

Books

USA: Revolutionary Redemption, lessons for activists - On the history of the Socialist Workers Party

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Barry Sheppard, *The Party, The Socialist Workers Party 1960-1988, Volume I: The Sixties, A Political Memoir* (Chippendale, Australia: Resistance Books, 2005), 354 pages including index. This volume also includes a rich collection of photographs.

Barry Sheppard, *The Party, The Socialist Workers Party 1960-1988, Volume II: Interregnum, Decline and Collapse, 1973-1988, A Political Memoir* (London: Resistance Books, no date [2012]), 345 pages including index.

[Both volumes can be ordered from Bolerium Books, 2141 Mission Street, suite 300, San Francisco CA 94110; www.bolerium.com; tel. 1-800-326-6353. Volume II is \$15, and a set of both volumes is \$25; shipping is an additional \$3.50 in the U.S. and Canada; \$6.00 for other countries. Volume I can also be downloaded for free from: barrysheppardbook.com.]

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To many who were paying attention, the U.S. Socialist Workers Party (SWP) of the 1960s and 1970s seemed an incredibly vibrant organization: between 1000 and 2000 activists animated by high ideals and dynamic Marxism, with a conception of socialism both democratic and revolutionary, and a proven capacity to organize – in impressive united front efforts – effective social movements and struggles capable of bringing about positive change.

Barry Sheppard has performed a great service to activists and historians of the U.S. Left by providing a coherent account of the SWP as it became revitalized in the 1960s, as it reached its zenith in the 1970s, and then as it self-destructed in the 1980s. *The Party, The Socialist Workers Party 1960-1988* aims to tell, through one person's political memoir, the story of an organization that had a generally unacknowledged yet not insignificant impact on the politics and culture of the

United States. The first volume took the story up to 1973, tracing the upward trajectory of that party's fortunes and impact. The second volume covers the continued upward trajectory, then the disorientation and awful crash of the 1980s.

Barry's role in all of that - revitalization, glory days, and destructive crescendo - has been remembered, sometimes bitterly, by many who went through the experience. In the second volume of his memoir, he himself has acknowledged some of the incredibly negative things that he did in this terrible third phase. Indeed, some saw his glowing first volume as self-serving and predicted that he would be unable to write the second darker volume. It would force him to deal with the tragic failure of the party to which he devoted himself, and to face what he himself did to bring that failure about. He would not be able to do that, I was assured. It seems to me they were wrong about the first volume, and - obviously, in light of its appearance - they were wrong about the second.

These two volumes will continue to be "must-reads" for all young activists who wish to challenge the power of the corrupt and profiteering 1% in order to create a society of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" for the 99% — what some of us still would call a transition from capitalist tyranny to socialist democracy, which can only be brought about by the working-class majority. Such activists will be looking for explanations of what went on before, in struggles of the past, from which lessons can be learned of what to do (and what not to do) in the future. While I have dealt with the first volume at length in a previous review [[1](#)], the two must be taken as a whole.

As with Volume I, the second volume of *The Party* provides an extremely valuable and important contextualization of the story - providing extensive background especially on international developments: the 1973 coup in Chile, the Arab-Israeli War, the revolutions in Portugal, Iran, Nicaragua, Grenada, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the rise and repression and persistence of the workers' Solidarity movement in Poland. Attention is also given to domestic social struggles (an especially good chapter is provided on busing and anti-racist struggles in Boston). But what makes these volumes unique is their focus on the effort to build, and the ultimate disastrous failure in building, a genuinely revolutionary socialist party in the United States in the twentieth century.

Prelude

The SWP was formed in 1938, but its origins were in the heroic years of the early Communist movement. The pioneers of U.S. Communism were inspired by the 1917 workers and peasants revolution in Russia, led by Lenin, Trotsky and other outstanding revolutionary Marxists who went on to establish a Communist International in 1919. But many of them were also rooted in deep traditions of American radicalism and labor activism associated, for example, with the Socialist Party of Eugene V. Debs and the Industrial Workers of the World.

After Lenin's death, however, the Russian Revolution's goal of soviet democracy and the commitment to a liberating revolution worldwide gave way to a bureaucratic dictatorship under Josef Stalin, preaching "socialism in one country" and advancing cynical policies to enhance its own power and privileges. This change did not triumph without a struggle, and Leon Trotsky was one of the leaders in efforts who heroically yet unsuccessfully opposed this bureaucratic degeneration both within the Soviet Union and in the member parties of the Soviet-dominated Communist International.

