

II: A COMMENT

THE EDITORS

BEFORE commenting on Howard Fast's article we should perhaps first say from what standpoint we view it. Obviously we are in no position to speak in the name, nor even in behalf of the Communist Party. But as editors of our country's only Left cultural periodical what Mr. Fast says concerns us deeply. He says it at a time when the socialist-oriented forces in the United States are beset with many baffling problems and their confusion—his document is an example—is very great; yet when the need to achieve some sort of working co-operation, if not unity, is apparent to almost all. It is within that larger context, communist and non-communist, that his opinion falls, and it is one we believe he will eventually relinquish.

Consider the manner of his reasoning. He says that he is protesting the course of happenings in the communist world, and that the Communist Party of the United States is compromised by events which are mostly beyond its control. How compromised? By matters of which its members could not know, by acts which they do not condone and in fact condemn? If a friend passes a bad check one may be "compromised," but only through guilt by association, to which Howard Fast does not subscribe. Yet so much of his article is devoted to Stalin and Khrushchev that one might think he was resigning from a party to which he never belonged: the Soviet Communist Party.

The party which he actually *did* leave, the American Communist Party, is in the midst of perhaps its greatest crisis. It has suffered and still suffers the continuous assault of the most powerful ruling class in all history. This alone is a source of disorientation for a small party. Internally, over and over it has been crippled by the rigidity and a dozen other evils of narrowness which Mr. Fast mentions. Yet if many left for those reasons, many stayed despite them, on grounds that seemed to them firmer and more justifiable; and we are not speaking of blind loyalty. Among them are veterans of great strike struggles and drives to organize the workers and farmers of our country, fighters for true Negro freedom and civil liberty, defenders of the abused and the victims of injustice,

laborers in the supreme cause of peace. Can one really despair of such people at a moment when they are trying to overcome faults of which most are conscious in varying degrees? And suppose their success is not unequivocal, and lots are still caught in the flypaper of phrases, or bear dogma like bags of cement on their backs? Should not one have as much patience for them as they must have to solve their immensely intricate problems? Howard Fast is an impetuous man, yet it took him a long time to arrive at his resignation. But organization is easily as painful as resignation and more wearisome; a multitude of minds is more complex than one. Therefore, we beg him not to settle back in his disenchantment if things do not turn out for the best so rapidly. Democracy brews surely but slowly in the ferment of rank-and-file persuasion.

LET US turn for a moment to Mr. Fast's reaction to the Khrushchev revelations and subsequent developments in the socialist world. As he knows from our editorial statements in past issues, we have no desire whatever to scabble excuses for crimes committed by anyone. Nor are we impressed by semantic victories whereby crimes become "mistakes." A man who kills his wife cannot plead that he had neglected to study the woman question. Neither do we accept the argument that anti-Semitism in the form of anecdotes about Jews is different and less reprehensible than white chauvinism in the shape of jokes about Negroes, and that anyone who concerns himself unduly with the matter must be a Jewish nationalist. While it is true that Eastern Europe, Czarist Russia included, had a long history of anti-Semitism, one would think that the Soviet Communist Party leaders would have been particularly careful to wipe out every trace of prejudice in themselves and have understood better their historic role in effecting a qualitative change in that as well as other oppressive traditions. In any case, discrimination against national groups and cultures was not confined to the Jews. (Some people, not we, seem to get a curious consolation from that.)

Yet Howard Fast must be aware of a tragic contradiction of which he does not speak in his piece. When the Nazi army began its invasion of eastern Poland, hundreds of thousands of Jews were removed from there and White Russia to save them from the special dangers which threatened them. And this was done on the orders of the same leadership which was later culpable of the repression of Yiddish culture and responsible for the death of its major representatives.

(At this point we cannot resist the introduction of an ironic note. The January issue of the magazine *Liberation*, an independent monthly,

contains an impassioned article by an Israeli citizen accusing his government of being a tool that *seeks* to be used by wicked hands. The author of the article, M. Stein, is identified as a Tel Aviv attorney who "purchased a printing plant in order to publish a Yiddish newspaper. When the Israeli government banned his paper, he went to court and invoked an old English law against the suppression of newspapers. The government did not test the law but confiscated the paper every day until Stein had to give up publication." Thought provoking to say the least).

