

The Left Hook: The Marxism of Sidney Hook

August 22, 2016



I. Introduction

When the politics of Sidney Hook, a public intellectual and philosopher, are remembered today, they are generally associated with a right-wing variant of social democracy which was compatible with both neoconservatism and McCarthyism.

For example, in 1953, Hook infamously wrote *Heresy, Yes - Conspiracy, No*, which justified the witch-hunts of the Red Scare and the purging of communists from academia reasoning that Leninist doctrine was the basis of an international communist conspiracy of subversion - with all orders emanating from Moscow.[1] Hook would end his life receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Ronald Reagan, whose policies in support of death squads in El Salvador he had "applauded." However, there was a very different Hook, who during the Great Depression was not only a committed communist revolutionary, but the leading Marxist theorist of his generation. Hook's Marxism is overlooked and misunderstood today due to his later political trajectory. However, Hook made a worthwhile effort to understand Marxism as a revolutionary method of practice. Hook's Marxism was unique not only for engaging with the "Western Marxists" Georg Lukács and Karl Korsch (whose works would not be translated into English until the 1970s), but for incorporating the pragmatism of John Dewey.

II. Background

Sidney Hook was born in Brooklyn, New York on December 20, 1902 to Jewish immigrants from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In his teens, Hook became a supporter of the Debs-era Socialist Party, the Bolshevik Revolution and an opponent of US involvement in the First World War. Hook did not join the Communist Party after its foundation in 1919, but he did remain a fellow-traveler of the party into the 1930s - including being a prominent member of the League of Professionals for Foster and Ford, which was formed to support the Communist Party's Presidential campaign of 1932. After

breaking with the Communist Party in 1933, over the politics of the third period and philosophical differences, Hook was one of the founders of the American Workers Party (AWP) in 1934. The AWP hoped to create a force to the left of the Communists by organizing workers, farmers and the unemployed on a revolutionary platform, which was independent of the USSR. However, Hook left the AWP after they merged with the Trotskyist Communist League of America in December 1934. Hook remained a sympathizer of Trotskyism and the anti-Stalinist left for a few more years until the impact of the Soviet Purges, World War II, and the Cold War caused him to shift to the right.[2]

□□ Hook combined political commitments with a career in academia, earning a Ph.D. at Columbia University in 1927, where he came under the influence of John Dewey, a major pragmatist philosopher. Hook would later be employed as a professor of philosophy at New York University (and later heading the Department of Philosophy) until his retirement in 1972. Hook also studied abroad, spending a year in Germany from 1928-9 where he attended the lectures of Karl Korsch and read Georg Lukács.[3] During this period, Hook spent time in the Soviet Union at the invitation of David Riazanov, Director of the Marx-Engels Institute, where he translated several of Engels' works into English.

III. *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*

On the 50th anniversary of Marx's death and just as President Franklin D. Roosevelt decreed a bank holiday, Hook's masterpiece, *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx: A Revolutionary Interpretation* was released. In his memoirs, Hook said that the time of the book's release occurred when "millions were already convinced that capitalism as an economic system was in ruins, and the thesis of the book, of which they were blissfully aware, apparently confirmed that." [4] Hook's work received rave reviews from across the political spectrum who hailed it as a lucid exposition of Marx's ideas.[5] However, Hook's harshest criticism came not from anyone on the right, but from the Communist Party who denounced the book for its apparent approval of social democracy and revisionism. This was nothing but a hatchet job by the CP, since the opening section of the book is an extended critique and condemnation of social democracy alongside praise for the revolutionary practice of both Lenin and Luxemburg.[6] The dispute between Hook and the CPUSA came down to their vastly divergent views of Marxism. For the Communist Party, Marxism was seen more and more as an infallible science, which in the hands of the party reveals rigid historical laws. According to his biographer Christopher Phelps, Hook's Marxism argued for "a methodological emphasis [on] provisional truth rather than absolute certainty, scientific inquiry over doctrinal fidelity, flux and change over fixity and determinism, and the potential of human action over fatalism... His criticisms [of the CP] derived not from a hostility to communism as a principle and social goal but from the perception that official Communism was straying from its stated aim and classical theory." [7]