American Trotskyists formed the Communist League of America in 1928, standing as a beacon of early revolutionary-democratic ideals of early Communism against the corruptions, cynicism, and murderous authoritarianism of Stalinism. While far smaller than the Communist Party and the largely reformist Socialist Party, the U.S. ranks of the Trotskyists grew amid the labor radicalization

generated by the Great Depression. By 1935 – after playing an outstanding role in various labor struggles, especially in the Minneapolis general strike – they were able to merge with other radical labor forces to form the Workers Party of the United States. This was soon followed by a decision to enter the Socialist Party in order to link up with that organization's growing left-wing, although they were soon driven out (along with much of the broader left-wing) by the reformist leadership.

The subsequent formation of the Socialist Workers Party, with significant influence in sectors of the labor movement (partly traced in Art Preis's classic *Labor's Giant Step*) and among prominent intellectuals and cultural figures (explored in Alan Wald's *The New York Intellectuals*), seemed to its members and supporters to be the beginning of an important new phase of revolutionary struggle in the United States. This was taking place as part of a coming-together of like-minded groups around the world to establish, with Trotsky, what was called the World Party of Socialist Revolution – the Fourth International.

The earlier U.S. Trotskyists, such as Jim Cannon, had blazed the trail of applying all of this to U.S. realities, connecting revolutionary Marxism to American radical traditions, also helping to develop a model of seriously democratic and cohesive organizational functioning. Each in their own way in the 1950s and 1960s, central party leaders Farrell Dobbs and Tom Kerry (and, for a time, Murry Weiss and Myra Tanner Weiss) sought to extend and refine this model under new circumstances, developing the conception of an experienced leadership team that would integrate into itself younger comrades who would be capable of assuming leadership of the party.

There were important contributions from others as well. In the period after the Second World War, Joe Hansen developed a notion of “deformed workers’ states” to help explain the nature of the Communist regimes established in Eastern Europe. Related to this was his conception of “workers and farmers government” that sought to make sense, initially, of revolutions (and different possibilities of development) in so-called “third world” countries. Another innovation was his penetrating analysis of the Cuban Revolution which, although hardly uncritical, identified its revolutionary essence and possibilities.

Sharing this approach to Marxism was George Breitman, who was able to utilize the insights and methodology of Lenin and Trotsky to shed light on issues of racism and nationalism – developing a pioneering analysis of black nationalism and the significance of Malcolm X. Breitman also developed a challenging analysis of the 1960s radicalization in comparison to the radicalizations of the early 1900s and of the 1930s – indicating that in some ways it was deeper than the others, if one considers how multi-faceted the 1960s radicalization was, and especially if one understands the essentially working-class composition of the new social movements.

Glory Days

The glory days of the 1960s radicalization forms the backdrop to the first volume of Sheppard's account. Considerable attention is also given to developments and major struggles inside the global network of Trotskyist groups, the Fourth International. Nor does he shy away from discussing factional disputes inside the SWP. Some of these gave rise to splits and competing groups – such as the Spartacist League and the Workers League (the latter gradually evolving into the Socialist Equality Party), while others (such as the Proletarian Orientation Tendency and the Internationalist Tendency) did not. But the thrust of the first volume is a straight-forward narrative of the on-the-ground development of “the Party” as an impressive force on the U.S. Left.

The dramatic influx of young activists from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s had a profoundly transformative impact on the SWP. Yet the new recruits were themselves transformed as they

became integrated into the Trotskyist movement – finding their understanding and self-confidence greatly enhanced by the program and political method of revolutionary Marxism (presented in a variety of publications, educational activities, one-on-one discussions, etc.) and their political effectiveness and impact greatly enhanced by the party's organizational structures and norms.

In part, this was accomplished by creating a youth group, the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA), rooted on the campuses and acting as a magnet for some of the brightest children of the white-collar and blue-collar working class. There was, as there has been for quite some time, some confusion over the class nature of this layer – the fuzzy and often contradictory term “middle class” was often applied to them. This was a prelude to categorizing the entire working class as “the middle class” in the United States. It is an important point to which we will need to return later.

Among the new recruits were important clusters of African-American and Latino activists, and also a significant percentage of women, some of whom assumed a significant leadership role in the efforts of the SWP and YSA. The party's earlier work on issues of race and nationalism contributed to the ability of some comrades to play a role not only in African-American but also in Chicano and Puerto Rican struggles.

