Intractable Realities

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Paul Hollander, *The End of Commitment: Intellectuals, Revolutionaries, and Political Morality*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006. 391 pp. \$28.95. ISBN-10: 1-5663-688-4; ISBN-13: 978-1-56663-688-9

In the compelling autobiographical essay with which *The Only Superpower* closes, the eminent scholar Paul Hollander explains his fascination with the puzzle presented by the near-universal denunciation of Nazism. Holocaust deniers may exist here and there, he writes, but no one argues that we must not criticize the Nazis because to do so is ethnocentric and judgmental; no one invokes postmodernism in relation to Hitler, or argues that, after all, moral values are relative. No one says, yes, but with somewhat different circumstances, Nazism might produce a good society. In short, no one tries to deny its destructive power or consequences. Yet, Hollander points out, each and every one of these stances became routine in dealing with the Communist world. Indeed, the apologetics continue to this day, apparently unhampered by the reality of political violence in every Communist country around the globe.

For many years now, Hollander has been a key contributor to our understanding of the radical mystique made up equally of unrelenting antagonism toward the

United States or the west generally, and adherence to Communism in theory, even if not always in practice. In “From a ‘Builder of Socialism’ to ‘Free-Floating Intellectual’: My Politically Incorrect Career in Sociology,” the last essay of his most recent book *The Only Superpower: Reflections on Strength, Weakness, and Anti-Americanism*, Hollander reflects on his career as a sociologist and on the objectives that have driven his work over the past five decades. For those of us who have long considered Hollander an indispensable analyst of both American culture and worldwide Communism, this autobiographical piece is of great importance, for it ties together not only the essays in this volume but Hollander’s extensive body of work as a whole.

Born in Budapest in 1932, Hollander left Hungary in 1956. Later, as the recipient of a scholarship that allowed 300 young Hungarian refugees to study in England, he chose to study sociology—a field he had not previously been aware of. But it could as easily have been history, political science, or anthropology; and, indeed, Hollander’s work touches on all these fields. He rejects the usual motives assigned to sociologists: he desired neither to be a critic of social injustice nor to unveil the roots of social patterns and practices. He rejects, as well, the mystique of the “exile,” the currently fashionable celebration of those who claim to be permanently displaced, and marvels at the irony of excellent careers afforded by the west to those who have cultivated this status.

Instead, Hollander’s aims were more modest: to shed light on the painful experiences of his life in Hungary: the persecution of Jews that culminated in the terrible events of 1944, the Communist repression of the years 1948 to 1956 (which included, for him and his family, several years of exile from Budapest to a village in eastern Hungary), and, finally, the Hungarian Revolution and its defeat in 1956.

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These experiences taught him two major lessons with sociological implications: 1) that human beings can be classified according to broad categories (whether racial, ethnic, political, religious, and so on), and could be treated accordingly, since these classifications are then taken to predict individual behavior; and 2) that people are capable of living for long periods of time under repressive regimes, successfully wearing masks of conformity.

Not surprisingly, such observations fed Hollander's skepticism about the theoretical models he would encounter in the field of sociology, models emphasizing conflict resolution and consensus building. However admirable these western values were, they did little to explain the decisive role of brute force that Hollander had experienced at formative moments in Hungary in the mid-twentieth century. And this in turn led to a defining feature of Hollander's scholarly life: An interest in the gap between appearance and reality, between propaganda and the lives lived under its dominion, and an abiding interest in abuses of power, political violence, and the ease with which intimidation works. As Hollander says: "I have retained a morbid fascination with the various institutional, cultural, as well as personal attempts at misrepresenting reality, and such interests found expression in my work."

Hollander's essays reveal that his political positions are by no means monolithic: liberal on many social and environmental issues; anti-Communist without being in thrall to capitalism; critical of consumerism and its role in American culture; dissatisfied with our ways of dealing with aging, dying, and death; doubtful of the potential of goods and services to fulfill all human needs; alert to the limits of social engineering and utopianism; aware of the inherently tragic aspects of the human condition with its contradictory desires and aspirations; and above all committed to reasoned debate.

The Only Superpower: Reflections on Strength, Weakness, and Anti-Americanism contains essays, most of them originally published between 2001 and 2007, that relate to contemporary political and cultural phenomena and build on Hollander's numerous earlier books on socialism and its discontents, political tourism, the adversary culture, anti-Americanism, and political violence.

