
CONCERNING AMERICAN REVOLUTIONARY TRADITIONS

BY EARL BROWDER

ONE of the most serious contributions made by the Communist Party to the American people, first of all the working class, has been its leading role in the general rediscovery of American history, with the revitalization of the democratic and revolutionary traditions that followed. During the past three years the Party has proved the correctness of its claim to be the inheritor of the revolutionary traditions of America.

The proof that this rediscovery of American history is a living force among the masses, that it arises from the needs of the national and world situation, is to be seen in the fact that it has already involved the broadest circles of intellectual life and all political tendencies. When a nation faces a great crisis, it first of all looks back over the past to see what it can learn to help solve new problems. Even the most fascist-inclined circles have plunged into the stream: witness the recent attempt to reevaluate Aaron Burr and raise him from the depths of ignominy as the symbol of treason upon to the heights of chief hero of the American revolution—a typical Trotskyite formula applied to American history for openly fascist ends. The liberal and democratic bour-

geois intellectuals are also rereading their history, gaining new perspectives and understanding, and producing much new material; its value is uneven, it is true, but the balance sheet will already show a big advance.

It is becoming necessary, however, to approach much more critically our work in this field, and to demand from ourselves a much higher standard. We must cut loose from stereotyped formula, and from the use of slogans as a substitute for thinking. We need now, above all, detailed and concrete work, with the emphasis laid upon accuracy and fundamental understanding of the continuous historical process that connects the past history of our country with its present and future problems.

The purpose of the present brief article is, from the above approach, to discuss the value and the limitations of the popular slogan: "Communism Is Twentieth Century Americanism."

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It is unquestionable that this slogan has played a positive role and served to dissolve the remnants of the old sectarian and nihilistic approach to American national traditions which we inherited from the pre-war Social-

ist Party, and which the Socialists had taken over uncritically from the mechanical debunking school of historical study founded by Charles Beard. The school of Beard, which stood alone in the first decades of this century as the only trend seriously interested in historical research, necessarily produced about the only work of any value; but its meritorious desire to dig beneath the sonorous rhetoric of conventional history to the underlying realities was gradually transformed into the fixed idea that historical analysis consists in reducing the rich pattern and colors of social development to a uniform gray monotone of human greed, unprincipledness, and lust for power, an undifferentiated mass of depravity from which the intelligent student finally turned in revulsion to an all-embracing skepticism or nihilism. No progress at all was possible until we broke out of this blind alley into which Beard had led progressive study of history in the United States.

It was in the first stages of our offensive against Beardism, and against openly reactionary Red-baiting, that there arose (one might almost say spontaneously) the slogan: "Communism Is Twentieth Century Americanism."

In the early summer of 1935, I wrote for the *New Masses* an article entitled "Who Are the Americans?", as one of a series later incorporated as the first chapter in the book *What Is Communism*. Answering the Red-baiters' challenge: "Why don't you go back where you came from?" and making a head-on assault against the cynical and skeptical attitude toward Americanism, I made the declaration: "We Are

the Americans, and Communism Is the Americanism of the Twentieth Century."

Without realizing it at the time, I had coined a slogan which was taken up and made a symbol of the whole struggle for a new evaluation of American history. At the Ninth Convention of the Communist Party, in 1936, the artists of the studio of the well-known Sequeiros presented a great painting, embodying the slogan. From that day it was famous, and recently reached the dizzy heights of reproduction in the columns of the *Saturday Evening Post*.

The Party has never written this slogan into any of its resolutions, however, although the struggle which it symbolized has been firmly established as a fundamental part of our program, written into the very Constitution of the Party. And the reason why this particular slogan did not find a place in a basic document must now become a matter of critical examination, since the time has come when such a discussion no longer carries any danger of confusing the main battle which has already been carried to its first and basic victory.

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We did not write the slogan into our resolutions and Constitution, because it is scientifically inexact. The basic thought, that the Communists are the inheritors of American revolutionary traditions, and that Communism will, in the twentieth century, realize in a more perfect form these traditions—this is not fully and accurately expressed in the formulation I first gave it in the heat of polemics, nor in its variation by our

excellent artists. And like all inexactness or inaccuracy, it must be subjected to criticism if we are to guard against all possible misunderstandings and even harmful theoretical conclusions.

What are the possible wrong theories that might conceivably be drawn, by uncritical and unschooled theorists—or by not-so-innocent alien influences?

Taking literally and uncritically the formulation—"Communism Is Twentieth Century Americanism"—and applying the rules of formal logic, the theory could be drawn from it that Communism is a peculiar product of American development, which would reach the rest of the world by exportation. Such a narrow nationalist trend of thought may conceivably spring from the uncritical repetition of our slogan. The danger must therefore be pointed out and guarded against.

