

Christopher Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook: Marxist and Pragmatist* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1997).

Christopher Phelps opens his biography with a 1985 White House ceremony at which President Reagan handed out the Medal of Freedom, "America's highest civilian medal of honor," to Jimmy Stewart, Frank Sinatra, Jeane Kirkpatrick, and Sidney Hook, among others. In his remarks the president singled out Sidney Hook as "one of the first to warn the intellectual world of its moral obligations and personal stake in the struggle between freedom and totalitarianism." Reagan's tribute confirmed Hook's status as one of the country's preeminent anti-Communists. For several decades the name Sidney Hook was synonymous with remonstrative opposition to a succession of "progressive" currents, from the popular front to the New Left. And yet throughout the Reagan era Hook insisted that he was still a socialist, and a supporter of the welfare state and the mixed economy. One conservative summed up Hook as "the best kind of socialist: an anti-socialist socialist."

Sidney Hook was born in 1902 and died in 1989. In certain respects his life-course was similar to that of other New York Intellectuals. He grew up in Brooklyn (his father was a tailor), and graduated from City College in 1923 with a degree in social science. As a graduate student in philosophy at Columbia University, Hook gravitated toward the ideas of John Dewey, the noted public intellectual. In particular, he adopted Dewey's pragmatism, which held that the task of philosophy is to contribute to the ability of humanity to attend to its most pressing problems, rather than to formulate ageless concepts. At the ripe age of twenty-seven he landed a job at New York University, where he taught courses on methodology, the history of philosophy, Hegelian thought, and Marxism. By all accounts he was an extremely popular teacher. Hook remained a mainstay of the institution until his retirement in 1973, when he joined the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace in Palo Alto, California. Among philosophers he was known as a controversial public figure, but also as one of Dewey's leading disciples and a critical interpreter of Marx, Hegel, and Dewey.

At the same time that Hook established a promising academic career, he was also immersed in left-wing causes. As a teenager he gave street corner speeches for the Socialist Party mayoral candidate, Morris Hillquit, and explored IWW bookshops. His high school teachers apparently regarded him as some kind of exotic anarcho-Bolshevik hybrid. In the 1920s he concentrated on his graduate studies but also maintained a friendly attitude toward the far left, particularly the fledgling Communist Party. A prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship at the end of the decade enabled him and his first wife, Carrie Katz,

to travel to Germany, Austria, and the Soviet Union. In Germany he talked over Marxism with Edward Bernstein and attended lectures by Karl Korsch. He found Berlin “cozy and Christmaslike,” and was impressed by what he saw of the U.S.S.R. Writing on a postcard sent from Moscow, Hook told his parents

This is Moscow — bizarre and gorgeous — a city of startling contrasts — carrying ugly scars of the past and seeds of the future. Food is mean and clothes are rather shabby — but every brick, every road, every machine is a symbol of the new spirit. I have seen no Potemkin village. Just mingling with the people has enabled me to tap veins of enthusiasm that run deep under the surface of things. And just think of it! A country in which the red flag is a national banner and the *Internationale* the national anthem.

Phelps says that Hook “was among the few young intellectuals to stick it out through radicalism’s dog days, but conflicting accounts make it difficult to reconstruct the precise nature of his involvement.” From the available evidence, Phelps concludes that Hook was “very close” to the Communists for a full decade, from the early 1920s onward. Carrie Katz, whom he married in 1924, was a charter member of the party, a rank-and-file partisan of the faction around William Z. Foster. Together they supported the Foster-Ford Communist presidential ticket in 1932. Rather than signing up as a party member, however, Hook saw himself as a sympathizer, a fellow traveller who could perhaps make a contribution as a philosopher of Marxism. As Hook grew wary of the party, his marriage crumbled. By 1933 Katz and Hook had separated. Two years later, Hook married an NYU student, Ann Zinkin, who was more comfortable with his mounting antipathy toward the Communist project.

Hook’s break with orthodox Marxist-Leninism was several years in the making. He privately grumbled about the party’s “stupid leadership,” and his pragmatic affiliations came into conflict with the party’s hardening dialectical materialism. One Communist friend warned him in a letter that an “adherent of the class struggle has a right to discriminate against certain stuff as contraband.” The contraband in question, of course, was pragmatism. A decisive moment arrived when a top-ranking Communist intellectual, Joseph Freeman, arranged a private meeting in late 1932 at which Hook was challenged to defend or recant his philosophical views to a hostile ensemble of party leaders, including Earl Browder, James Ford, Alexander Trachtenberg, Robert Minor, and V.J. Jerome. Within weeks of the meeting, Hook lent his name to a fund-raising appeal to aid supporters of the Left Opposition imprisoned inside the Soviet Union, and initiated a correspondence with Leon Trotsky. The party faithful would have

regarded these actions as tantamount to treason.

