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Making Sense of Trotskyism in the United States: Two Memoirs

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Review-essay: Peter Camejo, *North Star, A Memoir* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010), 364 pages with index. \$18.00

Leslie Evans, *Outsider's Reverie, A Memoir* (Los Angeles: Boryana Books, 2010), 438 pages with index. \$18.95

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The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) of the United States was for a number of years the largest and strongest section of the Fourth International — both of which were formally established in 1938, both representing the revolutionary socialist perspectives associated with Leon Trotsky. Rooted in opposition to Stalinism in the early Communist movement, the U.S. Trotskyists worked closely with Trotsky in building the Fourth International, the global network of small revolutionary groups adhering to the original “Bolshevik-Leninist” perspectives. They also played a heroic role in U.S. class struggles of the 1930s, and their reputation among many was as unyielding partisans of workers’ democracy and Trotsky’s revolutionary Marxist orientation. Yet in the non-revolutionary aridity of 1950s America, their ranks dwindled down to handfuls of stalwarts, perhaps 400 aging members, in a handful of cities.

The memoirs of Peter Camejo and Leslie Evans were produced by two of the most talented of the “1960s generation” rebels who flowed into and revitalized the SWP. Camejo (joining in 1959) was perhaps the best known activist leader of the party in the 1960s and 1970s, and Evans (who joined in 1961) was perhaps its most capable writer, editor and educator of that same “youth” layer. Both basically turned away from Trotskyism, quite consciously, during the 1980s. What is strange is that the SWP as a whole absolutely did the same thing — expelling or driving out all those not inclined to go along with the transition to its own esoteric variety of Castroism. Yet to their credit, neither Camejo nor Evans were able to remain inside the newly-revised version of the SWP, and their stories

each in their own way reveal much about the “how” and the “why” of this development. What each has to say, however, goes beyond the specifics of that experience. Larger questions emerge regarding the nature of activism and social change, the validity of Marxism, the possibility and/or need of socialism.

Camejo was writing his autobiography in a race with terminal cancer — which he almost won. Evans helped edit this book and prepare it for publication, and he was consequently inspired to write his own autobiography. But the two books are dramatically different in more than one way. Camejo focuses much more on social movements and struggles, all motivated by a never-ending opposition to the injustices of capitalism. Evans focuses much, much more on political ideas as well as internal life and conflicts within the SWP — and far more than Camejo he has made his peace with the status quo, settling into a niche very much to the right of his fellow memoirist. Camejo rejects the old Trotskyism because he sees it as an obstacle to revolution — Evans rejects it in large measure because he has decided that revolution itself is a bad thing, although this break was neither simple nor easy for him:

“In 1983 I may have begun to have doubts about Lenin and Marxism, but a lifetime of personal and political loyalties didn’t die easily or quickly. Part of it was habit, part loyalty to my fellow expellees. Then there were the dead to whom you had to answer. Trotskyism, like most religions, had its many martyrs, who inspired belief and dedication by their example. There was Trotsky himself, assassinated by Stalin’s agent in Mexico in 1940. His son, Leon Sedov, was murdered in a Swiss hospital in 1938 by Russian doctors secretly working for the KGB. There were the Old Bolsheviks, most of Lenin’s Central Committee, shot in the back of the head in the basements of Moscow’s Lubyanka Prison, where the cells were conveniently supplied with floor drains. And the countless anonymous victims I had become familiar with from the movement’s literature: The Trotskyist prisoners at the Vorkuta labor camp in Siberia, marched in groups to the firing squads in 1937 singing the Internationale, and the hundreds of Chinese Trotskyists shot by the Maoists in 1952, it was said after having their tongues cut out so they couldn’t shout any last protests. A few of them were jailed instead and remained there until after Mao’s death.” (Evans, 312)

In his own fashion, Evans seeks to remain true to this tradition — by writing as honest an account as he can, and certainly respectful of the finest in the old traditions that he has turned away from. As such, his memoir is a treasure trove for those seeking to understand at least some of the dynamics of the SWP in its years of growth and decline while Evans was a member. Yet it is hardly the kind of book one would hand to a young activist to help her or him carry on the revolutionary struggle for a better world, a struggle Evans now rejects.

Camejo also seeks to remain true to his earlier commitments — in his own fashion. But its thrust and spirit make it an ideal volume for young activists. He tells us:

“The battles in which small groups of Trotskyists fought against Stalinism will go down in history as heroic. Trotskyists were murdered in tremendous numbers in Russia and were persecuted in other countries as well. They faced enormous hostility from the huge mass base of the Communist parties, but also endured attacks from pro-capitalist forces.

As an instrument to revive the mass world movement for social justice, however, I think that Trotskyism had historical, internal, sectarian limits that blocked it from being able to become a critical force for social change. But during the early 1970s I can see in my diary that I still thought it was possible that the Trotskyist movement would gradually, and with occasional opportunities for explosive growth, come to replace the influence of the Stalinists and social democrats.” (Camejo, 115–116)

Both books give a vibrant sense of the perceptions and realities that made “believers” of Evans, Camejo, and many other activists of that time.

