

Where Communism Was Black

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Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression.
By Robin D. G. Kelley. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990. 369 pages. \$34.95 (cloth); \$12.95 (paper).

LIBERAL COLUMNISTS AT THE JOHANNESBURG *WEEKLY MAIL* GENTLY mock South Africa's Communist party by placing "World's Last" before its name in editorials. But the joke perhaps does not so much succeed in dismissing the importance of that nation's Communists as in raising sharply their achievements in remaining, as nowhere else in the world, a key part of a mass freedom movement. One might explain this achievement by following South African Communist party (SACP) leader Joe Slovo's argument that his party had in effect developed a "premature Gorbachevism"—a concern for democracy and human rights and a spirit of independence which made it more capable of critical thinking and less subservient to Moscow than its sister parties elsewhere. However, as African National Congress education officer Z. Pallo Jordan shows in a brilliant reply to Slovo, it is dangerous to overemphasize the extent of the SACP's break with the stultifying traditions of Stalinism.¹ If it is admitted that the SACP has historically functioned at the national level less democratically and independently than some other Communist parties (for example, Italy's), we might have to look elsewhere for the source of its strengths. Perhaps, in providing a forum for local resistance to an apartheid police

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state, the Communists offered to black South Africans new ways of looking at the world, and of imagining and carrying out self-organization and resistance, even while laboring under the dead weight of Stalinism.

Robin D. G. Kelley's superbly crafted *Hammer and Hoe* explores the history of Communism in another apartheid police state, Alabama in the 1930s. Indeed Kelley originally set out to write a comparative history of Communism in South Africa and in the American South. His emphasis helps to make sense of the historical appeal of the South African Communist party, while it differs from many studies of American Communism. Kelley asks not whether the Communist party was good (or correct or independent), but how the party came to attract a substantial number of African-American workers in Alabama and to energize *their* struggles. Or, more exactly, he asks how these black workers could embrace and use the Communist party as a vehicle for organizing themselves. He insists on measuring radicalism not by its ideological purity but by its ability to interact with a received culture to generate bold class organization. In so doing, *Hammer and Hoe* closely resembles, ironically enough, Roman Laba's fine but fiercely anti-Communist recent study of Polish Solidarity in its approach.²

The result is a story which is fresh in every way. Although we have two wonderful oral memoirs by Alabama Communists — in Share Croppers' Union (SCU) leader Ned Cobb's *All God's Dangers* (told to Theodore Rosengarten) and in Birmingham labor leader Hosea Hudson's *Narrative* (told to Nell Irvin Painter)—nothing like so full an analytical account of the Communist party (CP) in Alabama or any other Southern state exists.³ Moreover, Kelley well establishes Alabama's important place not so much as a microcosm but as a cauldron holding currents vital for understanding the twentieth-century South and modern America. Quasi-feudal oppression in the countryside persisted alongside Birmingham's highly, though recently, developed iron and steel industries. Jim Crow and lynch law poisoned the state's political culture but existed alongside older traditions of biracial labor unity, an African-American culture of opposition and a fragile presence of white liberalism.

Equally fresh are Kelley's interpretations, which do nothing short of turn much of the current wisdom regarding the history of Communism squarely on its head. For example, most scholarship which has offered a critical defense of the Communist party in the thirties and forties has tended to hold its Popular Front policies in high regard, emphasizing attempts under Earl Browder's leadership to draw on American democratic political

traditions, and to enter meaningful political alliances with liberal political forces.⁴ While this is an understandable viewpoint among engaged historians searching for models for left-center unity, for ways to “Americanize” radical ideas, and even for precursors of Eurocommunism or *perestroika*, Kelley’s interest is in African-American agency in Depression-era Alabama. From that point of view the Popular Front appears as much less of a blessing.

Indeed Kelley argues that the wild, often ultra-Stalinist and sectarian Third Period which preceded the Popular Front better undergirded black organization among tenant farmers and industrial workers. The extreme rhetoric of the Third Period Communists was not taken seriously by Alabama’s early black party members who avoided posturing and suicidal confrontations whenever possible. But on another level, rhetoric regarding a “new world,” which probably appeared extravagant to other working-class audiences, resonated among African-Americans whose traditions emphasized both a struggle for survival and the transcendent hope of deliverance. Help from a powerful ally, even one as far away as Moscow, could seem a source of power and possibility, especially when poor communications and the unfamiliarity with the South by white party leaders from the North ensured that party discipline remained largely a local matter. Kelley regards the belief of at least one black rural activist that “all the leaflets, handbills, and newspapers he distributed were printed in Russia” (100) as neither sad nor shameful. He sees it instead as a logical reaction to the “centrality of Russia in popular notions of Communism” (100), to the Third Period emphasis on Soviet achievements and, most of all, to the desire to believe that a powerful nation would support Africans-Americans in a second Civil War by a people whose “collective memory” (99) of the first one was intense. The role of the Communist-led International Labor Defense in mobilizing around the world against lynch law in the Scottsboro case and other Alabama miscarriages of justice helped to establish the Communist party’s image as such an ally.

Kelley is at his subtle best in describing the role of race consciousness in making Communism appealing to significant numbers of black Alabamans in the early 1930s. Eschewing a narrowly ideological approach, Kelley does not place much emphasis on the Communist party’s distinctive call for self-determination for a “Negro nation” in the Black Belt during these years. Sticking closely to the evidence, he finds that such a position was not nearly so important to rank-and-file party members in their organizing activities as it has been to modern historians of Communism.⁵

Nor does he find grass roots interest in pan-African struggles to have been overwhelming. While the Soviet Union was at times termed the "new Ethiopia" (100), the Birmingham campaign to defend the real Ethiopia against invasion by Italy was undramatic.

