

Western Intellectuals and Communist States

By Peter W. Rodman

PAUL HOLLANDER. *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba, 1928-1978*. New York, NY, and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1981.

THE ATTRACTION of communism to Western intellectuals is a subject long noted and much examined. Paul Hollander, a sociologist, has singled out an interesting aspect of the phenomenon—the “political pilgrims,” that is, the Western writers, scholars, and students who, generation after generation, have traveled to Communist countries and come away fascinated and admiring. In studying this particular aspect, he sheds new light on the broader phenomenon.

Hollander is in a position to make thoughtful judgments about Communist societies and the Western intelligentsia, having firsthand experience with both. Born in Hungary, he emigrated as a young man after the events of 1956. He studied at the London School of Economics, at the University of Illinois, and at Princeton University, where he received his doctorate in sociology. He is now a fellow of the Harvard Russian Research Center and professor of sociology at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Although the writing in the volume is a bit heavy at times, beneath the academic prose there is serious thought, provocative analysis, and

genuine insight. There is also a wealth of evidence, gleaned from the memoirists, of the incredible naiveté of Western visitors to Communist countries.

George Bernard Shaw, on a trip to the USSR in the 1930's during a period of widespread famine, was so convinced that reports of food shortages were capitalist propaganda that he threw a supply of provisions out the train window before crossing from Poland into Soviet territory. He later announced this action proudly to an audience of hungry Russians in Moscow—who gasped in horror. When it was suggested to him that he would have done better to throw the food out the window on the Soviet side of the border, Shaw refused to believe it.

Shaw's gullibility about Soviet realities was repeated many times over by other travelers to the USSR, before and after. And when disillusionment with the Soviet system eventually set in, as it did in later decades, other utopias beckoned—revolutionary China, Castro's Cuba, North Vietnam during its war with the United States, and others. Even Albania has been the subject of glowing reports by some adventurous West Europeans.

WHAT IS it that accounts for the continual suggestibility of so many Western intellectuals—precisely the class of men and women who pride themselves on their critical faculties,

on their professional ability to penetrate beneath surface appearances in the search for truth? All the Communist regimes examined by Hollander perfected what he refers to as the “techniques of hospitality”—the art of providing physical comfort, solicitude, skillfully packaged tours, and calculated flattery. (Shaw was provided with a luxurious sleeping car and—amazing coincidence—two waitresses who turned out to be intimately familiar with his writings!) Such hospitality makes criticism difficult, by establishing a subtle sense of obligation as well as by misleading the visitor as to local conditions. Only in rare cases (that of André Gide, for example) did the flattery backfire or fail to have some effect.

But, as Hollander goes on to demonstrate, this factor is hardly a sufficient explanation. The visitors were misled because they allowed themselves to be misled. They were not tourists but pilgrims, yearning to believe in the virtue of regimes they regarded as moral experiments of vast importance to mankind. As in the case of the anecdote about Shaw, the socialist ideal was so compelling a vision that objective reality was ignored, wished away, or rationalized with an artfulness that perhaps does a perverse kind of credit to the creativity of the Western intellectual mind.

For example, one Jerome Davis, traveling in the USSR during World

War II, was taken into custody several times by the Soviet security police (NKVD), but his arrests only increased his admiration for the country. He found the security police well trained and intelligent and "always made it a point to compliment them on their alertness in spotting a foreigner who might be a spy." Beatrice and Sidney Webb visited a model Soviet prison and concluded that the Soviet penal system was "apparently as free from physical cruelty as any prison in any country is ever likely to be." Thirty years later, Communist Vietnam, after its victory over South Vietnam, was reported to be forcing its prisoners ("war criminals") to walk through minefields to find unexploded mines left over from the war; radical antiwar activist William Kunstler said he thought he could "understand the reasoning" behind this barbaric practice. "It's part of a terrible, terrible time," he added.

Hollander traces these and other mental contortions that many learned observers have gone through to preserve the coherence of their own visions. We see a total suspension of the skepticism that marks intellectual attitudes toward most phenomena at home. Happy children cavorting in a kindergarten in a Communist country help convince visitor after visitor that the regime *must* be a humane one—as if children did not play happily in kindergartens in most countries. By a process of "contextual redefinition," those who would deplore child labor in Western societies as an abomination find boys and girls toiling in the fields in China or Cuba a positive sign of social solidarity and community. Squalor becomes picturesque; shabbiness, a sign of a more thorough egalitarianism. A group of Concerned Asian Scholars visiting China met an old woman whose job it was to remove and collect slivers of metal from oily rags.