Glory Days

An almost “glowing” chapter in Evans’s memoir deals with the amazing year 1968. His focus is global, involving a blend of triumph and tragedy: the dramatic surge in the Vietnamese liberation struggle; the decision of President Johnson not to seek re-election due to anti-war pressure; the quest for “socialism with a human face” in Czechoslovakia associated with the “Prague Spring”—and the repressive Soviet invasion a few months later; the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. as he was coming to the aid of striking sanitation workers, followed by enraged urban uprisings in black communities throughout the nation; militant student strikes throughout the United States; the May-June student and workers upsurge in France that almost toppled the De Gaulle regime; the mass student struggles in Mexico, violently repressed by the regime; and the militant protests in Chicago during the Democratic Party convention. All of this gave life to what had often been abstract assertions of revolutionary internationalism. “The afterglow of 1968,” he writes, “radiated for several years, raising spirits and hopes.” (Evans, 194)

Camejo’s account puts us in the thick of the battle. He tells us about tactics and strategy of the late 1960s and early ’70s — the remarkable “Battle for Telegraph Avenue” in the radicalizing Berkeley of 1968, the People’s Park confrontation, defense campaigns and electoral campaigns, all in the context of a sustained analysis of capitalism, state repression, imperialism, etc. that he held as much at the time of writing as at the earlier time of doing. A richly detailed chapter is devoted to the movement to end the Vietnam war, in which Camejo describes and defends the basic SWP strategy.

Although less detailed, Evans’s account is also positive. He describes the National Peace Action Coalition (NPAC) in which the SWP was a leading force — in competition with the seemingly more radical Peoples Coalition for Peace and Justice (PCPJ, backed by diverse elements that included the Communist Party, an increasingly ultraleft SDS, some radical pacifists, etc.). He notes that what “NPAC had going for it [was] a clear focus on the war, based on mass peaceful legal demonstrations, and the SWP cadres, who were generally tough dedicated people embedded in the leadership of real antiwar groups in a dozen major cities.” When NPAC “called for national demonstrations in Washington and San Francisco for April 24, 1971, PCPJ backed a week of civil disobedience and disruptions in Washington beginning May 1.”

Far more than the May Day actions, April 24 was building all over the country, and then came under attack from conservative newspaper columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, who published an attack warning of “Trotskyite Communists ... [who] were running NPAC,” and lamenting that “what makes all this significant is that the Trotskyists are not the few bedraggled malcontents of a generation ago but the most dynamic, most effective organization on the American far left.” Les Evans comments: “I cite this to show how the government and much of the mainstream press viewed us in those years, and how we viewed ourselves. We had come from the few hundred ‘bedraggled malcontents’ I had joined in 1961 to become generals of the antiwar army.” Indeed, 800,000 in Washington and at least 250,000 in San Francisco mobilized — in contrast to the 16,000 drawn to PCPJ’s more “radical” but disparate action on May 1. (Evans, 209-210)

The fact that both Evans and Camejo are quite prepared to critically examine and reject much of what they and the SWP did gives weight to the fact that both present a very positive account of the U.S. Trotskyists’ role in helping build the mass movement that contributed to ending the U.S. war in Vietnam — peaceful, legal, broad-based mass actions focused on a central demand: bring the troops

home now. Their great respect for certain figures in the older generation is also enhanced by the fact that they now disagree with much of what these figures stood for.

Among the electoral campaigns run by the SWP — which were always educational campaigns to get out socialist ideas and help build social movements and struggles — the most dynamic by far was the Presidential candidacy of Peter Camejo and his running-mate Willie Mae Reid. More than most other candidates, Camejo was able to generate energy and enthusiasm, sometimes break into the mass media, and get out the socialist message. The SWP membership, he suggests, “sensed that, unlike the other party speakers, there was something unique in my presentations that attracted new people to the SWP. However, most people did not realize that it was the nonsectarian manner of my approach — they just thought it was because I was a good speaker, a sort of political stand-up comic who used a lot of humor to illustrate points and keep the audience entertained.” (Camejo, 129–130)

The combined size of the SWP and its youth group the Young Socialist Alliance, by 1976, exceeded 2000 people — mostly in their 20s and 30s, with tremendous energy and commitment. There was a substantial weekly newspaper, *The Militant*, a monthly theoretical/political magazine, the *International Socialist Review* (which Evans edited in its most successful phase), plus the international weekly *Intercontinental Press* edited by Trotsky’s former secretary Joe Hansen. There was also Pathfinder Press, a publishing house producing a remarkable array of books and popular pamphlets, largely overseen by George Breitman, another veteran of the movement, whose *Malcolm X Speaks* made the speeches of Malcolm X available to millions, and who made excellent editions of Trotsky’s writings available throughout the English-speaking world. The SWP also boasted a substantial three-story national headquarters, a chain of combined offices/book stores/forum halls (with weekly forums) in a growing number of cities, maintained by an impressive corps of paid staff and many, many more hardworking volunteer activists.

What Happened?

How could something so good go so wrong? Looming large in both accounts is the figure of Jack Barnes. The rise of Barnes cannot be understood without reviewing some history about, and tracing some tensions within, the U.S. Trotskyist “old guard.” Evans gives considerable attention to such matters.

Back in 1953, the semi-retired founder of American Trotskyism, James P. Cannon — now living on the West Coast, surrounded by like-minded comrades there, and in touch with veteran comrades around the country — pressured the new national leadership of union veterans Farrell Dobbs and Tom Kerry, into a brutal factional dispute with a significant layer of comrades, led by Bert Cochran. The Cochran group, favoring a dramatic curtailment of open SWP activities in the McCarthyite anti-communist atmosphere generated by the Cold War, had aligned itself with the leadership of the Fourth International headed by Michel Pablo, who was calling for Trotskyists around the world to fold their banners in order to carry out a “deep entry” into Communist and social democratic movements and organizations. Cannon would have none of this — pressuring a reluctant Dobbs and Kerry onto a course of struggle and split. Working closely with Cannon in this were a dynamic husband and wife team, Murray Weiss and Myra Tanner Weiss. Once the integrity of the SWP was preserved, and particularly with Stalinism’s crisis generated by the Khrushchev revelations of Stalin’s crimes, the couple pushed forward (with apparent support from Cannon) in outward-reaching regroupment efforts on the Left. In the process, they developed a substantial influence among recently recruited younger comrades who were involved in forming a new youth group in the late 1950s, the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA).

