

Renewing the Third Camp legacy

Peter Drucker's book "Max Shachtman and His Left" has provoked considerable discussion in *Workers' Liberty* over the past year. Barry Finger's review ("Max Shachtman and his left", April 1995) concluded that Drucker "merits the gratitude of every thinking socialist" for his "panoramic review centred on the career of Max Shachtman." Ernest Haberkern more recently subjected the biography to a comprehensive critique ("The left and Max Shachtman", October 1995, and "Post-Trotsky Trotskyism", January 1996). In a response, Drucker pleads for a Third Camp socialism with room for theoretical pluralism and open to a changing world.

MANY of the issues that Haberkern has raised in his criticisms of *Max Shachtman and His Left* are of major importance. There are disagreements between us about the theory of bureaucratic collectivism, Workers' Party [WP] history and more. But none of these disagreements is as important as the different ways in which he and I explain and discuss differences of opinion among revolutionary socialists.

For Haberkern, the theory of bureaucratic collectivism, as developed by Joseph Carter, "was not one contribution of the Third Camp tendency, it was the theoretical basis of the politics that defined that tendency", and it is still the basis of democratic, revolutionary socialism. This is why "every other tendency on the left" — all those who dissented from the theory — "abandoned the fight not only for trade union rights but for democratic rights in general" during the Second World War, and why other tendencies remain suspect today. An author (like me) whose account of the theory differs from Haberkern's interpretation must at best be "confused." A more likely explanation is "political hostility to the politics of the Third Camp" (even if I never make this "explicit"). The ultimate cause must be "demoralisation and disorganisation of the working class", which supposedly leads dissenters (including me) to be "haunted by the fear... that the working class has no political future."

The most striking thing about this method

of analysis and argument, coming from a Third Camp socialist, is how closely it resembles the method used by James P Cannon and his allies against the SWP minority in 1939-40. Then too the orthodox, majority position was portrayed as the only legitimate working-class position, and all alternative analyses or even doubts were attributed to demoralisation and the pressure of alien class forces. On this basis Trotsky and Cannon confidently predicted that Shachtman and his allies would support US imperialism in the coming world war. As Haberkern and *Workers' Liberty* readers know, the prediction was groundless. Yet Haberkern has no hesitation in employing this same tried-and-tested approach in a discussion half a century later among Third Camp socialists.

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My starting point in this discussion is different. The number of avowed democratic, revolutionary socialists in the world at this moment in history is unfortunately small. We are outnumbered by the champions of "the free market": the class interests represented by their ideology are all too clear. The people running the Chinese and North Korean governments still claim allegiance to Marxism, but it is doubtful whether they fool even themselves. Even within the workers' movement in capitalist countries, labour, social-democratic and ex-Communist Party leaders — decreasingly linked to trade-union bureaucracies, increasingly linked to bourgeois state apparatuses — almost always shy away nowadays from the idea of a socialist transformation of society, focussing instead on the impractical project of giving capitalism some kind of social face. In this situation, I incline strongly to believe that those few thousand people who say they are democratic, revolutionary, working-class socialists are in fact democratic, revolutionary, working-class socialists.

Among these socialists there are different traditions and standpoints. Lack of faith in the working class does not strike me as a necessary or convincing explanation for this diversity. The working class itself is diverse, and changing rapidly as capitalism changes. It lives in countries with different economies, political structures and histories. Finally, anyone who tries to understand the world as a Marxist has to grapple with an incredible mass of data, which no single individual or group

is capable of mastering alone. Differences of emphasis and interpretation are therefore inevitable and in fact indispensable. The only way to arrive at an accurate Marxist understanding of the world is through dialogue between people with opposing standpoints, who have to try to listen and learn from one another.

This is how I would like to discuss the differences I have with comrade Haberkern. The most important points he raises are: Leninism; the theory of bureaucratic collectivism; revolutionary strategy; defeatism; and Stalinism.

