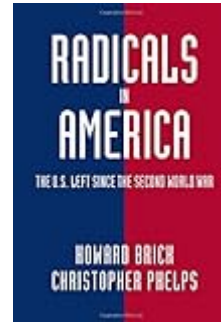




Howard Brick, Christopher Phelps. *Radicals in America: The U.S. Left since the Second World War.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. IX, 355 S. \$24.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-73133-1; \$94.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-51560-3.



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A Problematic Journey through the Recent American Radical Past

As someone who has long taught a course in the history of radicalism in the United States, I hoped that this work would be an analytical synthesis, one that I could assign and teach from. I knew Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps's previous work, the former on Daniel Bell, the latter on Sidney Hook, two figures of great importance in the rise of post-World War II Cold War liberalism and later neoconservatism. Bell and Hook are representatives of the sort of left that US cold warriors and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) promoted specifically through the world as the alternative to totalitarian communism in its alleged guises—neutralism, national liberation struggles, and the global struggles of indigenous and minority peoples.

Unfortunately, as I read and reread the work, I found myself disappointed. This was not so much because, writing and teaching from a Marxist perspective, I usually expect to have significant interpretive disagreements with historians of contemporary history and I am rarely disappointed. It is also not because I found, as one will, omissions and errors of fact in the work. That is normal

for a broad synthesis. What I found most disappointing is the authors's habit of making descriptive detail an end in itself, roadblocks rather than stepping stones to an overall coherent analysis. The effect of this approach, as historian John Higham once stated in one of my graduate school seminars about similar studies in intellectual history, is to produce a jam-packed synthesis where it becomes difficult for readers to separate the forest from the trees.

Before I continue, let me explain my different approach to the topic of radicalism in US history. I seek to understand the history of radicalism in America in terms of its dialectical relationship to the American mainstream, the effect of radical ideas and movements in both changing the mainstream and being changed by the mainstream over time. I also deal critically in both my writing and teaching with concepts like democratic socialism versus totalitarianism as ideology that reduces a concrete and complex history into abstract forces of good and evil, whose actions and reactions are preordained. Finally, I seek to distinguish between important

and less important groups in understanding the larger context and I try to make periodization reflect these relationships between radical groups and a changing mainstream.

Speaking to an audience in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1960, a ninety-two-year-old W. E. B. Du Bois said that "McCarthyism" had had a crippling effect on American democracy by making all discussion of socialism taboo and all discussion of communism a crime. Du Bois's topic was "socialism and the American negro," but much of what he said about the post-World War II effects of McCarthyism on socialists, communists, and the broad radical left could be related to the long and interrelated history of both antiradicalism and racism in the United States. Du Bois's insights would have helped the authors establish a better periodization and overall analysis, since these ideas continued to have great relevance long after 1960.

The first chapter, "War and Peace, 1939-1949," presents significant problems. First, a focus on 1935-47 would have been a much better periodization. This approach would have focused on the development in the United States of the popular front, an informal alliance of Communist Party activists and their allies with the New Deal government in a number of crucial areas. These included the building of industrial unions, the fight for social welfare legislation, and the founding of antifascist mass organizations and entities committed to combating racism and anti-Semitism. The achievements of this alliance—a fivefold increase in trade union membership; the development of social security, unemployment insurance, and pilot programs supporting education and housing; the growth of public power; and antiracist campaigns against lynching, police brutality, legal segregation, and disenfranchisement—were arguably the most important achievements of any radical movement since the antebellum abolitionist movement. The resulting formations of the New Deal and conservative coalitions also constituted the most significant changes in US politics since the Civil War. In 1960, Du Bois called this phenomenon "a surge toward socialism," which, while the term "socialism" was not used except in a pejorative sense then and forever after, makes sense.[1]

Throughout their book, Brick and Phelps provide a great deal of rich descriptive material, but they miss the political roller coaster that radicals faced, from the upsurge of the late 1930s, to the fierce backlash against that upsurge, to the radically different situation created by World War II, to the decades-long second Red Scare. The

authors, reflecting a growing scholarship, acknowledge the central and largely positive role of the 1930s Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) on the left and combine this scholarly notion with the older view that the CPUSA advanced the struggle against racism and the struggle for workers' rights, but somehow prevented a more "democratic" form of socialism from taking shape in the United States.[2] Of course, the authors' conventional portrayal of communists as engaging in bureaucratic top-down organization and leadership does have a fair amount of validity. But the same leadership structure can be shown to exist in the various leftist groups that defined themselves as "anti-Stalinist" and "democratic socialist." These groups' pre-Cold War role was to fight against the Communist Party rather than to develop alternative organizations. Their skills as professional anti-communists made them valuable to US government and private Cold War organizations. From their ranks came Hook, Irving Kristol, Bell, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Alfred Kazin, and others, and groups like the American Committee for Cultural Freedom, which under Hook's leadership beginning in the late 1930s, took the concept of "totalitarianism" and applied it to both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union to oppose People's Front organizations in the United States rallying against the fierce anti-New Deal backlash.

