RADICAL HISTORY REVIEW

COMMUNISM in Advanced Capitali Societies

MARHO

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MARHO
445 West 59th Street
New York, New York 10019

INTRODUCTION

For a Social History of Politics

With this special issue on communist movements, the Radical History Review turns to a subject that is immediately identifiable as *political*, and one that has generated polemics and deep division on the left. Yet at least until very recently, it has not been a notably rich subject of marxist or radical history-writing. This is partly because the subject was long defined by the passions of the cold war, causing doctrinaire attacks or defenses of party politics. It is also because the social movements since the late 1960s, of women, ethnic minorities, homosexuals, and ecologists, have often conceived of their struggles and modes of oppression outside of the traditional frame of reference of left-wing parties. In seeking to grasp the "hidden dimensions of power," as well as to recover the richness of social experience suppressed by capitalist advance, radical historians have thus tended to neglect the history of traditional working class parties and organizations. Inquiries into the spheres of daily life—of sociability, space, and sexuality—have proceeded largely to the neglect of the workings of politics in the accepted sense of the term—of coalition building, electoral activity, and policy-making—though these, for better or worse, have been the major modes of operation of left parties and movements in the West during the twentieth century.

To return to such a seemingly old problematic therefore merits some explanation, if only to underscore the need to break with two, now old new left conventions: one of which is political and has mired discussions of communist movements in futile debates over the success and failure of party tactics and strategies; and the other of which is historiographical and has resulted in a depoliticized social history which has paid inadequate attention to political processes in advanced capitalist societies. In developing this issue, the editors have sought to

extract the subject of communism from factional polemics by exploring how the history of communism in western capitalist societies illuminates not only the social and culture experience of twentieth-century working classes but also the operations of mass party politics. This approach, which might be characterized as a social history of politics, we believe can make a signal contribution to the self-awareness of contemporary radical movements.

The contribution of the study of communism to developing such a history should be understood in two ways. First, the communist tradition, even in this country, has been an integral part of the experience of contemporary radical politics. Although far less extensive in its impact than in Western Europe or Japan, the communist movement in the United States, up through the mid-fifties, served as an important vehicle for working class expression and a rallying point for cultural and intellectual rebellion; leaders of the civil rights movement, as well as intellectuals, entertainers, artists, and journalists passed through it and were shaped by its policies in important ways. Equally important for the left in this country is the history of the negative image of communism, whereby the Communist party has been represented not only to American elites, but also to workers and intellectuals as the image by which all radical possibilities are discredited—as the negation of those freedoms and ideals seen as the "American birthright." Thus, regardless of any historical assessment of the means or ends of party practices, communism has to a significant degree shaped all political discourse in this country. For this reason alone, it is important to come to terms with its history.

Beyond this, the study of communism reopens the question of how to study the relations between power and politics in advanced capitalist societies. Contemporary social historians have undoubtedly extended the analysis of power by exploring the myriad forms of its operations (on the body and the mind as well as on the downtrodden and the oppressed) and have revealed its instruments from the patriarchal family and the home-economics manual to the penitentiary and the psychiatrist's couch. Leaving behind the politics of parliamentary caucuses and lobbies, of party bureaucracies and electoral routines, they have sought out the multiple points of oppression and contest in civil society, identifying the dynamics of sexual politics, cultural politics, and consensual politics. Yet the "politics" of these new domains of study have rarely been measured against the common understanding of the politics of the modern state: as mobilization through explicitly political appeals, by means of the political and social institutions of the mass party. Too often historical evidence of oppositional custom and movement has automatically been equated

with politics pure and simple; and this equation has implied that every historical struggle, in every recess of social and cultural life, represents a contestation of dominant structures of power. Moreover, much recent social history, written from a perspective on politics coming from the study of relatively less complex organizations of civil society in pre-industrial or early capitalist social relations, has failed to come to terms with the institutional networks in which working class sociability and political action are deeply enmeshed under advanced capitalism.