The fact that the SWP had seriously engaged – in the 1950s and early '60s – with such works as Frederick Engels's *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* made it more sensitive and responsive to early feminist stirrings coming out of the new radicalization and enabled it to connect very positively to the rising women's liberation movement. In addition, the recruitment of a growing number of gay and lesbian comrades – combined with influences and insights that were part of the new radicalization – enabled the SWP finally to scrap a narrow and destructive policy that had banned homosexuals from membership.

Perhaps the SWP's most profound accomplishment involved its central role in the creation of the massive and powerful anti-war movement, through persistent united front efforts, that proved capable of helping to end the U.S. war in Vietnam. The details of that story were told in Fred Halstead's classic *Out Now!: A Participants Account of the Movement Against the Vietnam War* – but Sheppard adds additional details and insights of his own about this heroic achievement.

A sense of the realities, and of how the realities were perceived by the party leadership, can be summed up in the final three paragraphs of this memoir's first volume:

The radicalization had a massive impact on the SWP. Coming out of the witch-hunt years [of the 1950s], the SWP had become smaller in numbers, and older. Of course, it had recruited young people throughout those years, but not many and, usually, not for long. The process that led to the foundation of the Young Socialist Alliance in 1960 – even with only about 130 members – situated the SWP to participate effectively in the youth radicalization which was just beginning.

The recruitment and training of young people saved the SWP as a revolutionary organization at that point. Revolutionary socialist organizations generally do not last long in unfavorable times, and the SWP had been running out of time. The new layer of young people, and the opportunities provided to intervene in real struggles, gave the organization another lease on life. The older generation, that came out of the labor radicalization of the 1930s which was renewed for a time after World War II, was able to pass the torch on to the new generation.

The older leaders – especially Farrell Dobbs – understood that this process, in order to succeed, had to go all the way to replacing the older central leadership with a new one from the new generation. He sought to accomplish this in a phased way, while the older leaders were still around to train the new leadership. The transition in leadership was essentially completed by the end of the 1960s. Thus

the SWP was in good shape to face the challenges of the next decades – or so we thought. ...

Something Terrible Happened

Barry Sheppard was a central leader who helped bring this about – and who then helped to transform the organization into what seemed a very bad dream: an authoritarian sect, dominated by a cult figure, wracked by internal trials and expulsions, increasingly an ingrown and dogmatic little universe having little relationship to the people and the struggles of the larger society.

A new leadership had been nurtured by Dobbs and other old-timers who led the party. Sheppard was part of that younger layer. But it was headed by a tough, smart, capable person (whom Sheppard and others admired very much) named Jack Barnes. The new leadership initiated a “turn to industry” that seemed consistent with the old traditions of the Marxist left, and it sought to apply Marxism in new and creative ways to the realities of the 1970s and 1980s, being open to learning from the revolutionary upsurges in Central America and the Caribbean as the one decade gave way to the other.

Yet the revolutionary expectations that the leadership had for the U.S. working class didn’t “work out” – particularly as a phenomenon that came to be known as globalization had a devastating impact on the industrial centers into which the SWP was sending its young cadres. The new leadership, intensified pressure on comrades to go into industry, where cadres were expected to “talk socialism to workers” instead of listening to and learning from other workers, and instead of participating in a clear-eyed manner in the life of the workplace and actual union struggles. The impact of this ill-conceived orientation was a gut-level erosion of confidence in the U.S. working class – covered over by “class-struggle” posturing and persistent declarations that the workers were moving “to center stage of U.S. politics.”

The lure of successful revolutions in Nicaragua and Grenada – naturally inspired by the example of the Cuban Revolution personified by Fidel Castro – seemed to suggest a different kind of breakthrough than what had been promised by the “proletarian” Trotskyism of the older comrades. Barnes and those around him underwent a profound conversion – seeing the Trotskyism represented by the Fourth International as irrelevant to the promising revolutionary wave represented by Fidel and those influenced by him.

The Barnes leadership – Barry Sheppard very much included – made a decision to transform the SWP into a “sister organization” of the Cuban Communist Party, with all of the deep-going theoretical shifts that this involved. Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, the centrality of workers’ democracy to socialism, support for the democratic struggles in the bureaucratically ruled “workers’ states”, the Leninist-Trotskyist norms of internal party democracy, any critical-minded questioning the party leadership, and even inclinations to push against sectarian arrogance toward those outside the party – all were seen as impediments to the kind of organization that the SWP needed to be, in the view of the Barnes leadership. Increasingly, the party became an insulated universe separate from the lives and struggles of the workers and the oppressed, with organizational norms tightened in the name of a bogus “Leninism” and a systematic repression and expulsion of those adhering to the traditional perspectives and norms of the SWP.

