

The “Russian Question” and the U.S. Left

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An understanding of the history of the twentieth century is impossible without clarity about the nature of Soviet-style, statist societies. Yet conventional social science, at least until the late 1940's, contributed virtually nothing of value to the development of that clarity. Until the Cold War, social theory on Soviet society was the exclusive property of radical sects in the USA, and of left movements in other countries. An exception was a 1944 special issue of *The American Sociological Review* on Russia. The pieces on the whole dealt almost entirely with legal forms, and made no attempt to examine either the reality of stated conditions or their implications for social theory.¹

As the “Iron Curtain” expanded westward with the Czechoslovak coup of 1948, it became increasingly clear to the intelligence community that there was a dearth of serious information about Soviet society. A collaboration between the State Department, the newly-formed C.I.A. and Harvard University, with funding from the Carnegie Corporation, resulted in the creation of the Harvard Russian Research Center, directed by anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn, and including on its Executive Committee the sociologist Talcott Parsons. The Center's Refugee Interview Project, using Soviet émigrés living in West Germany as sources and funded by the Air Force, produced an extensive literature much of which was made available to the public (Bauer, Inkeles and Kluckhohn, 1956; for a critical history of this project see Oppenheimer, 1997). Although much of this was interesting, its orientation towards analyses of

¹ A much older body of theory on the nature of organizations, that of the “iron law of oligarchy” school (Pareto, Mosca, Michels, and Weber for example), will not be discussed in this essay even though some did write about early developments in the USSR.

Soviet morale, or examination of its elites—sophisticated Kremlinology as we used to say—was strictly in the service of the intelligence community. A series of studies sponsored by the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, one of which dealt with the Politburo, also focused on elites rather than social structure (Schueller, 1951).

Aside from the work of the HRRC, there was very little of substance from the academy until the appearance of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1958). The gist of her argument is twofold: first, that totalitarian systems such as Nazism and Communism are in their essence more similar than different since they operate on the same strategy of appealing to isolated, atomized individuals, and use the same method, that of terror, in controlling populations; and second that they are indeed total, overwhelming in their control of society and its masses so that their domination is virtually unshakable. It is true that after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 Arendt said that this domination contains the seeds of its own destruction, and that "every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning," (478) but this rhetoric is not otherwise supported in her work. She fails to examine the qualitatively different economic dynamics underlying different "totalitarian" states (Germany's economy under Hitler remained capitalist, though severely regulated in the service of imperialist war making, while capitalism had been destroyed in the Soviet Union), and therefore cannot explain how changes in class structure over time might lead to conflict and the collapse of Stalin's "totalitarian" state apparatus.

For alternatives to generally sterile "bourgeois" social science approaches to Soviet society, one had to turn to the left. Those familiar with the socialist movement in the U.S. will be aware that for better or worse the "Russian Question" was arguably the most important single issue defining left parties and organizations. This is not to say there were no other issues that

divided the left. The issue of democratic versus centrist organization, the “Negro Question,” the role of the trade union movement, the New Deal, the approaching war, even the definition of “left” (was the Communist Party really left?) to mention the more important, all played their parts in dividing the left.

The Russian Question was an issue with both political and personal consequences. The answer to how one stood on the Soviet Union was based, necessarily for anyone who claimed to be a Marxist, on one’s analysis of the class structure of the USSR. Parties were organized, split, re-split, families divided, people attacked in street meetings (and in some countries assassinated, imprisoned, executed) according to how one stood on this issue. If one wishes to see theory about Soviet Russia, what it was, what social classes existed there, if any, and how whatever was there came to be, one must turn to the writings of these groups. Indeed, the thinking of several figures who would become leading American sociologists later on was formed in the cauldron of this dispute (Oppenheimer and Stark, 1998:783).

Left views of Soviet-style societies have traditionally fallen into three broad categories, with numerous variations. One of these has been demonstrably bankrupt for many decades but deserves attention because of the damage it has done and continues to do to the general public’s understanding of what socialism is. The other two, with their variations, continue to be debated.

