TRUTH AND ARTIFICE

COMMUNISM IN AUSTRALIA—FALSE PROMISES

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Communism is indeed now history. But even so, much remains for us to understand about the power of its attraction and about its spectacular collapse. We might also speculate if anything of value remains of what Marx and Engels created. The area of my research, though, has less to do with the history of Communism than with pursuing an understanding of the power of the belief that provided the motivation for many in Australia to embrace Communism and, for those who later rejected it, the pain in repudiating ideas that had become part of their personality.

In his foreword to the 2001 edition of Richard Crossman's *The God that Failed,* a collection of essays written by prominent intellectuals on their encounter with Communism, David C Engerman reflected "To become disillusioned with Communism, as these authors did, presupposes a prior 'illusionment'" (viii). The testimony of the persons that Crossman presents is at times ardent and at times bitter. It tells us as much about the time of their conversion as it does about the people themselves, but essentially it is about a personal vision of a better world that they believed Communism offered, and their disappointment when Communism failed them, as it was to fail others.

In this presentation I would like to apply those ideas of illusion and disillusion to the theme of this symposium—truth and artifice, but in the context of Australia's experience with Communism. To illustrate this I have drawn on the experiences of three Australians who became convinced that Marx was right and that Communism answered their political, economic and social concerns.

Communism in Australia

Communism came to Australia officially in 1920 with the formation in Sydney of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). The founding meeting was at the instigation of the Australian Socialist Party (ASP) in an attempt to consolidate the efforts of a number of socialist and militant radical groups who stood for "the emancipation of the working class by revolutionary action".[1] It was a rather disparate group that attended the meeting but

[1] Extract from invitation to the meeting on 30 October 1920 issued by the Australian Socialist Party. Communist Party of Australia records in Mitchell Library Sydney. MLMSS5021, Box 82.

one thing that they had in common was a deep distrust of the political character of the Australian Labor Party as a representative of the workers (Mortimer). This was largely based on a perception that the ALP was too close to the capitalist party.

Moscow's recognition of the new CPA was not automatic and not forthcoming until after a further meeting in Sydney in July 1922 achieved some form of unity among disputing factions, only then did the Communist International—the Comintern, accept the party's application for membership and declared the CPA as the Comintern's Australasian section (Wells). It did not take long for members of the new party to realise that Australian socialism and Comintern policy were almost diametrically opposed. This was an issue that remained unresolved in the CPA almost to the end. The Comintern dictated a policy of fostering world revolution to overthrow capitalism, and the task of the Party members everywhere was to hasten that downfall. The CPA on the other hand aimed at working within the Labor Party rather than as a separate body to bring about change (Davidson 16).

Any concerns among Australian workers about being so closely affiliated with an international body would be heightened when representatives of the CPA who attended Communist International Congresses became more aware of the extent to which the Comintern would direct CPA activities in Australia (Davidson 21). But, even now opinions differ as to the degree of intervention by the Comintern Executive Committee and the effectiveness of it.

The Sixth Congress of the Communist International in the Soviet Union in 1928 was crucial for the effect that outcomes of that Congress had on the Australian Party, particularly in relation to the influence that Moscow would exert on the CPA and Communist Parties in other countries. Stalin emerged from that congress in a very powerful position. In his address to the Congress, Stalin predicted that a new period of slumps and proletariat revolutions was beginning, and claimed that this new period would lead to depressions and revolutions. Further, that the "social democrats and labor parties would become the worst enemies of the working class because of their inclination towards 'social fascism' " (Davidson 49). This was in effect a direction to Communists everywhere to withdraw from any alliances in their countries with the so-called reformers.

From 1928 overseas delegates to Party Congresses in the USSR were constantly reminded of the need for unanimity of action as this was stated as essential to the survival of the USSR (Penrose). Survival of the revolution in the USSR required subservient Communist parties around the world, Australia included. As would be expected, the level of debate on Comintern proposals would have been considerably muted.

Esmonde Higgins who led the CPA delegation to the Congress in 1928 reported to the Party in Sydney what Stalin had said and declared; "We glory in the fact that we are an International Party" Higgins said, and that the Australian Party must now concentrate on capturing the "..leadership of the Australian workers from reformists. In elections the call was no longer 'Vote Labor but Vote for the Revolutionary Workers' candidates' (CPA or left-wing candidates)" (Curthoys). This was a new direction not totally greeted with approval in Australia. In effect it was a direction from the Comintern to the CPA leadership to withdraw all support from the ALP. But the CPA leadership did not immediately follow this line, although there were some in the CPA who believed the

Comintern's direction was right and even sought Moscow's support to implement that policy in Australia.