The years since 2001 have been particularly fruitful for Hollander. After 9/11, as anti-Americanism flourished in many quarters, a new repressive political ideology, this time overtly linked to a major world religion, steadily gained in importance and popularity. Where once political violence tended to be restricted to national borders, it has now gone global. And the phenomenon raises questions that someone such as Hollander is particularly well-equipped to explore. Although his recent work only occasionally focuses on radical Islam, the sorts of questions Hollander has asked for the past 50 years are equally pertinent today.

Why, he wonders, has it been so difficult for westerners to criticize political violence when it comes wrapped in Communist ideology? What is the role of anti-Americanism in the failure among many U.S. academics and intellectuals to criticize Third World political violence? If the collapse of the USSR is not overtly lamented by most of these commentators, their unchanging sympathy toward other Communist regimes continues, now complicated by a similarly tolerant attitude toward radical Islam. The silence of the left today has new objects, but the phenomenon itself is hardly new, and it raises the same issues and problems that Hollander has spent years elucidating.

Central to this failure to critique political violence in Third World countries is the continuing, indeed increasing, anti-Americanism that has characterized many intellectuals and academics for generations now. The antagonism toward George W. Bush that turned into an obsession among some critics is one manifestation; the apologetics toward terrorism (when practiced by Muslims or others who can be seen as dark-skinned or Third Worlders) is another. Appropriately, Hollander notes that the "adversary culture" (a term coined by Lionel Trilling in the mid-1960s), the subject of several of Hollander's earlier books, has survived into the post-Soviet age.

Hollander's work is of immense value because he has thought so long and hard about these questions. Though impressively fair-minded, always skeptical and ready to consider issues from the other side and many angles, Hollander in the end is driven by the need to protest against the brutality that ideologically-inflamed regimes have inflicted on their subjects for generations. How does it happen, he asks, that people who are educated, privileged, and informed (or at least have ready access to information) maintain their blind faith in oppressive regimes whose brutality is not remotely disguised or mitigated by the rhetoric of equality, justice, anti-capitalism, and anti-imperialism?

For those living inside such regimes, the answers are of one order, related to the pressure to conform, the risk of dissidence, plain fear, and lingering faith. For outsiders, living without fear and immediate pressure or threat, the answers have to do with the seductiveness of the adversary culture, and the luminosity of maintaining political illusions about places conveniently far from home. And these attitudes, as is apparent today, show little sign of diminishing.

The first part of *The Only Superpower*, called "Anti-Americanism," is matched by the book's fourth part, "The Survival and Replenishment of the Adversary Culture." These themes, to which Hollander has devoted entire books (and some of the essays here first appeared as introductions to those books), have particular resonance today. For much of the twentieth century and still today, Hollander notes, apologists and fellow-travelers have had the luxury of risk-

free endorsements of radical politics that require no sacrifice on their part, seldom even any inconvenience. Hollander quotes Bill Ayers' famous comment, in an interview about his terrorist activities: "Guilty as sin. Free as a bird—America is a great country."

Of special interest is Hollander's discussion of the way in which the left's embrace of anti-Americanism and the adversary culture, far from diminishing after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, seems to have increased in intensity in the past two decades, culminating at the moment in the difficulty many intellectuals and educators have in acknowledging and dealing with the political violence arising from radical Islam. The point—constantly reiterated in Hollander's writings—is that antagonism to America is a crucial aspect of a leftist ideological culture. Part II of *The Only Superpower*, "Americana," includes often acerbic commentaries on aspects of American life such as celebrity-watching, the semiotics of SUVs, the problem of television news, the hypocrisy of Michael Moore, the decline of common sense, Tawana Brawley and the Duke case, the popularity of Islam on campus, and so on. Though some of these essays are light in tone, they nonetheless contain corrosive exposés of American foibles. The essay "Old and Busier Than Ever" reflects on how, in a culture in which claims of exhaustion and overcommitment function as tokens of importance, retirement presents a challenge. Certainly among academics, it is apparently easier to shed the job than to shed the rhetoric. If anything, the anxiety to appear "busier than ever" increases, as if such verbal magic might ward off death. The essay "The Counterculture of the Heart" takes a very unsentimental look at personal ads in high-brow publications such as *The New York Review of Books*.

