

1949

Two narratives of American Marxism intersect in 1949, one reaching a crescendo, the other sounding its opening notes. For most of the twentieth century, the former was the dominant account. In this account, 1949 represented the solidification of the Cold War order in the wake of the collapse of the wartime alliance and the division of Europe into East and West. This narrative threads through the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in April, the collapse of the Berlin blockade in May, the explosion of the Soviet atomic bomb in August, the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany in September and the German Democratic Republic a month later, and the collapse that same month of the Communist insurgency in Greece that, two years earlier, had led to the Truman Doctrine. To a remarkable extent, the geography of the Cold War in Europe had been entrenched by the end of 1949, and its boundaries would not substantively shift for the next forty years.

Looked at through this lens, the crisis of mid-century Communism in the United States simply represented the working out of the domestic implications of the Cold War in Europe. Bipolarity on the world's stage translated into an either/or politics at home. Above all, this meant coming to terms with the vexed position of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) in public life. The early Cold War witnessed a dramatic movement away from the Popular Front era, in which broad progressive collaborations had seemed to their advocates to be not only viable projects but crucial strategic alliances for defeating fascism. Although damaged by the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, support for a capacious anti-fascist coalition persisted during the war years, only drifting again in its aftermath as anticommunist feeling surged in the West and Stalin asserted a harder line of

control over an American party that under Earl Browder had been showing worrying signs of going native. In fact, there were three impulses behind the post-war fragmentation of the Popular Front: attacks from the Right and alienation on the Left were combined with a sense that in the political order built from the New Deal and the Warfare State, the Democratic Party offered richer pickings than Communism ever could.¹ In this sense, one might argue that the Popular Front had not functioned as a vehicle for injecting the bacillus of revolutionary politics into America, as had been warned by so many on the Right, but rather as a transmission belt for social democratic politics into the revolutionary Left.

The chief casualty of these fracturing alliances was, of course, the CPUSA. The failure of Henry Wallace's efforts in 1948 to resist the tide of red-baiting as he pushed for an alternative to the rapidly-freezing politics of the Cold War had underscored the political vulnerability of the Party. Former allies attacked the CPUSA for its deference to Moscow. The ACLU began including an anticommunist disclaimer in every brief it filed.² Union leaders such as Philip Murray and Walter Reuther, who had once cooperated with Communists, sought to exclude them. In November 1949, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) voted to expel two of its Communist-led unions; nine more followed in 1950. Within the NAACP, Walter White challenged W. E. B. Du Bois' attacks on Truman's foreign policy.³

The dissipation of sympathy could be seen among the intelligentsia, too, who had once been the Party's most vocal allies. The Waldorf Conference in March showed how far the Party's reputation had fallen. Irving Howe, who attended alongside other members of the anti-Stalinist Left in order to disrupt the proceedings, offered an unsparing assessment

¹ For a recent version of this argument, see Jennifer Delton, *Rethinking the 1950s: How Anticommunism and the Cold War Made America Liberal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

² This practice continued for more than a decade. Samuel Walker, *In Defense of Civil Liberties: A History of the ACLU*, 2nd Edition (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 186.

³ Manfred Berg, 'Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War', *Journal of American History* 94, 1 (June 2007): 75-96.

of the thin intellectual pickings the Party had put on display. “Few prominent American intellectuals are now willing to work with them,” he argued, “some because of intellectual conviction and others because it is no longer safe or fashionable”. Having lost sway among the intellectuals and in the labour movement, he concluded the Party “retains strength only in the urban middle classes, particularly the professions and the mass culture and amusement industries.” Though it didn’t compensate for their weakness among the workers, Howe claimed that Communists found their supporters in Hollywood and on Broadway to be a “profitable substitute for the intelligentsia ... [they are] less troublesome, ask fewer questions than the intellectuals; they are less prone to fool with notions about independent thought; and they have much more money to contribute.”⁴ Yet the cost was clear: the Waldorf Conference had no John Dos Passos or Richard Wright or Edmund Wilson. And over the next years Hollywood, too, would rid itself of Communism.

Divisions on the post-war Left were both a response to attack and made it easier for anticommunists to move against the Party. Indeed, as Phelps and Brick note, the effectiveness of the post-war anticommunist project was not a sign of American Communism’s strength but its weakness.⁵ Campaigns that had struggled to gain traction in the 1920s and 1930s now had far greater impact, and much of the work had already been completed by 1949. In the state bureaucracies, Communist influence had always been limited to relatively small pockets. The uncovering of Communist spies, at least those who operated on principle rather than for profit, was largely resolved before McCarthy reached the national stage. Truman’s Loyalty Programme and the Attorney General’s List of

⁴ Irving Howe, ‘The Cultural Conference (1949)’, in *A Partisan Century: Political Writings from Partisan Review*, ed. Edith Kurzweil (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 94.

⁵ Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps, *Radicals in America: The U.S. Left since the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 52.

