

# Crisis on the Left: A Review

Mary Sperking McAuliffe, *Crisis on the Left: Cold War Politics and American Liberals, 1947-1954*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1978.

This short book by Mary Sperling McAuliffe makes no claim to being a theoretical text. On the contrary it is a work of historical record and analysis which while displaying a sympathy for the left cannot be called Marxist in any but the most ideological sense. Nonetheless it is an extremely important book in the way in which it strikingly confirms, in the specific context of the U.S. social formation in the immediate post World War II period, the theoretical analysis which Marxism-Leninism has made of the character of state power under capitalism.

Before going into the specifics of the post-war period it is helpful to recall the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism with regard to the nature of state power under capitalism, how the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie is exercised and maintained. Here we can only summarize the excellent work done by others, most importantly Nicos Poulantzas in his groundbreaking *Political Power and Social Classes*.<sup>1</sup>

Poulantzas argues that Marxism understands the capitalist class not as some monolithic class which merely uses state power as its "instrument." Rather Marxism-Leninism insists that the bourgeois class is constantly divided into antagonistic fractions, a division which starts, Poulantzas notes following Marx, from the level of actual production relations.

If the bourgeois class is to exercise state power in a social formation it can only do so by means of the formation from the various fractions of a "power bloc" under the domination of the strongest, the "hegemonic" fraction. The role of the bourgeois state itself is to function as the principal factor of political unity for the power bloc. In this context the state has two principal functions: (1) with regard to the dominant class: to organize that class under its hegemonic fraction; to represent the interests of the power bloc in general and the interests of the hegemonic fraction in particular; (2) with regard to the dominated classes: to maintain their domination by the ruling class and to prevent their political organization by presenting itself as representative of the national-popular interest.

Poulantzas also says that the hegemonic fraction represents the general interests of the dominant class by its defense of the exploitation and oppression of the dominated classes and maintains its hegemony over the dominated chiefly by its ideological functions, representing itself as serving their general interests as well as its own. To do so however the power bloc is required at times to make alliances with classes and class fractions outside itself and to receive "support" from classes and fractions of dominated classes.

These groups generally give their support not because the power bloc has made political concessions, but as a result of ideological illusions on their part. The principal fraction of the working class which under imperialism renders such support to the power bloc is the labor aristocracy and labor union bureaucrats.

## The Post World War II Period

Before examining the period covered by McAuliffe's book, 1957-54, some historical background is necessary. What follows is an extremely schematic attempt to theoretically understand this history. A definitive analysis awaits the development of the U.S. communist movement.

The period before the Second World War was characterized by a twofold process--the world wide economic depression with its corresponding political crisis (the rise of fascism, the New Deal, etc.) on the one hand, and the increasing interimperialist rivalry of the leading capitalist powers on the other. The power bloc which exercised state power in the U.S. and whose leading political representatives were the Roosevelt democrats was constituted in response to these two factors: the economic crisis and its consequent intensification of working class struggle, and the increasingly perilous position of the U.S. in the world imperialist system.

In comparison with its relatively strong position in the twenties as a consequence of the first World War, the hegemonic fraction of the American bourgeoisie--finance capital--was significantly weakened during the depression. This weakening allowed for the development of a certain degree of autonomy within the power bloc and with regard to the working class on the part of the dominated classes, in particular the workers. In this process the dominant bourgeois ideology, liberalism, became diluted with ideological elements appropriate to other classes, in particular with aspects of petty bourgeois socialism. This diluted ideology served as a bridge between the power bloc and its supports within the working class and petty bourgeoisie.

World War II and its aftermath changed all this. It restored the U.S. economy to predepression levels and presented the American bourgeoisie, given the destruction of Europe and Japan, with the possibility that the U.S. might become the leading world imperialist power. This new conjuncture contained the basis for a class offensive on the part of finance capital to strengthen and extend its hegemony both within the power bloc and without, in particular with regard to the working class in order to lay the groundwork for realizing its imperialist expansion. The history of the successful efforts by finance capital to transform the relationship between fractions within the power bloc to its benefit and to reestablish bourgeois hegemony over the working class is the real subject of *Crisis on the Left*.

## The Cold War and the Division of the CIO

As we noted above McAuliffe's book, originally a doctoral dissertation, is an historical rather than a theoretical work. Nevertheless it contains in the practical state the elements of a theoretical analysis. McAuliffe demonstrates that the struggle to establish U.S. influence in Europe and Asia and



to contain communism by means of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan was a double-edged sword: (a) to bring under control those fractions of the bourgeoisie politically represented by Henry Wallace and the Progressive Party movement, among others, whose view of the post-war world did not give central place to U.S. imperialism, and (b) to neutralize the industrial union movement of the working class (led by the CIO) by driving from it the communists and their supporters.

An essential part of finance capital's campaign was a sharp ideological offensive. Naturally, since communists both internationally and domestically constituted the principal opposition to its effort, anti-communism was central to the ideological offensive. Liberalism, having been the dominant political ideology of the bourgeoisie throughout the New Deal era, could not have been simply abandoned. The struggle therefore proceeded within liberalism to produce a new kind of liberalism, different from that of the Roosevelt period when liberals, socialists and Browderite communists had been able to work together. The process of bringing into line the formerly semiautonomous fractions of the bourgeoisie was represented at the ideological level by the construction of liberal anti-communist apologetics, in the realm of politics, law, history and culture.

At the organizational level this process was reflected in the founding of the Americans for Democratic Action, the leading liberal representative of finance capital's offensive, and by the ideological transformation of organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union. In particular it can be seen in the path of the Progressive Party and its destruction as section after section of the bourgeoisie and its supports fell into line behind the cold war. By 1950, the former New Deal liberals and the class fractions of which they were representatives, were in the main united behind the imperialist war in Korea and the domestic red scare. Only four years before these same groups had variously divided in the conception of the post-war world and unsure of their political allegiance to Roosevelt's heir Truman.

