

SYMPOSIUM:

A Look at the Life of Sidney Hook

For half a century or more, Sidney Hook (1902–1989) waged a war of ideas against a variety of irrationalisms. Several years before his death, he allied himself with the National Association of Scholars in combating the radicalism that had overtaken American universities. He helped chart the course for our organization and we continue to bestow our most prestigious award in his memory. The recent publication of a selection of Professor Hook's correspondence provides the occasion for a retrospective on the man and his times.

The Crusade of a Constructive Critic

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"I do not know where you learned how to scan a text and what canons of analysis you apply," Sidney Hook told economist Frank Knight of the University of Chicago in 1937, "but the belief [in utopianism] you attribute to me is the rankest poppycock." Two years later he alerted Upton Sinclair to the novelist's usefulness as a "front," whom Stalinists privately "refer to...as 'a sap.'" To a fellow acolyte of John Dewey, the shockingly pink Corliss Lamont, Hook announced: "Only an infinite capacity for self-deception could have led you to write as you did," adding (a year later, in 1941) that emancipation from delusion might "revive a spark of intellectual integrity or moral decency in you who were once my friend." A fellow traveler who edited *The Churchman* received a 1949 letter deducing that "everybody has a natural right to be stupid but it is a privilege that should not be abused." "For a historian and scholar" like Curtis P. Nettels of Cornell, Hook wrote that same year, "you seem to me to be rather allergic to relevant evidence." In 1950 the resolutely pacifist views of A.J. Muste provoked Hook to doubt "there is anything wrong with your sanity, but I do think there is something seriously wrong with your logic and naivete." Two years later, Eugene Rabinowitch was urged to "stop thinking of yourself as an authority on foreign policy," since, as a physicist and editor of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, he had "neither the competence nor the right to do so." In 1963 an editor at a religious publishing house was informed: "All my life I have fought Catholic authoritarianism, but *your* variety of Catholicism I find morally vile." In 1980 a correspondent who opposed defending Afghanistan against its Soviet invaders received this reply: "You really ought to be ashamed of yourself.... Shame on you! and shame again! If I were a religious man, I would urge you to pray for God's forgiveness." Five years

later Congressman Stephen J. Solarz's op-ed piece, condemning aid to the Nicaraguan *contras*, rendered Hook at least briefly indecisive: "I do not know whether to conclude that you are politically naive and misinformed or blatantly hypocritical for electoral purposes." Four years before his death, the 82-year-old emeritus professor told one woman: "You write that you respect my work and background. It is obvious you are familiar with neither, and with not much else." Have a Nice Day.

Was there ever a philosopher more feisty than Sidney Hook? Would Leibniz or Kant have exulted, as the NYU pragmatist once assured a colleague, "I've had a wonderful week—I had a fight every day"? Edward Shils's claim that Hook was "probably the greatest polemicist of this century" is overstated, however, because his arsenal contained only one weapon: an eerily impeccable logic. Other controversialists, like Shaw or Chesterton, could summon resources of satiric wit, ironic bite, and a colorful historical imagination that dwarfed Hook's. (His letters, incidentally, are almost as humorless as a Papal encyclical.)

Yet there is something exhilarating about so pure and disinterested a flair for discussion conducted as intellectual combat. In the clash of ideas (from which truth is supposed to emerge), Hook never applied for CO status. His embattled correspondence has now been ably edited by Edward S. Shapiro, a professor of history at Seton Hall University, and the resulting *Letters of Sidney Hook* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1995) makes it obvious that Hook did not indulge fools—or ignore them; instead he paid them the respect of writing them back. He often scoffed and in half a century scarcely changed his mind, but when he went *mano á mano* with his correspondents, he made clear *why* they were mistaken. Despite the ferocious tone of many of these 218 letters, they are hardly studies in hysteria. Their disputatious author in fact subscribed to the ideal of rational discourse, and practiced it not only in two dozen books graced with philosophical and political wisdom, not only in hundreds of articles in popular as well as professional journals, but also in nearly three thousand folders of correspondence, located in the Hoover Institution archives at Stanford University. Hook merits praise for his willingness to go public and to inject analytic power into democratic discourse. Rare are the philosophers today who pursue the asymptotic ideal of objectivity even as they assert the moral urgency of political engagement.

Shapiro has not showcased an introspective Hook. Nor has he contrived to reveal an enigmatic but examined life. Instead the *Letters of Sidney Hook* bristles with political certitudes, whose dominant theme is conveyed in Hook's 1978 boast: "I think I know how the Bolshevik mind works. I have been studying it for more than sixty years." That effort made him afraid, even as late as 1985, that the West was losing the cold war; the Bolshevik mind was not capacious enough to allow for a Gorbachev or a Yeltsin. (Hook died four months before the fall of the Wall.) It would be unfair to tax him for failing to anticipate the dramatic implosion of Soviet power; no one else did—and at least his ferrous

belief in military deterrence and diplomatic resoluteness fortified the case for outlasting the Soviet system until it collapsed of its own internal inadequacies. "It is better to be a live jackal than a dead lion—for jackals, not men," this social democrat and agnostic wrote to William F. Buckley. "Men who have the moral courage to fight intelligently for freedom have the best prospect of avoiding the fate of live jackals and dead lions." But Stalinism posed a peculiar challenge not only to geopolitical strategy but also to pedagogy, and Hook's attempt to reconcile some teachers' membership in a (micro-)totalitarian movement with the ideals of academic freedom should especially interest readers of this journal.