Hundreds of actual and potential dissidents were expelled in trumped-up trials. This included most of the veterans of the 1930s and 1940s, and some of the most capable and also including experienced younger activists in the mass movements and trade unions. According to Sheppard (who played a central role in the carnage), the expulsion of dissident factions, one associated with George Breitman and Frank Lovell and the other with Nat Weinstein and Lynn Henderson, “marked the

death-knell of the SWP. No tendencies or factions have ever again appeared in the party in the decades since. Internal life became monolithic, and top-down commandism became the norm” (288). As this was happening, hundreds more comrades drifted out “for personal reasons” – some concluding that perhaps they were not real revolutionaries after all. Those who remained tended to define and shield themselves with militant adherence to a “correct” politics as defined by Jack Barnes.

Sheppard sees the development of a cult around Barnes (beginning in the late 1970s) as the most debilitating development leading to the SWP’s decline:

The formation of a cult in the party leadership blocked correction of political errors in the turn to industry, the assessment of the change in the objective situation in the Caribbean, the question of permanent revolution, and other theoretical and political errors. The cult prevented correction of the degeneration of the party’s organizational practice (301).

As Sheppard notes, the term “cult” can have different meanings. His usage involves political cults, the best known being personality cults of Stalin and Mao Zedong, who oversaw bureaucratic institutions of immense power and material resources, each of whom became “a supreme arbiter, in whom all final authority in all matters rested.” But there are also “cults in small socialist groups . . . not based on such material interests.” In the case of Barnes, his early talents included an ability to help draw comrades of different generations and with different perspectives together in a collective leadership process. As his authority in the SWP grew, however, he evolved into a “star” with special status. This is what developed into a cult: “He became the sole initiator of policy, and the supreme arbiter in any discussion. The obvious result was a growing fear among other leaders of freely expressing their views, else they be deemed ‘wrong’” (207-210).

Over time, “the ‘star’ system of leadership became more and more exacerbated and entrenched, including special treatment and perquisites for the top leader, special standards that applied to Jack Barnes and some around him, and not to the ordinary members” (211). Near the conclusion of the volume, Sheppard provides details on the pure and simple material corruption of Barnes and his few intimate associates – the use of SWP resources to provide a very free and comfortable life style, divorced from the day-to-day lives and far above the material conditions of regular party members.

Redemption

How could something that seemed so good turn so bad? How could someone like Barry Sheppard, who helped bring about such a terrible transformation, ever redeem himself?

The first step of redemption was to run afoul of Barnes, who dominated the nightmare regime that Sheppard had helped create; then to be broken and marginalized, and leave the SWP. The second step was to rebuild his life, critically reflecting on his experience, while attempting to remain true to the best of what he had believed in. The third step was to do more than beat himself up or apologize (although apologize he does, devoting an entire chapter in the second volume to “My Culpability”) – but rather to try to explain how it was that something so good had turned so bad. The destructive mistakes he made cannot be undone, but they can be explained in ways that can help others learn both from the positive and negative aspects of the SWP experience.

Regardless of whether one agrees with Barry Sheppard’s interpretations and assessments of what happened, he has had the courage and the stamina to draw together a unified narrative, providing a considerable amount of recollection and documentation, which can be extremely useful in trying to understand this political experience in which thousands of us shared. What is particularly impressive

is that, unlike all too many who went through this experience, he remains true to the idealism and revolutionary Marxist convictions that drew him, and others of us, into the SWP. For those who have “moved on,” this is bound to be exasperating – but this is what has made it possible for him to take on (and to want to take on) the difficult task of writing these two volumes.

Two recent memoirs by erstwhile comrades of Sheppard’s – Peter Camejo and Leslie Evans [2] – provide interpretations and valuable details not found in these two volumes. There are also well-documented accounts of the struggle against the SWP’s degeneration in the *Encyclopedia of Trotskyism On-Line* [3]. All are worth considering as one seeks to piece together the full story. There will probably be other contributions as well. But *The Party: The Socialist Workers Party 1960-1988* will stand as an essential account.

Those of us “who were there” and who can identify aspects of his account that strike us as wrong should certainly do so. In this spirit, I want to offer two corrections.

