

## Bohemian Bolsheviks After World War II A Minority within a Minority

Alan Wald

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Article abstract

Institutionalized forgetting about the scope of the Trotskyist experience in the United States was on display in every venue following the deaths of Peter Rafael Bloch (1921–2008), an authority on Puerto Rican artistic culture, and George Perle (born George Perlman, 1915–2009), a Pulitzer Prize-winning music theorist and composer once married to the sculptress and painter Laura Slobe (1909–58). Nothing written even hinted that the two iconoclasts were in the past highly educated and committed Marxists, or that revolutionary ideas oxygenated their cultural thinking at crucial moments. Alarm over memory loss of this type is the motive for this present essay, which appraises the lives of Bloch, Perle, and Slobe along with other “Bohemians” who sought a vexed amalgam of unconstrained cultural creativity, personal freedom, and disciplined “Bolshevik” politics in the Socialist Workers Party (swp) during the late 1940s and 1950s. What can be recovered of the political and personal passions of many “outlaw” lives on the Left, of cultural revolutionaries and sexual non-conformists, especially from those who infused anti-capitalism with anti-Stalinism, are only fragmentary narratives to be steered warily into coherency. For the postwar decade, one must write a kind of ghostly history, the reconstruction of the presence of an absence in a time of persecution.

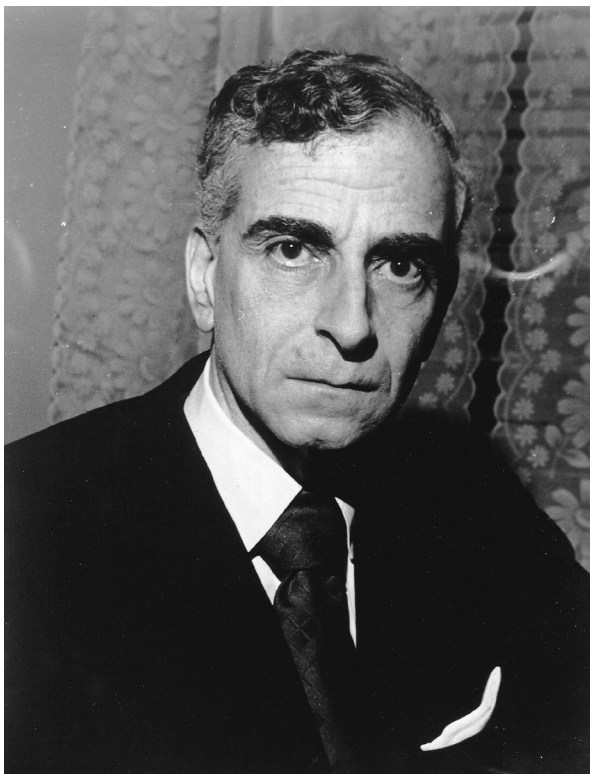
## Bohemian Bolsheviks After World War II: A Minority within a Minority

**Alan Wald**

THOMAS CARLYLE FAMOUSLY OBSERVED: “history is the essence of innumerable biographies.”<sup>1</sup> If so, how does one write a historical account of artistic rebels and sexual non-conformists in the United States Trotskyist movement during the repressive years of the early Cold War? An odd collusion of circumstances, including the hardening of anticommunist stereotypes and the self-censorship of radicals, caused a widespread memory loss that was acute on certain subjects. Chronologies of world events and the recitation of “correct” political positions are no remedies; it is the emotional archeology I am after.

Institutionalized forgetting about the scope of the Trotskyist experience was on display in every venue following the deaths of Peter Rafael Bloch (1921–2008), an authority on Puerto Rican artistic culture, and George Perle (born George Perlman, 1915–2009), a Pulitzer Prize-winning music theorist and composer once married to the sculptress and painter Laura Slobe (1909–58). Nothing written even hinted that the two iconoclasts were in the past highly educated and committed Marxists, or that revolutionary ideas oxygenated their cultural thinking at crucial moments. Alarm over memory loss of this type is the motive for this present essay, which appraises the lives of Bloch, Perle, and Slobe along with others who sought a vexed amalgam of unconstrained cultural creativity, personal freedom, and disciplined politics in the postwar Socialist Workers Party (SWP). What can be recovered of the political and personal passions of many “outlaw” lives on the Left, especially from those who infused anti-capitalism with anti-Stalinism, are only fragmentary narratives to be steered warily into coherency. For the postwar decade, one

1. The Carlyle quote is from “On History,” available at: <http://www.blupete.com/Literature/Essays/Best/CarlyleHistory.htm>



A personal photo of  
Peter Rafael Bloch  
(approx. 1980)  
Bloch's personal collection

must write a kind of ghostly history, the reconstruction of the presence of an absence in a time of persecution.

The late 1940s and 1950s was an era of growing right-wing “moral panic” about “folk devils” of communism and homosexuality. The national mood, soon dubbed “McCarthyism,” reinforced the predisposition of socialist organizations to promote a public, supposedly “proletarian,” image of their members as conventional in appearance and behavior. An example of the SWP’s earlier concern about the danger of alienating potential workers can be found in the 1940 book *The History of American Trotskyism*, which became required reading for members and sympathizers.

In a noted passage, party leader James P. Cannon (1890–1974) describes how he opposed admission to the SWP of a long-haired man who walked around Greenwich Village with unusual clothes and a curious mustache: “I said, people of this type are not going to be suitable for approaching the ordinary American worker. They are going to mark our organization as something freakish, abnormal, exotic: something that has nothing to do with the normal life of the American worker.”<sup>2</sup> SWP members, like participants in most

2. James P. Cannon, *The History of American Trotskyism: Report of a Participant* (New York

organized socialist groups, became known for a conservative appearance and a “clean-cut” look, reflected in the photographs of activists as well as cartoon drawings of the “working man” that appeared in its press.

Yet, as this essay will show, conventional behavior in one’s personal life, or in artistic and cultural affinities, was an entirely different matter. For many individuals, surface conformity began as politically strategic, an artificial demeanor to allow a hearing from those who might be already suspicious of revolutionary ideas as “outside” of and “foreign” to their culture. Then the Cold War atmosphere added intensified forms of state repression to the picture. Anyone who might be suspected of violating taboos had even better reasons to blend into the environs or go underground. Marxist cultural workers could have several lives; sometimes, like Bloch, Perle, and Slobe, they used different names for their political and professional activity. For many militants, such secrecy turned out to be habit-forming; much was never recorded at the time, and then it was forgotten. The exterior deportment became the history, and with the passage of time the vision of the postwar swp became locked within a powerful stereotype – one not very attractive to young radicals today.

Decades after World War II, even when the temper of the country proved more hospitable to left-wing activism, familiar expectations triumphed over the remembrance of anomalies that might produce a rethinking. There was an understandable reluctance among surviving radical veterans to “name names” and provide particulars of former members of any Marxist parties who had not gone public. After all, the Attorney General’s List of Subversive Organizations lasted until 1974; someone might yet end up in political “trouble.” Those who departed in the 1950s were sometimes dismissed as quitters who succumbed to alien class pressures. There was also a disinclination to acknowledge the longtime presence in the Trotskyist movement of sexual non-conformists. Homophobia was everywhere, including the Left, and slow to slacken. The insinuation of a person’s homosexuality, accurate or not, was widely perceived as a slur upon the accused. At the same time, the historic ethos of the Left was habitually performed as masculinist and hardboiled. Leaders set the tone by revealing little of their emotions; dwelling on the private and intimate was discouraged as “not political.”<sup>3</sup> While the actual love relationships of Trotskyist militants traversed a continuum from Puritans (who equated sex with heterosexual marriage) to reincarnations of the Bloomsbury Group (who shared multiple partners and sexual orientations), the ensuing silence about sexual

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1972), 92.

3. George Breitman (1916–86), longtime swp leader, observed that Cannon’s reluctance to reveal the personal was no different from that of other Trotskyist leaders of his generation such as Max Shachtman, Martin Abern, E. R. McKinney, and Carl Skoglund: “the style of that time, before 1960, was quite different than after. People in general, not only those in the movement, did not discuss personal things ‘publically.’ It was considered politically out of order or a sign of weakness, except with those with whom you had intimate relations.” Letter to Wald, 19 July 1985.

nonconformity in the Cold War Left became the dog that didn't bark for illuminating the movement's affective life.

Using the pseudonyms "Trent Hutter" and "George Sanders," Peter Bloch and George Perle were closely associated with the postwar SWP for at least ten years each. The organization was called "Cannonite" after its leader (James P. Cannon), mainly from 1940 through the 1960s. Although there are parties, groups, and individuals throughout the world who to varying degrees identify with the Cannon legacy, not a word was published in the left-wing press about their passing. Nowadays it seems that the history of Trotskyism is far too serious a matter to be left in the hands of "Trotskyists."

