APROPOS APOSTASY

By WILLIAM S. SCHLAMM

THE EX-COMMUNIST has become arch-typical for our disjointed decade but seems to be as generally unloved as the times he signifies. His predicament may be measured by the fact that he constitutes the only topic on which Westbrook Pegler and Eleanor Roosevelt persistently agree: they both hate the ex-Communist, albeit for opposite reasons — Mr. Pegler being unable to forgive the wretched man's past, Mrs. Roosevelt his reneging present. A Pegler-Roosevelt consensus on anything at all is surely a sufficiently remarkable spectacle to recommend inquiry — particularly if it promises to illuminate some other corners of the contemporary stage.

The ambiguities start with the label. It makes about as much sense to call one man an ex-Communist as to call every man an ex-child; which of course means that it does make *some* sense. It was generally known even before Freud that the child (its adventures and frustrations) remains traceable throughout grown man's entire life; and it is equally probable that the impulses which moved a person to fall in love with communism in an early phase of his growth will stay alive and operate after his conversion back to intellectual and moral sanity. So, if we choose, we may go on calling people ex-children in general and ex-Communists in particular.

Yet relevant information on a convert's personality will be found, not in the statistical fact of his former affiliation, but in the nature of his need for it. Berlin's extraordinary Mayor Reuter and his poisonous opponent, Gerhart Eisler, joined the Party almost at the same time, about 32 years ago; but their spectacularly different development since ought to have fully clarified that the two men must have taken an identical step for just about the opposite reasons — Reuter apparently because he mistook communism for a guarantor of human freedom; Eisler, because unashamed violence has always fascinated cynical intelligences. Such misunderstandings do happen, as no one knows better than Mr. Pegler. In the thirties, he supported F.D.R. and the Communist-inspired Newspaper Guild — presumably (and this is the pertinent catch) for the very same reason that made him later fight both: Mr. Pegler was then, as he is now, strictly against any pushing around of his friend George Spelvin, American.

The most calamitous short circuits in human affairs occur when motives get crossed. And the Pegler position of once-a-Communist-always-a-Communist won't do, because, among other things, it is wrong. His diagnosis presupposes that communism can attract only one very special sort of mind, the predetermined and therefore hopeless victim of an alien and rare plague. But cumulative evidence shows that communism, like polio, can strike anybody anywhere. Why? Because, while our modern society is empty of disciplined dedication, even the most modern of men eternally hunger for it. Distressed by a secularized world that seems to have lost all purpose, the sensitive young take easily to the opium for the intelligentsia — communism.

Why has it proved impossible for an illustrious majority of the world's important writers to avoid being captured, for a varying spell of sleep-walking, by the mendacious heresy? In "Verdict Of Three Decades" (Duell, Sloan and Pearce), an anthology shrewdly compiled and competently annotated by Julien Steinberg, dozens of famous voices explain their ultimate "individual revolt against Soviet communism." Intelligent college teachers who want to steer their students through the pains of growing up mentally could do much worse than introduce this volume, perhaps together with the preceding "The God That Failed," as textbook material for political science classes. Mr. Steinberg's choice selections from a tremendously growing crop of conversion literature give, quite definitively, a twofold evidence. They prove, one, that any authentic intelligence can finally recover from the ferocious attack of the potent lie; and two, that any authentic intelligence can be its victim.

Perhaps our more pessimistic theologians are right: perhaps young intellectuals *do* become Communists because man is born with original sin (which is pride). But the real hell of it is that, two times out of three, the Great Whore solicits our young men with the promise of *purification!* With justice, however, the devil is the final dupe: a person taken in by that sort of promise will dependably walk out again, Mr. Pegler notwithstanding, because the very same thing that first made him embrace communism must later make him fight it — his sensitive skin.

But what is true in two out of three cases may not necessarily apply to the third. Communism, a drive-in philosophy that can accommodate all kinds of customers, also appeals to some people's degraded craving for the violence man can do to man. For these, there will come neither a time nor a need for apostasy: in their case, the devil has faithfully kept the contract and honestly delivered all the thrills they were led to expect.

All available testimony counsels confidence in the superior power of motive over the more or less accidental error of affiliation. Such confidence, in turn, counsels anything but indulgence toward the error. To the contrary, short of grace, there is no other cure for the heretic but to be held strictly responsible for the consequences and the company of his heresy; and it remains society's pedagogic duty to push the heretic's nose into the mess he's making, whatever his motives may be. But society could not fulfil that duty, and thereby cure itself of an ever-present infection, if the Pegler position ever became official. The survival of free society depends very much on man's proven capacity to change, not his nature, but his mind. Fortunately, the rule that applies to the fundamentally sane person is not the Pegler adage but rather its reversal: once-a-Communist-never-a-Communist-again.

Much too often the ex-Communist himself seems to invite the sullen animosity around him. The convert, not unlike the lover, tends to yell that nothing comparable has ever happened before; and his breathless rapture is not only quite ludicrous but also a bit offensive. In the long run the world *does* mind being told ten times a year how one X.Y., still panting from his late discovery, has found out that Stalin is a Bolshevik. Rumors to that effect have been going around for quite some time, and though the most recent discoverer's slowness does not necessarily prove him an ass, all by itself it does not necessarily establish his claim to intellectual leadership either. If Hamlet had been nothing but slow, there would have been no play.