Believing that they were the rightful leaders of the SWP, Dobbs and Kerry deeply resented Cannon's interventions, and had a profound antipathy toward the "Weissites" (Murray, Myra, and anyone associated with them). But "Weissites" were not the only forces involved in building up the YSA. Clusters of young comrades around Tim Wohlforth and James Robertson and new recruits Peter Camejo and Barry Sheppard were also helping lead the newly-formed Young Socialist Alliance. Dobbs and Kerry, seeking to "tighten up" the party regime, increasingly worked to sideline and marginalize the "Weissites" — and when Wohlforth and Robertson moved into increasingly vociferous opposition (around issues of the Cuban Revolution and the reunification of the Fourth International), they found themselves marginalized and finally expelled (going on to form, respectively, the Workers League associated with Gerry Healy's Socialist Labor League in Britain, and the Spartacist League). This left Camejo and Sheppard, but in the radical stirrings of the early 1960s new forces were increasingly drawn in. "The real standout was Jack Barnes, a Carleton College graduate who joined the YSA and SWP in Minneapolis," according to Camejo. "Jack helped recruit a group of very capable leaders into the YSA, including Carleton classmates Larry Seigle, Dan Styron, and Mary-Alice Waters; while at graduate school at Northwestern, Jack brought in brothers Joel and Jon Britton, Lew Jones, and several more from the Chicago area." (Camejo, 37)

Evans adds nuance and detail. Initially, Barnes was not an impressive speaker. "When I first heard him in 1963 he was halting and difficult to follow. Oscar Coover [an older party veteran], who had heard him give a talk in Los Angeles after I had moved to San Francisco, said to me afterwards, 'How can the national office send us somebody like that? He has no idea how to speak, and the way he waves that stump of his around would put anybody off.' Jack did have the habit when speaking of slapping his left elbow where the arm ended [due to a birth defect] with his right hand for emphasis." While he never lost that mannerism, Barnes soon matured as a speaker. By the 1965 YSA convention, "Barnes emerged as the central leader of the YSA, the most authoritative and assured speaker on the major resolutions on the floor. When it was over, a brief plenum of the newly elected National Committee was called before we all left for home. It was held in a small unheated room. Outside, snow was falling and the temperature inside was near freezing. We were all standing, wearing our overcoats and breathing out white clouds of chill vapor. It made me think of the Bolshevik high command at the Smolny Institute in St. Petersburg during the October Revolution." It was in this setting that Barnes — nominating himself — was overwhelmingly selected as national chairman of the YSA." (Evans, 178, 157)

By this time, Evans notes, "Jack's standing had risen enormously, from a branch leader in Chicago to the effective head of the party. Farrell Dobbs didn't hand over the post of national secretary until 1972 but it was already clear that Jack and his inner circle were the heirs of the generation of the 1930s. The handful of middle-generation recruits from the late forties and the 1950s, such as Fred Halstead, Dick Garza, Ed Shaw, and Bob Himmel, were subordinate." Yet there were disturbing early signs. An angry dissident from the Bloomington, Indiana YSA told Evans and his then-wife Kipp Dawson about Barnes's heavy-handedness toward those differing with him, adding: "Jack Barnes is the Stalin of the SWP....The older comrades are desperate for successors so they blind themselves to it but Barnes is building a machine just like Stalin did. He undermines anyone who isn't part of his clique and gets them out of the way. He doesn't want recruits who know anything, nobody who was ever in any other socialist organization. All he wants is empty vessels he can fill up with his picture of himself as another Lenin." Evans and Dawson decided to reserve judgment. By the late 1960s, Evans observed, "Barnes himself adapted publicly to the standards of conduct of the older generation of party leaders, tough but fair. Still, there were differences and warning signs in private. Unlike any of the older group, Jack routinely said vicious things about people to anyone who happened to be around, which I took as a technique to keep people in line as you knew he would pillory you out of your hearing if you displeased him." (Evans, 178, 151, 227)

The national party leadership — in the minds of some of the new comrades — tended to be ranked in a particular way: “Joseph Hansen and George Breitman were theoreticians, the highest superlative, while Tom Kerry and Farrell Dobbs were at best politicians, able to carry out policy but not to formulate it. George Novack ranked lower still, an educator.” All were in their 60s, more or less . There was the need for...a Barnes. Even the way he wielded his half-arm “was something of a defiant pose, saying to the world that he was unyielding and wouldn’t concede an inch to a physical obstacle. He was the same in politics, hard, ruthless, and unyielding. That was what attracted us to him. The SWP as it existed at the 1963 convention seemed an impossibly weak instrument to rouse and mobilize the millions it would take to turn out the men of property who owned the country. Barnes meant to build a different kind of organization, as hard and mean as himself.” More than this, “there was a clear strong intelligence that rarely sounded like sloganeering or the tendency in many of the older comrades to approach every new situation with a set of fixed dead categories into which everything had to be shoveled. He looked always at the places where a small group could intervene in a situation to shape it. He was hard, which is what attracted us to him, but he seemed to also be fair. I was surprised at his patience in waiting five more years to assume the title of national secretary when he already carried its authority. He would wait seven years after that, until most of the older generation were dead, before making a decisive move to impose his own vision on the party.” It was clear to those who were watching that there was a Barnes machine, “a group within the younger leadership, most importantly the Carleton people and a few he had picked up in Chicago, who were his base and who were almost always favored in the distribution of important assignments.” (Evans, 158, 143, 178-179)

The new leadership layer worked hand-in-glove with the old, in the 1969-1974 transition period, around a fierce dispute within the Fourth International which began over whether Trotskyists in Latin America should support a continental strategy of guerrilla warfare or adhere to the traditional “Leninist strategy of Party building” rooted in the struggles of the working class — but soon encompassing a multiplicity of related issues. By the mid-1970s, SWPers felt, with some justification, that they had more or less won this dispute — but the taste of victory, and the certainty that theirs was the correct understanding of global reality, soured by 1979-80 as the Iranian Revolution that they had supported took an unexpected turn to reactionary Islamic fundamentalism, and as the Sandinista struggle in Nicaragua, which they insisted was about to collapse because it followed the wrong strategy, was swept to victory.

