



Politics

Through Tinted Glass (Brightly)

Lawrence Nevins

What should have been the Soviet Union's great lesson—that beautiful Socialist dreams can easily turn into something far worse than a repressively tolerant bourgeois society, while those with eyes to see refuse to look—is an example that many with eyes to see and ears to hear have yet to consider. The prevailing cold war consensus was responsible for policy errors and misapprehensions of serious consequence, but its perception of Stalin's Soviet Union as an evil and dangerous despotism was correct. Those who had thought otherwise before Khrushchev's famous speech of 1956 were wrong.

Hard facts and disturbing clues were available long years before Stalin's fans flip-flopped on cue. The more sophisticated had deliberately refrained from looking at the ugly truth, or had looked and were not repelled. But a majority simply were incapable of assimilating information incompatible with their political mindset, unless it was directly related to matters of personal concern. Few people have time to reconsider opinions that, in their circles, are presumed to be truths known to all.

Although there is truth to the notion that the young tend to be radical and the old conservative, many people do not change much over time, or change slowly, or change almost exactly as those about them change. As new climates of opinion emerge, some people grow and others switch tracks, but underlying patterns of political behavior perennially reassert themselves.

In L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* the gatekeeper of the Emerald City requires visitors to protect themselves from its "brightness and glory" by wearing locked-on green eyeglasses—with remarkable results:

Even with eyes protected by the green spectacles Dorothy and her friends were at first dazzled by the brilliancy of the wonderful City. The streets were lined with beautiful houses built of green marble and studded everywhere with sparkling emeralds. They walked over a pavement of the same green marble, and where the blocks were joined together were rows of emeralds, set closely, and glittering in the brightness of the sun. The window panes were of green glass; even the sky above the City had a green tint, and the rays of the sun were green.

Prescription spectacles for filtering out discordant visions are never out of style on the political marketplace; and if the glorious dream of the Soviet Union has tarnished, pilgrims to other pseudo-Socialist wonderlands still cheerfully snap on goggles that show the wonders that will be unimpeded by glimpses of the squalor that yet may be there. Not so long ago geniuses of the order of Edmund Wilson and George Bernard Shaw could see the brightness and glory of the Soviet Oz at first hand, while all about them forced labor camps mushroomed and workers and peasants died of starvation. That tradition lives on in the perennially progressive pilgrims who continue to ease on down the road to bear witness to the marvels of the wonderful wizards of Cuba and Cathay.

Something of the glory they feel may be experienced without even leaving our own polluted shores. Glancing through the September and October, 1976, issues of *China Reconstructs*—with texts still largely devoted to denunciations of Liu Shao-ch'i, Lin Piao, and Teng Hsiao-p'ing, but not the Gang of Four—I was taken aback by a smile on my face and a

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feeling of happiness in my soul. Why did I smile? Why did my soul rejoice? Because smiles and happiness are contagious, and the cumulative effect of color illustrations of happy smiling people can shoot right through even an arch-revisionist's very thin cerebral cortex deep into his brain's happy-feeling center. With magic lenses, not only do you see a glow, you also feel it. Seeing through a glass brightly, the perennial fellow traveler passes through life illuminated by visions of paradise.

Basically nonpolitical visitors also may enjoy some of that warmth. Naive about foreign cultures, they tend to accept what they are told by the apparently fine, upstanding people who are their guides. If what they are told makes them feel good, or if it is intellectually or emotionally coherent with previously held views on other subjects, it will make a deeper impression more difficult to efface. Otherwise intelligent Americans, who have come of age in a society immersed in pop culture anticommunism, sometimes are moved to find in the lands of the godless that children play in the parks and pedestrians go about their affairs unimpeded by iron balls and chains.

Many have been immunized against anticommunism by recollection of countless absurdities committed in its name. The crass stupidity of much of our domestic anti-Communist crusade was extraordinary. E.Y. Harberg, for example, recalls having been asked what he really had intended by entitling a song, "A Guy Called Joe." The annals of McCarthyism and the House Committee on Un-American Activities are cluttered with such tripe. That it is tripe was a point easily apprehended by the educated public.

