

United States (History of the Left) - Bryan Palmer's Preface and Acknowledgments of to his new book on James Cannon

Saturday 23 July 2022, by [PALMER Bryan D.](#) (Date first published: 2007).

Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

This is a long book about a relatively short span of time, the decade 1928-38. In the history of United States class relations, in general, as well as in the development of the American revolutionary left, in particular, these were years of decisive importance. What follows is centered on one individual, James Patrick Cannon, whose life in the years leading from his 1890 birth in the working-class hamlet of Rosedale, Kansas, to his 1928 expulsion from the Communist Party he helped to found I have traced in a previous book.¹ As the title for this volume suggests, *James P. Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism in the United States, 1928-38* is about the making of a revolutionary movement as much as it is about an individual historical figure.

Some explanations are in order with respect to the organization of this study. I opted to present the material in a roughly chronological fashion, at the same time as I structured the narrative around critical topical considerations. This inevitably produced some overlap, with subjects mentioned in one chapter being more fully discussed in a later section. Thus a topic such as the Spanish Civil War may appear to receive short shrift when initially introduced, but receives fuller treatment as the book unfolds.

James P. Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism in the United States, 1928-38 divides at the midpoint of 1933-34. This marks both a break in the international orientation of the Left Opposition and a qualitative leap into a different kind of practical engagement with American workers. In 1933, the Communist League of America (Opposition), known as the CLA or the League, along with the entire International Left Opposition, abandoned attempts to reverse the course of the Communist International [Comintern/CI]. The American Trotskyists who broke from this Moscow-based Third International ceased considering themselves a political tendency seeking to win the members of the Communist Party USA away from what Cannon and others considered their defeatist course. Codified with the 1928 adoption of a program of "Socialism in One Country," the Comintern's orientation, imposed on all Communist parties affiliated with the now unmistakably Stalinized International, abandoned the longstanding Marxist advocacy of World Revolution in favor of pursuing policies that supposedly secured the survival of socialism inside the Soviet Union. Evidence of the costly consequences of this strategic reversal and the ongoing degeneration of the once-revolutionary Soviet Union and the Communist International it led mounted over the course of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Trotsky's Left Opposition challenged Stalin's policies, including the Comintern's disastrous suppression of working-class initiative in the Chinese Revolution of 1925-27. Stalin, resisting what he labeled a "premature" proletarian uprising, aligned with Chiang Kai-shek and the Chinese national bourgeoisie, resulting in the suppression of a revolutionary situation, in

which general strikes were crushed and thousands of communist workers executed.

It was not until fascism's European advances of the early 1930s, however, that Trotsky and his followers determined to break decisively from the Stalinized leadership of the Comintern, realizing that it could not be won back to a revolutionary program. The catalyst for this turn away from the Third International was the failure of the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union and the Comintern that it controlled to mobilize the powerful German Communist and workers' movements against Hitler's rise to power. As the tragedy of this abstentionism unraveled in 1933, with fascism's threat to humanity and determination to crush all vestiges of working-class self-activity obvious, Trotsky was forced to conclude reluctantly that the Communist International was now dead as any sort of revolutionary instrument. The corollary was to launch a new Fourth International, and to build national sections and parties that would affiliate with it.

This untethering of the International Left Opposition [ILO] freed Trotskyists to pursue courses of agitation and mobilization that had been difficult if not impossible in the years from 1928-33, when its advocates (most of whom had been expelled from Comintern-affiliated Communist parties) considered themselves an external faction dedicated to righting the course of the Soviet-aligned forces of Bolshevism. Within the United States, the 1934 teamster strikes represented by far the most successful example of Trotskyist mass work to date. This achievement provided a model for how revolutionaries could lead workers in class struggles, and helped to launch a wider mobilization of a vibrant industrial unionism, the most heralded expression of which would be the Congress of Industrial Organizations [CIO].