The old Communist Parties and their peripheries consider the former Soviet Union and other countries of the bloc (plus China, Vietnam and Cuba) to have been, or to be “socialist countries.” Capitalist ideologues eagerly assent to this identification of socialism with these dictatorships. Current mainstream media boasts that the collapse of “Communism” demonstrates the bankruptcy of the socialist ideal is only the latest version of more than three-quarters of a century of using every failing within the Soviet bloc (or Cuba, etc.) as a cudgel to discredit all

socialist ideas. These efforts have on balance been fairly successful. The equation of socialism with top-down dictatorial rule (and material poverty) today carries over to the equation of socialism with top-down nationalization. The nationalization of various capitalist institutions by European social democratic governments, benign as some of these might be, is nevertheless a corruption of the meaning of socialism, even as many capitalists favor it in their present moment of crisis. The point is: neither total nationalization by a Soviet-style bureaucracy nor partial nationalization by a social democratic government under capitalism constitutes socialism in any way. If socialism is understood as inherently linked to democracy from the ground up, what the New Left called participatory democracy, one can only shudder when mainstream magazines proclaim, happily, that capitalism is about to be saved by the government, hence “socialism is here!”

We of the anti-Stalinist left did not need to read Khrushchev’s *Special Report to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (1956) to know that the Soviet regime did not represent the working class, that it was a brutal and repressive regime, and that it was opposed by many sectors of the “popular masses.” Such illusions had been rejected by virtually all left organizations outside the U.S. Communist Party’s orbit long ago, in some cases as long ago as the 1920’s, certainly by the time of the great purge trials of the 1930’s. Nor can any serious Marxist accept the notion, promoted by many Communists besides Khrushchev, that the only problem was “mistakes,” perhaps even “crimes” committed by a handful of people including Stalin, that it was merely distortions due to a “cult of personality,” or that economic failings were attributable to an overly rigid refusal to allow mass participation. A centralized command economy, in this view necessary for swift development in a backward country surrounded by enemies (a debatable point) necessarily breeds corruption and stagnation, so the

argument goes. But Stalinism, according to that perspective, is vindicated because the Stalin regime also led to Gorbachev, who by his very existence and initial success demonstrated the system's capacity for self-reform. Unfortunately Gorbachev failed and the system self-destructed altogether. This approach begs the question of how this command economy evolved over, and against, the organs of workers' democracy in the early years of the revolution. What were the historical circumstances that led to the rise of a paranoid Stalin to power, and to the development of such a corrupt and criminal regime? These are the questions that the anti-Stalinist left has been grappling with for a long time. Whatever the answers, the idea that the Soviet Union was a socialist society, a workers' state, and that societies modeled on the Soviet Union were or are in any way "socialist countries" is not tenable.

An early warning about dictatorial tendencies within Lenin's young Soviet Republic came from Rosa Luxemburg in her pamphlet *The Russian Revolution*, written from a German prison cell in 1918 shortly before her murder. Her prophetic words are worth repeating (1940:47-48):

Public control is indispensably necessary... But with the repression of political life in the land as a whole, life in the soviets must also become more and more crippled. Without general elections, without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element. Public life gradually falls asleep, a few dozen party leaders of inexhaustible energy and boundless experience direct and rule. Among them, in reality only a dozen outstanding heads do the

leading and an elite of the working class is invited from time to time to meetings where they are to applaud the speeches of the leaders, and to approve proposed resolutions unanimously—at bottom, then, a clique affair—a dictatorship, to be sure, but only the dictatorship of a handful of politicians ... Yes, we can go even further: such conditions must inevitably cause a brutalization of public life: attempted assassinations, shooting of hostages, etc....

