

## Faction Figure

### James P. Cannon, Early Communist History, and Radical Faith

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## REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

# Faction Figure: James P. Cannon, Early Communist History, and Radical Faith

**Eric Arnesen**

Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press 2007)

IN HIS WIDE-RANGING PORTRAIT of American life published in 1938, the left-liberal writer Louis Adamic recounted the tale of his research trip to the small Pennsylvania mining town of Shamokin while on assignment for *The Nation* magazine. In 1932, he learned, the Communist Party had dispatched its cadre to the state's anthracite region to organize the unemployed. The leftist missionaries from New York and Philadelphia insisted that revolution in the United States was "imminent." As good communists, they supported the "immediate and complete overthrow of capitalism," championed "the proletariat and the dictatorship thereof," viewed Soviet Russia as the "sole immediate ... [source] of all hope for humankind," and "recognized 'revolution' in every strike threat and in every grumble against a wage cut." If "one could judge by their talk and publications," Adamic learned from locals, "they hated nearly everything in the United States."<sup>1</sup>

The communists, many of them recent converts, were initially impressed with what they saw. Local coal bootleggers – men who illegally mined and sold coal from "company-owned lands, for the most part in open daylight, by the most primitive methods imaginable, in complete disregard of private property rights and successful defiance of company police,"<sup>2</sup> had organized an Independent Coal Producers union. To communists' eyes, a bootlegger of

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1. Louis Adamic, "Notes on the 'Communists' and Some American Fundamentals," in Louis Adamic, *My America, 1928–1938* (New York 1938), 325.

2. Adamic, "The Great 'Bootleg Coal' Industry," in *My America*, 316. Adamic's initial account of his visit to Pennsylvania can be found in "The Great 'Bootleg' Coal Industry," *The Nation* 140, No. 3627 (January 9, 1934), 46.

socialist leanings informed Adamic, the union had “all the earmarks of being revolutionary soviets” and the very act of bootlegging “impressed them right off as a form of revolutionary activity.”<sup>3</sup> All the unemployed miners needed was leadership, which the communists were happy to provide.

On a one-on-one basis, the miner admitted, “most of them were pretty nice people ... idealists,” at least when they talked about “something else besides the revolution.” But when the conversation turned political, “something happened and you wondered if they were crazy or you.” It was definitely them, the miner concluded, for they “saw things cockeyed and talked and acted accordingly, trying to press everything they saw into their ‘line.’”<sup>4</sup>

The tale, Adamic observed, “easily turns into farce without much effort on the teller’s part.” Treating Shamokin and other anthracite communities as if they were Union Square, the out-of-town communists sponsored demonstrations and parades, demanding more relief for the unemployed and carrying banners that read “Protect Soviet Russia!” “Free Tom Mooney!” and “Fight Fascism! Save the First Workers’ Republic!” Adamic’s informant admitted that when it came to the Soviets and the like, locals didn’t know “their elbow from a knothole in a fence-post.” The informant – who occasionally read the *Nation* and even the *New Masses* – did, but his neighbours exhibited little interest in the radicals’ issues. The “people from Union Square didn’t even know this attitude existed, or didn’t care if it existed or not,” he complained.<sup>5</sup>

Locals tolerated the outsiders – for a time. Eventually, the radicals attacked the mayor of nearby Mount Carmel as a “company tool, a stool-pigeon, a crook.” A big mistake – for the mayor was himself “one of the people,” a former miner who was unpopular with the mine operators and whose son-in-law was himself a bootlegger. “Who are these crazy people?” they asked. When the priests denounced the outsiders as communists, the communists denounced the priests as “stooges of capitalism.” It appeared that the communists liked “the outcry against them; it proved to them they were right.”<sup>6</sup>

Some locals came to believe that the agitators “were not really Communists but company agents and spies who came in to destroy the bootleggers’ unions.” They weren’t, but they accomplished that end nonetheless. If they “had been company agents,” the informant reported, “they could not have done a better job for the companies.” After seven or eight months, there was “nothing left.” Bootleggers were fighting one another and their union was in shambles. “Everything was wrecked.” The communists packed their bags and left town, taking with them the ideas that “made them see things crazy and cockeyed.”<sup>7</sup>

3. Adamic, “The Great ‘Bootleg Coal’ Industry,” in *My America*, 326.

4. Adamic, “The Great ‘Bootleg Coal’ Industry,” 326.

5. Adamic, “The Great ‘Bootleg Coal’ Industry,” 326–27.

6. Adamic, “The Great ‘Bootleg Coal’ Industry,” 327.

7. Adamic, “The Great ‘Bootleg Coal’ Industry,” 327–28.

The Communist Party whose antics Adamic mocked was a party that James P. Cannon would have recognized and likewise condemned. Cannon, a Party founder and leader who was expelled from its ranks in 1928 for his nascent Trotskyism, had come to oppose what he saw as growing bureaucratization, the wrong-headed notion of “socialism in one country,” and the “degenerating leadership” (313) of Joseph Stalin over not just the Soviet Union but the world communist movement. Now *persona non grata*, Cannon found himself the object of vilification and physical attack, his speeches broken up by knife- and brass knuckle-wielding bands of party workers. They didn’t succeed, for Cannon, in the words of historian Bryan Palmer, was “impossible to silence.” (3) The man who was becoming America’s leading Trotskyist would develop his critique of the party’s so-called “Third Period,” adopted following his ouster and lasting until the arrival of the Popular Front of the 1935–1939 years. Third Period communists maintained that capitalism was on the verge of collapse and that “only a steeled revolutionary vanguard could ensure that it toppled into communism.” (319) He would have recognized well – and deplored – the communists’ excesses and revolutionary fantasies in Adamic’s account.

