

A Discussion With Critics

By Herbert Aptheker

THERE HAS BEEN, in recent months, widespread discussion concerning the past, present and future of the American Communist Party. This has been especially marked, of course, among its members, but thousands of non-Communists have also participated in this re-assessment. We propose, in this article, to examine briefly the nature of this latter re-assessment, as it reflects itself in published sources.

Among established organs of conservative opinion, like the *New York Times* and the *Herald Tribune*, the Party remains the epitome of everything evil. It is true that in these publications, from time to time, there have appeared some rather anxious paragraphs concerning reports of fresh breezes in the Communist movement here and abroad, but the line is taken that these are purely demagogic, and that the Devil remains quite as Satanic as his nature requires. Recently, the *New York Times* editorially summed up its view as follows (Oct. 4, 1956):

Intellectually the Communist Party is bankrupt. Its record makes it impossible that it should ever again com-

mand the support of any significant group of Americans or play a serious role in the dynamic development of our society.

Others, while vehemently anti-Communist, take a different tack in the discussion, and view the evidence of change in the Communist movement with more seriousness. Characteristic of this group is the opinion of Mr. Michael Harrington, as expressed in the Catholic weekly, *The Commonweal* (July 13, 1956). In an essay entitled, "New Communist Line," Mr. Harrington reiterates his, and the magazine's, position: "It is impossible for democrats to cooperate with the Communist Party"; "cooperation with Communists remains as impossible as ever." The impossibility derives, according to him, from the fact that we Communists are in a pact with evil itself, are lost souls; we, and our Party, "are so tightly bound to Moscow that they quite literally *cannot* be transformed."

"Nevertheless," Mr. Harrington continues, "the changes which have taken place" in the Communist movement, "may well make this

Popular Front line all the more seductive," a phrase repeated three times in two pages.

To resist seduction Mr. Harrington advocates liberalism in domestic policies and anti-colonialism in foreign affairs; at the same time and for the same purpose he urges "a principled defense of the rights" of Communists. Yet, in his conclusion, Mr. Harrington finds that Communism "is irrelevant to civil liberties, to the labor movement, to the Negro struggle"; that "it is really a foreign phenomenon."

I do not believe that the program which Mr. Harrington advocates—and which any Communist would wholeheartedly support—has so strong and well organized a backing that it can afford, *in its own interests*, to rule out arbitrarily whatever assistance Communists might bring to its realization. Moreover, the process of such summary banning necessitates some kind of "loyalty-screening" and some kind of censorship, both on the right to speak and the right to hear, which, no matter how administered, is stultifying.

Furthermore, the anti-Communist policy of Mr. Harrington itself impedes the implementation of the excellent domestic and foreign program he endorses. This is so because it is flatly untrue to make of Communism a "foreign" movement; it is at once universal and indigenous. It appeared throughout the capitalist world long before the Soviet Union

existed, and it never has been the creature of anything since. While the relations of parties to parties, and especially the relationship with the Communist Party of the USSR, was one-sided—which hurt both sides—it was never the conspiratorial instrumentality of alien fiends, and increasingly the relationship is being placed upon a fully fraternal and equal basis.

It is, moreover, not true that Communism is irrelevant to civil liberties and the labor movement and the Negro struggle, as the history of all three, from free speech fights, to the organization of the CIO, to the Scottsboro campaign—to name nothing else—makes absolutely clear.

Because these assertions are basic to Mr. Harrington's case, and are not true, his case collapses *in its own terms*. It is quite contradictory to advocate "a principled defense" of the rights of Communists and simultaneously insist that they are diabolical foreign agents whose activities are irrelevant to civil liberties and the struggles of the working class and the Negro people. The latter characterization tends to negate the former proposal, to justify the grossest violations of the Bill of Rights, and to serve as the essential justification for the crassest kind of McCarthyism—as loathsome to Mr. Harrington as to the Communists.

More helpful, I think, is the spirit which pervades the recent writings of another non-Communist who has

been impressed with the re-examination and the changes going on in the Communist movement. I have reference to the venerable A. J. Muste, leader of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and a founder of the new magazine, *Liberation*.

In a pamphlet written by him and just published by that magazine (*Where Are We Now?*), Mr. Muste says he is heartened by the "new developments in the Communist Party" and feels that these suggest "at least the possibility of the healing or the dissipation of the split in labor and progressive forces." This position leads him, unlike Mr. Harrington, to a fully consistent stand on the civil liberties question. He wants the views of all to be aired and sees in such a common and friendly pooling of ideas and suggestions the most efficient way of hammering out a program for progressive social activity. He insists that all must be heard and must be heard publicly, the only proviso being that the participants "want to discuss issues in a spirit which provides for hard-hitting intellectual presentation but excludes rancor and personal vituperation."