This neglect provided a strange contrast to the spectacularly-edited information appearing in the *New York Times* obituary for Perle and other tributes for Bloch, fulsome in praise but misleading by gaps and omissions.<sup>4</sup> No doubt Bloch and Perle were reticent or even cagey about their pasts, but it was the constraints of historical amnesia that induced their admirers to fail to ask basic questions about political and emotional allegiances that may have informed the two men's cultural work. Perle in particular devoted much of his career to exploring the biographical sources of a movement that transformed the language of music. Try to understand Beethoven, especially the Eroica symphony, without reference to Napoleon and the French Revolution. Or Gertrude Stein, especially "Melanctha," while ignorant of her relationships with May Bookstaver and Alice B. Toklas. About Bloch and Perle we were given less than half of the story.

The striking correlations between historical events and stages in their intellectual and artistic developments passed unremarked. One is asked to believe that a forty-year old German-born man named Peter Bloch materialized suddenly in the 1960s as a fully-formed authority on Puerto Rican music and art with highly-opinionated politics. Scholars and journalists ascribe Bloch's choice of topic, activities, and perspective to nostalgia for his European Sephardic heritage, with no comment on the content of any publications of earlier decades. No one noticed that Bloch himself relied on boilerplate radical language in his first book: "For the last 15 years I have been actively involved in the struggle for the cause of Puerto Rican-Hispanic culture."<sup>5</sup> Isn't it odd that the volume, *La-Le-Lo-Lai: Puerto Rican Music and Its Performers*, concludes with a political polemic against unnamed antagonists accused of misusing the concept of the "dialectics of history" in their assessments of the Muñoz Marín government of the island?<sup>6</sup>

4. Sources for obituaries and tributes can be found on the Wikipedia entry for Bloch and the Homepage for Perle: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter\\_Rafael\\_Bloch](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Rafael_Bloch), and <http://www.george-perle.net>.

5. Peter Bloch, *La-Le-Lo-Lai: Puerto Rican Music and Its Performers* (New York 1973), 16.

6. Bloch, *La-Le-Lo-Lai*, 173–4.

Similarly, George Perle, whose life's ambition was to re-establish musical tonality within the twelve-tone system, is depicted as working out his ideas in isolation from world events. At his desk or in front of a keyboard, Perle studied Vienna School composers Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951) and Alban Berg (1885–1945), autotelically undergoing a succession of eye-opening revelations about 12-tone harmonic modes starting in the late 1930s. There seems to be a gag order against anyone's speculating as to what may have motivated Perle's sequence of breakthroughs in theorizing post-tonal pitch relationships. Did it never occur to anyone that Perle's trajectory resembles what scholars have noted about the break of Schoenberg with prevailing musical idioms?

As Schoenberg's chief biographer reports, he pioneered a new direction "not just because of the logic of his technical development." Perle's predecessor was initially driven to work out his responses to his own emotional unrest, but by the 1920s was living in the menacing political environments of Austria and Germany. At that point Schoenberg's "critique of the [musical] idioms in which society expresses itself [became] a critique of society itself."<sup>7</sup> One might take a cue from Perle's own scholarship about composers, which is relentless in reminding the reader how Georg Büchner and Berg were shaped by war and revolution, their music intimately linked to life and times. The recycled fairy tale of Perle's musical progression as the effusions of a romantic, isolated genius, calls to mind a remark by Thornton Wilder: "It is possible to make books of a certain fascination if you scrupulously leave out the essential."<sup>8</sup>

### **"Cannonite Bohemians"**

AT STAKE IN THE RECOVERY of this lost history are not just the three careers on which I am focusing, or the reclamation of a political model (the swp), now mostly obsolete.<sup>9</sup> Before recounting the Marxist chapters in the lives of Bloch, Perle, and Slobe, one must address the milieu of a band of Cold War revolutionists of artistic achievement and non-conformist sensibility operating outside the parameters of prevailing social conventions in their creative and personal stories. A cultural minority within a political minority, Bloch, Perle, and Slobe were among those who might oxymoronically be called "Cannonite bohemians," forcing us to rethink familiar expectations.<sup>10</sup> Some defied compulsory

7. Malcolm MacDonald, *Schoenberg* (New York 2008), 12, 25.

8. From a famous letter to Gertrude Stein, 16 September 1933, Edward Burns, ed., *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Thornton Wilder* (New Haven 1996), 143.

9. For an analysis of the complex causes of the transformation of the swp, see: Alan Wald, "A Winter's Tale Told in Memoirs," *Against the Current*, 153 (July–August 2011), 19–29, available at: <http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/3317>

10. The terms are unlikely to have been joined together openly at the time, inasmuch as "bohemianism" often connoted rebellions that celebrated marginality and lacked a vision of mass social transformation such as the swp advocated.

heteronormativity through non-conformist sexual orientations now said to have been anathema in their own organization. Bloch, for example, was by all accounts a closeted gay man.<sup>11</sup> Slobe was a bisexual woman prominent in the SWP for her political cartoons signed "Laura Gray."<sup>12</sup>

While I focus on the postwar SWP, offshoots and rivals of Cannonite Trotskyism had a similar ambience when it came to a conformist surface harboring a mixture of cultural and sexual rebels. Noah Greenberg (1919–66), founder of New York Pro Musica, and William Simon (1930–2000), a major specialist on sexuality and an early advocate of gay rights, were members of the competing Workers Party (after 1949 called the Independent Socialist League) throughout the 1940s. In the 1950s, the *American Socialist* magazine remained a source of politico-cultural insight and inspiration. One of its central editors, Harry Braverman (1920–76), was hired by Barney Rosset at Grove Press in 1961. There he played a central role in linking the avant-garde publishing house to the New Left.<sup>13</sup> *Correspondence* newspaper, with its muse of C. L. R. James (1901–89), outstripped all for its focus on youth, women, and race.<sup>14</sup>

Then, in the 1960s, celebrities emerged in the counter-culture with diverse Trotskyist pasts – Art Kunkin (b.1928), originator of the *L.A. Free Press* and associate of Timothy Leary; Marvin Garson (dates unknown), founder of the *San Francisco Express-Times* (where he famously called for "Queer Power!" in 1969); Barbara Garson (b. 1941), author of *MacBird* (1966); Ed Pearl (b. 1941), founder of the Ash Grove folk club in Los Angeles; Henry Spira (1927–98), pivotal figure in the animal rights movement; and Dave Van Ronk (1936–2002), Greenwich Village folksinger.

The rumor that *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry (1921–91) was once a follower in the SWP of the Argentine Trotskyist/UFO enthusiast Juan Posadas

11. Such opinions were expressed to Wald during personal interviews with George Weissman, 8 March 1983, and Ernest Mandel, 2 June 1984.

12. This was stated empathetically to Wald in an interview with Demila Jenner, 17 July 1981. "Bisexual" was the term used by Jenner to describe herself, Laura, and one other woman in the SWP.

13. See Loren Glass, "Counter-Cultural Colophon, Party II," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 30 September 2011, on line at: [http://lareviewofbooks.org/article.php?id=301&fulltext=1#0\\_undefined,0\\_](http://lareviewofbooks.org/article.php?id=301&fulltext=1#0_undefined,0_)

14. For a discussion of *Correspondence*, see Rachel Peterson, "Correspondence: Journalism, Anticommunism and Marxism in 1950s Detroit," in Robbie Lieberman and Clarence Lang, eds., *Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement* (New York 2009), 115–160. For *The American Socialist* see: <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/amersocialist/index.htm>. There are other political currents as well. Christopher Phelps discovered an essay on "Socialism and Sex" in a 1952 copy of the *Young Socialist* (issued by the youth group of the Socialist Party), and published an informative commentary on the document and the subject in 2008 in both *The Journal of the History of Sexuality* and *New Politics*; the latter version is available on line at: <http://newpolitics.mayfirst.org/fromthearchives?nid=100>



(Homero Rómulo Cristalli Frasnell, 1912–81) has never been confirmed.<sup>15</sup> But obscured affinities between the Far Left and the far edges of creative non-conformity are more present than extant narratives allow. For example, in late February 1935 James P. Cannon shared the speakers' platform in San Francisco with the California Trotskyist Norman Mini (dates unknown); fifteen years later, Mini, said by Henry Miller to be a combination of Franz Kafka and Big Bill Haywood, became a mentor of the visionary science fiction writer Philip K. Dick (1928–82).<sup>16</sup> Future research is likely to demonstrate such connections in every urban center with an historical Trotskyist presence going back to the 1930s and 1940s.

A ready illustration is Los Angeles, where one of the founders of the Trotskyist movement, Solomon ("Sol") Babitz (1911–82), was a close associate of composer Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971). Born in Brooklyn, Babitz had studied violin in Berlin and Paris, joining the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 1933. While abroad, Babitz wrote articles about the rise of Hitler for his father's newspaper, the *Los Angeles Jewish Voice*. Returning to Los Angeles, he became an ardent Trotskyist along with his sister, Thelma ("Tiby") Babitz, a dancer with the Martha Graham Company and in Hollywood films. When Stravinsky settled in Hollywood in the early 1940s, Sol, already employed in studio orchestras, began editing his string parts for many years. In 1941, he launched the *International Musician*, and in 1948 co-founded the Early Music Laboratory. His specialty in research became problems of performance practices in baroque and classical music through the interpretation of treatises from the 17th and 18th centuries; these led him to conclude that the Wagnerian style of playing Bach and Mozart was inaccurate.

