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Recommended Citation

Hunt, J. (2015). Communists and the Classroom: Radicals in U.S. Education, 1930-1960. *Composition Studies*, 43(2), 22-42.

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Articles

Communists and the Classroom: Radicals in U.S. Education, 1930–1960

Jonathan Hunt

Concern about Communists in education was a central preoccupation in the U.S. through the middle decades of the twentieth century. Focusing on post-secondary and adult education and on fields related to composition and rhetoric, this essay offers an overview of the surprisingly diverse contexts in which Communist educators worked. Some who taught in Communist-sponsored “separatist” institutions pioneered the kinds of radical pedagogical theories now most often attributed to Paulo Freire. Communist educators who taught in “mainstream” institutions, however, less often saw their pedagogy as a mode of political action; their activism was deployed mainly in civic life rather than the classroom. Awareness of this complex history may help current educators appreciate a wider range of possibilities for thinking about the relationships between politics, pedagogy, and professionalism.

Our field, like the teaching profession more broadly, has a long tradition of debating the complex relationships between politics, pedagogy, and professionalism. While the strident exchanges of critical pedagogy’s heyday have waned, at least in the pages of our journals, the issues raised by this pedagogy remain alive for every composition instructor who hopes that teaching writing can empower students to intervene positively in their own lives and in their communities, however defined: what forms of political belief and practice are essential to pedagogy and professionalism, as we understand them, and what forms are anathema? This issue periodically surges into the headlines, as in the recent case of Steven Salaita, inviting each of us to not only think deeply about our own individual practices (both in the classroom and out), but also to take part and to become involved—to sign this or that petition, to pressure our professional organizations to take a stand (or not), to repost a link on Facebook, or compose an op-ed or essay.

This essay looks to the past to help us consider our present responses to the complex challenge of political commitments in the writing classroom and in the profession of teaching. The past I propose to investigate is the messy and in some ways still-controversial context of radical educators in the Cold-War-era

U.S. And by “radical,” I mean in the Old Left sense of the word. Alice McGrath, a Communist lawyer who was the basis for the character Alice Bloomfield in Luis Valdez’s play and film *Zoot Suit*, described the term in an interview with another radical, Studs Terkel, as follows:

The word “liberal,” when I was young, meant somebody who was scared of his own shadow. Today, it means somebody of the extreme left. The *L* word of the ’80s is what the *C* word—*C* for Communist—was in the ’50s. You talk about the “radical right” today. That’s a phrase we never would have used in the ’30s and ’40s. “Radical” always referred to the Left beyond liberalism. (Terkel 364)

In short, the radical educators I’ll discuss were—for part of their professional lives, at least—Communists.

The issue of Communism overshadowed most of the history of the twentieth century in the U.S., particularly the decades following World War II: no social or political movement could be understood independently from the question of Communism, no cultural product went unscrutinized in the search for Communist propaganda; the question of Communism (or more accurately, anti-Communism) was central to American identity. Radical (again, meaning Communist) pedagogy in the U.S. from the 1920s through the 1960s was hotly debated in daily newspapers as well as scholarly journals, and in the halls of academe as well as the halls of legislature—it was a consuming topic of interest not only for teachers and students in the classroom, but also for trustees and administrators, law enforcement officers, political parties, and professional associations. Even now, decades after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, conversations about American Communists are politically charged and haunted by deep historical scars.

How can the study of this context help us today? Not in any simple way, unfortunately. Or rather, the value of this history is precisely its complexity and diversity. The people I’ll discuss—“Red-ucators,” as they were dubbed by anti-Communist discourse of the time—were individual educators making practical decisions about politics and pedagogy, and often doing so in the context of membership in the Communist Party. The Party, for many, both gave meaning to and, for some, betrayed their efforts as teachers.

The educators I discuss came from divergent backgrounds, played a range of different roles in the Communist Party, and participated in the Party in very different historical moments. Although today we might not consider all of these people to be compositionists, they each taught courses that in the twenty-first century would fall under the broad umbrella of composition and rhetoric or writing studies, courses intended to build rhetorical effectiveness in various

contexts, to develop school and community literacies, and to increase critical thinking and civic engagement. Some taught first-year writing or public speaking in the same institutions where many of us work today. And like us, they had to decide when and how to bring their varying, contested, and evolving politics into their professions and their classrooms.

Varieties of Rhetorical Education and the Mid-Century Radical Left

Through the middle decades of the twentieth century, hundreds of thousands of Americans were drawn, in one way or another, to the Communist Party. Precise numbers are hard to come by, both because the Party itself was highly secretive and because claims about its size or influence were (and remain) highly politicized. Anti-Communist historian Harvey Klehr states that membership peaked at about 100,000 in 1939, while Alan Wald asserts that up to a million people “passed directly through membership”; both agree that up to five times the membership were close to the Communist Party as “fellow travelers” (Wald 71). At the height of the Red Scare, long-time FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover placed the number of fellow travelers somewhat higher: “for every Party member ten others are ready, willing, and able to do the Party’s work” (5). In absence of an archival record of membership, assertions about the Party’s membership or influence usually tell us more about the rhetorical purpose of the claimant (pro or con) than about the Party itself.