Traditional political history, on the other hand, focuses mainly on the politics of party elites. In its most "revised" forms, it still tends to accept the contemporary structure of mass political action as the norm by which all radical politics must ultimately be judged, measuring their success or failure in terms of the institutions and ideals of a majoritarian politics, and categorizing them accordingly as pre-political or depoliticized, primitive or progressive. The existing studies on the history of communism fall for the most part in this category; even the most sophisticated examples, like those written by Italian Communist party historians in the last decade, are still governed by the canons of a political history from the top down. Typically, this perspective has led either to the neglect or condemning of alternative organizational forms and expressions of popular protest, whether arising from within the party rank-and-file or outside its primary constituency in the industrial proletariat. The rationale for this neglect is one familiar to critics of traditional political history: if such oppositional movements had been truly consequential they would have influenced party practice. The political implications of this approach are perhaps obvious: most importantly, the acceptance of democratic centralism as the institutional form best suited to leading working class movements. It has also prevented any systematic analysis of the role of women in communist movements and the relationship of women's movements to communist party politics. It has been equally detrimental for the study of rank-and-file movements, the political meaning and social implications of which cannot adequately be understood so long as they are labelled in terms of Third International party traditions: whether to the right as "social democratic," "reformist" or "revisionist," or to the left as "council communist" or "trotskyist" deviations.

Precisely because of the dual character of communist movements as political parties and social organizations, their study calls for a social history of politics. Such a history examines the role of politics in the organization of relations of power; but at the same time it must also study the specificity of its forms under advanced capitalism and how

these have conditioned and have been shaped by the practice and goals of working class and other oppositional movements. The obvious way to begin such a social history is by empirical studies, not so much on party policy, as on the relations of the parties to the surrounding society; as Gramsci noted, this involves setting party formations in a "complex portrayal of the totality of society and the state, often with international ramifications too." Only through this approach can we go beyond the definitions of political possibility set forth by the parties themselves, as well as by their critics and opponents, to examine the ways in which these movements were shaped by Taylorism, the development of the mass media and mass consumption, "total" and "cold" wars, anti-imperialist struggles, and the Bolshevik revolution itself. Such a study might then lead to the demand for a more adequate theory of politics under advanced capitalism, one that would better illuminate the relationship between state, power, and social classes and reassess the functions of mass political parties.

Within this broad framework of concerns, this issue of the RHR focuses on particular aspects of the communist tradition in Western Europe and the United States: first, on the intersection between party organization, intellectual work, and popular culture; then, on communist electoral strategies and on the problem of devising political tactics appropriate to contesting late capitalism; finally, on the relations between communist parties and movements like feminism whose definitions of issues have conflicted deeply with traditional party priorities. In their careful attention to the multiple levels of activity within the communist tradition, the contributions to this issue support the advice of E.P. Thompson, who in an interview that appeared in this *Review*, counselled against dismissing as "Stalinist pure and simple" an "entire phase of historical development and all the multiform popular initiatives and authentic areas of self-activity and heroism." By focusing attention on a political tradition which, whatever its other faults, has always given priority to questions of state power and the unification of diverse constituencies in a mass social movement, the authors also contribute to a reassessment of the conditions and means for building a socialist politics capable of contending, politically, as well as socially and culturally, with the myriad centers of institutional power in advanced capitalist societies.

Paul Buhle's article on "Jews and American Communism" explores how the communist movement came to embody the aspirations for political leadership and cultural identity of an important segment of the Jewish ethnic group. The energies of this group greatly invigorated the United States party, although they were eventually

dissipated amidst the rigidities of Stalinist politics, the massacre of European Jewry, and the relentlessly changing patterns of work, culture, and urban settlement in America. By its evocative reconstruction of the experience of Jews in the Communist Party, Buhle's study underscores the centrality of the cultural dimensions of radical movements to their political prospects.