How Cannon arrived at his critique of the Party is one of the subjects of Bryan Palmer’s new study, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928*, an ambitious attempt to recover the life and legacy of a key founder of American communism. The book won the Canadian Historical Association’s Wallace Ferguson Prize for 2008 as the best historical work on a non-Canadian subject. A prolific and versatile historian equally comfortable in the realms of fine-grained social history and rough-and-tumble theoretical debate, Palmer (who is also the editor of *Labour/Le Travail*) is always the engaged scholar. And that engagement is on prominent display in this book. Make no mistake: This is a passionate, partisan biography that makes no bones about its author’s affection for his subject and his approval of Cannon’s emerging critique of the party’s ideological drift. For Palmer, what happened inside the Communist Party ideologically and programmatically matters deeply. “The chief victim of Stalinism in this country was the magnificent left-wing movement,” Palmer begins. “The story of what happened to these young militants; what was done to them; how their faith was abused and their confidence betrayed by the cynical American agents of the Kremlin gang – that is just about the most tragic story in the long history of the American labor movement.” (3)

Palmer’s purpose here is not merely to restore a figure written out of the party’s past by his Stalinist successors or ignored by New Left historians sympathetic to the party. As in earlier articles, he advances a nuanced yet forceful critique of the larger thrust of revisionist historiography of American communism. Although revisionists – with some prominent exceptions – have averted their eyes from the party’s hyper-sectarian Third Period in favor of its subsequent, considerably less shrill Popular Frontism, their general sympathy for party members and the reforms they pursued has made them reluctant

to interrogate the party's ideological foundations, inhibiting their ability to explain the party's strategic choices. In Palmer's view, the recent interpretation "both sidesteps Stalinism too easily and avoids the original decade of international communism's faltering steps into problematic defeats (and worse)." (8) Developing Geoff Eley's earlier characterization of such revisionist accounts as a "history of communism with the Communism left out,"<sup>8</sup> he concludes that the history of the American revolutionary Left "cannot be understood ... without attention to the ways in which the communist project was transformed by Stalinism in the 1920s." (4) The historiography of American communism is marked by a "profound unease" with regard to this issue. Palmer insists that it cannot be evaded, and his biography of Cannon puts it squarely on the table.<sup>9</sup>

Jim Cannon was born in 1890 to immigrant parents in Rosedale, Kansas, and grew up in a working-class household in the greater Kansas City area. His father's move into real estate, insurance, and loan collection during that decade's depression did little to improve the family's financial condition. In his youth, Jim "knew poverty and economic hardship," (31) but his childhood was a "carefree" (31) one involving "meandering creeks, walks in the hills, and outings along the railroad tracks." (32) He would later look back with little nostalgia for Rosedale, whose "terrible limitedness" (36) and absence of civilization he deplored. Yet his familial past proved crucial to his subsequent self-presentation. "Rosedale's homespun, experiential, deeply materialized midwestern American commonsense would often filter through" Cannon's polemics, Palmer writes, lending his "sociopolitical comment the authority of a rare revolutionary who was unmistakably a native son." (36)

It was not his father's attraction to socialism that drew Jim toward the left. A difficult adolescent who worked for two years in the region's packinghouses, the young Cannon found his way into public libraries and secondhand bookstores for intellectual stimulation, where he would "spend hours ... devouring everything he could get his hands on." (42) Eugene Debs' writings and speeches made a deep impression on him, drawing him to the "periphery of the socialist cause" (45) and eventually, at age 18, into the local branch of the Socialist Party which absorbed his energies and "transformed" (47) his life. But it was only with his entry into the ranks of the Industrial Workers of the World in 1911 that his life's direction was "decided." (52) Absorbed in the IWW's local free-speech fight, Cannon mingled with hobo rebels and various "ultralefts." (55) His reputation as a gifted debater and speaker grew as he assumed the

8. Geoff Eley, "International Communism in the Heyday of Stalinism," *New Left Review* 157 (May/June 1986), quoted in Bryan D. Palmer, "Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism," *American Communist History* 2, No. 2 (2003), 151.

9. This is an argument I endorse in Eric Arnesen, "No 'Graver Danger': Black Anticommunism, the Communist Party, and the Race Question" and "The Red and the Black: Reflections on the Responses to 'No Graver Danger,'" *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 3 (Winter 2006), respectively 13–52, 75–79.

