

# The Movement

A HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN  
NEW LEFT 1959-1972

Irwin Unger



# THE MOVEMENT:

*A History of the  
American New Left  
1959-1972*

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*with the assistance of*  
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To Mary and Sam  
*with affection and gratitude*

THE MOVEMENT: A History of the American New Left, 1959-1972

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# Introduction

THE PHENOMENON we called the New Left is over. For something over a decade it flourished and made the Western world livelier and more exciting. Now that it has passed, Western Europe and America will be less interesting though quieter places.

Obviously the political left has not ceased to exist entirely. There will always be a left—and a right—so long as we continue to live by the political terms of the modern world. These terms were established by the French Revolution, that complex upheaval that also marked the emergence of the modern West as we know it. Until the influence of that great Age of Revolution has dissipated, we shall use “radical” and “radicalism,” “left” and “right” as key terms to measure and define the political environments of modern nations and political systems.

Yet, as a distinct phase of the radical assault on Western Establishments, the New Left has dwindled away and in the United States, at least, has ended. In what way is this true? Until Watergate and galloping inflation blanketed the public consciousness, ordinary Americans were still concerned about radicals and their deeds and misdeeds. The more important radical publications—*Ramparts*, *Liberation*, *The Realist*, *The Guardian*, even *New Left Notes*<sup>1</sup>—continue to be issued in the 1970s. Many of the under-

<sup>1</sup> Though not the original *New Left Notes*. See Chapter 6.

ground papers published in large cities and university towns survive. In 1972 we had the McGovern presidential campaign. If not strictly New Left, it represented about as much as the New Left could realistically expect of standard electoral politics. Certainly to most of us who watched the Democratic Convention at Miami on our television sets, the people who supported George McGovern appeared to epitomize many of the radical political and cultural currents that had marked the nation since the early 1960s. The 1972 convention in Miami seemed almost to be a replay of 1968, only this time the people on the street were in the convention hall wearing delegates' badges.

Nor is the death of the New Left seemingly borne out by a superficial survey of the college campuses. Sproul Plaza, at Berkeley, where much of it began, seems to be as lively as ever. The tables with signs proclaiming "Stop the War!" "End Racism!" "Big Rally Tonight!" "Support SDS Against the Administration" are still in front of the student union. On Telegraph Avenue, the street people still sell their leatherwork and their pottery, and still collect money for the Free Clinic from the squares and the students. And if Berkeley, the radical "mother church," is still as lively as ever, so too, it would seem, are the daughter establishments. I have not been to Boston University, or the University of Pennsylvania, or SUNY at Buffalo, or San Francisco State for a while, but the recent copies of *New Left Notes* and *Progressive Labor's Challenge* that I have seen assure me that the student left is also alive and well in these places.

And yet these appearances are deceiving. Something has ended, and most people who were a part of it will agree that it has. The New Left that emerged during the period from 1959 to 1962 was a well-defined phenomenon. Socially it was distinguished by its middle-class personnel, most of its members being university students or young professionals. The youthfulness of the New Left set it apart from the radical movements of America's past. Europe, perhaps, had had its radical youth movements during the nineteenth century, but the United States had not. Previous American radical movements had been led by adults with youth affiliates or auxiliaries trailing behind. Now, for the first time, young American men and women led an autonomous movement for social change without the supervision and control of middle-aged veterans.

The New Left was also distinguished from immediately preced-

ing radical movements in this country, and in the West generally, by its rejection of the dogmatic "scientific socialism" of the Second and Third Internationals. As a distinct phenomenon, the New Left found the Marxist-Leninist emphasis on the working class, a disciplined "vanguard" party, and society's economic relations dated and irrelevant. As we shall see, the humanistic socialism of the early Marx, as embellished by such men as Herbert Marcuse, Paul Goodman, C. Wright Mills, Serge Mallet, and André Gorz, along with the teachings and practices of the philosophical anarchists, seemed to the New Left far better suited to the circumstances of modern, "post-industrial" America and far more relevant to the sort of society that had created disenchanted youth as a class. The New Left ended sometime between 1969 and 1972 with the conquest of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) by hard-line, orthodox Leninism. Perhaps a generation from now we will say that only phase one of the New Left ended in these years, but it seems clear to me that with this philosophical overthrow something distinctive came to an end and can now be treated as a completed whole.