The political party that served as the instrument of the New Deal coalition, and continues to this day as the political party of the center-left in the United States, the Democratic Party, was, as many on the center-left and the left realized

activities. To be fair, there is still little academic scholarship on this period, unlike the new histories of labor and civil rights struggles of the 1930s and 1940s.

Certainly the CPUSA never regained anything like its previous membership or its influence in the trade union movement. More important, education, organization, coordination of activities, and coalition building, issues that the CPUSA emphasized, never became the principles that subsequent radical movements accepted and sought to advance. But the authors make no attempt to study the ongoing and wide variety of activities of Communist Party activists like Herbert Aptheker, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Robert Hunter Thompson, Henry Winston, and William and Louise Thompson Patterson. They do not examine the formation of the American Institute for Marxist Studies (AIMS), the establishment of W. E. B. Du Bois Clubs for students and youth, and involvement in civil rights and peace struggles. Even Angela Davis is only mentioned sporadically in the book, even though she became the most important figure on the US left globally during and after her tenure as a CPUSA leader. This history is important if one is to understand both the developments after 1960 in radicals' relationship to the Great Society in the 1960s and 1970s—the revival of an anarchist and social democratic influenced "New Left" under which old factional struggles in new forms took shape—and the backlash by the old "anti-popular front left," now a central part of the Cold War liberal establishment through journals like *Dissent*, *Commentary*, and the *Public Interest*, and CIA-funded organizations.

There are other serious omissions. Harry Hay, the former Communist Party activist who left the party to found the Mattachine Society with fellow gay party members and others (the authors unfortunately use uncritically the House Un-American Committee term "fellow traveler" for those who worked with party members and belonged to party-led organizations) is also absent from the authors' treatment of the rise of gay liberation. The gay liberation movement tends to get lost in a chronology of anti-Vietnam War mobilizations, mounting Richard Nixon-era repressions, and eventual leftist fragmentations.

Du Bois's 1960 comment that McCarthyism made the study and discussion of socialism taboo and any portrayal of communism that did not begin and end with it as a criminal conspiracy subversive might have been a basis for writing an analytical synthesis of post-World War II radicalism in the United States had the authors grasped this point. How this notion shaped both the postwar

mainstream and the radical movements that arose to challenge it, with the civil rights movement as its most important domestic catalyst, would have also helped to provide a clearer context for readers to better understand the descriptive narrative.

The global context of national liberation and antiwar movements, in which students and youth played central roles, and their influence on American radicalism is also largely absent from the study. Ironically, in the global national liberation movements, communists, supported by the demonized Soviet Union, played a central role and served as the central international catalyst for sixties-era leftist movements. Brick and Phelps, though, continue to provide a blizzard of descriptive data, making it difficult to separate the significant from the insignificant. As a result, many major questions are touched on but not answered as the authors race to the finish line. For example, what was the "New Left" in historical terms and in its relationship to the "old" communist-led left that it rejected? While many ideological categories are mentioned, anarchism, which many viewed as central to many "New Left" groups and which was hardly new on the left, is absent from the analysis.

Perhaps writing for a twenty-first-century post-everything market, the authors sought to make peace not only with history but also with the current status quo that has sought with

clarity, not simply mentioned as footnotes to changing events. The work's later chapters, dealing with Ronald Reagan and post-Reagan era radicalism, follow the line of the earlier chapters, observing individuals and movements that are in themselves observers of a changing political landscape, describing rather than analyzing events. Once more the effects of radicalism on a changing United States in the context of global changes (the dismemberment of the Soviet Union, China's new model of socialist construction and changed relationship with the United States, and the global hot and cold war against internationalism terrorism) are not analyzed in their relationship to mass movements.

Important questions linger. Why did much of the left go back to supporting a Democratic Party that was far more conservative than it had been on domestic policy during the period of both the Old and New Left? Why did veterans of the civil rights movement support first Jimmy Carter and then Bill Clinton, the two most conservative Democrats in terms of policy elected in the twentieth century? Did radicals reach their low point in the early twentieth century because of their successes as the authors claim, or because of the long-term and cumulative effects of Cold War political economy and ideology (i.e., the undermining at best and dismantling at worst of the New Deal labor and social legislation that the "old" or communist-led or -influenced left had contributed to)? And finally, where, since the authors do bring their narrative up to the present with reference to Black Lives

Matter, is the Obama administration in the conclusion?

The authors conclude with some hopeful observations on the future, but so many questions remain unanswered and some unasked. When I was an undergraduate student at the City College of New York half a century ago, I learned to read between the lines of narrative histories and to turn descriptive detail into analysis that the authors themselves avoided. This work is rich with such detail, even with its errors and omissions; the rich detail is both a weakness and a strength of the book. The history of the post-World War II left is still largely unwritten. It will, of course, as history always does, reflect not only the sources available but also the dominant ideologies of the present and future in the interpretation of those sources.

Notes

[1]. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Socialism and the American Negro," in *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, and Addresses, 1887-1961*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), 304.

[2]. For a fine analytical monograph on the role of socialists and especially communists in the labor movement in the first half of the twentieth century, see Rosemary Feurer, *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900-1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

[3]. Steve Fraser, *The Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power* (Boston: Little Brown, 2015).

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