Direct intervention by the Comintern followed with the despatch to Australia of a delegate known in Australia as Herbert Moore. Moore's task was to reorganise the CPA in such a way that would ensure complete adherence to Comintern policy. Bitter debate within the CPA ensued, finally leading to a change in leadership that accepted and then closely followed the Comintern's direction.

It is relevant here, in relation to the artifice or illusion that was being created or was emerging at that time, to question the form in which it appeared. There can be little doubt that the 1917 Revolution acted as a beacon to working-class movements around the world. No country had experienced a successful workers' revolution as Russia appeared to have had. Lenin had been the beneficiary of Marx's legacy, and Stalin had now laid claim to it. This added a degree of infallibility to the Soviet leadership and by the end of 1929 Stalin was undisputed master of Russia; his personality cult glorifying him as the Lenin of today had begun.

Following the Comintern's intervention, the Moscow 'line' was now firmly established in the CPA and it became a Stalinist party. Any opportunity for the CPA to justify being called an Australian party was therefore lost, effectively preventing the development of an Australian road to socialism. Following the Moscow line caused continual internal wrangling of the CPA as the Party struggled to follow the twists and turns of Soviet policy and interpret that in the Australian context.

To the rank-and-file Communist in Australia, the new direction dictated by the Comintern appeared an attractive alternative to what was seen as a betrayal of the workers by the ALP, but an even more powerful incentive to follow Moscow was the belief that revolution was on the agenda, and this is what appears to have sustained many members of the CPA (Curthoys). Marx had reasoned that revolution and the destruction of capitalism was inevitable and that it would be replaced by Communism as the highest form of social organisation. Stalin's reference at the 1928 Congress to the 'Third Period' of capitalism that would herald this revolution resonated with communists and militant workers everywhere. Molotov went one step further by stating that there would be no fourth period, as the third would end in revolution (Penrose 2).

The Wall Street Crash in 1929 appeared as the forerunner to the collapse of capitalism and the imminent appearance of the revolution. The depression that followed the 'Crash' initiated a number of Government policies in Australia aimed at mitigating the effects, but by the time they became effective the unemployment rate had reached 27 percent. By 1933 nearly one third of breadwinners were out of work (Horne 225).

Mass meetings and marches of the unemployed and evicted workers demonstrated the disastrous effect of the Depression. The Communist Party effectively channelled the militancy of the unemployed into the Unemployed Workers Union, a body that the Party controlled. Consequently membership of the Party increased, and the perception that the Party was much larger than it actually was is understandable because of its considerable involvement in the demonstrations. It is equally understandable that despite considerable community effort to assist those in need, Communists appeared to be the only ones to be doing something to assist them.

The range of converts to Communism was wide. There were those who joined the Communist Party because the situation in Australia during the 1930s made it seem the right thing to do. There were also those who thought deeply about the philosophy of Communism before committing themselves, and there were those in between. The three persons I have selected for this brief analysis will provide the insight we need to catch a glimpse of the illusion and the disillusion.

Ward

In his autobiography, *A Radical Life,* notable Australian historian Russel Ward details much of his early life, but in that detail there is little that indicates personal disadvantage or adversity. For many, this was reason enough to align themselves with radical causes, as many did find in the Communist Party Marx's recognition of their situation and the promise of emancipation from it.

Ward entered university from high school and during the 1930s met a succession of influential people, but in his own words, "After four years' study and play I was no nearer to understanding my own country, and the world events which threatened it" (Ward 24), but this was to change. Australia, at the time, was in the grip of the depression, while internationally the threat to international peace posed by the rise of fascism in Europe became real with the civil war in Spain, Mussolini's bloody adventure in Ethiopia and Hitler's seizure of the position of Chancellor in Germany. Ward now became quite explicit as to his detestation of the apparent appeasement of fascism by some countries Australia included, and he believed he saw in the USSR the only effective barrier to its spread.

