

# Neo-Stalinism: The Achilles Heel of the Peace Movement and the American Left

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THE ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT OF THE LATE SIXTIES AND EARLY SEVENTIES reflected more mood than cadre organization, an expression of mass revulsion to a seemingly irrational imperialist adventure of untold horrors and atrocities, brutalizing Americans and Vietnamese alike. As the war escalated, so did the disillusionment of the American people; it is probably fair to say that toward the end of the war, a majority of Americans were opposed to the continued military presence of the U.S. in Indochina.

Out of this huge reservoir of disaffection and opposition, hundreds of thousands responded to the calls for action by small traditional pacifist groups, newly coalesced anti-war committees and radical organizations. Not only large numbers of student youth, whose instinct for self-preservation reinforced their moral opprobrium and fervor, not only ex-radicals whose lost youthful social passions were rekindled, but a response from vast numbers of housewives, academics, lawyers, doctors, assorted professionals, men of the cloth and women in nuns' garb who took to the streets, many of them prepared for confrontation with the authorities and civil disobedience.

Despite its militancy and sacrifices, the energies of this huge protest movement were largely dissipated almost immediately with the end of the war. For a number of reasons: First of all, the movement remained, unfortunately, a single issue movement. As such, its reason for being simply disappeared with the war's end. Second, it was always a middle class movement. As such, the movement lacked the social cohesiveness and economic motivation that could facilitate its transformation into a broader, deeper and more permanent movement of social protest. More succinctly: the anti-war movement failed to attract the working class. Had it done so would have been no guarantee that the movement could survive in other forms; but without a working class base any effort to channelize the energies of the movement into new *mass* forms of social protest would be abortive. For the U.S. working class (as in other industrial countries—there is no "exceptionalism" here) remains an exploited class, a propertyless class, a near majority class, a socially organized class, and a permanent class.

To emphasize the middle class nature of the peace movement can in no way be interpreted as an attempt to belittle it. For this writer, at least, the movement was magnificent and inspiring. It took as much courage—perhaps more—for a student and professional to endanger his or

her career in the militant pursuit of peace as for a worker to place his or her job in similar jeopardy. And a blow from a cop's club is just as damaging to the middle class scalp as it is to the proletarian. The inherent weakness of a middle class movement is an objective limitation,

Why did the working class remain outside the anti-war movement, even hostile to it, sometimes violently so? Primarily because the American working class is one of the most politically conservative groups in the country. This does not give comfort to the Marxist view of the working class as the indispensable agent for revolutionary change; neither does it contradict that view. But it is only facing reality, for all of its discomforts, to see that today the so-called average American worker—the typical steelworker, or autoworker, or hardhat, etc.—is bigoted, racist, sexist and chauvinist. Nevertheless, on the question of the war, I believe that barriers might have been penetrated, a responsive chord struck, and via the issue of the war a degree of collaboration established between the left and the working class on economic problems, perhaps even a breakthrough on explosive racial issues.

**BUT THE LEADERSHIP OF THE ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT** never really sought to establish that contact. More important, even if the effort had been made, it could not have succeeded given the political character of much of that leadership. Let me put it bluntly: the movement's leadership was by and large Stalinoid and neo-Stalinist.

For those who do not understand what is meant by these terms, permit me to summarize:

A Stalinist (or Communist, if you prefer) country is one in which the means of production are owned and controlled by the state, and the state in turn is "owned" or governed by a ruling political Party which guards its social power through the use or threat of force to suppress other parties, deny all civil liberties (freedom of speech, press, assembly, etc.) and, of course, to crush unions. The ruling Party aspires to total political, economic, social and cultural control. Such countries and Parties are Stalinist (or Communist) countries and Stalinist (or Communist) Parties. Examples are Russia, the Eastern European countries, Yugoslavia; and North Korea, and Cuba, and China and North Vietnam; all of them ruled by a single Party which directs the nationalized economy, oversees the administrative and military apparatuses. Above all, the Party oversees the organs of internal security. Because the absence of dissidence is the health of the Stalinist state. The first such state to curse civilization was Russia under Stalin. But not all Stalinist countries need utilize the same degree of terror as did Stalin. However, they all have the capacity to do so, as each has shown at various times, including China and North Vietnam.

The term Stalinoid, then, is applied to individuals and tendencies

given to rationalizations, apologies, justifications for one or another or all such Stalinist totalitarian societies. With few exceptions, it describes the anti-war leadership. And many leading cadres were more than apologists for what they euphemistically called the "socialist countries" (i.e. Communist countries where socialists are either put in prisons, insane asylums or cemeteries if they dissent); they were enthusiastic supporters of Communist countries, above all Cuba, China and North Vietnam.