Leninism

HABERKERN accuses me of being an apologist for "ersatz 'Leninism'", and concealing the fact that "rejection of ersatz 'Leninism'" was part of the [Third Camp] tendency's politics from the beginning." He speculates that I am probably "incapable of conceiving of an organisation that is democratic and revolutionary." (He takes a startling logical leap by reasoning that because the book talks about "Max Shachtman's left", it implies that the WP was in the grip of some kind of "leadership cult." Presumably the next time someone mentions "Ernie Haberkern's neighbourhood in Berkeley" he will rush to defend himself against this accusation of authoritarian rule.) Even Barry Finger's otherwise generous review speaks of my "adherence to the Cannonite tradition."

In fact *Max Shachtman and His Left* describes at length the limitations on democracy in the Trotskyist organisations led by Cannon up until 1940, and contrasts with the open, democratic, free-wheeling and critical spirit of the Workers' Party in 1940-49 (pp56-58, 116-20, 126-31, 176-79). Not only can I conceive of an organisation that is democratic and revolutionary, I describe the WP as just such an organisation. I have spent my own political life entirely in democratic organisations: most recently in the US in the regrouped revolutionary socialist organisation Solidarity, and now in the Dutch section of the Fourth International. (Before *Workers' Liberty* readers conclude that this group and my outlook are therefore "Cannonite", they should remember a WP leader's comment that "the benevolent despotism exercised by Cannon does not find its counterpart" in the FI's European sections (p210).

Haberkern accuses me of ignoring realities that I describe at length, but he ignores evidence that contradicts his own interpretation. Contrary to Haberkern's argument, the WP made a distinction between "ersatz Leninism" and its own, critical, anti-authoritarian Leninism; it tried to learn from the best traditions of the Bolshevik Party in 1905 and 1917 by building a "centralized Marxist organisation in which the widest and freest discussion is not only 'tolerated' but encouraged" (p179). My experience in Solidarity in the US has convinced me that this kind of organisation can be built jointly by people who see themselves

as "Leninists" and people who see themselves as "non-Leninists", as long as they all agree that free-ranging, critical discussion and collectively decided practical activity are both essential. Much as some on the left make a fetish of some abstract "Leninist" organisational model, Haberkern and others devote considerable energy to denouncing "ersatz 'Leninism'." To me actually building democratic, revolutionary organisations is more important than arguing over labels.

Bureaucratic collectivism

HABERKERN says that I am "confused" about the differences between the theory of bureaucratic collectivism, as developed by Carter, and Shachtman's theory in the late 1930s and 1940s. In fact *Max Shachtman and His Left* analyses the debates between Carter and Shachtman at length (pp89-91, 131-138). The book's account coincides with Haberkern's on several points: that Carter was the first to develop the theory of bureaucratic collectivism, in 1938; that Shachtman disagreed with Carter's theory strongly for several years, because he maintained (unlike Carter) that the USSR's collectivised property forms (as distinct from its bureaucratic property relations) were historically progressive; and that by the end of the 1940s Shachtman gave up his disagreements and came round to Carter's point of view (without ever clearly announcing or explaining his changed views). On the other hand, the book mentions some other facts that Haberkern avoids dealing with.

The Workers' Party debated Carter's and Shachtman's rival theories of bureaucratic collectivism, democratically, openly, and for many months in 1940-41. (Except in the first few weeks of this debate, contrary to what Haberkern says, Shachtman like Carter called the USSR "bureaucratic collectivist", while saying that his agreement with Carter was merely "terminological" (p142, n73).) At the same time the WP also debated the theories of degenerated workers' states and state capitalism, since they too had supporters in the group. The outcome of this four-cornered debate was a convention decision that endorsed Shachtman's theory, not Carter's. What's more, the debate came up again tangentially at the 1946 WP convention, where Shachtman said: "The differences that we had I have to this day" (p167). There once more the convention backed Shachtman's position and voted down Carter's.

