HERBERT APTHEKER

History and Reality

CAMERON ASSOCIATES, INC.

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HISTORY and REALITY

By Herbert Aptheker:

The Negro in the Civil War (1938)
Negro Slave Revolts in the U.S. (1939)
The Negro in the American Revolution (1940)
The Negro in the Abolitionist Movement (1941)
American Negro Slave Revolts (1943)
Essays in the History of the Negro People (1945)
The Negro People in America (1946)
To Be Free: Studies in American Negro History (1948)
A Documentary History of the Negro People in the U.S. (1951)
America's Racist Laws (1952)
Laureates of Imperialism (1954)
The Labor Movement in the South During Slavery (1955)

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TO V. J. JEROME

IMPRISONED TEACHER

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INTRODUCTION

(1)

Herbert Aptheker is an historian and a Communist. The Marxist hypothesis of historical materialism provides, he says, a "frame of reference which holds in place coherently and meaningfully the total mass of the ascertainable past, or more of it than any other." In this volume of essays, Aptheker has applied to the contemporary scene the tools of the historical scholar and of the Communist.

Most Americans disagree with the socialist reasoning that the abolition of private ownership of productive property will eliminate poverty and inequalities. Above all, most of us repudiate the Communist Party as the means by which a more decent social order may be constructed. Nevertheless, deep in our national life, we can find a spirit of radical social criticism like that which animates Aptheker's work; and along with criticism, there are in our history proposals for complete transformation of the nation's economic order. American radicalism has its anarchism in Thoreau, its class struggle in Debs, its defiant organization in the Abolitionists, its passionate protest against established social injustices in a host of muckrakers.

We can place Herbert Aptheker as an American Communist within the national heritage of radical dissent; we can also see him as part of an international movement. That Aptheker's Marxist conceptions came originally from abroad is not particularly relevant to their appraisal. The German, Marx, drew upon English economics, French politics, German philosophy, and the humanism of Judaism and Christianity, and his followers have added lessons from Russia and China. We each can say much the same for our own views, be they matters of politics or religion or the customs of daily life. I suggest therefore that we refrain from concluding that views which are alien in their genesis are thereby un-American—by which I suppose we mean, if we mean anything at all, inapplicable to American conditions.

But that characteristic of Communism which is so different from traditional American radicalism is the international orientation. Here is a problem for Aptheker's readers to muse upon. The rational analysis of the American scene that serves to buttress Aptheker's topical essays is essentially the same as that which

Marxists hold of other nations and cultures; it is cross-national and intrinsically international. Likewise, the vision of a better tomorrow, which the Communist sees, is not a specifically American vision. It too is international. There is an older view according to which America was to serve as a model for other peoples. Is American Communism a radically new dissent according to which America has no unique salvation nor Americans a unique mode of social reasoning?

Aptheker writes, then, not only within an American tradition of dissent, and concern for justice, but with intellectual equipment new to that tradition, adding, to exposé and popular pressure, the Marxist method of causal analysis. There are, to my mind, other reasonable approaches to history than Marxism, and there are other components to morality than justice, but *the point I am making is that the America of the Cold War has denied both that Communism is reasoned and that a Communist can be moral. It is time that we questioned this view. We need to test the reasoning and judge the morality of those intelligent men and women who have become persuaded of the Communist way.*

(2)

Aptheker is an American historian, professionally concerned with the facts and meanings of American history. He was born in Brooklyn in 1915, educated in the New York City public schools, earned his B.S. at Columbia University, and proceeded to a doctor's degree there, with a dissertation on *American Negro Slave Revolts* (Columbia University Press, 1943). He entered the Army as a private in the Second World War, and served four years in the field artillery, ending his military career with the rank of major. He has been a Guggenheim Fellow and a frequent contributor of research in Negro history to scholarly periodicals. His principal research effort was published as *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (Citadel Press, 1951).

Dr. Aptheker's competence is well established. William E. B. Du Bois wrote that the *Documentary History* was "painstaking and thorough . . . a milestone on the road to Truth" and Dean Harry Carman of Columbia called the doctoral dissertation a masterpiece.

