Learn–like Seeger Did—to Sing Another Tune

written by Dan La Botz | February 11, 2014

Bhaskar Sunkara, editor and publisher of *Jacobin*, has written an article for *Al Jazeera America* that, while ostensibly a defense of the great American songwriter and folk singer Pete Seeger, is actually an apologia for the American Communist Party. Bhaskar, my colleague on the *New Politics* editorial board, is a sharp political analyst and *Jacobin* is a new and important voice on the American left, so his muddle on this issue needs to be addressed. American radicals have been decades freeing themselves from the Communist Party's historic dominance of the left, and it would be a shame if today's young activists were to turn back toward that fundamentally flawed and compromised tradition.

The heart of Bhaskar's essay is found in these short paragraphs criticizing those who praised Seeger for his role as one of the best known artistic voices of American social protests from the 1960s until his death, despite his past Communist Party membership:

> *Such attempts at balance miss the mark. It's not that Seeger did a lot of good despite his longtime ties to the Communist Party; he did a lot of good because he was a Communist.*
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> *This point is not to apologize for the moral and social catastrophe that was state socialism in the 20th century, but rather to draw a distinction between the role of Communists when in power and when in opposition. A young worker in the Bronx passing out copies of the Daily Worker in 1938 shouldn't be conflated with the nomenklatura that oversaw labor camps an ocean away.*
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> *As counterintuitive as it may sound, time after time American Communists such as Seeger were on the right side of history — and through their leadership, they encouraged others to join them there.*

Bhaskar's assertion about American Communists being "on the right side of history" flies in the face of all we know about the Soviet Union, the Communist International, and the American Communist Party (CP). The Soviet Union represented not "state socialism" or socialism of any kind, but rather the coming to power of a bureaucratic ruling class that built a totalitarian state and society that oppressed and exploited its own working class—killing millions—while it also controlled and manipulated the Communist Parties in other countries that followed its line through all of the famous "twists and turns" of the period from the late 1920s through the 1950s.

Bhaskar suggests a divorce between the (bad) Communist Party in power in the Soviet Union and the (good) Communist Party in opposition in the United States. But these parties were joined together organizationally and ideologically and pursued the same goal, which was the perpetuation of the Soviet Union's social system and, where possible, its extension to other societies. The national Communist parties not only praised and promoted the Soviet Union and its ruling Communist Party, but also modeled themselves after it, creating authoritarian organizations dominated by loyal Stalinist leaderships.

Bhaskar knows, of course, that by the late 1920s Joseph Stalin had succeeded in taking control of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the government of the Soviet Union, as well of the Communist International that laid down the line for Communist Parties around the world. He seems not to understand, however, that the American CP's leadership, cadres, and many in its rank and file were not political innocents. Stalin and his agents had to approve the Communist Party leadership in

the United States, and those who failed to carry out instructions from Moscow were soon removed from office. Perhaps his readers are unaware that party leaders and key cadres of the American CP of the 1930s were sent to the International Lenin School in Moscow where they were trained in "Marxism-Leninism," a dogmatic perversion of Marxism that argued for the Stalinist-style top-down political party, for the one-party rule of the Communist bureaucracy, and for the party's control of labor unions and other mass movements.

In 1936 the American Communist Party urged its members and fellow-travelers to join the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, to go to Spain, and to join in the defense of the Spanish Republic; but the Brigade also supported attacks on Spanish anarchists and on the Workers Party of Marxist Unification (POUM), including the kidnapping and assassinations of the leaders of those other left organizations—such as Andrés Nin—that were also fighting fascism. Some of those Communists returned to become local leaders of Communist Party chapters or labor unions.