Prior to these developments, from 1928-33, Cannon and his co-thinkers in the CLA largely focused on disseminating Trotsky's critical analyses of global developments with a particular accent on the betrayal of revolutionary principles by Stalin and criticism of the increasingly repressive bureaucratic apparatus he headed. The opening chapters of this book outline the establishment of an American Left Opposition and how it was assailed and attacked by former comrades in the Communist Party USA (Chapter 1). Marginalized and isolated, Trotskyists throughout the world faced difficult circumstances in the late 1920s and early 1930s. This nurtured personal recriminations, factionalism, and opportunistic tendencies throughout the ILO that threatened to capsize the movement, nowhere moreso than in the United States (Chapter 2). A youthful cohort of Cannon supporters - of whom Max Shachtman was perhaps the most significant - broke from their old factional leader of Communist Party days, leaving the League awash in cliquish accusations and acrimony that would only dissipate incompletely and with difficulty. Cannon and his Left Opposition comrades managed to weather these storms, and in the depths of dog days' difficulties they charted new ways of applying Marxism to the awkward realities of American experience. They rethought how communists should approach the vexing question of race and class, known at the time as "the Negro Question." Agitations among coal miners in Illinois and the significant role of Trotskyist cadre in the leadership of a militant hotel workers' strike in New York showed that new forays in class-struggle politics were achievable, even in the depths of the Great Depression (Chapter 3). The Minneapolis teamsters' strikes, the highpoint of this activity within the trade unions, signaled a breakthrough into entirely new realms of possibility for American Trotskyism (Chapter 4).

The remainder of this book, and the history it is concerned with, turns on taking the gains realized and consolidated over the 1928-34 years and turning them to the purpose of building organizations capable of extending the politics of revolutionary socialism, both in the United States and around the world. The path to the creation of the Socialist Workers Party [SWP] and the Fourth International [FI] ran through a series of sharp debates, out of which grew fusions, splits, and entries. Cannon's role in all of this was often decisive. From a merger with A.J. Muste's American Workers Party through the entry into the Socialist Party, Cannon helped to orchestrate a significant expansion of the ranks of revolutionary Trotskyists. He also confronted Hugo Oehler and other former close

associates when they refused to participate in building the bridges that were key to achieving dramatic organizational advances. These critical initiatives are presented as a distinct *internal* history in a chapter ordered by the tempestuous struggles within the Trotskyist movement as it worked to establish the foundations of a mass revolutionary party in the United States (Chapter 5). This intra-Trotskyist orchestration of fusions, splits, and entries took place in the context of Trotskyist activities in the wider world. Notable among them were the establishment of a Mexican tribunal, chaired by John Dewey, to counter the slanders and misinformation of the Moscow Trials; advocacy of a politics of revolutionary support for and engagement with the insurgents of the Spanish Civil War; and the development of class-struggle tactics and strategy for work in the trade unions. In all of these endeavors, Trotskyists in the United States continued to create alternatives to Stalinist maneuvers and machinations, developing the arsenal of revolutionary politics (Chapter 6). This book concludes with the 1938 establishment of the Socialist Workers Party and the creation of a revolutionary Fourth International, two milestones in which James P. Cannon played a critically important role.

How Trotskyism arrived in the United States and what it accomplished in its formative years is not a story that has preoccupied many historians. There have been few studies of Trotskyism in the United States, and some of them have been poorly done, as outlined in the introduction below. This has unfortunately allowed the working-class history of a pivotal decade, the 1930s, to be overwhelmingly concerned with the larger and more influential Stalinized Communist movement, a focus which has resulted in routinely excusing much and bypassing a great deal.

One reason for the detail in this study is to counter this interpretive tilt, expressed in the complex, seemingly contradictory, historiographic stands discussed in the introduction to this volume. These warring interpretive positions generally place the Trotskyist movement on the historical sidelines, and this has decisive implications. A study of Cannon's life, and the movement and Party he contributed so much to building and sustaining, illuminates aspects of history too long obscured. Aside from the intrinsic importance of outlining this experience, there are at least four ways in which focusing on Cannon to outline Trotskyism's significance in the history of United States radicalism provides a new perspective on issues of concern to both historians and activists of the left.