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There is also a significant body of opinion, among liberal, progressive and generally Left circles in our country, which holds that the Communist Party is an obstacle to democratic progress and therefore should be dissolved. The precise details of the indictment from this group dif-

fer—some hold the leadership to be completely inept or totally incapable of really independent thought; some feel the membership itself has been robotized and incurably "brainwashed," etc.—but its essential nature is that the Party is hopelessly sectarian and irrevocably estranged from the sympathy and comprehension of the mass of American people.

Let us offer summaries of the most widely circulated expressions of such points of view. In *The Nation* of July 28, Mr. George Benjamin of San Francisco, in a communication filled with transparently intense passion and concern, finds that the Party "leadership now confesses itself blind, slavish and cowardly." While there has been, in my view, excessive self-flagellation in the Marxist press, I do not think it is accurate to declare that the leadership has found itself to be blind, slavish and cowardly. But that is unimportant in terms of conveying Mr. Benjamin's ideas; clearly *he* thinks that such adjectives accurately describe the leadership of the American Communist movement—union official, feels that "the chief disservice which the Communist Party has done to the American people has been to deprive it of a radical leadership."

Becoming more specific, Benjamin reports the Communists guilty of arrogance and snobbishness, carrying with them "the posture of foreign visitors with a

mission." The Party, he writes, has been "unable to adapt itself to or understand the changing times and the special characteristics of American capitalism in its post-war phase"; it has been "anti-intellectual . . . in its rigidity and its rejection of every other school of thought" and has been "consistently unable to use intelligently" its own system of thought, dialectical materialism.

Consistent with such a finding as to the Party's contributions and character in the past decade, Mr. Benjamin concludes by urging, in the name of democratic advance and human well-being, that the Communist Party dissolve.

The editors of *Monthly Review*, Leo Huberman and Paul M. Sweezy, in their July-August issue, take a not dissimilar view, though their mode of expression is somewhat less vehement and more tentative than that of Mr. Benjamin. They find that momentous worldwide changes have altered "the central task of socialist parties (including CPs)," which no longer is that of "defense of the Soviet Union and/or postponement of war between the [capitalist and socialist] systems." Now, they write, the central task for all such parties is Socialism. This means each party must map out its own path to Socialism, they continue, "and only a party capable of thinking for itself and prepared to follow up the implications of its own analysis can hope to solve these problems successfully." Of this, Messrs.

Huberman and Sweezy feel members of the Communist Party are incapable. They do note—and welcome—an atmosphere of "freer discussion among American Communists," but their prognosis, put forward somewhat tentatively, is that American Communists are really incapable of independent and creative thought and that, therefore, the Communist Party will (and should) die.

Other liberal commentators have said very much the same thing, though often their language is less restrained. I. F. Stone, for example, in his *Weekly*, says American Communists are "idiots" and "cowards," and urges "the Left to break away from all Communist influence and strike out a new path determined in each country by its own conditions and traditions." Sidney Lens, a well-known author, and Chicago trade-union official, feels that "the tragedy of America is that it has no genuine Left" and that "The Communist movement has disoriented our Left," (*The Progressive*, October, 1956).

I think Mr. Lens is somewhat one-sided to place the entire onus of the American Left's disorientation upon the Communist Party, and that Mr. Stone chooses vivacity rather than veracity in characterizing Communists as idiots and cowards.

I find, also, serious inconsistencies in the more extended argumentations of other commentators.

Mr. Benjamin declares that for

over thirty years "the Communists have had a practical monopoly of American radicalism" (an overstatement, in my view) and that they have played a positive role "in publicizing and winning support for many causes, from Sacco-Vanzetti and the Scottsboro boys to the building of the CIO . . . in the long fight for labor's rights, for unemployment insurance, against discrimination and the like." Furthermore, Mr. Benjamin writes:

There are many besides the Communists who recognize the dangers in the deterioration of civil liberties. There are many indeed, in addition to the Communists, who want to eradicate from our public life the influence of such as Eastland, Walter, McCarthy, Nixon and Dulles. There are many who see more clearly than do the Communists the corruption of our society, the degeneration of our democracy, the despoliation of our free-thinking and free-swinging traditions.

Is this the record of a blind, slavish and cowardly organization or leadership? Even assuming the fullest accuracy to every stricture hurled against the Party by Mr. Benjamin—its rigidity, its dogmatism, its sectarianism, its arrogance—does his own picture of its notable role in the past and its fundamentally salutary program in the present, justify the demand for its dissolution? Mr. Benjamin, in condemning the Party, nevertheless uses it as the standard with which to compare the position of others vis-a-vis civil liberties, Mc-

Carthyism, and anti-democratic tendencies in general; is this a logical foundation making persuasive the plea for the Party's dissolution?