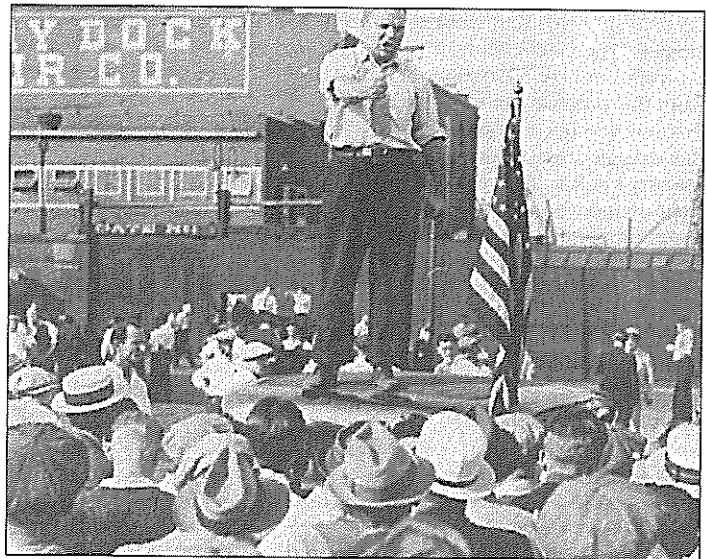
This means that from September 1941 until at least May 1946 — the years when, as Haberkern and I agree, the Workers' Party made its "most significant practical achievement" in the workers' movement — it upheld a theory of the USSR that Haberkern maintains was wrong. I myself think that the WP position was right in those years. The arguments are in the book; I encourage people to read and judge for themselves. But in any event, in those years, despite overwhelming pressure to accommodate to US imperialism and Stalinism, the majority position was compatible with the most radical, consistent and practically effective Third Camp activism on the US left. Why then is it so important to Haberkern to root out this heresy?

Revolutionary strategy

THE most disturbing chapters of *Max Shachtman and His Left* for many people around Haberkern's Center for Socialist History and the magazine *New Politics* are those in which the book discusses the Independent Socialist League years (1949-58). During the ISL years Hal Draper (later founder of the Center for Socialist History) and Julius Jacobson (later founding co-editor of *New Politics*) emerged as key Third Camp socialist leaders. Understandably, they and their political heirs see the ISL's politics as an integral and even privileged part of the Third Camp socialist tradition. They take criticism of the ISL in those years to heart. Barry Finger's review of *Max Shachtman and His Left* sums up a widespread view of the book's weakness in recounting these years: in seeing "inklings... in the late 1940s and early 1950s of Shachtman's later right-wing trajectory", Finger says, the book's account is "based on misinterpretation or an impressionistic forcing of the facts."

It is particularly important here to be clear on what the book does and does not say, and where it agrees and disagrees with its critics. It clearly says that Shachtman's and the ISL's politics in the early 1950s were "the politics of a left-wing socialist" (p219). It also points to issues on which Shachtman tried in the early 1950s to push the ISL to the right: specifically, by trying to pledge support for a non-socialist labour government in a war against the USSR, and by trying to pledge ISL support to trade-union candidates running inside the Democratic Party. The book credits Draper and Jacobson with resisting these rightward moves, successfully in the case of Shachtman's 1951 motion on wartime tactics, in the end unsuccessfully on the issue of "labour Democrats" (since the 1954 ISL convention finally backed Shachtman's position). It shows how cautious Shachtman was in these moves, how quickly he pulled back if he sensed he was in a minority. It concludes that he "barely made a dent in the Independent Socialists' identity as a Marxist group on the extreme left of the US political spectrum" (p222). On all these points, I think that Haberkern and I agree.

Nevertheless, the book concludes that the ISL did break with some revolutionary Marxist traditions in 1948-51, in ways that Draper and Jacobson went along with. For example, the book cites the 1951 ISL convention resolution that concluded, first, that a "broad socialist left wing" could win the British Labour Party to a genuinely socialist course, and second, that this would create "an unpar-



The heyday of American labour. On what basis should we rebuild the workers' movement

alleled opportunity for a relatively peaceful road to socialism" (pp237-38). For Haberkern, saying that ISL leaders gave up "the Leninist touchstone 'that revolution was necessary even in post-war capitalist democracies'... comes pretty close to slander." To me this is what the 1951 ISL resolution says about Britain. Perhaps Haberkern defines the word "revolution" differently than I do, and sees the relatively peaceful, legal transition described by the ISL in 1951 as a possible revolutionary scenario. This is a legitimate discussion. But it is not advanced by charges of slander.

