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Review / Reseña

Robert Service, *Comrades: A History of World Communism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.

An Oxford Don Looks at the History of Communism (but fails to see Latin America)

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Disclosures and Personal Biases of the Reviewer are Revealed

Why have I been asked to review this book? Perhaps it's because I went to work in the cane fields of Cuba in 1969, and from that initial 'bacillus' (a favorite metaphor that Robert Service employs in *Comrades: A History of World Communism* to describe the fatal attraction of communism), I became interested in revolutionary movements in Latin America and beyond. This, in turn, led me to try to understand imperialism as fundamental factors in both the immiseration of the colonized and decolonizing world and as a dialectical engine that contributed to

revolutionary responses against it. Perhaps, I was asked to review this book because I'm a recovering Communist myself (I was a factory worker in the 1970s and for several years I was an 'advanced worker' in several "pre-party formation" study groups). My knowledge of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought, such as it is, was not learned in the groves of academe. More likely I'm reviewing this book because in the late '80s and early '90s I went to school and was degreed in the history of Latin America. For the past 15 years I've been thinking about and teaching, among other things, social revolution in Latin America. Or maybe I'm here because of the luck of the draw. At any rate, I think that this disclosure may be of some value in forewarning the reader about the strengths and weaknesses I will bring to this review. One final self-advertisement is in order: on opening the book I noted that Service dedicates this book to his father whom he describes as first and foremost an Ulsterman. To be born into a colonial environment is certainly no one's fault; to celebrate that legacy, however, reveals a worldview that makes your reviewer, an orphan son of Hibernia, most wary. Service's prefatory nods to Saint Anthony's, Oxford University, Stanford's Hoover Institution (peopled by and large by the imperial Mandarin class) does nothing to assuage the feeling of apprehension upon entering the leaves of *Comrades: A History of World Communism*.

What is the Author Up To?

Over the years Robert Service has shifted his scholarly endeavors from biographies of Lenin and Stalin to histories of the Soviet Union and Russia to, now, a history of world communism. Like his other works, this current history views the subject matter through a dark lens. Service states in the beginning that he is attempting to answer the question of "whether communism was inherently despotic or potentially liberating (xi)." Beyond that, he says that the book's animating question is to what degree was the Soviet experience of communism unique? The first question, I think, was answered in Service's mind long before writing this book. His answer to the second question is that "despite the diversity of the states committed to communism, there was an underlying similarity in purpose and practice" (xi). The thesis of *Comrades* is that there is an unbreakable linkage,

ideologically and politically, from Karl Marx to Lenin to Stalin to Mao up to Castro, Krushchey, Allende, Pol Pot, and Abimael Guzmán. The ideology and actions that come from the original ideas of Marx and actions of Lenin, Service argues, are both fundamentally flawed and have been inherited *in toto* by all of their successors. Communism, in practice, was evil; its practitioners and followers were infected with the original and unredeemable sins of its dogmatic and hegemonic fathers; communism's fall, engineered by a pacific Ronald Reagan, leaves the world increasingly shaped by free markets, formal democratic structures, and a robust civil society, all harbingers of a better future. In many ways the tale—as told by Service—is a triumphalist journey from the middle of the nineteenth century to 2006, a narrative where the evil empire is resoundingly trounced by the virtues of vigor and right-mindedness of both its own denizens and the liberating ideas and actions of the free world.

Service's argument is based on extrapolations from his understanding of Marxism and the history of the USSR, his reading of the secondary literature on the People's Republic of China (PRC), and his firm belief that what he believes he has proved in the first and second case can be extended to explain the history of communism in Africa and Latin America. This analysis, in turn, is undergirded by Service's own social formation in such epicenters of imperial thought as Oxford, Cambridge, and Stanford. The problem with this formulation, of course, is that he appears to know very little about either Africa or Latin America, as if subconsciously taking to heart Kissinger's advice to an acolyte that history is not made south of the Tropic of Cancer.