But Kelley is too shrewd to suppose that absence of grand expressions of nationalist sentiment meant race was unimportant to black Communists. In effect, the decision to recruit African-Americans into the movement made sure that working-class whites could easily be race-baited away. "Thus two separate parties were formed," Kelley writes, "a large, broad-based organization of Southern blacks and a tiny cadre of Northern whites" (30). Therefore, Communism offered an opportunity for race-conscious as well as class-conscious mobilization. Moreover, it became a vehicle for pursuing what Kelley calls "intra-racial class conflict," providing its working-class cadre with resources, a sense of power, and training useful in challenging entrenched and cautious black elites.

The culture of early Alabama Communism was therefore the culture of Birmingham's African-American industrial working class and of the rural poor in the SCU. Indeed it is noteworthy that *Hammer and Hoe* may be our most sophisticated study of Communism and culture but that it does not analyze socialist realism or the other much-debated cultural theories of international Communism. Instead Kelley writes brilliantly on the folk traditions of resistance through cunning which made SCU members "act humble" (44) even as they assembled what black Communist Harry Haywood would later call a "small arsenal" (45) of weapons. "Rural blacks in and around the Party," according to Kelley, "transformed popular spirituals into political songs," making "Give Me That Old Time Religion" end "It was good enough for Lenin, and it's good enough for me." Third Period anti-religious propaganda enjoyed little currency in Alabama where "most black Communists . . . continued to attend services regularly," (115) even as they drew on a rich vein of African-American folklore skewering opportunistic ministers to attack conservative preachers. For many members, even outside of organized churches, "the Bible was as much a guide to class struggle as [the] *Communist Manifesto*" (107).

The Popular Front period saw black participation in the Communist party of Alabama decline both absolutely and relatively. A retreat from attacks on "white chauvinism" and a tendency "to deemphasize, however slightly . . . involvement in local black issue oriented politics" (134) made the Communist party seem less an instrument of deliverance. The former change, undertaken in an atmosphere in which white party members were

capable of using "comrade nigger" (137) to refer to black Communists, failed to attract many of the relatively liberal, but still segregationist, Southern progressives to the movement. However, enough whites did come in to make Alabama Communism less a vehicle for race-conscious-African-American mobilization. The shift to a Southern white leadership likely lessened room for local African-American initiatives. An increasing cautiousness born of a desire to appeal to moderates doubtless made the Party less of a clear alternative in intraracial class conflicts. Nor did building an open, above-ground party necessarily seem wholly desirable or possible to black workers.

Even so, Kelley is far from claiming that the change to a Popular Front line was the sole reason for the decline of African-American Communism in Alabama or that the agency of black workers proved entirely useless in the longer run. Intense repression, popularly supported with special zeal because Communism was associated with "social equality" and "nigger unions" (57), made organization difficult no matter what the line. The Popular Front initially appealed to Birmingham's black Communists because it seemed to open new strategies for blunting repression in a state where opponents at times professed a desire to "lynch Russia" (78) but settled for victims nearer at hand. Kelley's rounded portrait of the decline of the SCU emphasizes not the absence of a "correct line" but the presence of factional battles with Socialist-led unions, of terror and of agricultural transformations caused by market changes and federal intervention.

Kelley is also eager to demonstrate the continuing positive actions of ex-Communists, especially in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) but also the modern civil rights movement. Daniel Singer's recent jest that ex-Communists constitute the largest political tendency in France may have literally applied in black Alabama by 1940.⁶ Even if the movement never had more than several hundred African-American members in the state at any one time, it ran through members rapidly and the institutional presence of other political parties in black Alabama was slight. Kelley argues that, absent the fierce factional infighting and purges which often characterized the Communist party elsewhere, Alabama's black members often drifted from the organization without bitterness and without a backlash against radical politics. In particular, the many who left to devote their full energies to CIO organizing saw the union as a force for deliverance, as they had seen the Communist party some years before.

Much else deserves mention regarding this groundbreaking and beautifully designed book. Especially noteworthy is the sustained consideration

of gender, both in probing the experience of Communist women and in nuanced consideration of the role played by manhood in the construction of both Communist and anti-Communist world views. For this reason and a host of others, Kelley's lyrical prose and rigorous analysis deserve the widest possible readership.

NOTES

1. Joe Slovo, *Has Socialism Failed?* (London, 1990); Palo Jordan, "The Crisis of Conscience in the SACP," *Transformation* 11 (1990): 75-89.

2. Roman Laba, *The Roots of Solidarity* (Princeton, 1991); among studies of U.S. Communists, Mark Naison's *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana, Ill., 1983) is probably nearest in approach to Kelley.

3. Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York, 1974); Nell Irvin Painter, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson, His Life as a Negro Communist in the South* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979).

4. Fraser M. Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States: From the Depression to World War II* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1991) is the most recent and one of the most thorough and valuable studies reflecting this point of view. For recent debates on the history of Communism, see the article by Theodore Draper and responses by Paul Buhle, James R. Barrett, Mark Naison, Rob Ruck, Al Richmond, Maurice Isserman and others in *New York Review of Books* (May 9, May 30, and Aug. 15, 1985).

5. Kelley may overstate this point. Communists attracted by the nationalism of the Party probably left it sooner and are less likely to be identified by oral historians.

6. Daniel Singer, "The Treason of the New Intellectuals," *The Nation* 29 Apr. 1991, 560.