Her hands were "covered with cuts from the slivers." Asked if these were not painful, she replied: "When you are working for the revolution, it doesn't hurt." The visitors were deeply impressed.

The inversion of values applies ironically even to the treatment of their fellow intellectuals. One visitor to Cuba wrote approvingly: "The independent intellectual, the critic of all societies and all beliefs, is a luxury they [the Cuban regime] cannot afford." Mary McCarthy wrote in identical terms about North Vietnam: "The license to criticize was just another capitalist luxury, a waste product of the system. This of course is true." Thus are the most degrading conditions and the denial of the most vital freedoms excused by virtue of the higher social ideals in the name of which, or in pursuit of which, they are undergone.

ONE OF Hollander's principal conclusions, for which he shows ample evidence, is that the motivation lies not so much in the objective appeal of the societies visited as in the rejection of one's own society. The heyday of enthusiastic reporting about the USSR was not in the 1920's, the period of the New Economic Plan (NEP) and an attractive cultural vitality, nor was it in the 1950's, the time of the anti-Stalin campaign and the "thaw," which might have prompted new hopes for the benign evolution of the Soviet system. Rather, the peak for pilgrims was in the 1930's—the high point of Stalinist terror. The systemic crisis wracking the Western democracies in the Great Depression seems to have created such a powerful psychological need for an alternative ideal that there was strong incentive to overlook or suppress all thought of the horrific underside of the worker's paradise in the Stalin era (of which much was known at the time). Criticism of Western soci-

ety, so strongly expressed by so many of the Western intelligentsia, seemed to require the confidence that other, better societies were within the reach of human aspiration. When the Western crisis waned, so did the impulse to idealize the USSR. In the 1950's, the USSR's own display of self-criticism and self-doubt may only have accelerated the weakening of its appeal.

The second great wave of disaffection in Western societies came in the 1960's and 1970's. Hollander devotes considerable space to the counterculture of the period and its philosophical themes, such as they were. This time the critique was one of affluence rather than of poverty, but it prompted the second great flood of political pilgrims. The new socialist meccas were now mostly in the Third World—principally Cuba and China, which it was hoped would avoid the "mistakes" of the Soviet Union. In the United States, the Vietnam war acted as a further spur, adding North Vietnam to the itinerary.

While the context was somewhat different from that of the 1930's, the results were the same. American society, which had been rejected as a pathetic failure in the 1930's, was now scorned as brutally overweening, complacent, and corrupt. Susan Sontag offered this analysis in 1969: "To us, it is self-evident that the *Reader's Digest* and Lawrence Welk and Hilton Hotels are organically connected with the Special Forces' napalming villages in Guatemala. . . ."

LUDICROUS as some examples are, the malaise of intellectuals is not a laughing matter. No society is healthy if its most educated classes are so profoundly disaffected.

The roots of alienation are many. Hollander reviews a century of sociological literature on the subject and offers his own speculations based

on the example of the political pilgrims: the feeling of many intellectuals that they are insufficiently appreciated in their own countries; a diffuse rebelliousness toward societies that fulfill all material needs; a thirst for adventure; a yearning to identify with power (and with totalitarian systems where intellectuals often have, or seem to have, a powerful role); guilt feelings at their own lives of privilege, transposed into a yearning to identify with the "masses." The reader may or may not agree with every explanation offered by Hollander, but the discussion is thoughtful and not dogmatic.

Among the estranged, the impulse to debunk seems allied to an impulse to affirm *something*. Thus, as noted, the rejection of one's own society seems to require the faith that a better alternative is within man's capability, as proven by its existence somewhere else. If it is not—if *all* societies are fatally flawed—it is much more difficult to inveigh against one's own. Indeed, if there is no ideal society *elsewhere*, mankind is sore afflicted, and one is left in a spiritual void. And the intellectuals are precisely those among us who search most assiduously not only for knowledge but for meaning, not only for truth but for harmony and coherence in the human condition.

The quest for utopias in the modern age, concludes Hollander, is one of the delayed fruits of the secularization of Western culture, for with the decline of religious faith, man must seek fulfillment here on earth. It is "delayed" because for a time the lost religious faith was supplanted by a secular belief in Progress—a belief to which the 20th century has dealt a series of devastating blows.