One mistake in Sheppard’s account has to do with one of the essential positions of the oppositional current that I was part of. In deciding to orient to a presumed Castroist “new international” that was expected to arise out of the Cuban, Nicaraguan, and Grenadian revolutions – hailed as the “three giants of the Caribbean” – the Barnes leadership had, as already noted, decided to break from traditional Trotskyist perspectives. Sheppard writes:

“The Weinstein tendency rejected this orientation, mocking the whole concept of the “three giants.” The Breitman group was closer to our view, but didn’t see the potential for the advance of the Nicaraguan and Grenadian revolutions to positively affect Cuba. Both tendencies were not enthusiastic about the opportunities these developments opened for the SWP and the Fourth International” (298).

This mischaracterizes the position of the Breitman caucus, of which I was a member. Under Breitman’s tutelage, I composed a substantial study entitled “Permanent Revolution in Nicaragua,” which was meant to be a submission on behalf of the caucus to the preconvention discussion bulletins for the regular party convention that was undemocratically cancelled by Barnes. The point of this contribution was to argue and document that Barnes and Weinstein were wrong to counterpose Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution with the actualities of the Nicaraguan revolution (with Weinstein adhering to the former, Barnes embracing the latter, and both seeing the one incompatible with the other). Rather, we in the Breitman caucus saw the dynamics of permanent revolution being reflected in the actualities of the Nicaraguan revolution.

We were, in fact, quite “enthusiastic about the opportunities these developments opened for the SWP and the Fourth International.” After the expulsions, this study was published by the Fourth Internationalist Tendency, of which Breitman was a central leader, which included a laudatory introduction by Breitman himself.

A second correction has to do with Barry’s account of how he, Tom Leonard, and Wendy Lyons went to Breitman’s apartment (appropriately in 1984) in order to expel him from the Socialist Workers Party. It is not that his account is completely wrong – but I think it leaves readers with the wrong impression. He writes: “Breitman had been in poor health for some time. I can still see him wilting in front of us, holding his head, barely able to speak, never thinking he could be expelled from the SWP, the party he had been a founding member and central leader of for decades” (299). Of course, Barry was there, was able to observe how ill Breitman was, and was also able to observe Breitman’s personal hurt over this shameful act. It is simply not true, however, that Breitman never thought he could be expelled. By that time, people all around him were being expelled, and it was clear to any knowledgeable person that the Barnes leadership had people like Breitman on a short list for being

thrown out of the SWP. George Breitman was a tough-minded revolutionary veteran who had been centrally involved in this factional struggle since 1981. He knew what Barnes had become and had been actively anticipating the possibility of the expulsion for some time. What Barry observed as “wilting” was more likely akin to nausea than surprise. Indeed, after this expulsion (and another aimed at George Weissman, who told them to go to hell and slammed the door in their faces), the three Barnesites “went to a bar and drank a number of martinis, ostensibly to celebrate but in reality to numb ourselves to the disgraceful thing we had done” (299).

Regardless of any errors and analytical or interpretive limitations, it seems to me that these two volumes are written by a person who is, to the best of his abilities, trying to be honest, trying to tell the truth, trying to get it right. Central to the meaning of his life is his ability to contribute to the building of a consciousness and a social movement that will ultimately be capable of helping a working-class majority to replace capitalism with socialism. This redemptive act – trying to explain what actually happened, so that the positive and negative lessons can be learned by future revolutionaries – is what gives *The Party* a value transcending any legitimate criticism that can be expressed.

The first volume provides a clear, vivid, accurate description of how many of us who joined the SWP actually perceived the organization we were joining. Despite our undoubtedly idealized notions of what that organization was, many of the positive qualities we perceived were actually there. Nor was the glowing promise of what the SWP might become completely at odds with future possibilities.

Considering its organizational and political strengths, the intergenerational accumulation of political experience going back for decades, and the admirable qualities of many who were part of the SWP, it is conceivable that this organization of 2000 dedicated activists – if it had remained true to the best of what it was – might have doubled or tripled in size, and continued to play an outstanding role in the struggles for a better society down to the present time. SWPers played key roles in social movements and struggles, and in developing radical consciousness, that helped change the history of our time. Over the years, many former SWPers have continued to do so. It has not been demonstrated that some “iron law” existed to prevent such an organization from continuing to play such a role in the last two decades of the 20th and into the 21st centuries.

