

# New York meeting hears biographer of Cannon, the founder of American Trotskyism

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15 October 2007

Bryan Palmer, the author of a new biography of James P. Cannon, founder of the American Trotskyist movement in the United States, spoke to a standing-room-only audience at New York University's Tamiment Library on the evening of Friday, October 12.

Palmer gave a presentation on his book, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928*, which is the first part of a planned two-volume biography of the pioneer American communist.

In introducing his remarks, Palmer, a Canadian historian who teaches at Trent University in Ontario, said that he had been influenced by Trotskyism in the 1970s and 1980s, and that while his academic field of study has centered on Canadian labor, he had long wanted to write on Cannon.

He described Cannon as "the red thread of continuity in the American revolutionary tradition," stretching from his early days in the International Workers of the World through to the founding of the American Communist Party and to his break with the CP and founding of the Trotskyist movement in the US in struggle against Stalinism.

Palmer stressed that despite the importance of his subject, "outside of Trotskyist circles, Cannon has gone virtually unmentioned" in the histories of the communist movement.

Aside from his own political interests, Palmer indicated that he was also driven to write the biography by the "dead-end impasse" reached by historiography of American communism by the late 1980s and 1990s.

He believed that the biography of Cannon would help to clear up the disorientation in this field and establish the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism and its impact upon the communist movement.

An understanding of Cannon's historical role, he said, would put "communist possibilities back on the interpretive and political maps."

Palmer said that the book is the most deeply researched work that he has ever done. He wrote it conscious that, given its subject, it would have to stand up to intense academic scrutiny. As it was, he recounted, it was a battle to get the University of Illinois Press to agree to a 542-page volume on the subject, and he was compelled to cut 60,000 words to get it published.

At the same time, he said, he wanted it to be "a political book

with a political impact on people who are actively engaged at the present time."

As a result, he added, he was compelled to strike a balance, and he acknowledged that "some times one may have won out over the other" in the book's presentation.

After reviewing Cannon's early history growing up in Kansas and joining the IWW or Wobblies, Palmer stressed the immense role that the October 1917 Russian Revolution played in his development.

"He was transformed by seeing what could be accomplished by Lenin's vanguard party and by seeing what needed to be done in America" in the struggle to overthrow capitalism, he said. At the same time, he added, the experience implanted the conception of internationalism firmly in his consciousness.

Palmer reviewed Cannon's pivotal role in the early period of the American Communist Party, pointing out that he was one of only about half a dozen members with real experience in the class struggle. Based on his firm belief in the revolutionary capacity of the American working class, he led the fight to turn the party outward and against those who sought to preserve its underground existence—a product of the 1919-1920 wave of repression—as a matter of principle.

The author also went over Cannon's role in building the party and uniting disparate forces drawn to it as well as his involvement in the subsequent factional struggles. Palmer pointed to the intersection in the mid-1920s of a certain conservatizing influence in the national milieu in the US, brought on by the growth of American capitalism as well as the suppression of the more militant sections of the working class, with the growing bureaucratic degeneration within the Communist International, culminating in the Moscow bureaucracy's adoption of the perspective of "socialism in one country."

"It took Cannon a long time to come to an appreciation of the program and critique offered by Leon Trotsky," the author said, adding that this slowness was understandable in the context of the complex problems with which Cannon was grappling within the party.

He added, however, that when Cannon attended the Sixth Congress of the Comintern in 1928 and was able to read Trotsky's *Critique of the Draft Program* "the lights went on,"

and he embarked on the difficult struggle to build the Left Opposition in the US and internationally.

In concluding his remarks, Palmer stressed that “without a revolutionary alternative, the perspective for humanity looks dim indeed.”

Cannon’s history, he said, underscored the decisive importance of the subjective factor and the primacy of political program in the building of a revolutionary movement “steered in the necessity to march forward.”

“It has never been easy,” he said, “but it has been done in the past and it can be done again.”

The Socialist Equality Party was one of the co-sponsors of the October 12 event. The *World Socialist Web Site* published a review of Palmer’s book on September 8 and a two-part interview with the author on September 28 and 29.

In the opening section of the meeting, Fred Mazelis spoke on behalf of the Socialist Equality Party. His remarks follow.

“Everyone is here this evening because of James P. Cannon. As a young member of the Socialist Workers Party, I had the privilege of meeting him and hearing him speak. Although he was past 70 at the time, and well past his political prime, he nevertheless made an enormous impression.

“I would like to focus my brief remarks on the ideas that attracted Cannon to the revolutionary movement, the ideas of 1917 and those of 1928, which shaped his life, as Bryan Palmer so thoroughly and powerfully describes in this volume.

“In 1917 the October Revolution in Russia hit with the force of a political earthquake around the world. As this book correctly shows, that earthquake had its impact in the United States as well. The Russian Revolution, when Cannon was 27 years old, was a major turning point for him and for others of his generation. As he later explained, he turned to Bolshevism and to the Communist International because that’s where the ideas were - the theoretical weapons without which there could be no revolutionary movement.

“Cannon drew from and embodied the strengths of the American revolutionary traditions, the Wobblies in particular. More than any other figure he fused the strengths of revolutionary syndicalism with the lessons of Bolshevism. He was, as he said, a Wobbly ‘who learned something.’

“He learned the necessity of the fight for principled politics, for revolutionary principles, inside the working class, against opportunism and centrism. He learned to base himself on the internationalist principles of the October Revolution. Cannon played a key role in the fight for the legalization of the American party, and later in the 1920s, in his work for the International Labor Defense, he displayed the feeling for the working class, and the determination to fight for revolutionary ideas among its broadest layers, for which he was so well known. He sought to unite theory and practice on the basis of a dialectical appreciation of the relationship between the Marxist party and the working class as a whole.

“Another major turning point, with which this volume

concludes, was the courageous decision in 1928 to defend the genuine traditions of the Russian Revolution against the poison of Stalinism. When Cannon read Trotsky’s *Critique of the Draft Program* of the Comintern, he made a fateful choice. He supported Trotsky’s powerful argument for internationalism as the only scientific basis for a revolutionary perspective. Trotsky stressed the global role of American capitalism. At the very center of the Stalin-Bukharin program in 1928 was its failure to grasp the significance of the emergence of American imperialism on the world stage, and the revolutionary implications of this development.

“The pioneer Trotskyists led by Cannon had to endure political isolation and gangsterism, but they responded with determination and self-sacrifice. Cannon fought along these lines subsequently, notably in 1939-40 and again in 1953, when he wrote The Open Letter to the world Trotskyist movement that led to the founding of the International Committee of the Fourth International. Almost 80 years after the turning point of 1928 the ideas that inspired Cannon are no less relevant.

“In a recent review of Bryan Palmer’s book, amidst praise for different aspects, there is, however, a disagreement with the author’s emphatic insistence on the historical significance of Trotskyism. The reviewer writes: ‘Trotskyism hardly remains the only game in town for an explanation of Stalinism—if it ever was...Only when stripped of dogmatic, “orthodox” and self-inflated interpretations will Trotskyist thought play a central, even if far from pivotal, role in forging a new far Left.’

“This critic could not be more wrong or shortsighted. What other ‘game’ is there, to use his somewhat flippant phrase? Why are all the enemies of Marxism concentrating their fire today on insisting that there never was any alternative to Stalinism? It was only the Trotskyist movement that was able to explain the nature of Stalinism and to fight for an alternative to it. And a new revolutionary upsurge of the American and international working class will find the ideas and the program that it is searching for in Trotskyism and the history of the Trotskyist movement.”



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