

USA: On the Formation of the Jack Barnes Cult in the SWP

Monday 9 July 2012, by [HOROWITZ Gus](#) (Date first published: 23 June 2012).

Presentation

This essay was originally written a few years ago as part of the concluding section of the memoirs of my time in the SWP. But since the memoirs are only partially completed at this point, I have decided to release this essay now as a standalone piece.

In the earlier part of my memoirs I stress mostly the positive achievements of the SWP up through the early and mid-1970s. I also include what I see as mostly a positive assessment of Jack Barnes during that period, although I do try to show some of his flaws, to show him in that earlier period as the progenitor of the very serious future problems that developed.

This essay is not meant to examine all the reasons for the decline and degeneration of the SWP, only to take up one specific peculiarity: the formation of a cult around Jack Barnes. The events leading up to this point have been well described by Barry Sheppard, in the recently published Volume II of his *The Party: The Socialist Workers Party 1960-1988*. This volume, entitled *Interregnum, Decline and Collapse, 1973-1988*, covers the relevant background.

I believe that the party would inevitably have suffered greatly during the 1980s and beyond, due to the long lasting decline in the radicalization, a longer period of political conservatism than any in the past 150 years or more. This would have been compounded by political mistakes and built-in weaknesses. There might have been a possibility to recover and grow once again, however, had not a cult emerged at the top, centered around Jack Barnes. The development of such a cult was not unavoidable. Nor did it result from political errors. It depended on certain personality flaws and organizational weaknesses, as well as a skewed way of life and self-perception. I hope the essay below will help to explain that awful dynamic.

Gus Horowitz, June 2012

“The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat.” [1] These opening words of the Transitional Program, the founding document of the Fourth International, were fundamental to all of our political beliefs. By “crisis of leadership” we meant the revolutionary party. It was our contention that revolutionary crises had developed many times in many countries during the twentieth century, only to fail because of the absence of leadership. The workers followed the Communist or Social Democratic parties, misleaders who brought the masses down to defeat.

In the mid-1970s we in the SWP were at our height. Prospects looked so good to us. We thought we

had the correct revolutionary ideas, the ideas that could provide leadership and victory for the working class. But we were well aware that we were not the party that was needed. We were far too few in number and had very slender roots in the working class as a whole. We saw ourselves, rather, as the nucleus of the party that was needed, of the party that would develop into a mass revolutionary party. This concept was part of our blood and bone throughout the years.

Yet, there was more to it than that. Jack Barnes expressed these feelings eloquently in a major talk he gave in 1970, at the first of the many national SWP gatherings held at Oberlin, Ohio during the summer.

“But if we absorb one thing,” he said, “we should absorb this: we are not simply a component of the mass revolutionary party. We are the essential component that embodies in living cadres today the programmatic conquests that are essential for molding the kind of revolutionary workers party that can win the socialist victory in this country...”

“We’re engaged in what is the greatest adventure in the history of humanity. We have on our shoulders a more fateful responsibility than we can totally absorb, because of what the stakes are in this struggle. But we are not yet socialist humans...as people who are reared, marked and marred by this brutalizing, dehumanizing society, we have come to the consciousness of what we can accomplish to open the door to a truly human society. And that is our glory.” [2]

I remember how inspired I was when I heard Jack deliver those lines, and I think many others of my comrades felt the same way. It was as if we were driven by a mission, a historically important mission.

It was so easy for our critics to disparage or ridicule these views. But if revolutionaries take their ideas seriously, as they must and as we did, they must necessarily see their activities as immensely important. If you don’t believe that, James P. Cannon once said, you are in the wrong business.

Jack, however, stressed something more than the usual importance that serious people should give to the main focus of their activities. He insisted that, “we have on our shoulders a more fateful responsibility than we can totally absorb...”

The psychological burden of having the fate of the world resting on one’s own shoulders is enormous to bear. “What if I make a mistake? What if I don’t measure up? The consequences could be terrible.” Thoughts like these, whether one is aware of it or not, must surely have run through our minds, at least subconsciously. Not surprisingly this kind of pressure, even if it is self-imposed, will cause most people to seek to shift responsibility onto someone else, onto a stronger person, onto someone who seems supremely confident, onto the leader of the group. A price is paid, however, for that psychological relief: it must inevitably cause at least some degree of psychological dependence on the leader.