A. *Thesis*

The central thesis in *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* is that the guiding theme in both Marx's life and work was his revolutionary opposition to capitalism and class society. Hook bluntly declares: "The purpose of Marx's intellectual activity was the revolutionary overthrow of the existing order." [8] Hook claims that Marx's immediate successors, the Second International of Bernstein, Kautsky, Hilferding, completely misunderstood this and falsified Marx by turning him into a proponent of reformism, fatalism and determinism where socialism was "inevitable."

Hook said that social democracy's approach was an "abandonment of the revolutionary standpoint which was central to Marx's life and thought." [9] This change in the practice of the Second International had come about during decades of "peaceful" development of capitalism encouraged gradualism and parliamentary politics. This was most pronounced in the largest party of the Second International, the German Social Democratic Party who were integrated into the German state.

Germany had grown from being a backwater of Europe to a major imperialist power which was able to grant concessions to the working class such as rising wages and a social safety net. The party's orientation towards reforms resulted in a change in the composition of the SPD with the entrance of non-proletariat elements, the growth of a bureaucracy and officialdom who were cut off from the masses. All of this encouraged tendencies towards conservatism and nationalism within the SPD. Yet this produced in the SPD a need to square their seemingly revolutionary theory with a reformist practice that led to the controversy between revisionism and orthodoxy.

For revisionists such as Eduard Bernstein, the problem was simple enough - they wanted to "update" Marxism by officially turning the party into a social reform group that would bring theory into line with what they were actually doing. Ironically, Hook says, that the revisionists were honest and consistent, by contrast, their orthodox opponents were dishonest for "acting one in one way (always with the revisionists) and speaking in another (always against the revisionists)."[10]

Orthodox Marxists like Karl Kautsky argued that orthodoxy was the correct interpretation of Marxism. Yet this was a very peculiar form of Marxism, which was not viewed as the theory and practice of revolution, but as the science of social development. For orthodox Marxists, socialism comes about inevitably due to the processes at work under capitalism. In other words, this was a passive and fatalistic Marxism that was divorced from revolutionary practice. Hook said that this Marxism could analyze both the past and predict the future, but it was of no use in the present, rather it was a "religion of consolation" that dominated both the SPD and the Second International.[11] Despite their verbal commitment to revolution, orthodox Marxists were similar in practice to the revisionists, despite their claims to the contrary. For both revisionists and orthodox social democrats, there was a divorce between the ends and the means, which emasculated and bastardized Marxism.

□□Rather, Hook said, those who preserved Marxism were Rosa Luxemburg and V. I. Lenin. Not only had they criticized the reformist tendencies within the Second International, but they had argued for a connection between the ends and means, in the form of linking everyday struggles of workers with the conquest of power which was the ultimate aim of the socialist movement. Hook argued that Lenin and Luxemburg put active consciousness back into Marxism, which "was not mystic intuition but scientific knowledge. But scientific knowledge was not merely a disinterested report of objective tendencies in the economic world but a critical appreciation of the possibilities of political action liberated by such knowledge." [12] This Marxism was not just a knowledge of objective tendencies in the economic world, but a critical appreciation of the possibilities open for political action as a result of that knowledge.