Joseph Starobin in *The Nation* of August 25, presents a picture of the negative features of the Party in terms similar to that offered by Mr. Benjamin. But, after declaring that these features make the Party incapable of further contributions to the cause of Socialism and that it should therefore be dissolved, he nevertheless remarks that "there is a substantial group," within the Party, "perhaps several thousand" who are carrying on excellent work in their respective spheres. He does not indicate that the good they admittedly do may have *some* connection with their Party membership; no, only harmful functioning of Party members is due to the Party; beneficial functioning exists despite the Party. I do not find the logic of this very compelling and certainly Mr. Starobin offers nothing to substantiate this crucial point.

Yet, he is sure that these people "cannot alter the Party as such," but he does not say why. Mr. Starobin is confident of the possibility of changing the social structure of the United States from a capitalist to a socialist one; but he is sure that several thousand members, functioning well, in an organization totaling twenty thousand, will not find it possible to change their own organization. Once again, the logic here is inconsistent rather than per-

suasive and Mr. Starobin offers nothing to convince on this point, also crucial to his argument.

Mr. Huberman and Mr. Sweezy, in the editorial to which I have already referred, find the Party ill-equipped to face what they feel are quite new requirements arising out of a new situation, as they see things. That is, they feel that we are now living in an era of peaceful co-existence and that in such an era the central tasks of the previous period, which they themselves define as the defense of the Soviet Union and the battle against world war, are no longer basic. Yet they offer nothing more convincing than "a conviction, which has been growing on us for a long time now" that while the Party did respond with some competence to the basic tasks of the previous epoch, it is incapable of the necessary self-adjustment to make itself a helpful instrumentality in the present period. Happily, unlike Starobin and Benjamin, the editors of the *Monthly Review* do hold out the possibility of their being wrong, and do not, therefore, take it upon themselves to actually call for the Party's suicide.

In sum, I find nothing in the substance of any of the arguments hitherto put forward, by avowed friends of Socialism and of progressive social change, to convince me that either end would be advanced by the dissolution of the Communist Party. I think advocates of such a change are required to muster

very compelling reasons indeed. A friend of the cause of civil liberties and Negro freedom, of social security and working-class organization, of colonial liberation and peace, is compelled to bring forward really convincing and clear reasons for the dissolution of an organization which, for nearly forty years, has battled for the same ends, an organization in which splendid men and women have devoted endless hours of selfless and heroic labors. Such a friend is particularly obliged to *prove* his case for dissolution if his alternatives are exceedingly nebulous or speculative, as they have been up to now.

Above all, it seems to me, the advocate of the dissolution of the Communist Party must not get himself into the position of insisting that such dissolution is a prerequisite for the forward march of the progressive cause; nor must he put himself in the position of denying the Communist the freedom of *not* dissolving his Party, under the penalty of ostracism should he so choose.

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The fact is that the era of the world-wide transition from capitalism to Socialism—which is the era in which we live—raises questions and problems that are as imposing as they are new. The fact is that the transition from feudalism to capitalism was quite prolonged and far from smooth; the qualitative change from capitalism to Socialism is greater. It is now apparent, I think, that

while the movement may not be as prolonged it will not be any simpler or smoother. It is apparent, too, that the full impact in human terms of the meaning of the observation that it is people raised under capitalism who must themselves create Socialism, is becoming clearer than it was some years back.

The problems posed by this historic movement face all of us who favor Socialism. However we envisaged the change in the past, or envisage it today, whatever differences existed or exist, we must consciously seek to submerge them in the common and crucial task of finding our way, together, in the present, to create as magnificent a future as we can—one which, we may even be permitted to hope, we may yet enjoy together.

Everywhere, the necessity for thorough-going re-examination of basic ideas and of ingrained practices, is being more and more widely acknowledged. Such a process is difficult and necessarily painful and will be conducted at different paces in differing places and by differing peoples. But the process is inexorable and is manifestly going on. The need for this is great among Communists. I say this unequivocally as one who is a Communist. I think the need for this is great among non-Communists, too, who also want an end to colonialism, to racism, to exploitation and to capitalism.