First, this history reveals the red thread of continuity between early twentieth-century radicalism native to the USA - epitomized by the Industrial Workers of the World and a segment of the Left-Wing of the Socialist Party - and the Communist movement inspired by the Russian Revolution. Cannon considered himself to be a Wobbly who learned from the world-historic events associated with 1917. This brought him to Marxism, the theory of working-class revolution, and internationalism. Cannon's story, as much as the life course of any other individual on the American left, shows how revolutionary politics *could* develop in the world's most advanced capitalist nation. Nothing in Cannon's history is more striking than his ability to retain an acute sensitivity to the particular experiences of Americans, while appreciating the significance of major historical events beyond the borders of the United States.

Second, Cannon's life is a repudiation of the idea that American communism was always, and could only be, dominated by slavish adherence to Moscow's directives. As I discuss in commentary on the historiography of the Communist Party, Stalinization did mean that Moscow exercised a decisive influence over its American followers. The history of US communism cannot be analyzed rigorously without attending to how the Communist International controlled and colored the policy and practice of its adherents in the United States, be they leading cadre or rank-and-file militants. Cannon was an American radical who rightly valued the guidance provided by leading Bolshevik figures such as Lenin, Zinoviev, and Trotsky to the fledgling Communist movement in the United States. When it became apparent that the Comintern was subordinating struggles in other countries, such as the

United States, to its own ends, leading those who opposed capitalism into positions destined to derail the possibility of revolutionary advances, Cannon was prepared to break from Moscow and its leadership. This was a confirmation of his grasp of the pivotal importance of socialist internationalism and his refusal to collapse the communist project into the limitations and defeatist logic of "Socialism in One Country."

Third, Cannon's history in the late 1920s and 1930s, when engaged with substantively, suggests that writing on the Communist Party must confront Stalinization, which qualitatively transformed the nature of life in what was a leading United States organization of the ostensible revolutionary left. Among the troubling features of Stalinization was thuggery and violent responses to political opponents on the left that had previously been largely unknown among revolutionaries. The clash of Stalinism and Trotskyism was, to be sure, a fundamental disagreement over programmatic issues, in which "Socialism in One Country" and its inclination toward short-term pragmatic shifts in policy was counter-posed to the historic imperatives of revolutionary internationalism upon which the Communist International was founded. What followed in the wake of this conceptual and political divide, however, was ghastly. Cannon and his comrades in the original American Left Opposition experienced some ugly situations as CPers attacked their meetings and threatened them physically. Yet, many of these same Party members also played heroic roles in a variety of struggles for social justice, including highly significant anti-racist mobilizations. Moscow-aligned Communists were often among the most talented and dedicated organizers of vibrant campaigns to build militant industrial unionism. Fighting to advance working-class interests, they led struggles of the unemployed and actively built combative picket lines and sustained activist innovations, like the flying squadrons and sit-downs of striking workers that worked to such good effect during the class conflicts of the Great Depression. The Stalinization of the American Communist movement was thus a complex process, in which many self-sacrificing, self-identified revolutionaries combined honorable acts with repugnant ones. Its political weight was evident in the adventurism and sectarianism of the Third Period of the late 1920s and early 1930s, as well as in the subsequent turn to the class collaborationism of the Popular Front. The latter, Trotsky alleged, was centrally responsible for the defeat of the Spanish revolutionary upsurge. There were also the calumnies of the Moscow Trials, which Trotsky's American followers played a central role in combatting.

Fourth, and finally, a study of Cannon in the years 1928-38 establishes that when revolutionaries adhere to principled politics, even in difficult circumstances, it is possible to make considerable headway. Given the relatively small numbers that rallied to Trotsky's banner in the US between 1928 and 1938, their achievements were rather remarkable. They won some huge trade union victories; successfully combatted sectarianism and opportunism, both in their own ranks and in the broader workers' movement; and provided a lucid critique of the ways in which Stalinism undermined the politics of revolution. In fusions and entries involving other subjectively revolutionary elements in 1934-37, America's Trotskyists, with Cannon at their head, rapidly expanded their capacity to provide leadership in struggles against capitalist exploitation and oppression. All of this happened, moreover, as Trotskyists in the United States were often divided against themselves with respect to many questions.

