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# АМЕРИКАНСКИЕ ОБРАЗЫ РУССКОЙ РЕВОЛЮЦИИ

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## ВООБРАЖАЕМАЯ СОЛИДАРНОСТЬ: ОКТЯБРЬСКАЯ РЕВОЛЮЦИЯ И ЛЕВОЕ КРЫЛО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ США<sup>1</sup>

**Аннотация:** Сто лет спустя мы все еще бьемся над исследованием тех механизмов Октябрьской революции, которые привели к образованию коммунистических политических и культурных движений, оставивших несметных последователей. Межнациональная оптика нового движения, которую определил 1917 год, оказалась наиболее заметна в литературе и искусстве. Коммунизм в США не только увеличил культурную активность, но и способствовал распространению глубокого чувства товарищества и причастности к коллективной борьбе. В своей «воображаемой солидарности» коммунисты обращали особенное внимание на классовое угнетение, расизм, антисемитизм, колониализм, опасность новой мировой войны. Под лозунгами о солидарности коммунисты конструировали в воображении многие аспекты советской действительности, советской международной политики и партийных практик. Современной исторической наукой доказано, что подобные представления были ложными. Исследовательские методы, используемые для изучения постреволюционных коммунистических движений, обнаруживают необходимость применения аналитической категории, близкой к понятию *longue durée*: материалы должны быть рассмотрены как широкое и многоуровневое развитие постепенно изменяющихся структур, институтов и культур, возникших как коллективные биографии простых людей и политических лидеров.

**Ключевые слова:** коммунизм, левое крыло литературы США, формы памяти, воображаемая солидарность, СССР.

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# AMERICAN IMAGES OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

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## IMAGINED SOLIDARITIES: THE BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION AND THE U.S. LITERARY LEFT

**Abstract:** One hundred years later, we are still wrestling with the ways in which the event of the Bolshevik Revolution launched Communist-led political and cultural movements that generated myriad progeny. The transnational optic of the new movement inaugurated by 1917 was nowhere more evident than in the literary and creative production. Among cultural activists in the United States, Communism normally encouraged the extension of a feeling of deep horizontal comradeship and belonging to a common struggle. Communists in their “imagined solidarities” cared specifically about class oppression, racism, anti-Semitism, colonialism, and the danger of a repeat of World War I. Under slogans of solidarity, Communists were imagining many features about Soviet life, Soviet foreign policy, and the practices of various Communist parties that are now shown to be false. The methods of observation and inference required to engage this post-revolution tradition evoke the need for an analytical category close to that of a *longue durée*: it is to be apprehended as an extended development through the broader and layered context of gradually evolving structures, institutions, and cultures brought to life by collective biographies of actors from the ranks and leadership.

**Key words:** Communism, U.S. literary left, forms of memory, “imagined solidarities”, USSR.

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## A Hybrid Legacy

From the instant that the U. S. journalist John Reed witnessed the “Ten Days that Shook the World” in the fall of 1917, ideas and images of the Russian Revolution began to resonate across the world. The event had an electrifying – dare I say near-religious? – import for all varieties of radicals as a beacon of justice signaling that hierarchies were to be leveled on behalf of a liberated, unified humanity. What had been done and was being said in Red Russia were embraced and interpreted by activists and cultural workers as the opening of a new horizon; soon Bolshevik politics and the avant-garde art of the revolution commenced to intertwine with the national experiences and local struggles of many societies. One hundred years later, we are still wrestling with the ways in which the event of the Bolshevik Revolution launched Communist-led political and cultural movements that generated myriad progeny.

This post-revolution tradition is at this point a long-term, hybrid legacy, conditioned by organized, material underpinnings and what started as a relatively homogeneous ideological universe; the methods of observation and inference required to engage such a slow process evoke the need for an analytical category close to that of a *longue durée*. That is, the record after 1917, in the Soviet Union and internationally, cannot be understood merely by its relation to indubitably critical occurrences such as the civil war or rise of fascism; it is also to be apprehended as an extended development through the broader and layered context of gradually evolving structures (social formations as well as parties), institutions, and cultures brought to life by collective biographies of actors from the ranks and leadership.