Subversive Organizations were already well entrenched. The public was already familiar with state loyalty laws, corporate and academic anticommunist oaths, and blacklists and denunciations. These would grow in scope and scale in the early 1950s, and their consequences would become more divisive. More often than not, though, as with Eisenhower's expansion of Truman's loyalty program, this was because attacks increasingly focused on people who were not Communists, but whose identities or lifestyles were considered incompatible with the conservative mores of the era. As far as it is possible to disentangle the two, the heat of the Second Red Scare was generated less by the assault on Marxism that had already been underway for several the years, and more from an emerging culture war targeting women, civil rights activists, and homosexuals.⁶

By the end of 1949, the idea that the United States could live peacefully with the Soviets seemed an absurd proposition, almost other-worldly. Such was the power of this shift in public common sense, it seemed almost like a joke to point out that only half a decade earlier the nation had been bankrolling the Red Army with billions of dollars. The Second Red Scare did not mark the final end of hopes for a Popular Front, or even for a Stalinist America, which stumbled on till 1956. But the writing was on the wall for anyone who cared to read it. Harassed from without by the FBI, local police forces and a wide array of anticommunists, there was no space within the Party for creative innovation. Alongside its internal demons of Browderism and Trotskyite deviation, the Party became paralyzed by fears of surveillance and espionage. CPUSA politics became characterised by an extreme defensiveness. Gone were plans for moving "toward a Soviet America"; what remained

⁶ See, among others, Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Landon R. Y. Storrs, *The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

were complaints about their own victimisation. By far the most consistent coverage in the *Daily Worker* during the course of 1949 was of the twelve leaders of the Communist Party tried under the Smith Act. The Foley Square trial lasted nearly a year, was constitutionally outrageous, and the behaviour of Judge Harold Medina certainly generated good copy, but despite their best efforts the conviction and imprisonment of eleven of the defendants failed to generate a broad movement of support in a society that for the larger part had little qualms over their prosecution. The Party's presumption had always been that politicised trials could be used to spread sympathy for Communism, but this did not happen. Instead, prosecutions of more than a hundred lower-ranking members of the Party followed over the next decade. Similar efforts to propagandise through the case of the Trenton Six, a group of young African American men convicted by an all-white jury in 1948 for the murder of a white shopkeeper in New Jersey, were a pale echo of the Scottsboro case. One of the eleven Party leaders to be convicted in the Foley Square trial was John Gates, who went on to serve five years in Atlanta Penitentiary. As he sat in his jail cell he reflected on the history of American radicalism, and compared his situation to that of Eugene Debs, who had run for the presidency from the same prison in 1920 and won 900,000 votes. There were no such numbers defending the CPUSA now.⁷

This 1949 offers a story of crisis on the Left leading to a political caesura that lasted a generation. But it struggles with loose ends. It doesn't account for the persistence of Marxist-influenced political radicalism in the 1950s at the grassroots, among minorities, among sectarian anti-Stalinist radicals, in and outside the labour movement.⁸ It struggles to

⁷ John Gates, *Story of an American Communist* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Son, 1958), 141.

⁸ For instance, Maurice Isserman, "If I Had a Hammer...": *The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York: Basic, 1987); Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Joshua B. Freeman, *Working Class New York: Life and Labour Since World War II* (New York: New Press, 2000); Laura McEnaney, 'Nightmares on Elm Street', *Journal of American History*, 92 (2006): 1265-91.

unpick the ways that the New Left was connected to and influenced by the old, rather than born of its absence.⁹ It cannot accommodate the stories of civil rights radicals like Claudia Jones, Angela Davies, Bettina Aptheker or W. E. B. Du Bois, who continued to work with or inside the CPUSA, in Du Bois' latter case actually *joining* the Communist-affiliated Council on African Affairs in 1949 and taking Party membership a decade later, except by seeing them as outliers moving along erratic paths away from the broader traffic of history.

This brings us to the second narrative, less a story of endings than of new beginnings. This 1949 was marked by the capture of Beijing by the forces of the Chinese Communist Party in January and Nanjing in April. It follows the march of the People's Army southwards and eastwards over the summer as the forces of the Guomindang retreated to Formosa, and culminates with the formal establishment of the People's Republic of China on 21 September. No event in the world history of Marxism since the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 was of comparable significance. In the West, the psychological shock of a quarter of the world's population turning toward revolutionary socialism was, even at the time, as critical as the Soviet bomb in entrenching the American culture of fear. Indeed, for a section of American conservatives who had an entrenched, paternalistic view of the United States' custodial relationship toward China inherited from the Christian missionaries, Mao's seizure of power was even more offensive to their sensibilities since it represented a kind of filial betrayal, not to mention evidence of treason in America. Without the China Lobby and the blame game they launched at home in the wake of Mao's assumption of power, the McCarthyite coalition would have been robbed of some of its richest and most influential advocates in the 1950s, and the anticommunist movement would have been weaker and

⁹ Andrew Hunt, 'How New was the New Left?' in John McMillan and Paul Buhle, eds., *New Left Revisited* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003): 139-155.

less incendiary. The Chinese revolution drove the Truman administration to the right and enabled the conflict in Korea, while the fear of another “loss of China” would be the critical historical memory that shaped later Democratic administrations’ steps into the quagmires of Vietnam.