Disorientation and Disaster

The SWP actually began to flounder after the end of the Vietnam war. The question of questions was how to integrate the work of the party with the realities of the U.S. working class. With Barnes and his machine firmly in place, and the old guard moving (or being moved) increasingly to the sidelines, there was a decision to break up large SWP branches and create smaller community branches — which badly flopped. The decision to shift to working-class struggles was hardly unreasonable, however, although neither Camejo nor Evans give attention to dramatic stirrings in the United Mine Workers (the struggles and triumph of Miners for Democracy), the United Steel Workers (the militant campaign of dissident Ed Sadlowski), the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (where Teamsters for Democracy was making headway), the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (where a militant Tony Mazzocchi was becoming a force in the national leadership and beginning to agitate for a labor party), or the dramatic upsurge in organizing and struggle among service workers and government employees. What they are alert to, however, is how the “turn to industry” was increasingly bungled. Camejo puts it this way:

“The SWP gradually separated itself from all political activity, rendering the membership passive.

Finding union jobs in auto, steel, or another industry allowed some members to maintain the illusion they were doing something political. But the SWP leadership went so far as to dictate that members should not be teachers, work for a library, or take any sort of "middle class" job, and there was not to be any more student movement work. This disconnect from reality led to internal conflict, factionalism, and expulsions, until the SWP was reduced to a sect, a cult around Barnes." (Camejo, 176)

While comrades were deployed in industrial jobs, the new party leadership seemed to have little understanding about how the SWP could relate to the actual problems and struggles of workers in the industrial workplaces. Evans along with some other comrades took a job as an iron ore miner on the desolate Minnesota iron range — which was hit badly in the 1980s by lay-offs brought on by an economic restructuring that led to what some economists called the "de-industrialization of America." A party branch meeting was set to discuss what the comrades' response should be. The branch organizer — in touch with the national office — "proposed that the party members at the next meeting of Local 1938...call for having a Nicaragua slide show." A loyal comrade named Anne Teasdale, "still disbelieving that this could really be the whole of the party's anti-layoff strategy, spoke up. 'Don't we have something to say about what is happening here on the Range, the unemployment, what people are supposed to do about it.?' She was met with rage." One leading member accused her of "lowering our international banner" and failing to support revolutions in Central America and the Caribbean. "Others chimed in." (Evans, 289)

This relates to another key factor that Evans emphasizes, coming into play beginning in 1978. "Jack had had a revelation about Fidel Castro hardly less searing than Saint Paul's on the road to Damascus....Barnes said he was electrified by suddenly understanding that the Cubans had a strategy to intervene to promote revolutions." Struggles in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Grenada, etc. provided proof that Cuba was becoming the fount of world revolution. He adds: "It was clear that Jack was determined to make a turn toward Havana and that Joe Hansen was on the outs with the party's younger inner circle." Hansen died in at the beginning of 1979 — but Michael Baumann, who had been working closely with Hansen on Intercontinental Press, told Evans that "Joe didn't agree with Jack on anything by the time he died." Camejo reported to Evans shortly before his own death in 2008 that Hansen had approached him in the late 1970s with a proposal to form a bloc against Barnes. "Barnes is completely unacceptable. You can't treat people like that," he said. "Peter added that he was frightened and quickly ended the discussion." (Evans, 253-254, 256)

Evans was disturbed by the "whispering campaign without a vote or documents," utilized by the Barnes machine to "overturn forty or fifty years and turn the orthodox into outcasts," recognizing: "This was going to be bad." His next comment is revealing: "It was clear that Jack's basic motivation in his whole current political shift was to seek the approval of Havana, which had close ties with Moscow, where Trotsky was a demonic figure. But I was still reluctant to break with the party's favorable assessment of the Cuban government on its home turf." Aside from hoping that Barnes might be right, there was another reason for not challenging the reorientation. "There were two small opposition groups in the party that had done that, and become very isolated as a result. One was composed of Tom Kerry's supporters, led by Nat Weinstein in San Francisco and Lynn Henderson in Minneapolis. The other was based in New York, led by George Breitman, trade unionist Frank Lovell, and Steve Bloom. I thought Weinstein was hopelessly dogmatic and sterile. I was friends with Breitman and held him in high esteem, but didn't agree with him that the Cuban state was an undemocratic dictatorship though with an anti-imperialist and anticapitalist character." (Evans, 279)

A new party leadership school was established, with the students handpicked and the classes taught by Barnes and trusted lieutenants. "The first graduates began giving classes and internal speeches saying Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution was an ultraleft mistake and that his claim to have

reached agreement with Lenin in April 1917 on the aims of the Russian Revolution was not true," according to Evans. At the 1981 SWP convention, 42% of the National Committee, mostly seasoned and somewhat critical-minded comrades in their 30s and 40s, were replaced by little-known younger "hards." He comments: "The purge list included Dick Roberts, the party's only economist; Jeff Mackler, a leader of the teachers union; Ray Markey, president of the New York librarians union; Kipp Dawson, Syd Stapleton and Lew Jones, all important leaders in the antiwar work; and myself....Most of us concluded that the change of line being hinted at in the corridors was going public soon and the New York leadership wanted to strip potential critics of the status as National Committee members before any discussion began. We still thought there would be a discussion." In fact, the regularly scheduled national convention which was to occur in 1983 was cancelled in order to block the discussion, with expulsions already in full-swing. (Evans, 277-278, 303).*