"Foreign Matters," Part III of *The Only Superpower*, contains occasional pieces and book reviews relating primarily to Hollander's key themes. At the beginning of an essay on the murder of Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam, Hollander notes that three major movements in the twentieth and early twenty-first century have explicitly harnessed hatred and violence to political objectives: Communism, Nazism, and more recently radical Islam. Several of the essays in this part deal with themes found also in *The End of Commitment* (about which more below). In an essay entitled "Violence of Higher Purpose" (a small part of the long introduction to Hollander's indispensable *From the Gulag to the Killing Fields*), Hollander notes that dissolving distinctions between the personal and the political (of which he had ample experience in Hungary long before feminists in the U.S. naively made "the personal is political" a rallying cry and slogan) produces totalitarianism. Once political meaning is attributed to virtually everything, the result is ever-expanding definitions of political transgressions and deviance and a hyper-

vigilance about all aspects of life. In the absence of checks on state power, leaders both enact and justify repression and conformity—supposedly in the interest of creating a new human being and a better society.

An essay on Alexander Yakovlev, a high-ranking Soviet official for most of his life, introduces readers to this important figure, author of *The Fate of Marxism in Russia* (1993), which examined the link between Marxism and "actually existing" Communist societies. Yakovlev's more recent book, *A Century of Violence in Russia* (2002), with Hollander's essay as an introduction, is less theoretical and more practical, delineating the human cost of the "Soviet experiment." What makes Yakovlev unusual, Hollander explains, is his high rank and lifelong experience within the Soviet system: he was a member of the Party's Central Committee for 20 years, head of the Party's propaganda department, and later a member of the Politburo. All this provided the backdrop for Yakovlev's slow disillusionment (starting during World War II) and eventual passionate repudiation and indictment of the Soviet system.

Insisting on the relationship between Marxism and what it produced in practice, Yakovlev rejects absolutely the view that Stalin was responsible for highjacking Soviet Communism. "Stalin did not think up anything that was not there under Lenin: executions, hostage taking, concentration camps, and all the rest," he writes, a connection routinely denied by many western leftists. But, notes Hollander, Yakovlev's thorough critiques of the Soviet system are hard to discredit, for quite apart from his unusual experience and access to information, he did not defect, did not move to the west to enjoy fame and fortune. Rather, after publishing an article in 1972 critical of Russian anti-Semitism and national pride, he was exiled and (this sounds like a bad joke) sent to Canada as ambassador for 10 years. In 1983, he returned to Russia, where he lived the rest of his life, rehabilitated by Gorbachev, on whom he had a profound influence, serving as the intellectual power behind glasnost and perestroika. After the collapse of the Soviet bloc, Yakovlev worked as head of the "Commission on the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression." Yakovlev died in 2005, and to the end he was labeled a "Russophobe" and leader of "kike-masons," as Russian nationalism and anti-Semitism increased. But despite the insider knowledge and authenticity of Yakovlev's writing, some western leftists doubt the credibility of his message, perhaps because of their unhappiness over the demise of the Soviet Union, which left the United States as the only superpower (or so it seemed when Hollander wrote this essay in 2002).

In *The Only Superpower*, Hollander includes a brief essay on the fiftieth anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution (2006). Here Hollander reflects on his own life, then and now. He movingly expresses his love of nature and of

the New England landscape, into which, he says, he “sank roots.” Appreciative of his secure life as an academic and an American citizen, he is nonetheless able both to criticize American culture and to observe the strange phenomenon of anti-Americanism that he has devoted years to understanding. He knows that political conditions shape personal lives, and comments that the peasants and workers he met in Hungary, supposed beneficiaries of Communism, were in fact its most embittered victims and adversaries. He draws serious lessons from all that he has observed, studied, and learned: “It became clear to me that repressive political systems, even if they proclaim impressive idealistic aspirations, will cease to be idealized (as they often are from a distance) once the human costs of their practices are experienced or understood.” Hollander concludes the essay with this comment: “My life in the west deepened the conviction that personal freedom has a reality and meaning that can be truly appreciated only by those who have lived under circumstances defined by its absence.”