In this question is involved the basic problem of the relation between communism (or socialism), which is international and worldwide, and nationality, which is specific and concrete to one part of the world. Here we should recall Stalin's famous definition of the new society as it arises concretely—"national in form, socialist in content." The new society is the expression of principles universally valid, but its form is determined by the character of the nation in which it arises, by all the forces that have contributed to produce that nation in its specific and concrete peculiarities—in short, by its history and traditions.

Thus, the critical re-examination of our slogan leads us to the study of the basic principles of Marxism-Leninism,

of dialectical and historical materialism. It is the concrete application of these principles which led us to the rediscovery of the American revolutionary traditions, and to our general reevaluation of American history. Our study of American history is, in turn, vitalizing and deepening our grasp of the principles of Marxism-Leninism. Where in the past we depended almost entirely upon the theoretical works which concretized these principles in the history of European countries, we are now facing the creative task of tracing out the working of these principles in our own national history.

It was Lenin himself who wrote the words which led us finally to face the problem. In his famous *Letter to American Workers*, Lenin reminded us of the rich revolutionary traditions of our country, and advised us to claim the heritage of 1776 and 1861. The recent publication of the correspondence and writings of Marx and Engels on the American Civil War furnished invaluable material. Stalin's history-making works on the national question furnished us with the modern instruments of thought, hammered out in the course of actually changing world history, which armed us for the task. Dimitroff gave, on many occasions, a deep stimulus and help in boldly marching forward to attack the problem.

We have entered fully into the struggle for the mastery of our country's history; we have established this as a task that involves the masses, the whole life of the nation. We have drawn wide circles into the process. The preliminary lines are drawn and the question has been correctly posed

in its essential features. Now we must pass over in the most serious manner to working out concretely the task in a deep, thorough, and critical fashion.

This is a creative task of the greatest consequence and magnitude. It requires sustained and painstaking thought, much hard work. It requires discussion and criticism. The repetition of slogans, without the constant deepening of understanding, may become an obstacle instead of a help.

We have noticed this especially with regard to the slogan, "Communism Is Twentieth Century Americanism," because the slogan itself is scientifically inexact. But the warning holds good for even the most precise and scientifically-accurate slogans. Formula and battlecries are necessary, but their repetition does not and cannot replace the basic function of thought and understanding.

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There is another danger in the particular slogan under discussion which may be pointed out. We are Americans, American Communists, but do we claim that we are the *only Americans*, that we have staked out a monopoly claim on Americanism? Of course not, we would only be ridiculous with such a claim. The concept of "Good Americans," in the sense of the national democratic and revolutionary traditions, embraces the whole progressive majority of the people, and, further, extends to a degree among the conservative masses insofar as they show capacities of resistance to the modern forces of reaction. We Communists, taking our place as an integral sector of the progressive and democratic camp, claim the common

title of "Good Americans," and further add to it the claim that our particular principles and program embody the *future* development of our country. Thus our claim is, first, one of unity with the masses of the people, and with their historical development, and, secondly, the claim to be in the vanguard—a claim which we must continuously prove by our work.

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There is another angle to the question of nationality and its relation to internationalism, which more and more comes to the front. That is the question: what are "national interests," and do Communists and progressives properly identify themselves with support of such national interests. Some confusion arises in certain circles, due to the fact that imperialist policies are advanced for mass support under the claim that they represent "national interests." Therefore, some people draw the conclusion that support of national interests means support of imperialism, so long as monopoly capital controls the economy of the country.

This identification of the interests of monopoly capital with the interests of the nation is, of course, entirely false. It is false, whether it is made by the spokesmen of monopoly capital to mislead the people, or whether it is made by ostensible anti-imperialists supposedly for the purpose of fighting imperialism. In either case the false identification of imperialism with national interests comes to the same end—to confuse the people, the masses, and assist monopoly capital in maintaining its dominion over their minds.

The Manifesto of the Communist

International on the occasion of the twenty-first anniversary of the October Revolution contains the following most significant words on this problem:

"The nation is not the gang of fascists, reactionary financiers and industrial magnates who rob and betray the people.

"The nation is the many millions of workers, farmers and working people generally—the people who are devoted to their country, who cherish their liberty and defend their independence. Just as in Spain and China where the people are fighting with arms in hand, and in Austria and Czechoslovakia—so also in all countries menaced with fascist invasion from outside, only the working class can rally, rouse and lead the people to a victorious struggle for national liberation. The working class is the backbone of the nation, the bulwark of its liberty, dignity and independence."