Over the next several years, Barnes's SWP engineered splits in other sections of the Fourth International, creating small groups of co-thinkers who would sell *The Militant* in their respective countries, uncritically praising Fidel, Cuba and (for a time) the Nicaraguan Sandinistas. By 1990 they formally announced what had been true for several years — their abandonment of the Fourth International, in preparation for a new "communist international" that would be created (they were sure) by Cuban and Central American revolutionaries. Camejo, who had little problem with supporting Fidelistas and Sandinistas, was too opposed to sectarianism, and too popular among activists, to be trusted by the Barnes machine — and special, quite successful efforts were made in 1982 to put him outside of the SWP. He comments:

"The Barnes cult added a distinctive twist. They decided to refer to themselves publicly as 'communist,' which they do to this day. In the world of political sects this is a conscious effort to remain isolated. It assures their few followers that they stand alone, that they will prove right and everyone else wrong. The cult leader has mystical inherent knowledge that no one else is able to attain except by becoming a follower." (Camejo, 176)

In the course of the 1980s and '90s, the SWP devolved into a small and isolated entity — with little connection to the social struggles of its time. Its international collaborators fared no better. But the sad tale cries out for explanations. How could this have happened? What explains the degeneration? It cannot be laid simply at the feet of Jack Barnes. For Marxists, the "evil genius" theory just won't do.

Original Sin?

For Camejo, the methodology of Barnes was rooted in a sectarian quality inherent in Trotskyism itself — which then caused him to carry out the quest for relevance in a hopelessly sectarian manner — changing one rigid "orthodoxy" (a Trotskyism distinct from the revolutionary Trotsky) for another (a Castroism distinct from the revolutionary Fidel). The crisis arose in the organization as early as 1970, in Camejo's opinion, with the choice facing the SWP being either to go "forward, evolving into an organization connected with the realities of the national and international living struggles of real people; or inward, self-isolating from realities because those realities did not correspond to a preconceived idea ordained as the unchangeable truth." (114, 115)

Camejo was transformed by the international work he did in Latin America in the late 1970s. Sent by the SWP to Nicaragua in 1979, he was able to see a mass, popular revolution up close and personal. He describes a young militant of the newly victorious FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front), addressing the laboring poor in a Managua barrio:

"As he spoke it dawned on me. The way he communicated, the message he gave, was what I had

always tried to say; but he used only clear, understandable words about his message built on the living history of Nicaragua and the consciousness of the workers and their families who were listening." He explained how Nicaragua belongs to its own people. How rich foreigners had come and taken their country from them but that they were the people who worked and created the wealth of their nation. They had the right to run it and to decide what should be done. He spoke about the homeless children in the streets and how under the U.S.-backed dictatorship nothing was done for them. He described in detail how the FSLN was trying to solve each problem. That it would take time. That Nicaragua was still in danger of foreign intervention. To never forget those who gave their lives so that Nicaragua could be a free nation. At each mention of the departed, the crowd shouted, "Presente," to affirm that the missing ones were still with them, here. At every meeting of the Sandinistas, regardless where it was held, someone would read off the names of people from that block, school, or union who had given their lives for freedom. Everyone at the meeting would shout "Presente."

"My mind began to race. Of course this young man was not going to use terms that would lead to confusion; he would place these issues in the culture, history, and language of his people. It dawned on me — that is why this movement had won. They didn't name their newspaper after some term from European history; they didn't speak of "socialism" or "Marxism." While the rest of the left of the 1960s and '70s was in decline throughout Latin America, caught up in the rhetoric of European Marxism and the influence of Stalinism, the FSLN had delivered a great victory for freedom." (Camejo, 170-171)

Camejo describes this experience as a "tipping point" for him, and while the SWP leadership was willing to place Fidelista and Sandinista certainties into its "program" (chucking the erstwhile Trotskyist certainties), it seemed incapable of emulating the example of being connected with living struggle. In one of the book's few glaring errors, however, Camejo incorrectly characterizes the position of the Fourth International majority, led by Ernest Mandel, as being hypercritical and even hostile to the Sandinistas — which might strengthen his point, if true, but whose inaccuracy throws the overarching point into question. (There are some who would criticize the pro-Sandinista attitude of both the Fourth International majority and of Camejo as a betrayal of the Trotskyist program — which might cause him to say: "See, that's what I'm talking about.")

The approach that Camejo criticizes is reflected in a comment Farrell Dobbs made to him: "The program has been developed. Our job is to implement it." Evans reports a similar comment from Barnes (before his Fidelista revelation): "One day Jack and I were talking in the headquarters and he told me his opinion that all serious theoretical work had been completed by Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky and there was nothing for future generations to do but apply the existing theory to specific political situations." Camejo appropriately notes that this is "contrary to the essence of Marx' writings about the materialist basis of science and how it applies to economic and social relations. Science is a process, not a discovery or revelation by a genius. Not only is a political program an evolving concept, but it also requires continuous discussion and debate in order for it to be effective. And it must, most important of all, be tested against reality." (Camejo, 115; Evans, 226)

Such an open and critical-minded approach can also be found — explicitly stated — in the writings of George Breitman and Joe Hansen, regardless of whether one agrees with some of their conclusions. But Evans reports on some similar stirrings from U.S. Trotskyist patriarch James P. Cannon in 1964-65. "The party is too ingrown," he said. "It has become intolerant of differences of opinion. It doesn't work with real people in the world. All of its activities are self-generated — Militant sales drives, election campaigns for our own candidates, forums in our own hall of ourselves talking to ourselves. This isn't a way to build a live organization. If this goes on much longer the party will cease to exist." He went on: "I haven't said anything publicly in the party because I haven't seen an issue where these sectarian tendencies could be corrected and I didn't want to undermine Farrell

and Tom. But now there is one.”