As in classic examples of the *longue durée*, vital alterations in the trajectory of Communist-led politics and culture went unrecognized at any given point in time by many historical participants. To be sure, the switch of the Communist International leadership to “socialism in one country” or the Popular Front was immediately picked up by followers as slogans and stated policies, along with the advent of “socialist realism” in the arts; in themselves, such innovations seemed pragmatically plausible. Yet, almost as if behind the backs of idealistic activists, there were since the 1920s steadily increasing dictatorial policies and practices in Moscow, and in subordinate national leadership bodies, emerging stealthily like a political form of evolving “climate change.” This unrelenting erosion of the essence of Communist values was far from an “original sin” produced by Marxist or Leninist thought, despite the many errors in prediction in both; and it involved a great deal more than just the question of corrupt individuals,

inasmuch as it was produced by structural developments over long periods. Communist leaders implicated in this transition invariably depicted those who dissented as capitulators to the pressures of capitalism or worse. But often it was a sense of cognitive dissonance between what was said and what was done by the Moscow leadership that helped to produce minority splits and expulsions (Trotskyism, Bukharinism), periodic demoralizations and defections (1939, 1956), and rebellions in national parties (Titoism, Maoism, Euro-Communism). Even before 1989, widespread fragmentation and renovation were underway, so that it became more appropriate to talk of various Communist parties and individuals as *related* to the Bolshevik model rather than *wedded* to it. Clearly this is a subject demanding not just a chronicler but also a research historian.

More or less taking our cue from the French *Annales* School, we might ask of this long tradition: What is the ideological universe to be studied? What are the questions to be asked about the social origins, religious training, education, and intimate lives of the political and cultural actors? How do we incorporate what we find in various records into the larger frameworks of political debates, and economic and social history? Contemporary Marxists have a special stake in pursuing this line of inquiry: As with the classic *longue durée* approach, the adapted mode of investigating the past of long-term structural continuities can be used to illuminate the present. How did this long process give rise to today?

### **The People Who Cared**

The transnational optic of the new movement inaugurated by 1917 was nowhere more evident than in the literary and creative production that broke boundaries of genres and disciplines, tore down geographical fences, and opened the gates to the ingenuity of those from plebeian and subaltern groups. What occurred over the following decades was by turns uplifted and vexed by the charismatic ambiguities of Soviet Communism; to borrow from African American novelist Richard Wright, there were peaks of glory and depths of horror as the movement marched from the era of Lenin to that of Stalin and beyond. At the same time, aesthetic production was shaped by a collectivity of diverse temperaments and skills of those who often lived very different lives but imagined a shared solidarity with others engaged in anti-capitalist and anti-colonial struggles throughout the world. This can be grasped by mentioning just a fraction of the hundreds of writers in the United States whose creative work was profoundly yet diversely inflected by the altruistic aspirations generated by the *longue durée* of

the Communist movement: Langston Hughes, Muriel Rukeyser, James T. Farrell, Theodore Dreiser, Lillian Hellman, Arthur Miller, Carlos Bulosan, Thomas McGrath, Lorraine Hansberry, Ralph Ellison, and John Oliver Killens. Only rarely did pro-Communist ideals appear in the form of a literary text serving as the henchman for ideology, as in some of the lesser works of Howard Fast. Typically, such aspirations are enmeshed in the life experiences upon which the artistic imagination draws, as in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). In this instance, the sympathetic protagonists are substantially derived from autobiographical narratives of militants in Communist-led struggles (Cecil McKiddy for Tom Joad, W. C. Hamett for Jim Casey), and the underlying convictions are those of Popular Front anti-fascism (seen in Steinbeck's contribution to the League of American Writers pamphlet *Writers Take Sides on the Question: Are You For or Against Franco and Fascism?* [1938]).