The interview with David Montgomery by Mark Naison and Paul Buhle explores how the work of one of the United States' foremost labor historians reflects his experience as a communist trade union militant in the 1950s. Montgomery's recollections not only shed light on the sources of the American party's disintegration, but also convey how the changing composition of the United States working class in the post-World War II period affected the possibility of a radical politics: even in defeat, the left sustained initiatives for black equality while shopfloor struggles presaged a return of labor militancy.

Kenneth Waltzer's essay on the American Labor Party examines the attempts of the CPUSA to come to terms with electoral politics during the 1930s depression. His article, and the reply by Max Gordon, explore the strategic options of socialists in a period when the rise of fascism, the formation of the CIO, and the increasing involvement of the American workers in New Deal electoral coalitions, placed clear constraints on third party options. Whether or not communists toned down their radicalism excessively is the subject of debate between Waltzer and Gordon, a debate which brings into focus the problems the left generally has faced when seeking power in the electoral arena.

In her study of French Communist party politics in the last decade, Jane Jenson analyzes the evolution of a broad-based alliance and how it responded to the issues put forward by the women's movement. She explores the obstacles encountered in the party to redefining feminist issues in non-economistic terms and to appealing to social movements outside of its major constituency in the industrial working class. The more general issue of making a revolution in a world of capital flights and IMF deadlines is explored in John Hammond's study of the communists' role in the Portuguese revolution.

As Sarah Bernstein and Stewart Lawrence point out in their survey of the English-language literature on Eurocommunism and, as the bibliography of works available for the study of women and communism amply demonstrates, there is still much material to be assimilated and many questions still to be raised and answered. These, we hope, will be the basis of debates, research, and future contributions to the RHR. □

Victoria de Grazia

דער גרויסער קונדס

אויף דעם קלאָנט דער נביא

קארל מארקס: על אלה אני בכיה: אויף דעם ווייטן מיין הארץ! — אונטער דיעזער 10-שטאקינער קאפיטאליסטישער סטראשידלע ליענט בעגראבען די סאציאליסטישע בעוועגונג פון דער נייַ יארקער אידישער בעפעלקערונג.

Karl Marx says, "The pain in my heart! Under this ten story capitalist building [The Forward Building] lies buried the socialist movement of the New York Jewish people." Groysser Kundes *(1914).*

Jews and American Communism: The Cultural Question

Paul Buhle

The American Communist movement made serious recruiting
roads only among working class groups which had tasted Europe
labor and socialist influences. Tracing the membership of the part
great fraternal wing, the International Workers' Order, is a little li
studying a barometer of late nineteenth century industrialization a
political radicalization: Jews and Finns at one cutting edge of the pr
letarian experience, Poles and Southern Italians at the other, w
many groups toward the center. Superficially, the recruitment p
terns confirm the familiar hypothesis that radicalism in the Unit
States has been a phantom of struggles on other continents, negat
by the American system's political and economic performance.

The historical reality is far more complex, more radical, a
above all, more conditioned by cultural factors. Consider, for
stance, some elements shared by the two groups most attracted
American Communism—the Jews and the Finns. From their first ye
of mass immigration each group demonstrated a profound dedicati
to linguistic and cultural expression denied by repressive regimes
the Old World. Vibrant theatre, a thriving literary milieu, popu
educational experiments in preserving old values while reaching
for new opportunities, all grew up alongside trade union and politi
organization. A centuries-old resentment against Russian Czarism a
empathy for those relatives and friends still suffering its ravages a
carried over into immigrant institutions. Socialists, who took a lea
ing role in public affairs political, economic and cultural, interpret
and mobilized community aspirations for freedom on both sides of
Atlantic. Because of the long-standing influence radicals had exert
the Left wing of the Socialist movement could channel instinctive sy
pathy for the Bolshevik regime into a new political orientati
Tucked away in the icy northern reaches of Minnesota or ghettoi
in New York neighborhoods, emerging Communists thus succeed