To mediate between the two factors of the objective economic conditions and assert a revolutionary class will was the task of a political party which would act as a vanguard and general staff of the class struggle. However, the party's goal is not to organize the development of the economic preconditions of socialism (capitalism did that automatically), but to undertake the conquest of power. And if the goal of socialists was a revolutionary dictatorship, then this entailed the employment of means, "could not be of a kind that hindered the fulfillment of the end." [13] If socialism was "inevitable" and the goal was practical reforms, then it didn't matter if socialists voted to strengthen the bourgeois state (such as by increasing the size of the army) or made opportunistic deals with the class enemy. For revisionists and opportunists, a focus on the seizure of power was a distraction from their struggle for "practical" reforms. On the other hand, if the socialist goal was power, then they had pursue means consistent with that end. This meant socialists could not engage in short term compromises of voting to strengthen the capitalist army. As Hook put it, "if the state had to be captured, it was sheer insanity to begin by strengthening it." [14] Rather reforms would be the byproduct of the struggle for power, not the goal itself. Every class struggle was viewed as potentially a political struggle.

In 1914, when the Second International voted for war, under the banner of orthodoxy, it was Lenin and Luxemburg who remained true to Marxism by arguing for class struggle and the downfall of imperialism. Hook praised them both on no uncertain terms, "The work of Luxemburg and Lenin marked, so to speak, the beginning of the Marxist reformation. The texts of Marx and Engels were to be read in the light of the original spirit behind them. In refusing to be 'orthodox' at any price, Luxemburg and Lenin claimed to be more faithful to the ideas and methods of the men who originally inspired that orthodoxy than the formula - ridden pendants who anathematized them as heretics." [15] Although Lenin and Luxemburg were viewed as faithful disciples of Marx, neither escaped Hook's criticism. According to Hook, Luxemburg was wrong on the organization question with her reliance on spontaneity (as opposed to Lenin) and national liberation. In regards to Lenin, Hook argued that his epistemological approach in *Materialism and Empiro-Criticism* was mechanical, whereas the approach in *What is to Be Done* was Lenin's true philosophy with its "frank acceptance of the active role of class consciousness in the social process." [16]

B. Korsch and Lukács

As mentioned above, Hook was perhaps the only American to have engaged with the works of both Karl Korsch and Georg Lukács. Both were Marxist revolutionaries - in Germany and Hungary respectfully, who sought to purge Marxism of the determinism and fatalism of the Second International and, like Hook, to emphasize the role of active consciousness and revolutionary praxis.

In Korsch's 1923 work, *Marxism and Philosophy*, he argued that for Second International Marxism, theory had ceased to be guide for practice, but was viewed as "more and more as a set of purely scientific observations, without any immediate connection to the political or other practices of class struggle." [17] Korsch said that orthodox Marxism was fragmented with "separate branches of knowledge that are isolated and autonomous, and with purely theoretical investigations that are scientifically objective in dissociation from revolutionary practice" instead of being viewed as "a living totality; or, more precisely, it is a theory of social revolution, comprehended and practised as a living totality." [18] For Korsch, Marxism was not just a science of social development, that could be utilized by any class, but "is the theoretical expression of a revolutionary process" [19] which can not avoid questions of politics, ideology and the state. To neglect these questions is to fall into opportunism. Korsch praised Lenin's approach in the *State and Revolution* in 1917 as "an early indication that the internal connection of theory and practice within revolutionary Marxism had been consciously re-established." [20] Hook shares with Korsch a criticism of orthodox Marxism, determinism, upholding Marxism as a method of revolution and the active role of consciousness.

Although Hook had similar ideas on the role of the party to Lukacs, they diverged on the question of orthodoxy. Lukács had famously tackled the question of orthodoxy and the dialectic in the opening chapter of *History and Class Consciousness*, "What is Orthodox Marxism?" by declaring:

- Let us assume for the sake of argument that recent research had disproved once and for all every one of Marx's individual theses. Even if this were to be proved, every serious 'orthodox' Marxist would still be able to accept all such modern findings without reservation and hence dismiss all of Marx's theses in toto - without having to renounce his orthodoxy for a single moment. Orthodox Marxism, therefore, does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx's investigations. It is not the 'belief' in this or that thesis, nor the exegesis of a 'sacred' book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to method. It is the scientific conviction that dialectical materialism is the road to truth and that its methods can be developed, expanded and deepened only along the lines laid down by its founders. [21]