For a writer to be influenced by Communism was not to be reduced to it, and individual biography is indispensable if we are to take the full measure of any person or his or her creative work. Diverse creative personalities can be attracted to the same mental structure. My own research suggests that, among cultural activists in the United States, Communism normally encouraged selfless and good behavior. There was a feeling of deep horizontal comradeship that extended to all ethnicities. This sensation of connection was because militants partook in imagining that they belonged to a common struggle, and shared a redeeming future, with people they had never even seen outside of photographs and illustrations in movement publications. In my view, this was not a "false consciousness," but it could be one that was highly romanticized and simplified. Such ideals of Communism had a compelling power to motivate and inspire, even if one was a long-distance Communist intellectual who abjured membership and retained middle-class privileges. I would say that Communists were "the people who cared"; in their "imagined solidarities," they cared specifically about class oppression, racism, anti-Semitism, colonialism, and the danger of a repeat of World War I. In some cases the admirable and heartfelt solidarity that they imagined led them to die for these causes while organizing in dangerous situations, or perishing on the battlefields of Spain and World War II.

Nevertheless, the research historian must put these two aphoristic simplifications – "imagined solidarities" and "the people who cared" – under pressure. After all, a critical component of the imagined solidarities of Communists was embracing the slogan "Defend the Soviet Union." While it was certainly appropriate to defend the sovereignty of the USSR against invasion and back certain progressive

features, this became a stance that led to support, open or tacit, of the mass executions of at least 800,000 people in the Soviet Union from 1937 to 1953 and the imprisonment (often simply a slow death) of more than a million in the ever-expanding Gulag<sup>2</sup>.

Under broad slogans of solidarity, Communists were imagining many other features about Soviet life, Soviet foreign policy, and the practices of various Communist parties that are now shown to be false. They surely cared about anti-Semitism, yet denied the virulence with which it spread among Soviet-bloc countries after World War II. During World War II itself, the passion of imagined solidarity, not just on behalf of victims of fascism but with an egregiously idealized Soviet Union, led to Communists supporting the war-time No Strike Pledge, the internment of Japanese Americans, the use of the Smith Act against rivals, the temporary abandonment of national liberation struggles, and, for a small number, espionage activities that were falsely denied for decades.

An attractive but potentially dangerous aspect of the Communist movement was that it had certain features of one-stop shopping. To join the movement, as a member or ally, could mean participation in an entire social and cultural world of friends, family, lovers, and a vibrant cultural life. The international world of Communism allowed for some to have a connection to dramatic political events that offered excitement, intrigue, glamour, and a sense of purpose that countered the humdrum boredom of one's day job. For an artist, envisioning a world in revolution wherein women as well as workers and peasants of color were in the lead, induced one to imagine that one's work was engaged in unlocking the full human potential for cultural liberation. Altruism brings its own rewards, but to be an admired "proletarian cadre," a "people's poet," a "Volunteer for Liberty" in Spain, a member of the Party's inner circle, or a romantically mysterious person with a connection to secret and potentially dangerous work on behalf of the cause, could be like an adrenaline high that becomes addictive.

Among those for whom "Stalinism" has become a political swear word rather than a sociological tool, much has been made of Communist factionalism, undemocratic practices, and the lack of accountability of Communist leaders to the membership. Yet these are qualities shared by all almost all political movements, hardly the unique fingerprint of the pro-Soviet militants. More to the point, one's becoming accepted as a member of a Communist party or a trusted ally was premised on

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<sup>2</sup> These are the estimates of revisionist Soviet historian J. Arch Getty [Getty 2000]. For much higher figures by a more conventional historian, see [Conquest 2007].