Report on a First Glance of Comrades

World history, of course, is a most difficult enterprise and needs an implicit organizational schema in order to weave, out of many regional and national narratives and historical perspectives, an overarching narrative. In our era of increasingly self-conscious globalization, writing world history is an urgent but difficult task. And, as specialists, when reading this world history we pay close attention to who among our cohort of Latin Americanists Service has depended upon. Such an examination reveals

little reliance on the extensive literature (primary and secondary) on the subject. In primary sources, just about all Latin Americans, save Fidel Castro and Ernesto Guevara, are absent. The roll call of the missing is endless: José Esteban Echevarría, Francisco Bilbao, José Martí, Luis Emilio Recabarren, Luis Carlos Prestes, José Carlos Mariátegui, Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre, Augusto César Sandino, Farabundo Martí, Julio Antonio Mella, Vicente Lombardo Toledano, Guillermo Lora, Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, José Manuel Fortuny, Eric Williams, Camilo Torres Restrepo, Miguel Mármol, Hugo Blanco Galdós, Velodia Teitelboim, Carlos Marighela, Teodoro Petkoff. Also absent are Eduardo Galeano, Fernando Henrique Cardoso (Primeiro), Salvador Allende, Hugo Chávez Frías, Evo Morales, and Felipe Quispe. In the secondary literature, absent, to name only a few, are Manuel Caballero, Carlos Castañeda, Adolfo Gilly, and Luis Vitale. Missing also are the important works of K. S. Karol, Rollie Poppino, Irving Horowitz, and John Gerassi. The absence of engagement with at least some of these sources makes for a superficial and often misleading account of the trajectory of communist thought and actions in Latin America. It does a disservice to a history of world communism in the particular and the general. In the end, the bibliographical foundation of Service's survey of communism in Latin America is thin; in the main, his sources derive from *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, Leslie Bethell, Alan Knight, Jonathan Haslan, Ronald Chilcote, J. W. F. Dulles, Alan Angell. Listed, but barely cited, or not cited at all, are Piero Gleijeses, Richard Gott, John Ross, A. Lipschütz, and M. Löwy. Beyond that, very little.

On Organization, Asymmetry, and the Question of Tone

Any exercise in world history—particularly for the pre-post-modernists among us—is a most difficult enterprise. One of the central issues facing a historian who goes global is to balance chronology with regional particularities in the narrative. If the historian leans too far in the direction of strict chronology the narrative more often than not bogs down at key moments: 1917, 1968, 1989, for example, in the case under review. If one leans too far in the direction of regional narratives, the narrative runs the risk of telling seemingly disparate tales. The strands that connect are

difficult to weave together. Service leans, with deviations on China, Yugoslavia and Cuba, towards the chronological. The sections in the book are “Origins to 1917,” “Experiment: 1917-1929,” “Development: 1929-1947,” “Reproduction, 1947-1957,” “Mutation: 1957-1979,” and “Endings: From 1980.” This structure has advantages and it certainly serves his narrative purpose with a neat ending and beginning. The virtues are clear. The problems, however, lay in connecting events, say, in 1949 in China, on one hand, and the USSR and Eastern Europe, on the other. Or, how do you deal with the mid-1950s, and talk with intelligence about events in Teheran (Tudeh shamefully is left unmentioned by Service), Moscow, and the Circum-Caribbean? The difficulties here lie along several axes: the particularities of place, culture, and history are such that, in the latter case, comparing 20th Party Congress denunciation of Stalin, the overthrow of communist-supported governments in Iran and Guatemala, and the Castro-led attack on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago (denounced by the Cuban Communist Party, incidentally, as a putsch) is a most difficult task. Unless you either excise events or fold others into a larger story, the center of the narrative cannot hold. Service, when facing this dilemma, chooses in the main to both excise events and push the narrative forward by suggesting that it is the center, the Comintern, from which all things flow. Now, to be fair, these meta-organizational questions are tasks facing all historians embarked on a world history. But as committed to his central thesis as Service is, he ends up privileging a centralized explanatory device and belittling the independent agency of the different regional communist movements.

This brings up another organizational problem in Service’s work. When talking about Great Britain, France, Italy, or the United States, he is quite comfortable talking about the domestic role the respective communist parties played even though, in each circumstance, these parties never achieved state power. Additionally, he talks at some length about cultural engagement and disengagement with the communist project(s) in each country. Yet he seldom confers the same attention to details about active and engaged communist parties and movements in the ‘periphery.’ For example, in Latin America, the life of communist movements in Bolivia,

Brazil, Guatemala, or El Salvador are virtually ignored, their ideas and their actions are not part of the story. How do we explain this inconsistency? Is it because Service is less familiar with the history of, say, Lara or Prestes or Fortuny than he is with Pollitt, Marchais, or Togliatti? Well, yes, this is undoubtedly the case. But he doesn't explicitly address—or even seem to reflect on—the reason for this asymmetrical treatment. Such movements in the Americas, it would appear, are of less importance and less interesting than events in Europe. Well, I guess that's fair enough and arguable but to have this asymmetry in his history compromises—fatally I believe—his expressed purpose of writing a 'world history.'