I must make one important point clear at the outset. I define the New Left as a movement of *white* middle-class youth. The civil rights movement and black liberation helped shape the New Left and were important in their own right, of course, but I maintain that they did not supply its central thrust. Rather, I think, racial injustice in America, though especially acute, was—along with philistinism, cultural conformity, sexual puritanism, social hypocrisy, economic inequality, and international opportunism—one of those social deficiencies that always exist in varying degrees and can always be used to indict existing society. Black activists and militants, particularly the younger members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Black Panthers, goaded the consciences of young white radicals. Often they helped push the New Left in one direction or another. At times, too, blacks, the Black Panthers in particular, even participated in New Left deliberations and decisions. By and large, however, blacks were fighting for their own goals and in their own way, and they often regarded the radical students with amused contempt. I think the fact that the New Left was a phenomenon common to all the affluent industrial countries and yet in none of them, except the United States, was there a serious racial problem is conclusive evidence of this point.

Like all scholars, I have received cheerful and generous help from many people. My greatest debt is to my wife and collaborator, Debi. It is not necessary or appropriate to talk about the personal side of my gratitude to her, but I would like to express my deepest thanks for her valuable professional help as researcher, editor, amanuensis, and aide-de-camp. Her name on the title page is far more than a courtesy.

I should next like to thank my own university, New York University, which granted me a sabbatical leave, part of which I used for completing this work, and the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation for the grant which helped to support me and my family during its gestation period. I also owe a very large debt to my editor, Charles Woodford, whose suggestion initiated this book and whose encouraging words helped to sustain it.

Some of the work, as the pages that follow will make clear, I wrote at Berkeley, and I am indebted to the University of California at Berkeley for its help. The people at the university library, especially the periodical room, the newspaper reading room, and the Bancroft Library, were extremely kind in giving me access to material, some of which was unique. I would especially like to thank Bill Gottlieb and Frances Finn of the newspaper room for their cheerful help. Finally I wish to thank Professor Delmer Brown, Chairman of the Berkeley History Department, who accorded me research associate status at the university, Professor Richard Abrams who sponsored me with the department, and Professor Paul Goodman of the University of California at Davis whose enthusiastic hospitality made my stay in the Bay Area comfortable.

Doris Craven typed the manuscript with intelligence and dispatch. Genia Graves of Dodd, Mead gave the manuscript careful and perceptive editorial attention.

IRWIN UNGER

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## CHAPTER

# 1

## *Origins*

1945-1960

THE DECADE following V-J Day was a difficult period for the American left. Yet at the time of Japan's surrender, few people could have foreseen what trying times lay ahead for radicalism in the United States. In 1945 the world as a whole seemed bright for the left. The Western democracies had just won a great war against fascism in alliance with socialist Russia. The end of the war seemed certain to unleash great pent-up forces of social discontent, and the years to come promised a socialist rebirth. The startling victory of the British Labour party in the general elections of June, 1945, and the advent of socialist governments in many of the former Nazi-occupied European countries appeared to signal the start of a major world shift leftward.

The chief beneficiary of this trend in the United States was the Communist party of America, the most important group within the American left in 1945. The old Socialist party survived, as did the Trotskyite Socialist Workers, and a few other tiny fragments of the socialist past, but the great party of Eugene V. Debs was a pitiful remnant of what it had formerly been. As the nation turned its attention to peacetime pursuits, the Communist party came close to being *the* American left.

Yet all was not well with American communism. The Communist party worked under immense handicaps. Forged in 1919

from the left wing of the Socialist party, it never became acclimated to America. Generally it operated as an extension of Soviet foreign policy rather than as an indigenous radical movement attentive to the domestic needs and problems of the United States. With every change in Soviet fortunes or Russian national interests, the American Communist party tail was whipped about frantically. To some extent, Moscow's control depended on direct lines of command between officials of the Comintern, with headquarters in the Soviet capital, and American party officials. Orders passed between Moscow and the Communist party headquarters at Union Square in New York; so did what professional anti-Communists came to call Soviet gold. Undoubtedly more important in linking Union Square with the Kremlin, however, was the profound conviction of American Communists that the Soviet Union, "the Socialist Fatherland," was the vanguard of the world revolution and the last, best hope of oppressed mankind.

But whether gold or faith ruled the American Communist party, its members were heavily burdened by the task of making Party positions fit the needs of two nations separated by enormous differences in interests, traditions, experience, and social structure. To the Party's true believers the difficulty was not insurmountable. Whenever Russian and American interests diverged, they believed the Russians were right. To most Americans, however, it was hard to understand how the United States could always be wrong. During World War II, when American and Russian policies and interests overlapped, there was little apparent conflict between Communist party membership and patriotism. Following 1945, however, only those Americans who were profoundly alienated from their own country could comfortably accept the Party's political leadership and guidance.

