

Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998).

Immediately following World War I, organizations based primarily on race or class generally precluded serious interracial organization *and* theoretical analysis of the interplay between racial and class-based discrimination. Marcus Garvey captured the imagination of the New Negro in his quest to build an Africa for Africans, but his venture, the United Negro Improvement Association, quickly became mired in scandal, and Garvey's pandering to capitalists alienated him from more class conscious black liberationists. The Socialist Party offered a place for African Americans to work with whites to fight against capitalism, but it did not fully integrate the problem of racism into its understanding of class struggle.

The American Communist party challenged the duality represented by the Garveyites and the Socialists. Founded in 1919, the American party took nine years to formulate its thinking on the role of racism within a capitalist society. But at its Sixth Congress, in 1928, the Communist party finally committed itself to its line on self-determination in the Black Belt. This theory's creation and the activity and discussion that it generated began a groundbreaking interracial movement based upon the idea that the struggle against racism was a precondition to class unity.

By examining the complex relationship between the American Communist party and African Americans, Mark Solomon's *The Cry Was Unity* induces readers to rethink the historical connection between race and class and its relevance to today's society. This book, the first in a promised two-volume series, integrates first-rate interviews and archival materials with rich sources gleaned from the Communist International's archives in Moscow. In fact, this is the first book to incorporate materials from the Comintern's archives into an analysis of the relationship between African Americans and the Communist party. These revealing sources provide both national and international perspectives on the issues of race and class, placing Solomon at the center of the ongoing debate concerning the nature of American communism.

To this end, Solomon deftly challenges the two schools of thought on American communism and argues for a new paradigm. The first group of scholars, including Irving Howe, Lewis Coser, Theodore Draper, and Harvey Klehr, interpreted all aspects of internationalism with negative moral overtones. Moreover, by assuming that top-level discussions and factional fighting always dictated the attitudes and actions of people who organized on the city streets and in industrial workplaces, these scholars often ignored local developments and grass roots rationales that inspired working people to join the Communist party.

The second school of scholars, who came of age in the 1960s, began to contextualize American communism. Rather than emphasize the small and

sectarian nature of the party in the 1920s, as Draper and other scholars had in the 1950s, these New Left historians looked at the party during its Popular Front heyday of the 1930s and 1940s and concluded that people joined the Communist party because it was a radical movement that offered solutions to America's problems.<sup>2</sup> These scholars created a more sympathetic history of American communists. Yet, many of them continued to grant Moscow's unyielding control of the American party while assuring their readers that it was in spaces between the party's leaders and rank and file where members exerted their own free will. As Solomon argues, "Their portraits did not fully conform to the way the Party functioned and did not seriously examine the nature of external influences — reducing the issue to cancerous sores, best excised from the movement's relatively healthy tissue." (xxi) These revisionist scholars romanticized the communist movement, misrepresented the role of the Comintern in the life of the American party, and downplayed more sectarian communist attitudes.

The opening of Moscow's archive has created a new period of Communist party history, where opportunities to revisit the nature of American communism are ample. The first studies to appear, however, hark back to old schools of thought. Yale's series, *Annals of American Communism*, is determined to give *ex post facto* credence to McCarthyism's broad attacks against political dissent.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, works such as Ed Johanningsmeier's, *Forging American Communism*, show that Moscow's external control of American communists was in fact broken by a few examples when individuals, in this case William Z. Foster who was one of the most powerful and respected American party leaders, somehow forged their own path.<sup>4</sup>

Solomon, however, adeptly uses these sources to take the study of American communism in a new direction. He accomplishes this by examining the "interplay of national and international forces, of theory and practice, and of leadership and rank and file in the making and execution of policy." (xxi) This new approach to American communism depicts communists' individuality while simultaneously making readers aware that American communists all worked within a coherent national and international political culture. Rather than a "secret" or "soviet" world of American communism, Solomon finds that sources from Moscow's archives most importantly reveal the party's ideological fervour. Such intensity sometimes resulted in poor judgment and rigid policies, but taken as a whole, he concludes, the Communist party's devotion to racial justice and equality allowed its interracial membership to brave important new paths and stimulate necessary new discussions.

Unlike national studies that insist such zeal emanated in Moscow only to be mechanically imposed upon American communists, Solomon provides a survey of the national party scene offering regional analyses of how African Americans understood such directives and, more interestingly, how they used

them. He culls evidence from Chicago's neighbourhoods, New York's health clubs, and North Carolina's meeting halls. Never shy to point out the party's excesses or theoretical inconsistencies, Solomon succeeds at critiquing communists' faults while hailing their ultimate intention.

Although Solomon is sensitive to local developments, black political thought, and personal dynamics, he is not a believer in "oppositional culture." Solomon is a materialist who believes his subjects were motivated first and foremost by "the crushing burdens of the economic crisis and a consequent consciousness of social injustice, racial and national oppression, and class partisanship." (xxv) Solomon concentrates on these matters in his study, and uses this perspective to evaluate the international and national interplay of the Communist party. Rather than attack all turns in the party line, Solomon carefully evaluates them as they develop. Thus, he argues that although the Comintern served a detrimental function in 1925 when Bolshevization ended pluralism within the party's ranks and forced comrades to choose between black nationalism and class struggle, it provided an important vehicle for action with its 1928 line outlining its pledge to African-Americans' Self Determination in the South.

