

Remembering Sidney Hook

The Disputed Legacy of Sidney Hook,
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During the late 1920s and early 1930s Sidney Hook (1902-1989) was sympathetic toward communism, although he never joined the Communist Party of the United States of America. He did vote for William Z. Foster, the candidate of the CPUSA for president in 1932, and he authored two important books on Karl Marx: *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx: A Revolutionary Interpretation* (1933) and *From Hegel to Marx: Studies in the Intellectual Development of Karl Marx* (1936). He also helped found the short-lived *Marxist Quarterly*. The historian John P. Diggins called Hook “America’s most original Marxist thinker.”¹

In the early 1930s, Hook attempted to disentangle Marxism from Stalinist authoritarianism, the Hegelian dialectic, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the infallibility of the Communist party. His title for a 1934 article was apt: “Why I Am a Communist (Communism Without Dogmas).” Hook would eventually become the most important anti-Stalinist and anti-communist intellectual in America. He stressed that the fundamental division in society was no longer between capitalism and socialism, but between democracy and totalitarianism and “between the absolutist and the experimental temper of mind.”² Communists were not convinced. One called Hook a “renegade social-fascist,” Stalin said he was a “gangster of the pen,” and Hook’s supporters were described as “hookworms.”

The sociologist Edward Shils believed Hook to have been the greatest polemicist of the twentieth century. Hook enjoyed the thrust and cut of debate, particularly when he drew blood. “I’ve had a wonderful week,” he once told a colleague. “I had a

1 John P. Diggins, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 159.

2 Sidney Hook, *Political Power and Personal Freedom: Critical Studies in Democracy, Communism and Civil Rights* (New York: Criterion Books, 1959), 183.

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fight every day.”³ The subtitle of his 1987 autobiography, *Out of Step*, is “An Unquiet Life in the 20th Century.” Hook was deeply involved in many of the important controversies within the pre- and postwar American Left, and no one would ever have accused him of having lived “a quiet life.” He claimed for much of his life to have been a socialist and a social democrat, but in the last decade of his life he stated that a mixed welfare state was a more effective system for allocating resources and determining wages and prices than socialism.

But Hook had little interest in economics, never wrote on economic topics, and there is no indication that he ever seriously studied economics. He was initially attracted to socialism because of its moral appeal and not because it was more effective than capitalism in fostering economic growth and a higher standard of living. His affinity for socialism, Midge Decker noted, was a “utopian indulgence,” and Hook eventually admitted that he had been “guilty of judging capitalism on its operations and socialism on its aspirations.”

Hook’s two books on Marxism were preceded by the publication of his Columbia University doctoral dissertation, *The Metaphysics of*

Pragmatism, in 1927. While a graduate student in philosophy at Columbia, Hook became a devoted lifetime disciple of John Dewey, America’s leading apostle of philosophic pragmatism, and would publish several laudatory books on Dewey. Early in his academic career Hook sought to integrate Marx and Dewey, a hopeless task, as he soon came to realize. Hook was too much the rationalist and individualist to slavishly follow any party line, and, in any case, his respect for democratic processes was more important to him than Marxist ideology. He also was a critic of Marxist determinism. His 1943 book, *The Hero in History: A Study in Limitation and Possibility*, emphasized the role that event-making individuals such as Lenin had played in history.

“I am a democrat first, and a socialist only to the extent that socialist measures achieve a more abundant life for free human beings,” Hook wrote in 1951 to an editor of *Life* magazine. “This means that I do not believe in total solutions, that my socialism is a piecemeal affair, a matter more or less to be decided in the light of the scientific spirit and the democratic faith.” He humorously noted in 1947 regarding his idiosyncratic interpretation of Marxism that “if I

³ Edwin McDowell, “Sidney Hook, Exponent of Democracy,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 22, 1970.

were justified in my interpretation of Marx's meaning, I would be perhaps the last Marxist left in the world."⁴ In 1983 Hook published a book with the revealing title *Marxism and Beyond*.

