

# Oleksa Drachewych, *The Communist International, Anti-Imperialism and Racial Equality in British Dominions*

Gregory S. Kealey

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Kelliher's contribution to this volume, which widens and elaborates on the story of metropolitan gay and lesbian support (admittedly not necessarily far left) for the 1984 strike, recently depicted dramatically in the film, *Pride* (2014). Miners and Communists figure in two accounts of left-nationalist movements in Scotland and Wales by Daryl Leeworthy and Rory Scothorne and Ewan Gibbs.

*Waiting for Revolution* concludes with Lawrence Parker's "Understanding the Formation of the Communist Party of Britain," which readers should appreciate is an account of a split from the older, larger, and fractured Communist Party of Great Britain. Adhering to a version of the old CPGB *British Road to Socialism* program supposedly linked the Communist Party of Britain [CPB] to an established Communist base in the trade unions, but the new organization largely failed to secure much in the way of industrial support. At its founding conference in 1988, the breakaway body claimed a membership of roughly 1500, which placed it at approximately 15 per cent of the size of its counterpart, the mainstream Communist Party. By 2015, the CPB had atrophied to less than 1000 members, although it continued to retain a public presence through sustaining the long-time Communist publication, *Morning Star*. Clinging to Stalinist understandings of Party building and the virtues of both the defunct Soviet Union and the age-old traditions of the CPGB, the new CPB was destined to make a small contribution to the political world of the far left.

Parker's account of the CPB seems a fitting endnote to this book, outlining the recent history of a marginal group, an atavistic hanger-on of a disintegrating Stalinism that managed to avoid confronting Stalinism. The CPB awaits revolution without conforming to or confronting the revolutions in politics

that swirl around it and that constitute its own making. If we are to understand and appreciate the far left, we need writings on aspects of the history of dissenting communism that situate themselves differently than do most of the essays in this volume.

BRYAN D. PALMER  
Trent University

**Oleksa Drachewych, *The Communist International, Anti-Imperialism and Racial Equality in British Dominions* (London and New York: Routledge 2019)**

THIS MONOGRAPH BEGAN life as a McMaster PhD thesis. The author, currently at Western University, offers us a careful textual reading of the Communist International's (CI) shifting and developing positions on colonialism, imperialism, race, and ethnicity from its 1919 origins until its demise in 1943. He then analyzes these policies against the statements and behaviours of the Communist parties of Australia, Canada, and South Africa (CPA, CPC, and CPSA), respectively. His motive in doing so is to test the perennial question of national CPS' relationship to CI directives. Were national CPS simply subservient to the CI or did they operate with some degree of local autonomy? An old question obviously, but Drakewych's comparative methodology offers a fruitful strategy to pursue insights into a more subtle answer than much previous work.

The work's structure contains two parts: Part I contains two chapters providing an in-depth survey of the Comintern's evolving positions on first the national and colonial question and then on race and ethnicity. Part II provides three, somewhat parallel, case studies of the CPSA and "The Native Republic Thesis," the CPC and the national question, and

the CPA and "White Australia." The book then closes with a conclusion that draws out the comparisons of the three CPs and their relationship to the CI and a brief epilogue suggesting why such historical discussion of the communist experience is still relevant to contemporary struggles.

Part I, not surprisingly, consists of close analysis of CI thinking and how it changed over time both in terms of the influence of Soviet leaders, from Lenin to Stalin, but also with shifting international circumstances such as the rise of Fascism. The initial CI congresses, especially the First and Second, promoted strong anti-imperialist positions and significant commitment to colonial liberation. The Third and Fourth saw some modification of these themes and began to differentiate types of colonies in terms of different stages of capitalist development but post Lenin the focus drifted with some notable individual exceptions such as Willi Munzenburg and M.N. Roy. With the Sixth Congress and the initiation of the Third Period local CPs were left to figure out where they fit into the new stage of struggle, although Australia and Canada were slotted into the category of "secondary imperialist powers," a classification which caused considerable turmoil in the CPC as it tried to define Canada's position in the capitalist world. The demise of the Third Period at the Seventh Congress and the turn to the Popular Front to emphasize anti-Fascist struggles led to a Eurocentrism that de-emphasized anti-imperialist and colonial struggles.