This is what made the actual corruption and terrible crash of the party so devastating for so many of those who lived through the trauma. The reactions of different comrades varied. Some refused to believe the painful truths of what happened, and they remained members or uncritical sympathizers even as the organization shattered and dwindled. Among those who broke with the SWP, some sought an explanation for the debacle in some variety of “original sin” – presumably inherent in some deep flaw in the ideas of SWP founder James P. Cannon, or Leon Trotsky, or Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. Some concluded that they had, in fact, been profoundly mistaken in adhering to Marxism and believing socialism is necessary or possible.

Trying to Understand

One of the interesting features of Sheppard’s account is his return to, and straightforward defense of, those revolutionary orientations of Lenin, Trotsky, and Cannon which he had embraced in the late 1950s and early ’60s, but which, as a Barnes lieutenant in the early 1980s, he had been inclined to bend and break. As already suggested, this helps give his account an elemental political coherence that may also have been essential to his ability (or inclination) to produce this account in the first place.

In a way related to this, for the most part Sheppard is not inclined to see seeds of future problems in

the way oppositional groups were dealt with in the 1960s and 1970s. It is quite significant, however, that he acknowledges three errors in the way the SWP leadership handled these oppositions. One error involves a failure (contrary to genuine Leninist organizational practice) to include representatives of minority tendencies in the political leadership of the SWP, and a second involves a tendency to harden and exacerbate political differences with the dissidents – both of which did much to polarize attitudes and relationships. A third error – made in relation to the expulsion of the Internationalist Tendency – involves a blurring of the party’s Control Commission (which was supposed to be politically neutral in its defense of organizational principles and membership rights) with the party leadership when it was engaged in a fierce factional struggle.

Still, there is much in the earlier party leadership’s handling of oppositionists that he defends. In regard to the 1974 “re-registration” expulsion of the Internationalist Tendency, advanced by the Control Commission, Sheppard gives a lengthy and detailed explanation of how and why it made sense. But the dialectics of reality means the same thing can have both positive and negative qualities. The negative flip side of the “re-registration” expulsion weakened the Party. It helped make comrades with critical ideas less inclined to raise and press them, because to do so would “prove” that “they were on their way out” of the SWP, words that I heard more than once within the Party’s rank-and-file.

Actually, Sheppard himself had absorbed the same politically corrupting lesson, as he recounts in the second volume. He had instinctively understood, when he discovered some of his privately expressed criticisms had aroused Barnes’s ire, that a failure to back off would have terrible consequences for him:

“I had devoted my life to building and leading the SWP. The prospect of being out of it was terrifying and almost inconceivable. I knew I would be shunned by my former comrades and closest friends, as well as by the membership at large that had looked up to me as a central leader and teacher for decades. Under this pressure, I now see, I did everything I could to please Jack in the (vain) hope I would be spared the axe” (300).

If a central leader such as Sheppard felt this, think of how the membership as a whole must have instinctively felt (covered over with plenty of rationalization, to be sure). This situation did not drop from the sky. The pre-existing internal culture of the SWP had to make possible this kind of development.

The Dobbs and Kerry leadership’s tightening of party discipline through a 1965 document on organizational principles is also defended by Sheppard – though he gives a vague nod to the retired James P. Cannon’s “don’t strangle the party” admonition from the same period [4].

One concept stressed in the 1965 document is “party loyalty” – and much of what Sheppard says in its defense is quite reasonable. “Loyalty to the party is the bedrock of democratic centralism,” he writes, “which is democracy in decision-making and unity in action in carrying out decisions.” In the very next breath, he emphasizes the very same point: “Loyalty to the party is the concept that the SWP is the party you build and defend no matter what your criticisms. It is the bedrock of party organization. Without loyalty to the party there can be no common ground for either democratic discussion or unity in action” (50).

The question can be raised, however, as to the specific criteria for determining such party loyalty. Is it disloyal to believe that a particular convention decision undermines the party’s program and is contrary to its principles? Should someone who believes that the party program is in need of revision, in the light of new realities, be considered “disloyal” to that program? Who decides whether a member is disloyal? According to Sheppard, by the late 1970s Barnes believed (and others

accepted) “that the leadership must be loyal to him personally and centered on him personally” (322-323). Those who didn’t see things that way, and who disagreed with one or another perspective to which Barnes adhered, were viewed as politically incorrect, as possibly disloyal, and as probably “on their way out.”

Another aspect of the internal culture of the SWP that may have contributed to the triumph of “Barnesism” is a certain narrowness in the way Marxism came to be engaged with. There was a tendency to be ingrown, to be dismissive of all Marxists whose Leninist-Trotskyist credentials were not clear and in order, and – with a self-assured arrogance – to be rigid and polemical in ways that Marxism was to be understood and applied.