The early years of the Soviet Union saw considerable debate on the relationship between democracy and socialism, and the dangers of bureaucratization (Farber, 1990). According to Anton (or Ante) Ciliga, who spent some time in a Soviet prison, as early as 1922 the Workers Group, a wing of the Workers Opposition, “considered that the alleged socialism which was being constructed under compulsion was actually bureaucratic state capitalism” (Ciliga, 1946). Ciliga’s book *The Russian Enigma* appeared in Paris in 1938. This approach will be discussed in more detail below.

The second main current of analysis of Soviet society is Trotskyism. Leon Trotsky began his attack on the bureaucratization of the Soviet Communist Party around 1923, and broadened this critique to include Stalin and the regime in general as Stalin proceeded to take complete control. As the main director of Stalin’s opposition, he was expelled from the Communist Party in 1927, exiled and finally assassinated by an agent of the Soviet secret police in August, 1940. In all countries where Trotsky’s “Left Opposition” had adherents, they were expelled from their respective Communist Parties. In the U.S. the Left Oppositionists, led by James P. Cannon, Max Shachtman, and Martin Abern, were expelled in 1928. They then founded the Communist

League of America (Left Opposition) which evolved into the Socialist Workers Party. This soon became the U.S. wing of Trotsky's new Fourth International, organized in October, 1938, in opposition to the Stalinized Third International.

Trotsky wrote page after page of analysis of the Soviet system, including the important *The Revolution Betrayed* (1937; also see Deutscher, 1964, and the extensive discussions in Hobson and Tabor, 1988 and van der Linden, 2007). As his views on the Soviet system shifted somewhat over the years, so did those of his followers, not always in the same direction. Hence the intense debates within the broad Trotskyist milieu, and the continuing splits. Trotsky's initial conception, developed in the early 1920's during the New Economic Policy, which had been designed to encourage small enterprise and private farming, was that this course opened the door to counter-revolution. If private capital came to dominate state capital, "the political process would assume ... the character of the degeneration of the state apparatus in a bourgeois direction." Combined with an increasing "bureaucratism," the revolution would be undermined (Trotsky, 1943:41, 46).

After the destruction of the NEP and the collectivization of agriculture by Stalin, Trotsky explained the role of the bureaucracy in a different way. By 1932 he had concluded that "a closed bureaucratic stratum" characterized by "centrism" (neither left revolutionary nor right pro-bourgeois, but a vacillation between them) was being created. This centrist bureaucracy "hinders by its administrative zigzags the defense of the revolution and of socialist construction;" (Trotsky, 1971:217). It was an independent force that in the long run would prepare the ground for the restoration of capitalism. Historically it was analogous to, first, Thermidor, the

reactionary backlash to the French Revolution,² and second, Bonapartism,³ a dictatorship standing above classes too weak to take power themselves, but preparing the groundwork for rule by the bourgeoisie. Meanwhile, however, the Stalin regime had completely crushed the last vestiges of bourgeois economic forms. This meant, for Trotsky, that the Soviet Union remained a “proletarian state” after all despite its bureaucratic “degeneration.” Hence, a degenerated workers’ state, the formulation that was cast in stone in the founding document of the Fourth International, *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, most of which was written by Trotsky himself in 1938 (1946:47): “The USSR thus embodies terrific contradictions. But it still remains a *degenerated workers’ state*...The political prognosis has an alternative character: either the bureaucracy, becoming ever more the organ of the world bourgeoisie in the workers’ state will overthrow the new forms of property and plunge the country back to capitalism; or the working class will crush the bureaucracy and open the way to socialism.” Insofar as neither alternative had yet occurred, the USSR continued to be in a transitional state.

With war on the immediate horizon, the Trotskyist position seemed superficially to be contradictory: no support for the bourgeois states in a war against fascism, but unconditional defense of the USSR, since it was still a workers’ state, no matter how degenerated. As Hobson and Tabor describe it (1988:272), “This meant that the International would support Russia against *any country* (emphasis added) it might be at war with, without demanding a prior reform of the Stalinist regime, but also without giving up its opposition to the regime.”

² What in the sociology of social movements is roughly equivalent to the “routinization” or “institutionalization” stage.

³ A concept elaborated by Marx (1852).