The second chapter of Part I outlines the similar shifts in CI policy on fighting racial oppression. Here the dominance of the CPUSA and its African-American leaders triumphed at the Sixth Congress in "The Native Republic Thesis," which prescribed national self-determination for African-Americans in the USA and for Africans in South Africa. Here,

again the turn to the Popular Front at the Seventh Congress led to a de-emphasis on these struggles. In addition to the race question, the CI also struggled with its position on foreign workers in capitalist countries. This issue was of great significance in Canada where the CPC membership was dominated by its foreign-language affiliates, especially the Finnish, Ukrainian, and Jewish sections. The early Third Period effort to force Bolshevization and to abolish the language groups led to significant battles in the CPC. In the Canadian context there was the additional problem of the role of French Canadians. Finally, there was also the issue in the settler Dominions of indigenous peoples. Here the CI proved incapable of deploying any consistent strategy. The Native Republic Thesis provided guidance only in the South African case. It was not applied to the indigenous peoples of South or North America, nor Australia and New Zealand. This lacuna left room for the CPA to initiate a domestic progressive strategy.

The two chapters of Part I provide the test ground for the comparative case studies of Part II. In a review of this length there is inadequate space to provide a full treatment of each of the three cases. Briefly, in the South African case resistance by CPSA leaders to the Native Republic Thesis led to heavy-handed CI intervention and the expulsion of many of the Party's early leaders. In turn this led to the near destruction of the Party which only began to recover after the turn to the Pop Front. Drachewych attributes the crucial importance of the CPUSA and its African-American leaders to the CI's intransigence in the South African case. The Native Republic Thesis was too important to allow any dissent.

The Australian case study is almost diametrically opposed. There a relatively benign CI allowed some weak questioning of "the second-tier

imperialist power” designation until the stronger Third Period opposition to White Australia allowed the CPA to develop innovative positions on the oppression of Aboriginals, South Pacific Islanders, and the populations of Papua-New Guinea. Such campaigns, however, never applied the Native Republic Thesis. The Pop Front Period allowed more work of this kind, including a “New Deal for Aboriginals.” Drachewych enthusiastically endorses the relative creativity of the CPA and holds it out as his strongest evidence of the CI not always demanding blind compliance.

The case study of the CPC falls between the others. It should also be added that the archival and other source material brought to this chapter go beyond that available to the author for his other cases. In any case the chapter highlights major CI impatience with the CPC and its leaders on a number of issues including the Party’s federated structure which recognized the importance of the foreign language groups, an issue eventually resolved by direct CI intervention but ironically in favour of the language federations. On the major issue of Canada’s standing in the world capitalist system, however, the CI did not back down. Stewart Smith, a precocious Lenin School graduate, in 1925 with support from Maurice Spector (later expelled) and Tim Buck, developed a position contradictory to the Fourth Congress line that Canada was a “second-tier imperialist,” and instead called for an independent Canada. In the aftermath of the Sixth Congress’ reiteration of Canada’s second-tier imperialist status the CI denounced the CPC’s refusal to comply as “a social democratic rightest deviation”! Again compliance was not forthcoming and Buck left for Moscow. A renewed CI affirmation that Canada was a “secondary imperialist power” and a further condemnation of the CPC position as a “serious” right deviation