The process of political disillusionment with Communism, which has appeared in one guise or another in Hollander’s past work, is the theme of Hollander’s powerful recent book, *The End of Commitment: Intellectuals, Revolutionaries, and Political Morality*. This volume is a companion to the other book Hollander published in 2006, the 700-page *From the Gulag to the Killing Fields: Personal Accounts of Political Violence and Repression in Communist States*. Statistics about the depredations of Communism are indispensable: it matters that people should understand that many millions died in the famines and mass murders orchestrated by Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, and others equally determined to usher in a new world and create a “new socialist man.” Nonetheless, the sheer number of deaths and atrocities found in Stéphane Courtois et al.’s controversial *Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (1997 in French; 1999 in English), the first book to survey the magnitude of Communist violence from Russia in 1917 to Afghanistan in 1989, can be numbing.

Whereas *The Black Book* provides an overview of the toll taken by Communism in the 20th century, Hollander’s *From the Gulag to the Killing Fields* used memoirs and personal stories to expose political violence and give texture to experience. Using the same technique, *The End of Commitment* shifts the focus to political morality. What was it, Hollander asks, that finally caused ardent supporters of Communism to turn away from their faith? Knowing that many living under Communist systems “voted with their feet” does not explain what, specifically, led to the apostasy of long-time supporters and enforcers of Communism. To answer this question, Hollander set out to explore the roots and particular circumstances of disillusionment with Communist systems.

Shedding one’s beliefs was no easy process, and a common theme in these stories is the pain experienced by those who went through political disillusionment. Far from being a great and liberating experience, the abdication of cherished convictions and hopes involves deep disappointments, alienation from one’s peers, and ruptures in the entire pattern of a life. Indeed, in many respects it resembles nothing so much as the collapse of religious faith. Not surprisingly, such disillusionment took years and was rarely the result of one particularly shocking or traumatic experience.

In several lengthy chapters rich in detail, *The End of Commitment* draws from a substantial body of memoirs of disillusionment with Soviet and Eastern European Communism, many of them by officials who eventually defected. Cuba, China, and Vietnam also produced numerous defectors whose published memoirs are available in English. It proved more difficult, however, to find comparable published writings by those who grew disillusioned with Third World Communist societies such as Nicaragua and Ethiopia, where accounts by former officials, unlike those of ordinary people, are scarce. Still, Hollander presents compelling accounts of disillusionment from all these countries. Often what is striking is the idealism of the writers. Many were Communists not out of a drive to dominate others but rather from what appears to be a deep desire for social justice. This is an important point, highlighting the pathos of apostasy once the gap between aspiration and realization becomes insuperable. But the process takes time.

Story after story conveys how difficult it was for Communist idealists to come to terms with the reality of their societies, in some cases even after years in prison—such was their need to find meaning and a purpose larger than themselves. Nicaraguan dissident Gioconda Belli describes how, after years of supporting the Sandinistas and fervently believing in the perfect society the revolution would usher in, she slowly came to see that sacrificing individuals to presumptively positive general social goals could not lead to a better society, only to a worse one.

A particularly important series of observations that Hollander makes in *The End of Commitment* relates to the conflation of the personal and the political. This was not something invented by second-wave American feminists. Rather, the insistence on subordinating—in practice—the personal to the political existed already in the 1930s, and no doubt far earlier, and goes on to this day. And, indeed, Belli’s disillusionment and eventual rebellion was in part a response to the Party’s efforts to dictate her personal relationships.

Those who had always retained a trace of independent thinking and rebelliousness were less likely to be wholeheartedly committed to Communism. But others—for

example Sidney Rittenberg, an American inspired by the ideals of Communism who went to China in his early twenties and stayed there for 35 years, nearly half of them spent in prison—were genuine true believers who resisted even lessons inscribed on their own flesh.

A recurring theme in the process of becoming disillusioned relates to blatant inequalities evident in everyday life, which exposed the hypocrisy of Communist rhetoric. As an adolescent in post-war Hungary, Hollander himself had observed on a daily basis the contrast between the luxurious American automobiles that members of the *nomenklatura* used, and the obvious reality that few Hungarians had private cars at all; rather, they experienced lives routinely characterized by scarcity. Many of the apostates Hollander introduces us to emphasize the effect on them of noticing the inequalities in such basics as food provided to Party members versus to others, and the special access to western consumer goods, all in sharp violation of the professed egalitarian principles of Communism. Rittenberg, for example, noticed the stratification by diet (often at the same dinner) early on, but—as that rare thing, an American who had defected to China—he accepted the benefits bestowed on him and failed to think critically about their significance until much later.