McAuliffe also gives considerable attention to the shift in power within the CIO from a "left-center" coalition typical of the 1940's to the center-right coalition which emerged in 1947-48 and which led shortly thereafter to the expulsion of the communists. Here she touches on the shameful capitulation of the Communist Party to the right wing at the CIO convention in 1946 where the party leaders not only acquiesced but actually voted for a resolution against communist influence in the unions.

From even her limited treatment it is clear that communist activity in the CIO was not founded on a firm base of industrial workers so much as an uneasy alliance from above with what the Communist Party judged to be the "center" within the bureaucracy, the Hillmans, Murrays, and the Currans. The fruits of this "united front from above" was the isolation of communists from their working class base which enabled the center-right forces to drive them out of the CIO with relative ease.

*Crisis on the Left* is useful in demystifying the arguments given by present day liberals with regard to their own roles during this period.

McAuliffe especially points out the role played by Kennedy, Johnson, Humphrey and others such as Wayne Morse as leaders of the anti-communist offensive and the attempts at a wholesale curtailment of bourgeois democratic rights. The importance of this expose is obvious. McCarthyism was not some temporary aberration in an otherwise sane decade. It was only a small part of what was a much greater transformation. McAuliffe shows that the liberals who are now claiming responsibility for McCarthy's downfall never really fought McCarthyism except to the degree that they thought McCarthy's own personal idiosyncrasies were a threat to the general struggle against communism.

McAuliffe's conclusion: that the cold war period saw the end of an era. That era was the era of radical liberalism and its replacement by a new liberalism obsessed with anti-communism and predicated on a blind defense of the status quo can be put another way. The triumph of finance capital in its drive to strengthen its hegemony over the home front and to bolster capitalism and its own imperialist interests on a world scale--meant the death of New Deal liberalism and the evolution of a new ideology in keeping with the new situation. If New Deal liberalism was the ideology of finance capital in crisis, cold war liberalism was the ideology of finance capital triumphant.

#### The Character of the Power Bloc and Its Hegemony

It is impossible to understand the history of the cold war era without seeing its meaning in theoretical terms. It seems to us that the key theoretical concept in this regard is the concept of hegemony. Hegemony cannot be read simply as domination for it embodies a particular dialectic of domination and consent (active as well as passive). The hegemonic fraction in the power bloc maintains its position not just by its power to impose its interests on the others but by its ability, through its organization of the class and the state, to defend and advance the interests of all elements within the bloc.

Now of course this ability and the consent given by the others to the hegemonic fraction is not automatic. It is the result of class struggle, precisely the kind of class struggle (but not necessarily the same forms) which occurred between 1947 and 1954. This fact enables us to understand the struggles and the trajectory followed by left liberals within and without the Democratic Party during those years. They rallied to the demands of finance capital, its political representatives, and its ideological offensive because these demands were, in their long term interests as well, as they were political-ideological representatives of fractions of the bourgeoisie which, naturally had a stake in the defense of capitalism.

This is one of the central lessons of the Marxist-Leninist theory of the state and of history--a lesson ignored by the social democrats and rejected by modern revisionism--any alliance with "left" sections of the bourgeoisie is doomed to failure. While individuals may go over to the side of the working class, at every decisive turning point in the class struggle these "leftists" will be forced by their objective class position and their place in the power bloc and the state to take sides against the workers. For the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee and the CPUSA to coquette with



liberal democrats is only to lay bare a political strategy built on quicksand.

Another important aspect of hegemony concerns the character of the support rendered the power bloc by class fractions and strata outside it, in particular the labor aristocracy. McAuliffe touches on the historical role played by the trade union bureaucracy during the cold war but fails to fully depict the capitulation of the CPUSA before it. It is a sad fact, but overall the CP's "left-center" coalition in the CIO during the 1940's was an alliance between Party leaders and the bureaucracy, not between them and the organized workers in the shops. Further, it was an alliance in which the "center" almost always held the dominant position, an alliance maintained by the capitulation of the left on important questions.

The CPUSA itself caught up in a policy of supporting the New Deal, seriously misrepresented the character of the trade union bureaucracy, ignoring its objective position as political support of the bourgeoisie. At the same time basing itself on an economist approach trade union work, the CPUSA seriously underestimated ideological struggle, in particular the susceptibility of the CIO "center" and through it the entire working class, to an ideological offensive of the bourgeoisie. The party was thus isolated and ill prepared, when to its astonishment, the Murrays, Reuthers and Currans rendered their support to the class enemy by driving the communists from the CIO.

Not having built a political and ideological base for communism in the working class and not having understood the character of bourgeois hegemony or of its objective base of support in the workers movement, the CPUSA was unable to come up with a strategy to successfully combat the offensive of which they were the object. The danger of ignoring theory and failing to apply it to the conjuncture today on the part of our revisionists and economists, is just as real as that of the period treated in *Crisis on the Left*.

This review has attempted to sketch out some of the theoretical implications which Mary McAuliffe's historical work suggests, and to encourage communists to read it and to attempt to theoretically grapple with its lessons. We make no claims that our effort is anything more than exploratory. Some day when the U.S. communist movement has matured and produced theoretically advanced cadre, this period in American (and world) history will receive the theoretical and historical treatment it deserves. In the meantime McAuliffe's account is welcome for the challenge it presents to our movement: to understand our past and to correctly master our future.

#### Endnotes:

1. Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (New Left Books, 1973).

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