We have commented previously, in individual articles as well as in editorial statements, on the inhibition of creative thinking in Soviet ideology, art and science during the so-called Stalin Era, and have also described a similar situation which prevailed on the Left in this country. We share Mr. Fast's opinion of its harmful effects on books, paintings, music, scientific research and Marxist thought, as well as on the characters of those engaged in these pursuits. However, recent stories such as those of Harrison Salisbury in the *New York Times* and certain novels we have received within the last few weeks, incline us to believe that the ice is breaking. What these books reveal is not pretty; but is not that what Mr. Fast is listening for: honest voices in place of self-serving and silence? If Ehrenburg cannot satisfy him, perhaps the younger men will. As for the American Communist Party's cultural milieu, there is much evidence that its artists and scholars are determined that things should not go on as they once did. This sentiment seems almost unanimous among them.

Mr. Fast reproaches the Soviet leaders for not yet having transformed their legal system so that certain aspects of Anglo-Saxon law or their equivalents would now be incorporated into it. We are not competent to discuss this. We can only say that, from the little material available to us in English, it appears that while a number of significant steps toward the democratization and humanization of legal processes have been taken since the death of Stalin, the specific features which are sine qua non for him have not been adopted. These features are immensely precious to us; it is difficult for us to understand why they should not be transposed bodily to any country whose aim is the achievement of full democracy; but perhaps the question requires more study than Mr. Fast has given it. Everyone sometimes runs into facts that give his indignation pause.

Mr. Fast's anger sometimes overwhelms his judgment. In his charge he expresses no awareness of the increased international tension which

the American State Department has provoked by its ill-disguised intervention in the affairs of the New Democracies. He does not consider that one of the aims of such interference is to distract the governments of the socialist countries from the solution of their internal problems and from making the changes which they themselves assert they want to accomplish. (This does not mean that we deny that preposterous errors, inexcusable repression, and terrible crimes were of the greatest consequence in precipitating the recent Hungarian events. Nevertheless, as severe a critic of the action of the Soviet army as G. D. H. Cole, the British historian and socialist theoretician, recognizes that "the Russians had a difficult choice to make" for he is "not able to believe that, had they stood aside, the Hungarian people would have been in a position freely and democratically to decide their own destiny."*) Under such external pressures as the socialist countries have suffered since the XXth Congress it is not always possible, with the best of will, to erase long-ingrained injurious practices by a stroke of the pen, or to alter a legal system by "only a decision of the leadership." That in certain circumstances abstract morality gives way to extreme emergency is not just some perverse Leninist concoction; it is a fact in war and other situations in which individuals, as well as nations find themselves imperiled. But who is the foe of morality in the present case: the embattled parties of the socialist world or the lofty-minded Central Intelligence Agency which expends a billion dollars a year more or less for the avowed purpose of destroying socialism?

In his dissatisfaction with the nature and speed of Soviet reforms, Mr. Fast shows far less sympathy and understanding than not only Professor Cole but even Isaac Deutscher, author of a critically hostile political biography of Stalin, and surely no friend of the present Soviet leadership. Writing on the course of Soviet democratization in the anti-Communist cultural journal, *Partisan Review*, Deutscher estimates that the break with the past "is now felt in every aspect of Soviet activity and thought: in domestic and foreign policies, in education, in philosophical writing, in historical research, and, indeed, in the whole atmosphere of Soviet life. The scale and range of the changes taking place indicate that what we are witnessing is a many-sided, organic, and at times convulsive, upheaval in the existence of a huge segment of humanity."

Moreover, unlike Mr. Fast for whom all problems are dominantly and often exclusively moral, Deutscher presents the material evidence

* *The New Statesman and Nation*, January 12, 1957.

of democratic expansion (for example, the introduction of a new wage system, the condemnation of the "progressive piece rate," and the abolition of all fees for education, a step no nation of the "free" world has so far taken). He also names the social and economic factors impeding the process of democratization: the relative inadequacy of productive forces, the relative scarcity of consumer goods ("the decisive *objective* factor which sets limits to egalitarianism and democratic reform"). His patience is also instructive. Describing the present phase of reform as transitional, he remarks: "The present degree of liberalization is probably just sufficient to allow some scope for new processes of political thought and opinion-formation to develop in the intelligentsia and the working class. By their nature these are molecular processes, which require time to mature. But once they have matured they are certain to transform profoundly the whole moral and political climate of Communism, and to transform it in a spirit of socialist democracy." On this question, Howard Fast is less thoughtful than Isaac Deutscher.