And there was still another burden: the need to square the Party's Marxist-Leninist ideology with the realities of American life and American history. By the 1920s world communism adhered to a firm set of principles that had taken on the qualities of a secular religion. The Communist canon had grown over the years and like any evolving world view contained inconsistencies and anomalies. Yet if the house that Marx and Lenin built had some curious passageways and awkward-looking towers, the plan of the main structure was clear.

At the heart of Communist dogma was a theory of history

called dialectical materialism. According to Marx and his followers, human history moved by stages that could be identified with specific systems of production. The ancient world was based on slave labor, and slavery defined the essential nature of the Greco-Roman world. Ancient slavery eventually gave way to feudalism, a system in which the relationship between feudal lord and unfree serf, or peasant, was the predominant social institution. Feudalism in turn was superseded by capitalism. In feudalism the nobility and the peasants were tied together by immemorial customs and traditions of mutual obligations and duties. In capitalism the capitalist and his worker were linked only by money. The working man (proletarian) under capitalism, unlike the feudal peasant, was legally a free man who could leave his work and move anywhere he wished. But he was also a man stripped of the protection of customary law and deprived of traditional rights. In capitalist society, then, the working class was formally free, but actually enslaved because the means of production were entirely in the hands of the new ruling group, the capitalists or bourgeoisie, while the working man had only his physical strength to offer in the marketplace.

Though Marx and the Marxists were the foremost critics of capitalism, they were also, in some ways, its staunchest defenders. In its early phases, they held, capitalism was a progressive historical force. Feudalism was tied to primitive technology and distribution methods and was incapable of creating the abundance necessary for the good life for mankind. The feudal nobility were not interested in increasing the output of their lands, and the masses within feudal society were doomed by its economic backwardness to perpetual poverty, want, and misery.

The capitalist class, arising as a middle element between the nobility and the peasants, was, on the other hand, driven by the desire for ever greater efficiency, output, and profits. In its determined and aggressive quest for gain, it created new production techniques that culminated in the industrial revolution and furnished the means to attain material abundance. It also created new institutions and social relationships compatible with its needs as a class. It was the new bourgeoisie therefore that had destroyed the old feudal system, helped establish the modern nation-state, and finally overturned the Old Régime in Western Europe and replaced it with liberal democracy.

All of these changes were progressive and necessary, the Marxists held, but they did not produce utopia. Capitalism was, in some ways, even more brutal and exploitative than feudalism. The working class suffered immensely from the crushing burdens of the new industrial system. Long hours, low wages, child labor, frequent unemployment, industrial disease and accidents, and early death were concomitants of the new factory system. Though capitalism created abundance, it reserved the benefits of this new wealth for the capitalists alone. Equally deplorable was the growing alienation of men from their work as the industrial process became more and more complex and the laborer lost contact with the meaning and importance of his efforts. Under capitalism men were dissociated from their work. They did not own their own tools, and they had little to do with the final product of their labors. Generally they were small cogs in the great productive machines and received little or no satisfaction from the monotonous, repetitive drudgery they performed. Pride of workmanship, or even a simple understanding of where one stood in the productive process, had no place in this regime, and modern workers in capitalist society were inevitably alienated from their labor.

As time passed, things got worse, not better. Contradictions began to appear within capitalism, as they had within feudalism. Desiring ever greater profits, the capitalists continually forced down the wages of the working classes. Simultaneously, the smaller capitalists—the petite bourgeoisie—were increasingly forced out of business by growing giant monopolies and demoted to the ranks of the proletariat. With little beyond a subsistence wage, the workers were less and less able to buy the output of the factories where they labored. As a consequence capitalism encountered successive crises of underconsumption and depression.

To solve these problems, the capitalist nations sought out markets abroad, often in less developed countries, which they soon reduced to exploited colonies. This imperialist thrust of late capitalism did stave off the day of reckoning, but only for a while. Eventually, according to Marx, the great mass of the proletariat, made class conscious by its increasing immiserization under the capitalist system, would rise up in bloody revolution and seize the machinery of government. The revolution would establish the "dictatorship of the proletariat" under which the worker-controlled state would manage and direct the means of production and gradually

eliminate the last vestiges of private property and of the former ruling capitalist class. Eventually the state itself would "wither away" and be replaced by a voluntary society freed of the grim goad of material necessity and freed of class conflict. Man's long historical bondage to necessity and his entrapment in conflict would be replaced by a regime of peace, freedom, and brotherly love.