Anti-Communist discourse of the period argued that any member of the Communist Party ceded all independence and free will, becoming instead a disciplined agent of Joseph Stalin. This idea was central to the logic of loyalty oaths for academics: academic freedom, it was argued, could not be applied to someone who had surrendered her freedom to Communism. In fact, many former Communists have reported in memoirs that they felt their integrity was severely compromised by the demands of Party discipline. Yet as Wald and others have definitively shown, Communism and the Communist Party were also hotly contested arenas of thought and action, where a diversity of voices, intentions, strategies, and aims circulated and competed. The case of long-time Communist organizer Dorothy Healey is illustrative. In her autobiography, Healey observes that strong discipline contributed to the effectiveness of the Party and the identity of its members, but it also “leaves a false impression to say we changed directions only because of orders from Moscow” (Healey and Isserman 58). Healey argues that organizers on the ground had to make their own decisions: “The United States was a long way from the Soviet Union, and California was a long way from national Party headquarters in New York, and I [. . .] was a long way from state Party headquarters in San Francisco” (58). In short, as is the case with institutional forms ranging from representative government to corporate management structure to the governance of the modern

university, the Communist Party as an institution was varied and contested. As Wald puts it, “what actually happens in a trade union or on the pages of a novel is usually far more dependent on matters such as the personalities and abilities of those who are the human agents, and the context in which those agents are active” (74).

In the case of U.S. Communism, the diversity of human agents and contexts corresponds to the diversity of the United States: Communists were migrant farm workers and movie stars, plumbers and diplomats; they were immigrants and native born; they came from every region, ethnicity, religious background, income bracket, and educational level. Thousands were teachers and scholars working in every discipline. Many taught at what Susan Kates calls “separatist” institutions on the Left, such as Brookwood Labor College, which Kates describes vividly in her 2001 book *Activist Rhetorics and American Higher Education, 1885–1937*; other separatist institutions deserving our attention include the nonsectarian Highlander Folk School and the socialist People’s College, co-founded by Helen Keller and directed by Arthur Le Sueur, father of Communist author Meridel Le Sueur (whose 1984 memoir *Crusaders* focuses on the political and personal legacies of her parents and includes an account of the school). Many more taught at the Communist-run Workers Schools and their successors, such as San Francisco’s California Labor School, where PhDs taught alongside dockworkers. Most, however, occupied posts in public and private institutions of learning ranging from Midwestern elementary schools to Harvard University.

It is impossible to determine how many educators were Communists—at the time, the FBI and congressional investigating committees made every effort to find out, but because being a member of the Communist Party was actually illegal for much of the mid-century, and because any teacher identified as a Communist would almost certainly be fired, few were willing to stand up and be counted. Historian Ellen Schrecker has observed that the investigating committees of the McCarthy era were particularly interested in education: she calculates that “almost 20 percent of the witnesses called before congressional and state investigating committees were college teachers or graduate students” and observes that “most of the academic witnesses who did not clear themselves with the committees lost their jobs” (*No Ivory Tower* 10). These penalties for membership in the Communist Party were such that “it became possible and often desirable to be a member in practice with no material evidence” (Wald 75).

Even with the opening of the Communist Party archives, donated in 2006 to New York University’s Tamiment Library, we cannot determine with any accuracy the number of educators involved in the Communist Party; as one commentator in the 1950s wryly put it, “the number of Communists on univer-

sity faculties is not, of course, a matter of statistical record” (Hultzen 425). But Lee Hultzen and others estimate that Communist Party membership among higher education faculty was probably not more than one percent: energetic investigation at the University of Washington revealed two Communists among 1,397 full- and part-time faculty members (Hultzen 425); 12 Communists were discovered among Harvard’s roughly 2,000 faculty members; and the Rapp-Coudert Committee named 63 “confirmed” Communists among more than 10,000 teachers in the New York City area (Iverson 162, 219). For the FBI and congressional investigating committees, however, this paucity of results only provided greater evidence of Communists’ cunning skills at infiltration.

Like others on the Left, some educators remained “fellow travelers,” close allies of the Communist Party but never joining, such as philosophy professor Melvin Rader of the University of Washington. Rader characterized his thinking in a 1969 memoir: “Like millions of others, I reasoned that a good cause should not be deserted merely because Communists supported it. . . . It seemed apparent that if I refused to function in an organization simply because Communists were in it, I would be stymied, unable to effectively support the very causes I *knew* to be right” (31). Other educators were members, either in secret or openly, for a few years or for decades. Some joined the Party as adults: W.E.B. Du Bois famously joined in 1961 at the age of 93, half a century after his days in the Sociology Department at Atlanta University. Others were practically born into the Party: Sovietologist Bill Mandel, probably the only person to have served as an instructor at the Communist Party’s New York Workers School and as a Fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution, was raised in the Communist subculture of the 1920s and for a time attended university in Moscow (on this early generation of “red diaper babies” see Paul Mishler’s *Raising Reds*).