"vocation of outdoor agitator." (56) By the age of 21, Palmer notes, Cannon was a "professional revolutionary, albeit one without a salary." (56)

The IWW made good use of his skills. Cannon briefly worked on the Wobbly paper, *Solidarity*, before his "agitational restlessness" (60) took him to Akron, where he threw himself into supporting striking rubber workers. "It was a remarkable demonstration of how easily a cadre of agitators can take over a popular movement," (63) he noted later. When that strike ended "not with a bang, but with a whimper," (66) Cannon departed having been "baptized in the front-line fires of class struggle," an "experiential moment that he savored for the rest of his life." (66) Then it was off to Peoria, Duluth, Cleveland, and elsewhere, places, Palmer tells us, where the "battle lines were drawn in blood." (72) It was "class against class" (72) and class struggle could be witnessed "at its most raw." (78) Eventually, having married his high school teacher, he returned to Kansas City where he spent several miserable years reminiscing about his "year as a hobo rebel," (80) studying law, contemplating "how to deepen the trenches of class consciousness" (84) among the masses, and "[b]uilding the left wing in the tri-state area of Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska." (96)

Meanwhile, the Bolshevik revolution in Russia reconfigured the American left, carrying along Cannon in its wake. Indeed, the "new word of revolution ... rocked Cannon's settled midwestern syndicalism-socialist-populist world." (93) When the Socialist Party, already enfeebled by state repression during World War I, splintered, Cannon accompanied its left wing in a decidedly Bolshevik direction. His comrades watched the "approaching storm." (94) In the words of Cannon's ally, Alexander Bittelman, "things were coming to a showdown." (94) Cannon and his cohort eagerly awaited the "red dawn," (104) determined to do their part to make it a reality.

But what, precisely, was the Bolshevik path in the United States? Not surprisingly, the factionalism and sectarianism that are a constituent part of the Left's DNA were present at the creation of American communism. The "deeply committed 'reds'" who broke with the Socialists were "divided irreparably over the strategic question of what was to be done to develop American Bolshevism." (98) Uniting the new communists was a celebration of the Bolshevik Revolution, a conviction that a vanguard could lead the working class to victory, and a belief in the political wisdom of the Bolsheviks in Russia. "Comrades," declared one early communist, "the Russians made the Revolution, we did not. They know how; we do not. I for one trust the Russians and will follow them." (104) Whatever else divided them – and they fought over plenty – an appreciation of the Russians and a willingness to defer to their presumably better judgment proved a point of agreement. (This is not to suggest, Palmer notes, that Moscow *controlled* the pre-Stalinist Communists, as the orthodox historiography would insist. In challenging orthodox historiography, Palmer insists forcefully that Moscow did not control the pre-Stalinist Communists. Rather, American communists voluntarily – and, he seems to

believe – understandably sought out Russian guidance and eagerly submitted to Russian directives.)

From the outset, communists in America spoke with many voices, not to mention many languages. Many of the European immigrants in the Socialist Party's language federations defected to create a new ultraleft Communist Party. That new formation, Palmer notes, "tended to dismiss allusions to the particularities of American experience as little more than centrist evasion of revolutionary commitment" (99) and opposed those who, "[i]n the face of revolution's call," were "'irresolute, [prone to] vacillate, temporize, and remain stupid.'" (99) These self-appointed vanguards of American communism denounced trade unions as "the arch enemy of the militant proletariat" and rejected "all forms of laborism" and "moderate petty bourgeois socialism." (115) Not exactly in tune with American realities, they urged striking railroad workers in 1920 to engage in "armed struggle as a precondition for proletarian victory." (116) Few, needless to say, heeded that call.

Cannon rejected that approach, which coloured the "early communist movement with 'excesses of unrealism' and a 'tinge of romanticism'" (103) and isolated the left from the "activities and thoughts of workers." (103) Cannon, now emerging as a "major figure in the initial communist movement in the Midwest," (107) leaned somewhat uneasily toward the new Communist Labor Party, dominated by American-born activists who were less "isolationist, clandestine, and sectarian." (115) Driven underground by the post-war red scare, "communists embraced their class enemy's caricatured, fantasied understanding of the clandestine 'red,' living an otherworldly, 'illegal' political life. Active agitational work was replaced by an atmosphere of conspiratorial intrigue, increasingly distanced from the material circumstances of the United States." (112) The arrest, imprisonment, or deportation of many new communists only reinforced the conspiratorial worldview, rendering the movement "completely isolated from public life," (112) as Cannon put it. The Bolshevik ranks, Palmer concludes, "retreated further into the illusory world of sect-like isolationism;" (112) Cannon later complained that "the underground ideology ... manifested itself in wildly sectarian flights of fantasy." (118)

Enduring sectarianism, new factional splits, and gestures toward unification characterized the young communist movement into the mid-1920s. With Moscow's prodding, a United Communist Party uneasily brought the two parties – the Communist Party and the Communist Labor Party – together, but sharp tensions persisted. The organization's underground character was part of the problem. "We didn't have public meetings; we didn't have to talk to workers or see what their reactions were to our slogans," Cannon maintained. "So the loudest shouters at the shut-in meetings became more and more dominant in the leadership.... Phrase-mongering 'radicalism' had a field day. The early years of the Communist movement ... were pretty much consecrated in ultraleftism." (122)

Cannon hoped to change all that. Among the sins of the ultraleftists were a "reification of soviets" and the "unthinking, routinized call to form workers' councils." (125) Most important was the need to break out of "ironbound undergroundism" (127) and to connect the communist movement with the labour movement and American public life. That meant that the United Communist Party had to shed its clandestine, illegal character – a "millstone" encircling "the neck of revolutionary agitation" (134) – and go public, transforming it into a body capable of penetrating unions, working openly for communist ideas, and participating in the electoral arena. "No figure worked more diligently and more persistently to Americanize communism, to bring it out of its clandestine, alien underground" (18) than Cannon, Palmer concludes.