Mr. Fast believes that socialist democracy can no longer flourish under the aegis of the Communist Parties who have led one-third of the world's people to socialism. He attributes this inability to their structure and historical development. He pictures a kind of dialectical process by which the people, say of the Soviet Union, having saved mankind from the horrors of fascism (at the cost of countless lives) and having reached an extraordinarily high stage of cultural and spiritual development, will find unbearable the contradiction between communist rule and society at large—even though this rule guided them to victory and put them on the road to happiness. As Mr. Fast depicts it, this contradiction verges on the catastrophic.

Now, that contradictions exist is no surprise to Marxists; only a classless society will abolish or reduce them to relative insignificance (for them to be replaced by other contradictions we cannot foresee; such is the dialectics of all life). But it is not at all inevitable that they reach a critical point, any more than that the strains of normal family life must always be resolved by divorce. What happened in the Soviet Union under Stalin and in Hungary under Rakosi has not occurred in China, and every sign there points to a successful and infinitely less painful resolution of the specific problems of socialist rule. (In passing, while through ignorance of the Russian language, we are unable to judge what present-day Soviet ethical thinking is like, we know from translations how much the Chinese Communists are absorbed by questions of human conduct, principle, motive, relations between people, the control of arbitrary

leadership, bureaucratic habits, and the like.) Or are the Chinese not Communists? And what of the Poles whom Mr. Fast praises because they "so gallantly went on their way to democratic socialism"? Is theirs a Communist Party or not? He cannot have it both ways, so that those Parties which have disappointed his moral expectations are Communist and those which meet them have ceased to be.

What has escaped Mr. Fast is that the contradictions he sees as inherent and destructive in all relations between the Communist Parties and the people have appeared, not as inherent, but rather in a fresh and positive form, in the internal life of various Parties and in the course of their fraternal contacts as independent organizations. The enemies of socialism may be pleased and its friends dismayed by the sharpness of debate and the degree of personal feeling involved. But these are no more acute than the disputes within the Abolitionist Movement in our own country, which constituted the method by which its essential program and tactics were forged.

In this respect we want to refer to an excerpt from Palmiro Togliatti's report to the Eighth Congress of the Communist Party of Italy.* (The full report bears the significant title, "The Italian Road to Socialism.")

Togliatti criticizes the Soviet Communists for not investigating deeply nor exposing the origin and conditions under which the errors and crimes they denounced had been committed. He views the "dramatic posthumous signaling of the aberrations in the character of, and the wrong done by, a leader" as avoiding a clear obligation: to analyze the causes of the notorious distortions of Communist principle in order to decide how best to end them and prevent their recurrence. He notes that the failure to complete this task has done damage to the construction of socialist society and "even greater damage when the passage was being made from the construction and existence of socialism in one country alone to the existence of a socialist world made up of a system of states." Among other effects, it encouraged mirror imitation of Soviet solutions, and prevented a distinction being made between what is basic and "universal" (as the Chinese put it) in the Soviet experience and what is the job of each socialist country to solve for itself. Further, it often bred incredible mental calcification. One instance, cited by Togliatti, was the repression by the Rakosi government of the national holiday celebrating the 1848 revolution.

We believe this to be a fundamental and long-awaited criticism, and do not admit to hindsight in appreciating its urgency. In May, 1956, the editors called for such further explanation as Togliatti outlines. We

said then: "The desire for an answer cannot be stifled, and therefore the accounting must come from those who are best able to give it. It must come for the sake of the prestige of the only movement in the world which has as its aim the liberation of all mankind.