Babitz drifted away from the organized Trotskyist movement during World War II, during which time he married the artist Mae Babitz (Lily May Josephine Laviolette, 1911–2003). Although he remained a Trotskyist in his heart, and his sister (later known as Tiby Genecin) "proletarianized" as a garment worker, he politically went underground during the McCarthy era.<sup>17</sup> Igor and Vera Stravinsky were the god-parents of his children, and, his Hollywood career finished, Sol took the position of concert master of the Ojai Orchestra. Sol and Mae also hosted a salon of artists and poets in Boyle Heights, and Sol helped to co-ordinate roof-top concerts ("Evenings on the Roof") at the Silver Lake home of poet Peter Yates (1909–76). One of the Babitz daughters, Eve (b. 1943), became a noted writer and personality in the 1960s Los Angeles

15. The claim was discussed in several places, including: [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/swp\\_usa/message/11501](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/swp_usa/message/11501)

16. Mini is described in Henry Miller, *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Beach* (New York 1957), 61. Cannon discusses his sharing the platform with Mini in a letter of 25 February 1935 to A. J. Muste; I am grateful to the antiquarian bookseller Walter Goldwater (1907–85) for sharing this with me.

17. E-mail from Mirandi Babitz, 10 June 2012.



counter-culture, especially following the widespread publication of a 1963 nude photograph of her playing chess with artist Marcel Duchamp at the Pasadena Museum of Art.<sup>18</sup>

## Heteronormativity and Trotskyism

THE DEFIANCE OF SEXUAL CONVENTIONS can often be linked to a defiance of social and political conventions. It is dicey to apply contemporary terminology to the pre-Stonewall era, but this connection may explain why there was always a presence of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals in and around the Trotskyist movement. Most easily identified are writers: Claude McKay (1889–1948), Florence Becker (1895–1984), John Wheelwright (1897–1940), Parker Tyler (1904–74), F. W. Dupee (1904–79), and Robert Duncan (1919–88). The poet and journalist Sherry Mangan (1904–61), a life-long committed Trotskyist who was more of the womanizing type, was associated with many gay and lesbian artistic figures, including Gertrude Stein (1874–1946), Alice B. Toklas (1877–1967), Mary Butts (1880–1937), Robert McAlmon (1895–1956), and Maurice Grosser (1913–86), who painted Mangan in the nude.<sup>19</sup>

In July 1942, Mangan, who translated Mozart's *Idomeneo* (1781) and other operas, brought his closest chum, composer Virgil Thomson (1896–1989), who presided over a largely gay salon at New York's Hotel Chelsea on West 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, down to the SWP headquarters. Mangan introduced James P. Cannon to Thomson, who straight away turned out one of his "musical portraits" of Cannon (called "Professional Revolutionary"), as he had earlier done for Mangan in 1940 (called "The Bard").<sup>20</sup> George Weissman, director of the SWP publishing house after 1947, recalled that Lincoln Kirstein (1907–96), gay co-founder of the New York City Ballet, would come by the Weissmans' apartment to call on Mangan, who stayed there between sojourns in Europe and Latin America.

Some postwar Trotskyists were erotically free spirits in the earlier pattern of Maya Deren (1917–61), the avant-garde film-maker who was an active party member throughout most of the 1930s. There were also "sex radicals," attracted to the theories of Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957), an Austrian-born psychoanalyst who used Marxism to argue that neuroses stemmed from the social order; his treatment, catnip to young cultural rebels, was to increase

18. The photo, now an iconic image of Duchamps, is available on line at: <http://www.blakeferis.com/mhlt/?p=1313>. Eve Babitz makes passing references to her father's Trotskyist past in several of her books, *Eve's Hollywood* (New York 1974) and *L.A. Woman* (New York 1982).

19. See my dual biography, *The Revolutionary Imagination: The Poetry and Politics of John Wheelwright and Sherry Mangan* (Chapel Hill 1983).

20. Both are listed in Thompson's works, on-line at: <http://www.virgilthomson.org/worksfiles/portraits.PDF>

one's sexual potency.<sup>21</sup> After moving to the United States in 1939, Reich started building boxes called "orgone accumulators" that he believed could capture sexual energy from the environment. Reich's patients sat inside these boxes, one of many unorthodox features of his therapy. Although Reich was never a political follower of Trotsky, the two men corresponded in the early 1930s and may have held a meeting.<sup>22</sup> Associates of Trotsky were much taken with Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933). Reich's most venerated disciple in the United States today, Morton Herskowitz (b. 1918), has been identified as a sympathizer of Trotskyism when he met Reich in 1948.<sup>23</sup>

Reich's younger daughter, Lore Reich (b. 1928), became an active member of the swp youth group "International Socialist Youth" as World War II ended.<sup>24</sup> The artist and poet Jeanne Morgan (dates unknown), later a secretary of Cannon, met Lore as a teenager at a Trotskyist summer camp in 1945, recalling her as "a large-boned, zahftig [Yiddish for 'pleasantly plump'] girl with glossy black hair, a smiling, happy person who was sophisticated and intelligent."<sup>25</sup> Lore, close to New York swp organizer Ray Sparrow (who used the "party name" Art Sharon, 1915–85), acknowledged that she was the daughter of the famous Wilhelm, but rarely volunteered the information. Although Lore was studying to become a psychoanalyst, she did not subscribe to her father's views. Her husband, Julius Rubin (1921–2004), later an economic historian at the University of Pittsburgh, was active as well.<sup>26</sup> By 1951, both had renounced Trotskyism and were expounding their own economic and political theories while pursuing graduate studies.

Some members of the swp, however, were piously devoted to Reichianism, while more were simply curious but not convinced. Christy C. Moustakis (who used the "party name" Chris Andrews, 1911–89) had served as a guard in the Trotsky compound in Coyoacán, Mexico, for eleven months. He was the son of Constantine Christou Moustakis (1883–1925), knighted by the Greek government for his political services as a Greek-American. Christy had graduated from Staunton Military Academy and Bowdoin College, after which he received an MA in history from Harvard University. He arrived in New York City in 1938, where he was recruited to the swp by Joseph Hansen (1910–79).

21. Reich himself was unsympathetic to homosexuality, but homosexuals were drawn to his ideas and therapy.

22. See the discussion of the relationship in Christopher Turner, *Adventures in the Orgasmatron: How the Sexual Revolution Came to America* (New York 2011), 186–90.

23. Turner, *Adventures in the Orgasmatron*, 311.

24. In the 1940s and 1950s there was no national youth group of the swp; clubs of young swp supporters in different cities used various names. "International Socialist Youth" was used in New York, and "Socialist Youth Club" in Los Angeles.

25. Undated letter from Jeanne Morgan to Wald, probably 1983.

26. In a letter of 21 May 1980 to Wald, Weissman described Lore Reich as close to Sparrow and said that both she and Julius Rubin were active members for several years.

In the 1940s Christy traveled around the United States showing films that he had made of Trotsky, then worked for the *Militant* newspaper until 1945.

In a series of letters between 1951 and 1953, Christy, no longer formally in the swp after the latter date but still sympathetic, discussed his experiences in Reichian therapy with Demila Sanders (1911–2006), who had accepted an assignment in 1944 to assist in caring for Natalia Trotsky in Mexico.<sup>27</sup> Christy described how he had commenced treatment under the personal care of Reich in 1945, believing that Reich had found “a shortcut breakthrough, available to the masses because it didn’t need the long, drawn-out treatment of psychoanalysis.” Six years later, living in Reno, he was still reading Reichian publications, but baffled by Reich’s latest pronouncements on physics, astrophysics, medicine, and mathematics. His interest switched over to hypno-analysis (the combination of hypnosis and psychoanalysis), and he eventually moved to New York City where he worked as a proofreader for the *New York Times*.<sup>28</sup>

Other Trotskyists were practitioners of communal living, and open, non-possessive, and, occasionally, group marital relationships. This included two leaders of the swp in Southern California in the 1940s and 1950s, Murry Weiss (1915–81) and Myra Tanner Weiss (1917–99). The couple was committed to a policy of advancing women within the swp, although their perspective was qualified by their view that cadres in the movement should not have children. The Weisses sometimes strategized their love affairs for political reasons – including one of Myra’s with Trotsky’s grandson – and inspired a commune of young people in Los Angeles. This included Bert and Marge Wainer, Edmund and Shirley Kovacs, Elaine and Manny Sunshine, and Fred Halstead (1927–88, the swp candidate for president in 1968, memorable also because he was six feet and six inches tall and weighed 350 pounds). The collective was first known in the late 1940s as the “New England Street Commune,” but was still around in 1956 using other names.<sup>29</sup>

The trademark of the Weiss’s relationship, variously imitated by others who were sometimes called “Weissites,” was an inviolable political collaboration that was maintained even while the two conducted other heterosexual liaisons. Some of these romances persisted for decades, most famously the twenty-five year affair between Myra, who was three times the swp candidate for vice president of the US, and the younger Henry Spira, who provided crucial Civil

27. Demila was originally married to sculptor Duncan Ferguson, an swp member who shared the assignment in Mexico, and later in life she was known as Demila Jenner.