The transformative significance of Mao’s revolution was not clear in 1949. For most commentators in the United States, China was seen as an extension of the struggle against the Soviet monolith rather than a new door opening in the hallways of Marxism. This was as true for American Party members as anticommunists. The *Daily Worker* faithfully reported the advance of the columns of the People’s Army through the summer and fall of 1949 and attacked the Truman administration for seeking to undermine the revolution, but despite endorsing the Cominform’s description of the PRC’s creation as an event of “world historical significance”, discussion of China later in the year was surprisingly thin, and Mao was barely mentioned.¹⁰ Foreign affairs coverage followed the Stalinist line, which meant focusing on Europe: criticising the Atlantic pact, attacking the Marshall Plan, and presenting the Soviet acquisition of the bomb as part of a general effort to restore peace to the continent. The abuse of Tito was given more inches than the praising of Mao in the Communist press that year.

Nevertheless, as Soviet influence on the American Left eroded, China would come to the fore. Mao’s regime represented something powerful in the American radical imagination that once been promised by Japan, and only later by Russia: a model of a modernising state promising a route out of empire. The revolution stands alongside Indian independence in 1947 as one of the first nails hammered into the coffin of European

¹⁰ ‘Seek New Way to Destroy China’, *Daily Worker*, August 8, 1949; Charles Kormos, ‘Greet China’s New Republic’, *Daily Worker*, October 12, 1949.

colonialism, and a vital precursor to the non-aligned movement in the mid-Cold War years. At the same time, as an alternative locus of power within global socialism, China's existence encouraged challenges to Marxist orthodoxy. For radical Americans, and African Americans radicals in particular, Mao's example and theses would offer a new path for radical protest, one that was less deferential to the white working classes, less concerned with rigid interpretations of historical materialism, and less interested in Europe.¹¹

Much as had been the case with Bolshevism after 1917, this image of China would in large part be an American invention. The embargo severed ties of communication and exchange for much of the fifties. And unlike Stalin, while offering asylum to radical Americans in exile and criticisms of American racism Mao made no effort to build political organs in the United States to act as transmission belts for his ideas and objectives. Nevertheless, even as an idea, revolutionary China would have a powerful effect on American Marxist thought over the coming generation. Bolshevism had promoted an ethos of discipline and organisation. It was a doctrine that foregrounded professionalism, institutional coherence, and, increasingly, state power as the key elements of revolutionary struggle. Its fundamental claim on the loyalties of the Left was that only Bolshevism could deliver on the promise of Lincoln Steffens and deliver a future that worked. In the interwar battles between the Communist International and other forms of Marxian socialism, anarchism and independent revolutionary communism, time and again the Bolshevik orthodoxy reminded their rivals and challengers that Lenin was the only man who had succeeded in building a revolutionary state and a new international.

¹¹ Robin D. G. Kelley and Betsy Esch, 'Black Like Mao: Red China and Black Revolution,' in Fred Ho and Bill V. Mullen, eds., *Afro Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections between African Americans and Asian Americans* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

The oscillations of the Communism line that led to the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, the subsequent alliance with the capitalist democracies, and the renewed hostilities with the West after the war were, from this perspective, seen as a necessary statecraft. Without state power, radical projects – most poignantly shown by the failure of the anarchists in Spain to fight a revolutionary war against Franco – were doomed to fail. Nevertheless, even aside from the crimes committed by the Soviet regime, accounts of which even by the mid-1930s were circulating widely in the West, the reputation of Bolshevism as a supremely practical mode of revolutionary politics wore thin, especially as the Comintern grew less and less concerned with promoting reform or revolution elsewhere in the world. The preservation of Soviet Russia took precedence over all other concerns. Anything that was good for Stalin was good for Marx.

In this sense, if we understand the anticommunist politics of McCarthy era as essentially a hegemonic project, one that sought to equate Americanism with capitalism in the public mind, American Communists at least partly supported this effort. It suited the CPUSA to present themselves as the only true custodians of Marxism in America, rather than just one among many bickering clans.

When it was successful, the CPUSA showed how a comparatively small group of disciplined radicals could use institutions around it as a kind of force multiplier for radical change. But the Bolshevik obsession with discipline shut down alternative visions of liberation. It shouldered to one side the politics of spontaneity, individuality and authenticity that had been more characteristic of the Marxism before 1917, and would come to the fore again in the wake of the CPUSA's collapse. Correctly or incorrectly, American Maoism would offer a more improvisational and spontaneous revolutionary alternative, while those who continued to stress the need for discipline,

organisation and rigour remained in the smaller orbit of the old Party apparatus. In this sense, the destruction of the CPUSA would, ironically and against the expectations of its enemies, give radicals the space to innovate and the opportunity to multiply. In this sense, rather than thinking of the history of American Marxism generationally, in terms of old politics breaking against the new, perhaps it is better to think of competing Marxist traditions, some coming to the fore and others receding at different moments in time and space. Focusing on contestation and difference, rather than a singular, coherent narrative connects the important but incomplete account of the rise and fall of the CPUSA to the larger stream of American Marxism.