There is, I believe, a type of authoritarian/submissive dynamic at work here, akin in some respects to the dynamic at work in some religious groups. One’s focus at first is not on the group or the leader, but on the doctrine. One submits to the doctrine, to the force of history, to the authority of the great historical figures of the past. Over time, however, there is, at least in part, a transference of psychological submission from the doctrine and history to the current group and its current leader.

Paul LeBlanc, in his book, *Trotskyism in the United States*, presents a very perceptive review of this dynamic at work, quoting and summarizing from Freud.

“The functioning of some SWP members, responding to the powerful personality and tremendous authority that Barnes assumed, brings to mind Freud’s insights on group psychology: ‘the individual

gives up his ego-ideal [i.e., individual sense of right and wrong, duty, and guilt] and substitutes for it the group-ideal as embodied in the leader.' The authority of the leader (in the minds of at least many members) becomes essential for the cohesion of the group, and the approval of the leader, or a sense of oneness with the leader, becomes a deep-felt need that is bound up with one's own sense of self-worth. The member of the group enjoys 'a feeling of triumph' when his or her thinking coincides with this leader's judgments, and is vulnerable to 'delusions of inferiority and self-depreciation' whenever inner doubts arise about the leader's authority." [3]

This aspect of group psychology presents a fertile environment in which one person can emerge as the predominant figure in the group, as someone who cannot be challenged. Of course, one should not take Freud's perceptions in too sweeping a fashion. The problems he points to need not necessarily come to fruition. Other circumstances are required.

A leader, once he or she accepts the sense of mission that Jack spoke of, also bears the same kind of self-imposed psychological burden. Yet the leader is compelled to accept that responsibility, to take it upon his or her shoulders. The leader who "totally absorbs" that "fateful responsibility" must surely live with the keen feeling that he or she is a special person, a person on whom the fate of humanity at least partially depends. No wonder, then, that there is a serious risk of megalomania in such circumstances, a feeling that one is indispensable, a feeling that everything one does has special, fateful importance.

Picture the scene: an apartment in Brussels in the mid-1970s. It is the eve of a United Secretariat meeting, the top-most body of our international organization. The meeting is expected to last perhaps two days. It is not a particularly important meeting, but then again, all of these meetings do have some importance. I am there as our European-based representative. So too, I think, is Ed Shaw. Jack Barnes has come over for the meeting from New York, perhaps Mary-Alice Waters or Barry Sheppard as well. But Joe Hansen is not present; the meeting just isn't that important.

We are all having a good time, talking politics, drinking, making jokes and banter. If Barry had been present we would be eagerly anticipating boeuf bourguignon or some other gourmet treat. (Many SWPers were good cooks. It was one of the ways we could indulge ourselves on the meager subsidies we lived on.)

Then the phone call comes from the USA. It is for Jack, a personal call. He takes it in the other room. A few minutes later he comes back, his face ashen. Someone in his close family has died, I surmise, perhaps his father.

I wondered what Jack would do. I expected him to leave. But he didn't. He kept right on with the meeting. It was his duty. Jack was torn by his decision. I later heard him mutter under his breath, "I should have gone back," or words to that effect.

One reads about this in wartime. A general loses his son, a soldier loses his brother, but they go on, at least some of them can go on, despite the shock and loss. It is wartime, after all. Other lives really are at stake. And some generals really are indispensable. Jack's war, however, was mostly in his own imagination.

Jack had clearly come to feel overly self-important by this time. As the years went by, he also came to feel, more and more, that he could comport himself differently. At meetings, he would speak longer and more often than others, much more so than he had done in the past. He would take more time off, would increasingly work at home rather than at the headquarters. He would even - unheard of in earlier years - have a working lunch or dinner at party expense. First a little, thence to more, he sampled all that corrupting store. [4] In later years his comportment became an international

scandal.

Jack must have thought that he could behave differently because he was, after all, a special person, a person imbued with a unique historical responsibility. The rules of ordinary egalitarian conduct did not apply to one such as him, the indispensable leader.

Jack Barnes did not start out that way. I knew him well for twenty years. For most of the time I knew him he seemed quite normal and he lived a modest life style. But over time the psychological pressures took their toll on him, just as on the rest of us.