Meanwhile a third kind of analysis had appeared in the context of a battle within Trotskyism in response to the Russo-Finnish wars, in effect in opposition to the above thesis. In August, 1939, Stalin and Hitler signed a nonaggression pact and divided Poland between them, signaling the beginning of World War II in Europe. In November, Stalin went to war against Finland, ostensibly to prevent Finland from becoming a launching pad for an imperialist attack on the Soviet Union. As Soviet and Finnish troops hammered each other in the bitter cold of that winter, the Trotskyist movement abroad confronted the question of what position should be taken on the war, and specifically, should the Soviet Union be defended? Trotsky supported the Soviet Union, but a group of dissenters in his movement took a stance that was, in effect, neutral in the war between two similarly imperialistic and class-ruled societies.

There were two Russo-Finnish wars: the “Winter War” of 1939-1940, and the “Continuation War” of 1941-44. Finland joined Germany when the latter attacked the USSR in June 1941. By that time, Trotsky was dead. His followers continued to defend the Soviet Union.

As early as 1938, however, some members of the SWP had already been moving toward a position that rejected the theory that the Soviet Union was any sort of workers’ state, arguing that the Stalin bureaucracy was actually counterrevolutionary because the proletariat no longer had any say in running “its” state. In April, 1940, the Trotskyists split, with a faction that included this earlier group plus others forming a new group called the Workers Party. This group was led by Max Shachtman, formerly a close comrade of Trotsky. When the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union, the majority in the WP closed ranks against any defense of the Stalin regime, and, after the US entered the war that December, against any support for this “imperialist” war.⁴

⁴ The SWP had other problems as well. Following the passage of the Smith Act, which outlawed conspiring to overthrow the government by force and violence among other things, 28 people including the leader of the SWP, James P. Cannon, and the leadership of Teamsters Local 544

Shachtman considered the Soviet Union to be a new kind of social system called bureaucratic collectivism. As he developed the concept over several years, it appeared superficially to be a revision of orthodox Marxism because in classical Marxist theory bureaucracies could not be anything but structures dependent upon a class base rooted in some form of property ownership. So if in the USSR Stalin had eradicated private property and all capital had been “collectivized” under the ownership of the state, then it followed the only possible alternative to a capitalist state was a workers’ state since that was the only class in existence (now that the private land-holding peasantry had been liquidated). Trotsky, following this tradition, put it this way (quoted in Shachtman, 1962:38):

The character of the social regime is determined first of all by the property relations. The nationalization of the land, of the means of production and exchange, with the monopoly of foreign trade in the hands of the state, constitutes the bases of the social order of the USSR ... By these property relations, lying at the basis of class relations, is determined for us the nature of the Soviet Union as a proletarian state.

But Shachtman, while accepting Trotsky’s description of the facts, came to a different conclusion (1962:44, 46):

The social rule of the proletariat cannot express itself in private owner-

went on trial in Minneapolis in October, 1941. 23 were convicted and went to prison for terms of either 12 or 14 months. The Communist Party, against which the Smith Act would later be used, applauded the government’s action.

ship of capital, but only in its ‘ownership’ of the state in whose hands is concentrated all the decisive economic power. *Hence, its social power lies in its political power.* In bourgeois society, the two can be and are divorced; in the proletarian state, they are inseparable ... In the Soviet Union the proletarian is master of property only if he is master of the state which is its repository... (therefore the) political expropriation of the proletariat ... is nothing more or less than the destruction of the class rule of the workers, the end of the Soviet Union as a workers’ state.

The theory of bureaucratic collectivism stated that a new ruling class had developed in the Soviet Union, neither a bourgeoisie nor a working class, but against them both and for itself, as a collectivity, that is, in control of a state that owned and controlled the economy. It was a third alternative to both capitalism and socialism. It was the development of this new form of dictatorship that Luxemburg, Ciliga, and for that matter the entire anarchist movement had feared.⁵ The term itself was apparently coined by one Bruno Rizzi (“Bruno R.”), whose book *La Bureaucratisation du Monde* appeared in Paris in 1939, a year after Ciliga’s *The Russian Enigma*. However, Rizzi favored the development of rational, planned states, including the New Deal, Stalinism, and Mussolini’s fascism, as an alternative to a decaying capitalism. [For further discussion, see Haberkorn and Lipow (1996), Appendix A, 175-182.]

