

SIDNEY HOOK: DEFENDER OF DEMOCRACY

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Sidney Hook was one of America's most noted pragmatists. A protege of John Dewey, Hook was the first avowed Marxist professor in the United States. After initially trying to unite Marxism and pragmatism, he became disillusioned with communism after seeing it in practice in the Soviet Union, and became a noted opponent of Soviet dominance over Eastern Europe. Hook's writings on democracy have new relevance as Eastern Europe attempt to enact new democratic institutions after the collapse of the Soviet Union – something which Hook did not himself live to see.

It is fitting at this conference on Democracy in Post-Communist Eastern Europe to discuss the work of the pragmatist philosopher Sidney Hook (1902-1989). He was one of America's premier defenders of democracy. A protégé of the great philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952),¹ Hook dedicated his entire career to battling against totalitarianism and all assaults on human dignity. Sadly, he did not live to see the triumph of democratic values occur in Eastern Europe, although he was aware of the deep changes which were taking place. Nonetheless, his influence continues.

Hook was born in Brooklyn, the child of Jewish immigrant parents who had fled Eastern Europe because of persecution. He grew up in dire poverty, a circumstance which was to fuel his later embrace of socialism. Hook was fortunate to get an excellent education at the only public school in Brooklyn which was limited to outstanding students. He entered City College, where he studied with one of the country's few Jewish professors, the philosopher Morris Cohen. From 1923 to 1927, Hook was a graduate student in philosophy at Columbia University, where he met his mentor, John Dewey, and completed a dissertation under the latter's auspices, entitled *The Metaphysics of Pragmatism* (1927).

¹ The best introduction to Dewey's life and work is *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, edited by Paul Arthur Schilpp (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1989).

In 1927, Hook was fortunate to receive a teaching position at New York University (Jewish professors were restricted from teaching at most American colleges). He was to remain there until his retirement in 1969. Long interested in the radical social philosophy of Karl Marx, Hook was America's first explicitly Marxist professor. What he particularly appreciated in Marx was his call for human liberation from social and economic constraints which alienated people from themselves. Like Marx, Hook espoused the desire to allow people to enjoy moral autonomy, determining the patterns of their own life, limited only by the necessities of nature.

While he would later become an ardent anti-Communist, Hook continued to respect Marx as a philosopher. In an interview published in the Summer 1985 journal *Free Inquiry*, Hook declared that: "As I read Marx, it seems to me that he is committed to democracy as a way of life, that is to say, to an equality of concern for all human beings to develop themselves to their full, desirable potential. . . . I am firmly convinced that Marx was a fighter for human freedom and that he envisioned a society in which what we call 'human rights' would be universally established."² It is no wonder that Hook became incensed by those who used Marx's writings to justify the censoring of free ideas, or the suppression of human rights.

What made Hook's examination of Marx unique was his attempt to couple the Marxist call for social action with an instrumentally-based experimental approach. As a student of Dewey's, he had already worked out a synthesis of Marxist ideology and pragmatism. For him, the writings of Marx were not analogous to sacred texts, never to be criticized or updated, but rather a sketch for social progress which could be altered in light of new information. This attitude was to eventually bring about a break between Hook and most of the other leading Marxist scholars in America and abroad.

In 1928-29, Hook was granted a Guggenheim Fellowship. He traveled first to Germany, and then to Russia, doing research on the historical development of Marx's philosophy, where he was invited to the prestigious Marx-Engels Institute. Hook was impressed by the imposing facility, which had formerly been the palace of a Royal Prince, and he dryly noted that: "There was nothing particularly proletarian about the Marx-Engels Institute except the face of the red-kerchiefed peasant woman who guarded the gates. She did her job well, for no one could approach, except on business, the beautiful, flowered walks that led up to the entrance."³ He stayed in Moscow for fourteen weeks, getting a first-hand look at how the people there were living. It was at this time that he began to realize that the ideal vision he and many other American intellectuals had regarding the utopian society the Bolsheviks had erected was sorely mistaken. Political dissent was not allowed (Trotsky had recently fled from the country, and one of his closest associates had committed suicide in order to avoid arrest). Although the Great Depression had not

² "An Interview with Sidney Hook", *Free Inquiry*, Vol. 5, No. 3, Summer 1985, p. 30.