Some left the Party in protest, some left quietly, some were expelled (as was Mandel), and some lived out their lives as Communists. Of those who left the Communist Party, many stayed loyal to what they saw as its principles, and remained active in what they called the “non-sectarian” left. This trajectory, in fact, was probably the most common. Others left the Communist Party altogether, disillusioned with progressive politics, and took a hard turn to the right; for example, Frank S. Meyer, an instructor at the Communist Party’s Workers Schools in Chicago and New York in the 1930s, left the Communist Party to help William F. Buckley found the *National Review*, and, as the author of *In Defense of Freedom: A Conservative Credo*, is considered by some to be one of the primary architects of late twentieth-century conservatism. Many Communists or suspected Communists were fired, some went to prison or into exile; others laid low, signed loyalty oaths, and struggled to live out their beliefs in a time of massive state repression in both the U.S. and the USSR.

In the U.S., the state abuses of power known colloquially as McCarthyism are well known, in spite of attempts by pundit Ann Coulter and others to rehabilitate the senator from Wisconsin. Coulter's 2003 book *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism* reprises the rhetorical stance of Joseph McCarthy and the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). More recently, David Horowitz has attempted to keep the Cold War alive under the guise of "ideological diversity" and a "student's Bill of Rights." Horowitz, stumping for his 2006 book *The Professors*, told Fox News host Sean Hannity that the University of California at Santa Cruz is ideologically the "worst school in America," citing as evidence the presence of feminist and "well-known American Communist" Bettina Aptheker on the faculty ("Worst"). By her own account, Aptheker was a Party member for almost 20 years but resigned her membership in 1981 after experiencing "a sense of overwhelming betrayal by the party," which would not accept her feminism, her sexuality, or the scholarship these informed (Aptheker, *Intimate* 403).

It is important to remember, though, that while McCarthy names an era, his career as a red-hunter was short-lived (1950–54). Yet Communist teachers faced federal and state legislative and criminal investigations long before and well after McCarthy's brief heyday: throughout the 1920s, '30s, '40s, and '50s, the "Old Left" in education was the subject of surveillance, scrutiny, and blacklisting. We remember the institutions of this repression: the HUAC and the many "little HUACs" at the state level, such as (to mention just a few) the Rapp-Coudert investigations in New York, Washington's Canwell Committee, and the Tenney Committee in California, which brought about the Loyalty Oath that I shame-facedly signed in 1989 in order to work as a teaching assistant at the University of California. We invoke this history when academic freedom or civil liberties are threatened.

Context 1: Rhetorical Education and Communist "Separatist" Institutions

Given this history, it is perhaps unsurprising that the pedagogical practices, the theoretical positions, and the lived politics of U.S. Communist educators were as diverse as those educators themselves, a fact that makes it difficult to draw clear historical lessons from their experiences. Nonetheless, some general claims about these educators are permissible. Notably, they did all the same things we do as citizens and professionals: attended faculty meetings and perhaps union meetings, joined the PTA or ran for City Council, coached baseball, donated to causes or raised funds for them, wrote letters to the editor and submitted manuscripts to *College English*, signed petitions, planned or participated in demonstrations or read about them in the newspaper, voted. Yet they also did things differently—differences enabled, in part, by their awareness of and participation in a global political movement. This

movement sponsored a massive network, now entirely defunct, of separatist educational institutions whose central goal was activist organization and rhetorical training. These institutions provided very different contexts from those in which most of us now teach, and were in fact different from the mainstream institutions where most Communists taught. In these separatist contexts, Communist educators struggled with limited resources to enact visionary pedagogies they believed would help transform the world. However, in mainstream academic professional and pedagogical contexts—the contexts most familiar to us, which I discuss in the next section—they generally took care to moderate their political behavior. But *outside* the academic context they often put enormous effort into fundraising and political causes.

While discussing the work of Communist educators in the context of separatist institutions and other forms of explicit activist-rhetorical education and sponsorship, I combine two borrowed concepts: Susan Kates's concept of activist rhetorical education and Deborah Brandt's concept of sponsors of literacy. Kates's notion of activist rhetoric applies clearly to Party-sponsored schools; in its briefest formulation, an activist rhetoric "pursues the relationship between language and identity, makes civic issues a theme in the rhetoric classroom, and emphasizes the responsibility of community service as part of the writing and speaking curriculum" (xi). The Party also pursued activist rhetorical education outside the classroom, playing the role of a literacy sponsor. For Brandt, sponsors of literacy are "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way" (19). She explicitly notes that sponsors "represent the causes into which people's literacy usually gets recruited"—an apt description of the goals of Party-sponsored rhetorical education.

A brief survey of Communists in these separatist or alternative educational contexts reveals that a full treatment of them would require several volumes, and some of these volumes have already been written. They include Communist apostate Frank S. Meyer's *The Moulding of Communists* (1961) and life-long Communist (and former NCTE President) Holland Roberts's unpublished memoir *The Dangerous School: An Autobiography* (1971), as well as more recent texts by historians, such as Schrecker's *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (1986) and Richard J. Altenbaugh's *Education for Struggle: The American Labor Colleges of the 1920s and 1930s* (1990). Other histories are in the works, such as Marvin Gettleman's "*Training for the Class Struggle*": *Communist Education in the U.S.* and Jess Rigelhaupt's as yet unpublished dissertation on the California Labor School. These studies show that, in spite of a few clear directives in the Marxist-Leninist canon, pedagogical practices in Communist-run or sponsored institutions were widely divergent. It is no-

table, by the way, that these works are authored either by participants (Meyer; Roberts) or historians (Altenbaugh; Gettleman; Rigelhaupt; Schrecker); in our own field, as I have mentioned, disciplinary histories of the last decade have often brushed up against the Communist Party without treating it explicitly.