We are currently being presented with the most dramatic exposition of the sharp cleavage between imperialist and national interests, on the part of Great Britain and France. The governments of both countries are pursuing policies most obviously in contradiction to the national interest, policies which even threaten the annihilation or at least the deep degradation of the nations involved; but these anti-national policies are imposed upon the people by monopoly capital, by the imperialistic ruling class, the "best families," the economic royalists—those from whose mouths the phrase "national interests" rolled most unctuously in the past. We see the beginnings of the same phenomenon in the United States, where spokesmen of the most hard-boiled imperialist interests have become the champions of surrender of America's traditional policies of the "Open

Door" in the Far East and the "Monroe Doctrine" in the Americas.

Both the Monroe Doctrine and the Open Door originated in the resistance of American democracy to the monopolistic and aggressive policies of the older imperialist powers; during the twentieth century they were taken over and transformed into instruments of a matured American imperialism; in the present world situation we witness their transformation again, a process doing on under our eyes, into instruments of democratic defense against the aggressions of world fascism. In this process we have a classical example of the dialectical transformation of thesis into antithesis, and of the unity of opposites. Monopoly capital and the democratic forces are on opposite sides, in struggle against one another, throughout the process, but their position in relation to specific issues and policies change; these policies may be likened to fortifications, which at one time are occupied and defended by one army, at another time by the enemy.

So also the relation between national interest and capitalism is not a fixed one, given for all time and unchanging. On the broadest historical stage, capitalism first appears as the agency of all the progressive forces of society, and only gradually becomes transformed into its opposite, monopoly capital or imperialism, which threatens the destruction of society and of national interests. In the process of this transformation, as progressive capitalism grew over into the present decaying imperialism (which culminates in fascism), there is for a period an overlapping of national and capitalist interests simultaneously with

the sharpening of the contradictions between them—an example of the dialectical formula of the unity and struggle of opposites. And even in the present stage of decadent capitalism, when the interests of the broadest masses of the population (national interests) urgently demand the drastic curbing of the power of monopoly capital as the precondition for continued existence—even now, the broadest popular or national interest requires, not simply the “destruction of capitalism” but the organization of the democratic majority as the precondition for future progress to a higher stage. And a capitalist democracy threatened by fascist aggression, to the degree that it can be organized to resist fascism is to that degree representing the true national interest (including even capitalist interests which can express themselves independently of monopoly capital), which is the interest of the population of that country as a whole.

Casting our eyes over the rich panorama of American history we can reach a much deeper understanding of all its stages, when we learn to trace the ebb and flow of class forces, and their combination into the two opposing camps of the reactionary and the democratic or progressive; then the meaning of the slogans and battle-cries under which the struggle is conducted becomes more clear, and we begin to understand that which baffles the idealistic historians of all schools, the shift of personalities, parties, and classes, from the most energetic support to its opposite of the most stubborn opposition to concrete issues, policies and social institutions.

Along this path we not only gain a

deeper understanding of our past. We begin to acquire more and more the ability to look into our own future. And most important of all, we begin to obtain a grasp of the links which connect past history with future history; we find those answers to the problems of the day, which combine the most realistic and concrete approach to immediate questions, the solution of which leads by the quickest and least difficult path to the future, to the solution of the largest social questions, to the establishment of socialism and eventual communism.

This brief discussion, which has thus led into a consideration of some of the deepest problems of history and philosophy, opened with a critical examination of the values and limitations of a particular slogan: “Communism Is Twentieth Century Americanism.” It is not the purpose of these critical remarks to end with the abrupt dismissal of the slogan. On the contrary, our purpose is only to put it into its proper place and perspective. We have made even its deficiencies serve a useful purpose in opening a discussion which is really one of the preliminary steps to take up one of the great tasks of the coming year of 1939. Next year is the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of the United States. We have decided, at our last meeting of the National Committee and the Tenth Convention, to make this anniversary the occasion for a great campaign for study of the history of our movement and Party. Soon we hope to have available for this purpose the English translation of the new *Short Course in the History of the Communist Party of the*

Soviet Union, which is destined to become an indispensable textbook in the mastery of Bolshevism, and more, one of the classics of Marxism-Leninism.

While the whole world enters into the period of its deepest crisis, the Communist Parties, consolidating their positions as parties of the working class, cementing their ties with the

broadest masses and their most immediate problems, are taking up the task of arming themselves with the complete arsenal provided in the teachings of the greatest leaders of human thought and action, Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. That task is the mastery of history, past, present, and future.

“America’s most bitter heritage is its Negro problem. Perhaps no other question has aroused such hatreds, such slanders, such suffering in our country. For more than three centuries, ever since 1619, when the first slave ship touched our shores, the presence of this darker race in America has constituted an unsolved problem, reflected, on the one hand, in the bestial cruelty of lynching and, on the other, in the noble sacrifice of a John Brown. One of the major wars in American history was lit by the fire of this conflict; and the failure of the Civil War to free the Negro people economically and socially has brought the problem down to our own day in very nearly as aggravating a form as it presented in 1861.”

James W. Ford, *The Negro and the Democratic Front*, p. 19.
