Theodore Draper—American historian and social critic

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31 March 2006

Theodore Draper, the historian who first came to prominence with his two volumes on the history of the American Communist Party published nearly 50 years ago, died last month at the age of 93. Draper's long career as a freelance historian and essayist also included studies of the Iran-Contra scandal of the 1980s and of the American Revolution.

Draper himself worked closely with the Communist Party in the 1930s. He was part of a generation, the children of immigrant Jewish parents, who turned leftward under the impact of the Depression and the rise of fascism.

His younger brother, Hal Draper, became a Trotskyist during this period, but Theodore Draper's sympathies lay with the Stalinists. He joined the Stalinist-dominated National Student League, later worked for the *Daily Worker* and then briefly for Tass, the Soviet news agency.

The year 1939 appears to have been a political turning point for both Draper brothers, but in somewhat different ways. Hal Draper aligned himself with the opposition inside the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party, led by Max Shachtman and James Burnham, which declared that the pact signed in August of that year between Hitler and Stalin proved that the Soviet Union was no longer a workers' state. Breaking with Trotskyism, Burnham quickly moved to the extreme right, and Shachtman later became an open defender of US imperialism. Hal Draper himself was one of a minority of Shachtman supporters who never allied himself with anticommunism.

Theodore Draper was similarly disillusioned by the Nazi-Soviet pact, but in his case it led to the rejection of Marxism and the adoption of a liberal anticommunism which characterized him politically for the rest of his life.

In the 1950s, Draper secured funding from the Ford Foundation to undertake a major historical investigation of American Communism. Although an enemy of Marxism, he was a conscientious scholar, and *The Roots of American Communism* (1957) and *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (1960) were and remain immensely valuable for their documentation and historical accuracy.

Draper's work on the American CP required six years of methodical research, including efforts to contact dozens of former leaders of the party. He later wrote that in their memoirs "many of [these ex-CP figures] are basically motivated by the desire to tell why the writer decided to break with the communist movement rather than what he did in it."

Draper found one major exception to this tendency, however. He carried out a lengthy correspondence with the founder of the American Trotskyist movement, James P. Cannon. Out of this correspondence came what could be described as an unintended but nevertheless powerful contribution on Draper's part to the history of the revolutionary movement in the United States. Cannon gathered his letters to Draper and in 1962 published them in book form, as *The First Ten Years of American Communism: Report of a Participant.*

Draper wrote a preface to this volume, and his words go far beyond an author's appreciation for one of his sources. "Cannon's letters are the real thing," wrote Draper. "I feel that students of the American labor movement in general and the American communist movement in particular will cherish them for years to come."

Draper in particular praised Cannon's memory for events, relating how Cannon's version of incidents always proved accurate, as compared to the vagueness or errors of others.

"For a long time, I wondered why Jim Cannon's memory of events in the 1920s was so superior to that of all the others," wrote Draper in 1961. "Was it simply some inherent trait of mind? Rereading some of these letters, I came to the conclusion that it was something more. Unlike other communist leaders of his generation, Jim Cannon *wanted* to remember (emphasis in original). This portion of his life still lives for him because he has not killed it within himself, and I am happy that I had some part in luring him into making it live for others."

What was behind this remarkable tribute by Draper to a man with whom he clearly had sharp political differences? While he wrote as a dispassionate historian, he had been

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profoundly affected by the gigantic historical experience of the Russian Revolution. In honoring Cannon's memoirs, Draper was acknowledging, even if indirectly, that it was the Trotskyists who fought to carry forward that revolution.

Cannon reviewed each of Draper's volumes on CP history in the *International Socialist Review*, at that time the theoretical journal of the American Trotskyist movement. These reviews are included in *The First Ten Years of American Communism*, and little needs to be added to their objective evaluation of Draper's contributions as well as his political mistakes.

Speaking of Draper, Cannon wrote that "the author himself was deeply involved in the Communist Party during the tragic era when Browder ruled as the proconsul of Stalin, and the revolutionary party of the twenties was transformed into its opposite. Draper belonged to that betrayed generation of rebellious college youth who faced graduation in the midst of the economic crisis of the thirties with the prospect of no place to go..."

Many of these youth, wrote Cannon, were "propelled ... toward the Communist Party, behind which they saw the image of the Soviet Union and the Russian Revolution. Mistaking Stalinism for communism, they streamed into the party and made their careers in its service..."

"Draper was one whose youth was consumed in a career as a party journalist. Such an experience could not fail to leave its mark. He writes, now, not as a mere observer of the movement but as a wounded participant. For all that, if one is to judge by the scholarly objectivity and scrupulous fairness with which he now records the history of a movement to which he no longer pays allegiance, he came out of the experience with his integrity intact. In that he is exceptional, for the apparatus of Stalinism has been a devourer not only of men by also of character."

Cannon continues: "Unfortunately, as his present work seems to testify, Draper finally recoiled against Stalinism without correcting the original error of identifying it with Bolshevism." With this outlook, Draper concludes that the source of the downfall of American Communism was not the nationalist degeneration of the Soviet Union and the Communist International in the grip of the Stalinist bureaucracy, but rather the American party's reliance on and susceptibility to Russian influence. He equates the advice and influence of the Soviets under Lenin and Trotsky with the counterrevolutionary policies and bureaucratic tyranny of Stalin. "The result is a contradictory book," writes Cannon in his review, "which is beyond praise as a source of authentic information, but without value as a political guide in the study of its meaning. The degeneration of the Communist Party took a long time, and it did not come about automatically. Those who want to get to the heart of the mystery will have to evaluate the factual information by a different criterion than Draper's."

It may be that Draper's long correspondence with Cannon and careful research on the history of the CP served to remind him of the role of revolutionary struggle in human history, and the role of counterrevolution as well. In any event, for the rest of his life, Draper occupied a position well to the left of the various ex-Trotskyists and ex-Stalinists who became the most avid supporters of imperialism. He was an opponent of the Vietnam War, and later wrote *A Very Thin Line*, his study of the Iran-contra affair, which mercilessly exposed the tendencies toward dictatorship manifesting themselves within the US state apparatus.

Toward the end of his life Draper returned again to the subject of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution, to pay tribute once more to a Trotskyist who fought courageously for the ideals of the Revolution. The year was 1996 and Draper was nearly 84 years old. The occasion this time was a review of the memoir of Nadezhda Joffe, then 90 and living in New York. Joffe, the daughter of Bolshevik leader Adolf Joffe, who committed suicide in 1927 in part as a protest against the growing bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet Union. Nadezhda emerged from the Stalinist prison camps in the 1950s, and in 1972 wrote *Back in Time*, the memoir of her years in the prison camps. More than 20 years later it was translated into English and published by Labor Publications, the predecessor of Mehring Books, the publishing arm of the Socialist Equality Party, the American Trotskyist movement of today.

Draper reviewed Joffe's book in the *New Republic*. He wrote movingly of meeting Joffe, who was to die shortly afterward. "Rarely does one come across a book that makes one sad enough to cry and yet able in the end to celebrate the indestructibility of the human spirit," Draper begins his review. After a lengthy summary, Draper explains that the book was published by Labor Publications "because it is sympathetic to the Trotskyist cause ... so far, this is the only review that this remarkable book has received. In this tortuous way, a book which deserves a much larger readership and much more attention has appeared in the United States."

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