The now-forgotten Workers Schools and their World War II-era incarnations such as the “Jeff School” and the California Labor School were laboratories for many of the pedagogical methods, curricular features, and institutional structures that many composition teachers value today. These schools were student-centered in complex and ambivalent ways; Communists of the mid-century who survived to witness the late-century enthusiasm for Paulo Freire’s work often remarked that they had pioneered similar ideas in the ’30s and ’40s (see Le Sueur; Roberts). Unlike most labor colleges, the left-separatist institutions of the mid-century were open admissions and free (or nearly free) to attend. They were desegregated and antiracist, coeducational and antisexist, and they focused on student learning and not on quantified assessment. As Altenbaugh puts it in his description of labor colleges, they “served liberatory rather than adjustive outcomes, addressing the cognitive domain of human agency” (4). Particularly in the late 1930s and 1940s, leftist schools paired a broad cultural curriculum with activist rhetoric.

From the perspective of the Communist Party, these schools were established to build working class culture and to pursue political goals, including support for the labor movement, civil rights struggles, feminism, and a pro-Soviet foreign policy. Earl Browder, the head of the Communist Party from 1930 to 1945, who shepherded it into the moderate Popular Front period and coined the slogan “Communism is Twentieth-Century Americanism,” testified before a legislative committee in 1935 that “the Communist Party has its own educational work, with its own educational institutions” (Iverson 61). It was no secret that the Communist Party operated the schools; particularly in their early period, they were often housed under the same roof as Communist Party offices. Gettleman confirms that “North American Communists between 1923 and 1957 created a network of adult labor schools which was perhaps the most extensive program of adult education carried out anywhere in the Americas before regular colleges discovered the cash cow of continuing education.”

The enormous resources put into these schools indicate that the Communist Party and its members did not focus—or, in any case, did not focus *primarily*—on “infiltrating” mainstream schools. Browder himself explained part of the rationale for this in the Communist-influenced progressive educational journal *Social Frontier* in 1935, observing that “bankers and lawyers make up about 95% of all controlling boards in the educational system and it is utopian to expect to change the situation fundamentally until bankers and lawyers are in general expelled from seats of power” (qtd. in Eagan 140).

We may certainly view a Communist Party leader's remarks with suspicion, as candor was not a hallmark of Party leadership. But in spite of occasional calls for Communist teachers to use the classroom to revolutionize students, Browder's arguments were widely accepted. There was a general sense in the Communist Party that the marginalized groups it most wanted to reach—workers, racial minorities, immigrants, women—were underrepresented or neglected in mainstream schools, and that the schools themselves were not structured to privilege the knowledge of people belonging to these overlapping groups. As historian Eileen Eagan puts it, "Believing in the primacy of the working class in efforts to overthrow capitalism, Marxists tended to downplay the role of educators and intellectuals" (139-40); Schrecker concurs, observing that the Communist Party "had never been eager to recruit professors. It wanted workers" (*No Ivory Tower* 46).

This view was widely held, confirms Jane Dawson, Party organizer in Chicago and then Los Angeles from the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s. Dawson's FBI file, which she obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, includes a page from the 1938 course catalog of the Chicago Workers School, indicating that she taught a course entitled "The Woman Question" (in an interview with me, she says that she ultimately did not teach the course, but does not recall why). As a professional organizer for the Communist Party, however, she was familiar with the broad educational theories in place within the Party: "there was a feeling that a trade unionist would be more likely to understand capitalism than a learned, middle-class person, . . . that if you were a worker, you would understand what oppression was, whereas if you were middle class, you'd have a hard time understanding it" (Dawson). Students in the universities, particularly, were not the audience sought by the Communist Party, and—in spite of Vladimir Lenin and Stalin's various pronouncements on the role of the teacher—the Communist Party considered it unlikely that a few "subversive" instructors could change the situation. Surveying his time at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) and Harvard, Communist Granville Hicks observed, "Even if I had done my level best to convert my students, how much headway could I have made against the several hundred members of the faculty who were thoroughly committed to the capitalist system?" (*Where* 63).

In addition to the Workers Schools that could be found in most cities and many large towns, the Party ran training schools for Party organizers and leaders, as well as initiatives directed at the rank and file, such as literacy-oriented immigrant solidarity clubs based on national or regional origin, known as *landsmanshafs*. These groups, says Dawson, "weren't necessarily Communist, but there were a lot of Communists there, and probably, because Communists worked harder and stayed longer, they dominated them to some extent." The Communist Party's John Reed Clubs fostered proletarian writers—and in the

1930s “writing” meant not just fiction or poetry, but also “the (overlapping) genres of documentary, ethnography, oral history, folklore, journalism [and] reality-based fiction” characteristic of the period (Staub 1). The Communist Party’s Popular Front-era successor to the John Reed Clubs, the League of American Writers, put less emphasis on fostering proletarian culture, but nonetheless (according to Communist Frank Folsom) “maintained close contact” with the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and sponsored writing classes (“Finding Yourself in Writing” was the title of one 1939 offering) and Writers Schools in several cities (Folsom 78). Here, Folsom alludes to the influence of Holland Roberts, a specialist in literacy and a Communist who, at the time, was an associate professor of education at Stanford, a frequent contributor to and assistant editor of the *English Journal* in the ’20s and ’30s and president of NCTE in 1936–37 (see also Roberts).

