

“Radicals and Revolutionaries: The History of Canadian Communism From the Robert S. Kenny Collection.” An Exhibit Held at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto. 27 April - 10 July, 1998. Curated by Sean Purdy.

The history of Canadian Communism has engendered little interest among scholars outside of the Party. With this exhibition, Sean Purdy hopes to change that. “Radicals and Revolutionaries,” an exhibit of selected documents from the collection of life-long collector and Communist Party member Robert S. Kenny, celebrates the acquisition of this collection by the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto. The books, pamphlets, posters, party paraphernalia, and records collected by Kenny, a Party activist with access to internal Party documents, are grouped into eight topical categories that suggest various ways of conceptualizing Party activities and Party life. Adopting a theoretical rather than a chronological approach allows Purdy to present the documents in a way clearly intended to attract scholarly attention. It also aims at shattering some of the pervasive misapprehensions about Communism in general and the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) in particular.

No student of Canadian history, whatever their previous knowledge of the Party, could leave this exhibit unimpressed by how drastically Canada’s political climate was altered by the Cold War. Effectively dispelling the myth that the Canadian state accommodates political dissent, and that Canadians treated Communists far more decently than our alarmist neighbours to the south, Purdy presents the evidence of Canada’s persecution and incarceration of Communists solely on the basis of their participation in legal organizations and activities. This is highlighted by a 1934 photograph of a huge rally held at Toronto’s Maple Leaf Gardens to celebrate CPC leader Tim Buck’s release from Kingston Penitentiary, underlining the point that the suppression of Communism was the act of a repressive state, rather than a response to popular anti-Communism.

The accumulated evidence suggests, moreover, that the negative effects of official state anti-Communism were not restricted to Communists and other political dissenters. On the contrary, the unmistakable traces of Cold War propaganda on our collective historical memory is one of the underlying themes of the exhibit. Beginning with a selection of important publications, including some early editions of Marx and Engels, that demonstrate the impressive history of socialist thought, Purdy directly challenges the popular dismissal of socialism as a viable political philosophy. Evidence of socialist publications circulating in Canada since the late nineteenth century and produced by Canadian political thinkers since the 1910s challenges its absence from the standard histories as an overt, and possibly deliberate, omission.

It is also apparent that the historical erasure of Canada’s socialist tradition

has had a significant impact on contemporary political thinking. The easy abbreviations of political ideas encouraged by the simplistic reduction of Communism to a social malignancy, rather than as an ideological alternative to capitalism, still define the parameters of acceptable political choice. Thus, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union has removed any reasonable excuse for applying political blinkers, the political culture in the West is constrained by a reductionist view that restricts our ability to conceive of, much less develop, political alternatives. The breadth of the collection allows Purdy the opportunity to include the work of well-known Canadians, such as Stanley Ryerson, and of other public figures, such as Hellen Keller and Albert Einstein, who openly endorsed socialism. These items, by suggesting how thoroughly evidence of the socialist inclinations of prominent opinion-shapers were suppressed, are mute testimony to the power of Cold War dichotomies to silence dissent and discredit dissenters.

Communism is, of course, not merely a political philosophy but also a guide to action, and the exhibit highlights some of the diverse activities in which Communists participated. Post-Cold War assumptions of Communism's narrowly doctrinaire past and contemporary irrelevance are confronted by the evidence that the Party took a leading role in popular campaigns for peace, social justice, and government accountability. The range of activities in which Communists were active and the popular appeal of socialist ideas suggests not only a corrective to the image of Communists as spies and bomb-throwing revolutionaries, but also provides evidence of how the existence of a viable socialist alternative shaped Canadian political life before the Cold War, and the centrality of its influence in achieving the Canadian welfare state.

As a proud Party member until the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Kenny was centrally concerned with the life of, and life within, the Party. Memorabilia, minutes of meetings, photographs of Party stalwarts, and internal documents provide insight into the Party's origins and construction, expressing eloquently the vitality that characterized Communist political discourse, and the enthusiasm generated by the various intellectual debates, especially during the 1940s and 1950s, when the Party was regarded by its opponents as a genuine political threat. The political campaign posters on display throughout the room, along with pamphlets and leaflets detailing the Party's efforts to organize unemployed workers and its participation in the war effort, amply demonstrate the Party's participation in national and local politics at every level. The systematic state repression that has consigned this history to obscurity is both implied by the weight of the evidence on display and portrayed in the photographs of police suppression of Communist demonstrators and the evocative engravings of Lawrence Hyde. Equally stirring are the posters and mementoes of Communists who joined the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion to fight in the Spanish Civil War.

