

James P Cannon

1890-1974

Maybe all revolutionaries should aim — like the hero of Irish mythology, Cucullain — to die young and leave a great name behind them.

James P Cannon, whose centenary falls this year, lived 30 years longer than Lenin and a quarter century longer than Trotsky.

He lived so long that when he died in August 1974 he was a contemporary of his own epigones, and indeed appeared to be one of his own epigones himself.

He was a member of the epigones' party, the Socialist Workers' Party USA, the party which he, together with Shachtman, Aberg, Swabeck and others, had founded almost half a century earlier. He appeared to be at one with his own unworthy successors, who had already moved a long way from the politics Cannon had shared with Trotsky in the '30s. They were to move a long way further, to the openly Stalinistic politics they have had for a decade now.

Cannon did, as I will argue, agree with the SWP leaders on certain of the things which propelled and shaped their subsequent development, and he does bear much responsibility for the depressing degeneration of the party he founded into the grotesque and repulsive Castroite sect it is today. But there is more to the story than that.

Two things placed Cannon at the very centre of post-Trotsky Trotskyism in the decade when it reformulated and reconstituted itself — the death of Trotsky in August 1940, and the collapse as an organisation of the very weak Fourth International at the beginning of World War 2.

When the Fourth International was reconstituted at the war's end, it was largely under the SWP's influence. But it needed to be reconstituted politically, too.

Stalinism could no longer be seen as only a phenomenon of the decay of the Russian workers' state. It had survived the war and expanded enormously, and looked as if it would continue expanding.

Capitalism too had survived the war, and had begun to rebuild itself. The future would be determined by the competition of those two systems, in neither of which the working class ruled.

The goals, aspirations, and doctrines of revolutionary socialism had to be reformulated for this world. It was a task the Trotskyist movement never did adequately. All its conclusions and codifications were piecemeal and unstable.

By the end of the '40s the Trotskyists had grudgingly come to the conclusion that we were living through a deformed world revolution. The vanguard, for now, of that revolution was the Stalinist movement, which at one and the same time must be opposed, hated and fought, and supported and championed against capitalism and imperialism.

On the basis of the general ideas codified at the Third World Congress in mid 1951, calling the Stalinist systems degenerated and deformed workers' states, it was possible to develop various radically different policies. You could maintain a hard working-class attitude, the same attitude to Stalinist regimes



as pre-1940 Trotskyism, advocating a so-called "political revolution" that was in fact full-scale social revolution and in practice treating the Stalinist bureaucracies as the fully-fledged ruling-class enemy they in fact were¹. You could be against the military expansion of the Soviet Union and for its withdrawal from Eastern Europe, even while refusing to label the Soviet Union as imperialism, and "defending" it against imperialism.

But you could also go completely "soft" on the bureaucracies, recognising them as the "leadership" of this or that revolution — as indeed the Maoist bureaucracy, for example, was the leadership of the Chinese revolution. You could look with hope to the taking over of new areas by Stalin's "Red" Army.

Or you could do both, oscillating. Cannon supported the ideas of "reconstituted" 1951 Trotskyism. His tendency gave them a "hard working-class" interpretation. Others took the opposite fork from the bivouac at that 1951 crossroads. Many zig-zagged back and forth.

Cannon split the world organisation in 1953, denouncing others — Pablo and Mandel — for not supporting the East Berlin workers' uprising. In the '60s the SWP would give scarcely critical support to the Castroites; by the end of the '70s they supported the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and rediscovered a fervent enthusiasm for Castro, now a Stalinist even among Stalinists.

From Cannon to Barnes (the present SWP leader) there is a steep and continuous decline. The generation after Cannon, Dobbs and Hansen, were Trotskyists disintegrating politically; the present leaders of the SWP are visibly a bunch of ignorant pigs with neither socialist principles nor working-class loyalty. They have evolved into a different species.

Cannon always remained superior to the people who were to ruin the SWP USA. As an old man, he spent a long period in retirement and semi-retirement, during which he more than once came out against them.

Indeed, the story of Cannon's last 30 years could be told as a story of his attempts to intervene against or moderate the "excesses" of his followers, not only in the SWP but internationally. He was trying to undo, reverse, limit — or sometimes deny, by way of world-play and 'ideological' self-deception — the consequences of the fundamental political decisions he had taken or licensed in the late '40s and early '50s.

He was always dragged down by the magnetic pull on post-Trotsky Trotskyism of the seemingly successful revolutionary Stalinist movements. His efforts were never effective. They were like the efforts of someone trying to lift himself up against the

power of gravity inhering in the terrain he had chosen to stand on. They became increasingly feeble and tragic as his force and strength declined.

In 1953 he could shatter the Fourth International in a panic-stricken and emotional leap away from the policies which the majority leaders of the organisation had built on the basis of the Third World Congress decisions. A dozen years later he could not dissuade the SWP leaders from taking a series of organisational decisions which he knew risked "strangling" the party.

In his last published article, printed in an official "United Secretariat of the Fourth International" volume (*Fifty Years of World Revolution*) along with all sorts of Castroite and semi-Maoist rubbish, Cannon took issue with some of the woollier enthusiasms of his comrades. "The weakness of the enemy in the backward countries has opened the possibility of coming to power with a blunted instrument". However, this factual observation does not dispose of the entire question, or even touch its most important aspects. The deformations of the regimes emanating from the revolutionary movements headed by the Stalinised parties, and the opportunism and sectarianism exhibited by their leaderships... demonstrate that the need for organising genuine Marxist parties is not ended..."

In effect he publicly reprimanded his international tendency (the "USFI"); but even in doing so he criticised the ruling Stalinist bureaucracies in political terms, as a poor political leadership in a common struggle, not as a hostile social force.

For Cannon, that attitude to the Stalinist bureaucracy was unusual; for some of his co-thinkers, the norm. They were closer to the Brandlerite "Right Communists" (or critical Stalinists) of the '30s than to the genuine politics of Leon Trotsky.

When Cannon died in 1974 I wrote an obituary which said this: "Cannon and the post-Trotsky Trotskyists leave us with many problems to solve. But the very possibility of repairing the ravages of the last decades and developing an adequate Marxist outlook is real only because of the work of the Trotskyist movement, only because it represented the link with the heroic age of communism and its Marxist renaissance which flowered, however briefly, in the Comintern under Lenin and Trotsky."

To Cannon we owe a great deal for this possibility. He passes on to us a priceless heritage and a great example. [In the Communist International] a whole army set out to change the world — and fell victim to the virus of Stalinism, or to ruling class repression.

When almost all of them had sunk into renegacy, taken up the trade of power brokerage for Stalin, or become ministers in bourgeois or Stalinist governments — when the army of revolutionary heroes had sunk and shrunk into phillistine power-worship — Cannon was the last outstanding leader of Lenin's Comintern to remain unbowed and unchanged, uncorrupted and unrepentant".

Sixteen years later the "problems" can be seen to be far deeper and bigger than we thought, and the condition of what Cannon left behind far worse. Cannon did the best he could in very hard and unfavourable circumstances. I see no reason to change the judgment I made when comrade Cannon died.

Sean Matgamna

1. That was the political character of the self-proclaimedly "Cannonite" Workers' Fight group, all through its history as a "workers' state"-ist tendency.