The idea that a “New Class” had appeared not only in Stalinist Russia but in other regimes as different as Britain’s Labor government and Hitler’s dictatorship soon impacted

⁵ See, for example, Woodcock, 1944.

Shachtman's Workers' Party. James Burnham, one of Shachtman's original comrades in the split from the SWP, resigned from the WP almost immediately after its formation, having taken bureaucratic collectivist theory to what he considered its logical conclusion. In his letter of resignation dated May 2, 1940, he said (Trotsky, 1942:207):

Not only do I believe it meaningless to say that 'socialism is inevitable' and false that socialism is 'the only alternative to capitalism'; I consider that on the basis of the evidence now available to us a new form of exploitation (what I call 'managerial society') is not only possible as an alternative to capitalism but is a more probable outcome of the present period than socialism.

He then wrote *The Managerial Revolution* (1941:42) in which he argued that

The economic framework in which the social dominance of the managers will be assured is based upon the state ownership of the major instruments of production ... the state... will ... be the 'property' of the managers. And that will be quite enough to place them in the position of the ruling class.

Burnham's position was that managerial society was not restricted to Russia. Fascist Germany and the New Deal, he said, also represented advanced stages of managerial society. This line of reasoning implied that any development in this direction must necessarily be

opposed, even if it took the form of a benign social democratic state. Hence, politically, this led Burnham into the camp of conservatism.

Another ex-Trotskyite, Dwight Macdonald, had meanwhile also struck out on his own, and in the midst of the war organized a peppy anti-war “libertarian” magazine called *Politics*. In a series entitled “The Root Is Man,” first published in April, 1946 (1953:27, also 1995:70) Macdonald wrote that “a form of society has come into being which is not Socialism but rather an even more oppressive form of class society than Capitalism and yet which has resolved those economic contradictions on which Marx based his expectations of progress to socialism. It is a ‘third alternative’ to both capitalism and socialism.” Like Burnham, Macdonald also threw Keynesian economic policies and the postwar nationalization trend in Labor Britain into the bureaucratic collectivist pot but he did not follow Burnham into the conservative camp. Macdonald continued to hold out hope for an alternative, left-libertarian vision.

Since this volume focuses on the concept of State Capitalism, it seems important to pay attention to this analysis of Soviet-style societies as it developed within the anti-Stalinist left.⁶ This was the proposition that the USSR was a “state capitalist” society. A group within Shachtman’s Workers Party, led by C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya (the “Johnson-Forest Tendency”) proposed that the “capital-labor relationship,” that is, the nature of social relations in the workplace, insofar as this is characterized by exploitation, was similar in both Stalinist and capitalist societies. Investment decisions are made by the state. Production for profit—the profit of the state—occurs. Instead of many capitalists, as in capitalism, there is only one capitalist: the state (van der Linden, 2009:110-116). Hence the term “state capitalism.”

⁶ This essay will not describe the continuing debates within and between Trotskyist groups concerning the nature of post-1945 Eastern European societies, which some called “deformed” workers’ states. For a detailed discussion of this and other Left conceptions of these societies see van der Linden (2007, 2009).

This is a description that Shachtman would not have contested, as far as it goes. Yet for the Shachtmanites, the absence of a capitalist class meant that there could not be a capitalist economy, even though the hierarchical division of labor and close supervision typical of capitalist enterprises existed. These forms of exploitation can exist in other class systems. The capitalist imperative to invest, reinvest, and grow constantly for the sake, ultimately, of individual profit (filtered through corporations, banks, etc.) did not exist in the USSR. The use of surplus was at the command of politics, the political needs of the bureaucratic state and its collective leadership. In contrast, in capitalism the dynamic of private profit commands politics, although political exigencies do interfere from time to time.

