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Book review

The Romance of American Communism

- Reviews section -

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As protests work to remake the world, the reissue of Vivian Gornick's *The Romance of American Communism* invites a new generation to reflect on what it means to live a life of political commitment where the passionate pursuit of justice meets organized political action. *The Romance of American Communism* by Vivian Gornick [Verso](#).

Throughout the late twentieth century, assorted political gravediggers worked overtime to entomb the legacy of the U.S. Communism. In hindsight they may strike us as having protested altogether too much, as those were decades when, like today, most activists on the far left referenced Moscow and its aging authoritarians mainly as punch lines to political jokes. Yet the terror that the pro-Soviet Old Left might inspire new forms of radicalism ran deep among the intellectual establishment that had emerged during the High Cold War and continued to take root in its wake. These anointed gatekeepers, from the reactionary James Burnham to the liberal Sidney Hook, wanted their version of the legacy of the left in short, a horrific one so fixed in the cultural firmament that all roads of inquiry would lead straight to the 1949 collection *The God That Failed: A Confession*, that touchstone of disillusionment with Communism.

Affect and emotion play essential roles in radicalization

One must ask why, among certain domestic historians and cultural critics in the era of the solidly center-right administrations of Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter, a Lazarus-like return of Communism felt so threatening. Was it really fear of political revolution, or was this resolve to win the narrative rather induced by a premonition of a coming loss of status to a new generation of scholars a certain guilty trembling before a vision of pink-hued ghosts, holding yellowing copies of the *Daily Worker*, sitting in the professors' places at the heads the seminar tables? I suspect the latter, for the reason that not a few of these gatekeepers had been complicit in a kind of muscle memory cover-up regarding the positive impacts Communism had made on the national political landscape. Among younger labor, civil rights, and literary historians (including people like myself), evidence was accruing that both the direct and the indirect achievements of the movement were much weightier and even prophetic than most scholarship wanted to admit. Moreover, the core stories of personal commitment to the cause were inherently compelling. Today, there is no doubt that this insurgent research was spot-on.

To put it briefly, between the early 1930s and the mid-1950s the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) attracted (cumulatively) around a million individuals to membership, and even more to the broader organizations that it led. In a prelude to what the New Left of the 1960s promoted and the present-day socioeconomic calamity urgently requires, the Reds and their allies campaigned relentlessly against white chauvinism and fascism and on behalf of unionization and state-sponsored programs for health and welfare. Sundry facets of the Communist legacy could provide a way for young rebels to reimagine themselves. Above the establishment's uproar over the movement's grotesque misjudgments regarding the Soviet Union under Stalin, one could still hear the full-throated cry of American Reds to end racial and social injustice in the United States.

This is what the gravediggers had to contend with, the legacy they sought to repress as the star of the New Left began to rise. But beginning in the mid-1970s and early 1980s, what would become a long and bitter fight to nuance the narrative of the Communist experience was vividly on display in a series of debates about the publication of several books and one documentary, *Seeing Red: Stories of American Communists*, directed by Jim Klein and Julia Reichert. An opening salvo was the 1977 publication of the essayist and critic Vivian Gornick's *The Romance of American Communism*, her collective oral history of mostly middle-aged former members of the CPUSA, rereleased

by Verso in April this year with a new introduction by the author. The structure of this modest-sized volume fell into three central parts, for which the memories of some forty-five veterans were synthesized to dramatize their feelings about their personal lives before, during, and after the party.