Hook took seriously his responsibility as a public intellectual to educate those outside academia. He replied promptly to the many letters he received from ordinary citizens regarding various issues of the day, and his responses were often quite lengthy, running to several typed pages.⁵ He valued the power of logic and rationality and expected to convince the most obdurate, and when this failed he would become distraught and offended. This was particularly evident in his increasingly bitter correspondence with Corliss Lamont, a staunch communist and son of the wealthy Wall Street banker Thomas Lamont. Hook detested Lamont's defense of the indefensible, including the politically induced Soviet famine in Ukraine in the early 1930s which killed millions, the Moscow show trials a few years later, and the German-Soviet neutrality pact of 1939.⁶

Increasingly in the 1930s, Hook warned in books, articles, book reviews, and lectures of the threat of

communism. Moscow and not Berlin, he argued then, was the biggest totalitarian challenge to America, in part because of its ability to seduce gullible intellectuals. Hook was particularly concerned with the challenge that communism presented to academic freedom. In his 1953 volume, *Heresy, Yes—Conspiracy, No*, Hook argued that members of the communist party, by definition, were not dispassionate searchers after truth, but rather members of a conspiratorial organization which controlled what they espoused in their classrooms and writings. Because of this subservience, communist teachers and professors had forfeited any right to the normal academic protections afforded true dissenters.

For some American intellectuals on the Left, Hook's anti-communism, which lasted until his final days, was obsessive. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., for example, accused Hook of exaggerating the communist threat of the 1930s and 1940s, overstating the appeal of communism to intellectuals, and being preoccupied with the communist peril. Hook, Schlesinger claimed in 1987, had allowed "anti-Communism to consume his life

4 Sidney Hook, "The Future of Socialism," *Partisan Review*, 14 (January-February, 1947), 25.

5 For a sample of such letters, see Edward S. Shapiro, ed., *Letters of Sidney Hook: Democracy, Communism, and the Cold War* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1995).

6 Sidney Hook, "Corliss Lamont: Friend of the G.P.U.," *Modern Monthly*, 10 (March 1937), 5-8; Edward S. Shapiro, "The Sidney Hook-Corliss Lamont Correspondence," *Continuity*, 12 (fall, 1988), 59-95.

to the point that, like Aaron's rod, it swallowed up nearly everything else." Schlesinger also criticized Hook for moving into the hardline anti-communist camps of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. Hook, he avowed, "found more sustenance in right-wing anticommunist fundamentalism than in what seemed to him the dangerous softness of liberals who detected changes in the Soviet Union."⁷ Hook did, in fact, vote for Nixon in 1972, but this was not because he admired Nixon but rather because he abhorred his dovish opponent, George McGovern. Hook did not vote for Reagan in 1984, believing that his policies toward the Soviet Union were "irresolute."

But, contrary to Schlesinger, Hook never fixated on the communist threat to the exclusion of other matters. He wrote continually on such issues as academic governance, religion in the public square, the right to suicide, and Jewish identity, to name just a few, and the value of his work was appreciated by his contemporaries.⁸ The honorary fraternity Phi Beta Kappa, with funding from the John

Dewey Foundation, established in 1991 the triannual Sidney Hook Memorial Award for scholarship, undergraduate teaching, and leadership in the cause of liberal arts education. Its recipients included the historians John Hope Franklin, Natalie Zemon Davis, Jonathan Spence, Charles Tilly, Jill Lepore, and Nancy Weiss Malkiel. The National Association of Scholars also established in 1989 its own Sidney Hook Memorial Award for "distinguished contributions to the defense of academic freedom and the integrity of academic life." Among its recipients were Donald Kagan, Thomas Sowell, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Eugene Genovese, Harvey Mansfield, Midge Decter, Ward Connerly, and Robert P. George, all staunch opponents of the viruses infecting the modern academy, a cause with which Hook closely identified.⁹

The claim of Schlesinger and others that Hook was a Johnny-one-note Cold-War warrior perhaps explains the otherwise puzzling fact that there is as yet no serious full-length biography of him, although he is discussed in the many histories of the fabled New

7 Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "A Life at the Barricades," *New Republic*, 196 (May 4, 1987), 30-31. Ronald Radosh excoriated Schlesinger in "Sidney Hook – Schlesinger Article," in Herbert London, ed., *Sidney Hook and His Legacy in the Twentieth Century*, New York University Public Policy Series (no date), 27-34.

8 Edward S. Shapiro, "The Jewishness of the New York Intellectuals: Sidney Hook, a Test Case," in Seymour Martin Lipset, ed., *American Pluralism and the Jewish Community* (Piscataway, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1990), 153-71.