Aptheker is an active Communist, a frequent spokesman, an expert witness at several trials of Communists indicted under the Smith Act, a writer for the Marxist magazines *Masses & Mainstream* and *Political Affairs*. Many American scholars stress non-participation in public affairs but others have become active in public life. Like the historians Bancroft and Beard, Aptheker has entered political controversy; and, with these and such others as Commager and

Nevins and Becker, he has often left his research specialty to offer commentary on present issues. It is not unlikely that in a more tolerant time a scholar of Aptheker's distinction and influence would hold a university professorship of Negro history.

(3)

The reader will find in these essays four major themes: first, the objective nature and causal relatedness of historical facts; second, the Marxist interpretation of these facts, historical materialism; third, application of that interpretation to specific events, especially to the writings of influential thinkers; fourth, the union of understanding, morality, and activity.

Written as occasional essays, they show the scars of battle and the heat of passion. Aptheker has combined analysis, interpretation, and partisan inspiration. Here, I believe, is the connection between the essays and Dr. Aptheker's historical researches. They fuse scholarship and politics, focusing upon what he feels is a shocking state of public ignorance.

Now any defender of democracy will be alarmed if the citizenry is misinformed or not informed about policies or social facts. What Aptheker brings to our attention is that ignorance of ourselves and of our society is an illness and a danger. He asks, in a memorable image, "How shall the victim of amnesia fend for himself—and in a hostile world?" As historian, he seeks to bring knowledge to bear on the problems of today by revealing the greatness and humanity of the oppressed of yesterday. Without knowledge of yesterday, we believe the slanders of today, even about ourselves. We are left rootless and ashamed; we are isolated from our fellow-Americans, our fellow human beings, disrespectful of them and of ourselves.

Aptheker's idea of the social role of historical study is especially pertinent to Negro history. Now, in the present volume, the goals of his research on the Negro are sought again in a new context. The purpose of these essays can be put in simple terms: to battle the slanders of ignorance, cowardice, deceit, and self-righteousness.

Of course, the pot often calls the kettle black. Self-righteousness is frequently a fault of those who proclaim it a sin. At times the reader may wonder whether the merits of Aptheker's exposure of others are matched by the defects of his own partisanship. He asks, correctly, how such scholars as Professor Schlesinger and President Baxter can misquote so many Communist sources, and indeed how such a careful writer as Mr. Krutch can fail to quote any source whatsoever for his account of the Marxist philosophy as a theory of robots. But, I fear, Aptheker's emotional and perorative *style* contrasts, in a self-righteous way, with his factual and rational

method. The light which scholarship can shed on public issues is dimmed when sarcasm darkens the facts or presumptions dilute the logic. This seems especially true of Marxism since so much of its analytic strength rests upon its critique of unconscious motivations and hidden interests. Aptheker's *method* is rarely dependent on either sarcasm or mere praise, and it seems to me that this is the best reason why he should have avoided the outraged tone of some of these essays.

A sympathetic observer might reply that he writes under considerable provocation. The times are hostile to his views, and men assert again and again that Communists are criminals and should be jailed. Whatever the reader may think of the merits of the Smith Act, it is clear that Dr. Aptheker must see his imprisoned friends as political prisoners, incarcerated for their views.

Actually Aptheker's style has both American and Communist precedent: there is the muckrakers' habit of passionate exposé and personal caricature; and when did Marx or Lenin write a college textbook or a scholar's treatise which was free from political encounter or partisan emotion? But precedent and provocation aside, there are faults in Aptheker's style. It distorts the material and it may alienate the reader. One example: Aptheker unfairly accuses Sidney Hook of placing Dreiser, Picasso, and Norman Bethune in a gang of conspirators. Yet behind the anger, he has written, in response to provocation, an essay of the utmost gravity, with evidence of Professor Hook's lack of objectivity and of abundant misquotation; but it is too hard to find our way through! Nor does Aptheker show that Professor Hook's views actually entail Professor Bridgman's anti-social and egocentric pessimism.