Emotions that lay behind the choice of Marxist commitment

The book lacked a granular account of Communist politics, but there was no pink-washing of Stalinism. Gornick's observations were often clear-eyed and objective about the Communist movement's many flaws as she describes undemocratic expulsions, bullying, delusions of grandeur, and self-deception about Stalin's barbaric rule. Even the idealism that attracted so many is shown to have a self-serving dimension, as when Morris Silverman all the names in the book are invented boldly states the following about his years as a leader: "I really don't know if I loved doing it because it was valuable in and of itself, or if I loved doing it because I was good at it." What was distinctive, and threatening, about *Romance* was precisely this brave foray into the emotions that lay behind the choice of Marxist commitment. In the commentary that accompanies Gornick's character studies, she was candid about the many psychological "hungers" that allegiance to a party could assuage for a time. "One of these hungers, beyond question," she writes, "is the need to live a life of meaning." Conversely, Gornick was explicit in her memorable concluding chapter, "To End With," that she had written the book as a warning to radicals. She gave voice, that is, to the agonies as well as the ecstasies.

This determination emerged while she was participating in the burgeoning feminist movement, a topic she covered for the *Village Voice*. When she found herself in a bruising debate with other women over the cause of female oppression some attributed it to the "nature" of men while Gornick held that it was the result of "a system of relationships" she experienced an epiphany that she and others were repeating the journey of so many Communists from an intense awakening to the dead-end of dogma. "The memory of the Old Left," she wrote, "surfaced like an underground stream bursting through encrusted earth, and it overran me."

In other words, the arc of the narrative of *The Romance of American Communism* led to the frustration of ideals at the hands of the very discipline and ideology that had originally provided efficacy and viability. Gornick was in awe of the passion of commitment but recoiled from its capacity to blind and even destroy. Even so, the attention she devoted to the affective dimensions of the Communist experience obviously outran the norms of the genre of political deceit and betrayal that many intellectual machers of the day aimed to defend. Her publishers at Basic Books might well have put a content warning on the cover: "Beware! This volume depicts Communists as complex human beings."

The attraction to Communism

Reviewing the book, Marion Magid, managing editor of the once liberal *Commentary* magazine in the first years of its drift toward the right, cried out in dismay: "On Stalinism, at least, one might have thought the verdict was in for all time, but no such luck." Tellingly, Magid directly proceeded to express alarm about impending developments in the academic and journalist treatment of Communism that others would also share: "The revisionist impulse peeping shyly from every publisher's list grows fatter and bolder with each success, thriving on ignorance, short memories, nostalgia, and that passion for novelty at any cost." One can easily imagine her muttering under her breath, "The horror! The horror!"

She was not alone. One measure of the shifting political landscape over the last half-century is just how different the reviews of the reprint today are from those of the time.

While the original edition of *The Romance of American Communism* received an astonishing number of reviews across the political spectrum, all but a few contained sharp rebukes, many assumed a gladiatorial posture, and several blatantly misstated Gornick's intentions.

The crudest conservatives, those who thought the only good Stalinist is a dead Stalinist, responded with flame-throwing diatribes. Hilton Kramer, hurling flash-bangs in the *New York Times*, called it "particularly odious" and "entirely devoid of political intelligence." He then made a mockery of his own alleged acumen by describing Communists one-dimensionally and retrogressively as foreign agents: "stalwart followers of the political party whose sole purpose . . . was to serve the interests of the Soviet terror machine." The *Boston Globe* informed readers that "The 'romance' of American Communism was an historical byway where good gulls and sweet dupes and a few steely-eyed wretches ruined lives mostly their own." Theodore Draper, an esteemed historian of Communism in the 1920s, called it a "sob sister version" of the Popular Front. Such snark betrays more than a hint of distress about the presence of a nascent feminist sensibility: Was he furtively fearful that "scribbling women" would soon be invading his scholarly turf?

The game for these critics was to uphold the tradition of objectifying Communists and stripping them of their humanity. Anti-Communists of all stripes insisted on a diabolical uniqueness to the naivete and powers of rationalization Communists exhibited apropos a distant regime they idealized. The proposition that Democrats and Republicans had also exhibited obtuseness and selective empathy in regard to Cold War complicity of the United States with mass murder in many countries did not fit into their calculations.