The Marx who said “doubt everything” (and who freely made use of the ideas of “non-Marxist” and even bourgeois thinkers) was not held up as a model. There was a veering away from considering even such Marxists as Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, E. P. Thompson, Paul Sweezy, C. L. R. James, Hal Draper, Harry Braverman, Sheila Rowbotham, and others. There were outstanding countertendencies, to be sure, that could be found in the thinking and writings of some figures – Joe Hansen, George Breitman, George Weissman, at times Cannon himself. But many members felt restraints on critical thinking, a concern to “get it right” (as defined by certain party authorities), a fear of going too far in thinking for one’s self.

In Barry Sheppard’s account, however, none of these factors – previous mishandling of oppositionists in the SWP, problematical organizational conceptions propagated by the Dobbs-Kerry leadership, limitations on critical thinking and on the way Marxism was understood and utilized by many in the party – explains what happened. And I would agree that, by themselves, they do not provide an adequate explanation.

The problem is, however, that the “deeper” explanation Sheppard provides is incredibly thin. There is an obligatory Marxist genuflection to the larger “objective” political conditions – failure of world revolution, failure of the radicalization process to sweep through the U.S. working class as expected – and then Jack Barnes, an impressive person who lost his way, somehow assumes great psychological and organizational power over his comrades, becoming a cult figure and leads the party astray. Sheppard reflects:

“It would be naïve to think that the membership itself could resist this juggernaut. It could only have been stopped in the Political Committee itself. Jack couldn’t do it – he didn’t understand what he was fashioning. It was up to the rest of us on the Political Committee, but we failed. The responsibility is primarily mine, since I was the first to understand it, and next to Jack I had the greatest leadership authority” (323).

This remarkable passage raises more questions than it answers. For Barry to imply that only he could have saved the world revolution (or at least the revolutionary party) from Big Bad Barnes, but that he screwed up, places far too much blame on him, and it seems implausible, given his earlier explanation of his own vulnerability. Why did the entire Political Committee fail? Why was the membership itself incapable of facing and resolving the problem? If the answer to all of this was that there was a powerful and destructive cult of Jack Barnes, the question remains why was there such a cult, how could it have arisen in the excellent party that Sheppard tells us about in Volume I of *The Party*, with all the excellent traditions associated with Dobbs, Cannon, Trotsky, Lenin and the Bolsheviks?

The Past and the Future

What strikes me as the missing piece in Sheppard's analysis has been put forward more than once [5].

For Marxists, there is a need to trace the answers to such riddles to a historical materialist exploration of broader and deeper cultural, social, and economic developments than can be provided by a focus on ideas and personalities. It is obvious that the ideas of Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, Leon Trotsky, James P. Cannon and others who influenced revolutionary socialists in the United States cannot be understood without reference to this larger context that they were part of. This larger context involved a global mass workers' movement that evolved at least from the 1860s down to the Second World War, and that movement was shaped by larger social, economic, cultural and political realities.

The impact of the Second World War, and the immense changes that followed in its wake, profoundly altered the social, economic, and cultural realities that had given rise to the workers' movement and its left-wing, within which the ideas of the revolutionary Marxists had developed and made sense. Even though the words of the revolutionaries continued to be read and studied, the nature of the labor movement (which gave the words their distinctive meaning) qualitatively changed, fragmenting and eroding.

In the United States, capitalism generated a recomposition of the working class in a manner that increasingly de-radicalized the rank-and-file layers that had been the base of labor insurgencies from the time of the Knights of Labor down to the heroic struggles in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). It was within that broad working-class activist milieu that Socialist, Communist, and Trotskyist organizations had flourished, and within that context the earlier cadres of U.S. Trotskyism had been formed and the political perspectives of American Trotskyism had practical meaning.

After the Second World War, the broader economic, social and cultural context was changed, and in the 1950s and early 1960s, the shrinking number of U.S. Trotskyists – despite their strength of character and ideas – had become relatively threadbare and brittle as a political force.

When new recruits began to flood into the ranks of the SWP in the 1960s and 1970s, they mostly came from the campuses, not the factories. They engaged with the writings of Lenin, Trotsky and Cannon, but they did not automatically consider the disconnect between the revolutionary texts and the changed contexts. They came from a different experience and with a different consciousness. Important political work was done – especially in struggles against war, racism, and sexism – but the revolutionary working-class orientation that had been at the heart of American Trotskyism was understood and practiced in a different, more abstract, less vibrant manner than had been the case earlier.