Defeatism

IN describing the 1951 ISL discussion over "defeatism" in the ISL, according to Haberkern, *Max Shachtman and His Left* so confuses Shachtman's and Draper's positions that it "concludes that there wasn't much difference between Draper and Shachtman." The book concludes no such thing, as any reader can see. In the ISL Political Committee, it says: "Draper successfully resisted Shachtman's apparent intention to support British Labour's role in Korea"; in his articles in the *New Internationalist*, "Draper suggested that the idea of 'defeatism' had always been confused and confusing and that Shachtman was turning its ambiguities upside down in a way that undermined opposition to US wars" (pp247-48). This is essentially Haberkern's account as well. It does not "amalgamate the anti-imperialist Draper with the social-patriotic Shachtman", as Haberkern charges.

The difference between Haberkern and me is that he agrees with Draper's way of responding to Shachtman, whereas I still think that "defeatism" was and is a surer basis on which to oppose imperialist wars. This does not mean endorsing Lenin's arguments that a Japanese victory over Russia in 1904 or a German victory over Russia in 1914 would have been lesser evils; I agree with all of Draper's and Haberkern's criticisms of Lenin on this score. But this is not the interpretation of "defeatism" that revolutionary Marxists had in the 1930s or 1940s. The interpretation that Trotsky and others accepted equated

"defeatism" with Karl Liebknecht's anti-war slogan, "The chief enemy of the people is in its own country." Revolutionaries starting from this premise can wage class struggle in wartime without any qualms that this strike or that struggle might inadvertently lead to "their" country's defeat. They can even plan on using their own government's defeat, as Lenin and Luxemburg jointly proposed and the Second International voted before the First World War, to hasten the overthrow of capitalism. This is after all what the Bolsheviks did in 1917, why there was a revolution in Russia and nearly a revolution in Germany.

Draper's standpoint in his *New Internationalist* articles, by contrast, allowed him to endorse the idea, later adopted in a 1954 ISL convention resolution, that socialists should not do anything during a US-Soviet war "in any way or degree to facilitate [a Soviet] victory." What effect would such a standpoint have had in 1943-45 on WP activists in the United Auto Workers, virtually all of whom were helping produce military equipment for the war? Would they have provided the same militant leadership to wildcat strikes? Or would they have first had to make sure that a strike would not "in any way or degree" facilitate a German victory?

Haberkern and I both want to honour Draper's resistance to Shachtman's rightward drift in the 1950s. But I think Haberkern and others let their knowledge of what happened later influence too much their view of what was said and written in 1951-54. Clearly Draper was worried then by some of Shachtman's positions. But he could hardly be certain that Shachtman would become an outright Cold War social democrat. I think people who read Draper's writings from those years with an open mind will find that he (understandably) was trying not only to rein Shachtman in but also to find common ground with him. It is hardly surprising that Draper, writing as a loyal, leading member of a small, beleaguered group in a time of virulent McCarthyism, sometimes used formulations that now seem doubtful. To defend those formulations uncritically over forty years later strikes me as unwise.

Stalinism

THERE can be only one motive for criticising the heroes of Independent Socialism like this, Haberkern suggests: I must be soft on Stalinism. More specifically, Drucker "implies, although he does not say openly, that Shachtman's acceptance of the proposition that the Stalinist parties represented a social and political force at once reactionary and anti-capitalist was responsible for his political and personal collapse." This interpretation of *Max Shachtman and His Left* is not based on what the book says, however. Haberkern arrives at it by taking his own views and turning them upside down.

Haberkern believes that one's theory of Stalinism is determinant for the whole of one's politics. He says in so many words that the theory of bureaucratic collectivism (as understood by Carter, Draper and Haberkern) is "the theoretical basis" of Third Camp politics. He concludes that my understanding of Stalinism must be the theoretical basis of my

politics, and the key to my book. But I have a quite different explanation of Shachtman's evolution, an explanation that to my mind is more materialist. I see the main cause of Shachtman's rightward drift in his loss of a rank-and-file working-class base and his determination to link up instead with the trade union bureaucracy: with the Reuther UAW bureaucracy in the 1950s and the Meany AFL-CIO bureaucracy in the 1960s. This is quite explicit in *Max Shachtman and His Left*, for example in the introduction to Part II (pp185-88). Perhaps Haberkern missed this, or perhaps he prefers not to discuss it. In any event, he fails to see that I portray Shachtman's changing views of Stalinism, at least from fall 1949 onwards, as only one symptom of his developing reformist politics.