Despite Lukács' rhetorical point in the above passage, there is little utility in following a method that only produces the wrong results and conclusions. Hook handled questions of method and orthodoxy far differently than Lukács. In regards to orthodoxy, Hook said it was "an anomaly in any revolutionary movement. Its derivation is notoriously religious... Wherever there are people who insist on calling themselves orthodox, there will be found dogma; and wherever dogma, substitution of a blind faith or a general formula for concrete analysis and specific action." [22] Whereas Lukács is orthodox in his dialectical method, in contrast to the determinist and revisionism of the Second International, Hook is unorthodox for precisely that reason. [23]

C. *The Dialectical Method*

Although Hook differed with Lukács on the question of orthodoxy, both did agree that Marxism is defined principally by its method. For Hook, this meant that Marxist intellectual activity was "a program of action; his analyses a method of clearing the way for action." [24] This methodology was experimental since ideas are true only so long as they are verified by experience and practice. The Marxist method was not, as the Communists and the USSR imagined, a rigid dogma and foolproof science, but a flexible method where conclusions were provisional and revised according to the dictates of experience. These themes bore the imprint of John Dewey's pragmatism.

It may seem strange and untenable that Sidney Hook is defending pragmatism as a revolutionary method. After all, pragmatism is associated in the popular mind with opportunism, "doing what works" and anti-intellectualism. [25] And for Marxists, such as George Novack, it is the philosophy of the petty bourgeois tainted by its twin links to liberalism and imperialism. However, this is a vulgarization of pragmatism and not the views of John Dewey, Hook's pragmatist mentor. Dewey saw pragmatism or more preferably "experimentalism" or "instrumentalism" as when the "validity of beliefs and judgments about values is dependent upon the consequences of action undertaken in their behalf." [26] These hypotheses and ideas must then be verified by experience - which extends the scientific method out of the laboratory and into social life. People can thus plan and work towards certain future outcomes. Yet these outcomes are not known in advance, since all conclusions are provisional and need to be proved. While Dewey is not mentioned in *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* and only once in passing in *From Hegel to Marx* (1936), his influence on Hook's perception of the dialectical method is undeniable.

According to Hook, the dialectic is not a dogma or a religious mystery, but a logic of movement, growth, and action. The dialectic was applicable to all levels of existence and it seeks objective knowledge of the natural and social world from the standpoint of the doer, not the spectator. Human action is the necessary element of the dialectic. Hook stresses that there is a difference between the laws of the natural world and those of the social. In the latter, human thinking is an active historical force. After all, human productive activities give rise to new needs and desires because as people act on the external world, they change their nature in the process. It is only through practice that problems can be solved. Hook went so far as to claim that: "Any problem which cannot be solved by some actual or possible practice may be dismissed as no genuine problem at all." [27] The dialectic was thus the philosophical rhythm of conscious life.

Hook summarizes his defense of the dialectic along pragmatist lines as follows:

- The truth of any theory depends upon whether or not the actual consequences which flow from the praxis initiated to test the theory are such that they realize the predicted consequences. In other words, for Marx all genuine questions are scientifically determinable even though for a variety of reasons we may never know the answer to some of them. Since all judgments are hypotheses, the expectations which enter into the process of discovering the truth about them are not the personal and private expectations of the individual thinker but the public and

verifiable expectations which logically flow from the hypotheses entertained. What a man wants to believe is relevant only to what he believes, but it is not to its truth. There is no will to believe in Marx but a will to action, in order to test belief and get additional grounds for further action if necessary. What takes place as a result of practice is not a relevant consequence of the theory unless the conditions involved in the meaning of the theory are met.[28]

In other words, the dialectical method is not a dogma or inflexible method, but is flexible, provisional and the hypotheses proposed are subject to change based on practice.

