Introduction: History and Historiography of American Communism in the 1920s

In November 1917, the Bolsheviks in Russia seized state power amid the devastation of the World War, announcing that they were proceeding to build socialism. As the American Socialist John Reed put it, the Bolshevik Revolution ‘shook the world’ by making a workers’ state flesh and blood instead of a goal. In Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas, left-wing militants rallied to the Revolution and to the new Third or Communist International (Comintern) that Lenin, Trotsky and other Bolshevik leaders initiated in early 1919. The Bolsheviks envisioned the Comintern as a new, genuine, revolutionary International able to create Communist parties from those socialist militants who rejected the ‘social-chauvinism’ (support to militarism or imperialism using socialist rhetoric) and parliamentary reformism that had caused the social-democratic Second International to collapse in the face of the War. By summer 1919, the American Communist movement was born, its enthusiasm matched only by its divisions.

This book is a political history of the first decade of the American Communist Party (CP).1 Above all, this study examines how the early Communists, inspired by the first successful workers’ revolution in history, sought to forge a party in the United States capable of making a revolution in that country. In particular, this work analyses the ‘Americanisation’ of Communism: how Communists understood and applied the lessons of the international Communist movement to American society. Although historians of Communism are divided, there is broad agreement that this ‘Americanisation’ was counterposed to the ‘interference’ of the Communist International. This book, on the other hand, argues that in the early 1920s the Comintern helped the early Communists come to grips with American society. By the end of the decade, reflecting the political degeneration of the Russian Revolution under Stalin, the Comintern’s interventions were more negative.

Two questions come to mind: why study American Communism in the 1920s? And why do we need another study? In much of the world in the

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1 As described below, the American Communist movement underwent several splits in its early years, and when it unified in the early 1920s, it first called itself the Workers’ Party and Workers’ (Communist) Party, and only in 1929 did it become the Communist Party, USA. For the sake of simplicity, the term CP is used to describe the entire party during this period.
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1920s, the question as to which class would rule society seemed immediately posed. From 1919–29, Communists in Central Europe repeatedly faced revolution. In England, Communists played a key role in the 1926 General Strike. Communists led revolutionary movements in Indonesia and China. If American Communists avoided the massive repression faced by their international comrades, it is only because they lacked these opportunities. In the popular imagination, American radicalism, after a brief upsurge during the First World War and in the heady days after the Bolshevik Revolution, was beaten back by Red Scare repression and ‘roaring twenties’ prosperity, enduring what a recent study of the American left labelled ‘a dark decade of myopia and division’. Only with the Depression did Communism recover and ‘bloom in the sunlight of a New Deal majority’.2

Judged by numbers alone, this appears correct. While at its birth in 1919 as a split from the Socialist Party (SP), the Communist Party counted tens of thousands of members, it soon atrophied—growing only a decade later during the Great Depression. In 1938, the party had 55,000 members, and in 1945 it had 65,000. Even in 1955, at the height of the Cold War, the FBI estimated that there were almost 23,000 members—almost twice the membership in 1928.3

Yet the importance of Communism in the 1920s is greater than its declining membership. There are several reasons why the Communists of the 1920s are important to study. First, if the child is father of the man, then understanding the ‘mature’ Communist Party of the 1930s requires examining its formative years. (Not just Wordsworth, but Mordecai Richler’s description of Duddy Kravitz should be kept in mind when considering the evolution of the CP: ‘A boy can be two, three, four potential people, but a man only one. He murders the others’).

Second, while the 1920s were not the high point of Communist influence, this was a reflection of the period as much as of the party. F. Scott Fitzgerald described the 1920s as ‘cynical rather than revolutionary’, and observed that it was ‘characteristic of the Jazz Age that it had no interest in politics at all’. Amid this reactionary period, the Communists were the most important left-wing component of the labour movement. The American Federation of Labor

3 Glazer 1961, pp. 92–3; Communist International 1928a, p. 20. Membership figures—for both the American Communist Party as well as parties in other countries—are notoriously inexact, reflecting fluctuating dues payments, changing definitions of membership, as well as manipulation and biases of party leaders, the press or the government agencies reporting them. Thus any numbers should serve as a general indication of party strength and not an exact census.