Yet despite the emotive power of this history, and with the particular

exceptions of the graphic art displayed on the walls, the exhibit evokes a surprisingly unemotional response. Aware that Purdy is both an historian and an activist, I had anticipated a more direct engagement with what must be a central issue for contemporary socialists: the rebuilding of a vital socialist alternative. While reclaiming a vibrant and relevant past is an important aspect of this project, the failure to engage with the question of how we can use this history to reshape the future only reinforces the cynical judgment of the disengaged majority that socialism, whatever its erstwhile promise, has been exposed as a failed experiment and that, sadly, there is nothing to be done.

Two factors seem to account for this omission. The first of these, and the most evident, is Purdy's emphasis on the Communist Party as a political institution, as opposed to Communism as a social movement. My own research on Canadian Communists during the Cold War suggests the importance of such a distinction. While the Party provided a political and economic critique, a guiding vision of social change, and frequently an initiating concept for grassroots organizing, as well as skilled organizers — all of which were crucial to the movement — the movement was always more than the Party. People joined the movement, and sometimes the Party, because they saw it as a vehicle for social change.

The vitality of the movement waxed and waned according to social and economic conditions and the ability of the Party to organize in response to them. Whether the Party decisively influenced what it termed "mass organizations" or whether community organizations simply benefited from the expertise and advice of skilled Party cadres, the momentum of these grassroots activities depended on their popular appeal. Thus, it is critically important that, in addition to celebrating the Party's achievements, we also look critically at its failures, and in particular, to examine what inadequacies within the CPC, once the most vibrant organization of the popular left, eroded its relevance as a political vehicle. In other words, we need to consider the Communist Party in relation to the movement it engendered, and to focus as much attention on the rank-and-file members as on internal Party policies and activities.

Yet even in the sections expressly devoted to grassroots and union organizing, the exhibit focuses on the Party as an organization, rather than as a variable and fluctuating community reflecting a diversity of interwoven, and sometimes contradictory, interests. This tendency is perhaps most obvious in the section of the exhibit that details the Party's activities in fighting for women's rights, against racism, and in the lesbian and gay movement. These are key areas in which the Party's insistence on defining the problem overrode the efforts of those directly involved to define their own struggles within the Party. Finding their issues expressed in terms inconsistent with their own experience, and experiencing continued marginalization within the Party, most of these activists chose to struggle without, rather than within, the Communist movement.

Secondly, rather than attempting to explain the Communist phenomenon, the theoretical structure of the exhibit seems specifically designed to suggest possible research topics. The focus on institutional history, and the compression of chronology into conceptual categories reinforces the perception of Party history as moribund, a topic to be studied for its historical interest rather than its contemporary relevance, and by historians, rather than activists.

Finding it initially difficult to articulate my sense of disappointment, I found enlightenment in a conversation I struck up with another viewer. He, it turned out, was a long-time socialist who had personal experience of many of the events referred to in the documents. While he was impressed by the variety of the documents on display, and pleased that such an important collection was attracting popular attention, he found the exhibit historically confusing and overly theoretical, despite his long history of political involvement. Like me, and no doubt with similar exaggerated hopes, he had wanted it not only to celebrate the history of the Canadian left, but also to stimulate new ideas and suggest new directions for organizing and action.

In spite of the disappointment I felt as an activist in response to this exhibition, as an historian, I was excited about the possibilities it suggested. Indeed, its failure to address those questions I felt were most pressing prompted me to review once again the reason I do historical work. History, I suggest, should not only help us to explain the present but also to guide our efforts to intervene in the future. Such a project is admittedly ambitious. Yet surely it was on precisely such outrageously ambitious hopes that the Communist movement was built, and with which, for several decades, it led a significant number of Canadians in their struggle to make a better world.

Julie Guard  
York University