

Review

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Michael E. Brown. *The Historiography of Communism*. (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2009)

Michael E. Brown notes at the beginning of this collection of essays that “[d]ebates within and about the historiography of communism seem to be instances of how discourse comes to be constrained in antidiscursive ways” (41). Though Brown has a good deal to say about these constraints and how they operate, in some ways the key intellectual dynamic of this book runs in the opposite direction, towards the kinds of discourses that are made possible, and indeed necessary, by certain aspects of society. Throughout this collection, which covers topics from the nature of ideology to the breakup of the Soviet Union to E.P. Thompson’s methodology, Brown seeks to develop understandings of the human sciences that come to terms with the necessarily social character of human society.

The book’s Introduction establishes Brown’s program by examining the interaction between the concepts of “society” and “the Left.” Attempts to write the Left out of American history, such as Theodore Draper’s relentless insistence that any aspect of the Communist Party must be examined through the lens of its relationship to the Soviet Union, have an impact on how one conceives of American society. As Brown notes, texts like Draper’s, which don’t see the history of the Left as rooted in the history of American society, have “bearing on deciding how the history of American society ought to be understood – e.g. as the history of democracy rather than the history of capitalism” (3).

The implications run the other way as well. By masking the contradictions of American society that give rise to oppositional movements (what Marx referred to as “the bad side of history”), historiographies that emphasize the development of democracy and the actions of the state “make the existence of a Left virtually unimaginable” (4).

Given the close relationship between concepts of the Left and concepts of society, Brown argues that the former should be seen as an immanent feature of the latter, the

“irrepressible and irreducibly critical aspect” of capitalist society (3). In other words, the history of the Left shows the necessity for theories of society to account for the aspects of their subject which manifest as critiques of it.

Brown continues this theme in the two chapters on “Issue in the Historiography of Communism” that form the heart of the book. In these chapters, Brown attempts to discern the discursive categories which separate different types of works on the history of American communism. In the first chapter, Brown develops a theory of three different types of histories: those written while witnesses to the object of the writing were still abundant, those written while the witnesses were dying, and those which can only rely on preserved documentation. These three categories are separated by the rules that govern each. Writing while the witnesses are alive gives the historian the option of cross-examination, of checking the veracity of any given account against another. Writing while the last witnesses are dying is, in Brown’s words, “an altogether more desperate venture, one that sacrifices the elevated perspective of the survivor for the final, impatient, and virtually administrative settling of accounts” (80). Finally, writing after the death of the witnesses is different from the other two in that it is necessarily theoretical, as different methods for assembling and interpreting the same material must be developed and weighed against one another.

Brown uses these three different modes of history writing, in particular the last two, to explain the longevity and apparently static quality of the debate between the “traditionalists” and “revisionists” in the historiography of communism. Concentrating his interpretation on the debate between Theodore Draper and various revisionist historians that took place in 1985 in the *New York Review of Books*, Brown argues that Draper’s work, written as the last of the first generation of American communists were dying, is governed by fundamentally different rules than the revisionist historians of the seventies and eighties. While the revisionist writers draw on developments from structuralism, discourse theory, and Marxism, writers attempting to settle accounts often portray their subjects through a dispositional logic – organizational structure as the expression of “sacred texts,” subjects’ motivations as governed by forces hidden to them but obvious to the author, etc. Ultimately, Brown argues, attempts to incorporate

histories such as Draper's into the new historical literature on the Communist Party are "like trying to use bricks as furniture" (88). The two bodies of work developed in periods separated by the different status of their object in each. As such, their discursive logics are irreconcilable.

While Brown argues strongly for this interpretation, as well as for other themes developed in the essays in this collection, many of his conclusions are undermined by an apparent lack of stakes. If Brown is insistent on tracing the connections between historical discourses and their conditions of production, he is far less concerned with highlighting the political stakes involved in his argument. This is an unusual stance in the historiography of communism. As Brown makes clear, Theodore Draper wrote his history of the Communist Party with the hopes of closing the book on that chapter of American radicalism. Contemporary historians seeking to preserve Draper's interpretation, such as Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, have gone even further and all but accused revisionist historians of treason. The revisionists themselves wrote with clear political intent, as they came out of the struggles of the New Left intent on searching for their political ancestors. Given the tremendous political resonance of so many histories of communism, Brown's near-exclusive focus on their intellectual operations sometimes leaves one feeling underwhelmed.

The political implications of Brown's arguments are finally taken up at length in book's last two chapters, on "Left Futures" and "Rethinking the Crisis of Socialism." Both written originally in the 1990s, these chapters don't explicitly follow Brown's earlier arguments about the rhetoric of Communist historiography, although they both continue his methodological approach of examining societal phenomena as immanent features of capitalist society.

"Left Futures" analyzes recent discussions revolving around the prospects for a new, unified Left after the collapse of Communism. Brown spends a great deal of time in this essay examining the logic behind calls for a new, unified Left to arise out of the "new social movements" of the 1970s. These calls, he writes, are noteworthy for the stridency with which they proclaim unity to be a value and the intensely critical attitude they take towards the Lefts of the past. They also often argue for greater participation in the institutions of the state through mainstream political parties. Asking again what this

means for conceptions of society, Brown argues that these proposals assume a history of American society “open to the very pluralism that generations of Left thinkers and researchers have shown to be impossible” (173). In other words, they repress the history of American society, which leads to the development of previous Lefts. In their anxiousness to separate themselves from previous “bad” Lefts, those calling for a new Left based on new principles have also cut themselves off from history.

The following chapter deals with the reaction of the American Left to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Brown argues that far too many Leftists have seen socialism as only the negation of capitalism, rather than a movement of history which emerges dialectically from the contradiction between the socialization of production and the private control of capital. By treating socialism as something wholly apart from capitalism, Brown argues, many attempts to analyze the Soviet Union were easily drawn into using an assemblage of categories (totalitarianism, statism, etc.) which presupposed that the societies ruled by Communist Parties were not subject to the same dialectical tensions as capitalist society. The elimination of these tensions occurred in two forms: first, in the theoretical elimination of Soviet civil society as a factor in Soviet history, and second, the lack of attention paid to the linkages and contradictions of the Soviet economy to the global economy. These theoretical maneuvers prevented many Leftists from anticipating the upheavals that led to the end of the Soviet Union; in the aftermath, some even adopted what Brown calls “the prophetic language” of the right, attempting to use the banalities of State Department theorists like Fukuyama and Huntington to create a Left freed from the historical burdens of Communism.

Though Brown is properly critical of these currents, he is equally unsympathetic to theories which deny that the Soviet Union had a socialized economy. In another essay, for example, he argues that many critical accounts of Soviet society “typically rely on ‘class’ and ‘state’ models more suitable for a sociology of capitalism than for the analysis of social economies such as Soviet socialism” (178), effectively ruling out in advance the possibility that such models could produce important understandings of Soviet society, which would raise the question of whether socialism is a proper descriptor for the USSR. Later, Brown criticizes critical accounts of the Soviet Union for relying too heavily on a state-centered methodology which effectively banished Soviet civil society

from the theoretical horizon. These two criteria for disqualification allow Brown to rule out in advance even those theories which focus on both the contradictions of Soviet civil society and the determinations of the global economy upon Soviet society, namely the various theories of state capitalism.

Altogether, *The Historiography of Communism* is a thought-provoking collection of essays on a wide variety of topics. Though there is little here that will fundamentally re-orient the debates surrounding the subject, by introducing critical reflection on the logic they follow Brown has helped to pave the way for more theoretically aware discussions in the future. This is a contribution that can only be welcomed.