28. Letter from Christy Moustakis to Demila Sanders, 18 March 1952, courtesy of Demila (Sanders) Jenner. Demila reported back to Christy on her adventures among many fellow travelers of Reichianism, some Trotskyists and others not, and described a meeting with Reich’s older daughter, Eva Reich (1928–2008). Eva Reich can be viewed on Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rU3wNgrxLwc>

29. Letter from Nora Ruth Roberts to Wald, 4 March 1995.

Rights movement coverage for the *Militant* under the name “Henry Gitano.”<sup>30</sup> Myra was brilliant and vivacious; her lovers and partners included Joseph Hansen, Bernie Goodman, Bill Farrell, and Edmund Kovacs.<sup>31</sup> Murry was overweight, often sickly from a heart condition, and “weird-looking.”<sup>32</sup> But women were drawn to him because he took them seriously, intellectually and politically. He aided in their education (focused almost exclusively on Marxist classics) and campaigned for their assignment to leadership positions.

A few open partnerships in the swp lasted until death, such as that of George Novack (1905–92) and Evelyn Reed (1905–79), who were not “Weissites” but modeled themselves on Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone De Beauvoir. Another relationship that survived was that of Fred Halstead and Virginia Garza, who reportedly had an understanding that they would stay married while having other relationships. But there were also couples in such non-monogamous pairings who eventually broke up, including the Weisses. In 1960, following a stroke, Murry departed the swp and ultimately became a therapist. This new career ruptured the centrality of his political alliance with Myra, who was also out of the swp but despised therapy, and Murry moved in with a young radical psychologist, Carol Munter. After Weiss died – he contracted Legionnaire’s Disease while attending a Trotskyist conference in Europe – Munter became the partner of Weiss associate Bert Wainer (also known as “Bert Deck”).<sup>33</sup>

A number of women in these non-monogamous relationships were proud of their autonomy, speaking candidly of their “open marriage” late in life.<sup>34</sup> But there were also grievances, privately expressed: the movement was still male-dominated, jealousy was not as easy to eradicate in practice as in theory, and professions of anti-bourgeois non-possessiveness could serve as a mask for sexual bad behavior.<sup>35</sup> The worst case of such conduct was that of sculptor Duncan Ferguson (1901–74), who ardently preached against “bourgeois” sexual possessiveness and tenderness, and usually had several lovers at once. His artistic talent and devotion to the movement were never in question, yet he could be violent with women and was incorrigibly predatory when any sexual opportunity became available. With his striking blue eyes and erotic body language, Ferguson seduced the mother of one of his wives, and even in

30. Roberts to Wald, 4 March 1995; See Peter Singer, *Ethics into Action: Henry Spira and the Animal Rights Movement* (Boston 1998), for more details on Spira’s activities.

31. Roberts to Wald, 4 March 1995.

32. Nora Wainer interview with Frances Nicklas, undated, p. 137, in possession of Nora Wainer.

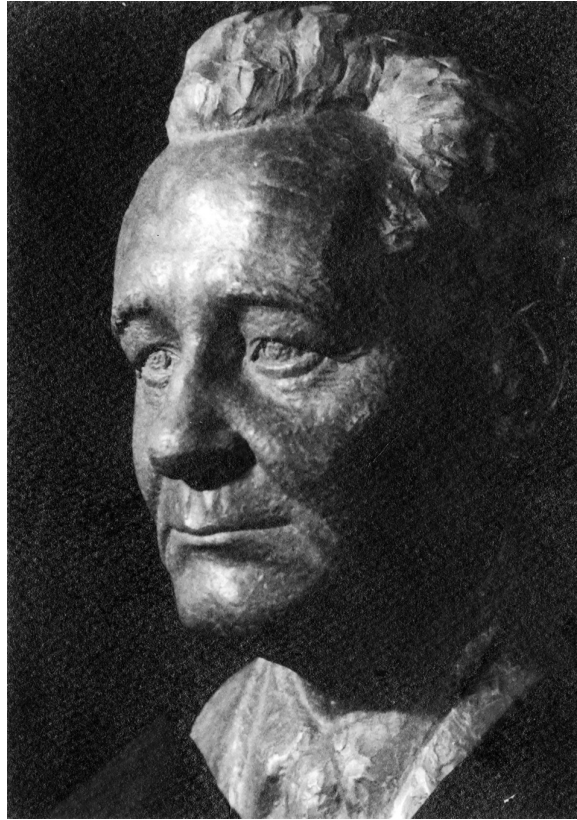
33. The above paragraph relies on Roberts to Wald, 4 March 1995.

34. Myra Weiss did so at Murry’s memorial meeting, according to a 3 January 1995 letter to Wald from Nora Ruth Roberts.

35. All of the personal interviews and correspondence with women cited in this essay make references to these sorts of issues.

**Duncan Ferguson's  
head of James P. Cannon  
(1943)**

From the Duncan Ferguson  
Papers assembled by Rod  
Holt.



his mid-sixties could not be trusted with the underage daughter of a comrade. His third wife, Demila, recalls an incident when Ferguson was simultaneously bedding herself along with a beautiful young model from New Jersey, the sister in-law-of a party leader. The model suddenly brought up the fact that Duncan had browbeat her into an unwanted abortion.<sup>36</sup> After reviewing my biographical research about Ferguson, George Novack observed: "Many of his friends and comrades sought to help or solace him but could not counteract his 'soul-sickness.' The cast of characters in his intimate life – the overpowering stern

36. This information was reported in the interviews that are cited in my biographical study of Ferguson, although some details were not put into print. See Alan Wald, "Sculptor on the Left: Duncan Ferguson's Search for Wholeness," *Pembroke Magazine*, 19 (Spring 1987) 32–56. The essay was reprinted in Wald, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals: Selected Essays on Marxist Traditions in Cultural Commitment* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, 1992). More details about Ferguson's seduction of the underage daughter are in an e-mail to Wald from Les Evans, 21 June 2012.

patriarch, the beloved doomed brother, the chorus of sisters, the succession of wives and lovers – would not have been out of place in a Eugene O'Neill drama.”<sup>37</sup>

### Factionalism and Narrow-Mindedness

SUCH PERSONAL STORIES MUST be factored in for a full portrait of a left-wing movement. Some years after I interviewed Myra Weiss, I received a report from her closest associate that Myra had been unhappy with our discussion: “You seem to be interested only in political positions. We were whole people. We lived complex lives. Further, you cannot understand the life of the party without understanding women or sex.”<sup>38</sup> This was an exaggerated and unfair perception of my approach – which is to be cautious about gossip and subjective perceptions – but her complaint justifiably underlines the need to transcend official and “impersonal” histories. What might be added is that the political life of the radical movement was itself emotional and tumultuous, never all puppy-dogs and rainbows.

From its outset Trotskyism inherited a meme of organizational factionalism that eventually rendered most self-proclaimed Leninist parties fanatical cults, although Cannon’s was among the “least bad” of such groups. In 1943–46, George Perle bared his fangs to join the attack of Cannon’s majority against the small Goldman-Morrow tendency, an opposition that was the more fore-sighted in its vision of the coming postwar world. Perle, writing as George “Sanders” (his mother’s maiden name), was prompted to defend an orthodox dialectical materialism against Jean van Heijenoort (1912–86), a personal secretary to Trotsky who after 1949 became a world authority on mathematician Kurt Gödel.<sup>39</sup>

In the early 1960s, Peter Bloch found himself in the middle of a brutal fight in the SWP about the nature of the Cuban revolution. Although he was not aligned with any of the oppositional factions, which were marked by an excess of sectarianism, he was as “Trent Hutter” denounced by his chief American patron, Joseph Hansen, as having fallen into a “cesspool.”<sup>40</sup> Paradoxically, it was sympathy for the early Cuban Revolution that paved the way for the 1963 reunification of the Fourth International, a world organization of Trotskyists, and Bloch himself would play a noteworthy part in the promotion of this new confederation. After Hansen’s death, fifteen years later, it was again over the

37. Letter from George Novack to Wald, 12 October 1982.

38. Letter from Nora Ruth Roberts to Wald, 1 January 1993. The interview with Myra Weiss had occurred in New York in November 1983.

39. See George Sanders, “Another Answer to Comrade Loris [van Heijenoort],” in New York SWP, *Internal Bulletin*, 5 (October 1943), 11–15.

40. See Joseph Hansen, *Dynamics of the Cuba Revolution* (New York 1978), 122, 124.



assessment of the Cuban Revolution that the swp degenerated into a circular firing squad, all but unrecognizable today.<sup>41</sup>

Factionalism, among other shortcomings, breeds narrow-mindedness, judgmentalism (the inclination to make quick moral and personal judgments about those who seem different), and a view of others as instruments for immediate political objectives. Often factionalism combines with the Anaconda of political orthodoxy, which kills creativity and autonomy by constriction. A factional environment can also be a breeding ground for interlinked bigotries masked by an alleged concern for revolutionary purity and a “proletarian” policy. Program and orientation are foundational for a socialist movement, but a factional mentality transforms Marxist terminology into a name-calling (“reformist,” “centrist,” and “petit-bourgeois” are the most famous) more likely to produce a proletarian “mystique” than an effective presence in the working class.