These outreach or sponsorship efforts often served Communists and non-Communists alike, and were accompanied by literacy-oriented and activist rhetorical activities aimed specifically at members: Party membership included involvement in a small group (called a “cell” by the anti-subversives). This group would meet periodically to discuss readings and current events and to plan fundraisers and other events—it was essentially a politically active book club. As Hollywood script writer Jean Rouverol notes in her memoir of the period, “these once- or twice-a-month meetings at someone’s house with 8 or 10 friends sitting about a living room, fueled by coffee and Danish and discussing dialectical materialism, were an intriguing experience” (23). Hicks, for his part, characterized such meetings as “dull as dishwater[. . .] An ordinary meeting of the branch of the Party I belonged to in Troy was more like a meeting of the Roxborough Parent-Teacher Association or the Roxborough Volunteer Fire Company than it was like a meeting of conspirators” (*Where* 43).

The local Party organizer (Dawson was one of thousands) would usually attend group meetings to listen in on conversations and guide discussions of theory and doctrine. The local groups were often sites of the kind of discussion and critique that the late twentieth-century Right would call “political correctness.” In a revealing moment, Frank S. Meyer, the former Workers School instructor who became a prominent conservative, decried the educational component that accompanied Communist Party activities, complaining that “even common expressions must be carefully watched [. . . as] the last word of the harried male, ‘That’s just like a woman,’ has more than once been seized upon as a pernicious sign of ‘male chauvinism’” (29). Finally, the Party mounted *ad hoc* efforts in the midst of other struggles and campaigns; in her memoir, for example, Dorothy Healey remembers one-on-one literacy work with African American Communists in the South (Healey and Isserman; for

a more detailed description of literacy efforts in the South, where even many organizers were not literate, see Kelley 93-99).

These many and varied contexts of activist rhetorical education, from massive schools with extensive curricula and thousands of students to small clubs and discussion groups, have been extensively documented by historians as well as in FBI files, legislative committee investigative reports, sensational anti-Red screeds, and, usually obliquely, in dozens of memoirs of Communists.

Context 2: Activist Rhetorical Education in “Mainstream” Schools

We have seen that radical pedagogues were at work in a wide range of contexts during the 1930s and '40s. But what of those who taught in mainstream schools, particularly the colleges and universities that (unlike the Workers Schools and labor colleges) still stand today? That is the situation for most of us now. We (probably) will not get fired for assigning Marx in our classrooms (by the early 1960s even conservatives began to argue that Communism should be taught in U.S. schools in a know-your-enemy policy; see Iverson; Seymour). Our academic freedom is generally more secure, although recent efforts by David Horowitz and others on the Right to “save” academic freedom follow quite closely the logic of the anti-Communist purges of the post-World War II period, when Sidney Hook (a former Communist) and others redefined the term “academic freedom” so that instead of protecting teachers with radical politics, it became the rationale for excluding them (see Horowitz, *Indoctrination*; Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower* 105-12). So long as we have no real or imagined financial ties to Al Qaeda or refrain from tweeting too aggressively on political topics, we are reasonably free to belong to any political party we choose (Jaschik). But we have neither the option nor, for most of us, the courage, to teach in the kind of radical “separatist” political contexts described above—Worker’s Schools, labor colleges, activist training schools, etc. In other words—and this is a key point—any decisions made by Communist teachers working in mainstream institutions in the middle decades of the twentieth century need to be understood in a larger context informed by an awareness of and (sometimes) participation in a broad, varied, organized, and politically radical program of free education.

Like most of us today, most teachers who were Communists taught in “public schools, private schools, and church schools, from kindergartens to colleges,” and these were the primary concern for congressional investigating committees and other professional anti-Communists, as well as for concerned parents (Stripling 206). While Communist educational institutions such as the Workers Schools that were found in most large cities were looked upon with concern, the real fear was of the “infiltrator,” a teacher in a mainstream classroom who would secretly indoctrinate America’s youth in an *Invasion of the*

Body Snatchers-style scenario, turning them into robots controlled by Moscow. According to Robert Stripling, chief investigator for the HUAC from 1938 to 1948, these Red teachers operated by “slipping propaganda into classroom work and textbooks and by leading gullible students into Red-sponsored campus activities” (201). Once “snared,” the “girl or boy who falls under Communist influence is in danger of losing his whole future as an independent, American citizen” and becoming subject to “absolute obedience in all things to Party orders” (200-01). Here we can see the basis for the logic that purging Communists would protect, rather than jeopardize, academic freedom.

Yet if successful in firing hundreds of teachers who were Communists or suspected Communists, investigating committees and even the FBI were hard pressed to provide examples of actual subversion or indoctrination in the classroom. Schrecker observes, “Had the colleges and universities who sought these dismissals possessed any information that the teachers they were trying to oust had proselytized in class, they certainly would have produced it. But they had none. . . . Despite all the Cold War rhetoric about Communist teachers indoctrinating their students, there is no evidence that they did” (*No Ivory Tower* 44). In the perverse logic of the times, though, this absence of evidence was itself taken as proof of the enemy’s skill. Congressional investigating committees and anti-communist witnesses who appeared before them were obsessed with the idea that, even if no explicit instruction in Communism were given, some form of indoctrination would take place. After all, Communists were, in the words of J. Edgar Hoover, “masters of deceit”—this phrase became the title of his own book-length anti-Communist screed, *Masters of Deceit: The Story of Communism in America and How to Fight It* (1958).