The fight proved to be an uphill one, for the foreign-language federations remained, by and large, wedded to the "underground straightjacket." (129) Off to Moscow went the representatives of the various factions, each seeking the Comintern's stamp of approval for their positions. To make a long story of sectarian wrangling short, Moscow largely concurred with the advocates of a legal party, prompting the formation of a consolidated Workers' Party in December 1921. As left oppositionist proponents of an underground party (now called the Goose Caucus) maneuvered against the liquidationists (as the opponents of undergroundism were called), a "confusing array of parties, factions, and splinter groups" (150) came to constitute the communists' ranks. It was back to Moscow for the battling comrades, while the Goose-versus-Liquidator conflict erupted into "virtual party warfare, raging furiously" (154) back home. Despite lingering Soviet sympathy for the undergroundists, Cannon carried the day. The underground was dissolved, making the Workers' Party "now the undisputed center of American communism," (166) in Palmer's estimation. A triumphant Cannon returned to the us with both an "abiding antagonism to the functionaries of bureaucratic regimes" (164) and a "genuine appreciation of the Bolshevik leaders." (165) As for charges of Russian dictatorial control, Cannon concluded that the proponents of openness and legality had "found our best friend in 'Moscow.'" (168)

On to the next crisis, this one in the form of a Hungarian émigré, Joseph Pogany/John Pepper, who had installed himself as a communist leader in New York, amassed "tyrannical power," (177) relentlessly suppressed his opponents, and fanned new factional flames. Much to Cannon's dismay, Pepper's "external adventurism" (187) involved a bungled Workers' Party takeover of the Farmer-Labor Party in 1923, jeopardizing the organization's trade union work. "We seem to be organizing our enemies faster than we are organizing our friends," a distraught Cannon noted in his critique of the "errors of Pepperism." (191) It appeared that communists' relations with progressives "were now soured forever." (230) More trips to Moscow followed for adjudication of conflicts. More squabbles over farmer-labourism. The party's leadership was stalemated; factional differentiation was not producing "unambiguous programmatic



clarity.” (233) All the while, neither Cannon nor his opponents were aware of Stalin’s growing power and the “degeneration” it caused in the Comintern. In effect, the Americans were clueless.

Back in America, Cannon threw himself into concrete efforts to take advantage of the “unique opportunities” (260) afforded the Left in the mid-1920s by exploiting “the contradictions of democracy the better to bring a revolutionary program to the masses.” (260) With his new romantic partner, Rose Karsner (Cannon having abandoned his first wife and children),<sup>10</sup> he established the International Labor Defense in 1925 as the “quintessential Leninist united-front activity.” (261) His goal was to publicize, defend, and materially support those he viewed as class-war prisoners through joint efforts with non-communists. The ILD was the party’s most significant creation. Even though it never quite managed to become the truly mass organization that Cannon had hoped for, it raised considerable sums of money, published its own journal, and functioned as “an antidote to years of sectarianism, undergroundism, and factionalism,” (271) in Palmer’s view. On a personal level, the ILD work allowed Cannon to distance himself from the debilitating and “ubiquitous” (285) factional intrigues of the party leadership. (It helped that Cannon surrounded himself with ideological allies, a move his critics were quick to point out).

The subsequent assumption of power inside the us party by Jay Lovestone spelled trouble for Cannon, who, along with his allies, was “almost entirely displaced” (304) from the party’s governing circles by 1927. Cannon had long advocated an approach centered on appealing to American workers, speaking a language they could understand, and orienting communist work “to the actual struggles” of American workers in a manner that took “into account” their “traditions and psychology.” (300) (Nonetheless, his own choice of words and phrases – “America as an imperialist power” and as an “aggressive danger to world peace and the forces of the international proletariat,” (302) for instance – were not necessarily those that American workers might relate to

10. Although Cannon’s personal life occupies a relatively small place in this political biography, Palmer’s observations on Cannon’s relationship with his wife and the difficulties of sustaining a family in the intense context of revolutionary politics are fascinating and tantalizing. Cannon’s activism was all consuming, and the world he moved in was an intensely masculine one. In the 1920s, Palmer writes, Cannon was “exhibiting signs of the professional revolutionary’s lifestyle, in which the days were short, the nights long, and the masculinist penchant for the sociability of the bar alluring.” (283) He indulged his “attraction for alcohol” and his close friends included members of the “hard-drinking faction of the party.” (314) He spent little time with his family (often living apart from them), rarely seeing his children, Carl and Ruth. Cannon helped out financially “when he could,” but “his material capacity to ‘provide’ for the family was constrained severely” (314) by his political commitments. Palmer tries, with less than full success, to put a positive spin on the familial relationships. “No doubt Jim loved his children, and possibly even Lista,” his wife. But “the demands of being a professional revolutionary meant that he saw little of his family.” (195) Cannon’s life “was the Workers’ Party, and its struggles,” which perhaps explains how he eventually became involved with a “vivacious, slender, thirty-five-year-old brunette, Rose Greenberg Karsner,” (195) for whom he eventually left his wife to enter into “a lifelong comradeship.” (196)

comfortably. It is likely that the bootleg miners in Adamic's Shomokin would have responded to Cannon's phrases as they did to those of the Third Period communists.)