However insistently sophisticated Marxist intellectuals later sought to befuddle the fact, Marxism was clearly materialist. All institutions—marriage, the family, the church, the state—were outgrowths of the existing production system and reflected the needs of the class that controlled it. Ideas, art, and even science were also part of the superstructure of the existing production relationships. The prevailing social ills of capitalism were also by-products of class control. The exploitation of women and non-whites, for example, was a direct outgrowth of the capitalists' need both to weaken the proletariat and to ensure a cheap pool of docile labor. Marx was not a crude economic determinist, perhaps, but for him and for most of his disciples, productive relationships were primary, all others derivative.

The Marxist doctrine was also dialectical. Change took place not in a linear way but by a series of sharp zigzags. Within any system of production—whether ancient slavery, feudalism, or capitalism—contradictions would occur eventually. These were inherent in the very nature of the existing system and could not be alleviated for very long. Thus although imperialism might delay the contradictions of capitalism, it could not solve them. Nor could liberal or social-democratic reform. Capitalism could not *avoid* creating a discontented and impoverished working class, and this working class, aroused to its own misery, would inevitably and cataclysmically pull down the system in its entirety. In the jargon of the Hegelian dialectic that Marx borrowed, "thesis" would produce its "antithesis," followed by a new "synthesis."

This complex theory of history, society, and revolution was bequeathed virtually whole to American communism in the 1920s. It proved a heavy cross to carry. By then the United States had become the most advanced capitalist country in the world. Here, in the heartland of world capitalism, if anywhere, the process of working class immiserization and growing proletarian class consciousness should have proceeded the furthest. Yet compared to Western Europe, the American working class seemed prosperous and indif-

ferent, or even hostile, to socialist and Marxist ideas. To make the problem more difficult, American imperialism seemed feeble compared with that of England, France, and the other capitalist nations of Western Europe. In short the Marxist-Leninist scheme seemed to bear little relation to the situation of the United States during the prosperous 1920s.

During the Communist party's first decade, a number of American Marxists attempted to modify the dogmas of the standard canon to reflect American circumstances. In 1927 and 1928 Jay Lovestone and Bertram Wolfe developed the notion of American exceptionalism that professed to demonstrate that the absence of a feudal past and the extraordinary natural endowment of the United States had modified the dialectical process in this country. This idea was soon branded a heresy by Moscow, and the American comrades who had compromised with the true dogma were expelled from the Communist party.

The 1930s were better years for American communism. The collapse of 1929 and the Great Depression that followed seemed to confirm the direst predictions of Marxism. Never before had the American capitalist system been in such deep trouble. National income plunged; factories stopped; millions were thrown out of work. The cities were full of hungry men and women, while farmers burned unsalable crops. Class struggle seemed finally to have become an undeniable reality in the United States. Riots, farmers' strikes, sit-downs in the great automobile plants of Detroit marked the grim slide of the economy ever downward.

The Communist party of the United States, and to a lesser degree the older Marxist party, the Socialists, benefited from the growing misery and resentment of American labor. Membership in the Communist party grew, and for the first time the Party's influence in the labor movement became significant. Equally important, the Party became intellectually respectable. Sensitive and humane artists, writers, professors, students, and professional men could now see with their own eyes the prescience and wisdom of the Marxist analysis of capitalist failure. It was only necessary to compare the plight of the capitalist West with the growing economic might and power of the Soviet Union under its various Five Year Plans to see which system was superior.

The international upheaval of the 1930s reinforced the growing prestige of communism in America. The rise of fascism was

deplored by liberals and Marxists alike, but at least until 1939, it was the Soviet Union and, by extension, its system, rather than the Western democracies and theirs, that seemed honestly dedicated to stopping the dictators. England and France retreated in the face of Hitler, Mussolini, the Japanese militarists, and Franco, the Spanish dictator, while the Soviet Union made frantic, though unsuccessful, efforts to organize an international coalition, a United Front, of liberals and leftists, to stop them.

Briefly, in the period 1939–1941, the Soviet Union reversed this growing tide of approval by its sudden and shocking *détente* with Hitler. The Hitler–Stalin Pact of August, 1939, followed by the absorption of the Baltic Republics and the Russian invasion of Finland, alienated many Party members and fellow travelers. But then Hitler attacked Russia in 1941 and turned her into an ally of the European capitalist democracies. After America's own entrance into the war, the Soviet Union became our ally as well. During the period from 1941 to 1945, the media abruptly adopted the attitudes long associated with the Soviet propaganda apparatus. Even Hollywood, in a series of saccharine movies, glorified the victimized Soviet Union and its heroic citizens.