Hook's incorporation of pragmatism also allows him to defend Marxism as a science. Hook said that, despite its professed goal of revolutionary overthrow of the existing order, this "did not make [Marx's] conclusions any less objective, but it made them partial in their bearings and implications." [29] Marxism was the revolutionary class theory of the proletariat and that class had different goals and interests from those of the bourgeoisie. Thus the social theory of the proletariat would naturally be denounced as wrong and dangerous by its class enemy.

This understanding of Marxism as a science, yet tied to the class interests of the proletariat, can be seen in Hook's defense of the labor theory of value. The labor theory of value is not a myth, but

- is rather the self-conscious theoretical expression of the working class engaged in a continuous struggle for a higher standard of living - a struggle which reaches its culmination in social revolution. It states what the working class is struggling for and the consequences of its success and failure... In its full implications it can be grasped only by one who has accepted the class struggle from the standpoint of the working class and thrown himself into its struggles. To the extent that economic phenomena are removed from the influences of the class struggle, the analytical explanation in terms of the labor theory of value grow more and more difficult. The labor theory of value is worth saving if the struggle against capitalism is worth the fight.[30]

Lastly, Hook sought to reconcile pragmatism and communism by stating that only by establishing communism could the pragmatist ideal of free inquiry truly be realized since capitalist society blocked any proposal or genuine inquiry that questioned or challenged private property. "That is why no true social experiment is possible in class society." [31] The result of Hook's elaborate exposition, synthesis and reconstruction of Marxism during the 1930s was what Phelps called, "one of the most substantial contributions to Marxist philosophy in American history." [32]

IV. The Right Hook

So what explains Sidney Hook's later right-wing trajectory and odious positions? Some of his critics cast blame upon his blending of Marxism and pragmatism. However, Dewey's influence on Hook was at its lowest point during the 1930s. In this period, Hook criticized Dewey for failing to see the struggle of the working class as the appropriate means of change. And as we have already discussed, Hook barely discusses Dewey by name in his major writings on Marx.[33]

What was more decisive in Hook's later evolution were wider social and political factors. In the 1920s and 30s, Hook had managed to balance a commitment to both philosophy and political action, but the demands of career and family no doubt encouraged him to retreat from politics.[34]

Yet this still doesn't explain his adoption of right-wing politics. Alan Wald, in his study of the Anti-Stalinist New York Intellectuals of the 1930s – the broader milieu that Hook was a part of – identifies a number of factors that brought them close to Marxism, but in their absence caused them to shift to the right. First, their anti-Stalinism had a dual nature which “allowed the possibility of either a return to classical Marxism or a sharp turn to the right, depending on individual circumstance and the complexity of the context in which an individual became an anti-Stalinist.”[35] During the 1930s, there were radical working class movements in the US and abroad that inspired these intellectuals to see socialism as a viable alternative to capitalism, whether the CIO or anarchists and the POUM in Spain. Thirdly, Leon Trotsky offered a Marxist, democratic and revolutionary alternative to the conservatism of the existing Communist Parties and the USSR. Lastly, many of the New York intellectuals lived in poor financial straits and expected few rewards for social advancement or success under the current system.[36] However, as Wald notes, at the end of World War II, all of this changed:

- The very factors that had occasioned the development of the intellectuals into revolutionaries in the 1930s had dissipated. Moreover, they had abandoned their ties to those socialist groups that might have reinforced their original convictions. So by the time a resurgence of social and political struggle occurred in the 1960s, many of the intellectuals had become hardened apologists for American imperialism.[37]

V. Conclusion

Sidney Hook, despite his sharp mind, was not immune from these social and political pressures. He too, ultimately succumbed to puerile anticommunism. It is also a sad fact that Hook's abandonment of the revolutionary left meant he refused to allow *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* to be republished during his lifetime for fear that it would “corrupt the youth.” Yet Hook's work not only remains worth reading for its clarity and commitment, but many of the problems he identified – avoiding dogma and using Marxism as a method for revolutionary change – still remain with us.