But for Cannon, Lovestone's "American Exceptionalist" thesis – positing that American capitalism had been stabilized, that revolution was not on the table for the foreseeable future, that the party should invoke the heritage of 1776 and learn from the bourgeois national liberal struggle that was the American Revolution, and that revolutionaries must concede leadership to non-communists in their alliances – went too far. (Lovestone's star too would fall soon enough, after Stalin denounced Bukharin as a right deviationist and made a hard left turn into the Third Period at the Sixth World Congress in 1928. "American Exceptionalism" had little place in a world deemed to be on the brink of capitalist collapse and revolution.) Cannon and his allies denounced this as "The Right Danger" that overestimated, in Palmer's words, "the reserve powers of U.S. imperialism." It also failed to appreciate the shifting mood of labouring people, the "break from passivity signaled by rising militancy, revived antagonism to the threat of war, and initiatives to counter conservative union officialdoms." (320) Lovestone's crime, Cannonites insisted, had been to engage opportunistically in united front campaigns, understate "potential communist strengths" among blacks, women workers, and "anti-imperialist strongholds," (230) and otherwise let the party press and work falter.

That stance might have put them in good stead with the Comintern, which, under Stalin's maneuvering, had cut the ideological ground out from under Lovestone with its Third Period shift to the left. It didn't. Cannon's growing recognition of Stalin's "degenerating leadership," (313) his rejection of the notion of "socialism in one country," and his newfound appreciation for the now-discredited and exiled Leon Trotsky (whose Draft Program of the Communist International, a "withering" [323] assault on the Comintern's program, had fallen into Cannon's hands in Moscow), made that impossible. Palmer resists the temptation to invoke the religious imagery of conversion, but the impact that Trotsky's document had on Cannon and a small group of likeminded communists had an unmistakable scales-falling-from-the-eyes character. It "was a bolt out of the blue," Palmer notes, "explaining their doubts and reengaging them with what they considered Marxist truth." (325) Prudently holding their tongues while in Russia, they returned – with Trotsky's Draft Program secretly tucked away – to the United States and Canada where they saw their "main responsibility as organizing support for Trotsky's positions within their own parties." (325)

Cannon and his cohort proceeded to gather a micro-number of like-minded activists in secret meetings to flesh out their arguments and strategies. With the Comintern now demanding "'outing' Cannon," (338) Lovestone complied, putting Cannon and others on trial for their Trotskyism. Cannon and fellow proto-Trotskyist Max Schachtman and Martin Abern used the occasion to release their nineteen-point statement, "For the Russian Opposition! *Against*

*Opportunism and Bureaucracy in the Workers Communist Party of America!*" Publicly linking themselves to Trotsky, their fate was sealed. The party Cannon helped to found and guide unceremoniously expelled him from its ranks. Now free from party discipline and control, the 38-year-old American Trotskyist turned his attention to the building of a Left Opposition in the United States, launching a newspaper (*The Militant*), embarking on speaking tours, and fending off ideological and physical assaults by Communist Party members. There Palmer ends his account. A volume two, he promises, will pick up the story of Cannon's life and politics at this chronological and thematic point.

Palmer's accomplishments here are considerable and, in some cases, an overdue corrective to the romanticization of the party that characterized revisionist historiography in the 1980s and 1990s. Despite scholarly acknowledgment – some grudging, some more forthright – of Stalinism's evils, most revisionists still tend to emphasize the indigenous character of American communism and evade the more uncomfortable implications of party ideology, structure, and foreign connections. Palmer's ongoing insistence on the need to take ideology and organization seriously poses a vital challenge to the revisionists, who have yet to fully address his charges.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, Stalin and Stalinism have few academic defenders today; even many a revisionist inserts what feels like an obligatory denunciation. Most recently, Randi Storch – whose book *Red Chicago* emphasizes Stalinism's incomplete hold on American party members and the vibrancy of a local communist movement culture – concedes that "Stalinism *did* matter to the American Communist movement" in that the party adopted a hierarchical Marxist-Leninist organizational style and required members to toe the party line, which "damaged the party ... and the Left more generally."<sup>12</sup> Then, shifting gears, she argues that "to fully understand American Communism, one must move beyond these Stalinist polices to more concrete questions" about who communists were, how they

11. Palmer's criticism of anti-communist historians is, in contrast, less effective. He makes clear his distaste for the "current fixation on communist subterfuge, Moscow domination, and Comintern funding of espionage and propaganda" put forth by various anti-communist scholars (including Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, amongst others). "Historians of the Left have faced a literal ordeal by spy historiography" and have been subject to a "medieval-style torture-test" by this "historiographic overproduction." (10) Palmer's hyperbole invites a simple response: A few authors' multiple books on the espionage angle hardly constitute "historiographic overproduction"; those writing in opposition to revisionists have hardly made much of an impression among academics, whose outpouring of local studies of communists itself might attract the "historiographical overproduction" charge; and revisionists have yet to fully confront the import of the revelations of the Venona transcripts and other evidence from the opened Soviet archives. The orthodox scholars have, I would suggest, hardly overwhelmed "the indigenous history of American radicalism." (10)

