Cultural Commentary: The Workers' Party Revisited

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Though conservative politicians tend to portray socialism as a unified, monolithic force, its history as an American political and ideological movement is, as Betty Mandell reports, anything but unified. To understand something of the issues with which the movement has struggled, a bit of background may be useful.

In 1929 the Communist League of America (later to change its name to the Socialist Workers Party - SWP) was founded on principles articulated by the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky. By 1940 the SWP was split over this issue of whether to defend or oppose Russia in the coming war. Some in the SWP who saw Russia as a "degenerated worker's state" continued to defend Russia against all Capitalist foes. Others, including Max Shachtman (one of the founders of the Communist League in 1929), argued that Russia was merely a "bureaucratic collective" in which a new bureaucratic class ruled in contradiction of workers' interests.

Shachtman and others split from the SWP and formed the Workers Party (WP) which remained a formal political party only until 1948 at which time, having been labeled subversive by the Federal Department of Justice, it became an educational organization called the Independent Socialist League (ISL).

Choose. Choose between Russia and the United States. Choose between Cuba and the United States. Choose Between China and Russia. Choose between starvation and totalitarianism. Choose between cold war rhetoric and communist infiltration. But why? Are there no other possibilities? Can a socialist be independent of popular definitions of socialism which force such awful choices? Can she or he proclaim that Russia, China, Cuba are not socialist, and at the same time try to move the United States toward genuine democratic socialism?

There were some radicals in the 1940s and 1950s who did just that. In the words of the anarchist Max Nomad, they felt like "a bone that two dogs are fighting over and someone asks the bone whose side it is on." To the cold war fight, they said, "A plague on both your houses." In 1948 this small group of radicals, called the Worker's Party, was placed on Attorney General Tom Clark's list of subversive organizations. In 1958 they were removed from the list. Then they disbanded.

Twenty-six years later, on May 6-7, 1983, some of that small group and a few friends reassembled at New York University's Tamiment Library for a Workers' Party/Standing Fast conference to reminisce about old times and to celebrate the acquisition by N.Y.U. of the papers of the man who had been the leading theoretician of the Workers' Party, Max Shachtman. I attended that conference, and felt like I was stepping back into a little known, but important, page of history. Small as the group was, it was influential in the intellectual development of the left. Some members of the group are famous today, including Michael Harrington, whose book The Other America fired the first shot in the War on Poverty; Irving Howe, literary critic, renowned author (World of Our Fathers), and editor of the journal Dissent; Dwight MacDonald, literary critic and essayist; novelist Harvey Swados; and labor activist Bayard Rustin.

The conference consisted of three separate panel discussions. One focused on the Workers' Party, another on Harvey Swados' 1970 novel Standing Fast as a portrayal of the Workers' Party, and the third on three journals which had their roots in the Workers' Party: Politics, Dissent, and New Politics. Invitations were sent to former Workers' Party activists, some friends, and some contributors to early issues of the journals. The invitation list was a story in itself, combining those who had stood fast in their radicalism and those who had turned to the right. As Phyllis Jacobson, editor of New Politics, put it, "In this small gathering there sits both the Old Left and the New Right."

Julie Jacobson, head of the Socialist Youth League, the youth division of the ISL, noted that those who turned to the right had rejected all Workers' Party principles but their anti-Stalinism and said that some former Workers' Party members (for example, Saul Bellow and Seymour Martin Lipset) had switched their commitment from Lenin and Leninism to Henry Jackson and Ronald Reagan! The invitation list also contained a sprinkling of radicals turned social democrats, such as Michael Harrington and Irving Howe. (Neither attended.) Perhaps the largest irony of the Standing Fast conference is that the central figure, present only in the consciousness of the participants and in the papers on display, Max Shachtman, had not stood fast, having ended a brilliant radical career by ignobly supporting the American involvement in Vietnam. This split between those who had turned toward the Right and those who had remained true to the original principles of the Workers' Party set the stage for some tense conference debates. Some people had even refused to participate because of their rage at those who had turned to the Right.

There was pride, there were regrets, and there were ambivalences that seemed never to have been resolved. Everyone was proud that the Workers' Party had presented a political choice that was independent of both the capitalist countries and the countries calling themselves socialist but run, in fact, by a privileged bureaucracy. The Workers' Party had kept alive an independent political perspective through the 1940s and 1950s, and as individuals, even through the 1960s and to the present. As some Leftists were chanting "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh,"
Those with a Workers' Party analysis criticized the totalitarian politics and tactics of the Soviet Union and the Communist parties that were funded by Moscow and controlling the Popular Front. One speaker commented that when neo-conservative Irving Kristol points to so-called socialist countries and jeers, "Look what happened to socialism," a Workers' Party analysis would point out, "But that's not true socialism—if it's not democratic it's not socialism."