Within a few years of his break with the party, Hook achieved a high public profile as a critic of international Communism. As Phelps observes, he became “a virtual house writer for the *New York Times* on issues of Communism and education, and anti-communism was the largest single topic of his works.” In 1950, in the pages of the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, he formulated the argument that the “heresy” or ordinary dissent tolerated under the American system was a far cry from the threat posed by the Communist “conspiracy.” For this reason, colleague deans and high school principals who took swift action against CP faculty were to be applauded. He scorned those who regarded Joseph McCarthy as a greater threat to civil liberties than the Communists, and later denounced the campus new left as a “dire threat to democratic liberties,” in Phelps’s words. By this time Hook’s socialism seemed to consist of a general sympathy for human betterment and a mild form of economic redistribution via the instrumentality of social spending. On philosophical and scientific grounds he retained the atheist and secular views of his early years. A broadly-conceived anti-Communism (Phelps prefers “anti-communism”) remained his political touchstone.

Phelps is less than enamored with the long, post-1930s phase of Sidney Hook’s career, regarding it with cautionary disdain. The bulk of his study is concerned with the dramatic period from the early to the late 1930s. At stake is a five-year period during which Hook marched in step with the revolutionary socialist left. Having abandoned Communism, he briefly positioned himself as an independent Marxist before embracing the West in the early days of World War Two. Thus, as Phelps says, his book “seeks to understand and recover the legacy of a much younger and very different Sidney Hook.” For the most part, this more radical phase of Hook’s life and work has been overlooked by critics and supporters alike who have understandably emphasized Hook’s leading role in the postwar ideological crusades. In Phelps’s view, not only has Hook’s radicalism been unfairly neglected by historians and memoir-writers, but as a matter of fact “many of the solutions he put forward years ago have remarkable resonance today.”

The late 1930s was an extraordinary period for U.S. intellectuals who stood to the left of the Communist Party. While the Communists were gaining influence through their policy of the popular front, the intellectual far left was not without resources of its own. The Sidney Hook that Phelps admires was in the thick of the New York anti-Stalinist socialist intellectuals; but at the same time, he had a reputation for being somewhat fixed in his thinking. Philip Rahv and William Phillips, the main editors of *Partisan Review*, were said by William Barrett to regard Hook as a “kind of Johnny One-note, clear and forceful but always

monotonous in the one issue he was always pursuing.” And Irving Howe later said that “even his friends had to admit that something was missing in Hook, some imaginative flair or depth of sensibility that might complement his intellectual virtuosity.” Partly for this reason, perhaps, and with only a few exceptions, Hook has received less than fulsome attention in the literature on the New York Intellectuals, although his views and writings are often cited in passing. Phelps’s biography offers a capable and energetic, albeit selective, remedy. The same might be said of Hook’s autobiography, *Out of Step: An Unquiet Life in the 20th Century*, (1987) which was selective in a different way and unreliable in certain specifics, but vigorously argued and entertainingly written.

The case for Hook’s importance as an independent Marxist rests on two grounds. First, there are the articles and books he produced which examined the Hegelian origins of Marxism from a leftist and pragmatist perspective. Second, there are his political activities, particularly his membership in the American Workers Party and his comradeship relationship with the Trotskyists.

Hook’s first book, *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*, (1933) cast Marx as a practical-minded philosopher whose work provided a historically-contingent guide to working class self-activity. Rather than viewing Marx’s words as infallible scripture, activists could pay closer attention to the fluid, dialectical approach that Marx took in responding to changing circumstances. “Marxism,” said Hook, “is neither a science nor a myth, but a realistic method of social action ... The task of the revolutionary philosopher is to bring social classes to an awareness of what it is they are doing and the historical conditions of their activity.”

For the most part reviewers praised Hook’s account as both clear and well-informed, although some readers were concerned that Hook had tamed Marx by turning him into a respectable pragmatist. The CP press denounced Hook’s failure to define Marxism as a science of history, and the party’s leading theoreticians were even more disturbed by the impact of Hook’s next book, *From Hegel to Marx: Studies in the Intellectual Development of Karl Marx* (1936), which cemented Hook’s scholarly reputation as a student of Marx and Hegel.