³ Sidney Hook, *Out of Step: An Unquiet Life in the 20th Century* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., 1987), p. 121.

yet begun, Hook was struck by the amount of poverty he saw in this supposed “workers paradise.” Yet during this period, he remained an ardent supporter of the Soviet regime. In his autobiography *Out of Step*, Hook reflected on his early years as a Communist sympathizer:

What accounted for my failure to discover the truth and even to search for it with the zeal with which I would have pursued reports of gross injustice committed elsewhere? . . . I had come to the Soviet Union with the faith of someone already committed to the Socialist ideal and convinced that the Soviet Union was genuinely dedicated to its realization. . . . My teacher, John Dewey, who had visited Russia in 1928, had declared its educational system to be the most enlightened in the world and closest to his own ideals. Actually, although I was as impressed as Dewey was by the *pronouncements* of Soviet educators, I was never taken in by the claims that Soviet educational practices lived up to them on a large scale. On the basis of what I was told by the Russian families I got to know, I became convinced that Dewey in 1928 and George Counts, whom I met that summer in 1929, were being shown specially selected classes and schools that were not representative at all.⁴

Although he continued to be active in Communist circles upon his return to America, Hook had started to doubt the truths of what he had been told. While continuing to write about Marx (and even offering the first undergraduate course in the United States on Marx’s philosophy), Hook became convinced that the Soviet Union, far from bringing about the sort of classless society which *The Communist Manifesto* had foretold, was actually perpetuating a totalitarian system. Understandably, the Moscow trials of the former leaders of the Revolution further disillusioned him. Convinced that the accusations against Trotsky were false, in 1937 Hook organized the Commission of Inquiry into the Truth of the Moscow Trials. Held in Mexico City, where Trotsky was living in exile, the Commission was chaired by John Dewey himself. World attention was focused on this examination of the unjustified methods which Stalin had used to destroy all his rivals.

Hook was for many years a regular contributor to *The Partisan Review*, a journal began in 1934, which has been called the most influential little magazine ever published in America. Most of the editors were initially either Communist Party members or supporters, but the *Review*’s articles became increasingly anti-Stalinistic over the years. The pivotal break with Stalinism came after the Non-Aggression Pact between Germany and the Soviet Union was signed in 1939. Hook became the journal’s most vocal opponent of the Soviet Union’s repressive policies, such as its bloody purges, its mass deportations, its gulags for political opponents, and its wholesale executions of countless innocent people. He also strongly criticized American intellectuals who continued to praise Stalin while ignoring his dic-

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 123-124.

tatorial misuse of power. Perhaps Hook's most famous contribution to this journal was his essay, "The New Failure of Nerve", which appeared in 1943. Published along with companion pieces by such other notables as John Dewey, Ernest Nagel, and Ruth Benedict, Hook castigated the radical critics of the war, including the remaining followers of Trotsky. In his history of *The Partisan Review*, Terry A. Cooney describes this series of essays:

The common theme was that the ideas of such thinkers as Reinhold Neibuhr, Jacques Maritain, and Aldous Huxley represented a contemporary flight from rationality and from the critical traditions built up over two hundred years. Within the *Partisan Review* circle, only one of these essays attracted any substantial response – the two-part article by Hook that served as the flagship of the series. Listing a whole set of movements that betokened "intellectual panic," Hook declared that liberalism, not as ideology but "as an intellectual temper, as faith in intelligence," was "everywhere on the defensive." The present "attack upon scientific method" required a campaign to "prevent intellectual hysteria from infecting those who still cling to the principles of rational experiment and analysis."⁵

This was a campaign which Hook would steadfastly wage for the rest of his life. He continued to write provocative works, defending rationality as the best tool for dealing with problems. Also in 1943, he wrote one of his most influential books, *The Hero in History: A Study in Limitation and Possibility*. Lewis Feuer was to call this work Hook's "definitive rejection of Marxism."⁶ In it, Hook challenged the prevalent Marxist notion of the inevitability of the stages of economic development and the concomitant view that human beings play little role in such changes. Hook went so far as to argue that the October Revolution itself would never have happened without the organizational skills and ideological fervor of Lenin to propel it forward:

But without Nicolai Lenin the work of the Bolshevik Party from April to October, 1917, is unthinkable. Anyone who familiarizes himself with its internal history will discover that objectives, policy, slogans, controlling strategy, day-by-day tactics were laid down by Lenin. Sometimes he counselled in the same painstaking way that a tutor coaches a spirited but bewildered pupil; sometimes he commanded like an impatient drill sergeant barking at a raw recruit. But from first to last it was Lenin. Without him there would have been no October Revolution.⁷

⁵ Terry A. Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), p. 192.

⁶ Lewis Feuer, "From Ideology to Philosophy: Sidney Hook's Writings on Marxism" in *Sidney Hook and the Contemporary World*, edited by Paul Kurtz (New York: The John Day Company, 1968), p. 47.

⁷ Sidney Hook, *The Hero in History* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1992), p. 130.

In a postscript he added to the book's republication in 1978, Hook goes on to warn about the danger which "event-making personalities" like Lenin or Stalin can play in a democratic system. "As a principled democrat," Hook adds, "I make a crucial distinction between the 'great' man or woman who imposes his will on the electorate by manipulating the sources of public opinion and resorting to other devious means of patronage and intimidation, and the democratic leader who does not flinch from following his sense of high responsibility even when it conflicts with the prejudices of the crowd but who relies only on persuasion and intelligent compromise to win their support."⁸ For this reason, any democratic system must place great emphasis on the education of its populace, and must find ways to encourage them to participate in the electoral system, so that it will not be usurped by ambitious, powerful figures who have little regard for the rule of law.