There were regrets, however, about the route Max Shachtman had finally taken, and these regrets mingled with the regrets about the failure of the Workers' Party to provide a bridge between the Old and the New Left. It was pointed out that even Dissent, one of the most important Leftist journals in America, had been more critical of the New Left than of the Vietnam war. Participants recalled that at the time of the Port Huron Statement, the founding credo of Students for a Democratic Society, the SDS had gone to Irving Howe and Michael Harrington for guidance and been rebuffed. Harrington and Howe had moved so far to the Right that they were no longer opponents of American imperialism, and had opposed an American unilateral withdrawal from Vietnam.

Another painful split within the movement, that between the Old Left and feminists, was glaringly revealed when one of the panelists, Albert Glotzer, told of how the journal Labor Action had an entirely female editorial board during World War II (since so many men were in the armed forces) then added, "But we managed." It was easy to discover sexism in the work of group members. It was obvious in Swados' novel Standing Fast, for example, but no one mentioned this—if indeed, they were aware of it when they read the book, Swados himself may have been unaware of it when he wrote it. The "important" characters in the book are all male, and even when children of party members are portrayed, only the male children are fleshed out. Women play supporting roles in every sense of the word, and even their lovemaking is shaped by male promptings that sometimes seem to suggest a "raging hormone" theory of male sexuality. At the conference sexism seemed to be just one aspect of the generally strident tone of the discussions, in which men dominated.

More than one person commented on the sharp and often acerbic polemics that had prevailed in the old days, and in fact occasionally bubbled up again at the conference. (Like mothers anxious to keep the family peace, a couple of women urged people to be kind.) From all accounts, Max Shachtman, while a brilliant polemician, debater, and theoretician, was often caustic and sarcastic. One participant characterized the usual tone of discussion as follows: "Not only must you defeat your opponent in debate, but cut him in several pieces and stomp on him."

In the discussions about the Workers' Party position on World War II, old doubts resurfaced. While the Workers' Party supported resistance movements in Europe, they had advocated resisting the war by the continued prosecution of the class struggle, e.g. through strikes, and they could not support capitalist powers, even though they were not conscientious objectors and most did serve in the Armed Forces. In view of their predominantly Jewish membership, it was difficult not to support Allied capitalist opposition to Hitler.

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More than one speaker claimed to have become "older and wiser." Articles in the New International or Labor Action had often been prefixed by the phrase, "In this period of the death agony of capitalism..." Although Workers' Party members had a sense of history, their thinking was often reductionist. During the war, they assumed that revolution was just around the corner. Perhaps, it was suggested, this sense of "being right," of "knowing the way" had faded with age, with tiredness, and with the real threat of the atom bomb. They had been naive about some of Trotsky's theses, for example the colonial belief that India couldn't be free of English rule without a socialist revolution. Even when events disproved certain of Trotsky's theses, some Workers' Party members still clung to his outdated theories. For those people who saw the world as "infinitely more complicated than we thought it was," the old certainties were gone.

The conference also saw the resurfacing of an old, many-sided debate over political orthodoxy. People within the movement disagreed strongly as to what variety of Marxism the Workers' Party had represented. Those who imagine that Leftists are united in their aims would surely have been enlightened to witness the differences expressed by old colleagues in New York.

Part of the debate focused on whether the original Workers' Party had been truly Leninist. One side said it had not been Leninist since the Workers' Party had promoted democratic ideas while Leninism was associated with an anti-democratic, one-party state. The opposite view was that the Workers' Party had been Leninist in its commitment to the success of the Russian revolution, and to the idea that the suppression of opposing parties after the revolution was due to the treachery of Social Democracy, not to the Bolsheviks' Left-wing principles of party organization. Others, preferring Trotskyism for its "theoretical rigor," criticized the Bolshevism of the Workers' Party for its "sterile and narrow-minded orthodoxy, hierarchy, cliches and resistance to change."

The theme of differences within the movement was addressed most directly when the sociologist Lewis Coser, a co-editor of Dissent, discussed the rich cultural tradition that many Workers' Party members had brought with them from Europe. Many of their children, like the radicals depicted in Standing Fast, had discarded those ethnic and religious traditions in their eagerness to be citizens of the world. One participant, who was once in the Catholic Left but is now a religious Jew, thought the Workers' Party had ignored cultural differences, seeking to build a movement that reflected America as a melting pot rather than a pluralistic society. He argued the need to pass traditions, unlike the enormous rancor between the Old and the New Left. In Standing Fast Harvey Swados dealt with the tragic gap in understanding between radical generations. He wanted to prevent this breakdown between generations by describing what they had in common. For this effort, Swados was described at the conference as "one of the great heroes of our time."