It is his pompous insistence on tragedy that defeats many an ex-Communist. Even more important, the loneliness which has so often been his fate breeds a peculiar superiority complex — the tacit, and sometimes not so tacit, innuendo that he alone has been chosen to save the world. Too many ex-Communists bear their increasingly trite experience like a special cross. To have erred is certainly no unforgiveable sin; nor is it, on the other hand, a sacrament. It is perfectly true that the ex-Communist can usefully serve the free society with his hard-earned knowledge of the moon's other side; and that this important service should be appreciatively invited. But the ex-Communist should learn how to calm down, to laugh at himself on occasion, and, above all, to understand that others may have acquired wisdom, even sophistication, without having served a stretch in the Party.

Even though his melodramatic trimmings of conversion may exasperate the audience, they neither explain nor excuse the characteristic sneer the ex-Communist dependably evokes among the certified "liberals." No, the derisive foam that automatically emanates from the "liberal" book-review sections of our conservative morning papers whenever the writings (or the mere existence) of an ex-Communist must be considered, indicates far more than just the critics' occupational weakness for easy cracks.

In comparison, the Pegler position is clearly superior to that of our professional "liberals." Mr. Pegler feels about all shades of Marxism pretty much the way he feels about leprosy: he just wouldn't touch a former leper because, no matter how long ago the fellow seemingly recovered, he might still be carrying loathsome germs. An unenlightened and perhaps somewhat inhuman attitude — yet a coherent one. Whereas the "liberal" sneer at the ex-Communist is more confused than even a "liberal" has any business to be.

For our "liberal," though he never was in the Party himself, readily understands how a generous and competent man might for a while have been seduced by the forceful primitiveness of Leninism. The ability to understand could be called the Hiss-Reflex of the conditioned "liberal" mind. Yet right next to the Hiss-Reflex sits the Chambers-Reflex — the violent "liberal" revulsion against the ex-Communist who wants to repair what he has come to consider the catastrophic consequences of a grave error. Whence that revulsion? Does he, the "liberal," deny that those consequences *are* catastrophic? He most assuredly does not, so the "liberal" protests; in fact, he points out, he himself never fell for Leninism because he had always sensed its hidden beastly nature. So why hate Chambers? Because, asserts the "liberal," renegades are congenitally despicable.

So, contrary to Mr. Pegler who loathes ex-Communists because they once were Communists, our "liberal" hates them because they are renegades now. Well, doesn't this simply mean that the "liberals" prefer the ex-Communist's previously held position? Not at all, they assert again; it means merely that a turncoat is the lowest possible form of life. And here the "liberal" mind gets spectacularly entangled.

It can't be "turncoatism" that really bothers the "liberal." No "liberal" has ever sneered at the apostasy of Harold Ickes and Henry Wallace, two ex-Republicans who attack their former associates with the lustiest venom and gustiest vigor. Some "liberals" may have disagreed with one or another publicly taken position of Ickes and Wallace — but surely never on the grounds of turncoatism or "the psychopathic emotionalism of apostasy." If any one were to question the high integrity of Justice Hugo Black by connecting his admirable sensitiveness in the area of civil rights with his conclusively repented former membership in the Klan, Mrs. Roosevelt would be articulately, and very rightly, incensed. And no yokel amuses the *Nation* more genuinely than an Oyster Bay Roosevelt who keeps cursing Cousin Franklin as a renegade from family and class.

Clearly, the "liberal" contention that apostasy is intrinsically abominable appears *prima facie* dishonest. It is also, of course, logically absurd. If language is to retain any meaning at all, there can be nothing dishonorable in turning from error to truth and combating what one has found to be error. True, a dishonorable man can renounce even a false position for dishonorable motives; in which case the argument has to be directed *ad personam* rather than *ad factum*, with the full burden of proof on the accuser. But what is one to think of an accuser who then offers the fact of conversion in *sole* evidence of the convert's moral inferiority?

And what is one to think of our "liberals" who applaud Harold Ickes's savage attacks on what he honestly considers the villainy of his former fellow-Republicans, but damn Whittaker Chambers's legally enforced and quite reluctant testimony against his former comrade Hiss? Quite simply, and inescapably, one is forced to conclude: 1) our "liberals" sincerely detest what Ickes has reneged from; 2) they do *not* sincerely detest the position Chambers has renounced; 3) they deem, in general, conversion from Republicanism to anti-Republicanism morally progressive, but conversion from communism to anti-communism morally degenerate. And if any other conclusion can be drawn, within the bounds of logic, from the "liberal" position on apostasy, our "liberals" have not yet submitted it.

However, our "liberals" cultivate a substitute for intellectual coherence — the humanly attractive sentiment that, no matter how honest a conversion, a convert ready to damage, personally, his former associates-in-error is simply repugnant. Yet is this sentiment, on second thought, really so attractive?

The "liberals" under consideration are Americans and profess, quite believably, profound agreement with America's bright tradition of constitutional law. Now that