



Draft protest at Los Angeles city hall

The Old Left..

A Long View from the Left: Memoirs of an American Revolutionary, by Al Richmond, Houghton Mifflin. \$8.95.

The Communist Party, USA, which for three decades after World War I was the dominant left force in America, is a moribund institution. It had no presence in the New Left; it has no visible base of operation in the '70s, no real constituency in any geographical, class or ethnic section of the country; and it has long since lost the commitment of intellectual figures of substance, a social element essential to the kind of Leninist party it prides itself on being.

Yet, in retrospect, this same moribund movement can be seen as the root of most of the radical energies which powered the political upsurge of the recent past. In Europe, the New Left is generally understood, in fact, as a break-away development from the traditional Communist parties, in the wake of the Khrushchev Report and the Soviet invasion of Hungary. In America, the connection is more obscure, because the Communist Party had been more or less

driven underground by the mid-'50s and, as a result of the McCarthy repression, radicals resorted to an Aesopian language to work out their internal politics.

Still, when the American new left emerged in the late '50s on the campuses at Madison, Berkeley, and Chicago, it posed an explicit challenge to many tenets of the Communist Party, even as it was led in practice and in theory by the sons and daughters of the old Communist movement. Its first theoretical expression was manifested in such journals as *Studies on the Left*, *New University Thought* and *Root and Branch* (whose editors later appeared as a political directorate during the formative years of RAMPARTS). All of these periodicals were genetically connected to the old Communist left.

The famous Port Huron Statement of 1962 had an altogether different political heritage in the Socialist Party and the anti-communist League for Industrial Democracy. It has been widely misunderstood as the founding document of the New Left. But it was not so much the manifesto of the birth of a movement as a declaration by an important liberal current of its readiness to join an existing new radicalism—a fact made clear in the subsequent development of SDS. For the evolution and eventual disintegration of SDS was determined by the far

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by David Horowitz



STEPHEN SHAMES

Vietnam protest in San Francisco

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stronger currents of left ideology and commitment which surfaced in 1968 in a sudden surge towards Marxism, and then precipitated its dissolution into factions led by Progressive Labor and Weatherman, two tendencies heavily influenced by the self-styled "red diaper" babies of the old CPUSA.

One irony of these developments has been that the newer and younger members of the movement, who lack a connection with its pre-Khrushchev moments, have tended to write off the entire Soviet experiment (and therefore the left's own responsibilities in its failures) as an irrelevant bad dream, while at the same time embracing the examples of China and Cuba, in the same unmodulated and potentially disastrous manner in which the old Communist left embraced the Soviet path. By the same token, they write off the Communist experience, though in fact the New Left has been equally unsuccessful in establishing a real living connection with the American present, and derives its principal sustenance from its connection with other peoples' struggles—currently the Vietnamese. These circumstances are but a reflex of the left's historical inability in this country to relate its international responsibilities to the problem of reaching a domestic constituency, articulating a domestic program, and building a domestic base.

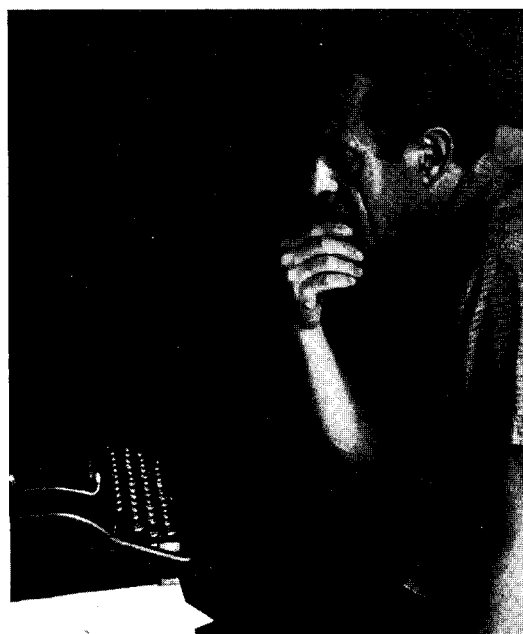
In this situation, the effort to understand the past becomes a vital part of the effort to consolidate its real gains in consciousness and experience, in order to move forward to a new stage of radical development. Part of that task is made easier by the recent appearance of *A Long View from the Left*, the political autobiography of Al Richmond, 40 years a member of the Communist Party, USA, 30 years the editor of its organ, *The People's World*, and for a decade, until his resignation in 1971, a member of its National Committee.

