

# Theodore Draper Writes About 'Roots of American Communism'

**THE ROOTS OF AMERICAN COMMUNISM.** By Theodore Draper. Viking Press, New York. 498 pp. \$6.75.

By **ROBERT FRIEDMAN**

There is no single book which tells fully the history of the Communist Party of the U. S. Without prejudice to what I may later write about its merits and defects, let that rather dogmatic assertion stand for Theodore Draper's "The Roots of American Communism" as much as for its predecessors in the field.

The story of the Communist Party has been told by former leaders and members; by Red Squad policemen; by cloistered professors burrowing in yellowed files. It has been told loudly, luridly and lyingly. It has been set down in passion by men eager to settle scores with former comrades and to present posterity with the best possible self-portrait. It has been squeezed dry of all the juices of life and written by academicians to whom history is an endless procession of documents.

In most cases it has been written by men pathologically hostile to their subject matter. In many cases it has been written by men to whom the American Communist Party was nothing more than a conspiracy and who, therefore, studiously obliterated the facts which mocked their thesis.

Does this mean, therefore, that historians sympathetic to communism have provided the authoritative, factually reliable history of the Communist Party? Unfortunately, such is not the case. In fact, the Communist Party of the U.S. was notoriously laggard in sponsoring any history at all. Most Communist Party historical material, until the appearance of William Z. Foster's history of the party in 1952, was presented in anniversary articles in party periodicals.

It is not hard to explain the lack of a history of the party which includes all the necessary ingredients of scholarship, accuracy, completeness and a humanity which transcends both un-scholarly hostility and subjective bias. No issue has evoked more passionate partisanship in our time than that of communism.

Some of the most fantastic distortions of Communist history and policy are corrected in such a work as Foster's. This is not a review of Foster's book. But it is relevant to a review of Draper's work, since Draper makes much of Foster's omissions and inaccuracies.

There is no doubt that the student seeking to grasp the essence of the Communist movement, its successes, its errors, its contributions to the American labor movement and the welfare of the nation can do no better, among available works for all its deficiencies than the history of Foster. It is nevertheless true that the story of the rise, fall and clash of factions within a party that has experienced a century's worth of inner turmoil



in its short life, and the story of individual leaders of the party who left it or were disgorge from it would remain a confusing one even after a reading of Foster.

But few American historians have earned the right to piety in this connection. Where is the American history which tells the story of Negro resistance to slavery? How many white scholars give to Frederick Douglass, towering American figure, as much as a footnote?

Even in our own time we watch the eerily fascinating spectacle of history being excised. There is by now a whole shelf of published books on the history of the New Deal. How many give even a passing mention to the Communist priority, fully verified in contemporary accounts in the efforts to establish a social security program?

If Communist accounts of Communist history have been guilty of gross lapses in the treatment of former Communist leaders, ignoring their contributions because of their later defections or ignoring them altogether as if they had never existed, it is not too difficult to find a parallel in the propensity of Soviet Communist writers to suit their history to the political convenience of the moment.

This is bad. It creates historical illiterates at best, cynics at the worst. And American Communists will understand their own history well only when they look with candor at the whole of it.

But these sins, I submit, are still petty as compared to the grand design of historical deception practiced on the American people by most of our writers. When the history of labor's struggles is a commonplace, when the epic of the Negro people is in every school-boy's texts, it will be more appropriate for others to reproach Communist writers like Foster who, to their credit, do not keep from the people the key to essential chapters of their own past history.

The foregoing is doubtless a tediously long way of getting around to Theodore Draper's "The Roots of American Communism." But the introduction will have served its purpose if it indicates the complex frame of reference in which such a work must be examined.

Draper is a former writer for the Daily Worker, the New Masses and the Tass News Agency. He writes as a disillusioned former adherent of communism. The tone of his book, sponsored by the Ford Fund for the Republic as one of a series projected on "Communism in American Life," is dispassionate, free of hysteria or diatribe. Only in an occasional bitter passage about the Soviet Union is this note of scholarly aloofness dropped.

If I were to sum up briefly my own picture of the Soviet Union, I would say that its achievements outweigh the crimes and distortions of democracy despite my revulsion against the nature and magnitude of the latter and my conviction that American socialism must avoid them.

To Draper, however, the Soviet Union is a crime and communism a failure. True objectivity could include the viewpoint that Soviet experience is no lodestar for Americans. But despite the carefully sustained tone of Draper's book, and his notable departure from several major tenets of the faith for anti-Communist accounts of American Communist history, it falls short of the grasp of such works as the British E. H. Carr's "History of the Bolshevik Revolution" which does not deny the accomplishments or challenge of Soviet communism although it is by no means a partisan account.

What Draper does do in his book, which brings the Communist Party from its founding to the period, a few years later, when it emerged fully into public activity, is to present the American roots of the American Communist Party.