unswerving public loyalty to Moscow in its major foreign policy decisions and domestic claims. Usually one was internally converted to a belief that the Communist International had proven itself to have a monopoly of historical–political insight, of which the incarnation at any given time was “the correct line” handed down by national leaderships. No doubt there were individuals who privately harbored doubts and questions, but this idea of a Soviet Mecca could result in auto-brainwashing to the point where even the most brilliant people lived in fictional times. A loyal Communist simply was unlikely to believe news or information about the Soviet Union that wasn’t vetted by the Party. Terms such as “Trotskyite” were employed to quarantine a far-reaching circle of oppositional thought, especially by linking such views to fascism. This fueled a well of hatred, suspicion, and confusion that has never been fully drained. Over time the intellectual world could become one of epistemic closure where a Communist heard the same political arguments repeated by all of his or her comrades, and disbelieved or simply couldn’t hear contradictory information from other sources. This is not to suggest that Communists were essentially servile people who took orders from above; their movement toward the imagining of solidarities was generously rebellious and self-motivated. But the choices made, and sudden switches in “political line,” invariably reflected the authority of Moscow, an overriding structural continuity despite conjunctural changes in the political landscape.

### **Forms of Memory**

Today, students of the “Imagined Solidarities” of the pro-Communist Literary Left confront three forms of memory through which the components of this inheritance are available. First is “historical memory” in which the dead past can be found in old records; these document the theory and practice of Marxist cultural workers in the post-revolution Soviet Union as well as countries where Bolshevism – sometimes in dissident communist forms – gained traction among artists and intellectuals. Second is “autobiographical memory” which refers to the recollected experiences of individuals involved in such activities; here we have memoirs (sometimes unpublished), recorded interviews, or information about experiences reported in letters or imaginatively recreated in poems, novels, and plays. Finally, there is the “collective memory” of radical scholars in and out of the academy, political and cultural groups, and publishing houses and magazines that consciously work to sustain and transmit a shared pool of knowledge about what happened. What is special to Marxists about collective

memory is that it aims to render this cultural practice an active past available to informing and shaping our undertakings and even our identities in the present and future.

To analyze and assess the legacy and impact of 1917 for the U. S. Literary Left, one must avail oneself of the resources of all three forms of memory. For the United States, the historical memory can be explored in dozens of journals, newspapers, and anthologies published under the auspices of the Communist movement and their allies. The *New Masses*, the *Daily Worker*, the early *Partisan Review*, *Direction*, *Negro Quarterly*, *Dialectics*, *Jewish Life*, *Masses & Mainstream*, three volumes of the proceedings of the American Writers Congress, and literary collections issued by International Publishers are only the start of a long list. The autobiographical memory can be found in most detailed form in books, all of which must be read with a critical eye, such as Granville Hicks' *Part of the Truth: An Autobiography* (1965); oral histories such as Albert Maltz's "The Citizen Writer in Retrospect" (1983, available at the UCLA Oral History Project); and novels such as John Sanford's *Scenes From the Life of an American Jew* (1985–91, five volumes). The collective memory is trickier. Due to the entrance of radicals into the academy during and after the 1960s, much is available through the scholarly fields of literary radicalism, gender studies, and multi-cultural literatures in the form of books, essays, journals and conference papers that are in debate and dialog with each other. There are also occasional writings and reviews in publications of left-wing organizations that interpret this legacy according to their own outlook. Beyond this are a substantial number of films, some dumbed down (*The Way We Were*, 1973) and others more compelling (*Trumbo*, 2015).

Gaining a critical perspective on all this is no easy task. In a sense, much has changed and little has changed since the Communist movement made its major mark on U. S. literature in the 1930s, then continued a strong presence in the 1940s as the vanguard of Popular Front culture, and finally was demonized as "totalitarian" in the Cold War. The liberal mainstream public perception of Literary Communism, in a nutshell, is that of a flawed, minor achievement at best, while right-wing hitmen depict it as a sub-artistic conspiracy to indoctrinate by crude methods. A tsunami of scorn has been aimed at the "proletarian novel." This has produced a reactive and defensive tendency by radical partisans to celebrate certain pro-Communist writers while smoothing over real contradictions and problems. Curiously, interest in writing by authors substantially shaped by Communist ideas and activities continues to grow steadily, and yet the specificity of the emotional and ideological commitments of the artists is being written out of scholarship and collective memory by identifying the individuals primarily as "Left" or

“Progressive.” It is as if a legion of well-meaning radical academic “Terminators” has gone back in time to assassinate the origins of their own beginnings.