Hollander's narrators give full expression to a crucial common denominator: Neither self-interest nor even self-preservation adequately explains the effort to cling to old beliefs. Apart from the desire to belong, most of these individuals had a profound commitment to an ideal they believed to be right and valuable, to the point that any and everything—including millions of people—could be sacrificed to it and only slowly erode the believer's core convictions.

Some, such as Carlos Franqui, a Cuban Communist and early supporter of Castro, suffered from “chronic hope,” as the well-known poet and fellow defector Heberto Padilla put it. Hollander notes that because the Cuban Revolution was indigenous, it generated enormous hopes and expectations, which resulted later in deeper rejections of the system than was the case in countries where Communism was imposed by external force. For these individuals, despite their years of commitment to “revolutionary Cuba,” the distance between rhetoric and reality became unbearable: The institutionalization of inequalities, the creation of a monolithic party suffocating all liberty and turning itself into a powerful privileged class, the prostitution that was officially denied but in fact condoned or orchestrated, the bureaucracy, the mandated worship of Castro, the corruption and endless lies, the persecution of homosexuals and Jehovah's Witnesses, who were sent to concentration camps, the doctrinaire view of how people ought to live, enforced by coercion and terror and justified by the mystique of the Leader—all this eventually could no longer

be explained away. But, of course, any opposition was automatically dismissed as Yankee, as counterrevolutionary. Franqui's memoirs, Hollander notes, are particularly valuable because of his understanding that “revolutionary Cuba” shared all the forms of oppression and cruelty found in other Communist states.

As for Heberto Padilla, whose persecution by Castro was something of a cause célèbre among western writers, he came to realize that, despite Castro's accomplishments in areas such as literacy and healthcare, “more and more had to be explained away.” Hollander identifies this as a chronic dilemma in the lengthy process of disillusionment. While Padilla was imprisoned and his forced confession was being prepared, he wept in shame that “I had never taken the trouble of finding out for myself that in Cuba people were being tortured on the most preposterous pretext.” Nor could he finally ignore that many outstanding revolutionaries, who had been with Castro from the beginning, had been tortured and executed. As he faced his own complicity, Padilla recalled Arthur Koestler's warning of 1943: “There is no excuse for you—it is your duty to know and to be haunted by your knowledge.”

A very different kind of story of disillusionment is that of Rafael Del Pino, the highest-ranking Cuban defector, with 30 years of a distinguished career in the Cuban air force. Del Pino had no interest in ideology and in fact for a long time believed that “any direction Fidel and Raul decided to take was fine with me.” Though eager to play a significant role in Cuban history, Del Pino, who trained in the Soviet Union, had noticed rampant corruption at levels both high and low, lack of freedom, glaring inequalities, and flagrant lies. At the time, however, he did not realize that all these problems were already developing in Cuba as well. Later, as a high-ranking member of Cuba's political and military elite, he had intimate knowledge of the Castro brothers.

Aware of the failures of socialism both in the USSR and in Cuba, Del Pino still needed the experience of a handful of incidents to spark such moral indignation that he decided to break with the system. These included observing the prostitution of teenage girls active in the Young Communist Union, who were provided as entertainment to visiting Soviet cosmonauts; the disaffection of Del Pino's son, an air force fighter pilot; and Del Pino's knowledge that he himself was being watched by counterintelligence as a result of his criticisms of Cuba's role in Angola. All this led to his high-risk defection in 1987.

Rarely does Hollander second-guess his narrators. He reflects on their accounts, recognizing that they often shape their stories so as to justify their lives, even as they discuss their feelings of guilt over privileges they enjoyed by virtue of participation in regimes they came to despise. What is often missing from the stories, however, is any exploration

of motivations hinting at the role played by ambition and attraction to power in these individuals' prolonged adherence to systems characterized by cruelty and oppression. The Ethiopian Davit Wolde Giorgis, for example, spent nearly 12 years as a high-ranking official in Mengistu's brutal regime. Though aware of the famines caused by the forced collective farming and the disastrous resettlement policy that aimed only at satisfying political objectives, Giorgis continued in service to Mengistu until finally defecting in 1985. In the end, it seems to have been the combination of long-term revulsion at the violence, cruelty, and oppression of the system, along with concern for his own safety, which led Giorgis to defect.