Evans continues: “Here Jim produced a pamphlet called *The Triple Revolution* written by the futurist Robert Theobald and published by the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara. The three revolutions supposed to be taking place in the world were in the growth of atomic weaponry, in struggles for human rights, but mainly in automation, leading, Theobald argued, to massive structural unemployment in the near term.” Cannon asked Evans to take up these issues and to write about them in the party on his behalf. (Evans, 154)

When it became known to Barnes that Evans was moving in this direction, he let it be known that such a thing would not be welcome — but also Evans concluded, after some investigation, that Theobald and Cannon were wrong, and he dropped the matter. Cannon himself — satisfied that the SWP’s energetic engagement with building the antiwar movement was shifting the party in an outward-moving direction — set the Triple Revolution discussion aside, without repudiating its importance.

What is clear is that the “original sin” that Camejo perceives — while identifying a genuine problem — is overstated and by itself inadequate in explaining the SWP disaster.

Les Evans reaches for a different variant of “original sin” to help explain the SWP disaster — Leninism. To make this case, he offers a set of authoritarian quotations from Lenin’s *Collected Works* from the civil war period of 1918–1920 and concludes: “Lenin, as his published works showed, was committed to an extreme Jacobin dictatorship over the whole of society to remold it to his vision.” (Evans, 285) He goes on to assert:

“The general pattern internationally was that most of the FI sections that had sided with Cannon and the SWP in the 1953 split were of the hard party type, while those led by the Europeans were looser, as a legacy of having been committed to deep entry in larger left parties in the 1950s. The hard parties with their super centralist structures more often than not ended up with a mad captain at the helm, sailing ahead with seeming unanimity among the ranks until they hit the iceberg. Witness Healy in England, Moreno in Argentina, or the still long surviving cult around Pierre Lambert in France. This centralist and ideologically intolerant structure seemed to produce the same result not only for little parties but for national states both great and small, as witness Stalinist Russia, Enver Hoxha’s Albania, Mao’s China, and Ceausescu’s Romania to name a few. In the case of the state rulers the Trotskyists attributed everything to the virus of Stalinism, which in turn they explained by the economic privileges of the party bureaucracy in an economy of scarcity. This neatly exempted them from any charge of similarity. Yet the same totalitarian virus decimated the various Trotskyist parties in the 1970s and 1980s, at least those of the hard Leninist sort. Draw your own conclusion.” (294)

There is much scholarship that would need to be confronted and refuted (or reinterpreted) to make this interpretation of Lenin stick. The desperate and often disastrous “emergency measures” of the Bolsheviks during the civil war period and its immediate aftermath do not provide a fair characterization of Leninist organizational principles as they actually developed from 1902 to 1917. What passed for good “Leninism” under Stalin and his disciples (or under Barnes and other sectarian cultists) is another matter. The fact remains, what Evans tells us about the organizational perspectives of Cannon, and of the SWP during the period of Cannon’s leadership, does not harmonize well with his generalization — or with any notion of Leninism à la Cannon leading to the Barnes disaster.

In a conversation in Cannon’s home in the early 1960s, Evans commented on a dissident in the YSA, suggesting “we would be better off if we could get him out.” Cannon asked: “Does he do anything for

the movement?" Evans conceded that, yes, he "read French and had presented a talk on Ernest Mandel's *Marxist Economic Theory*, which was not yet available in an English translation." Cannon responded sternly, "Well, that is something. The party is a voluntary organization. You can't hire and fire in the party. If you lose an experienced person you can't go out on the street and hire a replacement. You have to conserve what you have." (Evans, 162) Or consider his description of the 1963 national convention of the SWP:

"I now had my first chance to observe how party discussions and internal democracy worked. Mimeographed internal bulletins began to arrive from New York. All party members were permitted to write their views, to be printed in the bulletin during the preconvention period and, if it involved a resolution, to be put up for a vote at the coming convention. This was an internal discussion, however; all party members were expected to present the majority line when speaking to nonmembers."

There were some factions that were spread as minorities within several branches, and two that controlled their branches outright. The first type included a group around Jim Robertson and Tim Wohlforth, who dismissed the Cuban Revolution as an authoritarian nationalist event and who were opposed to the reunification with the International Secretariat. Another faction supported Arne Swabeck, one of the original founders of the movement, who lived in Los Angeles and had become convinced that Mao Zedong represented a true socialist tendency.

