

REVIEW

Commies: A Journey Through the Old Left, the New Left and the Leftover Left, by Ronald Radosh. San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2001, 216 pp., \$24.95 hardbound.

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There used to be a large number of Americans in the 1960s and 70s, among them prominent intellectuals and public figures, who were fully convinced that American society was the foulest of all and that communist regimes like those in Cuba, China, Nicaragua, and Vietnam were meritorious and deserving of fervent support. Many among them believed that conditions were ripe for a sweeping revolution in the United States and that American society was in an advanced state of moral, social, economic, and political decline. The same people, more often than not, were active in the radical protest movements of the 1960s and later in the special interest groups (feminist, racial, ethnic, alternative-sexual) of the 70s, 80s, and 90s.

With the passage of time these radical views were toned down and sometimes abandoned, but few of the former activists, critics of American society, and admirers of the revolutionary regimes in the Third World have publicly repudiated their beliefs and attitudes. To the contrary, the 1960s continues to inspire nostalgia and recollections of youthful idealism, selflessness, and public virtue inextricably intertwined with the pleasures and fervor of youth cherished by the middle-aged and older. Very few among the recent generation of true believers have been willing to engage in the kind of public soul searching and

unhesitating disavowal of political misjudgments an earlier generation of pro-Soviet intellectuals and fellow travelers were capable of.

The darker sides of the 1960s remain to be fully chronicled and explored. Ronald Radosh is one of the handful¹ who had undertaken a searching self-examination in his political memoir here reviewed. His account of the evolution and transformation of his political beliefs and commitments—against the background of the political struggles in which he participated—deserve the attention of all those, and especially readers of this journal, who are still trying to understand what went wrong in the 1960s. (The only reservation I have about this volume is its title: “Commies,” with its ironic or sarcastic undertone, is inappropriate and trivializing for the serious matters under discussion.)

The book also helps to understand why so many of the beliefs and attitudes of the period survived and found their way into major cultural and political institutions of the country and the mind-set of educated Americans. Arguably, many of the major afflictions of present-day American life and culture can be traced to the 1960s, including political correctness, racial preferences, radical feminism, identity politics, the cult of victimhood, postmodernism, critical legal theory, grade inflation, the dumbing down of the curriculum, and a primitive hostility to science.

Radosh’s account illuminates not only his own unusual political journey but also the stubborn persistence of political commitments and attitudes (of his former comrades-in-arms) that found their way into the phenomena

noted above. Of further interest is the observation that the political beliefs and convictions dealt with on these pages have survived in the face of an abundance of disconfirming evidence. Radosh, the author of the study demolishing the myth of the innocence of the Rosenbergs, was in a unique position to learn firsthand the fury of true believers when their articles of faith were called into question.

The attitudes examined and documented in this book remind the reader of the deep-seated human need to believe in matters that cannot be empirically confirmed—that fly in the face of well-established social or psychological realities and findings. The volume affirms and sheds new light on the emotional determination of political attitudes and their adversarial roots: the simple-minded “which side are you on?” mattered far more for most of the protagonists described than the substance of nuanced political arguments and events, more than truth or falsehood, reality and illusions. This mind-set was strikingly revealed in the refusal of people who agreed with him in private to support him in public, especially in regard to the Rosenberg affair. Not only was Radosh vilified by the radicals, but “democratic socialist intellectuals” too refused support when he asked for their comments (blurb) on the jacket of the book. Michael Harrington, whose organization Radosh belonged at the time, said: “I always knew they were guilty . . . but we are trying to get former Communists . . . into our organization and I can’t do anything to alienate them.” [160] Irving Howe turned him down, saying, “I can’t get involved in that.” [160]

Radosh traces the evolution of his political attitudes from early childhood. He was a bona fide “red diaper baby.” His father was a fellow traveler and his mother ran in Jewish anarchist circles in New York. Many readers will be surprised to learn how highly structured and well defined a political subculture the old Communist left created. Besides the American Communist party and its numerous front organizations, there were Party-controlled schools, summer camps, unions, and cultural-recreational organizations that created and sustained this subculture. Radosh went to one of them, Camp Woodland, as a child and later worked there as camp counselor. Among his fellow campers were the two sons of the Rosenbergs. Later on he was an activist in the “Labor Youth League,” a major front organization. He also attended what was then known as “the little Red Schoolhouse,” a high school in Greenwich Village that had on its faculty a high concentration of teachers who were either Communist party members or committed fellow travelers. A list of the graduates of the school “reads like a Who’s Who of the Children of the Old Old Left.” [25] They included Victor Navasky (editor and publisher of *The Nation*), Angela Davis, Kathy Boudin, the Rosenberg sons, and other eminent figures of what became the New Left in the 1960s and 70s. Radosh also took a course given by Herbert Aptheker (“dean of the party historians”) at the “Communist Party’s educational institution named—of course—the Jefferson School of Social Science.” [44-45] In the course of his involvement with the radical move-