The truth is that these peace leaders were not opposed to the war in a traditional sense; they were opposed to American intervention and to the operations of its corrupt and dictatorial puppet Saigon regime. While a consistent opponent of war and dictatorship fought for unilateral withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam *even if* it meant the victory of the Communist armies, the Stalinoid or neo-Stalinist peace leaders *wanted* the victory of the North Vietnamese and their subordinate forces in the NLF.

Thus in the propaganda and agitation of the peace leaders there were legitimate denunciations of atrocities committed by American and South Vietnamese troops; nothing about massacres by the North Vietnamese armies.

There were horrifying stories about the Saigon jails filled to overflowing with political prisoners; nothing about the political inmates of the prisons in the North.

There were accurate accounts of the authoritarian nature of the Diem, Ky and Thieu regimes; nothing about the totalitarian regime in the North which had long outlawed all unreliable parties.

There were accounts of the terrible mistreatment of Buddhist dissidents in the South; nothing about the extermination of tens of thousands of peasants by the regime of the gentle Uncle Ho shortly after his Party took power in the North.

There were truthful reports about the mistreatment of striking workers in the South; nothing about the fact that strikes were and are illegal in the North.

There were exposés of how Washington hoped to strengthen its position in Vietnam through military and economic support of every reactionary regime in Southeast Asia; but there was nothing about the fact that the North Vietnam regime gloried in Russia's suppression of the Hungarian Revolution and that Ho was rivalled only by Castro in the speed with which he congratulated the Kremlin for sending its armored divisions to crush the revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1968. And so it went; revelations about the crimes of American imperialism; silence, understatement, denial or support for the crimes of Stalinism in the North.

I am not overlooking the fact that many leaders of the peace movement whom I consider Stalinoid have taken a public stand against the

Kremlin's persecution of dissidents at home and suppression of popular movements in Eastern Europe, above all, in Czechoslovakia. That is because they are, fortunately, not consistent; they are Stalinoid, not Stalinist. Just as significant, however, is that their manifestations of anti-totalitarianism are pretty much confined to Russia, which, in their misunderstanding of the nature of Stalinism, they consider to be a conservative society that compromises with the bourgeois West. One would be hard put to find similar support for victims of totalitarianism in those countries—Cuba, Vietnam, China among others—which, also in their misunderstanding of the nature of Stalinism, they regard more sympathetically as incorruptible and revolutionary.

Now, AMERICAN WORKERS, FOR ALL THEIR PREJUDICES AND CONSERVATISM, are really not all that backward. They think that the right to vote, the right to travel, the right to organize, the right to read an uncensored newspaper, etc., are pretty good things. These are rights which, in their naiveté, makes America great—"Love it or Leave it." (Should socialists, in their sophistication, deny that these rights are of fundamental importance or that, because of their limited nature under capitalism, they are meaningless compared to the denial of freedom in the totalitarian countries?) American workers may be critical of union bosses (generally not critical enough) but try to take away their right to join a union and you have made an enemy. A steelworker may bitch about a strike of auto workers (class solidarity is not the earmark of the American working class) but try to deny him the right to strike the steel corporations and you have a fierce foe.

If these are characteristic predilections of American workers—and they are—how could a peace leader have communicated with them? By chants about the glories of Ho Chi Minh? By waving the NLF flag (and burning the Stars and Stripes)? With glowing reports of friendship tours to Hanoi and Peking? The questions are rhetorical of course. Workers' patriotism and chauvinism are fed by what they understand about Communist countries, an understanding far closer to the truth than that of the Stalinoid oriented leaders of the anti-war movement. How would one of them answer an American workingman who asks, "If North Vietnam (or China, or Cuba) is so great for working people, tell me, do they have the right to strike like I have in this country?" An honest reply would end the dialogue.

All this is not to argue that had the anti-war leadership taken a forthright stand against all dictatorships it would have been sufficient to win significant numbers of workers to the anti-war movement; it would not have been sufficient, merely a pre-condition for even limited successful contact. The Wall Street hardhats might still have reacted savagely to the youthful anti-war demonstrators; but then they might not have, had

they not been seeing waves of NLF flags and hearing chants for the victory of Ho Chi Minh on television news.