Other semi-official anti-Communist texts similarly emphasized the slipperiness of the Communist threat: the suspected will not admit to being Communists, but if they do admit it, they will not admit to indoctrinating students; and if no evidence of indoctrination can be found, that just proves how wily they are. Semi-official texts along these lines include Stripling’s *The Red Plot Against America* (1949) and California Senator Jack Tenney’s *Red Fascism: Boring from Within by the Subversive Forces of Communism* (1947); spanning the decades, other notable examples include Fascist sympathizer Elizabeth Dilling’s *The Red Network* (1934), conspiracy theorist Eugene Lyons’s *The Red Decade* (1941), Harry and Bonaro Overstreet’s *What We Must Know About Communism* (1958), and former Communist Frank S. Meyer’s *The Moulding of Communists* (1961), as well as a volley of titles from Louis Budenz, a Brookwood Labor College instructor turned professional witness: *Men without Faces* (1950), *The Cry Is Peace* (1952), *The Techniques of Communism* (1954). Budenz famously declared, “Every Communist educator or Red sympathizer in education is an

active agent of the conspiracy, whose orders it is his duty to obey. In his own field, he is just as dangerous as a Soviet espionage agent” (*Cry* 156).

Every scholar who has looked at the question of Communist practices in the classroom has noted that our project is similar to that of the FBI and the investigating committees of the mid-century era. And like the committees, “we know surprisingly little about the CP’s [Communist Party’s] activities within the academic community” (Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower* 24-5). I asked Dawson about the practices of Communist teachers that she knew through her Party work. Her reply to my question showed a rhetorical perspective: “Well, they did pretty much what you do, probably—a little more emphasis on civil rights, something about the poor or about industrial working conditions. They didn’t come right out with Marx and Lenin. You had to think about your audience” (Dawson).

Dawson’s observation brings to mind Karen Kopelson’s rhetorically minded critique of the critical-pedagogical imperative that the instructor’s politics must be staged in the classroom. Drawing on the ancient Greek rhetorical concept of *mētis* or “cunning,” Kopelson argues that an instructor’s “performance of the very neutrality that students expect from their (composition) instructors, and from education more generally, can become a rhetorically savvy, politically responsive and responsible pedagogical tactic” (Kopelson 118, emphasis in original). In other words, Kopelson argues not that instructors should abandon political commitments, but that a strategic, audience-aware performance of political neutrality is a way to “negotiate students’ resistance” and thus help students wrestle productively with politically volatile or sensitive topics.

While Communists’ pedagogical goals may have involved changing students’ minds, there is considerable evidence that they nonetheless did not see a politicized classroom as the best path to this end. To depart momentarily from the post-secondary and adult education worlds, the case of David Friedman is illustrative. Friedman, who joined the Communist Party after becoming a substitute teacher in Harlem, never mentions students or the classroom in his account of his activities as a Communist teacher. When he was hired, Friedman “was appalled” by the conditions in Harlem schools, which, as he says, “were considered a place where you didn’t worry too much about the quality of education” (qtd. in Schrecker, *Age* 112). The teachers’ union seemed to him to be the only active force for change, getting parents involved and pressuring the board of education to address the high ratio of substitutes, scarcity and antiquity of textbooks, and poor condition of the facilities. Friedman was drawn to the Party through his involvement in the union. He observed that the most active and dedicated members of the union were Communists: “the ones who would sweat it out all kinds of hours and come in on Saturdays and would work the mimeograph machine or writing statements or trying to

mobilize committees all hours of the late afternoon and evening” (133). His admiration for these activists led him to the Party: “I realized that these were the kind of people I was glad to work with” (133). Friedman’s remark aligns with Jane Dawson’s observation that Communists “infiltrated” organizations like unions by working harder and staying later than others.

Significantly, though, in describing his work, Friedman *never once* mentions the pedagogical strategies he pursued in the classroom. The “tremendous energy” and “tremendous activity” (his words) of Communists in the union was devoted to organizing teachers and parents; selling the Communist Party’s newspaper, *The Daily Worker*; raising money for other unions such as auto workers’ and steel workers’; and raising consciousness about the dangers of fascism. It may well be that Friedman and his colleagues engaged in some form of Communist-influenced pedagogy (the worst fear of Congress and, apparently, much of the public), but his reminiscences indicate clearly that he imagined his primary sphere of activity as located outside the classroom. His students were not the target of his activist rhetoric.