9 Among the other honors Hook received during his lifetime was being awarded the Medal of Freedom in 1983 by President Reagan (along with Frank Sinatra, Mother Theresa, and Jimmy Stewart) and being selected to deliver the annual Jefferson Lecture in 1984 in Washington, D.C.

York intellectuals of the 1930s and 1940s. He has been the subject of only one book, Christopher Phelps's 1997 volume, *Young Sidney Hook: Marxist and Pragmatist*, a rather hostile examination of Hook's effort to Americanize Marxism and his rejection of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. The publication in 2022 of Gary Bullert's *The Disputed Legacy of Sidney Hook* is hopefully a sign that Hook still remains of interest to some academicians.¹⁰

Bullert's most important contribution is showing the diversity of Hook's legacy, and it refutes Schlesinger's argument that Hook was solely concerned with the communist menace. Hook has been variously described as a Marxist, a humanist, a cultural conservative, a social democrat, and a neoconservative. For Bullert, Hook's legacy is a compendium of philosophic pragmatism, anti-communism, and secular humanism. Bullert notes that academic issues were of particular concern for Hook during his forty-four years in New York University's department of philosophy and the seventeen years

he spent at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.¹¹

Hook's view of the university as a refuge of scholarship and rationalism explains his loathing of the academic radicalism of the 1960s. He respected students, believed they should be motivated by reason and not emotion, and assumed they were in college to cultivate the life of the mind and not to engage in violence. He was horrified when groups of violent anti-Vietnam War radicals and racist demagogues, urged on by sympathetic faculty, occupied campus buildings, trashed faculty offices, and intimidated spineless administrators to lower academic standards and establish racial and ethnic quotas, and then never suffered any consequences for their actions. A guilt-ridden academic community, Hook said, had committed "intellectual treason" by appeasing student and faculty "storm troopers."¹² Bullert notes that Hook considered this "virtual implosion of higher education into anarchy and violence, coupled with craven dereliction of faculty and administrators to resist it, to be

10 Bullert is also the author of *The Politics of John Dewey* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1983).

11 For Hook's negative views during World War II of Robert Maynard Hutchins, Mortimer J. Adler, and St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, see Edward S. Shapiro, "Sidney Hook, Higher Education, and the New Failure of Nerve," in Matthew J. Cotter, ed., *Sidney Hook Reconsidered* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2004), 183-201. "During these years Hook appeared more concerned with the direction of higher education than with the threat of communism." (192)

12 Sidney Hook, *Out of Step: An Unquiet Life in the 20th Century* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 548-51; Hook, *Academic Freedom and Academic Anarchy* (New York: Cowles, 1970).

among the most disillusioning experiences of his life.”¹³

Hook considered the radical politicization of the American university to be a far graver threat to American democracy than that which communism posed during the 1930s. He founded the University Center for Rational Alternatives in 1968 to help restore academic civility and purpose, and he wrote voluminously in defense of traditional academic goals and values. He was particularly troubled by “affirmative action,” which the sociologist Nathan Glazer more accurately termed “affirmative discrimination,” and he testified before Congress in opposition to it. Hook, Bullert says, believed affirmative action “subverted the mission of the university from advancing the normative pursuit of wisdom and truth to social promotion in the absence of individual merit.”¹⁴

The recent campus rages have been worse than even Hook could have imagined. “Equality” rather than “excellence” has become the contemporary academic buzzword, and the defense of ideology has replaced the search for truth as the academy’s *raison d’être*. Not coincidentally, this has been accompanied by a growing public skepticism regarding the value

of “higher education.” John Silber, the president of Boston University, noted back in 1974 that “the community outside looks in at the madness and doubts whether the university, after all, is an institution worthy of any special admiration.” Academic freedom had become a weapon used by persons “unconcerned for the truth; who . . . promulgate ideas for which they can claim no expertise, or even commit deeds for which they can claim no sanction of law.” The madness has only increased since 1974, and one suspects that if Hook were alive today he would be in the trenches defending traditional academic verities.

13 Bullert, *Disputed Legacy*, 121. Note the title of an article Hook published in the spring, 1969 issue of *Public Interest*: “Barbarism, Virtue and the University.”

14 Bullert, *Disputed Legacy*, 126; pages 191-96 contain a verbatim transcript of Hook’s Congressional testimony.