Richmond's book is the first memoir of an American Communist that does not belong to the literature of disillusionment on the one hand, or cardboard hagiography on the other. It is a generous, often self-critical, always warm and perceptive account of a political life for which the author feels justly (but not complacently) proud. There is a tolerance and effort at sympathetic understanding towards party critics which is refreshingly remote from the harsh, uncompromising and generally destructive attitude that characterized the Communist Party throughout its history—one of the negative legacies of the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky.

In three essays—interspersed with the chapters of autobiography—Richmond writes of the continuity between



American Communists on trial in 1949 under Smith Act



Al Richmond

radical generations, of the problems of relating to foreign revolutions and revolutionaries, and of differing interpretations of labor history in the 1930's. In these informed and well-articulated reflections, he successfully establishes the ground of a potentially fruitful dialogue between radical generations, as well as between contemporary currents on the left.

Beginning with a fascinating account of how his mother carried him westward around the globe in order to join the Russian Revolution, the memoirs themselves proceed as a series of portraits of intensely dedicated, frequently fallible and mostly endearing people with whom Richmond worked for half a century in idealistic struggle to bring about a better world. (If there is any criticism to be made of the book in its own chosen terms, it is the author's too stoic suppression of his own personal life. The extraordinary woman, whom we meet in the first chapter, vanishes for most of the narrative, only to reappear at her son's trial in the mid-'50s. Paradoxically, I think, by being more personal, Richmond would have deepened the political impact of his story.)

By presenting these figures out of the Communist past in their complex humanity, Richmond successfully lays to rest the common impression that American Communists were simply automatons, programmed by dogmatism and faith to follow Moscow's commands. In this way, he restores the vital connection between present and past; only the most obtuse radicals of the present generation would not recognize themselves in the pages of this book. But to do so is immediately to confront the question: How could a movement built out of such dedication and lofty idealism, and with such a wealth of experience and insight behind it, come to such a futile squandering of human resources and energies as the Communist Party did in the mid-'50s, and end up in such abject political bankruptcy?

It would be unfair to tax Richmond's book for its failure to confront this question; but a deliberate decision by the

author not to deal with the internal politics of the party deprives the reader of a basis for formulating an answer to the question on his own.

The strengths and weaknesses of Richmond's portrait of American Communism can be illustrated by his account of the United Front strategy, which the Communist movement adopted two years after the disastrous collapse of the left in Germany in 1933. "The tragic debacle in Germany confronted the left with questions," writes Richmond.

Why did it happen? How can similar catastrophes be averted? I remember how compelling these questions were for me and my immediate associates, how we welcomed the "People's Front" as the appropriate answer. To us it seemed the strategy of marshalling in one common front all forces opposed to fascism grew out of the anxious search in which we, along with millions of others, were engaged for two long years.

Richmond's recollection of these events in his text, provides the occasion for a characteristic reply to "New Left" criticism—in this case my own—of Communist policy.

All this was brought back to me recently by the curt characterization of the People's Front as a Kremlin manipulation in a book by one of the more thoughtful and scholarly younger radicals, David Horowitz. His treatment was not original, of course, nor was my response. How different, I thought, is history as living experience.

But is Richmond's recollection of history as "living experience" really that accurate? What if Al Richmond had realized in 1931 or 1932, before Hitler's seizure of power in Germany, that the Communist International's policy of attacking Social Democrats instead of Nazis as the "main danger" was a disastrously sectarian and self-defeating strategy? The question is not academic. Leon Trotsky

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Styles

Women's Fiction:

WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?

by Elizabeth Fishel

With feminist critiques proliferating almost faster than porn these days, it may seem surprising that there hasn't also been a new brood of feminist novels. Apart from Doris Lessing, Simone de Beauvoir (whose latest work is not fiction, anyway, but a sociological study of old age), and several short story writers whose work has appeared in *Ms.* and in the feminist literary journal, *Aphra*, few women novelists have yet set out to explore those feminist issues which preoccupy their more politically and socially minded sisters: the patterns and nuances of sexist exploitation, the rigidity of roles, and the necessity for radical re-examination and change.