Hook argued that event-making men and women are unlikely to emerge within a democracy, primarily because in order to make monumental changes, they would have to subvert the democratic system itself. Still, in times of peril, such as the American Civil War and World War II, democratic leaders have been able to significantly effect events. The ideal democratic hero possesses two key traits: moral courage and intellectual honesty. In that sense, democracies do have room for heroic figures, who work within the system, and who stand as exemplars of integrity in their defense of liberal ideals. Hook adds:

Inspired by Jefferson, John Dewey a century and half later developed the philosophy of participatory democracy. It presupposes not that all citizens are equal in the capacity to govern, but that they are all equally entitled to judge those who govern them; and that the soundness of their judgment depends upon the extent to which they attend to the daily business of government as it affects them and their neighbors where they work and live.⁹

Hook was to devote much of his later writings to delineating a theory of democracy. Like his mentor John Dewey, he drew a strong connection between democratic practices and public education for the masses. Yet even above democracy itself, Hook placed a strong emphasis on the virtue of freedom. He recognized the paradox that within a democracy a majority could vote to *abolish* democracy. Should such a state of affairs occur, he argued, one had an obligation to fight against such a regime. Furthermore, Hook doubted that people would actually freely choose to give up their political power if they were not coerced into doing so. "I have enough faith in human beings," he stated late in his life, "(because ultimately that's what our faith in democracy rests on) to believe that when given a free

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

choice they will know what their own interests are better than others. If one doesn't believe that, one can't reasonably be a democrat."¹⁰

While he became most famous for his opposition to Communism, Hook did not consider this to be his main role, but only a natural part of his overall quest for freedom. At the end of his autobiography, he wrote: "I no longer believe that the central problem of our time is the choice between capitalism and socialism but [rather] the defense and enrichment of a free and open society against totalitarianism."¹¹

It is ironic, then, that the most recent examination of his life and influence, Christopher Phelps' *Young Sidney Hook* (1997), calls for a reevaluation of Hook's early career. Phelps argues that Hook's most important contribution to political discourse was his defense of revolutionary socialism.¹² Yet Hook was supremely suspicious of revolutionaries, having so often witnessed the dire consequences which such movements have had upon the general public. While Phelps makes the case that Hook's 1933 book *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx: A Revolutionary Interpretation* was his major work, Hook was to distance himself from it, going so far as to refuse to let it be reprinted. Still, his respect for Marx as a reformer remained strong. In his last interview, published in the Summer 1989 *Free Inquiry*, just a month before his death on July 12, 1989, Hook stated that "Marx's ideas – what he said and what people think he said – still have relevance to what's going on in the world today, and to the possibilities open to human beings. It seems to me quite clear that unless people have some understanding of what Marx taught and how others interpret his teachings, they can't understand the world in which they live; it is as if they are trying to understand the Middle Ages without any knowledge of Christianity."¹³

After his retirement from New York University, Hook spent the remainder of his career as a Senior Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution of War, Revolution and Peace, at Stanford University. He received many awards in his last years, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1984. He was also fortunate to have a wide circle of good friends, especially the philosopher Paul Kurtz. A student of Hook's at New York University, Kurtz went on to complete a doctorate at Columbia University, and always credited Hook as his chief mentor. The two men were to work together on many projects, including the defense of academic freedom, an opposition to Soviet imperialistic aspirations, and the advocacy of a secular humanistic worldview. Much like Dewey and Hook in an earlier generation, their working relationship was a close one. In a charming passage in *Out of Step*, Hook writes

¹⁰ "An Interview with Sidney Hook", p. 29.

¹¹ *Out of Step*, pp. 600-601.

¹² Christopher Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1997).

¹³ "The Future of Marxism: An Interview with Sidney Hook", *Free Inquiry*, Vol. 9, No. 3, Summer 1989, p.16.

that: "It came as a great surprise to me (and as a shock) to learn a few years ago of the existence of a letter from Dewey to his old friend, James H. Tufts, written during my last year at Columbia. He told Tufts that he was ready to resign his post and withdraw from the field of philosophy because he had found a successor. And he named me as that successor!"¹⁴ In a similar fashion, Hook found a worthy successor in Paul Kurtz, who has continued to fight for most of those causes that Hook himself so passionately addressed. Just as Hook had organized several conferences and *festschriften* in honor of Dewey, so Kurtz put together two volumes on Hook's life and influence: the first on Hook's 65th birthday, the second on his 80th.

It is sad to note that Sidney Hook did not live to see the collapse of the totalitarian Soviet regime he had criticized for so long. Still, his own writings, and his personal courageous opposition, played no small part in its downfall. In the fight for democratic freedom throughout the world, Hook himself was, as the title of his book stated, a hero in history.

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¹⁴ *Out of Step*, p. 90.