The prevalent modern religious faith among intellectuals is social-

CORRECTIONS

Several corrections should be made in the "Checklist of the 'National Liberation Movement'" (*Problems of Communism*, March-April 1982, pp. 77-82).

On page 78, it should be noted that the Yemen Socialist Party did attend and the Democratic Party of Guinea did not attend the November 1981 work conference of *Problems of Peace and Socialism*.

On page 79, the impression is erroneously given that the Zimbabwe African National Union had a vice president on the Presidential Committee of the World Peace Conference; the vice president from Zimbabwe is Joshua Nkomo of the Zimbabwe African People's Union.

Finally, in the abstract at the beginning of the given issue of *POC*, the World Peace Council should be described as "Moscow-line" rather than "Moscow-sponsored."

The Editors' Note on page 71 of the March-April 1982 issue inadvertently miscited the source of the "Checklist of Communist Parties and Fronts, 1981." This list is published by *Problems of Communism* jointly with the *Yearbook on International Communist Affairs*, edited by Richard F. Staar, Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, Stanford, CA.

ism—the humane ideal of equality, justice, social harmony, and well-being. As John Maynard Keynes observed nearly 50 years ago, it is a moral, not an economic, impulse:

Communism is not a reaction against the failure of the 19th century to organize optimal economic output. It is a reaction against its comparative success. It is a protest against the emptiness of economic welfare, an appeal to the ascetic in us all. . . . It is the curate in [H. G.] Wells, far from extinguished by the scientist, which draws him to take a peep at Moscow. . . . The idealistic youth play with Communism because it is the only spiritual appeal which feels to them contemporary. . . .

It is a powerful dream, so powerful that it attracts even when continually perverted in practice. Either its failures and perversions are ignored, or else the faith persists that somewhere else, in some other newly discovered land of innocence, its feasibility will at last be proven.

How ironic that Marxism, which

prided itself on its materialism and determinism, should find its appeal as an object of faith and a spiritual ideal, while Western values, which always claimed a spiritual origin, should seek their vindication in material abundance and find failure in their inability to provide meaning. How ironic also that intellectuals, who in our societies have usually been the chief defenders of freedom and creativity, should be so ready to overlook the stultifying brutality of systems whose response to freedom and creativity has always been to crush both. For, in the end, the tragedy of the political pilgrims is their abandonment of the liberal values that nurtured them. It is our tragedy as well. Hollander concludes with the disturbing question "whether or not, willingly or inadvertently, Western intellectuals will contribute to the destruction of their relatively free societies, in part because of their illusions about other societies and their recurrent fantasies of new forms of liberation and collective gratification."

It is an important book, as important as its subject.

Problems of Communism

SUBSCRIPTIONS

ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTIONS or copies of recent (the last five) issues of *Problems of Communism* may be obtained by writing to the Superintendent of Documents, US Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402 (USA). Subscription blanks for one-year and single-issue requests are provided on the facing page. For further information, see the inside front cover.

CURRENT PRICES: Annual subscriptions, US mailing address, \$14.00 each; outside the US, \$17.50 each. Single copies, US mailing address, \$3.25 each; outside the US \$4.10 each. A 25% discount is allowed on orders for 100 or more subscriptions or single copies mailed to a single address.

ENCLOSE CHECK OR MONEY ORDER, payable to "Superintendent of Documents, USGPO," or if paying by VISA or Master Charge, please indicate credit card number in the space provided on the subscription blank.

Problems of Communism

REPRINTS, MICROFILM, REPRODUCTION

A variety of services, ranging from reprints, through microfilm and microcard editions, to reproduction of individual issues or articles are commercially available. Those firms which offer one or more such services and which have come to the Editors' attention are, in alphabetical order:

J. S. Canner & Co.
49-65 Landsdowne Street
Boston, MA 02215

Johnson Reprint Corporation
111 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10003

Microfilming Corp. of America
1620 Hawkins Avenue, Box 10
Sanford, NC 27330

Pergamon Press, Inc.
Fairview Park
Elmsford, NY 10523

University Microfilms
300 Zeeb Road
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

Annual indices for Volumes IV-to-date appear in the November-December issue (No. 6) for each year. A combined index to the first three volumes is contained in Vol. III, No. 6 (November-December 1954).