ments and causes, he knew many prominent activists and leftist political figures of the period including Paul Berman, Eric Foner, Abbie Hoffman, Tom Hayden, Bianca Jagger, Saul Landau, Herbert Marcuse, Bertell Ollman, and I.F. Stone.

These recollections also help to recognize the often overlooked connections and continuities between the old and new left. While much of the New Left did move away from the American Communist movement, there remained an unmistakable political affinity between the generations (for example, the daughter of Herbert Aptheker, the prominent ideologue of the American Communist Party, Bettina Aptheker, became a prominent West Coast radical-activist in the 1960s although unaffiliated with the Party). Even those among the 60s radicals who did not follow in their parents' footsteps as faithful party members retained a sentimental appreciation of the Party and what it stood for (as, for example, Eric Foner, the historian).

The political beliefs and attitudes associated with and left over from the 1960s raise two major questions. First, why have there been so few people like Radosh (or Peter Collier, David Horowitz, Eugene Genovese, and Julius Lester) who succeeded in divesting themselves of these beliefs and are willing to admit this in public? Why so few have undertaken to reexamine the evolution of their political identity and the roots of their disillusionment, assuming that far more than a handful became disillusioned? It is far less mysterious why so many became radicalized during the 1960s than why

so few made a public break with these attitudes in the decades that followed.

This is a question Radosh does not address. To be sure it cannot be separated from the more general riddle of how political attitudes are formed, retained, or changed and why people of similar social, ethnic, or religious backgrounds, educational attainments, political-historical experiences, and general intelligence end up with diametrically opposed political views and attitudes.

Besides acknowledging that human behavior is generally hard to explain and predict, there is a possible sociological explanation of the tacit or vocal persistence of the 60s worldview and the unwillingness to renounce it publicly. Unlike in the earlier periods when pro-Soviet and pro-Communist sympathies were often emphatically abandoned (as chronicled in the famous volume *The God That Failed*), the beliefs of the 1960s were far more widespread and there was a critical mass supporting them, especially on and around the campuses; it was easier to persist in wrongheaded political beliefs when they were widely shared by like-minded people (often of the same generation) living in close proximity to one another. There was no similarly widespread communal-group support for the pro-Communist commitments of the 1930s or early 40s; the Party loyalists were a much smaller and more isolated group. Moreover, these earlier beliefs were easier to discredit because of their close association with a hostile foreign power, the Soviet Union. While many among the radicals of the 60s idealized Mao's China

and Castro's Cuba, those systems were not as profoundly discredited as the Soviet Union became after Stalin's death.

Preserving the 60s worldview was also easier because the unconditional and increasingly reflexive rejection of American society it entailed was linked to various idealistic beliefs and movements: the anti-war, civil rights, and women's movements, and later environmentalism.

The second major question concerns the paths to political disenchantment. Why did Radosh become disillusioned (when most of those around him did not, or not to the same degree), and how far can his case be generalized? Broadly speaking, political disillusionment originates in perceiving, and being troubled by a discrepancy between ideals and realities, theory and practice, expectations and their fulfillment. The problem with this explanation is that many individuals become aware of such discrepancies but are capable of dismissing their importance by employing various defenses. They succeed in convincing themselves that the discrepancies do not undermine or taint the great goals pursued, (Koestler called this the "doctrine of unshaken foundations"), that the ideals remain untarnished by the methods used for their attainment, that the "enemy" is so vile or vicious that even a flawed movement, cause, or ideology is preferable and deserves support.