It is, to be sure, almost a truism of literary history that writers with a political ax to grind tend to lose the edge on their literary efforts. Still, this does not seem to have daunted the likes of Philip Roth and John Updike, both resourceful and politically outraged novelists whose most recent works are marked by a strong anti-Establishment insistence. So isn't it too facile to presume that women novelists are abandoning feminist ideology for artistic purity, that they are refusing to "come out" as feminists for fear that their creative choices will be too severely circumscribed? Could it be, then, that revolutionary feminist novels are piling up in manuscript, waiting to be published, or are they not being written at all? Why this black-out on feminist fiction?

Nearly half a century ago, Virginia Woolf posed questions eerily like these about her own contemporaries in two

papers delivered at Cambridge and later published as *A Room of One's Own*. What conditions, she asked, are most likely to encourage women to write fiction? And why are men especially hostile when that fiction turns out to be feminist? ("That arrant feminist," she quotes a gentleman on reading Rebecca West. "She says that men are snobs.")

Woolf's answer to the first question was straightforward and incisive. "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." Her response to the second bristled with indignation:

Why was Miss West an arrant feminist for making a possibly true if uncomplimentary statement about the other sex? [His exclamation] was not merely the cry of wounded vanity, it was a protest against some infringement of his power to believe in himself. Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. . . . If she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished.

Woolf's words remain pertinent today, for the would-be woman novelist is still hamstrung by the socio-economics of a woman's place in a man's world. If married, she's still expected to keep her house shipshape, take care of the kids, hold the family together. If she wants to follow her muse, she must do it on the sly, while baby is napping or husband is on the golf links. Significantly, she lacks assistance, someone to type for her, bring her a stiff drink, smooth her ruffled feathers. In short, she lacks a wife, that spineless, but all-nurturing presence lauded in the dedications of men's books from time immemorial—"without the constant etc. of my darling etc., this book would never have etc." (The dynamics are, of course, complicated in marriages that are partnerships of writers. I am tempted to think—although admittedly without statistics—that for every patient Leonard Woolf willing to lend a hand to his wife Virginia in her times of

madness, there are several Scott Fitzgeralds jealously, recklessly pushing their Zeldas over the deep edge.)

For the unmarried and struggling novelist, the social pressures may be less tangible than the pile of dirty diapers but hardly less restrictive. She is still dogged by the dilemma of how to find money for a room of one's own (take a job as a barmaid? a fellowship? write jingles for greeting cards?). But even having eased that particular bind by her wits and the grace of God, she does not necessarily fly to her typewriter on the wings of inspiration. Some unnamed but many-armed enemy (nagging stereotypes? "the motive to avoid success"? a crucial failure of confidence?) is somehow able to detain her. Subtle psychological warfare, but I have seen it happen over and over again among friends who dream of being writers. The men are able to seize the time as their own, lock themselves oblivious in their rooms, and keep going on booze and TV dinners to churn out page after page of the novel that will surely rock the world. But the women—equally talented, smart, and dedicated—will somehow refuse to focus, dissipating their energy on a hairwash, a new soufflé recipe, a love-affair or an abortion. Again, how eerie to hear Woolf's talk reverberate, her tale of Judith Shakespeare, William's long-forgotten sister, who, every bit as promising a playwright, fell in with the same troupe of players, was knocked up by the same Nick Greene who became her brother's patron and, finally, killed herself on a winter's night to hide her shame.

Nevertheless, over the last half century, some intrepid souls have managed to keep the flame of Judith Shakespeare alive within them. And though their names don't trip off the tongue like Mailer and Malamud, most who care about the past and future of the novel have read them at some point: Woolf and Edith Wharton in college, perhaps, Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor a little later on, Mary McCarthy or Katherine Anne Porter for something

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