As these accounts reveal, prolonged awareness of the moral problems of Communist rule—manifested by so many apostates—was not by itself decisive for most of those who eventually rejected Communism. How they interpreted the troubling features of Communist rule played a larger part, and flexibility in judging what was morally acceptable was crucial in the retention of commitment. A “single-minded focus on ends and intentions,” Hollander notes, could deflect and postpone disaffection.

The story of Zdenek Mlynar is emblematic. Having joined the Czech Communist party as a teenager, he stuck with it for 25 years, resisting disillusionment with “actually existing Communism” and clinging to his belief in the possibilities of a “humane Communism.” Already as a law student in the Soviet Union he had been shocked at the reality of Soviet life. Later, as a department head in the Public Prosecutor's office in Prague, he was intimately involved with “the machinery of repression.” It took him 20 years of extensive reflection to work through the slow process of reassessment of his beliefs, and even after his expulsion from the Czech party in 1970, the work of reflection continued. A telling point Mlynar makes is that his avid consumption of Marxist-Leninist literature gave him a sense of privileged access to truth, which in turn encouraged arrogance and paternalism in the exercise of power. Although he also had experience of the gap between rhetoric and reality, for a long time he accepted the privileges that he enjoyed as a member of the elite.

In analyzing these accounts, Hollander identifies three major ways of retaining one's belief in Communist systems while disassociating oneself from misdeeds that could not be concealed. Mlynar experienced all of them. One was to claim unfamiliarity with the system and its abuses. The second was to shift responsibility up—to higher authorities, a plausible move in a centralized system guided by a supposedly infallible party and its even more infallible leader. And the third was to reinterpret the sufferings imposed by the system. This could be done by focusing on ultimate goals—pride in the supposed abolition of capitalism (a siren song as well to many Western sympathizers), or by alluding to “difficult

historical conditions,” and what Trotsky memorably labeled deficient “human raw material.”

All these rationalizations, in Mlynar's case, were demolished by the Prague Spring of 1968, when it became clear that reforming Communism was not an option. Mlynar refers to this time as “the ultimate debacle of my life as a Communist.” Expelled from the Central Committee and later from the party itself, Mlynar remained for seven more years in Czechoslovakia, no longer “among the privileged but in the ghetto of the outcasts.” In 1977 he went into exile in Vienna, and died 20 years later.

Mlynar's experience highlights one of Hollander's major themes: More difficult than coming to terms with the abject failures of Communism in so many different societies was the recognition that Communist ideals could not, in fact, be implemented, even were its leaders less corrupt and brutal. Sidney Rittenberg, the American who went to China, is a prime example of this. His yearning to “belong,” a yearning he initially—and indeed for many years—found fulfilled by both the ideals of Communism and being accepted by its fellow adherents, survived even his first 6 years of imprisonment in China, which only increased his zeal. As with followers of millenarian religious cults, whose faith may be paradoxically renewed and strengthened by an initial failure (a phenomenon known as “belief perseverance”), such reinforced convictions make sense when one has spent years devoted to a belief and has sacrificed all else to it.

In this light, Hollander discusses the standard responses to the collapse of the Soviet bloc: The insistence that Communism “never failed”—rather, it was “never tried.” The persistent separation of intentions and accomplishments, so that loyalty to old ideals need not be questioned. The ongoing tendency to blame capitalism. The commitment, still, to radically altering the human condition as rapidly as possible while evading the evidence that attempts to do so invariably involve coercion and violence as necessary conditions—and even then failure is likely. These attitudes are still with us, as we are reminded by a recent opinion piece in the *Wall Street Journal* (Feb 1, 2010), in which Fouad Ajami comments: “A historical hallmark of ‘isms’ and charismatic movements is to dig deeper when they falter—to insist that the “thing” itself, whether it be Peronism, or socialism, etc., had not been tried but that the leader had been undone by forces that hemmed him in.” Eventually, however, even cult followers may grow disillusioned as failure after failure of their leaders' predictions and stated goals unfold. Thus, increased zeal slowly gives way to disillusionment and the desire to break free.

