CHAPTER FOUR
THE ‘RUSSIAN QUESTION’ AND THE U.S. LEFT

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It is impossible to understand the history of the twentieth century without first thinking clearly about the nature of Soviet-style, statist societies. Yet conventional social science, at least until the late 1940s, contributed virtually nothing of value to the development of that clarity. Until the Cold War, social theory on Soviet society was the exclusive property of radical sects in the USA, and of left movements in other countries. An exception was a 1944 special issue of The American Sociological Review on Russia. The pieces in this volume, on the whole, dealt almost entirely with legal forms and made no attempt to examine either the reality of stated conditions or their implications for social theory.¹

As the ‘Iron Curtain’ expanded westward with the Czechoslovak coup of 1948, it became increasingly clear to the intelligence community that there was a dearth of serious information about Soviet society. A collaboration between the State Department, the newly-formed C.I.A. and Harvard University, with funding from the Carnegie Corporation, resulted in the creation of the Harvard Russian Research Center (HRRC), directed by anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn, and including on its Executive Committee the sociologist Talcott Parsons. The Center’s Refugee Interview Project, using Soviet émigrés living in West Germany as sources, and funded by the Air Force, produced an extensive literature much of which was made available to the public (Bauer, Inkeles and Kluckhohn 1956; for a critical history of this project see Oppenheimer 1997). Although much of this was interesting, its orientation towards analyses of Soviet morale, or examination of its elites—sophisticated Kremlinology as we used to say—was strictly in

¹ A much older body of theory on the nature of organizations, that of the ‘iron law of oligarchy’ school (Pareto, Mosca, Michels, and Weber for example), will not be discussed in this chapter even though some did write about early developments in the USSR.
the service of the intelligence community. A series of studies sponsored by the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, one of which dealt with the Politburo, also focused on elites rather than social structure (Schueller 1951).

Aside from the work of the HRRC, there was very little of substance from the academy until the appearance of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1958). The gist of her argument is twofold: first, that totalitarian systems such as Nazism and Communism are, in their essence, more similar than different since they operate with the same strategy of appealing to isolated, atomized individuals, and use the same method, that of terror, in controlling populations; and second, that they are indeed total, overwhelming in their control of society and its masses so that their domination is virtually unshakable. It is true that, after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, Arendt said that this domination contains the seeds of its own destruction, and that “every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning,” (478) but this rhetoric is not otherwise supported in her work. She fails to examine the qualitatively different economic dynamics underlying different ‘totalitarian’ states (Germany’s economy under Hitler remained capitalist, though severely regulated in the service of imperialist war making, while capitalism had been destroyed in the Soviet Union); therefore, she cannot explain how changes in class structure over time might lead to conflict and the collapse of Stalin’s ‘totalitarian’ state apparatus.

For alternatives to generally sterile ‘bourgeois’ social science approaches to Soviet society, one had to turn to the left. Those familiar with the socialist movement in the U.S. will be aware that, for better or worse, the ‘Russian Question’ was arguably the most important single issue defining left parties and organizations. This is not to say there were no other issues that divided the left. The issue of democratic versus centrist organization, the ‘Negro Question,’ the role of the trade union movement, the New Deal, the approaching war, even the definition of ‘left’ (was the Communist Party really left?), to mention the more important, all played their parts in dividing the left.

The Russian Question was an issue with both political and personal consequences. The answer to where one stood on the Soviet Union was based, necessarily for anyone who claimed to be a Marxist, on one’s analysis of the class structure of the USSR. Parties were organized, split, re-split, families divided, people attacked in street meetings (and in some countries assassinated, imprisoned, executed) according to where one stood on this issue. If one wishes to see theory about Soviet