Of course, writers themselves frequently evoked such anodyne terms as necessary protective coloration against pigeonholing, blacklisting, and persecution. In a sense, we are obligated to tell the story that these former pro-Communists didn’t want told, which can be unpleasant work in the face of a generation of older scholars who based their treatments of these authors on sanitized history, and family members of writers nourished on myths for their own protection. But the simplistic use of some label is not what this is about. To take one example, one’s political positions are always influenced by the bonds one forms with others, in and around the movement. With literary Communists, one often finds an inspiring and supportive mentor or role model; but surely I can’t be only one who has learned that life in the radical movement can also involve tales of frenemies and alcohol-inflamed egos.

The point is that when one leaves hands unsullied by empirical spadework into precise convictions, activities, influence, and relationships, this functions to gloss over the texture of the experiences, emotions, and passions that are the raw materials of an individual’s art. Euphemisms for the Communist legacy such as vague talk of “contradictions,” “mistakes,” and “imperfections” only serve to infantilize the subject (and one’s readers). Why shove skeletons into closets from which they will sooner or later be disgorged? The understanding of a work of creative art requires getting inside the people of the past and recreating the world as they saw it; Marxist cultural workers of today will never really know our own historical hinterland, the dialectic of individuals and collectivities that animated these movements, until we can accomplish this with candor.

In many respects, scholarship on this subject has been moving ahead, especially in relation to gender, ethnicity, region, and an expanded appreciation of cultural forms. Thanks to scores of scholars after the 1960s, we no longer have to accept the older perception that literature emergent from the Communist experience comprises a stagnant pond, apart from the living river of contemporary literary progress. The finest synthesis that accurately transcends the 1930s and pursues the subject well into the mid-20th century is Michael Denning’s brilliant and beguiling *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (1998) [Denning 1998] Here we have the depiction of a counter-hegemonic historic bloc compellingly based on concepts from Antonio Gramsci and Raymond Williams, and a fabulous exploration of institutions, cultural apparatuses, and audiences. Now, in order to advance conceptual sophistication in the field, scholars

must modulate abstract theory about the construction of social formations by revisiting the land of boisterous research, where the dead people who vivified those institutions and formations never stop talking and their published and unpublished writings tell stories with far more mysteries and rough edges.

There are most certainly paradoxes at the heart of the pro-Communist tradition that are largely responsible for contradictions and confusion, and hence gives rise to the temptation to evade. To say who is or isn't a "Communist" writer is more a "conjectural science" than an "exact science," heavily dependent on definitions and circumstantial evidence. And how does one draw the strings together of all the strangely connected lives of writers once enhanced by Communist utopian dreams that were later crushed by awareness of Stalinist terror? How do Communist lives translate into art, especially when the bulk of their poetry over the decades is about the intimate spaces of the self, and much of their work in fiction and theater does not treat Communist characters, or dramatize the implementation of any "political line"?

Those of us still committed to socialist revolution, but who are as activists distressed over the impasse of the inherited Communist movements in politics as well as culture, must enter a daunting archive of a labyrinthine nature with a willingness to confront unfamiliar and unsettling experiences. Some of us may still be afflicted with residual self-censorship stemming from personal loyalty to imagined solidarities of our own that remain insufficiently examined; this is often conjoined with nostalgia for the heroic Enlightenment certainties about the future of humanity that emerged so clearly and compellingly among Bolsheviks in 1917. For a critical engagement with the *longue durée* of Communist politics and culture, both must be exchanged for a sense of history shorn of false consolations. With Marxism as our set of tools and moral compass, innovative frameworks will emerge that will renew, refresh, and tell us more. Then, the light even from extinct stars of the *longue durée* can trail on as an enchanting force, inspiring us to engage in transformative struggles with the disenchanting world.

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