Perhaps it all boils down to the mysteries of individual psychology: some people are more sensitive than others to such discrepancies, whereas for others the preservation of a political commitment at all (moral) costs is central

to their sense of identity. People also differ in their capacity to withstand the social pressures of their setting or community to retain commitment and conformity. There is also the matter of experience: some succeed in sheltering themselves from disillusioning experiences more ably than others. But most important is the apparently widespread determination to preserve important, long-held, identity-giving beliefs and worldviews. Conversion experiences are rare and usually occur under relatively unusual and depriving conditions and pressures, as in the case of inmates serving long prison sentences in this country who come to embrace fundamentalist religious beliefs (Christian or Muslim).

Several events and experiences led to the erosion of the political beliefs of Radosh. Most important to note, that—as in other cases—the process was halting, lengthy, and gradual, extending over years. In my extensive reading of this literature, I have encountered very few instances when a particular experience or event had a major, sudden, traumatic impact on the beliefs of an individual. (André Gide comes to mind, whose trip to the USSR had such a shattering impact.)

The tentative beginnings of Radosh's doubts were apparently stimulated by his perception of extreme, shrill, and less than fully rational attitudes and behavior among many radicals he knew: "We [including his wife] seemed to find shrill and almost pathologically crazy behavior wherever we looked on the left." [118] Here it may be recalled that the political currents of the 60s soon merged into quite apolitical and self-indulgent thrill-seeking attitudes and

activities involving drugs, promiscuous sex, and music.

It was his trip to Cuba in 1973 that was the first important stage in the process of disillusionment. Like most of those associated with the New Left, Radosh too revered Castro and believed that Cuba represented an authentic socialist revolutionary movement embodying all the attractions the Soviet system lost. But as happened to André Gide—but to hardly anyone else on similar conducted tours—Radosh found unexpected blemishes and flaws in Cuba. Like Gide, he too noted with dismay the difference between the way he and his fellow political tourists were fed and accommodated and the more typical diet and accommodations of Cuban citizens. He was horrified by working conditions and neglect of the safety of workers in a refrigerator and cigar factory where he and his group were taken. He was not convinced by the manager's response: "If it [working conditions] were dangerous, Fidel would have informed us. Masks would cut down production, and we are certain that what we are doing is safe." [125] Radosh was disturbed by learning about the production quotas determined by the authorities without any input by the workers. He was shocked to learn that homosexuals were confined in a mental hospital and lobotomization was widely practiced. He was not reassured by the explanation of the group leader: "We have to understand that there are differences between capitalist lobotomies and socialist lobotomies." [27]

But the group leader put her finger on something important concerning the attitude of the true believers on con-

ducted tours (and in general): they were engaged in an ongoing reinterpretation of social and empirical realities whereby the same phenomena were evaluated differently depending on their context—a process also observed by other former true believers or sympathizers such as Arthur Koestler, Wolfgang Leonhard, and Malcolm Muggeridge.² Gertrude Himmelfarb wrote of this mentality: "The marvel was not that there should be parks, hospitals, factories [in the Soviet Union]; after all these could be found in England as well. The marvel was that they should all . . . be inspired by a collective ideal, a single moral purpose."³

The fellow tourists of Radosh in Cuba found ways to explain away whatever might have been problematic or disturbing: the lack of affirmative action to correct past racism, (no need for it in a socially just society); the dilapidated buildings of Havana (they had charm); and what in the United States would have been sternly condemned as the sexist display of female bodies, when it occurred in a Havana night club ("What's wrong with a woman showing her body and moving it on stage?"—a feminist in his group said).⁴

Radosh was also unhappy with Castro's support of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, and that too isolated him from his fellow tourists who could not bring themselves to condemn it since Castro approved of it. The trip started him "to rethink . . . [his] most fervently held assumptions. It was an accumulation of small things that began to push doubts into the forefront of my thinking." [128] Subsequently he wrote an article of his experiences and impressions in Cuba that prompted a flood of

“bitterly hostile” letters to the magazine where it was published.

Doubtless these hostile responses to the article and other expressions of his increasingly unorthodox attitudes, calling into question articles of faith within the radical-left subculture, furthered the process of distancing himself from his earlier beliefs and the people upholding them.