Across both higher education institutions and public schools, New York City had the highest number of Communist teachers (and the same is true of staff members, who were subject to the same repressive measures). Of particular concern to investigators was The City College of New York (CCNY), whose large population of dispossessed students was seen as a potential breeding ground for Communists. While the evidence suggests that it *was* such a breeding ground, the fear that teachers were indoctrinating students was misplaced. In fact, *students* were the most active recruiters: most Communists on the teaching staff had been radicalized by other students during their own undergraduate years. In a detailed and carefully documented 1959 monograph on Communism in U.S. schools, Robert Iverson wrote:

The idea that a handful of Communist teachers launched students on the road to Communism must be laid to rest. The Communist student movement antedated any activity among professors. There was not a single Communist teacher on the staff of the New York City colleges when the Communist student movement began. . . . By 1938, enough young instructors, tutors, and graduate students had emerged from the student movement to provide faculty support. (142)

Bill Mandel, the instructor at the Communist Party’s New York Workers School who later went on to be a fellow at Stanford’s Hoover Institution, was a part of the student movement described by Iverson. Mandel attended City College before being expelled in 1933 for involvement in student antimilitarism

demonstrations. His account of the Communist presence at City College does not quite fit with Iverson's, though: according to Mandel, students demonstrated as early as 1932 in defense of an English instructor, Oakley Johnson, fired for being a Communist. But if Mandel's autobiography challenges Iverson's claim that "there was not a single Communist teacher on the staff," it nonetheless confirms the general thrust of Iverson's argument: the Communist student movement did not come out of the classroom. Like David Friedman, the Harlem substitute teacher interviewed by Schrecker (*Age*), Communist students at City College devoted their energy primarily to raising money and organizing protests. Mandel even goes so far as to say he has "only one memory of my classes" at City College.

This memory is of a moment when Mandel, as a *student*, did try to bring communism into the classroom. He reports that an English instructor assigned the class to choose a passage to read aloud. Mandel, whose middle name is Marx, chose a passage from *The Communist Manifesto*, expecting to provoke other students and the genteel Southern instructor. According to Mandel, the instructor "listened courteously, and properly confined his comments to manner of delivery and enunciation" (62). It was only later, when the instructor joined the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and was killed in the Spanish Civil War, that Mandel realized he must have been a Communist. Mandel does not identify the instructor by name in his memoir, but I believe he must have been Ralph Wardlaw (1907-38), a Georgia native and instructor in CCNY's Department of Public Speaking (see Watt 104-05 for an account of Wardlaw's death).

It might seem surprising that an instructor so dedicated to a political cause would keep his opinions to himself, and in fact, Leon Wofsy, another red-diaper baby and active Communist who attended CCNY in the late '30s, told Marvin Gettleman of his surprise at learning which of his professors had also been in the Party (Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower* 42). Yet this seems to have been the dominant practice of Communist teachers. Most sought to keep their Party membership secret, because open admission of Communist Party membership was generally cause for immediate dismissal and even, for much of the 1940s and 1950s, imprisonment under the Smith Act. But this constraint was not the only reason for discretion: for most, "professionalism as well as prudence encouraged [Communist educators] to separate their politics from their teaching. They were, after all, highly trained scholars who, despite their radicalism, shared their colleagues' commitment to the standards of their calling" (Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower* 43). Most saw their primary sphere of activity as Communists as being *outside* the classroom, in study groups, unions, organizing meetings, fundraisers, demonstrations, and the like.

The most prominent Communist in education during this period was Granville Hicks, who was among the few members of the Communist Party to

be relatively open about membership, and one of many intellectuals who joined the Party during the Popular Front period in the middle and late 1930s—a time when, in the words of his Harvard colleague Daniel Aaron, “a communist seemed hardly more exotic than [. . .] a Republican or Elk” (qtd. in Levenson and Natterstad 110). The Harvard-educated Hicks first became widely known during the 1930s as an essayist and literary critic whose work appeared in such periodicals as *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *SAQ*, *American Literature*, H.L. Mencken’s *American Mercury*, and other magazines and journals, including *College English*. As he moved to the left through the 1930s, Hicks became a contributor to and, subsequently, literary editor of *The New Masses*. He was fired from the English Department at RPI in 1935, most probably due to his radical political associations and his published work, which included *The Great Tradition* (1933), an openly Marxist rereading of the U.S. literary canon. While openly a Communist, he was employed at Harvard on a one-year contract in 1938-39. Along with many others, he left the Party in the fall of 1939, as a result of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of that year.

At Harvard, Hicks was a “counselor,” associated with a residential house rather than an academic department. He did not, in other words, teach writing, composition, rhetoric, or literature, but instead led reading and discussion groups, advised undergraduates and graduate students on academic matters such as theses, and arranged lecture series. However, Hicks’s case is illustrative of the perceived stakes of political radicals in education. The appointment of an unashamed Communist Party member to the faculty of (arguably) the nation’s most prestigious university was controversial, unleashing considerable debate on campus and in the pages of local and national newspapers. Eventually, after the war, Hicks drew the attention of the HUAC; having left the Party, he appeared as a “friendly” witness in 1953. At stake was the question of propaganda or bias in the classroom.

There was no shortage of canonical Marxist works asserting the power of education in bringing about revolution—Lenin’s writings, in particular, offered a vision of teachers as sowing the seeds of a revolutionary future. Hicks, however, asserted that he “leaned over backward to keep my biases out of the classroom, and [. . .] called attention to them when they forced their way in” (*Where* 63). In Hicks’s view, his primary contribution to the Party was in his writing and public speaking; in other words, in his role as *rhetor*, not as pedagogue. He also brought to the Party (as Party head Earl Browder confirmed later) his protestant New England heritage. Although he was willing to risk and ultimately sacrificed his academic career for his beliefs, he did not see the classroom as an appropriate arena of political activity.