Following 1945 the prestige and goodwill of both the Soviet Union and the American left were quickly dissipated. The Cold War, already anticipated by strains within the wartime Grand Alliance, soon came to overshadow Soviet–American relations. The growing crisis between East and West brought out the worst in both Russia and America. In the Soviet Union it fed Joseph Stalin's paranoia and led to mass purges, jailings, and executions of suspected dissidents and traitors. In the United States it also led to an obsession with loyalty and to fears of subversion and treason. No one in the United States, with the exception of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, directly lost his life to the Cold War, but thousands lost their jobs, their reputations, and their peace of mind.

During these years liberals did not always acquit themselves heroically. Early twentieth-century liberalism was a composite of social generosity, cultural elitism, and intellectual tolerance that was particularly strong among intellectuals, people in the media, and certain ethnic groups, especially Jews and middle-class Negroes. Liberals believed in equality of condition, and by the 1930s they were willing to use the state to help correct social and eco-

conomic inequities. They were skeptical of the American conservative reliance on a "fair field and no favor" to take care of social inequalities; yet while fearing "bigness," they did not disparage private property when held in small amounts or employed in socially useful ways. Although liberals sympathized with the underdog, in the cultural realm they often deplored the "degraded" cultural characteristics that ordinary Americans had acquired. These, of course, were no fault of the man-in-the-street, but in a just society these characteristics would disappear as all men acquired the means to lead fuller, more comfortable, more abundant lives. Finally liberals professed to be fierce defenders of ideological and intellectual dissent. No group took more seriously First Amendment guarantees of free speech and a free press, or denounced more vehemently totalitarianism or vigilante intimidation of the free, inquiring spirit.

Liberals, unhappily, sometimes disgracefully betrayed their libertarian principles in the years following the war. The first sweeping investigations of loyalty in government departments began in 1947 under the liberal Truman administration. In later years many avowed liberals abandoned their principles and either condoned loyalty oaths and witch-hunting or betrayed radical associates from the days when they themselves had flirted with the left. It was the liberal Senator from Minnesota, Hubert Humphrey, who sponsored the amendment to the Communist Control Act of 1954 that made the Communist party of the United States an illegal body.

Still, the main impetus to the great postwar Red scare was supplied by conservatives, and its victims were often liberals. Conservatives—of the American variety—were really old-fashioned laissez-faire liberals. They believed in individualism and self-help and despised the welfare state that the liberals had created during the New Deal era. This seemed to them indistinguishable from socialism, a political system they considered godless and anarchistic, although at the same time they attacked it as dogmatic and authoritarian. Creeping socialism at home and galloping socialism abroad seemed to conservatives the two greatest dangers of the age, and they felt compelled to make war on both in the name of humanity and civilization. On the domestic scene Senator Joseph McCarthy was supported by the traditional right in his home state of Wisconsin, and much of the financing for such groups as the John



Birch Society and the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade was supplied by rightist Texas and California "new money."

Whether inspired by liberals or conservatives, fear and distrust polluted the nation's political and intellectual atmosphere during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Hunting for "subversives" who wished to undermine the American way and substitute socialism seemed to become a major national occupation. Almost every cranny of American life was affected. Teachers and professors were required to take oaths of loyalty and to reveal their past political associations on pain of dismissal. Actors and performers were placed on blacklists for casual left political activities during the 1930s. Scientists working for private concerns were denied "clearance" to examine and use classified government documents and reports and were effectively blocked from practicing their professions. In 1949 eleven top leaders of the Communist party were indicted and convicted under the 1940 Smith Act, which had made it unlawful to advocate or teach the violent overthrow of the government.

The effect of all this on the American left was devastating, but repression and Red baiting were not solely responsible for the left's troubles. Soviet policy was also crippling. Premier Nikita Khrushchev's revelations in 1956 of Stalin's mass purges shocked and dismayed many sensitive, if naïve, members of the left. What could be said for a system that permitted such a man to control the lives of millions of people? Still more damaging was the brutal Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising of the same year.

Finally the vigorous good health of the postwar capitalist economy conspired to frustrate American socialists. Instead of the massive recession predicted for the American economy after the Axis defeat, a great boom marked the postwar years. The gross national product burgeoned far beyond all expectations. Unemployment remained low, while real wages leaped ahead. Increasingly, skilled labor and the rapidly growing white-collar class were converted into suburbanized home owners with a stake in an expanding, consumer-oriented economy.

Prosperity, repression, and Soviet truculence together almost destroyed the American left. Formal membership in radical organizations, especially the Communist party, decreased sharply. The seventy-five to eighty thousand Communist party members of 1945 had declined to fewer than three thousand by 1958. In that year publication of the *Daily Worker*, the Communist party paper for