As fraught as relations were at many points between Cannon and his comrades, however, no other national section of the nascent Fourth International contributed nearly as much to its founding, as Trotsky recognized. His "Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International," often known as *The Transitional Program*, served as the founding document of the new International. It drew on the experiences of Trotskyists in the United States, and was in part shaped by discussions Trotsky had with Cannon, Max Shachtman, Rose Karsner, and Vincent Ray Dunne - all founders of the American Left Opposition and the Socialist Workers Party - in Mexico in March 1938.

In embarking on a study of James P. Cannon, I faced a daunting task, for the archival and other primary sources available to the historian of the American Left Opposition and its successors in the various organizations that preceded the launching of the Socialist Workers Party in 1938 are voluminous. Archives and archivists to which I owe particular debts include: the Tamiment Institute, Bobst Library, New York University, where Peter Filardo, Dorothy Swanson, and Andrew Lee were generous with their help; the State Historical Society of Wisconsin and Harold L. Miller, who guided me through use of the extensive James P. Cannon-Rose Karsner Papers; Wayne State University Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library; Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library; and the United States Justice Department, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Freedom of Information/Privacy Acts Section.

At the Prometheus Research Library, in New York City, the late Diana B. Karsten, Emily Turnbull, Alison Dundy, James Robertson, and Jacob Zumoff have gone out of their way to advance my research on Cannon. They have all read portions of this book and provided suggestions and criticisms, improving it significantly. I am extremely grateful for their help and shared commitment to the rigorous study of American Trotskyism.

My extensive work in the Cannon-Karsner Papers was facilitated by Jack Barnes who, when I began researching this study more than 25 years ago, was the owner of the copyrights in and to the James P. Cannon Papers. Barnes and Steve Clark arranged for me to have uninhibited access to these materials, so obviously necessary to the books I was writing. I am grateful for their willingness to grant me access to a central body of documentation vital to the writing of this book.

Mainstays of the *Historical Materialism Book Series*, Sebastian Budgen, Peter Thomas, and Danny Hayward have encouraged my research on Cannon. I appreciate their support, resolute political commitments, and dedication to the publication of Marxist history and theory. I am indebted to Simon Mussell for his copy-editing of a lengthy manuscript.

I am especially thankful to those who originally pushed me to write on Cannon, and who have prodded me to keep going or insisted that I consider texts with which I was unfamiliar or other sources of relevance. Foremost among such advocates has been Paul Le Blanc, who introduced me to the late Frank Lovell and the late Dorothea Breitman, both of whom gave me important primary sources, as did the late Jean Tussey. Paul also provided an extremely thorough reading of the entire manuscript, saving me from a number of infelicities and errors, and offering suggestions for improvement, some of which proved impossible to address.

My oldest friend on the left, Tom Reid, read much of this book in draft form and offered extensive and extremely useful commentary. He poured over various chapters with a fine eye for detail, stylistic improvement, and nuances of interpretation and meaning. I am especially grateful for the work Tom put into this book; it would look quite different without his efforts.

Among others who read drafts of chapters or offered helpful commentary and useful perspective, I thank Michael Goldfield, Michael Taber, David Riehle (whose knowledge of the Minneapolis strikes of 1934 is unrivaled), Donna T. Haverty-Stacke, Ernie Tate, Jess MacKenzie, and Joan Sangster. For research help I am indebted to Tom Mackaman. Others who have contributed to this study in various ways include Alan Campbell, John McIlroy, Marcelo Badaró Mattos, the late Jerry Tulchinsky, Peter Campbell, Charlie Post, Ian McKay, Gregory S. Kealey, Kirk Niergarth, Alan Wald, Jim Barrett, Steven Sandor John, Christopher Phelps, Murray Smith, Sean Purdy, and Ted McCoy.

None of those whom I have thanked in the above paragraphs are responsible for any errors that may remain in this book, which I have done my level best to eliminate. If mistakes remain, they are of course my sole responsibility.

Portions of the manuscript have appeared in different form elsewhere. Much of Chapter 4 appears in my book, *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934*, which first appeared in the *Historical Materialism Book Series* with Brill in 2013, and then in a subsequent Haymarket Books edition in 2014. I thank the publishers for permission to reprint material from that book here. My article "The French Turn in the United States: James P. Cannon and the Trotskyist Entry into the Socialist Party, 1934-1937," *Labor History*, 59 (2018), 1-29, draws on the more detailed outline of events in Chapter 5. I thank the editor, Craig Phelan, for permission to reproduce material that first appeared in *Labor History*.