Struck a profound chord

Even the gifted democratic socialist Irving Howe, capable of wielding his pen like a sharp scalpel with style and sophistication to offer insights based on decades of experience, resorted to quips. "One sometimes has to remind oneself," he wrote, "that in her evocation of coziness and warmth she is writing about the CP in the time of Stalin and not about a summer camp." Predictably, he next went full pedant on Gornick and mansplained to her the party's "real" history that she certainly knew: dual unionism, social fascism, the Popular Front, the Moscow Trials, the role of the NKVD (the Soviet secret police), the expulsion of CPUSA General Secretary Earl Browder, the trial and execution of Rudolph Slansky in Czechoslovakia, the Hungarian revolution. Moving in for the kill, he ended by adding insult to travesty: it "is not so much that she can't think as that she evidently prefers not to." A man clearly not built to go only halfway, Howe also used the journal he edited, *Dissent*, to run a piece by former Communist Joseph Clark that characterized Gornick as having "both her thesis and ideology . . . neatly packaged in advance" and as "lacking in candid recollection" and "barren of political appraisal." Why this combination of nasty finger-wagging, use of debating tactics inspired by a Peregrine falcon, and a creepy aura of hatred that feels oddly personal?

Other reviews from the left were far more temperate, and a few offered praise. The up-and-coming historian Maurice Isserman, however, concluded in *In These Times* that "she ends up developing a set of stereotypes of the Communist experience as flat and unconvincing as those churned out by the sectarian and witch-hunting schools of communist historiography." In contrast, former Communists Annette T. Rubinstein and Jessica Mitford admired the same portraits, but demurred at Gornick's own reflections; "curiously apolitical" was the judgment of the former. Other left critics expressed concerns about lack of documentation and an explanation of the methods of selecting interviewees and accurately recapitulating them as stories. What was not predicted was the extent to which *The Romance of American Communism* struck a profound chord among activist readers. Our used copies were passed from hand-to-hand as it morphed into an underground cult text on the left, a primitive version of what we now call going viral.

This subterranean activist embrace was even more curious given that efforts to bury the book aimed to diminish the

once proud history of not just the CPUSA but the broader left to nothing more than a historical trace. A minimalist understanding of "Stalinism," a crucial and still much abused concept, was used to smear any troublesome socialist, so that even anti-Stalinist Marxists might fear that being seen with the book would be seen as damning proof of "Stalinoid" tendencies. Then again, by the 1970s, much damage to all forms of domestic radicalism had already been accomplished, so this campaign was hardly gutsy. What we were witnessing at that time, following the McCarthy era's endeavor to outlaw Communism as a Satanist conspiracy, was a priest's desire to condemn and excommunicate Lenin's spawn through a safe rearguard effort. It is pertinent, however, that Gornick's doubled-edged project a compassionate rejection stemmed from her own personal trauma in breaking with Communism during those awful plague years of the 1950s.

Communists as complex human beings

Postwar repression featured harassment, blacklisting, imprisonment, and executions, but these overlapped with the CPUSA's own reckless accretion of pro-Soviet delusions. Abetted by the movement's long history of top-down decision-making and the Soviet Union's brutal crushing of the Hungarian revolt, the result was a perfect storm of external pressure and internal crisis. The upshot was an implosion between 1956 and 1958 that nearly devastated Communism's organizational presence in the United States as its street cred was tarnished worldwide. Thousands of the most devoted cadres, including the teenage Gornick, walked away from the movement and the ambient subculture that had sustained political and social identities for decades.

And yet the afterlives of that Communist era of Marxist commitment seem unending. Among academics there has been a Forever War since The Gornick Affair between two interpretative schools in dueling narratives. On the one side are traditionalists Draper and disciples who emphasize the CPUSA's unbreakable ties to the Soviet Union and the political zigzags that flowed from a culture of submission to a totalitarian hierarchy. On the other are social historians Isserman and a cohort of one-time Young Turks called "New

Historians" who emphasize rank and file initiative in the implementation of policy and local history with its ethnic and gender dimensions. More numerous have been memoirs, novels, plays, Hollywood films, independent documentaries, paintings, sculptures, monuments, and stand-up comedy routines. My favorite among the last is Josh Kornbluth's 1997 autobiographical one-man show, "Red Diaper Baby." It begins: "My father, Paul Kornbluth, was a communist who believed there was going to be a violent communist revolution, and I was going to lead it. That gives you an idea of the pressure." It's hard out here for a Red.