Endnotes

[1] Sidney Hook, “Heresy, Yes – Conspiracy, No,” *Dissent Magazine*. https://www.dissentmagazine.org/wp-content/files_mf/1390433798d15Hook.pdf; Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Intellectuals From the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 290-1; Christopher Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook: Marxist and Pragmatist* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 227-8.

[2] For more, see Phelps 2005, 74-139; Wald 1987, 3-16; Sidney Hook, *Out of Step: A Unique Life in the 20th Century* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, Inc., 1987), 7-207.

[3] “The author wishes to state his indebtedness to two contemporary writers: Georg Lukács whose *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* stresses the significance of the dialectic element in Marx's thought and links Marx up – unfortunately much too closely – with the stream of German classical philosophy; and to Karl Korsch whose *Marxismus und Philosophie* confirms the author's own hypothesis of the practical-historical axis of Marx's thought, but which underestimates the difficulties involved in treating the formal aspects from Marx's thought from this point of view.” Sidney Hook, *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx: A Revolutionary Interpretation* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2002), xii [73]. Brackets indicate the page numbers in the updated edition.

[4] Hook 1987, 165.

[5] Hook 2002, [39]-[43].

[6] Ibid. 43-53.

[7] Phelps 2005, 89. See also Hook's own account of his fight with the CP over his book in Hook 1987, 158-65.

[8] Hook 2002, 68 [142].

[9] Ibid. ix [71].

[10] Ibid. 41 [115].

[11] Ibid. 28 [102].

[12] Ibid. 55 [129].

[13] Ibid. 58 [132].

[14] Ibid. 59 [133].

[15] Ibid. 60 [134].

[16] Ibid. 63 [137].

[17] Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 60.

[18] Ibid. 60 and 57.

[19] Ibid. 69.

[20] Ibid. 68.

[21] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (MIT Press, Cambridge, 1971), 1.

[22] Hook 2002, ix [71].

[23] Wald 1987, 121.

Hook also followed in Lukács in touching on Marx's ideas on reification: "The historical expressions of a set of relations of production were turned into fixed things; and human behavior in all its economic ramifications was explained as controlled by things.

The upshot of this unhistorical approach corresponds to the actual consciousness of those who live in a commodity-producing society and have not yet penetrated the secret of commodity production. The rise and fall of the market, periodic glut and scarcity, small-scale and large-scale panics, are taken as natural events bestowing blessings and calamities, like the fortunes of the weather, upon the just and unjust, the wise and the unwise. The social relations between human beings are 'thingified' into impersonal automatic laws while the material instruments of life are 'personified' into the directing forces of human destiny. Man finds himself ruled by the products (commodities) of his own hands." Hook 2002, 188 [262].

[24] Hook 2002, 65 [139].

[25] Phelps 2005, 7. George Novack, *Pragmatism vs. Marxism* (New York: Pathfinder, 1975).

[26] John Dewey, "The Quest for Certainty," Marxists Internet Archive. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/dewey.htm>

[27] Hook 2002, 76 [150].

[28] Sidney Hook, *From Hegel to Marx: Studies in the Intellectual Development of Karl Marx* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 284-5.

[29] Hook 2002, 106 [180].

[30] Ibid. 222-223 [296]-[297].

[31] Ibid. 105 [179].

[32] Phelps 2002, 9.

[33] Ibid. 54.

[34] Ibid. 119 and 130.

[35] Wald 1987, 157.

[36] Ibid. 366-74. See also Alan Wald. 1984. "The New York Intellectuals in Retreat." In *Socialist Perspectives*, ed. Phyllis and Julius Jacobson, 178-9. New York: Karz-Chol Publishing, Inc.

[37] Wald 1987, 368.

Originally posted here.