*From Hegel to Marx* provided a careful analysis of Marx’s evolving relationship with Hegel’s philosophy and with some of Hegel’s followers, such as Bruno Bauer, Arnold Ruge, Max Stirner, and Ludwig Feuerbach. This emphasis on the Young and Left Hegelians distinguished Hook’s approach from earlier accounts and earned him lavish praise from a variety of sources. The *Economist* magazine, for example, called the book “far and away the best account of an obscure and important subject at present available in English.” As Phelps points out, Hook “managed to explain Marx’s relationship to Hegel without turning Marx

into a Hegelian,” while taking into account “the mediating influence of the Young Hegelians of the 1830s and 1840s upon the young Marx.” Once again, the Communists and other orthodox Marxists warned that Hook’s preoccupation with the active and dynamic side of Marx’s politics and philosophy obscured Marx’s efforts to identify the economic laws of capitalism, and drew too heavily on pragmatism’s preference for means over ends.

Phelps mournfully notes that *From Hegel to Marx* “would prove his last full-length scholarly contribution as a revolutionary socialist, a final moment in his long period of commitment to radical philosophy and revolutionary political engagement.” The irony is that the works Hook produced after he jettisoned Marxism displayed a small fraction of the verve and intellectual ambition of his earliest writings. “Herein lies an old tale,” argues Russell Jacoby. “As a Marxist sympathizer he wrote thoughtful and philosophical books; as a sworn enemy of Marxism, he fell into a philosophical rut, endlessly recasting the same positions.”

Aside from writing books and conducting archival research, Hook wrote numerous reviews for the left press. His extended debate with Max Eastman over the underpinnings of Marxism attracted considerable attention in intellectual circles. Following his break with the Communists, Hook joined forces with the American Workers Party, an innovative but short-lived radical labour group led by the venerated activist A.J. Muste. At Muste’s request Hook drafted the party’s founding statement of principles, which called for an integration of socialist practice and “American working-class experience.” A year later, he worked behind the scenes to help engineer the merger of Muste’s AWP and the main Trotskyist group, the Communist League of America. The merged organization was called the Workers Party of the United States, which became the Socialist Workers Party. From Hook’s perspective, both the AWP and the Trotskyists recognized the importance of promoting a new form of democracy, one that was based on working class participation and leadership in industry. But Hook decided against joining the merged group, partly in hopes of finding more time for his philosophical work.

Despite this decision Hook actively collaborated with the Trotskyists, particularly around international issues. For example, he became quite active in the Trotsky Defense Committee, which sought to refute the explosive charges raised at the Moscow Trials of 1936-1937. Hook’s involvement helped peak the interest of his old professor and mentor, John Dewey, in the issues surrounding the Stalin-Trotsky fight, and Dewey agreed to chair a group called the Preliminary Committee of Inquiry into the Charges Made Against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials, which is sometimes known as the Dewey Commission. The efforts of Dewey, Hook, and many others provided a countervailing force to the political

culture of the popular front, which accepted the nonsensical legalisms emanating out of Moscow. Long before he became a hero to readers of William Buckley's *National Review* Hook eagerly sought out opportunities to mock the zig-zag policies of the Communist Party and to challenge supporters of the Soviet Union to boisterous debate. As Hook's anti-Stalinist class politics gave way to a purer anti-Communism, his dalliance with the Trotskyists became lumped with his earlier support for the CP as one continuous revolutionary mirage.

Christopher Phelps has done an admirable job of recovering Hook's radicalism and situating his early scholarship in a broader intellectual and social context. He mounts a robust case for the view that Hook's commitment to pragmatic values actually strengthened his Marxist scholarship and gave him valuable insights into radical political practice. As Phelps recognizes, this favorable evaluation of Dewey's influence on Hook challenges the received wisdom on both Right and Left which assumes that pragmatism and Marxism are incompatible and that any attempt to reconcile or synthesize these divergent approaches will result in an incoherent muddle. Hook's transition from revolutionary socialism to secular American patriotism came about, Phelps insists, not as a consequence of pragmatism's inherent limitations but because of changing political conditions and the relative weakness of the far left. When his "pragmatist philosophy of action ... encountered historical defeat in the combination of fascism, Stalinism, and war, Hook's Marxism was unable to sustain its radical bearings."

Phelp's effort to uncover, explore, and analyze Hook's forgotten leftism must be judged an unqualified success. I remain to be convinced, however, that the act of reviving the radical Sidney Hook offers much in terms of creating a way forward for the contemporary left. Certainly the organizational realignments with which Hook was concerned with in the mid-1930s have limited application to present-day conditions. While his work on Marx and Hegel was path-breaking for its time, and richly merits the more recent reprintings, it has been superceded in important respects by scholarship that has been done in the past thirty years. While Hook is, without question, one of the most important polemicists to emerge out of the circle of the New York Intellectuals, the idea that "many of the solutions" that Hook argued for as a young intellectual "have remarkable resonance today" seems to be an example of understandable biographical overkill rather than probing political wisdom.

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