*The lesson here is that any movement aspiring to reach workers in this country must be committed to democracy, must be anti-Stalinist. Because a radical, militant, principled anti-Stalinist stand represents a convergence of truth and political effectiveness.*

THE ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT EMBRACED HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS if not millions. It was strong enough to force an incumbent President not to seek re-election. It left its mark on everything from lifestyles to moral concerns, creating a political atmosphere which made it impossible for Nixon and his Administration of thugs to survive the Watergate and other scandals.

Perhaps it was too much to expect that even such a volatile force could produce a viable socialist movement in this country. But that *nothing* developed was not to be expected either. The irony is that socialism has retrogressed, ideologically and organizationally; it is weaker today than it was in the periods before and during the anti-war movement's heyday.

The one organization strengthened by the anti-war movement was the Socialist Workers Party. Today, the SWP together with its youth section, the Young Socialist Alliance, has perhaps 2,000 members. Not a very strong figure in light of the leading role played by the SWP in the peace movement. The SWP bears a good deal of the blame for the failure of a significant socialist movement to arise out of the anti-war struggles. It thinks of itself as the Vanguard Party of the revolution; all other socialist organizations are therefore either irrelevant or a threat to its turf. It followed that the peace forces had to be maintained as a single issue movement, an arena from which the Vanguard Party could recruit a few members or sell subscriptions, rather than encourage a broadening of concerns to other related social and economic issues. That might only have led to a more broadly based radical or socialist political formation, precisely what the SWP feared.

This narrow, sectarian approach was and remains of a piece with the SWP's bureaucratic internal life and intellectual sterility. Ideologically, it claims to be Trotskyist. The resemblance exists but it is a superficial one. More than a third of a century has gone by since Trotsky was murdered yet his self-anointed heirs repeat his phrases as though the world froze on its axis more than 35 years ago.

The vacillating attitude of the SWP toward Stalinism, as compared to Trotsky's revolutionary anti-Stalinist fervor, bears directly on our discussion of the weakness of the peace movement's leadership. The SWP was an important part of that leadership but it aided in compromising the anti-war movement through its failure to expose the terror, the anti-

socialist and totally reactionary nature of the Hanoi regime. A regime, incidentally, headed by a Party and led by a man who specialized in the organization of assassination squads to hunt down and execute Indo-chinese Trotskyists in the 1930s and '40s. (The SWP would probably consider it bourgeois sentimentality to remind the world that Ho Chi Minh was responsible for the murder of so many Trotskyists. Of what importance is that, after all, compared to the nationalized economy?)

For the SWP and most of the anti-war leadership, Ho, his Party and subordinate allies to the South were leading a "war of national liberation." Now, socialists (but not all of them) have supported real wars of national liberation even when led by non-socialist, bourgeois forces. Such struggles were viewed as part of a dynamic process, where throwing off the foreign yoke meant the mobilization of an oppressed people, a heightened consciousness, the release of new creative energies. National independence would permit the growth of native industries, the emergence of a working class, of unions, of political parties and civil liberties, etc., even within the framework of a ruling native bourgeoisie. Right or wrong, that is what socialists expected of wars of national liberation they supported.

But North Vietnam's war against American imperialism? In what comparable sense was that a war of national liberation for either the Northern or Southern half of Vietnam? To the North there was already a well defined bureaucratic ruling class which had long ago destroyed all non-conforming parties and whose social power is dependent on its ability to suppress any expression of or vehicle for popular dissent. And for South Vietnam a victory of the Stalinist armies could only mean a society restructured in the totalitarian image of Hanoi. The Communist struggle in Vietnam bore about as much resemblance to national liberation as terror bears to freedom.

It was certainly the responsibility of all American socialists to expose their government's imperialist role in Southeast Asia and to demand unilateral withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam. But it was no less their political and moral obligation to expose, at the same time, the venality of the Vietnamese Communist movement.

WHILE THE SWP IS MARRED BY ITS COMPROMISE WITH STALINISM and bears a degree of responsibility for guaranteeing the peace movement's isolation from the working class, it is more critical of Communist societies than most other tendencies and groups proliferating on the so-called left. It supported the Hungarian and Czechoslovakian revolutions and it does point to the undemocratic nature of Communist regimes. And for all its sectarianism, it is at least among the sane. By contrast so many of the old tendencies and new sects, appearing like ugly stumps when the waves of anti-war protest receded, seem afflicted with a kind of mad-

ness. There is, for example, the National Caucus of Labor Committees (NCLC), a cult led by a modern cross between Svengali and Rasputin which makes known its dedication to cracking the heads of competitors on the "left" and acts accordingly. There is the Revolutionary Union, now organized as a party, which has discovered the glories of Stalin. There are the underground Weatherpeople with their bombs and then the October League, and those who rejoice in the "Workers Bomb" i.e., nuclear devices which are sanctified if possessed by a "socialist" country. And there are more. Their folk heroes include Ho, Mao, Kim Il Sung, Castro, Stalin and the entire Central Committee of the Albanian Communist Party. (One of the very few groups that has not developed any kind of enchantment with Stalinism is International Socialists, a small sect that can hardly be placed in the same category as those mentioned above.)