12. Randi Storch, *Red Chicago: American Communism at its Grassroots, 1928–35* (Urbana 2007), 3–4. Also see Storch, "'The Realities of the Situation': Revolutionary Discipline and Everyday Political Life in Chicago's Communist Party, 1928–1935," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 1 (Fall 2004), 19–44.

implemented policy, their activism in specific communities and industries, their understandings of the party line” – precisely the revisionist agenda for the past generation. One step forward, two steps back. The general revisionist tendency, as Palmer has demonstrated, has been to downplay explicit *communist* beliefs, language, and structures and to substitute in their place an emphasis on good-hearted progressive militancy.<sup>13</sup>

Romanticization, though, is in the eyes of the beholder. In describing early American communists and their Russian counterparts, Palmer is not immune to indulging in his own fair share of idealizing. American communism in its formative years represented the “*promise* of proletarian revolution,” (351, italics mine) Palmer argues. His narrative, however, allows for an alternative, less charitable reading. Although he suggests that the party’s formative years were a necessary if difficult period of forging the proper Leninist perspective, his account underscores repeatedly the organization’s irrelevance to the American scene. In the early 1920s, Cannon himself complained that “[w]e have virtually disappeared from the public scene”(131) while his then ally Bettelman regretted that the party “practically does not exist as a factor in the class struggle.” (131) By 1924, the Workers’ Party program, Palmer says, was incoherent and the leadership in a “state of permanent factionalism.” (222) By the following year, American communists simply “stewed in their factional juices,” (241) with the effect that the party was “effectively immobilized.” (241) One party factionalist acknowledged that “We are doing nothing in the field of political and industrial work ... We are simply tearing each other to pieces.” (241) Decades later, Cannon reflected that “Something went wrong, and the party began to gyrate crazily, like a mechanism out of control.” Factionalism had taken on the “form of political gang warfare,” becoming “an end in itself.” (285–86) Party policies and flip flops earned them the enmity of potential allies. Once the party’s underground apparatus had finally been dissolved, a still discontented Cannon reflected on the “biggest danger facing the Workers’ Party,” namely “the disregard for objective facts and reality, dangerous self-conceit as to the strengths and abilities of our party, the worship of empty phrases, and a grave lack of realism, practicability and Leninist objectivity.” (232) The party, he believed, should make an effort “to speak the language that [workers] understand.” (232) It didn’t. In the field of labour, communist efforts to lead a textile strike in Passaic, New Jersey, in 1926 led to disaster, with its organizer betrayed by party officialdom and the strike turned over to the AFL. Party leaders did give speeches – a lot of them, apparently – and Cannon’s achievement in establishing the ILD was not insignificant. But the party’s ranks remained small, turnover was high, its terminology can be described

13. This is most pronounced in the expanding literature of the Communist party, left-led unions, and race. See, for instance, Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge 2003) and Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill 2003). I develop this critique in Arnesen, “No ‘Graver Danger.’”

charitably as arcane, and its analysis bore a tenuous relationship to reality. This critique, at times, applies to Cannon as well as to his opponents. Was Cannon right to harp on “America as an imperialist power,” an “aggressive danger to world peace and the forces of the international proletariat,” (302) in 1927? Palmer cites Cannon’s words with no commentary. The overall track record, one can argue, was a pretty dismal one.

Yet for all of the sectarian infighting that defined the party’s opening years, neither Cannon nor Palmer are willing to write off its importance. For Cannon, the initial factional warfare that consumed the comrades’ energies and rendered the party all but an invisible presence on the working-class scene never rose to the level of a “tragicomedy of P.T. Barnumesque proportions.” (134) Palmer concurs with Cannon that the early ultra-left “erred,” but that it “did so out of courage and conviction, learning lessons, habits of work, and depths of commitment that ensured it a place in the history of world revolution.” (134) Perhaps, but a more accurate claim might be: it earned a place in the footnotes of the history of world revolution. Only if one privileges the gradual development of a correct ideological line – as Palmer, but no one outside of a small circle of contemporary leftists, does – can these early years be seen in anything resembling a positive light.<sup>14</sup> And since, ultimately, Cannon lost the factional fight and the Stalinists prevailed, the tragedy (or farce) was merely compounded. To maintain a strongly held belief in early communism’s promise requires a strong subcultural faith in communist values and a reading of history through intensely rose-coloured glasses. For the non-believers, the “promise of proletarian revolution” in the United States is a delusion.

That early American communists were slow to recognize (one might say downright blind to) Stalin’s growing power and its implications for world revolution (as well as the welfare of the people who lived under his rule) is

14. On one specific front Palmer defends the early party – its efforts to grapple with “the Negro Question.” Historians too often identify 1928 and the formulation of the Black Belt nation thesis as the revolutionary Left’s first serious effort to grapple with race, he argues. (Elsewhere, he pointedly refers to the Black Belt thesis as an example of the Third Period party’s “flights of political fantasy.” See Bryan D. Palmer, “‘Who ARE These Guys?!’ Politics, Passions, Peculiarities, and Polemics in the Historiography of British Communism,” *American Communist History*, 4, No. 2 (2005), 193. In the pages of this journal, he recently characterized the Black Belt nation thesis as “an *ideological* project that seriously undermined the programmatic integrity of the revolutionary Left at the same time that it appealed to those for whom an unambiguous declaration of the centrality of the race question was the only way to convince the black masses that a white, Marxist party was serious about confronting racism.” Palmer, “Race and Revolution,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 54, 200. Credit should be given, he believes, to the party for its establishment of the American Negro Labor Congress in 1925, which he suggests served during its five years of existence as a voice of African Americans for full equality and ringing opposition to lynching and other forms of terrorism against blacks. His evaluation may be too generous to the ANLC, which recruited few members and accomplished little. For a positive evaluation of the ANLC, see Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919–1950* (New York 2007). For a more critical assessment of the Communist Party’s uneven record on race, see Arnesen, “No ‘Graver Danger.’”