A crucial moment in this process, which Hollander identifies in many of these stories, is arrival at what he calls a “moral threshold,” that is, the “ability to tolerate or to

refuse to tolerate certain actions and moral transgressions.” Crossing this threshold would once and for all require a radical break with the past and the prior beliefs on which it was built. Individuals varied greatly in how they dealt with arrival at this point. Some backed away, retreating into rationalizations meant to bridge the gap (more often, Hollander notes, an abyss) between rhetoric and reality. The most prevalent way was by adhering to what Arthur Koestler long ago labeled “the doctrine of unshaken foundations.”

Others, however, unable to maintain their faith in the ultimate benefits of Communism, crossed the moral threshold and found themselves at a new location, one that afforded quite a different view of the familiar landscape. Some embraced the new view with the same intensity they had earlier brought to the old. Miklos Gimes, for example, a Hungarian Communist functionary and committed Stalinist whose changed convictions after 1956 cost him his life, engaged in epistemological contortions. When these failed, his intense early devotion transformed into an equally intense bitterness. With Stalin’s death in 1953, he became a critic, and wrote eloquently about his former beliefs in two kinds of truth—the factual truth and the politically useful truth of the Party.

In outlining what seem to him the likely motives and processes of those who became active apostates, Hollander is careful not to explain too much. He is always aware that multiple factors played a role, and these factors varied greatly from one individual to another. But key themes emerge with remarkable clarity nonetheless. The enormous distance between the claims made by Party propaganda with its lofty utopian goals and the realities of daily life catapulted some over the threshold and into “moral revulsion.” Many of the disillusioned describe their sense of outrage, generated by “the routine misrepresentations of reality.” Gyorgy Litvan, a Hungarian historian who turned against the system, wrote of the “moral cynicism” which, ironically, became the Achilles-heel of Stalinism: “*It was obligatory to moralize* because of the redemptive claims but it was precisely the moralizing that made the system vulnerable” [italics in original].

Hollander never forgets that there is an enormous difference between Communist propaganda in the west and that enacted within Communist systems. These latter rested on a totalitarian mentality, which itself could function only by guarding power and using it coercively. The official worldview formed an integrated whole (and paradoxical views of the meaning of truth, for example, helped maintain a coherence that would otherwise have been readily revealed as threadbare). As Litvan noted, those in power feared that “if only one brick is pulled out, the whole edifice would collapse.”

A significant part of *The End of Commitment* is devoted to exploring a less usual question: Why, asks Hollander,

were so few in the west willing to recognize and express disenchantment with Communism? Was it simply that, in western democracies, the awareness of Communism’s reality was more abstract, and information about the distance between goals and routine practices less visible? Hollander approaches this question from two perspectives: that of those in the west who did become disillusioned, and, an equally fascinating group, those who resisted disillusionment.

In his initial chapter devoted to “Disillusionment in the West,” we encounter well-known figures such as Howard Fast, David Horowitz, Ronald Radosh, and Eugene Genovese. Having noted that both in Soviet bloc countries and in the west major events such as Khrushchev’s 1956 speech precipitated disillusionment among some, Hollander observes that for westerners, their experiences in their own society seemed most decisive. He makes a telling observation: “While it is easier to break with a system or movement that has no control over one’s life . . . at the same time the lack of concrete, personal experience of the failings of these systems makes it more difficult to reach the breaking point.” Furthermore, adversarial subcultures in the west make it easier to cling to beliefs and loyalties discredited by events and experiences elsewhere. Howard Fast is a particularly interesting figure, in that he later had second thoughts about his apostasy and insisted that the U.S. and the USSR under Stalin were morally equivalent.

Ronald Radosh, who began by revering Castro, was shocked to find flaws and discrepancies all around him when he finally visited Cuba in 1973: Homosexuals were confined in mental hospitals and lobotomies were widely performed. His tour group’s leader, however, offered this explanation: “We have to understand that there are differences between capitalist lobotomies and socialist lobotomies.” Such explanations seemed to work for Radosh’s fellow tourists—as earlier apostates (such as Arthur Koestler) had also noticed: To the true believer, facts become irrelevant, or can always be explained away by context.