No particular individual may have been to blame, but the postwar swp, frequently factionalized, was to some degree infected by the homophobic, sexist, and racist society in which it functioned. It is accordingly necessary for historians to develop a framework acknowledging “intersectionality” in the Left as well as elsewhere in society.<sup>42</sup> Many of these manifestations only became clear in the changed cultural climate of later years. Around 1969, for example, many of us who recently joined as New Leftists were stunned by the surfacing of evidence of the swp’s unwritten policy against membership for homosexuals – one that was quickly eradicated. How this rule came into place has yet to be fully explained.<sup>43</sup>

To be sure, in the 1930s there had been leaders believed to be gay. One was Grant Cannon (?–1969, no relation to James P. Cannon), a prominent Trotskyist in Ohio, who was sufficiently “open” to take his organizer to a gay nightclub where his lover was performing.<sup>44</sup> Another was Thomas Stamm (dates unknown), who broke from the Trotskyist movement in 1935 to form the Revolutionary Workers League. swp founder George Breitman (see footnote 3) recalled to me that homosexuals had been members and served in

41. Wald, “A Winter’s Tale Told in Memoirs.”

42. “Intersectionality” is the term in feminist sociological theory for a methodology of studying social inequality in which these three forms of oppression interrelate. For a break-through study along these lines relevant to the subject of this essay, see W. Chris Johnson, “Sex and the Subversive Alien: The Moral Life of C. L. R. James,” *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 14 (1 & 2 2011), 185–203.

43. Historian Christopher Phelps has been researching the topic for several years.

44. In a 27 June 1990 interview with Wald in Ann Arbor, B. J. Widick expressed certainty that Grant Cannon’s sexual orientation was widely known in the Trotskyist movement. In the 1940s, Cannon married novelist Josephine Johnson.



the leadership of the Newark swp in the 1930s and 1940s; as branch organizer, he considered the matter of their sexual orientation of no importance.<sup>45</sup>

After World War II, however, the situation apparently devolved. One former swp assistant branch organizer, Phil Clark (1921–92), told me that he had been forced out of his position in Manhattan in the late 1940s when a young worker complained to national leaders that Phil had made a pass at him. Phil described how he subsequently met with George Novack, who recommended, with intellectual hauteur, that he temporarily resign and get “cured” by a Freudian psychoanalyst.<sup>46</sup> Frances Nicklas (dates unknown) was the branch organizer in San Diego in the late 1940s, assigned by Murry Weiss. She claimed that homosexuals were tolerated in the swp on the West Coast if their sex lives were kept separate from party life, but that party leaders on the East Coast took a significantly harsher approach: “In New York they came down like Holy Hell on homos.”<sup>47</sup>

It was later explained that the reason for such exclusionary practices was “security” – a belief that homosexuals were susceptible to being blackmailed into informing. Inasmuch as evidence is very slight of any alarm at the time over potential blackmailers, such prohibitions were more likely motivated by ignorance and a dread of difference.<sup>48</sup> Expressions of the prejudiced belief that homosexuality is a sign of social decadence, and a view that potential working-class recruits would be alienated by a gay presence, were known to exist in the swp. Nicklas recalls that the prevailing swp attitude in the 1940s and 1950s was “absolutely opposed” to homosexuality: “It was as if you had a disease, a communicable disease and you shouldn’t be allowed around.”<sup>49</sup>

45. Breitman to Wald, 14 March 1985.

46. Yet Breitman wrote me on 14 March 1985 that he was skeptical of what Clark recalled about Novack’s role. Also see Patrick Quinn’s obituary for Clark in *Against the Current*, 40 (September–October 1992), 49. Quinn reports that after World War II “the organization [swp] requested a number of its gay members to resign.”

47. See “Interview with Frances Nicklas,” undated, in possession of Nora Ruth Roberts, 155–6.

48. In a letter from George Breitman to Wald, 14 March 1985, Breitman insists that he never heard any leadership body in the swp discuss concerns about homosexuals as members or blackmail targets until the late 1960s. David Thorstad, an expert on the swp and homosexuality, maintains that there was no policy of excluding gays for security reasons until the late 1960s. See: <http://archive.org/details/GayLiberationAndSocialismDocumentsFromTheDiscussionsOnGayLiberation>

49. See “Interview with Frances Nicklas,” undated, in possession of Nora Ruth Roberts, 141. References to similar attitudes in both the Canadian and the U.S. movements can be found in the section called “The Gay Question” in a document online: <http://www.socialisthistory.ca/Docs/History/Raphael-1960-Trotskyism.pdf>

## Mystery Figure

A NARROW-MINDED ATMOSPHERE may be a reason why Peter Bloch was never fully integrated into the US Trotskyist movement. A thin and frail man, suggestive of a small bird, Bloch will always remain a somewhat opaque individual, a “mystery figure,” in the 1950s. A precise appraisal of anyone’s sexual orientation can be a convoluted affair, and Bloch was particularly secretive about his. Beyond the speculations of close friends, all we really know is that he lived in Uptown Manhattan where his life revolved around his mother, Else Israel Bloch, “for whom his attachment surpassed ordinary filial devotion.”<sup>50</sup> They shared an apartment from their arrival in 1949 until her death in 1988; she is the only person with whom Bloch publicly acknowledged an affectionate relationship, except for Louise Fölsche (1864–1945), Else’s nanny and companion since the 1890s. Bloch’s father, an eminent Jewish medical researcher hung by the Gestapo in 1943, is scarcely mentioned.<sup>51</sup>

Since Bloch was a refugee, he needed to operate with some political caution. His status, before and after he gained US citizenship in 1955, would be endangered if he were a known associate of domestic Marxist organizations or connected with such parties previously in Europe. Yet he did not go fully underground. “Trent Hutter” was treated as a party member by others in the SWP; he received and wrote for the SWP *Internal Bulletin*; occasionally gave lectures at events sponsored by party branches; and taught classes at Mountain Spring Camp, a piece of land in New Jersey where SWP conventions were held.<sup>52</sup> Faced with both 1950s compulsory heterosexuality and anti-radical repression, some of his personal reticence may have been because he feared a fate such as that of Oscar Wilde, who was tried and imprisoned for indecency.

Did Bloch’s SWP writing express a “gay sensibility”? Sexual identities are far too diverse to share a single responsiveness; sweeping generalizations are dubious. Bloch, however, articulated many views that certainly challenged the predominant heterosexist orthodoxies of the Left. One surprise was his promotion of the writing of W. Somerset Maugham (1874–1965), a popular and highly-paid English author who resided in exile in the United States. Maugham lived openly with male companions but was circumspect about

50. Letter from George Weissman to Wald, 13 February 1983.

51. The major source for Bloch’s family history is the diary and memoir, *When I Was Pierre Boulanger: A Diary in Times of Terror* (New York 2002). The volume contains photographs of his mother, Louise Fölsche, himself, and a half-dozen other individuals, but none of his father.

52. “Danger Signals in Cuba” was one such contribution to the *Internal Bulletin*; see Hansen, *Dynamics of the Cuba Revolution*, 120. Hutter was described as “an SWP member” when some of his private correspondence about the Fourth International was published in *The Struggle to Reunify the Fourth International (1954–63): Volume IV* (New York 1978), 83, published in a November Education for Socialists format. Hutter’s public appearances at SWP functions are mentioned in a letter from George Weissman to Wald, 13 February 1983.

directly addressing his homosexuality. I am not aware of any other Marxist endorsements of Maugham, whose writings were skewered a few years ago in an attention-grabbing essay by one-time Trotskyist Christopher Hitchens.<sup>53</sup>

In "W. Somerset Maugham and the Social Question" (1960), Bloch published a long defense of the artistic achievement of Maugham in the SWP's *International Socialist Review*. Bloch even characterizes Maugham's 1938 *The Summing Up* as "one of the 20th century's most admirable books of wisdom."<sup>54</sup> His argument is that the "personal philosophy" revealed there is "related to Marxist materialist thinking," and that Maugham's first work of fiction, *Liza of Lambeth* (1897), is "a pioneering one in the field of the modern proletarian novel." As a regular contributor to the same journal a dozen years later, I was so intrigued by the boldness of such claims that I initiated a correspondence to which Bloch responded with enthusiasm.