The earliest letter formulating his hostility to communists in the classroom was written in 1941, and from that opposition he did not deviate over the next half century. Indeed, in *Academic Freedom and Academic Anarchy* (1970), he argued for extending the quarantine to the Students for a Democratic Society. Members of the Communist Party were not like Democrats or Republicans or even Socialist Party activists. Cadres in schools were required to submit to the following instructions (as enunciated in 1937 in *The Communist*): "Marxist-Leninist analysis must be injected into every class.... Communist teachers must take advantage of their positions, without exposing themselves,...[to] conduct struggles around the schools in a truly Bolshevik manner." Such political indoctrination traduced vocational ethics so flagrantly, Hook argued, that anyone teaching in such a fashion should have been disqualified from employment. Voluntary membership in a political organization proclaiming its fealty to a totalitarian state thus automatically constituted a case of professional unfitness. Such a presumption was rebuttable; he believed in due process. But Hook did not believe in waiting until a communist (or an alleged communist) engaged in "truly Bolshevik" propagandizing before academic authorities could stir themselves to investigate and fire the culprit, and he favored peer review rather than the primitive inquisitions of federal or state legislators. Authorized personnel only. The case for denying academic freedom to communists is best advanced in *Political Power and Personal Freedom* (1959), chapters 22 and 23. One of the few departures from this campaign to be found in Hook's correspondence is his objection to the loyalty oath imposed on the faculty of the University of California in the early 1950s.

At the time, the presidents of Harvard and Yale favored the automatic dismissal of communists on the faculty (as did the publisher of the *New York Times* for his own employees); Hook by contrast looks almost like a moderate. And his logic was characteristically impressive: from his premise (communists are by definition "unprofessional"), his prescription (fire them unless the presumption is falsified) is ineluctable. But logic alone need not be operable. Empiricism has its claims too. Well after the culture of the cold war spent itself, the craft of history can be exercised. Even before Ellen W. Schrecker had published *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (1986), a mas-

sive account of the denial of *Lehrfreiheit* to excommunists and to noncommunists, Hook scolded her: "You are obviously unfamiliar with the way a Communist Party cell functions on a campus... and unaware of actual Communist Party activities on the campuses.... [Y]our naivete is... somewhat pathetic.... It is as if you were born yesterday."

Yet, in reviewing *No Ivory Tower for Minerva* in 1987, he failed to show that communists actually abused the privileges of the classroom by trying to foist the Party line on students. Though criticizing Schrecker's scholarship for its "shoddiness," Hook did not accuse her of having concealed or fudged the evidence of abuses. He could cite *none*. In the 1940s and 1950s, the various legislative and academic investigating committees engaged in monitoring or expelling communist professors also could not specify instances of classroom indoctrination—though surely such evidence would have been seized on and trumpeted had it been found. Since the historical record has so far yielded no signs of such professional dereliction, the argument that Hook first presented over five decades ago is not defensible. *Logically* communists employed as academics ought to have behaved according to the dictates of their Party superiors and rules, just as many documents support the presumption that believing Christians are expected to seek martyrdom. But in the classroom communists did not—apparently—follow the script either, and later insistence that *presumes* their unfitness in the absence of historical evidence is disturbingly oblivious to empirical testing. On the subject of the academic privileges of communists, however, Hook kept thinking in the subjunctive and resented the efforts of younger scholars like Schrecker to use the past tense. Yet hindsight ought to be permitted to do the work once confined to probable inferences; by letting his hostility harden, the philosopher thus violated the pragmatic method that he so conspicuously urged others to employ.

Another unattractive feature of his stance on academic freedom should be noted. By emphasizing the political depravity of those who were expelled from universities and sometimes driven into exile, by being insensitive to the suffering of those who exhibited the fanaticism of "the Bolshevik mind," Hook seemed unable to mount a defense when their civil liberties were violated even according to his *own* standards. None of the letters that Shapiro has reproduced shows any concern for the fate of those who were fired—even when such instructors had been thrown over the side by university administrators for reasons that Hook, by his own principles, should have deemed wrong and unfair. Though the letters do occasionally refer vaguely to "excesses" in the expulsion of faculty members in the 1950s, a reader of Hook's correspondence or his other writings would not realize that such abuses usually collided even with his own sense of procedural rights. Yet Hook was silent on such abuses. Former communists, fearful of incriminating themselves and others, were typically the victims of these political purges. Hook himself insisted that penalties should only be imposed upon current members of the Party. Yet

nowhere in the *Letters of Sidney Hook* is there a hint of dismay—much less public protest—that teachers were being fired *for the wrong reasons*, that their procedural rights were being unjustly stripped from them. His principled anticommunism had become compulsive, which disabled him when suddenly faced with the opportunism of those who had turned anticommunism into a racket.