Such a contextual approach allows Solomon to draw out contemporary lessons while analyzing such intriguing episodes as the party's Third Period attempt to rid itself of racism through its "white chauvinist" campaign. The Comintern, assisted by African Americans such as Harry Haywood, agreed that the "Negro" question in the United States was at the heart of workers' struggle against capitalism. Capitalists promoted racism among workers, dividing and weakening them. Therefore, in order to unite all working people against such an oppressive system, the party had to rid itself of racism. Rather than a paternal act, communists believed that African-American equality (or liberation) was an essential step toward the revolution of all workers. One could not exist without the other.

Because communists understood that racism directly benefited capitalists, its removal was more urgent and fundamental to their ultimate quest than it was to liberal organizations in the 1930s. Thus, theory developed in the Comintern, moved American communists to act against racial slights, to examine their own attitudes about race, and to rout out racism in their affiliated organizations. Such an approach caused communists to address racism in ethnic clubs, cooperative businesses, labour unions, and among their fellow members. Party trials and expulsions for racist behavior (or for supporting someone else's racist behavior) made private proclamations resonate with a public reality. Solomon concedes that such displays were "characteristically rigid and heavy-handed." And yet, he believes they were "important contribution[s] to the search for effective opposition to racism in the way [communists] argued the case." (146) After all, Solomon reminds, eradicating racism meant fundamentally changing power relationships in the United States. Such acts,

then, were more proof that communists did not patronize nor pity blacks (like their liberal contemporaries) but looked upon them as essential allies in the fight against capitalism and for social justice.

Whereas the relationship between the national and international Communist parties (and the centrality of race to it) are important themes that run throughout his book, Solomon's story is also about the developing alliance between communists and African Americans between 1917 and 1936. Because cues from the Comintern changed frequently and national conditions were in flux, Solomon shows that the American party's relationship with the Comintern is best understood in terms of particular issues and historic conditions.

Solomon's chronology begins two years before the American party's creation when Cyrill Briggs founded *Crusader*, and it lasts through Roosevelt's second term when the party joined with a coalition of black activists and organizations to form the National Negro Congress. Such a time span allows Solomon to highlight the interplay between the national and international parties by grounding his narrative in America's political landscape while following the growth of a black and red alliance.

The initial black members of the American Communist party were a mixed lot whose ideas about race and class made the party an important arena for debate and discussion. Some West Indian immigrants and native born African Americans would move into the Communist party from the Socialist party once they found that Socialists did not fully embrace the fight against racism in America. Cyrill Briggs, however, came to the party via a different route. He sharpened his racial consciousness during Wilson's administration when it became clear that although Wilson promoted self-determination for nations in Europe, he was unwilling to push for the liberation of blacks at home. Moving to a position that advocated the end of colonialism and capitalism with articulated links between the two, Briggs began to advocate Communist party positions on race before the American Communist party existed. His black nationalist ideas and revolutionary socialist concerns fit well with the Comintern's interest in colonial questions, and his ideas about race and white workers' racism would soon influence American communists' racial policies.

Perhaps the most innovative part of Solomon's work is his first section, "The Early Years," in which he traces the development of the party's line on self-determination from Brigg's early writings, to the creation of the American Negro Labor Congress, and finally to Comintern debates surrounding the Sixth Congress in 1928. Fundamental political differences reinforced bitter personal squabbles between Briggs and Garvey, which intensified through conflicts between the African Blood Brotherhood's and the United Negro Improvement Association's leaders as well as among their rank and file. Briggs' and the African Blood Brotherhood's support of Communists brought international attention to the question of race in America and created a forum for this issue

within an international radical movement. Garveyism, on the other hand, increasingly supported a race-first agenda, which looked uncritically at capitalism and its promoters. Throughout its history, the Communist party continually revisited debates concerning black liberation and nationalism and, as Solomon emphasizes, the fundamental problems underlying such discussions still reverberate in today's dialogue on race.

As for African Americans' early relationship with the Comintern, Solomon's chapters on the subject are the best to date. Co-inspired by Russian historian Valery Kuklov, a specialist on the development of the party's self-determination line, and reinforced by newly available Comintern sources, these chapters trace the Comintern's placement of the racial question within the field of national and colonial questions and demonstrate the early importance of the Comintern to African Americans in giving legitimacy and support to their ideas and programs. After detailing the discussion of the Haywood-Nasanov thesis and the Comintern's eventual adoption of their self-determination line, Solomon clearly explains how American communists hoped to implement such a program. Concluding that their self-determination theory was fundamentally flawed and expectations mistaken, Solomon nevertheless insists that their efforts to implement such a theory were not wasted. Instead, he argues that "the Communists had touched a fundamental issue: democracy as independence, and independence as the right of choice." (86) And more importantly, this theory pushed white communists to publicly organize against racism and for civil rights.

The opening of the Comintern's archives creates an exciting period for scholars of American communism. Solomon has discussed the most prominent dynamics and pressing questions related to the struggle for racial justice revealed therein. His national purview has allowed him to show glimpses of debates and actions from North to South. As local studies are written, they will continue to deepen our understanding of how national and international concerns shaped the relationship between racial liberation and class unity. Solomon has skillfully prepared our ground

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<sup>1</sup> Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History, 1919-1957* (Boston 1957); Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York 1957) and *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York 1957); Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism* (New York 1984).

<sup>2</sup> A few examples include Steve Nelson, James R. Barrett and Rob Ruck, *Steve Nelson: American Radical* (Pittsburgh 1981); Nell Irvin Painter, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson* (Cambridge, Mass. 1979); Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana, Il. 1983); Robin Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists*

*During the Depression* (Chapel Hill, N.C. 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Works in this series include Harvey Klehr, John Haynes and Fridrikh Igorevich Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven, Ct. 1995) and Harvey Klehr, John Haynes and Kyrill Anderson, *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New Haven, Ct. 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster* (Princeton, N.J. 1994).