There was another factor compounding this personal dynamic. It was the group dynamic and our peculiar life style. As a general rule, the leaders and most of the members of the SWP were extraordinarily active, many spending six or seven days per week in one project or another. Few of us had our own families, careers or professions. We thought of ourselves as footloose rebels, for the most part, tied neither to job nor location. Our entire lives revolved around the party. Our friends, our manners, our speech, our way of doing things were all shaped by our way of life in the group. The group dynamic was part of an all-encompassing atmosphere.

The world of the group so dominated the life of the members that most of us found it difficult to develop or maintain friends or even normal non-political personal associations with people outside the organization. Even long-time family relations turned awkward in many cases. To leave the organization, even to become a non-conformist within the organization – to risk being shunned – posed serious psychological issues.

It was tragically ironic: the very bonds of collegial comradeship, which made us feel so strong when we confronted the ruling class or our political opponents, weakened our resolve as independent individuals in relationship to our own group. This was true of the leaders as well as the general members. Actually it was probably truer of the leaders than the members and was one of the reasons why no major figure in the younger party leadership stood up against the deleterious trends that developed.

Under such pressures many small aspiring revolutionary groups like ours degenerate into cults or sects. This was true not only of the world Trotskyist movement, but for many other small groups of various political persuasions.

That sad fate, however, is not foreordained. Ordinarily, in a period of mass action, there are strong countervailing pressures. The focus of the group is outward. The members are working all the time with others outside the group. There is a real live movement to temper the strains. The group is not entirely closed in on itself. The group's ideas are being put to the test continually by events outside of itself. There is room to revise mistaken ideas, to take back false steps. We in the SWP were becoming like that in the high point of our activity in the anti-Vietnam-War movement and in the other social protest movements of that period.

But in a period of decline, there is an insular environment, a sort of hothouse atmosphere in which negative features can more easily take root and flourish. This is what started to happen to the SWP in the 1950s. Some of the party's branch units started to behave a bit like cults or sects, particularly the units in Buffalo and Milwaukee, to some extent the branch in Seattle. The local party leader started to become the center of attention and the font of all wisdom.

At the party center in the 1950s, however, we had Farrell Dobbs and the leadership team around him. Farrell had immense moral authority and stature in the party, yet he was one of the least self-centered persons one could ever know. He had been a nationally famous Teamsters strike leader in

the 1930s. Had he pursued union officialdom as a career – and he had many offers to do so – he might well have gone on to hold high union office on a national level. He chose instead to give it all up for party work and a prison term for his ideas as well. In the party he seemed completely untainted by egotism, a blessing that few party members fully appreciated. He deliberately set about building a team leadership, not an individual leadership. His personality, I now believe, was essential to the party's survival through the downturn of the 1950s. The unhealthy trends that developed in some party branches never predominated on a national scale.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, however, a much different type of person was at the center. Jack Barnes had earned his spot as leader of the party. He was very talented. In some respects he had a sharper political mind than Farrell Dobbs. His mind was as quick and his way of thinking as deep as any of the older party leaders, at least I thought so. He certainly had the loyalty and backing of the party members. But he lacked the moral stature, the psychological equilibrium and the sense of his own human frailty that are also essential in a top-level political leader.

So it was that from the late 1970s onward an unfortunate combination of circumstances worked like a cancer on the SWP: the decline of the radicalization; the party's small size and relative isolation from mass action; weaknesses and flaws in our traditions; unacknowledged political mistakes; the abnormal way of life in the group; and the human frailty of the leaders. None of these factors, taken alone, would have been sufficient to decimate the organization. But in combination, they were deadly.

It is likely, I think, that the SWP would have declined terribly simply because of the circumstances in which it found itself. It might have recovered, however, once a new upturn came along. But the political and organizational weaknesses and flaws, and in particular the human frailties – what we liked to call “the role of the individual in history” – shaped and distorted the decline in such a way that the possibility for recovery and renewal became ever more distant.

The party, stricken on all fronts, turned into a grotesque caricature of its former self.

P.S.

* Published June 24, 2012:

<http://gushorowitz.wordpress.com/2012/06/24/on-the-formation-of-the-jack-barnes-cult-in-the-swp/>

Footnotes

[1] The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution, Pathfinder Press, New York 1973. P. 72.

[2] Towards an American Socialist Revolution, Pathfinder Press, New York 1971, p. 125.

[3] Trotskyism in the United States, Humanities Press, New Jersey, 1996, p. 205.

[4] Here I have stolen and modified a phrase from one of my favorite poems, Terence, this is stupid stuff, by A. E. Housman. Housman was making a rather different point, but he put it well.