Despite all the difficulties of polemic, I urge the reader to be tenacious, even though he may well reject the sneers and the shouts. There is a man of high intelligence here and what he says derives from his anatomical skills of dissection, operating on the body of current political cliché. How damning are his contrasts of statement and fact! How many liberal Democrats know that their own eminent historian, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., believes that "all important problems are insoluble"? How many remember the unanimous error of the Western experts on the Soviet Union when they all—Americans, British, Nazis, Fascists alike—informed each other that Hitler would beat Russia in at most twelve weeks? How many know that the median annual income of American Negro families in 1949 was under $1,600, at a time when the government's estimate of the minimum cost of decent living was $3,450?

Aptheker works to relate ideals to factual origins, that is, to offer a concrete genetic analysis in place of an abstract idealistic analysis. Thus we read his account of the Open Door and of justice at Guam.

Genetic analysis is, at once, causal and historical. It requires a hypothesis concerning the relations among facts. Aptheker summarizes the Marxist theory of historical causation as social conflicts based on clashing economic interests, contrasting this with the views of other historians. He goes on, as in the essays on Hiss and McCarthy, to offer explanations of the functions, motivations, and political framework of specific happenings. Needless to say, he does not *prove* Marxist conceptions of social history in this book. What is important is that he offers the reader a conception which at least rests its claim on the adequacy it has in providing rational understanding. Aptheker notes that this is a criterion which such assorted viewpoints as those of nonsense (Oakeshott), incomprehensibility (Berdyaev), utter individuality (Fling), pure correlations (Brinton), and spiritual contemporaneity (Croce) seem to reject. With Aptheker, the reader can find grounds and reasons to reject or accept the author's views.

As Aptheker sees it, many critics of Marxism are beating a straw man of economic determinism. Ideas and ideals do matter in the Marxist view. The reader may find this to be the most positive point of the book. In contrast with the view of the Communist theory which so many critics present, Aptheker holds that Marxism is an activist theory. Men make their own history, said Marx, and while the theory of historical materialism explains the objective basis and source of men's ideas and ideals, it does not, in so doing, explain them *away*. Likewise, the popular conception of the Marxist robot-man is challenged by Aptheker's repeated reference to the French and Czech Communists who were lone martyrs, spiritual heroes in the face of Nazi power.

We need to ponder the curious amalgam of partisan fervor and academic research with which Aptheker writes, and which he clearly regards as a particular virtue of the Marxist philosophy. It rests upon the Marxist claim to be a union of theory and practice; what critics may regard as a weakness, the Communist sees as a strength, whether he deals with matters of historical investigation or with public events. Can we assent to this paradox, the partisan scholar? If we ourselves cannot avoid our own amalgamations, should we praise them? And, in a more personal reference, we note that the Communist's belief in Marxism is rationally the source of his membership in a Marxist party and of the policies of that party. But joining is more than a matter of Pure Reason; such a motivational mixture of passion and reason deserves closer examination, for the two are susceptible to much hostility. Should we not expect a Marxist account of the dialectic of moral attachment and rational detachment?

I cannot judge these essays as an expert in the social sciences,

but can only try to show the reader why I believe they are relevant to our lives as citizens. But is it advisable for one who is not trained as an expert on economic and social issues to express views on such matters? Albert Einstein answered this query with the conclusion that "we should be on guard not to overestimate science and scientific methods when it is a question of human problems . . . we should not assume that experts are the only ones who have a right to express themselves on questions affecting the organization of society" ("Why Socialism?" in *Monthly Review* May 1949). If we refrain from deciding social issues in as responsible manner as we can, others will decide them for us, perhaps not scientifically and perhaps in *their* interests. The question should be, can we afford not to consider the questions which Aptheker raises? Do we not owe it to ourselves to ascertain the proportion of truth, error, and half-truth in his analyses of social issues?

(4)

While I cannot agree with all that Dr. Aptheker says in these pages, I find myself even more at odds with him on problems that are implicit. Perhaps it will be helpful if I state briefly a number of objections and questions.

The frequent charge that the Marxist scheme is intellectually dogmatic seems to me to have two kernels of substance: the Marxist thinker sometimes substitutes a proposal for a proof, a program of theoretical explanation for the required explanation; on the other hand, the same thinker may brusquely dismiss a rival theory. Thus, Dr. Aptheker has certainly shown the *relevance* of economic considerations, even of class interests, in explaining political events; but he has said little to show the explanatory *dominance* and causal priority of such factors. Can he reject economic determinism, assert human responsibility, and yet summarily dispense with the possibility of other objective factors, themselves independent of the economic? Both his rejection of the first and his assertion of the second call for an analysis of supplementary causation. In more general terms, I think of the hasty treatment Communists have accorded the views of Einstein and Freud, of the philosopher Carnap, the physicist Bohr, and, at Dr. Aptheker's hands, the historian Croce.