"The cry for such an accounting," we said and repeat, "is not just a concoction of the enemies of socialism. It is the wish of those who yearn for the advent of socialism. It must be satisfied, for otherwise millions will be tugged at by doubts that will cast shadows even over the greatest achievements of socialism in the coming years." Recent events, and the disorientation of the intellectuals and many others of good will by them, have reinforced our conviction.

At the same time, we do not accept Howard Fast's picture of these happenings as a debacle. If they have destroyed any illusion of imperialism's reluctance to profit from defects and crises in the socialist world, they have also driven an intellectual opening-wedge into questions which most Communists once considered settled for good and for all. Togliatti's report, which we cannot begin to describe here; the Chinese experience; the developments in Poland; Kardelj's remarks on the relation of social to individual incentives, all these are marks of a new approach. On the one hand, we watch the colonial peoples take lessons in equality under the guns and bombs of the "free world." On the other, we hear the first speakers in a great debate to determine how international solidarity shall be tempered and strengthened by deference to national interests. As for the members of the Communist Party here, they tell us that they hope the old rubber stamp is worn out and they do not want it repaired. Discipline must be the product of the mutual respect of persons. One may disagree with such people; but they are not compromised. So we are not convinced by Mr. Fast's argument.

In the foregoing remarks we have outlined our disagreement with Howard Fast. We regret that much of our argument dealt with questions only secondarily related to the American scene, but here we had no choice, since those were the terms in which he defined the reason for his defection from the Communist Party.

So the reader may well ask why we consider his statement a disservice not simply to the Communist Party, not just to the cause of socialism, but to the American progressive movement as a whole? Briefly then, it is our opinion that the Communist Party has just begun its most difficult and painful task: the review of its past and present role in American life, its relations to the working class and to the people in general.

* *Political Affairs*, February, 1957.

If the reader will examine some of the published resolutions adopted by its recent National Convention, he will find a recognition of the Communists' need once and for all to place common interests above doctrinal differences in their contacts with every individual and organization—working class, farmer, Negro, foreign-born, and the like—seeking the betterment of life in this country and peace in the world at large. A need not merely to subordinate differences, but genuinely to immerse themselves in common tasks and to identify themselves with the outlook of others even when that view is not theirs. If Mr. Fast says: "I'll keep my fingers crossed," who can deny him the right? The Communist Party has made many, many mistakes. But it also has a noble past of devotion and struggle, as Mr. Fast himself admits, else why did he join it? He says he was no one's dupe.

We know that no political party can rest on the laurels it has gathered, but must justify itself by its future. Yet at this time, when the development of American capitalism presents the progressive movement with such enormous and devious challenges, can that movement afford to ignore any group which offers its manifold experiences and best insights to the good fight? It needs everyone and every gathering of men and women to wage it. And if the Communist Party is such a group, then the ranks should be opened for it.

Mr. Fast may say that he does not deny the American Communist Party the right to participate in anything it pleases. But he does question its worthiness of his adherence to it in such a manner as to cast doubt on its democratic ideals, and to encourage the factional belief that its existence is harmful to the progressive cause. With all respect to him, we think such a view unwarranted and its effect deterrent to a desperately needed unity. And in all friendliness, we urge him to reconsider it. If on the other hand we have read into his statement a conclusion which is not latent there, we shall be more than happy to withdraw it.

A LAST word to friends on both sides of our argument—Mr. Fast's and ours. Let them read his ending carefully and hear the note of solidarity it sounds. For our part we are not inclined suddenly to regard him as one sees a photographic negative where the bright spots are darkened and the round parts hollowed out. Nor do we think that the differences between him and his former comrades, sharp as they are, need be exacerbated so that a hostile chasm lies between them. In this difficult

time, when a "hundred schools contend" and none can prevail, it is not so much what a man has come to doubt as what he fights for that should determine our feelings about him. Once the contenders can be convinced how much they *do* have in common and how precious it is, the bridge can be rebuilt sooner than they may imagine.

Note to Readers

We are proud to welcome three more writers to our Board of Contributors. One is a former member of the Board, Meridel Le Sueur. The others are Jesús Colón, whose "Puerto Rican in New York" appeared in our February issue, and Jack Beeching, the British poet and novelist, also one of our contributors in the recent past.