In 1960, Bloch's views on Maugham caused some SWP eyebrows to be raised. Duncan Ferguson was horrified, although Hansen defended Bloch on the grounds that his general method was dialectical materialist.<sup>55</sup> But more startling to readers of the *Militant*, *Fourth International*, and *International Socialist Review* throughout the previous decade was the tenor of his articles on American musical theater, then in its heyday, and Hollywood films.<sup>56</sup> Bloch was particularly taken with musical plays, some of which were being made into films that had evolved from old "musical comedies" of the US stage. In contrast to most on the Left, who considered almost anything from Broadway or Hollywood to be commercial fluff, Bloch saw these works as vital and original cultural achievements. According to George Weissman, editor of the *Militant*, there emerged for this reason a general anger against Bloch's "lousy movie reviews," and many SWP'ers who attended his classes at Mountain Spring Camp came precisely to express their objections. Bloch was taken aback and hurt by what he found to be a tendency to judge art by "political line."<sup>57</sup>

53. See: <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/2004/05/hitchens.htm>

54. Today this work is out of print and usually not considered among Maugham's significant works, except as autobiographical source material. See Trent Hutter, "W. Somerset Maugham and the Social Question," *International Socialist Review*, 21 (Summer 1960), online at: <https://epress.anu.edu.au/history/etol/newspape/isr/vol21/no03/hutter.html>

55. Joseph Hansen to Duncan Ferguson, 19 August 1956, Duncan Ferguson Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Ferguson was at one with Perle and Slobe in favoring avant-garde art as the "revolutionary" counterpart to Marxist politics; yet his own sculptures were classic and traditional.

56. In the same 19 August 1956 letter from Joseph Hansen to Duncan Ferguson, controversy about Hutter's reviews is cited. In a 27 October 1957 letter from Ferguson to Hansen, Hutter's political assessment of Maugham is described as "farcical."

57. Letter from George Weissman to Wald, 13 February 1983.

Yet he remained adamant in his writing: "The motion picture...is the art form of the masses of our time....Contempt for light entertainment is foolish."<sup>58</sup> Among the Hollywood productions that Bloch especially admired were George Cuckor's 1954 *A Star is Born*, with Judy Garland; Vincente Minnelli's 1951 *An American in Paris*, with Gene Kelly; and Gene Kelly's 1952 *Singing in the Rain*, featuring Kelley. He also esteemed a low budget independent film of 1953, *Little Fugitive*, about a child alone at Coney Island.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, Bloch wrote prolifically on Leon Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution*, William Faulkner's *A Fable* ("A Revolutionary Novel"), Soviet music, Gerhart Hauptman's plays (he was a supporter of homosexual and transgender rights in pre-Hitler Germany), and books and films about the Nazis.<sup>60</sup>

In 1983, in answer to my inquiry as to whether he had revised any of his earlier judgments, Bloch responded: "I still believe in most or nearly all of what I wrote in the Trent Hutter reviews; but I seem to remember that in one article I took a somewhat critical view of Cecil B. deMille's work; and this is something that was obviously based on insufficient knowledge; for a few years later I realized that he was a master of the monumental type of film epos, an artist and a man with deep religious convictions who wanted to be an educator through the motion picture."<sup>61</sup> Looking through Bloch's post-Trotskyist writings, from the mid-1960s until his death, one finds an obvious continuity despite the additional focus on Puerto Rico; many of the issues and themes characteristic of Trent Hutter are reiterated in new contexts with politics reconfigured from his Trotskyist years.<sup>62</sup>

As a semi-clandestine revolutionary in the 1950s, Bloch was a completely political person well-versed in Marxism, although he mainly wanted to write cultural articles. In these years, while collaborating with both the *International Socialist Review* and the *Militant*, he simultaneously published as "James Parker" for the Belgian Far Left paper *La Gauche*. His connections with the Fourth International date back to the immediate postwar era in Belgium when Bloch met Ernest Mandel (1923–95), another Jew born in Frankfurt, one whose Resistance activities had landed him in the Dora concentration camp

58. Trent Hutter, "The Workers' Stake in Bourgeois Culture: A Socialist Looks at Art," *Fourth International*, 17 (Winter 1956), 21–24; online at: <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/news-pape/fi/vol17/no01/hutter.html>

59. Trent Hutter, "The American Motion Picture Today: What Unions Can Do To Get Better Movies," *Fourth International*, 16 (Winter 1955), 10–14; online at: <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/fi/vol16/no01/hutter.html>

60. George Novack often edited these essays, but only stylistic changes – to de-Europeanize the use of pronouns and so forth – were made.

61. Letter from Peter Bloch to Wald, 17 August 1983.

62. This is particularly obvious in a 1983 essay called "The Unreliable Writer," where Bloch insists: "The writer who is worthy of our respect has to be a non-conformist." Peter Bloch, "The Unreliable Writer," *Unveiling Cuba* (November 1983), 8.

in Germany. According to research cited in the recent biography of Mandel, Bloch, upon his immigration to the United States, became the chief conduit of information between the swp and the International Secretariat of the Fourth International, the organization from which Cannon's followers had officially departed in 1953.<sup>63</sup> Although biographer Jan Willem Stutje refers to this role as an "open secret," it is one difficult to reconstruct as Bloch later decided to eliminate the entire Trotskyist phase of his life (about fifteen years) from the autobiographical materials he disseminated.<sup>64</sup> When providing information about Mandel for Stutje's biography in 2002, Bloch still insisted on protecting his identity by being cited as "Karl Manfred" – a minor character in Alfred Hitchcock's movie *Torn Curtain* (1966).<sup>65</sup>

At some point in the 1950s, Bloch began taking trips to Puerto Rico, on occasion with his mother, and he befriended a cousin of the Puerto Rican radical poet Julia de Burgos (1914–53). Spanish was one of the four languages in which he was fluent, and he placed a premium on his mother's "Spanish-Jewish" (a term he preferred to Sephardic) heritage.<sup>66</sup> One might wonder if his attraction was encouraged by his political connection with the International Secretariat, which, led by Michel Pablo (Michalis N. Raptis, 1911–86) and Mandel, became increasingly "Third Worldist" with a focus on North Africa and Latin America. By 1960, Bloch came to his own theory of Puerto Rican economic development, believing that a substantial transformation was underway and that it could no longer be considered a mere colony of the US.

According to Stutje's research, Bloch was quite favorably inclined toward the swp and anxious to assist in its smooth reunification with the United Secretariat. The main problem was the swp's tendency toward dogmatism and political sectarianism, especially evident in its polarizing attitude toward the writings of Isaac Deutscher. But Bloch maintained friendships with a circle of swpers with whom he felt at ease. These were chiefly with the editors Weissman and Hansen; party members who were aficionados of classical music, such as Art Preis (1911–64) and Ethel Preis (?–1966); and artists such as Laura Slobe.

What happened in 1961 is not entirely clear. When both the swp and the International Secretariat responded favorably to the first stages of the Cuban Revolution, Bloch encouraged reunification in his communications with Mandel. En route to a decisive meeting with Cannon in California in the summer of 1961 to discuss the implementation such a development, Mandel made a clandestine stopover in New York to be coached by Bloch, who paid his

63. See the review of Stutje by Wald: <http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/2383>

64. Bloch went so far as to insist that his decision to write for Trotskyist publications in the 1950s was based merely on whether they would give him a dignified platform, not due to any political allegiance.

65. Jan Willem Stutje, *Ernest Mandel: A Rebel's Dream Deferred* (London 2009), 104.

66. Bloch can be seen in a Spanish-language interview on Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4vsa2tz8K0>

expenses. Yet Bloch had in late 1960 submitted an essay to the *International Socialist Review* on Puerto Rico that was rejected, and a subsequent meeting with the swp leadership on the matter resulted in further estrangement.<sup>67</sup> In the spring of 1961 Bloch circulated a widely-discussed article in the swp internal bulletin, "Danger Signals in Cuba," arguing that Cuba had entered the stage of the dictatorship of the proletariat (i.e., had become "a workers state"), but was rapidly degenerating to Stalinism due to the lack of the working-class political democracy advocated by Marx and Lenin. Hansen rebutted Bloch by claiming that his arguments were essentially "lifted" from the "State Department," a formulation unlikely to promote a warm future relationship.<sup>68</sup> That seems to have ended all official contact with the swp, although Weissman arranged a brief reunion between Bloch and Mandel in New York in 1967.

Political pressure from society and history surely impinge on character and the intimate spaces of the self, and there are individualized ways in which a multifaceted person such as Bloch was affected by the atmosphere of the 1950s and 1960s. Bloch's post-Trotskyist evolution in political and cultural thinking was *sui generis*. Like his reviews of musicals, films, and novels, it withstands all pigeonholing, although one can find reverberations of shaping attitudes acquired during the Great Depression and World War II. Raised as a Jew in Germany, and from a distinguished medical family on his father's side, Bloch was drawn more to his mother's family's Spanish ancestry. As a student in the 1930s, in Germany and England, he had felt torn apart by the Spanish Civil War, characterizing his position as "not neutral but impartial." Disgusted by the violence on both sides, he experienced an attraction to the conservative cultural traditions of the Right, and the need for stability, but he also identified with the suffering of the poor.