The Canada Research Chairs Program of the Canadian government supported my research for 15 years, during which time I was a Canada Research Chair in the Canadian Studies Department at Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario. I express my appreciation for the funding that allowed me to complete this book and a number of other studies.

I dedicate this book to two people I know differently and, in many ways, lightly: Mike Davis and Ernie Tate. Both have more than a bit of Jim Cannon's kind of revolutionary Irish in them.

I first met Mike Davis in 1981, when I was flogging a little book on E.P. Thompson that I had written for a small independent press in Toronto. In those days, it was commonplace for young and unknown authors like myself to stuff a backpack with books and peddle them directly to large stores like Foyles in London. I also stopped in at the offices of *New Left Review* where Mike was living. He took me out for lunch on the *NLR*, and our pizza and beers turned into more and more drink, culminating in a bleary evening and dinner at the apartment of his exceedingly gracious ex-wife, Brigid Loughran. Her tolerance for Mike seemed boundless, and extended to accommodating his collection of snakes and reptiles. In the 40 years that followed this encounter, Mike has been generous and kind, and our paths have crossed periodically. We shared grief at the death of his very close friend, Michael Sprinker, someone who promoted my writing and with whom I engaged in many late evening phone calls until his life was cut tragically short. I talked to one of Mike's classes when he had a stint teaching at Stony Brook University, and we shared a podium giving keynote addresses at a conference in Montreal, where my partner Joan and I spent a memorable evening with Mike and his wife, Alessandra Moctezuma. Over decades my contact with Mike has been intermittent, always enlivened by his capacity to tell wonderful stories. Many of them were undoubtedly rather tall tales, but all of them kept me (and anyone else within shouting distance) listening. More importantly, Mike has produced a body of writing that has earned him the stature, in my view, of the Left's leading public intellectual in the English-speaking world. Precisely because Mike has pissed so many people off over the years - some deserving, some not - it is appropriate to express appreciation that many others would be less than inclined to offer. This book is dedicated to him as small thanks for his immense contributions, and his refusals to tame or soften his tone, wild and relentless in its antagonism to injustice and oppression. The voice of Mike Davis has been an impressively and irrepressibly powerful and passionate one that I have long listened to with pleasure and political admiration. So thanks to Mike for being himself.

Ernie Tate I have known *of* for a long time, at least by reputation. As a militant in the Canadian Trotskyist movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and as someone who fought for the politics of revolutionary socialism and built the anti-imperialist movement in Britain in the mid-to-late 1960s, Tate was someone whom I had certainly heard of and read about. But our paths did not really cross until after the publication of my book *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928* in 2007. Ernie was, thereafter, a strong advocate of my historical research, as I was of his two-volume memoir, *Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s and 1960s*, which appeared in 2014. I devoured it in a few days and wrote a lengthy and appreciative review. Thereafter, through emails, lunches and dinners in Toronto with Ernie and his partner, Jess MacKenzie, a retirement conference for me at Trent University, and culminating in our mutual

involvement in the Trotsky conference in Cuba in 2019, Ernie and I became friends. It saddened me greatly when, after a battle with pancreatic cancer, Ernie died in February 2021, before I could put this book in his hands. Ernie was a rigorous thinker, a Marxist of integrity and principle, and a warm and giving human being. I dedicate this book to him as a way of conveying my regard for Ernie's years of commitment to the revolutionary left and as a grateful expression of how much his support and enthusiasm for my study of Jim Cannon has meant to me. Thanks, too, to Ernie for being himself.

My life with Cannon has always been shared with Joan Sangster. I thank her, as well, for being herself, and, above all, for her love, which I hope she knows is reciprocated, and her indulgences, which have been as many as they have been much appreciated. I could not have finished this book without her deep affection and support and respect for my writing, which has always been offered freely if, occasionally, where Cannon was concerned, with a skeptical reference to his "Saintly" stature.

Bryan Palmer

P.S.

- <https://brill.com/view/book/9789004471528/front-11.xml?language=en>

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