In the 1930s Hook's political stance had been unstintingly brave. A decade or so later, his awareness of communist wickedness was no longer distinctive, and eventually stiffened into inflexibility. Though several letters proclaim open-mindedness and a willingness to entertain fresh evidence, too many of them emit the sound of deceased equines being whacked. If anything, his political views seemed to harden over the years, as though a testament to his intellectual pride, and they were not easily dislodged. Hook's quiet support of U.S. military intervention in Vietnam did not waver—despite the early, often pragmatic opposition of even other anticommunist intellectuals like George F. Kennan, Walter Lippmann, Hans J. Morgenthau, Theodore Draper, Irving Howe, and Dwight Macdonald. There are no letters to any of them, nor is there any indication of his having read the sorts of books (like Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest* or FitzGerald's *Fire in the Lake*) that helped push sections of the intelligentsia into dissent. Those intellectuals who did not lip-synch his views were dismissed for naiveté, or worse. In 1984, when a young journalist (who would later win a MacArthur "genius" grant) criticized such obsessions in the *Village Voice*, Hook asked an old friend: "I would like to find out who Paul Berman is and what political group he's associated with. Someone said he belongs to the *Nation* crowd." Such suspicious mental habits violate the logician's injunction against ad hominem arguments.

It would nevertheless be foolish to discern, in the trajectory of Hook's career, the squandering of talent; he applied his gifts with concentrated force and cogency. His tenacity did not flag until the very end, and some of his late essays—especially in *Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life* (1974)—are sadly ignored and unappreciated. Yet, it is also apparent that Hook peaked early: the pragmatic *Towards an Understanding of Karl Marx* (1933) has not been superseded as an original American contribution to Marxist thought, just as *From Hegel to Marx* (1936) represents an illuminating exercise in intellectual history. By the end of that decade, *The Hero in History* (1943) had brilliantly exposed the historiographic pitfalls of the dialectic, and, with his major work behind him, the scholar turned mostly into a polemicist. Recent surveys like Douglas Tallack's *Twentieth-Century America: The Intellectual and Cultural Context* (1991) grant Hook only a little more space than, say, bell hooks; Robert M. Crunden's *Brief History of American Culture* (1994) omits mention of him.

Early on, in the 1930s, Hook's pen pals include Einstein, Arthur O. Lovejoy, Will Herberg, Stephen S. Wise, and Waldo Frank. The final entry ("personal and urgent") in *Letters of Sidney Hook*, dated May 1987, is addressed to Lawrence A. Tisch, the chairman of CBS. One need not be a lifelong socialist, as Hook

claimed to be, to wonder why an opportunity was forfeited to object to the limits of corporate accountability, or to the philistine excesses of a medium using public airwaves, or to the disparities of wealth that Tisch has exemplified—though he even *looks* like Daddy Warbucks. What aroused Hook to write was the glum suspicion that Dan Rather had disseminated KGB-planted disinformation on the evening news, and Hook wanted penalties invoked. Perhaps an admirable consistency can be found in Hook's tendency to make letter-writing into a branch of the martial arts. But in so crabby a finale, in so unworthy a target, there is something ignoble about the uses to which Hook's keen intelligence had been put. A lustrous career devoted to clarifying the relation between means and ends had inspired authors as diverse as Daniel Bell and Robert Penn Warren to dedicate books to him. Yet the legacy that these letters disclose includes some betrayal of the promise of pragmatism's most energetic advocate.

A Vigil against Totalitarianism

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Particularly since the Vietnam War, often blamed on America's obsession with communism, anticommunism has rarely been fashionable in American intellectual circles. And few intellectuals were as obsessed with communism as Sidney Hook. It is, therefore, not surprising that he has not fared well in recent historical or autobiographical accounts of American life in the 1900s. In his autobiography Irving Howe complained that on the communist issue "within that first-rate mind there had formed a deposit of sterility, like rust on a beautiful machine."¹ Alan Wald has charged that Hook was the model for those intellectuals who "became fanatical adherents" of the anticommunist ideology that marked America's transition from isolationism to imperialism.² Judy Kutulas chided such "extreme anticommunists" as Sidney Hook, who kept badgering "progressives" like Corliss Lamont about the political positions they had taken in the 1930s.³

Unlike many of his academic critics, Sidney Hook's knowledge of and hostility toward communism grew out of his own experience with the Communist Party. His long life intertwined with the issue of communism, from his early infatuation to disillusionment and his final deep hostility. At every stage of his professional life, he confronted communism and communists—as friends and allies, as subjects of study and friendly criticism, as intellectual rivals, and, finally, as relentless enemies. Hook was a passionate and fearsome polemicist