This was inevitable, if one accepts the Marxist precept that being determines consciousness – how we live, what we actually experience, determines how we think. People from different realities will understand and apply the same ideas differently. In fact, some serious efforts to remain true to the old perspectives necessarily generated sectarian results. In my opinion, this is not because the old perspectives were inherently sectarian (on the whole, they were not), but because the context in which they had made sense no longer existed.

A majority of the youthful layer of U.S. Trotskyists – although students and ex-students – were predominantly children of the blue-collar and white-collar working-class. But they tended to see themselves, and to be seen, as “middle class” (especially since traditionally, before World War II, it

was typically the children of “the upper and middle classes” who went to colleges and universities). Nor was there the broader labor-radical sub-culture that had existed from the 1860s to the 1940s. The actual working class and its consciousness had been evolving, since the 1950s, without the benefit of such a sub-culture.

Nonetheless, there existed the conceptualization among SWPers that the Socialist Workers Party alone was the nucleus of what would become the mass revolutionary party of the working class. This had made sense in the 1930s and 1940s when (1) a mass workers’ movement existed as a powerful force within the working class, (2) within that mass workers’ movement there was a substantial left-wing, and (3) in that left-wing of the mass workers’ movement there were three major currents – reformist-oriented Social-Democrats, authoritarian-opportunist Stalinists, and revolutionary socialists influenced by Trotsky. Obviously, only the Trotskyists in that context had the capacity to provide revolutionary leadership to the working class, and in that context they also had a realistic possibility of doing so.

Just as obviously, however, the realities of the 1960s and 1970s were qualitatively different. The SWP’s reasonable self-conceptualization of 1938 could not make the same kind of sense in 1978. It was disconnected from the real world.

If one was oblivious to this actual situation, as so many SWP members were, attempts to apply the old perspectives to the qualitatively different situation could be relevant only to the internal universe of a political sect, not to the actual lives of working people living and struggling in the larger society. It is within this framework that the decline of the Socialist Workers Party (as a Trotskyist organization) can best be understood. Within this context the previously discussed factors could assume decisive importance: rigidity in organizational and theoretical conceptions, limitations on critical thinking, growing intolerance toward oppositionists, the nurturing of an ingrown organizational sub-culture, the susceptibility of comrades to the development of cultism.

Our present-day reality in 2012 is as different from the 1960s as that decade was from the 1930s. Capitalist globalization has been generating economic and cultural crises, radicalizing discontent, revolutionary ferment, occupations, insurgencies. The decomposed working classes have been recomposing in ways that give new relevance to revolutionary Marxism. A labor-radical sub-culture has also been in the process of recomposing. New possibilities are emerging. This reality provides the vital context that gives Barry Sheppard’s contribution particular resonance. He himself explains it quite well:

"I believe the worldwide crisis of the capitalist system that began in 2007 represents a massive attack on the working class. The drive by the government and the corporations to make the working people bear the burden of this crisis will impel new forms of struggle and organizations to emerge. The rebuilding of a revolutionary socialist party is an urgent necessity to help lead this process as it unfolds. A new radicalization will develop, and we must coalesce a conscious Marxist party out of it and to lead it to victory.

I hope this political memoir will help in this process, both by preserving positive lessons and pointing to some things to avoid in the experience of the SWP. People from other traditions, new and old ones, will also contribute to this necessary rebirth" (7-8).

The rebirth that Barry anticipates is, in fact, being prepared by struggles in workplaces and communities throughout the United States. In a special appendix to the second volume of *The Party*, Barry provides “An Example of Work in the Unions,” a fine account of the courageous and creative work of Caroline Lund, his beloved companion, a working-class militant in an auto plant and a dissident trade unionist in the United Auto Workers. Caroline’s work was cut short when she

succumbed to Lou Gehrig's Disease - but her example will have value for activists prepared to continue and multiply such efforts to advance the consciousness and the struggles of the working class.

Paul Le Blanc

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 23557), [The US SWP in the 1960s - Two reviews](#).

[2] see http://www.laborstandard.org/New_Postings/Camejo_Evans_Review.htm

[3] in three digitized volumes "In Defense of American Trotskyism" - <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/fit.htm>

[4] <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/fit/dontstrangle.htm>

[5] for example, in my 2008 talk "What Happened to the Socialist Workers Party" - http://laborstandard.org/Legacy/What_Happened_by_Paul.htm