followed. In light of this and of Buck’s personal warnings from Moscow, Smith moved a “repudiation” of previous CPC error. Drachewych asks why were Buck and Smith not removed from leadership positions as had been the case for the CPA leaders who failed to comply to CI directives. His answer that the CI simply attached less importance to this issue than to the Native Republic Thesis is not totally satisfying. The subsequent highly publicized Canadian state repression of the CPC leadership, which ironically endowed Tim Buck with martyr-like stature, may also have contributed to this outcome. Ironically, the issue reasserted itself when the CPC was forced underground after the Nazi-Soviet Pact. While Buck was in hiding in New York, the Smith-led CPC revived the latter’s independent socialist Canada line and combined it with support for self-determination for Québec, with the backing of Stanley Ryerson. Both these positions ran contrary to CI thinking and in 1941 the CI endorsed the embattled Buck leadership which had denounced Smith. After Buck’s return to Toronto after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, the CPC adjusted to the new realities of full support for the renewed war against fascism. In contrast to the CPA, the CPC failed to develop any significant positions on Canada’s First Nations until after World War II.

In his conclusion, Drachewych argues that, while it is incorrect to speak of a rigid CI line on national, colonial, and racial questions, there is a discernible drift over time from the free debate of Lenin’s time to Stalin’s CI which was “more inflexible in tactics and ideology.” He also reiterates his position that the CI’s vigorous interventions in South Africa derived from the importance of the Native Republic Thesis. His overall emphasis based on his case studies is that local conditions do indeed matter. He also concludes, somewhat

surprisingly, that “by examining the actions of individuals ... we can better understand how different approaches to international communism led to variants in party approaches to similar issues.” (156) I say surprisingly because my major critique of this innovative and useful work is that it is too distant from the men and women who composed the CPA, CPC, and CPSA. We hear much of the CI and of Party leaders but almost nothing of Party members and activists. Perhaps in further work the author will explore the relationship of base and leadership in a fashion similar to his dissection of national parties and the CI.

GREGORY S. KEALEY

University of New Brunswick

**Sherry Lee Linkon, *The Half-Life of Deindustrialization: Working Class Writing about Economic Restructuring* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2018)**

LIKE MANY SCHOLARS of deindustrialization and the working class in contemporary Europe and North America, Sherry Lee Linkon finds the recent upsurge of public interest in her work “at once affirming and frustrating.” (xv–xvi) Brexit, European populism, and the election of Donald Trump may have generated thousands of “what’s wrong with the working class” newspaper articles, but there is still a fundamental lack of understanding of how deindustrialization has reshaped and compounded the injuries of class. Her latest monograph, *The Half-Life of Deindustrialization*, is a powerful report to those who argue that working class people in deindustrialized communities should “just get over it” (3) and move on with their lives, and it is exactly the book we need right now to help understand the cultural and political fractures of this new gilded age.

Linkon does a wonderful job of weaving together what are basically short literary analyses of dozens of poems, essays, novels, blogs, memoirs, films, which she argues constitute a distinct genre she entitles “deindustrialization literature.” (15) Her concept of a “half-life” of deindustrialization is a powerful and evocative one that captures the extended, persistent effects of industrial decline on culture and community. E.P. Thompson famously demonstrated how pre-industrial modes of organization and structures of feeling lived on well into the industrial age; likewise the cultural products of the industrial age and the trauma wrought by its rapid decline will continue to shape Western societies for decades to come. Much of the literature studied by Linkon was actually written by the children and grandchildren of industrial workers and focuses on how they navigate a landscape of ruin, casualized service labour, and the legacies of class solidarity that provide hope for change but seem inapplicable to present circumstances.

In her first chapter, Linkon focuses on work, the memory of work, and the sets of conflicting emotions that work often generates in the context of industrial decline and capital flight. The accusation that deindustrialized communities are trapped by a “simple nostalgia” (27) for the past is robustly refuted. She instead identifies a “reflective nostalgia” (35) that combines feelings of longing and attachment with critical thinking and a nuanced understanding of one’s own exploitation. However, turning this ‘reflective nostalgia’ into active resistance can prove challenging. For dock workers in Baltimore in the hit HBO series *The Wire* or low-paid service workers in suburban Detroit in Dean Bakopoulos’ *Please Don’t Come Back from the Moon* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2005), the class struggles and “good work” of the past provides an inspiration for the next generation, but not