What a difference forty-five years makes! Gornick's book is now rereleased by Verso, the premier leftwing book publisher of our time. Jacobin has already published two congratulatory pieces by Hannah Proctor and Laura Tanenbaum and hosted a podcast about it. The Nation, which had been fairly critical in its original review by Ronald Radosh (the ex-Communist, ex-leftist, almost ex-Radosh), has now published a fiercely admiring one by political theorist Corey Robin, and the New Republic, which had formerly been warm albeit critical of factual errors in a fine appraisal by David Caute, has revisited the book with a wholly laudatory one by Sophie Pinkham. In These Times and Dissent have similarly published second reviews, the former by Micah Uetricht, completely admiring, and the latter by Alyssa Battistoni, generous and thoughtful. In December the Los Angeles Review of Books as well devoted considerable space to a celebratory commentary on it by Lana Dee Povitz. The titles tell it all: "The Humanity of American Communism," "What Today's Socialists Can Learn From the Heyday of American Communism," "What Vivian Gornick Got Right," "How Vivian Gornick Reinvigorated Political Writing," and so on. This generation gets it.

Breaking with Communism

The question remains, however, whether this reception might also translate the lessons of the book into the serious business of building a new socialist movement. In the 1960s hundreds of thousands of young people were drawn to an activist left, and in the 1970s a variety of new revolutionary groups popped up, while old ones revived like both flowers and toadstools after a spring rain. Nevertheless, all went into steep decline during subsequent decades of backlash. Even so, as social movements diminished in size, Marxist ideas remained a permanent and dynamic fixture of the intellectual landscape as a Third Wave of feminism became ascendant, Gay Liberation moved toward LGBTQ rights, and intersectionality became de rigeur among anti-racists.

The pattern of history suggests that intervals of retreat and repression come and go, while the radical tradition hangs around to be rediscovered and revived when the population is prodded by dramatic events. This nudging transpired as the new millennium generated a steady march of endless war in the Middle East, grotesque financial mismanagement and heightened inequality, environmental disaster, and the ability to record police murders of African Americans on video. The evolving sequence of domestic protests together with the opening to discuss class politics afforded by Bernie Sanders's presidential campaign has now metamorphosed into a yearning for a fresh take on socialism by the best and the brightest young people of our time. And many of them mean business.

A year ago *New Left Review* hosted a symposium of such activists members of the once ultra-moderate Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), now 66,000-strong (not far behind CPUSA's peak membership of 85,000), in which the first participant explained: "only organized socialists can consolidate the gains of the class struggle, assimilate the lessons of the international working class and bring these to a new generation." To old-time '68ers like myself, this is a familiar truism; some of us have devoted much of our lives to addressing the problem and failed miserably to achieve anything that could even compare to the heyday of the Old Left. Since we live under the long shadow of memories of the disastrous fate of the relatively unstructured and extemporaneous Arab Spring in Egypt, it'd hard not to agree that this formula organized socialists encapsulates the foremost challenge faced by the present far left. Massive new protests are erupting but they are as yet without clear-cut national leadership, have been (understandably) organized on the fly, and are driven by slogans that can evolve in various but not yet fully determined directions. This situation goes a long way toward explaining why *The Romance of American Communism* still matters.