Most Americans more or less sympathetic to the worldview of the undemocratic Left lost a sometimes unacknowledged guiding light with the successful repression of the Communist party and its overt, covert, and incidental instruments of influence. Such people saw, and still see themselves, as having been champions of true democracy, civil rights, brotherhood, peace, and oppressed peoples everywhere. In the thirties association with the Communist machine had seemed to many the most effective way of doing all those things and fighting fascism. The vast majority were in no serious way involved in attempting to overthrow the government by force or handing over the country to the Soviet Union on a silver platter. The American politburo was Stalin's puppet, and the party had a deep conspiratorial side, but, especially during the Popular Front, rank-and-file members could envision themselves as angels with dirty faces, working for the true, the good, and the beautiful as well as for oppressed humanity and the United States of America. There must have been many card-holders who did nothing more militant than pay their dues and leave publications behind on subway seats.

The vicious idiocy of the McCarthyite assault on Communists, ex-Communists, fellow travelers, ex-fellow travelers, and many varieties of somehow compromised innocents did nothing to convince such people that whatever sins or follies they could manage to discern in themselves came anywhere near matching the moral squalor of those who would have them be stool pigeons, suffer ostracism, or go to jail. In the 1960's such people

and their children—both real and figurative—were nuclei of resurgent radicalism rallying around the old clichés. A part of the New Left was Old Left in long hair.

Conservatives and isolationists were not the only people slandered and hurt by the McCarthyism of the pro-Communist Left. Democratic Socialists, liberals, Trotskyites, or anyone who questioned the eminently questionable state of civil liberties in the Soviet Union, were targets for the C.P.'s poison pen pals. There is a special obloquy the true believer reserves for comrades who come to question a part of his great truth. An edifying latter-day sampling of this sort of thing may be found in Cedric Belfrage's *The American Inquisition*, a disingenuous history of the cold war Red scare by one of its victims, an exiled editor of the *National Guardian*.

Consistently referring to the USSR as Russia, Belfrage felt free to qualify as anti-Russian anyone who had prematurely protested Stalinist crimes against the Russian people. Contrariwise—as they would say in Wonderland—those who allowed the brightness and glory of the Soviet Oz to blind them to the oppression of its unfortunate citizens were consistently categorized as heretics or Jimmy Higginses—i.e., humble but noble-hearted activists. Let it not be supposed from this that Belfrage could never find a harsh word for anyone who ever had red stars in his eyes. Some of these, he felt, had been talmudic; an epithet, unfair to rabbis, he could lay on those guilty of such mortal sins as leaving the Party in the wrong style, like the novelist Howard Fast.

Fast made public his disgust for the Party in an interview with the *Times'* veteran expert in Russophobia, Harry Schwartz, an article in an investment-house magazine, and a book *The Naked God*. Heretics sympathized with his pain and fury at the treachery of his Russian writer friends, who had placidly lied to him about Stalin's liquidations, but were repelled by his choice of outlets. His denunciations of Party leaders' talmudry had a touch of arrogance for ex-comrades who had recalled him as one of the most talmudic.

Harry Schwartz was a Russophobe for reporting the Soviet Union as it was.



From *The New Wizard of Oz*, by L. Frank Baum, with pictures by W. W. Denslow (1899, 1903)

In postwar America it was far easier to be anti-Communist than pro-Communist, and the loaded language of righteous leftists lost some of its sting. But, in the Party's heyday, heretics whose social lives were involved with the cause were likely to be rendered submissive to orthodox heresy by the threat of abuse and ostracism. Dissenters sometimes were pushed farther right than they might have moved under their own steam, hurt feelings being common catalysts of political mutations. In spite of its many faults, the pro-Communist Left was associated with numerous good causes that drew good people into its orbit. Not the least of these was what once was known as the struggle of the Negro people.

The Party's concern for blacks has often been dismissed as self-serving, but the very fact that it could conceive of black Americans as a potential political force put it in the vanguard of race relations in the 1930's and 1940's. While courting the blacks the Communist party crossed racial barriers as did no other institution in American life. Its publicists and invariably tendentious scholars were lonely pioneers of what are now known as Black Studies.

Although many years have passed since the American Communists and their camp followers were reduced to a state analogous to the Cheshire cat's smile, something of their invincible spirit goes marching on beside all those who deliberately censor reality on behalf of political dreamlands, burying their brains—not in Moscow, but in places like Peking, Havana, or Hanoi. The history of our time has repeatedly and dramatically demonstrated that inspirational abstractions can be deadly, but those under their spell do not expect that they will die by them, and everyone knows a revolution is not a dinner party.