When World War II broke out, the Soviet Union—and therefore Communist Parties around the world—at first aligned themselves with Hitler's Nazi Germany, leading many Communists to quit the party. When Germany attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, the Communists suddenly became supporters of the Allies, joining with Britain, France, and later the United States—the world's three great capitalist and imperialist powers—in the struggle against the Axis. Following the Soviet line, the American CP for the duration of the war opposed the fight for African American liberation, and worked to prevent labor union strikes and to squelch anything that might have disrupted the war effort. When the U.S. government invoked the Smith Act to imprison the Trotskyist leadership of the Minneapolis Teamsters Union, the Communists applauded the government (though later the Smith Act would be used against the Communists themselves from 1949-1958). During the war, the Communists also supported the internment of the Japanese and expelled Japanese members from their own party.

While still running its own candidates, the Communist Party—with the exception of the Henry Wallace Progressive Party campaign of 1948—moved most of its political work into the Democratic Party. The Democrats were at the time the party of the Jim Crow Solid South and the corrupt big city political machines; and the Communists failed to extricate themselves from the Democrats where they have remained for over 65 years.

All of these, however, are details compared to the greatest problem, which was the fact that the Communist Party dictatorship in the Soviet Union became identified in the public mind with socialism, first through the efforts of the Communists and then through the propaganda of the anti-Communists. This did immeasurable harm to the socialist cause. Since the 1920s all of those interested in creating a democratic socialist society have had to struggle to disentangle Marxism from Stalinism, to separate the struggle for socialism from the construction of a Communist dictatorship. We may only now be freeing ourselves from the CP albatross.

Without a doubt, many American radicals who wanted to fight racism, organize labor unions, establish a mass working class party, and fight for socialism were attracted to the Communist Party. The Communist Party, however, also shaped those radicals who joined the party, convincing them to accept its top-down organization, pressuring them to toe the party line, and over time shaping a membership that in too many cases gave up its critical faculties. Party patriotism—much like national patriotism—created a membership that by and large rejected any criticism of the Soviet Union, the Communist International, or the American CP. For too many Communists their attitude was "My party right or wrong." Communist rank-and-filers often adopted a kind of imagined "toughness," a callousness about human life and suffering, summed up in their old adage that you "can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs." Communists were all too often willing to look the other way, turning a blind eye to things they knew were happening in the USSR because one

could not cast any doubt on the “workers homeland.”

It is, of course, true that many rank-and-file Party members, perhaps including Pete Seeger, sincerely believed that they were fighting for something like democratic socialism—although their conception of socialism had to have been corrupted by the need to apologize for Soviet reality, both to others and in their own minds. It is also true that many CPers were barely socialists at all, even subjectively, but saw themselves rather as militant trade unionists or fighters for racial equality. But the point is that whatever rank-and-filers *thought* they were doing, their activity served the needs of the Party as long as they stayed in it. They had no ability to control the policy of the Party or its top leadership, which was selected by the Soviet bureaucracy and which in turn selected the leaders at lower levels of the organization. For Communist leaders, loyalty to Stalin and the Soviet Union was absolute; as soon as that loyalty wavered, they either left the Party or were expelled.

While for years Pete Seeger had been a loyal Stalinist Communist and an exponent of those politics, to his credit by the early 1950s he like so many other Communists a bit later—after the Hungarian Revolution and the Khrushchev report on Stalin’s crimes against humanity to the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party—had broken to a great extent with the Soviet Union and the American CP, even if often retaining a somewhat nostalgic and romanticized view of the Communist past.

Unfortunately Bhaskar doesn’t follow the example of the Seeger he admires. Ignoring the extensive literature on the American Communist Party and its relationship to the Soviet Union, which makes clear its subordination to the bureaucratic Communist model, Bhaskar attempts not the rehabilitation of Seeger, but the refurbishing of the Communist Party and its Popular Front period. If we are going to look back at the Communist Party in order to learn from it—and there is much to learn from that experience—we have to do so critically. If we admire Seeger, as I do, and the thousands of other rank-and-file Communists who fought racism and built labor unions, we have to consider how their accomplishments and the prospects for the socialist cause in the United States were undermined by the fact that they were led by such a fundamentally reactionary political party. Just think of how much better off the left would be today had those activists been democratic radicals and socialists.

If Bhaskar and *Jacobin* are going to be a voice of the American left, they should—as Seeger did—learn to sing another tune.