This takes us to the revenant of this wonderful but also strange book as it enters the political mix of twenty-first-century radicalism, which now incorporates the capitalism-related twin crises of a mishandled pandemic and revolt against racist police violence. Wonderful, because Gornick built bridges to a realm of crucial, unwritten dimensions of socialist dedication by daring to rush into a delicate subject where more straitlaced radicals fear to tread. Anyone listening to the interviews with protesters on the street in response to the killing of George Floyd can understand that affect and emotion play essential roles in radicalization and the impulse toward necessary action. They will also be factors as individuals move from the raw rage occasioned by particular events to thinking about how collective structure and organization can enhance power and clarity. Even beyond that, taking into account emotional requirements and frailties is vital to the perilous task of defining the most effective program and trustworthy leadership.

The passion of commitment

Socialists, for whom radical politics are a way of life, are prone to look to the construction of a new political party that can more effectively represent the interests of working people; organizational forms that are transparent; a leadership that is collective and fully accountable; a program that addresses immediate needs but creates stepping stones to an anti-capitalist future; and so on. Enduring vulnerabilities lie in our susceptibility to relying on leaders who claim authenticity and act decisively, and on analyses based on what we want to hear. Gornick offers no blueprints, but she teaches us that we must address the slippery ingredient of the emotions of a committed political life by first

recognizing and naming them.

But besides being wonderful, *The Romance of American Communism* is also a bit strange because it is so seductive. The younger, uniformly admiring reviewers of the rerelease are not much worried that Gornick operates without documentation, evidence of crosschecking, or the slightest concern about justifying her reasons for selections or the authenticity of her data base. Her case studies are frequently made through novelistic methods, for which she has an indubitable talent. Along the way one can be mesmerized by perfect sentences. One character in the book, David Ross, explains, "My studies, my marriage, my friendships were all strained through the liquid flow of Marxist thought before they entered my brain and my feelings." A group of former Communists are "governed by an emotional frame of reference that cannot be wrenched from the socket of an old and passionate experience inextricably bound up with disciplined structure."

Why isn't there greater skepticism of the genuineness of the primary interviewees? Are they candid or are they performing saying what they think will make the best impression or rehearsing old speeches well honed after being delivered many times before? Then there is the uncertainty of the degree to which Gornick is cherry-picking and selectively hyping her material. Beyond that, it can hardly be missed that all kinds of quick characterizations are offered about the intelligence, motives, sexual drives, and talent of the principal interviewees' relatives, friends, comrades, and fellow workers, none of which may be accurate or fair. In her depiction of the chief villain of the book, a snarling renegade dubbed Bitterman who calls Communism "the work of the devil," Gornick may have badly misjudged. The character appears to be Joseph R. Starobin, author of the widely esteemed study *American Communism in Crisis, 1943-1957*, published in 1972. Starobin's friends insist that his misbehavior arose out of grief over a son who committed suicide and his own recently diagnosed fatal illness. Nevertheless, I have also interviewed at least half a dozen of the same activists Dorothy Healey, Herman Liveright, Carl Marzani, among others and what she writes about them rings true to my own research.

If there is a climax to Gornick's narrative, it is that moment in the concluding fifth chapter when she finds her own emotional hardwiring triggered in response to a harsh debate among feminists. This is the point at which she is overwhelmed by the same type of emotion turning into fanaticism that she has depicted among Communists at their worst. Now she feels as if these Old Reds had somehow been residing inside her psyche expecting to be acknowledged. "For the first time since 1956 I did not feel anger toward the Communists," she writes. "It's as though they've lain there all these years, deep inside me, chained to the wall of remote memory, waiting for the right psychic moment to be brought forward, waiting to let me understand." This recognition allows her to grasp her peril and to pull back.

I suspect that this frank acknowledgment that she is not one whit better or different from those former comrades she had been previously dissecting is a central reason why young radicals are powerfully drawn to her book despite its scholarly and analytical drawbacks. When Gornick wrote that "the real point about Communists" is that they "were like everybody else, only more so," she was willfully countering the notion of a deep ethical chasm between active Communists and ordinary citizens that is no longer defensible. Moreover, Gornick is asking the self-proclaimed far leftists of the 1970s and now 2020 to look at her gallery of veteran Marxist militants and ask: "Is their Redness not like my own Redness?" Are not their flaws the same as those that we, too, have already exhibited or to which we may one day fall victim? By dehumanizing the Reds, and vaunting their own superiority, the anti-Communists actually made it easier for young activists to identify with the maligned targets.