Then, there is a question of tone. Often when Service talks of his subjects, he resorts to a cheerful, clubby kind of disdain that grates: Edgar Snow, a journalist who wrote *Red Star Over China*, a seminal account of Mao Zedong, and Hewlitt Johnson, the Dean of Canterbury, were “out of their intellectual depth” in their assessment of communism (204, 207); Graham Greene and John Steinbeck are portrayed as gullible stooges; Stephen Cohen, a Princeton Sovietologist, was deluded by his own idealism; George Bernard Shaw was a preening “intellectual peacock... (who lacked) intellectual capacity” (205, 207) to understand the U.S.S.R.; Tariq Ali, a trenchant journalist of the left, was a “a muddled Oxford student” (375). In Service's book, Lenin becomes a “cockahoop” (93), his New Economic Policy is peopled by “spivs, crooks and fly-by-nights” (103), and Fidel Castro, at the beginning years of the revolution, “epitomizes the carefree Latin American,” and in a single paragraph is reduced to a caricature of an unhygienic woman-chaser who drives like a madman (343). “Red barbarities,” “stooge,” “dullard,” and similar terms are liberally deployed without quotation marks. There is something very grating about this kind of patronizing humor. It's a kind of smug condescension that one might find in the best clubs and academies of mid-twentieth-century England. It's redolent of imperialistic arrogance.

Contextualization

But beyond questions of organization, asymmetrical arguments, and glibness, there's a more substantive problem in Service's history. As a

narrative, it describes the development and history of communism *ex nihilo*. For example, there is little sense of the forces at play in the England of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, nothing of Dicken's 'satanic mills,' little of the degradation of the lives of workers in the industrial north Atlantic. Communism, it would appear, arose not out of the disorders and dysfunctions of capitalism but out of the sociopathologies of dogmatic men who were more wed to theory than to the real world. In Service's telling, capitalism is really incidental—or, better, secondary—to the rise of communism.

By the same token, very little is made of the absurdity, savagery, and destruction of World War I. The revulsion of many to this war, in Russia and beyond, is acknowledged by Service but the dynamo of his is an unswerving, unprincipled, and amoral will to power by the Bolsheviks. Land, Bread, and Peace become demagogic slogans, flags of convenience, rather than principled articulation of a future without the seasonal return of wars of pillage, acquisition, and destruction. Later, right after the war, the anti-revolutionary forces that swept into Russia after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk are mentioned but their funding, backing, and supplying by Western powers are only alluded to, leaving the unsuspecting reader to think that the White Army was in the main derived from Russian internal opposition. So, the increasingly militarized and paranoid style of Soviet politics in the 1920s and the hardening of ideas about the dictatorship of the proletariat emerge, once again, in Service's telling, as fundamentally a function of the genetic make-up of the Marxist paradigm. The relentless and unceasing attempts to subvert and destabilize the revolution are, in this analysis, at best tertiary causes for the excesses of Stalinism.

There is probably no greater example of the Stalinist crimes against humanity than the destruction of the kulaks (well-to-do peasants) in the 1930s. In the forced collectivization of agriculture, millions of kulaks were, in the anesthetized language of the day, liquidated. This is one of the horrors of communist rule in the U.S.S.R. and, it is true, it has an analog in famines attendant to the Great Leap Forward campaign in China in the late 1950s. History rightfully judges these policies and the attendant deaths with severity. They will not be forgotten. But it should be remembered that

both events occurred in the process of industrialization. They were justified as historical sacrifices that needed to be made to fulfill the economic policy. It must be remembered, as horrendous as they are, that this is not the first time that such events have occurred. Indeed, if we look at the history of Service's own "green and pleasant" England, we will remember that in both the process of primitive accumulation of capital and the subsequent industrialization (read: slave-based plantation economies and the destruction of the commons) there were also millions of deaths and dislocated lives. The difference between industrialization in England and the Soviet Union and China was not primarily in the amount of lost lives; rather, it was the time that the process took place in.