There was a small group in Detroit who thought the Soviet Union was some kind of new capitalist state as contrasted with the party majority position that it was defined by the nationalized property and only the bureaucratic government needed to be removed. The two factions that had their whole branch behind them were in Seattle, led by Dick Fraser and Clara Kaye, who championed "revolutionary integration" for the black movement and opposed any support of black nationalism, and in Milwaukee, led by James Bolton, who had a pro-Maoist position similar to that of Swabeck. Articles defending and opposing these variegated viewpoints filled many thick mimeographed bulletins. Also there were a few very long, almost incomprehensible, articles larded with abstruse organic and early computer analogies signed by a single individual, Lynn Marcus. When I asked about him I was told his real name was Lyndon La Rouché and his party name was an immodest contraction based on Lenin and Marx. . . . I had spoken before the branch that spring to propose that the militant black nationalism of the Muslims was a progressive force that should be supported despite their strident antiwhite rhetoric. This was met with general skepticism. I felt vindicated when the main party resolution, titled "Freedom Now," written by George Breitman in Detroit, called for support to black nationalism and the Nation of Islam." (130-131)

At the same time, Evans was struck by "the heat of the majority supporters' hostility to all the minority tendencies," and this would culminate — finally — in an organizational tightening under the Dobbs/Kerry regime as part of the leadership transition to the Barnes regime. Yet he notes that Cannon had disagreements with "the tightening up process that Jack Barnes had been shepherding through the national structure." (131, 234) After Cannon's death, Evans was assigned to go through his papers in order to help compose and edit new volumes of his writings. His comments, again, give the sense of a different Leninism than is described in the sweeping generalization:

"Reading over fifty years of Cannon's letters several things struck me. In the early sixties in Los Angeles I had seen that he held meetings of the local National Committee members and outraged New York by sending in policy proposals in the name of the Los Angeles NC group, like a dual Political Committee. I always assumed that dated only from his somewhat early retirement to Los Angeles in 1950. Not so. In 1936 the Trotskyists had dissolved their organization to join the Socialist Party with the aim of connecting with a developing left wing. During most of 1937 Cannon lived in California, and from there he repeatedly upstaged the elected leadership of his group in New York,

mailing out counterproposals to theirs to the faction national committee. This wouldn't have been tolerated for a minute in the Barnes-led SWP. Sharp exchanges took place openly between leaders of the Cannon faction without hiding them from other tendencies in the Trotskyist group. Another thing that struck me was Cannon's attitude toward former factional opponents. A surprising number of his close associates and even friends had earlier been bitter enemies: Sylvia Bleeker and Morris Lewitt, Joseph Hansen, and Art Sharon were all members of the Shachtman faction or, worse yet, part of the clique around Martin Abern, one of the three original Trotskyist leaders, infamous for his onionskin copies of leadership documents that went out regularly to his select list." Cannon's two closest friends seemed to be Ray Dunne in Minneapolis, who had always been a Cannonite, but the other was Joseph Vanzler, party name John G. Wright, who was described in a May 1933 letter to Cannon from George Clarke as "the vanguard of the freaks" and a supporter of the B. J. Field minority All of these people became part of the party's central leadership without prejudice over their former alignments. No such thing ever happened under Barnes. Anyone who opposed him was forever marked and generally quickly expelled." (Evans, 233)

At one point, a Barnes loyalist threatened Evans around pursuing the Triple Revolution thesis with the comment: "The Political Committee has had a meeting about that and has ruled that it is prohibited to discuss it. Cannon is completely out of line to try to raise it and if he pursues it any further he will be expelled. You had better shut up about it." While Evans learned from a more seasoned comrade that "no one was going to expel Jim Cannon from the SWP," he concluded that this meant "Barnes didn't have the power to do everything he might want to do." (Evans, 156) More, it suggests a qualitative difference between the Leninism of Cannon's party and that of the Barnes regime.

Digging Deeper

If "the inherent sectarianism of the Trotskyist program" and "the inherent authoritarianism of Leninist organizational principles" do not provide the answer to the question of the qualitative change in the SWP, where can we look?

For any Marxist group that wishes to bring about revolutionary change, one obvious question — if one is a Marxist — is "what is its relationship with the organized working class?" Camejo comments:

"Unions, which at one point had organized 33 percent of American labor, had shrunk to just 12 percent. No major political opposition appeared. Yes, there were many defensive struggles as the industrial unions were weakened by corporate and governmental attacks, which had stepped up under Reagan. But labor had no labor party or any kind of effective defense strategy. By the early 1980s the industrial working class and its unions had been in a sharp decline for two obvious, interconnected reasons. First was the growth of globalization; second was the union capitulation to the Democratic Party. At every level the unions, pushed by the Democratic Party, were capitulating, supposedly a necessary step for U.S. corporations to be competitive in the global economy." (173)

The world had changed in important ways, and the SWP leadership — with few and marginal exceptions — didn't see it coming. Indeed, it might have made sense if the SWP *had* actually looked more carefully and thoughtfully at the dynamics of "Triple Revolution" that Jim Cannon vainly pointed to. The automation and computerization discussed in that document did not bring mass unemployment in the immediate term, but they did contribute to the steady erosion of the industrial working-class base that had been the source of traditional union power — and these developing technologies were very much related to what came to be tagged "globalization." (The so-called "revolutions" in human rights and in weaponry also moved in slower and more complex — but no

less transformative — ways.)

One must also give attention to the “great divide” represented by the Second World War, which brought into being a very different world than the one framing the perspectives of Lenin, Trotsky, and their comrades. Young SWP and YSA members — reading the “classic” texts that had been written in qualitatively different contexts, and themselves having come into adulthood and consciousness in very different social-cultural contexts — could not easily grasp the actual meaning of what Lenin or Trotsky might be saying. But they did not know that. This naturally contributed to a stilted understanding of the texts, contributing to flattened and simplistic applications, and to growing disorientation.

Related to this, the vanguard layers of the working class — at least in the United States — had been nurtured by a labor radical subculture from the post-Civil War era of the 1860s down to the 1940s. The cadres of the early SWP had been shaped by and were an integral part of that labor radical subculture. But the class-conscious working-class layers were fragmented and eroded by the profound economic, political, cultural, social, and economic changes of the post-World War II period — whose components included a fierce and stultifying Cold War anti-Communism, an unprecedented relative prosperity, working-class suburbanization, transformations in an increasingly conformist mass popular culture, and more. The subculture of the radicalized sections of the labor movement, and those radicalized sections of the labor movement themselves, were no longer a vibrant reality as young members flowed into the SWP and YSA in the 1960s and early '70s.