uncontroversial. Cannon was largely oblivious to the shifting ideological winds, growing personality conflicts, and intra-party squabbles on his multiple “pilgrimages” (as Palmer calls them) to Russia. Like so many communists visiting the Soviet Union well into the 1930s, Cannon, on his first visit there in 1922, was thrilled “to witness the living Revolution, and he drank it all in,” (153) his biographer observes. On another trip three years later, Palmer tells us, Cannon and company were excited by the “exhilarations of actually seeing firsthand the home of the Russian Revolution, of experiencing the accomplishments of the first workers’ state.” (239) Palmer vicariously shares that enthusiasm, celebrating the “living Revolution” and accepting at face value the first workers’ state’s “accomplishments.”

Central to Palmer’s history and his politics is a relentless insistence on a qualitative break in Bolshevism’s history with the rise of Stalinism. Here lies the crux of Palmer’s argument: Was communism “an organically flawed project destined to reproduce time and again a subordination of American interests to Russian interests,” (14) as he characterizes the orthodox view? His answer is a resolute no. “On the whole,” he maintains, “the communism of the 1920s was a momentous advance for the revolutionary Left, albeit one that would soon stumble and eventually fall backward.” (351) The Communist International, for a brief moment, served as the “bright and shining red star ... a guiding beacon for the United States revolutionary movement” (351) – that is, until “its faltering bureaucratization and, from the mid-1920s on, increasing Stalinization, spelled the end of a particular age of innocence for the Left.” (351) It may have served as that star and beacon for the revolutionary Left, but should left historians’ today view it in the same light? I would venture that few – very few – outside of the miniscule ranks of the committed, self-proclaimed revolutionary left (and even fewer in the academy) would accept this latter conclusion without grimacing.

Palmer understands that he stands on lonely ground. Writing in 2003, he admitted that his views on “one foundational issue are clearly very much out of step with the conventional political wisdoms of our time,” for “[a]lmost nobody in academic circles ... is willing to stand the ground of the original Bolshevik tradition ... Recognition of the colossal and overwhelmingly positive accomplishments of the Russian Revolution of 1917 are [sic] side-stepped. The immense contribution of Lenin and Trotsky in actually implementing a Marxist program, advancing theoretical premises in a changed 20th-century context, building a revolutionary movement and, above all, a disciplined party capable of establishing the proletariat in power ... is glossed over.”<sup>15</sup> To argue that the record of the early Soviet era was, “all things considered, quite positive, is not ... to create a mythical and romanticized fiction of a golden age ‘perfection’. It is simply to balance interpretation of one period, and its significant

15. Bryan D. Palmer, “Communist History: Seeing it Whole. A Reply to Critics,” *American Communist History* 2, No. 2 (2003), 204.

contributions and generally positive features, against the drift of later years.”<sup>16</sup> If Lenin’s Russia had not yet become the mass graveyard and prison camp it would be under Stalin, neither was it the caricature Palmer provides us with, a positive “before” to the tragic “after” of Stalin’s assumption of absolute power. For those who are not political true believers, the before/after distinction is a somewhat artificial, even specious one, drawn merely to cast the initial Leninist stage as a useable model. Palmer, by neglecting to interrogate Lenin’s Russia seriously, asks us to take his word on faith and in contradistinction to considerable evidence and established scholarly understanding. The best he can do is to claim that in the “crucible of civil war, the practice of governance in the world’s first socialist state was inevitably hardened over the course of the years from 1917 to 1921, and many Bolsheviks faced the necessity of institutionalizing an apparatus of repression, centered in the Cheka, in order to preserve the revolution and its advances. Internationally, the failure of the socialist revolution in Europe.... constrained Soviet possibilities even further.” (5)<sup>17</sup>

Elsewhere, he has reminded us that the “immense contribution of Lenin and Trotsky” must be understood in a context of “extreme adversity,” which led to “unfortunate decisions and actions [that] had sometimes to be taken in the face of acute threats to the world’s first socialist experiment.”<sup>18</sup> In the face of the widespread skepticism whose existence he readily acknowledges, even, and perhaps especially, the activist should recognize that proclamations of political faith – in this instance, an insistence on the ultimate good of the Bolshevik Revolution and a dismissal by way of invocation of context of the Bolsheviks’ “unfortunate decisions” – sound more like ritualistic sloganeering than carefully constructed arguments. Palmer is playing the activist, not the scholar, on this front. If proclaiming is the goal, then the slogans suffice; if persuasion is the goal, they do not. And if context explains why the Bolsheviks had to institutionalize their “apparatus of repression,” persuading largely unsympathetic readers of its necessity requires much more effort than Palmer is willing to expend. While Stalin’s Soviet Union, by the 1930s, had become “one of the most criminal regimes that ever existed on the face of the earth,” in the words of the historian Peter Kenez, the pre-Stalinist regime was hardly a