Over a period, Ward had gradually developed pacifist views and he became convinced that socialist ideals of collective ownership of the means of production would bring an end to wars and abolish poverty. He also believed that "Communists were the only people who unequivocally shared these views" (Ward 139). In 1941 both Ward and his wife joined the Communist Party because "Germany and Japan had to be defeated and it still seemed more unlikely than ever it would be without the massive help of the USSR" (Ward 139). How Ward was able to rationalise his views on fascism and the non-aggression pact Stalin had concluded with Hitler, is not fully explained; even news of Stalin's "murderous repression of freedom [was] dismissed as capitalist propaganda" (Ward 139).

Ward's beliefs were further sustained by undertaking studies to gain a deeper understanding of Marxist philosophy but, as Ward admits, with his later absence from these regular "devotional exercises with comrades" (Ward 195) his faith gradually withered away. However, Ward remained an active member of the Communist Party, which was to have later consequences for his future as a teacher and academic.

As part of the Liberal Party policy leading up to the Federal Election of 1949, Robert Menzies announced that he would outlaw the Communist Party in Australia and confiscate its assets. The CPA mounted a vigorous campaign against Menzies, and this placed a heavy burden on members to be involved. Personal circumstances caused Ward's wife to cease to be involved in Party activities, and Russel followed. His departure attracted much criticism, but there appears little doubt that he became disillusioned by Kruschev's revelations about Stalin' murderous activities. Nevertheless, despite feeling

some relief on leaving, he remained convinced that Marxist philosophy was "incomparably the best guide to action for those who would change the world" (Ward 195).

Sendy

The attraction of Communism that John Sendy experienced was quite different to that of Russel Ward, as was his subsequent departure from it. Sendy spent thirty-five years as a Party functionary, sixteen years of which was spent on National Councils of the Party in Australia. He travelled widely around Australia, visited the Soviet Union, Italy and Czechoslovakia, and spent three and a half years in China studying under the tutelage of Chinese and Soviet theoreticians (Sendy 1-2). He was a real communist veteran.

To Sendy, Communism was the champion of the working-class who had suffered the most during the depression. That experience prompted many to contemplate alternative societies, such as that offered by Communism. Sendy further elevates Communism as having a "lofty humanitarian cause" (Sendy 11). He writes that for him, joining the party was the obvious thing to do, which implied almost unquestioning acceptance of what socialism and Communism meant at that time in Australia. He was influenced by his father, who read widely and held strong socialist views; the whole family joined the Party in 1940.

Unquestioning acceptance is further suggested where Sendy explains that Communist Party members do not usually clutch Marx's *Capital* in one hand and Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* in the other and that their appreciation of Communist ideals is usually quite limited. "But most who join are just ordinary people fed up with exploitation in their job, tired of the opportunism of the ALP, awake to the rotten aspects of capitalism" (Sendy 11). This is where Sendy confesses his belief that Communism was the alternative society that would provide resolution of this problem. His role was not one of a prominent official, but as one with a reputation for reliability, loyalty and steadfastness rather than any intellectual ability. What then, would make such a committed communist leave the Party.

Sendy's departure in 1974 occurred at a time when membership of the CPA was in serious and, as it turned out, irreversible decline. Stalinism, he relates, robbed the Party of the will for vigorous analysis. Subsequent purges and splits within the Party mostly occurring after Kruschev's revelations about Stalin, caused widespread disillusionment and defection from the Party.

Sendy's honesty does him credit. He questions the likelihood of socialism ever having a chance in Australia, and expresses frustration at the many Communists who mistakenly viewed the Bolshevik Revolution as the model for similar revolution in Australia. He emphasises the failure of many Communists to appreciate the reality of the situation in Australia, which was as different as it was possible to be from that of the Soviet Union. Too much time and effort, he believed, was then expended in trying to correct deviant tendencies. For those like Sendy, who gave their unquestioning commitment to Communism in Australia, to see the results of their efforts in all but a few cases come to nothing, was more painful than many seem ready to relate, Sendy included.

Inglis

A re-occurring feature in this research is the extent to which families influenced their children's decision to become a Communist—this is certainly the case with Amirah Inglis. Amirah was born in Melbourne in 1926 of Polish-Jewish immigrants. She was already an embryo Communist, as she called herself, when she entered Melbourne University in 1944. This was as a result of her parents' socialist critiques of capitalism and the vision that they had "of a world without inequality and war, where men and women worked together for the common good and did not kill each other for their religion or race" (Inglis 7). Both parents were communists and believed that this was what Communism had achieved in the Soviet Union. They raised their daughter on the same dream, and so Amirah joined the Party when she turned 18.