It is not only those of a messianic temperament, or unlearned in the ways of foreign societies, who fail to see what tinted lenses are meant to conceal. Scholars who lose sight of the ordinary feelings of ordinary people likewise learn to see things as they are not. It is an old problem; La Rochefoucauld was not thinking of the liquidation of the kulaks when he wrote, "We all have sufficient strength to support the misfortunes of others."

To study human behavior through analysis of political language, especially official political language, tends to abstract it from what touches flesh and blood, and thereby distorts the perception of reality. True empathy—except in the most intimate relationships—is difficult to attain because of a natural tendency to project our own passions—or lack of passions—upon ostensible objects of concern; but it is crucial for a genuine understanding of human beings and the things they do.

In an unfortunately timed essay, "On the Death of Mao," that was published in the *New York Review of Books*, October 14, 1976—eight days after the arrest of Mrs. Mao and her alleged co-conspirators—John K. Fairbank, a Harvard historian who has written extensively on Sino-American misconceptions, charged that what was happening in China was not a power struggle but a policy debate. Obviously writing before the incarceration of the Gang of Four, Professor Fairbank insisted that the power struggle existed only in the minds of

Americans, who, unable to recognize a policy debate when they saw one, cut dedicated revolutionaries down to size by imposing their own self-image on the Chinese scene. "Ford vs. Carter is a more naked power struggle than anything going on in Peking. The policy differences are greater between Peking factions than they are between Democrats and Republicans...."

Mr. Ford is still at large, skiing, writing, politicking, and committing speeches upon paying audiences who have only themselves to blame. Big-time losers in Chinese politics await other fates. Dedicated revolutionaries though they may be, Chinese politicians know that policy follows power, and therefore requires a power struggle.

Professor Fairbank went wrong by overreacting to aspects of American attitudes and, more fundamentally, by observing what people in China were openly saying and doing without allowing himself, in this instance, the indulgence of considering whether—despite vast differences between their culture and ours—some Chinese might not have been burning resentful of treatment—not ideology but treatment—that would have aroused strong feelings in any of us had we the misfortune to experience it. How many of us are truly eager to learn from the peasants, except in illustrated tracts, technicolor movies, or a quickie visit to Potemkin Village? Who would care to spend their declining years building socialism by lugging honey buckets on a commune? How many armchair or endowed-chair communards, East or West, would relish physical abuse and humiliation by mobs of rampaging junior high school students?

There was always something new and strange out of Chairman Mao's China: plucking flowers that dared bloom in the spring, killing flies, cooking steel on the home burner, denouncing Confucius, et al. No Hollywood publicity agent could have dreamed up a better way of building up his image in the mysterious Occident, but the Chairman's bag of tricks had been designed for the manipulation of his countrymen. After the disaster of the Great Leap Forward, Mao's advice was heard in official council but not heeded. Like all great dictators, Mao's real genius was for the perpetuation of himself in power, and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was the chosen instrument. Ideas flaunted in that gigantic theatre of the absurd were taken seriously at home and abroad, but ideas never were what the struggle was about at the top. Mao was not fighting for the implementation of a policy, but for the power to implement each and every policy that popped into his dedicated noggin.

The policy debate before and after the great man's death made dire threats that were credible because citizens of the People's Republic knew by experience that dire events often follow dire threats. An article in *China Reconstructs* (September, 1976), authored by the Party branch of that famous Tachai Production Brigade all China had been exhorted to emulate, raised the question: "Will the proletariat and poor and lower-middle peasants hurt the handful of people who oppose revolution?" The answer was typical of the language used by China's dedicated revolutionaries in policy debates:

(Continued on page 35)

(from page 26)

Experience in class struggle tells us they will and must hurt revisionism, capitalism, the bourgeoisie within the Party, the capitalist roaders, the restoration staged by Liu Shao-chi, Lin Piao, Ten Hsiao-ping and other ringleaders promoting the opportunist line.

Is it right to hurt them? Surely right, ten thousand times right! Is this good or bad? Surely good, ten thousand times good! Without such hurting there won't be any socialist revolution.