Radosh began a search for more moderate political positions “working for incremental change” [139] and joined various more moderate organizations, but was on the way toward a complete break with his earlier beliefs and goals. It was his involvement with the Rosenberg case also in the early 1970s “that began my slow motion exit from the left.” [147] He was, to begin with, as much a believer in their total innocence as the rest of the old and new left subculture; as a child he attended their funeral with his parents. He joined the movement to rehabilitate the Rosenbergs (in particular, the National Committee to Re-Open the Rosenberg Case) in the same frame of mind as the other true believers in their innocence and in the good of their cause (it was a peculiarity of the Rosenberg supporters that they at once indignantly rejected the charges of spying while tacitly taking the position that spying on behalf of the great beacon of mankind, the Soviet Union, and helping it to equalize its position toward the United States by acquiring the atomic bomb, was a good cause). While he “hoped and expected that the files would provide enough hard data to prove a frame-up” and “a major miscarriage of justice” [152], the opposite happened: it be-

came clear to him that they were in fact guilty as charged of spying. He revealed these findings first in an article in *The New Republic* and later in a book. It was the end of his acceptance by his former political community, even by friends who “made it clear that they were shocked by what I had done.” One of them suggested that he should have written “a book that would show Julius Rosenberg to have been a spy, while at the same time explaining ‘sympathetically’ that the Rosenbergs saw their espionage as ‘entirely in the best interests of the American people’” [156]. Another good friend told him: “‘Even if it was true you should not say this, because you’re helping the other side.’ And others would say quite bluntly: ‘The facts are irrelevant. We need the Rosenbergs as heroes.’” [157]

The Rosenberg case and the Left’s response to his findings led him to “the ultimate heresy: perhaps the Left was wrong not just about the Rosenberg case, but about most everything else.” [171]

With the Rosenberg book, Radosh became “the new enemy,” and from then on it was not only his own attitudes that determined his affiliations, commitments, and beliefs, but rejection by other people as well. The most deeply felt reproach against him had little to do with the facts of the matter (the guilt or innocence of the Rosenbergs) but with an obsessive preoccupation with providing ammunition to the enemy.

There was still Nicaragua—the final, confirming experience of his disaffection. But initially, as with Cuba, he hoped “that what was taking place in Nicaragua was something different” [175]. Several visits during the 1980s

disabused him of this hope. For example, it gave pause that during the Somoza period there were no refugees pouring out of Nicaragua whereas under the Sandinistas hundreds of thousands fled! [182] Again, his critiques of the Sandinistas were dismissed by the same argument and emotional disposition as his Rosenberg book; political expediency was everything: "Your timing is wrong. The Sandinistas are under attack, and we have to support them." [179] As Radosh paraphrased the prevailing attitude: "Whatever the sins of the Sandinistas, since the U.S. is opposing them, they had to be supported." [184] An editor of the "democratic socialist" journal, *Dissent* (Debbie Meier) put it this way (at a meeting called to discuss his views of Nicaragua at a time when he was still on the editorial board of the journal): "You may be right about what you say about the Sandinistas, but while they are under attack by the American empire, we have a responsibility to extend our solidarity." [185] Irving Howe informed him that he would not be allowed to write in *Dissent* about Nicaragua. [185]

Radosh's book will be an important part of the historical record of the 1960s and a lasting contribution to understanding the incompatibility of truth seeking and realizable social ideals with political causes and movements which thrive on resentment and on the mistaken notion that complete self realiza-

tion can be achieved by political means and actions.

Notes

1. See also *Political Passages*, ed. John Bunzel (New York: Free Press 1988).
2. Malcolm Muggeridge wrote of these attitudes among favorably disposed visitors to the Soviet Union: "They were earnest advocates of the humane killing of cattle who looked up at the massive headquarters of the OGPU [political police] with tears of gratitude in their eyes, earnest advocates of proportional representation who eagerly assented when the necessity of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat was explained to them, earnest clergymen who walked reverently through anti-God museums and reverently turned the pages of atheistic literature, earnest pacifists who watched delightedly as tanks rattled across Red Square . . . earnest town-planning specialists who stood outside overcrowded ramshackle tenements and muttered: 'If only we had something like this in England!'" *The Sun Never Sets* (New York: Random House, 1940), 79.
3. "The Intellectual in Politics: The Case of the Webbs," *Journal of Contemporary History*, No.3, 1971, 11.
4. This was quoted not from the book here reviewed, but from the piece Radosh originally wrote about his trip and included in the volume he edited, titled *The New Cuba: Paradoxes and Potentials*, (New York: Morrow, 1976), 64, 65.

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