Might reprint's warm reception translate into the serious business of building a new socialist movement?

The Romance of American Communism

What radical has not bristled against false and simplistic characterizations of our motives and behavior? In the 1960s and 1970s, those of us fighting war and racism were told that we were simply mad at our parents, guilt-ridden about privilege, and otherwise neurotic. Feminists have been told they are man-haters. People of color have been accused of being too sensitive to perceived racial slights. Activists for Palestinian human rights have been ritualistically denounced as anti-Semites or, if Jewish like myself, as self-hating Jews. Today the peaceful protesters against police brutality are being paternalistically lectured that "violence is not the way" by those who have shut their eyes to anything other than explicit Southern racist violence for their entire lives.

The problem of assessing Gornick's message for a new generation may also be connected to the enigmatic emotions of love. To quote the old Lerner and Loewe song, the attraction to Communism was "almost like being in love." But love is problematic, definitions disagree, and the consequences vary. One hopes love will last, that love is love is love, but it sometimes turns into hate. Love can also mean falling into dependency, sometimes into entitlement, and of course it can be confused with fleeting erotic attachment. People in love don't always come to know, truly to know, the object of their love. And lovers change; lovers can surprise. Love also hurts. Putting this all together, Gornick's primary aim is to reveal the secret lives of Communists, and her chief revelation is that we are all potentially susceptible to passionate dogmatism when making an ideological commitment, whether to Leninism or feminism. This prospect apparently convinces her to pull back from immersion in a collective project and rely on her own resources.

While regaining control of oneself is certainly part of the solution, it may not count for much if one is also out to change a world dominated by classes, states, and armies. Here is where I agree with part of Howe's review: echoing Gornick he issues his own warning against committing "the whole of life" to some totality, but to that error he juxtaposes the creation of "a union of autonomous persons." The accent is on union. No one can doubt that "surrender of the self" can lead to authoritarianism, no matter its guise. That is why we must search for versions of socialist identity politics that militate against that longing for "wholeness" that ends in submission and ultimately in abasement.

After reading *The Romance of American Communism*, some millennial socialists may understandably say to one historical wing of the organized left: "Sorry, Bolsheviks, we're just not that into you." Nevertheless, to build a socialist movement, one could do worse than ransack the archive of Communists, Trotskyists, and Socialists to make a substantial, critical-minded visit to Leninism's past. To advance and sustain the current action in the streets, we need to learn how to build national and local coalitions with democratic functioning, defense committees on behalf of our political rights, and a union movement that campaigns for social justice. From decades of struggle there remain documents and memories of how to effectively counter fascism through mass mobilizations, how to understand the interrelationships among national racial, gender, and class oppression, how to intervene effectively on the shop floor, how to defend the socialist movement against the violence of the right and provocateurs, how to recognize when a once-promising revolutionary upheaval has turned in a Thermidorian direction, how to express genuine international solidarity and much more.

None of this, however, suggests that the mechanical imposition of old political forms on new content would amount to anything other than a recipe for disaster. There is wisdom in this legacy of the Old Left, but too many issues were omitted and poorly handled. Today it will take a good deal of work to figure out once again what is to be done, or at least what is to be done next. In the meantime, while listening, learning, and abetting, some of us can still take heart from people like Ben Saltzman, son of a rabbi and former Communist without illusions. Immediately after his interview with Gornick, Ben joins a picket line. "I'm going now to take my place in a war to reduce the worldly humiliation of men and women like myself," he explains. "After fifty years of fighting, I know this war will never be won, but I go anyway. I take my place. I stand on the line. I do this because I was a Communist."

PS:

The Romance of American Communism

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