How subtle a mind is needed to penetrate the meaning of this kind of thing? The proletariat and poor and lower-middle peasants have nothing to do with it. The dreamers of hurting were members of the administrative class plotting their faction's total victory—evidently the losers now getting a taste of their own medicine. Words sometimes numb feeling, but—as the Chinese might say—one cartoon is worth a thousand words, and the cartoons of the Gang of Four skewered on a bayonet should be a visceral reminder to all that the policy debate in China was of a somewhat different character than the power struggle in Washington. Those who would know what is happening under heaven, and not in a terrestrial mirage, should remain open to the possibility that poor Third Worlders may not appreciate being at the receiving end of atrocities, even when the alleged price for the establishment of heaven on earth.

What price utopia? You cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs; you cannot make a revolution without breaking anywhere from a few dozen to a few million human beings. Moralists untroubled by nonrational scruples must admit the price is right if the result is a pure land where all, except the handful who oppose revolution, enjoy the blessings of peace and prosperity and perfect justice; where inflation and unemployment, crime and corruption, shall be no more; and all is beer and skittles—or noodles and dumplings. In real life there are no utopias, and the moral question of paying for them with other peoples' lives is hypothetical.

It can happen that a one-man or one-party dictatorship, with a totally controlled press, may, for a time, do more good than harm, or do no more harm than any seemingly viable alternative; but never does such a government, ceaselessly doing its utmost to control the perception of what happens behind its borders, deserve the benefit of the doubt. If repressive efficiency regularly paid off in the greatest good for the greatest number, it would be hard to argue against it in purely secular terms. But this rarely happens, although, especially in the case of left totalitarianisms, many otherwise skeptical people are ready to take the leap of faith that allows them to see it happen. They imagine themselves to be helping, or at least cheering on, a better world.

In the case of China a not uncommon view admits that its political system is not perfection but, inasmuch as extensive civil liberties are not typical of the less developed countries, the People's Republic should be judged on the basis of what it has done for its people. China can truly boast of many positive accomplishments after three decades of Communist rule, but as much may

be said for the rest of East Asia, including Hong Kong—which absorbed millions of pauper refugees from the People's Republic—Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, both Koreas, Soviet Asia, and Japan. The famine in the days of the Kuomintang was not unrelated to the war with Japan. The famine that followed the Great Leap Forward was a direct result of the policies of the great poet and social thinker then reigning in the Imperial City.

The true quality and extent of Communist China's accomplishments will be easier to judge when critical observers are allowed to travel at will through an unprepared land, and talk with a people unafraid to relate their own experiences, problems, and opinions to whomever they wish, and in their own words. Most accounts of visits to China bear a strong resemblance to Dorothy and her friends in the Emerald City, and—what amounts to about the same thing—George Bernard Shaw in the Soviet Union.

Effective policy depends upon an ability to see reality. As Lincoln said: "If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do, and how to do it." Passion, feeling, ignorance, and self-interest in its myriad guises stand in the way, and no human is alien to them.

To know where we are requires knowing where we have been, and to know either requires that we do not forget that feelings, contradictions, and irrationalities are parts of human reality. Truth does not come in neat packages; but, in the long run, hard or messy truths usually are less hard and messy than the consequences of lies, half-truths, and self-deceptions. The ostensibly well-intentioned who conceal and distort truths on behalf of a cause are not building a better world but a worse one.

Cruelty is cruelty, and tyranny is tyranny, whether in the name of communism or anticommunism, God or the devil. Eternal vigilance, the price of liberty, also is a cost of understanding what happens in the real world. The true enemy of social understanding is within, and an adult should be prepared to reconsider periodically the possibility that explanations that feel overwhelmingly satisfactory may be mistaken. The arguments of intelligent adversaries should be studied for their strong points, not the weak ones.

A truly critical posture—more easily preached than practiced—is uncomfortable. Selective indignation and double standards are practically inherent in normal modes of perception, but the effort to overcome insidiously sloppy but satisfying subjectivity is a struggle that transcends the worthy question of one's own dignity and self-esteem. Social policy, foreign and domestic, even at the theoretical level, ultimately affects the lives of real people. The less untrue the ideas and notions on which it is based, the greater the possibility that its consequences work for good instead of bad. That ideologies backed by those who think of themselves as loving human beings, or at least basically decent people, often work out in practice not a bit better, and sometimes a lot worse, than the doings of those who do not deign to conceal their brutality and selfishness is something that deserves more thought than it usually gets from those who would do good.