This is no mean contribution to objectivity, considering how so many other writers assiduously hide the fact that the Communist Party grew out of an authentically American radical movement and misrepresent the admitted influence of the Bolshevik Revolution upon it as a Russian conspiracy to create an American branch agency.

In turn, I do not wish to misrepresent Draper. He is quite clear in detailing what he describes as the transformation of "a new expression of American radicalism to the American appendage of a Russian revolutionary movement."

How tenacious has been that Soviet influence is clearly evident in the recent great debate within the American Communist movement on the question of its inde-

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story, "resuming for a moment the jauntiness of Little Ceaser:

"Oh yes," he said, chuckling. "There ain't room for both of us in this town—one of us has got to go, and it was me."

No doubt about the verdict now. Robinson had named names which is what the UnAmericans had been trying to get him to do for months. "According to the evidence presented to this committee you are a good, loyal and intensely patriotic American citizen", said Rep. Moulder. Also a "number one sucker" Rep. Walter added. It was the end of a sordid show.

A talented actor had sacrificed his dignity as a man and his stature as an artist for a "mess of pottage".

The Post writers put it this way.

"There are those who remember Robinson's season in Washington as, politically, and even theatrically, a triumph. But to less burdened patriots, it presented the old spectacle of a man prostrating himself in order to stand upright."



# DRAPER'S 'THE ROOTS OF AMERICAN COMMUNISM'

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pendence and the limits on the validity of the Soviet experience. Nor is that debate finally resolved, even though the Communist Party's convention went beyond all precedent in stressing its determination to interpret socialist theory according to American conditions.

No doubt students of Communist Party history will hereafter include Draper's book among others required to obtain a full picture of what was an incredibly complex and confused first five years of the Communist Party—replete as it was with mergers, splits, and splits and mergers all over again.

Nevertheless I found it a cold and somewhat shallow book. Communists have had their share of human follies. But Communists for the most part, have also usually been ordinary men and women moved in the first place by a vision of a better world.

All the bewildering details of ideological twists and turns that Draper provides can never explain the Communist Party without two vital ingredients—the flaws in capitalist society and the moral fervor of those who looked to socialism as the better life. (Nor must the historian be silent about the in-

ternational ties of capitalists and cartels and by his silence create the impression that international Communist relations are a unique phenomenon.)

These are missing from his book. And although the book begins with a perfunctory chronology of the radical movements in which American communism was rooted, it is not possible to learn from Draper that men and women who toiled in sweatshops, struggled to raise their children in tenements, wept and worked and hoped were behind all the manifestoes and resolutions and factional maneuverings on which he concentrates to the reader's great tedium.

What feeling for human beings there is in this book is concentrated on the person of Louis Fraina (Lewis Corey) who, Draper believes, with evident reason, deserved better than the later oblivion from Communist Party memory for his services to the party as one of its first leaders before his break with Marxism.

Only in his account of the life and death of Fraina does Draper demonstrate the tenderness of feeling and human sympathy which lifts historical writing from the

mere cataloguing of the chief players to something richer and greater.

And still, it is an irony that Fraina, in his initial Communist period, was a symbol of the anti-parliamentarianism and worship of violent mass action which one might suppose Draper would have found repugnant.

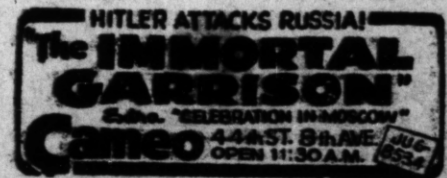
One final word. Books and reviews end, but there is no finality about history. This book, although it records many changes, is written with the fixed belief in mind that, despite abortive efforts to "Americanize" "American communism, it surrendered to Russian leadership. Draper's final sentence reads: "Nothing else so important ever happened to it again."

The Communists' role in sparking the organization of the CIO and in the New Deal unemployed and social security struggles dispute that statement. But even in the strict sense of Draper's meaning, that sentence is not yet proven irrevocably accurate, although this reviewer believes that mechanical aping of Russian dictates on everything from modern art to politics constituted American Communists' greatest folly.

The Khrushchev revelations of the deficiencies in Soviet society set in motion reactions within the American Communist Party and among other socialist-minded Americans, the outcome of which is still not fully clear. One cannot reproach Theodore Draper for his failure, in this book, to anticipate events of so startling a nature.

Still and all, it is curious that a book so filled with examples of Communist dogmatism should conclude on so dogmatic a note as the belief, expressed as certainty, that the underlying character of the American movement, save for "sporadic, superficial and short-lived interruptions" was fixed beyond all changing.

Maybe the future will bear him out. Many other people, not all of them Communists, think otherwise. In any case it is not the function, nor even the better part of wisdom, for the historian to slam the door on change.



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