The affliction is not only of recently founded sects. There are older tendencies, too. Take the current represented by *The Guardian*. It had always been Stalinoid but in the early days of the peace movement it had a kind of professionalism, a degree of openness and a wealth of information about movement affairs that made it useful reading. Today, reflective of the heartbreaking collapse of all the movements of the '60s, *The Guardian* has descended into the sectarian Inferno. It has become the clumsy, vindictive voice of Mao.\*

THE STALINOID AND NEO-STALINIST MALAISE that has generally overwhelmed most organized left-wing sects is also evident in the broader "progressive" community. It used to be Cuba, now it is China which has become the main beneficiary of its admiration. Liberal academics, intellectuals, journalists, movie stars, feminists, liberal (and not so liberal) politicians return from junkets to China full of praise, even euphoria. They have discovered that the peasants are happy in their work, the people genuinely love Mao, women are of course liberated, the Little Red Book is an inspirational repository of oriental wisdom, etc., etc.

It all provides this writer with a sense of *déjà vu*. I can pick up almost any issue of *Soviet Russia Today*, a 1930's Stalin-worshipping publication, take any article by some elitist fool or other "progressive" person, substitute China for Russia, Mao for Stalin and, voilà, an article by a contemporary academic or "progressive" emissary.

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\* I must admit, though, that my regular reading of the *Guardian* ended a number of years ago with a series of articles by Carl Davidson exposing the dangers of Trotskyism. To one familiar with the literature of the Communist movement, it was clear that Davidson's exercise in ignorance was lifted largely from a particularly noxious pamphlet, "Trotskyism; Counter Revolution in Disguise," written by Communist Party theoretician Moissaye Olgin in the middle '30s. Olgin's pamphlet might well have been called "The Protocols of Trotsky" but at least he could write a coherent English sentence, a feat to which Davidson should aspire.

How do they know that the people love Mao when no Chinese who loves life would deny it to a stranger? The same way the friendly visitor to Russia knew that people loved Stalin. Their guides told them so and no Russian was about to say otherwise. If women are free in China why are they virtually unrepresented in the Chinese power structure? And how free can women be when no one is free to organize in opposition to the state? How free is any society which has liquidated millions and denies its people access to the finest achievements of Western culture (the fingers of a Chinese musician were broken for playing western music)? How free is a society that organized public executions of "enemies of the people"?

But isn't Mao an "egalitarian," China an "egalitarian society," both man and country guided by "revolutionary purity"? The terms, used reflexively these days, are as ludicrous as the attempts to describe who or what is right, left or moderate in the Chinese Communist Party. (One anti-war luminary, a libertarian pacifist no less, once described China as a society operating on SDS principles of "participatory democracy.") When students are encouraged to lynch their professors, is that "egalitarianism," a kind of social levelling? Or when hundreds of thousands of young people are forcibly shifted to remote areas to do manual work and be "re-educated," is that "egalitarianism"? Is the technique of gathering peasants or workers together to review production quotas, encouraging them to denounce shirkers, illustrative of "revolutionary purity"? If so then Russia with its tens of thousands of vigilante Neighborhood Committees and Comrade Courts is the epitome of socialist saintliness.

It is no less painful to read the benign views of Chinese society by some gurus of the American counter culture. Does it challenge the imagination to guess what would happen to one who tried to bring the sexual revolution to China? Or possibly start a branch of the Gay Activists Alliance or introduce a Peking chapter of Radical Lesbian Feminists? How about a new radical style of dress? An avant garde theater? What about promoting sexual explicitness in film or literature? Some grass, hash and pills in a rural commune, perhaps? Rest assured that souls brave enough to press the counter culture, American style, would be dealt with with "egalitarian" and "revolutionary purity," Peking style.