The other argument against the “state capitalism” formulation is that it has often conflated qualitatively different social systems, as is clear from some of the other contributions to this volume. The term has historically been used not only when the state owns and controls the entire economy, but also when the state “interferes” or regulates, or even nationalizes economic enterprises under capitalism. This has happened under the New Deal, under labor governments as well as under fascism, none of which have challenged the existence of a system of profit for individuals and private corporations. The term “state capitalism” has been used when the bourgeois state temporarily takes charge of the economy in greater or lesser degree. But it is still a bourgeois state. The contrast is clear: In a statist society such as the USSR, the capitalist class is destroyed. The fact that some small businesses existed in some countries of the Soviet bloc, for example Czechoslovakia, is irrelevant since they were insignificant in the larger economy. Without capitalists as the dominant economic class there cannot be a capitalist state.

There can be transitional periods, as after the collapse of the USSR, when it is not (yet) clear whether private capitalists or state bureaucrats are dominant. Indeed there may be

partnerships between the two in which the privileges of both are protected by a still powerful bureaucracy that guarantees the success of its private partner, and its own survival, by suppressing labor. But as capital becomes ever more powerful, the state increasingly becomes a state over which the bourgeoisie conquers “for itself ... exclusive political sway.” (Marx and Engels, 1948: Part I, 11. Orig. 1848). Hence a capitalist state.

The “Johnson-Forest Tendency” that is associated with the state capitalist framework within the US Left had initially split from the SWP with the Shachtmanites, later rejoined, then went out on their own in 1950. C.L.R. James was a West Indian intellectual who wrote numerous books on many topics including Herman Melville and cricket, but his best-known work, in the same league as Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution* (1932) was undoubtedly *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Overture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1963; orig. 1938). Raya Dunayevskaya was a political philosopher whose project focused on the early Marx and his humanistic outlook. In 1953 James was deported, a victim of McCarthyism, and their organization, called *Correspondence*, soon split. James’ followers’ group, *Facing Reality*, is now defunct. Dunayevskaya’s group publishes *News and Letters*. The *Facing Reality* group had some influence among African-American activists in Detroit in the 1960’s, particularly with the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, which was affiliated with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.⁷

Looking back, was the distinction between bureaucratic collectivism and state capitalism worth the acrimony and the splits among the ex-Trotskyists worth it? Probably not, but as the “Old Left” declined, it seemed that the smaller the political stakes, the more vicious the battles. In the context of World War II, however, most people on the left preferred to be agnostic about

⁷ For more on the League, see Georgakas (1998:436-439).

the precise nature of the Soviet state, our ally in the struggle against fascism. The Workers Party's anti-war position was distinctly in the minority within the broader left, the vast majority of which, if we include the Communist Party and its periphery, supported the war effort. Irving Howe's verdict (1978:184) that "Trotsky's stand on the war had not the slightest practical consequence" could as well be extended not only to the Shachtmanites but to the entire anti-war left during World War II, including the pacifists in the Socialist Party.

The "new class" idea finally emerged from the relative obscurity of left sectarian debates in 1957 when *The New York Times* and Frederick A. Praeger, publisher, discovered Milovan Djilas, a former comrade of dictator Josip Broz Tito, in a Yugoslav prison. Djilas, who apparently had some access to archives that included the writings of Trotsky, laid out a theory of a "new class" in terms virtually identical to those of Shachtman. First as a series in the *Times* (July, 1957) and then in his book *The New Class*, Djilas proclaimed that "in contemporary Communism a new owning and exploiting class is involved and not merely a temporary dictatorship and an arbitrary bureaucracy" (1957:54). Most of those who read and reviewed *The New Class* were unaware of the earlier history of this theory. The book was treated as just another "expose" of the evils of Communism.