In the final analysis, what effect did the Workers' Party have on history? The government considered the Workers' Party dangerous and the Workers' Party responded to that evaluation by taking assumed names and going underground. Party members believed that capitalism was in its death agony and that revolution was just around the corner. Many deferred college education and other pursuits, committing themselves to building a mass base among the workers in preparation for the impending revolution. The revolution was not in fact "around the corner," and the majority of American workers did not develop revolutionary consciousness. In time a sizeable number of Workers'
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Party members wearied of the struggle or stopped believing in it, turning to their consumer comforts, and often actively supporting the capitalist government they had struggled against in their youth. Did they achieve no more importance than to become quaint objects of study for Ph.D. candidates holed up in the carrels of the N.Y.U. Library?

In the novel Standing Fast one of the characters, Paul, was murdered. His agonized father, trying to make sense of Paul's murder and his own life, cries, "You know what all of us are? Not even a footnote. . . . Roosevelt and the war that you were against, Truman and the war that you were against, Eisenhower and the McCarthyism that you were against. . . . Who cared what you thought? Nobody but a handful of cranks and psychopaths. Nuts, freaks, unhappy like me . . . ." His friend replies, "One way or another, we tried to keep an idea alive. There weren't enough of us, there never are. We ridiculously wrong about a lot of things but wasn't? And what idea did they keep alive, others?"

I feel that those who kept the faith have so brilliantly. After the official demise of the Phyllis and Julie Jacobson published New as a platform for socialists who maintained a radical perspective that was both anti-Stalinist and anti-capitalist. They published articles by the imprisoned Polish radicals Jacek Kuron and Karol Modzelewski, later to be founders of KOR and eventually the Solidarity movement. Although New Politics discontinued publication in 1978, the Jacobsons are laying the groundwork for reinstating it. C.L.R. James had an important influence on both African and Caribbean radical movements. Hal Draper has continued the Workers' Party tradition of theoretical rigor in his recently published multi-volume analysis of Marx and Engels. He and his late wife Anne provided an outstanding education during May Morning (May 1) celebrations of Oxford has made throughout twelve centuries of its existence and would like to taste a portion of its rich cultural life. Such an opportunity was extended to me and my family through a sabbatical granted by B.S.C. during 1983 to join the Inorganic Chemistry Laboratory (I.C.L.) and investigate some aspects of the chemistry of muscle contraction. Here I wish to summarize my Oxford experiences on two fronts: town and gown and research related to muscle action.

I was totally unprepared for a visit to the slaughterhouse at five a.m. to collect fresh cow brains...

The City: Oxford (110,000) is the seat of Oxfordshire, a county on England's South Midlands ("Home Country"), and is located some fifty-five miles northwest of London. The natural beauty of Oxford nestled in the valley of the Isis River (soon to be known as the Thames as it approaches London) is greatly enhanced by the dominant College Spires visible to visitors approaching the city from any direction. Soon the visitor discovers the intimate proximity of town and gown: for the university buildings are dispersed throughout central Oxford, easily mingling the dons and undergraduates with merchants and curious tourists. This concentration of ancient college buildings surrounded by manicured gardens, libraries, bookstores, churches, museums, all located in a well-defined circular pattern, makes Oxford an easy adventure to experience by foot. Naturally, tired feet need convenient rest stops during day-long visits. Enter the friendly pubs where a family can enjoy a simple meal and warm beer and witness exchanges of opinion between robed students on topics ranging from the nuclear arms race to sports events between Oxford and the Other Place (Cambridge). The heterogeneity of languages, attire, and mannerism exhibited by thousands of visitors in Oxford adds a definite international flavor to this very English city. For long-term visitors, the city offers numerous cultural attractions in the form of societies for music, architecture, literature. To my great delight I was admitted by the Oxford Bach Society to sing to knowledgeable audiences in ancient cathedrals -- a cherished audiovisual experience indeed.

The University: At the onset I must state that Oxford lacks the typical centralized administration which governs a university. Oxford shares with Cambridge the distinction of having preserved the medieval collegiate system where a collection of autonomous colleges offer education and lodging to undergraduates through dons (teachers ranking from lowly assistants to revered professors) on a one-to-one basis. For Oxford University consists of thirty-five such Colleges, each with its own physical plant (dorms, library, chapel, dining room, gardens, and extensive real estate holdings) and a governing body consisting of a Head and elected Fellows. Most Fellows hold teaching and research positions at the University. The Colleges vary in size, wealth and prestige. The largest and best known is Christ's Church (1525) with its renowned choir, extensive gardens and a rich history of prominent alumni in music, theology and government. The majestic Magdalen College Tower by University Botanical Gardens, greets visitors at the southern entrance to the campus and is the site of much merry making during May Morning (May 1) celebrations, a tradition vaguely linked to Viking mythology. New College was founded in 1379 and boasts an excellent choir which regularly performs in the chapel containing the famous stone statues of medieval recluses. In contrast, Wolfson College was estab-