Evidences of the critical re-thinking among friends of Socialism are

everywhere. Thus, the dean of European Social-Democrats, Camille Huysmans—Secretary of the pre-1914 Socialist International and presently Socialist Speaker of the Belgian House of Commons—just recently replied in a warm manner to the call for fraternal unity from R. Palme Dutt, a leader of the British Communist Party. G. D. H. Cole, outstanding British Socialist and one of the most eminent historians in the world, has expressed his fervent wish for an end to the breach that has divided Socialist and Communist advocates of Socialism; R. H. S. Crossman, another outstanding figure in the history of British Socialism, more recently has seconded Mr. Cole's appeal. The Socialist Union of Great Britain, in a stimulating study, *Twentieth Century Socialism* (Penguin Books, 1956), attempts a "re-thinking of Socialism" and insists that British Socialists must never allow themselves "to become the slave of doctrine." The leader of the British Labor Party, Hugh Gaitskell, in a pamphlet just published (*Socialism and Nationalization*), takes a fresh and very critical look at basic elements in his own Party's program.

Re-examination is the order of the day among all Italians who want Socialism from Saragat's Social Democrats to Nenni's Socialists to Togliatti's Communists. That the results so far have been in the direction of more creativity by all and resulting greater unity is apparent

from the remarks of Ignazio Silone, an author of *The God That Failed* and hitherto one of the most bitter of Italian anti-Communists:

Confirming the importance of the event in process is the perplexed and hostile attitude of the Right and a part of the Center, which a short time ago were deploring the political subordination of the Socialist Party to the Communists and exhorting it to independence. But hardly has this independence emerged as a possibility than a grave peril is seen. . . . The Right politicians (and partly the Center ones) are in reality less anti-Communist in the name of freedom than they are anti-Socialist in the name of the old social order. *Socialist unification cannot be conceived of in anti-Communist perspective, but rather in an anti-capitalist one.* (My italics.)

In all Communist Parties, also, the entire membership is engaged in a searching analysis of their practices, programs and principles and in all of them the objectives of greater unity and greater freedom are apparent. At the Eighth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, just concluded, the problem of combatting sectarianism was placed in the forefront. The extension of inner-Party democracy was the keynote, and the airing of different views was put forward as the chief manner of arriving at a just estimate of reality. Said an editorial in the *People's Daily* of Peking, October 9:

Not only in discussions during which decisions are to be made should free expression of different views be permitted. Even after decisions have already been made, the Party should allow individual members to reserve their differing views and present these to organizations at a higher level and allow organizations at a lower level to present their differing views to those at a higher level.

The Draft Resolution of the Communist Party of the United States denounces "dogmatic application of Marxist theory," "doctrinaire acceptance" of theoretical propositions, the "uncritical acceptance of many views of Marxists and Marxist parties in other countries" and says that such habits prevailed in the past. It denounces "doctrinaire forms of party organization, bureaucratic methods of leadership, failure to develop inner party democracy" and calls for a thorough and independent study of "the distinctive features of the American road to Socialism." The single member of the National Committee, William Z. Foster, whose differences with aspects of the Draft Resolution were sufficient to cause him to vote against it, in his recent article setting forth his own views (*Political Affairs*, October 1956) states that, "The Party membership have said clearly in the debate that they want their Party to be more democratic, less dogmatic." He also demands a "war against bureaucracy"; he also wants "new and better concepts of Party democracy"; he

also seeks to "make war upon all forms of dogmatism."

I do not wish here to express my own views upon the content of the Draft Resolution, nor the position of William Z. Foster, for this is not the proper occasion. But I do point out that there is overwhelming agreement in the Party as to the critical need for deep-going changes in its practices and policies, in its conduct vis-a-vis its own members and people outside its ranks.

Given this situation—and its existence is indubitable—and given the fact that internationally and within our own country there is a growing desire to submerge past differences in the critical need for the parallel or common activity of all partisans of social advance, I find every cause to believe that the forthcoming February convention of the Communist Party will result in healthy changes and in the revitalization of the Communist movement.

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In 1771, Samuel Adams, denounced as a traitor, insisted that

The true patriot will enquire into the causes of the fears and jealousies of his countrymen; and if he finds

they are not groundless, he will be far from endeavoring to allay or stifle them. On the contrary, he will by all proper means in his power foment and cherish them. He will, as far as he is able, keep the attention of his fellow citizens awake to their grievances; and not suffer them to be at rest, till the causes of their complaints are removed. . . .

The task of "true patriots" has always been difficult. The visions of true patriots have varied but the essential goals are identical. Our duty is to pool our strength and illuminate the insights of each other. Our duty is mutual encouragement and assistance.

The need is not to scatter what organizations we have, but to improve and strengthen them. The Communist Party is an honorable and viable member of the present-day band of "true patriots." Its members have no monopoly on patriotism and no patent on *the* way forward. But its members can make their organization what they want it to be. Having accomplished that, Communists, with renewed vigor, will make their modest contributions to the welfare of the American people, to the unity of the Left, and to the cause of Socialism.