

Lobotomies, Socialist and Capitalist

A gossip journey from left to right.

Jesse Walker

Commies: A Journey Through the Old Left, the New Left and the Leftover Left, by Ronald Radosh, San Francisco: Encounter Books, 216 pages, \$24.95

RONALD RADOSH IS AN academic historian, author of several respectable (if not always respected) books on the critics, allies, and enemies of American foreign policy. He is also a former leftist who has joined the political right. The second description, in itself, tells us little: There are many lefts and many rights, especially now that the events of 1989 have turned the political spectrum into a Jackson Pollock painting. Once the world gets turned upside down, you never know where the people who once sat securely atop it will fall.

Those interested in the myriad political journeys American intellectuals have taken should be interested in *Commies*, Radosh's memoir of his path across and out of the radical left. As a case study, it's invaluable: an exemplary text as notable for what it skirts over as it is for what it says.

It's also less academic than one might expect from a book by a scholarly historian. *Commies* is crammed not with pedantic footnotes but with gossip, much of it gratuitous and most of it highly entertaining. Here we are told that Mary Travers (the feminine third of Peter, Paul, and Mary) displayed a "precocious sexuality" at Elisabeth Irwin High School, which she attended with Radosh; that Bianca Jagger may have had an affair with the Sandinista commandante Tomas Borge; that at the first

wedding of Michael Lerner, later to invent Hillary Clinton's "politics of meaning," the cake bore the slogan "Smash Monogamy." Bob Dylan has a cameo, as do Henry Wallace, Pete Seeger, a dope-dealing descendent of Wendell Willkie, and Barbara Garson, author of the delightfully libelous LBJ-bashing play *Macbird*, who by Radosh's account climbed into bed with him 15 minutes after they met.

In a book stuffed with embarrassing anecdotes, my favorite involves Robert Scheer, a former editor of the New Left magazine *Ramparts*, who now appears in such reputable outlets as the *Los Angeles Times* and National Public Radio. In the early '70s, Radosh claims, he attempted to interview Scheer for the Pacifica radio network, only to find that the man "would talk on the record about only one topic—the only one that mattered—the realization of the socialist utopia in Kim Il Sung's North Korea." According to Radosh, the discussion lasted more than two hours, yet never strayed far from Scheer's hobbyhorse; the results proved too weird for even the famously tolerant Pacifica to play.

How much of all this scuttlebutt is actually true? I have no idea. I e-mailed Scheer to ask for his side of the story; he replied that he remembered no such interview, that he has to "wonder why there is no written record of my having said anything like that," and that he never regarded North Korean communism as an ideal. Others have issued similar denials and semi-denials of Radosh's stories, leaving future historians with a mess of contradictory accounts to sort through. Like all good gossip, Radosh's tales come with the faint suspicion that you're being had.

Weaving through all this tittle-tat-

tle is a narrative. In just over 200 pages, we watch a young Stalinist evolve into a New Leftist, into a social democrat, and, finally, into a member of David Horowitz's circle of fiercely repentant refugees from radicalism.

Here's the tale in brief. Radosh was born in the late '30s to a pair of immigrant radicals, both of them sympathetic to the Soviet Union. He went to a socialist summer camp and to a private high school, the latter a refuge for teachers who had refused to sign the public schools' loyalty oath or to cooperate with the House Committee on Un-American Activities. As a teenager, Radosh joined the Labor Youth League, sort of a junior wing of the Communist Party; he became a full-fledged member of the party as an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin.

Radosh's portrait of life as a young Red is engagingly written, filled with vivid characters (such as his mother's cousin Jacob Abrams, a Bolshevik-hating anarchist exiled to Mexico City) and enjoyably odd details (such as the teacher who tried to relate everything he taught to dialectical materialism—including geology). Refreshingly, he is generally able to criticize the Stalinist subculture in which he was raised without defending McCarthyism and its excrescences.

Returning to Wisconsin for graduate school in 1961, Radosh studied under the historian William Appleman Williams, a non-Communist radical in the American populist tradition. He grew disillusioned with orthodox Marxism, adopting first the pro-Soviet but anti-Stalinist views of Isaac Deutscher, and then a more eclectic New Left socialism. In the '70s, Radosh and some comrades »



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