Finally, in terms of contextualization, there's the question of empire. On one hand, Service is happy to talk of empire in terms of communism. The U.S.S.R presided over its East European empire; Russia had, within the Soviet Republics, an imperial role. The P.R.C. was an imperial presence on its western borders and among its national minorities. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam was "south east Asia's bully boy" (404). Over and over, Service uses the trope of empire in terms of world communism. But he is far more circumspect in using it in terms of the colonies and semi-colonies of the North Atlantic powerhouses. The process of decolonization of the Third World plays a decidedly minor role in the way Service narrates the history of communism. This is distracting and ultimately tendentious. It is fair—and perhaps essential—to point out the imperial nature of the U.S.S.R. Indeed, in the late 1960s, China referred to the actions of the U.S.S.R. as Soviet social imperialism. Likewise, it is fair to point out the imperial policies of the P.R.C. But it is a deep structural error, when dealing with the history of communism, to not deal in an explicit way with the more powerful currents of western colonization of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. First, if this is not understood—and described—as imperialism, then the anti-colonial tributaries cannot be understood in the context of their complicated relationship to world communism. And if the anti-colonial tributaries cannot be understood—or even problematized—then it is possible to assert, as Service does, that there is no substantive difference in terms of motivation, trajectory, and historical

particularity between the U.S.S.R. and Cuba, between P.R.C. and Vietnam, between Cuba and Venezuela, between Guinea-Bissau and Ethiopia. This, in turn, allows Service to contend that there is conformity of purpose and structure in world communism where there is manifestly not; and it also allows Service to fundamentally misapprehend the different manifestations of communist thought in the modern world. His view of world communism does not fully take into account that qualitatively different forms of communist thought and action can be found in the world, a world that Service consistently reduces to centralized uniformity and a death foretold.

Service's history would have benefited from a more nuanced—and informed—disquisition on colonization and imperialism (in both its capitalist and communist variants). This would, of course, require a paradigm that while Service is happy to impose upon the communist world, he is loathe to apply it equally to the west. It's a shame that Service does not employ a form of dialectics—even its non-Marxist variant—to inform his discussion of empire and colonization. Unfortunately, and somewhat perversely, Service shows considerable disdain for dialectical theory. Throughout the book he derides it as intellectually vacuous and as an engine for the apologetics of brutality and coercion (entre al., 31, 37, 47, 130, 200).

Service's Latin America

Service's treatment of Latin America in *Comrades* is shameful. Other than a chapter on Cuba, his coverage is very limited. He fitfully and in a rather sloppy and uninformed way devotes, in a closing chapter ("The Comrades Depart"), a few sloppily edited lines to Sendero and Abimael Guzmán, a few others to FARC and Colombia, a few paragraphs to Nicaragua, and a few pages to the Zapatistas (who he calls Ejército Zapatista de la Liberación Nacional, the EZLN, and the EZNL). Of Chile, we learn in earlier passages that the Unidad Popular was "communist led" (2) and "communist inspired" (323). We learn as well, without sustained evidence or argument, that Allende's government was tilting towards a one-party, one ideology state. Only its overthrow prevented this inevitable outcome (9).

In Service's episodic and careless remarks we learn virtually nothing about the origins and history of Marxist and communist thought and action in Latin America. Nothing on the early stages of socialist thought in Argentina or Chile, nothing of anarchists and communists in Buenos Aires or Mexico, nothing of the life and times of Luis Prestes and his Long March into the hinterlands of Brazil and the subsequent formation of the Brazilian communist party. Nothing on the globally unique theoretical contributions to communist theory by José Carlos Mariátegui in Peru, nothing on Julio Antonio Mella in Cuba in the 1920s. Nothing on the formation of soviets in the Cuban countryside in 1933-1934. Nothing on the working alliance between Farabundo Martí in El Salvador and Sandino in Nicaragua. Nothing on the role of communists in Central American uprisings in the early 1930s. Nothing of Gaitán in Colombia, nothing of communist participation in United Front governments in Bolivia, Chile, and Cuba in the 1940s, nothing on communist trade unionists and Vicente Lombardo Toledano's relationship to the Cárdenas sexenio. Nothing (well, one indirect line) on Trotskyist influences on the 1952 Bolivian Revolution. Nothing on Marxist and communist influences upon Latin American artists (other than a disdainful mention of Neruda's poem about Stalin). Nothing on communist influence in Guatemala in the early 1950s or the centrality of the U.S. engineered overthrow of Guatemala in 1954 in shaping several generations of revolutionaries, Marxists, and communists. Nothing—and this is a kicker—on the Communist International's line on communist revolution in Latin America (they were against it because in order for a communist revolution to succeed a proletariat was needed and in order to grow a proletariat capitalism needed to first develop). Nothing sustained or illuminating about the National Security Doctrine, or the wave of death squads and right-wing anti-communist military regimes that, in the name of the struggle against communism, visited disappearances, terror, torture, and death to millions of Latin Americans.