During World War II, Bloch was drawn into the Resistance in Belgium, where his family was in hiding, and in Switzerland, to which he escaped under a pseudonym. But his politics were less internationalist than adamantly pro-Allies; he displayed a bust of Winston Churchill in his apartment and for the rest of his life expressed strong affection for the ideas of Charles de Gaulle.<sup>69</sup> Bloch did not jettison such earlier views when he was recruited to Trotskyism by Mandel, just as he did not turn explicitly anti-Marxist when he became militantly anti-Castro. Following his separation from the swp, he remade his past, claiming to have been only a journalist for European publications. He next launched a career in popular Spanish-language papers in New York, especially arts columns in *Nueva York Hispano*, *América Ilustrada*, and *Canales*. He also promoted concerts, poetry readings, and exhibits, and worked with

67. George Weissman to Wald, 13 February 1983.

68. Hansen, *Dynamics of the Cuban Revolution*, 122.

69. These and similar views are expressed in long letters from Peter Bloch to Wald, 17 August 1983 and 5 November 1983. A 1 October 1983 letter from Ernest Mandel to Wald confirms that Bloch had been pro-Ally.



radio and television. Privately he continued to admire Trotsky as a “political genius,” and he traveled to Germany to lecture in public schools on his holocaust experiences.

Then came an astonishing development in 1969: Bloch was awarded a Spanish Knighthood in the Order of Isabella the Catholic for his activity on behalf of Puerto Rican culture. After this he declared that he was “a friend of Spain” and “always shall be grateful to Franco....”<sup>70</sup> The statement is mind-boggling in light of the Spanish fascist’s record of brutality, including the deliberate execution of 20,000 supporters of the Republic after his victory. Yet somehow Bloch was not totally deradicalized. He maintained his opposition to the Cold War policy of the West and characterized the United States as an imperialist country. He was also an anti-Zionist who was opposed to Israeli policies. During the time we corresponded, his strongest political identification remained with European social democratic newspapers, where he felt he had the freedom to say what he wished.<sup>71</sup>

### The Non-Serial Serialist

THE POLITICAL RADICALIZATION of George Perle, a critical theorist of serialism (the method of composition associated with Schoenberg’s twelve-tone technique), was more conventional than that of Bloch. Born in Bayonne, New Jersey, of a Jewish immigrant family that was supportive of his cultural interests but financially insecure, Perle lived in Chicago until the mid-1920s. His socialist father had been a house painter by trade but in the 1930s the family ended up on farmland near Laporte, Indiana. Perle’s genius for music was apparent at age six or seven when his father obtained a piano for a niece arriving from abroad. Pearl heard her playing a composition by Chopin in F minor, “Trois Nouvelle Etudes.” It made sense to him and he then knew that he wanted to write music.<sup>72</sup> Soon he was commuting back to Chicago for lessons.

Perle started attending DePaul University at the height of the Great Depression and was radicalized by the time he received his degree in 1938. He next moved toward Trotskyism while obtaining a Masters of Music at the American Conservatory of Music. He joined the Chicago branch of the swp in 1942, the same year that he finished the degree. In these years Perle, still known as Perlman, was tall, wiry and slender, a darkly handsome man with strong-looking shoulders, high cheekbones, and an ascetic aura.<sup>73</sup>

70. Bloch to Wald, 17 August 1983.

71. Bloch to Wald, 5 November 1983.

72. George Perle, *Perle on Perle: The Composer Recalls his Life in Music in an Interview by Dennis Miller* (Englewood 1987), 6.

73. Letter from Jeanne Morgan to Wald, 15 July 1983. Perle legally changed his name in 1949.



The stages of Perle's musical development link to political moments in the late 1930s and after, although it would be simple-minded to claim that a growing attraction to Marxism and Trotskyism explains his art, which grew from an interaction of intuition and logic. It was in 1937, following a period of pessimism and disorientation, that Perle initially connected with he called "the revolutionary direction in 20th century music represented by the Viennese," and in 1938 he wrote his first atonal piece.<sup>74</sup> After 1939, with the onset of the war in Europe, he took his first lesson with refugee composer Ernst Krenek (1900–91) and realized that he was developing a consistent theory of diatonic music – a kind of non-serialist serialism.

In August 1940, the same month Trotsky was assassinated, Perle wrote three important piano pieces using the 12-tone row system, a groundbreaking departure from the diatonic scale. In 1941, on the cusp of joining the Trotskyists, he published his first scholarly essay on the theory of atonality. Three years later, in his political writing for the *swp*, he explained that his understanding of musical tones was originally made visible through the Marxist dialectic, although this claim did not appear in his academic publications (which he cited as evidence).<sup>75</sup>

Between August 1943 and February 1946, Perle served in the army as a chaplain's assistant, mostly overseas in Europe, the Philippines, and Japan. Relocating to New York City to join his wife, Laura Slobe, he used the G.I. Bill to start graduate work at New York University in Medieval and Renaissance Music Studies, enrolling in a PhD program. In the New York *swp*, he was not distinguished as a branch activist but participated in arranging fund-raising, sometimes by playing concerts with violinist Seymour Barab (b. 1921). On at least one occasion he wrote under the name "George Sanders" for the *Fourth International*.<sup>76</sup> Like Schoenberg, who arranged singing groups of workers, Perle established a chorus of *swp* members in New York, people with no particular musical education. After rehearsing and then performing traditional radical songs, such as "Drill, Ye Tarriers, Drill" (1888), Perle arranged to cut a record for use at party functions.<sup>77</sup> Beyond his friends in the *swp*, Perle participated in a diverse circle of artists and musicians who read Dwight Macdonald's *politics* magazine and who held sympathy for other radical organizations.

In 1949, Perle started teaching in at the University of Louisville, where he also composed, and in 1956 finished up his New York University doctorate. In April 1951, as his ties with the *swp* were loosening, he heard a transformative performance of Alban Berg's opera *Wozzeck* (1914–22) in a New York

74. Perle, *Perle on Perle*, 8.

75. See Sanders, "Another Answer to Comrade Loris [van Heijenoort]," 11–15.

76. George Sanders, "Joseph Stalin, Music Critic," *Fourth International*, 2 (March–April 1948), 56–7.

77. Letter from Jeanne Morgan to Wald, 15 July 1983.

Philharmonic concert directed by Dimitri Mitropoulos. By the late 1950s, Perle began to be recognized as the premier scholar of Berg, whom he eventually made the subject of a two-volume work. But his academic writing actually arose out of his composing – it just got published first. During the 1960s, Perle, teaching at the City University of New York's Queen's College, broke even further with the tradition of Schoenberg and the 12-tone method; in his view, it had become academic and he wished to remain avant-garde. In 1973 he produced what he considered to be his first mature work in post-diatonic music. In 1986 Perle was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his *Fourth Wind Quintet*, a masterpiece of symmetry, and also a MacArthur Fellowship.

In a September 1982 personal interview, Perle told me that the primary problem he faced in the SWP was the pressure he felt around proletarianization. There was no SWP policy obligating members to go into industry, and not everyone was asked, but the attitude of certain SWPers was that one would never be a full-fledged member without factory work.<sup>78</sup> After he accepted his teaching position in Kentucky, Perle decided to switch his status to that of sympathizer. Gradually he drifted away from the SWP and maintained contact only through his former wife, Laura, from whom he was legally divorced in 1952. Upon her death he completed one of his most noted works, "Quintet for Strings" (1957–58). Dedicated "In Memory of Laura Slobe," it was a composition for two violins, two violas, and a cello. The piece is remembered today for its repetition of a stark cry without any answer. In 1966, he also wrote a memorial composition for Noah Greenberg, a longtime follower of Trotskyist Max Shachtman, called "Songs of Praise and Lamentation."<sup>79</sup> As a New Left emerged, Perle participated in anti-war demonstrations and in 1980 voted for the independent presidential campaign of John Anderson. He also wrote political letters to the *New York Times*, using the pseudonym "Gregor Peele."<sup>80</sup>

Scholars unsympathetic to both Trotskyism and serialist innovations might see a parallel in their fates: two lost causes emerging in the 1920s and exhausted by the 1950s. In Perle's case, however, one could speculate that a version of Trotsky was artistically reincarnated as he theorized increasingly revolutionary breakthroughs in music to be passed on and understood only by a small circle of forward-looking people. His defense of the avant-garde in music as combining earlier stages resembles some of Trotsky's phrasing about "permanent revolution": "the revolution in the language of music embodied in the works of Schoenberg, Berg, and [Anton] Webern in the early

78. I reported on the interview in an 8 October 1982 letter to George Breitman; the purpose was to arrange a longer meeting in New York City, on which I failed to follow through. In her letter of 15 July 1983, Jeanne Morgan wrote of Perle: "He resisted the 'proletarianization policy' of the 40s and 50s and continued his career as a musician rather than going into a factory."

79. Greenberg is the subject of a scholarly book by James Gollin, *Pied Piper: The Many Lives of Noah Greenberg* (Hillsdale, New York 2001).

80. A 7 February 1971 letter is available on line at the *New York Times* archive.

years of this century was not merely a cultist self-centered tendency that could have no significance for musical culture in general. They solve the perennial problem of operatic form in a new and unique way, integrating characteristic self-contained pieces that recall the classical 'number' opera within an overall cyclic and recapitulative design whose unity and scale are comparable only to the most impressive achievements in literature."<sup>81</sup> Perle's student and close collaborator, Bartok scholar Elliott Antokoletz, recently observed: "Perle's entire creative development as composer and theorist, and his critical way of thinking, always impressed me as having deep associations with the Marxist principle of dialectical materialism."<sup>82</sup>

The political evolution of Bloch and Perle after their swp years was not merely an instance where the promise of epiphany gave way to disillusionment. Their cultural beliefs advanced in the 1940s and 1950s in association with revolutionary Marxist ideas and activism, each partaking of the other, with some vision of socialism persisting. But their relationships to the swp turned out to be uncomfortable; they could not find their way forward within it. Bloch was on the defensive for his open-minded views, and Perle concluded that his music (regarded, perhaps unfairly, as cerebral) was not what was wanted from him.<sup>83</sup> Later, in separating from the swp, the two men translated the intellectual and moral fervor of their radicalism more exclusively into the art world.