The WP/ISL's attitude to CPers in the trade unions changed over the years, for example, in ways that Haberkern does not make clear. He does not mention that the 1941 WP convention explicitly kept open the possibility of joint work with the CP in the trade unions, or that the party's March 1949 convention — after all the Stalinist abuse and attacks that WPers had suffered from — reaffirmed the

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need for alliances with Stalinists in specific unions in specific circumstances (pp 155-56, 239). Throughout these years, the WP/ISL explicitly reaffirmed the rule of thumb that Cannon laid down in 1940 and that Haberkern recalls: that in general almost any genuine trade-union current was preferable to the Stalinists, because the Stalinists had no ultimate loyalty to the unions. But until the fall of 1949 the organisation always held that in some exceptional circumstances, particularly in a union where a corrupt and/or reactionary leadership was strong and the Stalinists were weak, the Stalinists could be an ally. Only in September 1949 — one month after the ISL officially gave up the idea of building an opposition to Reuther in the UAW, and at a moment when the CIO leadership was visibly on the verge of expelling the Stalinists from the CIO — did Shachtman move to close off this loophole. Haberkern may believe that Shachtman just happened to be convinced by Draper's and Geltman's arguments at this particular moment. It would be a remarkable coincidence, though.

"Those ISLers who did not want to support Reuther shared the same view of the Communist Party and its role", Haberkern says. In a sense this was true: all ISLers agreed with Cannon's rule of thumb. But Gordon Haskell, an ISL leader who criticised Shachtman's positions in the late 1940s, argued that the 1947 UAW faction fight was one of the

exceptional circumstances in which anti-Stalinism had to come second: in this case to the fight against the Taft-Hartley Act, which all ISLers saw as a devastating blow to labour, which the Stalinists had no choice but to fight in order to survive in the unions, and which Reuther was ready to use in order to purge the Stalinists from the UAW. The fall 1949 CIO split was another exceptional moment when Haskell argued that alliance with CPers was permissible and necessary. This was and is another legitimate discussion among Third Camp socialists. The sweeping formulas that Shachtman began wielding in the late 1940s were used to close off this discussion. For this reason alone I think those formulas should be discarded today, not uncritically defended.

Haberkern's analysis of Stalinism and mine differ in other important ways. But it would drag this response out too much to go into our other differences. Besides, unlike Haberkern, I do not believe that Stalinism is as central an issue now as it was forty or even ten years ago. Of course we should be intransigently opposed to the Stalinist regimes that still survive; of course our socialism has nothing in common with "socialists" who think that these regimes are in any sense "socialist." But as Haberkern himself says: "Neither Stalinism nor fascism are likely to return in the same form." If Third Camp socialists continue to beat the dead horse of Russian Stalinism, we will ensure our political irrelevance to the new times we are living in. That would be a tragedy, I think, above all because anti-Stalinism was not and is not the be-all and end-all of Third Camp politics.

We sometimes forget that the concept of the Third Camp was not originally just a way of saying "Neither Washington nor Moscow", still less the property of those who held a particular theory of bureaucratic collectivism. It was also a way of refusing to take sides between fascism and "democratic" imperialism. It was a way of saying, "We will not back any government or elite against another. Our camp is the camp of those who control no governments and belong to no elite, who are struggling for their own freedom and organising their own movements. We are confident that these struggles will ultimately converge with the revolutionary working class to build a new international force and ultimately to build socialism from below."

Today the Third Camp's enemies take new forms and are assembled in other camps: triumphant neo-liberalism; Islamic, Hindu, Jewish or Christian fundamentalism; the perpetrators of "ethnic cleansing"; the Buchanans and Le Pens; and others equally ugly. While our basic Marxist starting point remains the same, we face enormous challenges in creating an adequate new body of theory, rebuilding the basic organisations of working-class struggle, and linking up very disparate progressive forces. The political heirs of Shachtman or Draper or Haberkern cannot do all this on their own, nor should they try to, because other currents from different origins but committed to the same effort are emerging and will emerge. Rather than chewing over old internecine battles, Third Camp socialists should turn outward and towards the future.