapable of being located in the shadows of the underground "subway" Party; his politics were a venomous and retrograde sectarianism. And the Comintern did not take the first steps against Ballam: he was suspended by majority vote in the Central Executive Committee of the American Party. In hearings before the Comintern, Ballam lost his argument to keep Communism in the US irrelevant and clandestine. What would the Communist movement have looked like had Ballam won in the New York CEC, or in Moscow? Not

pretty, and certainly not politically effective. It is a reflection of the early US Communist movement's openness to malcontents and non-draconian response to dissidents, however disturbing their individual left adventurism, that Ballam was allowed to return to active involvement in the Workers Party as long as he abided by duly constituted Executive decisions. McIlroy seems to disregard the *content* of political decision the better to valorize its *form*.

More serious is McIlroy's commentary on Zinoviev and Bolshevization in 1924. He is quite right to point out that I say too little about this in my essay, although wrong not to note that I do indeed refer to Comintern bureaucratism. The essential point about Bolshevization in 1924, developed more fully in my book on Cannon, is that it was two-sided. McIlroy opts for a one-sided, and consequently liberal, attack on Bolshevization as nothing more than bureaucratism, arbitrary centralization, and the cultivation of a "capricious Russian regime." To be sure, Zinoviev bent the stick of Comintern policy and practice in 1923–24 in precisely this direction, and for that he must bear responsibility for creating something of the climate in which Stalinism could emerge and grow. But Bolshevization had another side. It was also a necessary response to a political and programmatic looseness in national sections of the Comintern, and a legitimate attempt to create a discipline within parties where many were crying out for the need to tighten an apparatus so dominated by autonomous sections and weakened by factionalism that it threatened to fall apart. Cannon was an advocate of Bolshevization in the mid-1920s because he judged that the Workers Party needed a rigorous reordering. If he opted for an overly mechanical language that seemed to feed into a centralizing authoritarianism, this does demand criticism, but it is entirely understandable why this happened. And what happened must actually be explored. Endless quoting of the same solitary reference to the need for a monolithic party is no substitute for a rigorous recovery of practice.

McIlroy sees into this history one-dimensionally, and this feeds into his discussion of Cannon and alternative Communism. He presents something of a potted account of Cannon's Trotskyist years, suggesting that the former Workers Party leader was "a life long admirer of Zinoviev," permanently marked by his schooling in the 1920s Communist International. In actual fact, one does not have to dig too deeply into Cannon's published writings to find ample evidence that Cannon's relation to Zinoviev and his view of this complex Bolshevik figure was far more complicated than is presented by McIlroy, or others in various "Third Campist" and "bureaucratic collectivist" traditions. Nor is it possible to accept at face value the judgements about Cannon's factional heavy-handedness. After all, the US SWP, in the years 1938–55, was as open to discussion, debate, and dissent as any political organization on the left; its governance was hardly one of silencing opponents, as the record of factional discussion and debate establishes. Space precludes a full response, but McIlroy has not done Cannon justice. He presents a one-sided critique that is highly selective in its reading of events and skewed in the evidence it does not present. A more detailed and balanced accounting is indeed in order, and I am at work on it.

There is much more that could be said, but in winding this rejoinder to a close I want to end positively, and with thanks to *American Communist History* and my four critics for responding so generously and seriously to “Rethinking the historiography of United States Communism.” To be sure, Barrett, Dubofsky, Haynes, and McIlroy let me off anything but easily in their hard-hitting criticisms, and I have responded in kind. This is as it should be. There is indeed a lot at stake, especially if the *history* of Communism is ever to play a role in the revived political mobilization of the revolutionary left. Too much contemporary academic life is a mutual admiration society, a club of fawning non-criticism. The historiography of Communism is ill-served by this kind of sanitized sociability, which is an affront to the politics at its core. Yet honest critique, an exchange of views that brings forth clear articulations of intellectual and political difference, need not spell the end of cordial relations. I have enjoyed positive and mutually productive encounters and friendships with my four critics, some of quite longstanding duration. I hope and expect that this will continue, for the history of the revolutionary left, like its embrace, is an ongoing challenge, one where dialogue around differentiation rather than the harsh closure of decided division, will serve us all well.

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