### Sophisticated Lady

PERLE'S FORMER WIFE, LAURA SLOBE, died suddenly in 1958 at age forty-nine. The swp's *Militant* immediately memorialized "Laura Gray" as "heroic" and "beloved," an accurate reflection of her stature as the staff artist. The swp's commemorative meeting for her closed with the playing of "The Workers Funeral March." In his tribute, swp leader Art Preis called Slobe "the greatest political and social cartoonist of our generation," and talked of her devotion in selling the party newspaper in all weather at plant gates.<sup>84</sup> Slobe's cartoons surely deserve scholarly attention; they are naturalistic and powerful, in the tradition of the *Masses'* Boardman Robinson, and warrant comparison to

81. George Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg, Volume One, Wozzeck* (Berkeley 1980), xiv.

82. E-mail from Elliot Antokoletz to Wald, 2 July 2012.

83. The question of cerebrality in Perle's music is debated in Leo Kraft, "The Music of George Perle," *The Musical Quarterly*, 57(July 1971), 444–465. A number of performances of Perle's work can be viewed and heard on Youtube: <http://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en-us&q=George+Perle+youtube&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>

84. See Art Preis, "Laura Gray – Socialist and Militant Artist," *Militant*, 20 January, 1958, 1–2. Four years earlier James P. Cannon wrote a tribute to Slobe as a cartoonist, reprinted in his *Notebook of an Agitator* (New York 1958), 334–37.



**Photograph of Laura Slobe at Mountain Spring Camp (early 1950s)**

From the Duncan Ferguson Papers assembled by Rod Holt.

artists such as Hugo Gellert and Robert Minor. Sometimes her rugged-looking male workers resembled men who she knew from political work.<sup>85</sup>

But Slobe herself never judged her cartoons to be serious art, and women in the SWP were fascinated by her for qualities beyond proletarian rectitude. Jeanne Morgan wrote an unpublished memoir of Slobe that began by recalling a 1945 discussion of younger women in the SWP about "Who is the most sophisticated woman in the Party?" The answer was Laura – for her look, manner, and style. With pale skin and light brown hair "in a corona of curls," she presented herself as a "gentle Bolshevik...giving no quarter to others' needs for a proletarian style and disguises." Of interest to Morgan was also Laura's rhinoplasty; the shape of her nose had been enhanced to produce "an exquisite long, straight, fine line profile" through plastic surgery.<sup>86</sup>

Born of a wealthy Jewish family in Pittsburgh, Slobe's mother, herself a painter, was recalled by one person as a terrible, dominating woman.<sup>87</sup> In the 1930s, the Slobe family lived on the near north side of Chicago in a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. A prodigy who entered the Art Institute of Chicago at age sixteen, Slobe began exhibiting two-dimensional paintings

85. Fortunately, Kent Worcester, an authority on cartoons, is currently researching a study of her work.

86. "Laura Gray," Jeanne Morgan, 15 July 1983.

87. Letter from George Weissman to Wald, 10 October 1981.



**Sculpture by Laura Slobe (name and date unknown)**

From the Duncan Ferguson Papers assembled by Rod Holt.

at age 19, then had a one person show at the Art Institute of Chicago and in several galleries. Her sparse and incisive style immediately brings to mind Paul Klee and Piet Mondrian. In the late 1930s she began showing the avant-garde sculpture for which she became better known; "Vanity," a 1935 carved plastic figure, was a much admired modern interpretation of a classic theme and can now be seen on-line.<sup>88</sup> The Institute still has a Laura Slobe Memorial Prize in Sculpture.

Slobe subsequently worked at the federally-funded Illinois WPA Sculpture Program from where she was "loaned" out to art centers in other states. This ended in October 1940, when she had to be removed from project roles due to a rule that eighteen months of continuous unemployment was the maximum. Nevertheless she continued holding exhibits in the Chicago area until 1944. By this time, Slobe was regarded as mostly a sculptor who also did some paintings. At first she was associated with the Artists Union, which had evolved from the pro-Communist John Reed Club. Then, through her association with

88. [http://www.museum.state.il.us/muslink/art/htmls/de\\_ms\\_slobe.html](http://www.museum.state.il.us/muslink/art/htmls/de_ms_slobe.html)

a circle of other avant-garde artists inclining toward Trotskyism, she met George Perle, six years her junior. They were married in 1940.

In 1942 the young couple joined the SWP in Chicago. Within a few weeks, Laura was assigned to assist with a fraction of workers in the auto industry, and began drawing cartoons for the shop paper. The branch organizer, Art Preis, recognized her talent at once and encouraged her to submit to the *Militant*. After a visit to New York in January 1944, her first cartoon appeared on March 4, and thereafter almost weekly. Eventually the number of cartoons totaled around 430, mostly treating subjects such as the War Labor Board, the No-Strike Pledge, the murder of Emmett Till, and unemployment. They would be reproduced in Trotskyist and labour publications in twenty countries.

Moving to New York while her husband was in the military, Slobe did increasingly less avant-garde art and sculpting while she held on-and-off jobs painting mannequins and creating window display art for department stores. Her career had received a demoralizing set-back when work of hers was destroyed during the closure of the WPA and a show of her paintings was lost to a fire. She lived on 12th Street at the time George returned, but the marriage was in trouble and she eventually took up residence in a one-bedroom apartment near 14th Street, with clippings, tear-sheets, and sketches fluttering on the white walls. For commercial reasons, she produced hydrocal castings of Siamese cat images to be sold on consignment in stores. She also made a noteworthy contribution to the SWP's Mountain Spring Camp by creative painting and decorating. She was reliable in her production of cartoons, even though the effort was grueling; she was usually up all night before the deadline and often submitted several versions from which the *Militant* editor would make a selection.<sup>89</sup> But all was compromised by her precarious health. At age twenty-two she had been stricken with tuberculosis, requiring bed rest for two years. In 1947 one of her lungs was removed. As she struggled through the Cold War years, the longing to return to her avant-garde art – “the grotesqueries that you can make real” – became a haunting apparition.<sup>90</sup> Then in early 1958 she was diagnosed with pneumonia that rapidly turned fatal.

Of her personal life, only sketchy information remains. In regard to the break-up of her marriage to Perle, all that Slobe would say was: “Just because you love somebody does not mean that you can live with them.”<sup>91</sup> Subsequently she had affairs with both women and men. For several years in the late 1940s and early 1950s she tried living with Duncan Ferguson, and also had heterosexual affairs with Frank Lovel (1913–98) and John Black (1921–2006).<sup>92</sup> Her

89. Letter from Jeanne Morgan to Wald, 15 July 1983.

90. Letter from Laura Slobe to George Perle, 3 January 1958.

91. Jeanne Morgan to Wald, 7 July 1983.

92. For a detailed study of Ferguson's life and art, see Wald, “Sculptor on the Left: Duncan Ferguson's Search for Wholeness.”



closest female friendship toward the end of her life was with Ethel Bloch (no relation to Peter Bloch, 1924–99), who joined the swp in 1943 at age nineteen. One year after Slobe's death, Ethel married a new member named Arthur Lobman (1924–2003), after which she was known as Ethel Lobman. Both remained in the swp until their deaths four decades later.

### Gender, Desire, Intimacy

FOR THOSE WHO SEE RADICALISM as an ongoing tradition, there remain huge gaps in our knowledge of personal lives. The biographical study of many postwar activists is partly an exercise in speculation because institutionalized forgetting has obscured research. In particular, the disappearance of cultural dissidents and sexual non-conformists from memory was induced by the needs of the dominant cultural optics (liberal, neo-conservative, post-modernist) as much as by the Left's fixation on political programs and idealized precursors. Too many of yesterday's maps have now outlived their usefulness, especially in their political coding. This is part of the reason why questions asked about sexual resistance to heteronormativity are so frequently linked to the recovery of new knowledge about inventive cultural work.

Gender, desire, and intimacy are just some of the pressing fresh categories essential for correcting "enforced forgetting" as one looks back on Bloch, Perle, Slobe, and others discussed in this essay. One method of challenging institutionalized memory loss about the Left is to raise queries about "bohemians" (sexual and cultural non-conformists) in unexpected places. The point is not to reveal any "secret histories," political or sexual, but to compel contemporary socialists to more fully consider the actuality of predecessor efforts. What is required of Marxism for the 21st century is a cultural anthropology of the Left, a recreation of the ambiguous texture of the free-form plots of lived radicalism and the sometimes-crooked paths of its politics and culture. If older frameworks continue to explain and therefore contain the history of the Left, the legacy of emancipatory socialist politics of sixty years ago is more likely to perish.

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