Let us consider the last case. The original source of Marx's logic of change, and hence of the Marxist theory of history, is in the early nineteenth century idealist philosophy of Hegel. Although transformed and transcended, the idealist contribution to historical materialism is nevertheless of significance, for it is this which makes possible both the repudiation of mechanical determinism and that affirmation of activity which play so positive a part in Dr. Aptheker's

thinking. Benedetto Croce is an idealist who broke with Hegel, denying just that part of Hegel's thought which made a pattern of history predictable, retaining that part which could stimulate both the Fascist philosophy of pure irrational action and a liberal philosophy of pure rational liberty. To the greatest of Italian Communist thinkers, Antonio Gramsci, Croce's thought was the highest point of liberal Italian culture, and hence the starting point for a new and creative development of the Marxist philosophy. But of this Aptheker gives us no hint; on the contrary, he ignores what is challenging and alive in Croce while emphasizing what is negative and dead.

Dr. Aptheker treats Walter Lippmann with more understanding, but yet with a serious omission. Lippmann, as Aptheker shows, loses faith in democracy at the crucial point: recognizing certain facts of mass ignorance and mass illiberalism, he concludes that the masses are incapable, and leaps to a doctrine of a purified élite, an aristocracy. But democratic faith is in human potentiality, not actuality. If the electorate is informed, and if they participate in the social process of government, then their decision will be right. Obviously this raises a question of the means of education and the media of information. Jefferson decided that education was the keystone of the democratic structure; Marx wanted to know who will educate the educators. Mr. Lippmann evidently feels that the conflict today is between nations led by Communist élites and nations led by mass-corrupted, i.e. "democratic" capitalist élites. Now a solid faith in the people is implied in all that Dr. Aptheker writes. And yet his faith has room for a conception of leadership which Mr. Lippmann may recognize. Whereas Lippmann rejects the idea that people are wise and good, and goes on to his pure élite, Lenin and Aptheker reject the idea that people are *spontaneously* wise and good, and proceed to the need for a party. It is true that the "masses must have grasped what is at stake" (as Aptheker quotes Engels) in the Communist view of a democratic political movement, and it is true that the masses are spontaneously wicked in Lippmann's view; this is a significant distinction, a difference between optimism and pessimism regarding humanity, but can Dr. Aptheker dismiss Lippmann's problem of the élite, the educators, without further justification? The possibility of a democratic political machinery is at stake and, with it, scientific analysis of the social basis and mass psychology of reactionary and Fascist movements.

I should like to put this problem in a boader national context. There are many Americans who share with the Communists a belief in the advisability of some measure of central economic planning. The old cliché is that Communists seek economic democracy while

liberals seek political democracy, each claiming that the desire of the other will be achieved only by the prior attainment of his own goal. This needs a most careful formulation, particularly by the conscientious American Communist; for it is in this country and Britain that the apparatus and emotions of political freedoms have been most highly developed, our precious rights of personal expression, of political endeavor, of habeas corpus, of social action. In the words with which Professor Einstein closed his article on socialism: "How [under a socialist planned economy] can the rights of the individual be protected . . .?"

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August 7, 1955

Author's Note

These essays represent my reflections on and reactions to the events and issues of the past eight years. They have appeared, as reproduced here, in *Masses & Mainstream, Political Affairs* and *Science & Society;* the date of original publication precedes each essay. Much of whatever merit they may possess is owing to the critical comments that several of the editors of these publications offered the writer. I am especially indebted to the creative suggestions and criticisms of my friend, Samuel Sillen; and in this writing, as always, the proddings and corrections offered by my wife have been most helpful. I have attempted to convey some idea of my obligations to V. J. Jerome, Editor of *Political Affairs,* by this volume's dedication.

Shortcomings, errors and other failings, whatever they may be, are the responsibility of the author alone.

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