16. Palmer, “Communist History: Seeing it Whole,” 205.

17. “Given that there were positive aspects to Bolshevikization,” Palmer argues, “it is possible that had the Soviet Party retained a healthy revolutionary program, the wrongs of the mid-1920s Comintern could have been righted. But this was not to be. The parochialism and chauvinism of the constricting advocacy of ‘socialism in one country’ replaced the proletarian internationalism and widening reach of a program of world revolution.” (6) It was the “programmatic reversals of Stalinism that were the critically important factor in the reverse of the Revolution’s direction,” he noted several years ago. “[H]ad they not taken place it is possible that Comintern bureaucratism could have been righted and the arbitrary authoritarianism, indeed tyranny, that came to be commonplace in the government of the Soviet Union, resisted and thwarted.” Palmer, “Communist History: Seeing it Whole,” 205.

18. Palmer, “Communist History: Seeing it Whole,” 204.

civil libertarian paradise. Again Kenez: "Stalin's terror could not have existed without certain preconditions ... [T]error had been part of the Leninist system from its inception."<sup>19</sup> As Lenin put it to Molotov in 1922, after the civil war had concluded, the "greater the number of representatives of the reactionary clergy and the reactionary bourgeoisie which we succeed in shooting ..., the better."<sup>20</sup> Whatever one's estimation of the need for revolutionary terror, holding up the Leninist party as a shining light today, even if its record of killing was less than that of Stalin's, is a hard sell.

The neglect of Leninist brutality is all the more surprising given Palmer's impassioned denunciations of American repression at the same moment. What were early American communists up against in the aftermath of World War I? The "economic and political bastions of power," threatened by the "storm of left-wing agitation[,] ... unleashed the terrors of a repressive onslaught the likes of which had never before been seen." (350) The red scare, he notes, was "as vicious as anything seen up to that point in American history ... leading inexorably to the anti-communist pogrom of 1919–1920." (88) However illegal the Justice Department round-ups, however violent the vigilante attacks, however nasty the public vilification, two things stand out: First, the post-war wave of repression was short-lived and soon *subsided* (as Cannon himself later recognized, even if some of his party opponents did not). And second, the scope of the American red scare paled when set side-by-side with what the Leninist party was meting out to opponents of the Bolshevik regime. In emphasizing this obvious contrast, my point is *not* to exonerate the American government for repression or to downplay its impact on left-wingers, immigrants, trade unionists, and democracy itself. It is, rather, to call into question both historical actors and their historians who shed tears – crocodile or real – for one set of victims of a country whose regime they oppose but utterly ignore the more horrific fate of a vastly larger number of victims of a regime they admire and celebrate.

Ultimately, Palmer's purpose is a vindication of Cannon and his Trotskyist vision with which Palmer so closely identifies. On that front, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left* is unlikely to appeal to any but the already converted. Cannon, the "native son of the United States heartland," (134) comes politically alive in these pages, as do the party's sectarian struggles (which Palmer skillfully dissects) and Cannon's only partially successful effort to "translate the vocabulary of Bolshevism into an American idiom." (134) As for making the case for Trotskyism, Palmer, alas, assumes its validity as a self-evident truth, missing an opportunity to illuminate skeptical or otherwise uninformed academic or activist readers on a political tendency

19. Peter Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End*, 2nd edition (Cambridge 2006), 108, 104.

20. Lenin quoted in Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven 2007), 488.



he feels has been distorted, slighted, or otherwise ignored over the years. Given the passion he brings to his subject and his conviction that Cannon's life and politics have much to teach us, this is unfortunate. It is surprising, too, that the advisors to the *Working Class in American History* series for the University of Illinois Press did not insist upon fewer polemics and more explication.

"Bringing this system [of capitalism] to its knees and ushering in a new, egalitarian order was, for Cannon, 'the highest privilege today,' an exercise of human citizenship," (366) Palmer wistfully concludes. "If the United States revolutionary Left is to be reborn, which is the only hope for turning back the tides of reaction ... Cannon and his age of innocence have to be rediscovered." Here, the faith of the believer shines through history's dark clouds. On an empirical level, one can question whether the party Cannon helped to bring into existence was pursuing an "egalitarian" order or "human citizenship," even in its earliest years. On an imaginative level, one can marvel at the prospect of a rebirth of a revolutionary Left in the United States and the fanciful belief that it is the "only hope for turning back the tides of reaction." Given the human catastrophe that has been inflicted on many millions in the name of the revolutionary Left over the course of the twentieth century (even if Palmer might respond – "not my Left!"), that prospect might be understandably dismaying to many.

These are, of course, not just questions of moral interpretation but also of politics. As such, they are likely immune to evidence and history. We all live by our own illusions. The illusion of revolutionary virtue and the imperative of revolutionary transformation refuse to die; at least among a small number, it is kept alive by radical faith. Palmer might disagree: Without close scrutiny of the past not for "absolute lessons" but rather for "traditions, insights, organizational forms, and strategic directions," (367) he sees "nothing but relentless and purposeless movement, a treadmill on which the revolutionary movement marches endlessly to no avail." (367) Through other eyes, and without the benefit or curse of radical faith, that past – and the future – looks remarkably different.