Nothing, either, on the land question, the infant mortality rate, rampant illiteracy, the unemployment rate, the disease vectors in the countryside and urban slums, the emptying of the countryside, the forced migrations north; none of these are seen as useful metrics to discuss the

shape of communism in Latin America. And even with the chapter on Cuba in the 1960s, there's nothing of substance on the theoretical underpinnings of Cuba's "Two, Three, Many Vietnams" or the formation of the Tricontinental Congress. The emergence of OSPAAAL (the Organization for solidarity with Asia, Africa, and Latin America) is unmentioned. Of the declarations at the Tricontinental refuting Soviet policy we learn nothing. Service, though, is happy to detail Cuba's capitulation to the U.S.S.R. in the late 1960s and to assert that it obediently and in lockstep followed the U.S.S.R.'s direction "right down the line of communisation" (346). He doesn't describe Cuba's independent foreign policy, particularly in regards to Africa (this is odd as Service includes Piero Gleijeses's *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington and Africa, 1959-1976* in the bibliography, but he gives no indication of having read it). And, even though Service's manuscript was completed in late 2006, there is nothing on the economic shocks in the wake of neoliberalism, the rise of M.A.S. (Movimiento al Socialismo) of Evo Morales or of Hugo Chávez Frias' twenty-first century socialism, or, for that matter, the rise of the so-called Pink Tide. All and all, the pickings for Latin America are pretty slim in Service's world history. Latin America, like the rest of the Third World, dissolves into a misted and exotic background for *Comrades: A History of World Communism*. And as communism is declared dead, Latin America becomes a few footnotes in service of another narrative. By relying on this book alone, a reader would never guess that a hundred flowers are currently blooming now in Latin America as it confronts the toxicities of rapacious modern capitalism. And some of those flowers are red.

Closing Thoughts

A global history of communism in the twentieth century is badly needed. Service's survey falls short of the mark. It is good, if caustic and tendentious, in describing communism in Europe; it relies on secondary and often polemical sources for P.R.C.; it is woefully dismissive and uninformed about Africa and Latin America. If you read Service's work, useful correctives can be found in Manuel Caballero's *The Comintern and Latin America*, Sheldon Liss' *Marxist Thought in Latin America*, even

Rollie Poppino's dated Cold War *International Communism in Latin America*. Other useful points of departure can be found in Daniel Castro's edited volume *Revolution and Revolutionaries: Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*. Several case histories on Cuba will also prove useful to the serious student of communism and Cuba: K. S. Karol's fine *Guerrillas in Power*, Gleijeses' *Conflicting Missions* and even Jorge Castañeda's *Utopia Unarmed*. A more comprehensive antidote to Service is to be found in Vijay Prashad's *Darker Nations*. And so that the reader doesn't neglect the current state of that "other imperialism," a useful polemic will be found in Greg Grandin's *Empire's Workshop*. Indeed, there are many, many correctives to Service's works but that is, I fear, a subject for another day.

This is not to say that we avert our glance when contemplating a global history of communism. It is clear that great crimes have been committed in the name of communism. All conscious humanity must reflect on the origins, depth, and consequences of these acts. It is important, though, not to demonize the communist idea. The idea, I would say, will prove to be as enduring—and imperfect—as Christianity. The crimes of communism do not invalidate the continued fight against profane capitalism nor do those crimes negate the need to look through the eyes of Marx, of Gramsci, of Marcuse, of Fidel, of Subcomandante Marcos and through the eyes of the suffering millions who continue to wish not only to understand the world we live in but to change it.