In *Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder*, Lenin emphasizes that efforts by would-be revolutionaries to maintain “iron discipline” if their Marxism and organization are not actually rooted in vanguard layers of the working class and intimately connected with mass struggles, “inevitably fall flat and end up in phrase-mongering and clowning.” One might say that this is precisely the essence of the “Barnesism” emerging from the accounts of Camejo and Evans.

Some left critics may be inclined to see Barnes’s adaptation to the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutionaries as the opposite of “ultraleftism” (instead reflecting a submission to “the conservative elements of those national programs”), which gets into analyses of the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions that are beyond the scope of this review. But Lenin’s decisive point — that no “Leninism” is possible if there is a disconnect between would-be revolutionaries and the actualities of working-class life and struggle — points up the fatal problem that faced and finally overwhelmed the SWP. The lack of possibility for democratic correction, due to the deepening authoritarianism and cultism represented by the Barnes regime, sealed its fate. Perhaps all this was not inevitable — but that is the way it happened.*

Aftermath

In reaction to their experiences in the Trotskyist movement, the two authors went down different pathways.

Evans participated in two efforts to pick up some of the political pieces after the mass expulsions from the SWP — helping to found, in turn, Socialist Action and Solidarity, both of which still exist as fairly small groups. Before the end of the 1980s, he had given up on socialist activism and — essentially — on socialism and Marxism altogether. Acquiring additional skills and knowledge upon returning to university life, he went on to play an impressive role as a web journalist for the International Institute associated with University of California Los Angeles, as well as a staff member with the World Health Organization and the World Bank (of all things). Also he and his wife

have been quite active in their local neighborhood committee's highly focused efforts to protect their own community in South Los Angeles, contending with "gang crime, illegal dumping, graffiti vandals, drug houses, and abandoned buildings." Evans seems defensive about this, and goes on the offensive: "For Trotskyists all politics is global. If it doesn't involve a foreign war for which imperialism can be excoriated, or a union-busting multinational corporation, it is hardly worth talking about." (Evans, 399) There is an element of truth to this — but it is not totally true, in my opinion.

Camejo was unable to give up on the radical activism that animated most of his life. He joined together in the mid-1980s with a short-lived "non-sectarian" left-wing group called the North Star Network, made up of former SWPers and other radicals. The group ended up getting involved in Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition — which he considers "a major political mistake" since it became "just another name for keeping progressives in the Democratic Party." (Camejo, 180-181) One of the appendices of his book contains an analytical critique entitled "The Origins of the Two-Party System." He also established ties with a breakaway from the Communist Party, Committees of Correspondence, and with a Maoist-influenced group called Line of March — but concluded that intertwined vestiges of Stalinism and reformism hindered both from becoming effective left-wing forces.

For a time, thanks to considerable expertise on the capitalist economy, he worked very successfully for the investment firm of Merrill Lynch. From there he branched out into helping left-leaning people make "socially responsible" investments, and also with raising substantial amounts of money — through his business and financial contacts — for such things as fighting AIDS, job creation, immigrant rights, unionization, and protection of the environment. He became perhaps the most dynamic — and one of the most radical — figures in the Green Party of California, running for Governor and then becoming Ralph Nader's Vice-Presidential running mate in 2004. While raising questions about using the word socialism, and insisting that Marx should not be treated uncritically as a deity, he continued to embrace the socialist goal (preferring the term "economic democracy") and a broadly Marxist analytical framework.

Both Camejo and Evans appear to have ended up with wives whom they have loved and who love them, children, grandchildren, and interesting personal experiences, some of which are discussed or alluded to in their books. And both felt a need to share their reflections about U.S. Trotskyism with readers whom they knew would be mostly on the Left — which is our good fortune.

Paul Le Blanc

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*For details and documentation on the struggle in the SWP and the expulsion campaign, and an analysis of its background, context and meaning, see: In Defense of American Trotskyism: The Struggle Inside the Socialist Workers Party, 1979-1983, edited by Sarah Lovell (with an essay by Frank Lovell) in 1991, available at <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/fit.htm>; and In Defense of American Trotskyism: Revolutionary Principles and Working-Class Democracy, edited (with a major essay) by the present author in 1992, available at <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/fit/revprinindex.htm>.

*Among other books shedding light on the story of the U.S. SWP explored in Camejo and Evans are the following: Fred Halstead, Out Now! A Participant's Account of the American Movement Against the Vietnam War (New York: Monad/Pathfinder, 1978); Tim Wohlforth, The Prophet's Children: Travels on the American Left (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994); George Breitman,

Paul Le Blanc, and Alan Wald, *Trotskyism in the United States: Historical Essays and Reconsiderations* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996); Paul Le Blanc and Thomas Barrett, eds., *Revolutionary Labor Socialist: The Life, Ideas, and Comrades of Frank Lovell* (Union City, NJ: Smyrna Press, 2000); Anthony Marcus, ed., *Malcolm X and the Third American Revolution: The Writings of George Breitman* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2005); Barry Sheppard, *The Party, A Political Memoir: The Socialist Workers Party, 1960-1988, Vol. 1* (Chippendale, Australia: Resistance Books, 2005). Sheppard is currently working on the concluding volume of his important memoir.

P.S.

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http://www.laborstandard.org/New_Postings/Camejo_Evans_Review.htm