By then the Workers Party had changed its name to the Independent Socialist League, and with a long list of other groups both Stalinist and anti-Stalinist (including the ISL's youth group), found itself on what was called the "Attorney General's List of Subversive Organizations" (Executive Order 10450). Eventually the list was declared unconstitutional, but not before many people directly or indirectly associated with these groups had lost their jobs or suffered other social and economic consequences.

The long-term impact of “The Russian Question” on the US left will be a subject of debate for historians and some of the left for some time to come. But the short-term impact was more significant. Although Trotsky and his followers were not the first to expose the Stalinist state for what it was, they were clearly instrumental in educating large numbers of the left-oriented in the 1930’s as to what was going on. When Trotsky arrived in his Mexican exile in January, 1937, he called for an international commission of inquiry into the Moscow purge trials. Such a group was indeed convened, headed by the well-known educator and philosopher John Dewey. Five members of this commission went to Trotsky’s home in Coyoacan, and held hearings from April 10-17, 1937. Trotsky had been convicted in absentia, and the charges against him were duly examined. Almost needless to say, the commission “concluded that the Moscow trials were frame-ups and Trotsky and Sedov (his son: M.O.) were not guilty of the eighteen specific charges ...” (Novak, 1968:xi).

Despite these events, many “progressives,” and not only members of the Communist Party, remained astonishingly naïve about the Soviet Union until after the war, some until Krushchev’s “revelations” in 1956, and a few even until this day. The concept of “third camp socialism” (neither Washington nor Moscow) continued to be a minor note on the left, despite the work of such publications as *Partisan Review* (in its late 1930’s incarnation), *Politics* (in the 1940’s), *Dissent* (especially during the McCarthy period), and *New Politics* (beginning in 1961).

This naivete impacted the student New Left as well. Certainly their leaders were right in attacking the “unreasoning” anti-communist crusade that was being used to sell U.S. militarism and quash political dissent. But they were also antagonistic to what they saw as the overly zealous anti-communism of Leftists who had long fought the Communist Party. These were sometimes shrill to say the least (1964:30). This led some of the New Left to be “anti-anti-

communist,” which blinded them to the less pleasant realities of such regimes as Mao’s China, “Uncle Ho’s” North Vietnam, or Castro’s Cuba.⁸ The uncritical love affair of many veterans of the New Left with Cuba continues to this day. These societies are, or were, after all, some version of bureaucratic collectivism or state capitalism, or, in some views, degenerated or deformed workers’ states. But socialist they were not, despite their rhetoric. Few of the New Left had much of a handle on such theoretical matters in those days, with the exception of those who had contact with such third camp organizations (in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s) as the Student Peace Union, the Young People’s Socialist League, the Young Socialist League or (in Berkeley) with the Independent Socialist Club.⁹

Today the “Russian Question” and the heated arguments around it seem almost quaint. It is difficult to share Michael Harrington’s optimistic view (quoted in Isserman, 1987:65) that the ideas debated in such organizations as the Young Socialist League (I was a member) had much influence on the movements of the 1960s. It is possible, however, that these ideas may reemerge in current debates about the nature of “post-Soviet” societies. These societies are in transition. What they are in transition from is fairly clear, regardless of the terminology. What they are now is, tragically, that they are moving towards integration with world capitalism just at the moment

⁸ The SDS founding document, *The Port Huron Statement*, states clearly that “As democrats we are in basic opposition to the communist system.” However, this rhetoric was likely inserted to mollify its parent organization, the League for Industrial Democracy, a staunchly anti-Stalinist group, which later expelled them anyway (Isserman, 1987:209-211).

⁹ Today’s publications *Labor Notes* and *Against the Current*, and several small left socialist groups including “Solidarity” are traceable to this third camp tradition (Phelps, 1998:348-351).

when capitalism is once again in deep crisis. The consequences for their working classes in particular have been catastrophic, with deepening inequality and impoverishment. The outcomes of the inevitable clashes of masses of protesters in the streets with the repressive organs of these post-stalinist states are far from clear, but nothing is inevitable.

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