Introduction to Part 3

There is no great surprise in a working-class historian turning to the study of the revolutionary left. Most historians of the workers’ movement have a sense of the importance of dissidents in the trade unions, and of activists who have struggled to realise Marx’s vision of the proletariat as a transcendent class, the architect of a new world order. To study the working class and its history is to be constantly bumping into a wide variety of labourists, anarchists, communists and socialists, and even within such general designations there are contentious separations of position.

My own contribution to the historiography of the revolutionary left is premised on this sense of differentiation. In August 1857, Charles Darwin wrote to his friend J.D. Hooker that ‘It is good to have hair-splitters and lumpers’, adding, for clarification, ‘Those who make many species are the “splitters”, and those who make few are the “lumpers”.’ More than a century later, Jack Hexter, in a critique of the method of the pre-eminent Marxist historian of 17th-century England, Christopher Hill, suggested, somewhat disingenuously, that the key divide within historiography was not between right and left but between the lumpers and the splitters. Hexter deplored Hill’s lumpish, ostensibly indiscriminate use of sources, claiming that it allowed the historical materialist to subordinate important differences to his overall distorted understanding of 17th-century dissent. ‘Splitting’, Hexter insisted, was the better strategy for historical research. It accentuated the particular, suggesting the importance of nuance and subtlety within experiences of the past that were seldom easily reduced to commonplace, and usually formulaic, generalities.

Of course, we are not required to choose in an absolute sense. There are times, as indicated in Volume I of Marxism and Historical Practice, where the inclination to lump can produce illuminating and necessary statements of historical trends. So, too, are there times when splitting is a crucially important project, for it is sometimes necessary to differentiate even in the face of pressures to congeal.

The historiography of the revolutionary left is one field of study where an unhealthy and unhelpful tendency – strongest on the right, but with expression

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1 Darwin 1888, p. 105. See also Darwin 2009.
2 Hexter and Hill crossed swords as a result of Hexter’s article “The Burden of Proof,” Times Literary Supplement, 24 October 1975, with Hill’s “Reply to Hexter” and Hexter’s rejoinder appearing in subsequent November issues of the TLS. For a reasoned and more distanced response to Hexter, see W.G. Palmer 1979.
on the left as well – to lump all manner of dissident thought into one common container has had evident effect on historical analysis. This takes the form of reducing the history of the revolutionary left to its most dominant tendency, the Soviet Union-affiliated Communist Party, with its particular variant of communism3 structured by the Stalinist trajectory of the Communist International from the mid- to late 1920s onwards. Other variants of revolutionary leftist politics get short shrift, most especially that particular current known as the Left Opposition, which is associated with the critique of ‘the revolution betrayed’ and Leon Trotsky. Even within this specific political formation there would be important ‘splits’ worth recognising, drawing attention to their reasons for forming new political tendencies and accentuating specific developments that the revolutionary left addressed in different ways.

The first essay in this grouping of writings reflects my sense that the historiography of American communism demanded an infusion of differentiation. At the time of its writing, in 2003, historians of the Communist Party in the United States were largely divided into two hostile camps. On one side of an interpretive divide stood a contingent of political scientists and historians who adhered to the interpretive framework first espoused by Theodore Draper, whose major texts *The Roots of American Communism* (1957) and *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (1960) elaborated a liberal Cold War-influenced anti-communism that stressed, ultimately, the extent to which communism in the United States was a foreign import, a ‘made-in-Moscow’ politics that was always alien to American conditions. On entirely opposite analytic ground were those, largely coming out of the New Left of the 1960s or influenced by the sensibilities of this epoch and the generation of radical historians it nurtured, who instead adhered to a view that communism in the United States had been embraced and promoted by home-grown dissidents. They struggled in a particular context in ways entirely congruent with that setting and, whilst they were certainly aligned with the Soviet Union, these United States communists were never entirely subordinated to it. Their struggles against racism and in opposition to all manner of oppressions and the exploitative essence of capitalism could not be boiled down to the pre-packaged priorities of a distant Communist International.

As I suggest in ‘Rethinking the Historiography of American Communism’, this historiographic impasse had long stalemated. Draper-esque histories tended to be unduly dismissive of communism’s appeal and influence, just as

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3 Throughout these pieces, I will use ‘communist’ to indicate the general orientation and ‘Communist’ to indicate the ideology specifically associated with the Comintern.