Though the vision of the Left educator as a pedagogical fifth columnist haunted discussions of American education through the twentieth century

and continues to haunt us today, we see again and again evidence that suggests that most radical educators in “mainstream” contexts sought to make political impacts *outside* the classroom, either in Party-sponsored alternative educational contexts or in civil society, in the practices we associate with the duties and pleasures of citizenship. Their main strategy for “infiltration” in these civil society contexts—and this is a motif in Communist memoirs—was not brainwashing but simply working harder and staying longer (as both Dawson and Friedman emphasize). In fact, Schrecker notes that many academics who drifted away from the Party in the 1940s did so not because of political objections to a Party line but because involvement in the Party was simply *so much work* (*No Ivory Tower* 57). And, as Schrecker’s point illustrates, most Communists did not make a life-long commitment to the Party, even if they remained committed, in multivalent ways, to the Left.

Conclusion: Betrayal and Promise

This brief survey of radical educators demonstrates the rich variety of positions and activities available in negotiating Left political and professional identities, a variety that runs counter to grim visions of rigid conformity to a Party line and a relentless agenda of subversion. These visions remind us of the fact that histories are never neutral; they are, as Jeanne Gunner puts it, “interested rhetorical forms, and our work should include examination of whose interests are being served by them” (264). When we bury a rich, varied, and problematic history behind thin but powerful stereotypes, we allow not only our past but also our present to be commandeered.

The educators discussed here, working in a range of related fields, thought carefully and often rhetorically about the intersections of their politics, their professionalism, and their pedagogies. This rhetorical thinking led radical educators to a wide range of conclusions about the intersections of their politics and their work as educators. The Cold War stereotypes of the doctrinaire Stalinist or the insidious spy were but two of the many possible roles available to Left educators, though some people did actually adopt them (as some educators do today). Most, however, seemed to have tried, as we do today, to maintain a capacity for aspiration in the face of very real political and institutional challenges, a capacity that was often bolstered and sometimes hindered by the context of an organized, international Left centered on the Soviet Union.

I opened this essay with the observation that for many radical educators, the Communist Party both gave meaning to and also betrayed their efforts as educators. The notion that the Party betrayed its own adherents is a common motif in the historiography of Communism in the U.S., and an often-poignant feature of Communist memoirs (or, more accurately, ex-Communist memoirs, since most authors of such memoirs were no longer in the Party at the time of

writing). A clear example comes from Hope Hale Davis, who was a member of the Communist Party in the 1930s, along with her husband Robert Gorham Davis, the noted author, literary critic, essayist, and professor. Near the conclusion of her memoir *Great Day Coming*, Hope Hale Davis describes the continuing shame at this betrayal she felt at having her struggle for a more just world hijacked by Stalinism:

Not shame that we joined in the fight, which indeed must be renewed and renewed, as long as people are still ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed, and brutally tortured. My shame is in the terms of my joining: I forfeited for the cause my most essential freedom, to think for myself. Instead of keeping my wits about me, I gave them over to others, believing big lies and rejecting truths as big as millions starving. No excuse can lighten the knowledge that I used my brain and talents in defense of Stalin. (336)

This shame has, I think, occluded our field's knowledge of the past in a way that undermines Hope Hale Davis's main goal: to "renew and renew" the fight. Such a renewal depends on confronting this radical past, so that we may "truly overcome [its] grave errors and yet still draw sustenance from real glories" (Wald 81).

Yet if shame and betrayal are motifs in our understanding of Communism, Communists are certainly not the only educators who have felt betrayed in their political lives and their professional work. I point to Richard Ohmann's 1976 *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession*, of enduring interest to disciplinary history in rhetoric and composition, as well as to activist rhetoricians. I do not know if Ohmann ever joined the Communist Party; I am assuming that he uses the term "radical" in its post-1968 sense, no longer as a synonym for Communist. In his 1995 introduction to the book, Ohmann opens with the observation that the "anger" of the book was "closely linked to a feeling of having been deceived and of having collaborated in the deception" (xii)—a familiar motif, but Ohmann's collaboration was not with Stalin. It was, rather, with liberal humanism. If ex-Communist Hicks could write that "the great evil of Communism is not that it uses vicious persons, as it sometimes does, but that it corrupts good ones" (47), the same must certainly be said of liberal humanism and its institutional forms, including the disciplines in which we work and the colleges and universities that house them.

Our field has energetically explored its past—or, more accurately, pasts—and hosted vigorous and eloquent discussions of the value of this exploration. It is now time to include in this discussion an exploration of our Communist past. Burying our Communist past will not save us from a sense of betrayal

by the groups to which we belong and the institutions in which we labor. Recovering this radical past may, in fact, enrich our understanding of the possibilities before us. In language that would not have been out of place in the 1930s, Richard Miller has recently observed that “it is not difficult to imagine a preferable world, one where students come to college to learn how to work collectively on solving the major problems of the twenty-first century” (*Writing* 173; see also *As If Learning Mattered*). Studying the “Red-ucators” of the twentieth century—their vision and their errors, their vigorous debates and energetic citizenship as well as their excesses and failures—may help us to “renew and renew the fight,” to be more effective in our struggle not only to imagine but to realize a preferable world.

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