The capacity of so many to adopt contradictory sets of values is appalling. What is good for Americans is not necessarily good for the Chinese (or the Russians, or the Cubans, or the Vietnamese, etc.), we are told. Political liberties are important in this country for protection against the powerful, capitalist state; the Chinese, Russians, et. al., need



no such protection against their regimes. They need other things. Freedom can wait. Besides, political freedom is a "bourgeois value."\*

If after all that we have learned about the Russian brand of Stalinism, the Party-created famines, the mass murders of the '30s, the pact with Hitler, all the crimes revealed at the Twentieth Congress (and then repeated by those who revealed them), if after Hungary 1956 and Czechoslovakia 1968, it is still necessary to argue with "radicals" and "revolutionaries" about the indivisibility of freedom and socialism, to have to explain why the great socialists of the past talked about taking *political* power as the first step toward achieving socialism and why political rule meant democratic rule; why socialist democracy is preferable to bourgeois variety because it means greater democracy, not its extirpation, why China is not socialist because it is not free, why Che had not a drop of socialist blood in his veins, though he did cut a dashing figure . . . if this remains the task of socialists after all that has happened, then what are the realistic possibilities of creating a meaningful socialist movement in this country? The question is a serious one that cannot be ignored despite the pain it causes. Perhaps the inspiration for American socialism will yet derive from the anticipated upheavels in Communist countries where revolutionary movements must be anti-Stalinist as well as socialist.

THE DESTRUCTIVE FORCE OF STALINISM IS MANIFEST TOO in the response from those who call themselves "democratic socialists" (as though socialism could be anything but democratic) who are so disoriented by their hatred for the Stalinist behemoth that they abandon their socialist ideology. Witness the moral and political disintegration of those socialists who were trained in the Marxist movement and who, had they retained their revolutionary politics and perspective, *might* have had a salutary effect on the anti-war movement's leadership, particularly its younger cadres. I am writing about the culpability of those who came out of the Independent Socialist League and its periphery and, to a lesser extent, of those socialists around *Dissent*. While their total number was small, I believe they could have exerted a moral and political influence beyond their number had they proved themselves as resolute in their opposition to American imperialism as they were to Stalinism. They included people of considerable talent and political sophistication

\* Not long ago, a leading American filmmaker and writer being interviewed expressed extreme displeasure with the lack of a warm reception of an avant garde film in this bourgeois country. When asked if such a film could be shown at all in China, the immediate response was, no, that it could not be shown, and what is more, no need for such avant garde films there. In China, our filmmaker explained, the masses need posters, not avant garde films. How can one cope with such illogic? It is not merely a double standard that is revealed, but an inverted form of American chauvinism; intellectual pleasures are necessities for the American elite but the Chinese are condemned to posters spurring them to work harder for the state.

—Max Shachtman, Bayard Rustin, Michael Harrington, Irving Howe, and others.

Shachtman, Rustin and their particular followers emerged as hawks on Vietnam and in the right of center wing of the Democratic Party. Michael Harrington and Irving Howe and their followers (now organized in the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee) did not move as far to the right as their recent colleagues turned hawks. But it was far enough to alienate the young anti-war activists, especially when Harrington and Howe made it clear that they were merely *critics* of the "tragic" (their favorite adjective) war, *not real opponents* of an imperialist adventure. They fought bitterly against those who advocated the unilateral withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam which only meant that they favored—"tragically" and shamefacedly—American divisions remaining in Vietnam until Hanoi met Harrington's and Howe's conditions for peace. (In Harrington's book, "Socialism," written when the Vietnam war was at its bloodiest and the anti-war movement at its peak, there is not even a single paragraph in all 400 pages devoted to the war. There are instead many bizarre pages arguing that George Meany, unbeknownst to him, or to anyone except Harrington and friends, is a closet socialist and that the Meany-led section of the labor movement is really American social democracy in disguise.)

What educational effect could such anti-Communist "socialists" possibly have had on young radicals who knew little of the crimes of Stalinism abroad but knew well the crimes of capitalism here and in foreign lands? It was all predictable. In the minds of young radicals to be anti-Communist became synonymous with being a cold warrior, a reactionary, etc. Thus, ironically, the anti-Communism of much of the so-called "democratic left" reinforces the mystique and continuing ideological appeal of Communism.

The lesson here, too, should be clear. If the ideological force of Stalinism in the left wing world is to be exposed and eliminated it can only be done by those who continue in a truly radical, socialist tradition; never by those who compromise with imperialism. Unhappily, this radical socialist tradition has no organized voice in America, today.

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