Amirah's membership of the University Labor Club, which had a predominant Communist Party faction, entailed attending meetings and listening to talks given by visiting Communists which fostered a strong belief in what the Party was doing. They sang the *Internationale* with the conviction that their ideal of a perfect world would come and in their lifetime. "Marxism had disclosed the motive force of class struggle" she wrote, and "Lenin had laid out the path; our Bolshevik models gave us the revolutionary plans, the fighting rhetoric and the intolerance of opposition" (Inglis 30).

There were many challenges for Australian Communists in their pursuit of the ideal Communist society but, for many, Amirah included, their faith in the Soviet Union was unshaken. The expulsion of Yugoslavia from the Cominform, the successor of the Comintern, the coup in Czechoslovakia, the trials and execution of the Hungarian Foreign Minister failed to raise any doubts about the involvement of the Soviet Union in these events. Unlikely stories that twelve of the original founders of the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia were part of a Zionist conspiracy did not raise any questions. "We believed it. We had to believe it or give up our faith" Amirah explains (Inglis 122).

Party Branch life, Amirah relates, continued to be rich and satisfying. "My attachment to the Party was as much spiritual as intellectual; a faith I was born into" (Inglis 133) Yet, criticism of the Party leadership and increasing factionalism began to raise doubts about where the party was heading and who would be leading it. Publications started to appear in Australia which gave an entirely different picture of what life was like in the Soviet Union. Amirah now expressed her surprise at these disturbing revelations, which challenged what she had been brought up to believe about the Soviet Union and read about in the Communist press.

Doubts also began to arise among Party members about events in Hungary, and despite assurances from friends that what Russia had done in Hungary was justified, Amirah's connection with the Party became tenuous. She remained in the Party with what she called "hopeful blindness" (Inglis, 173). Questioning about how Marxist teachings of Lenin, Stalin, Liu Shao-chi and Mao Zedong could be applied in Australia surfaced despite Australian Party leadership insisting on the correctness of the Soviet and Chinese models. When differences arose between the USSR and China, the Party in Australia stated that there could not be any serious differences between "..the two great socialist powers. Was not their unity built on the common basis of Marxism-Leninism?" (Inglis 174). Discussion on the subject was not permitted, and when Amirah demanded a Branch

meeting of the Party be held to explain the difference or else she would resign, her resignation was accepted.

Evidently the decision to quit the Party was not just related to this issue, as Amirah herself admits that "no one reason is enough to explain why believers lose belief" (Inglis 175). Also, for those who did not leave the party, she could not understand why when despite everything that now became known about the USSR, they remained committed to a social system which so little resembled their dream of "justice and equality, a rigid ideology which did not help to explain the post-war world, a party whose policies and tactics were so often out of touch with the hopes and realities of the very Australians we claimed to lead" (Inglis 189).

A large part of Amirah's life was devoted to the Communist cause, and her story is interspersed with her responsibilities as a mother and the anguish associated with a failed marriage to Ian Turner, himself a prominent party member. Interestingly, after so much devotion to Communism, her leaving the Party is not expressed so much in terms of disappointment with the failure of the cause as with a sense of wonderment of what sustained those who remained. Amirah observes two well-known Party members, Katharine Susannah Prichard and Jean Devanny, and appears almost puzzled that they maintained their belief "in class war and in the party members as warriors" (Inglis 191). In trying to understand the tenacity of their commitment, Amirah concludes that for them and others it was always belief before the facts.

What conclusion can be drawn from these brief sketches about the illusion and disillusionment that people experienced with Communism. The influence of contemporary events—the depression, fascism and WW2—cannot be ruled out, nor the considerable public support for the Soviet Union, or more specifically the Red Army, when it appeared to be alone in recognising the Nazi threat, and again portrayed as alone at Stalingrad. To this must be added the willingness to believe in communism almost as a religion. The Party demanded complete submission without offering anything in return other than the revolution which would solve everything, but no one was able to say when it would come. The stronger the demands, the stronger the beliefs in whatever came out of the Party—we had to believe, writes Amirah, and so the artifice became real. But as the truth began to emerge, the interesting fact is that while all three eventually rejected the Party, they all retained some loyalty to their socialist ideals.

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