If all else fails, one can cling to the hope that the system is nevertheless moving in the right direction. Only when that last belief, too, was exploded did some westerners finally rethink their beliefs. In Genovese’s case, for example, though he was expelled from the Communist Party USA in 1950, he remained a supporter until the mid-1980s, when he could no longer sustain his belief that Communism, especially in its Soviet form, would eventually deliver economically, and that repression would then cease or at least soften. Eventually it became impossible for him to believe that the deficiencies were not systemic, or that reform was possible.

A subsequent chapter on disillusionment in the west focuses on Doris Lessing, Maurice Halperin, Susan Sontag, and Christopher Hitchens. Sontag is a telling example of the anxiety among western apostates to avoid

being mistaken for anti-leftists or conservatives. In 1982, Sontag spoke at a Town Hall event in New York organized to protest the suppression of Solidarity in Poland and to criticize the Reagan administration's policy in El Salvador. There, Sontag unexpectedly attacked the American left, denouncing its gullibility, double standards, and reluctance to protest the repression prevailing in Communist states. Communism, she argued, is successful Fascism, and American intellectuals have deluded themselves about its nature. In fact, Sontag, who had been expressing her doubts more quietly since the late 1970s, attributed the failings of leftist intellectuals in part to their shame at being bourgeois intellectuals and in part to efforts to distance themselves from McCarthyism. At the Town Hall event, she made her point in stark terms: "Imagine, if you will, someone who read only the *Reader's Digest* between 1950 and 1970, and someone in the same period who read only *The Nation* or *The New Statesman*. Which reader would have been better informed about the realities of Communism? The answer, I think, should give us pause. Can it be that our enemies were right?" (When her comments were later published in *The Nation*, this paragraph was omitted.)

And yet, while recognizing that it was the commitment to sweeping change that made Communist regimes oppressive, Sontag's belief in the ideals of Marxism persisted, as did her view that capitalism was the main source of evil in the world. It's worth noting that Sontag's fear of being associated with enemies of the left is understandable, for many of the apostates Hollander describes (David Horowitz, for example) were indeed showered with unrelenting ridicule and contempt for their changed attitudes. In Sontag's case, she perhaps redeemed herself in part by extolling, in the pages of *The New Yorker*, the courage of the terrorist hijackers who died on 9/11.

In a valuable chapter called "Disaffection and Resisting It: The Rank and File in the West," Hollander returns to a project he initiated in 1994–95 and has not hitherto written about. He had placed an ad in *The Nation*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *Dissent*, seeking to hear from those who had reassessed their leftist commitments. About 50 people responded, and Hollander sent them questionnaires and also did personal interviews with some. He divides these respondents into three groups: the unwavering; the totally disillusioned; and (the largest group) those with modified commitment. This is the only part of his book in which Hollander disguises individuals' names, presenting instead capsule views of a sampling of his respondents and quoting their words. The subsequent chapter, "Patterns of Disillusionment," provides an excellent analysis of these accounts, along with Hollander's general conclusions about the process of disillusionment and its different manifestations in east and west.

Among those living within Communist systems, where cultivation of individuality and nonconformity were dangerous and entailed real consequences, personality played a smaller role than it did among westerners. A corollary observation is that for those living in Communist regimes, the pursuit of individuality and identity were not typically present in their support of the initial revolutionary ideals. But a personal attribute that did matter in the long term was the ability to confront the moral threshold. When, however, as in the Hungarian revolution of 1956, the whole society also arrived at the point of questioning the system, individual critics were finally free to express their long-suppressed doubts. Thus, social support emerged for voicing critiques or even for breaking with the system altogether. And the result for many apostates was a sense of individual shame, guilt, and the recognition that willful or blind faith had distorted their perceptions.

In the west, by contrast, Communist adherents lived amid particular subcultures and social movements that tended to retard or even ward off altogether a reassessment of political beliefs and commitments. Indeed, especially during and after the 1960s, social movements and the subcultures they generated perpetuated left-wing beliefs and attachments (as they do to this day), and offered adherents the comfort of a heroic self-perception. Furthermore, the continuing belief in Marxism as the path to a better future inoculated individuals living in western capitalist societies against recognizing the relationship between Marxism in the abstract and the realities of Communist societies built in its name.

Striking examples of this mentality occur in a long chapter entitled "Resisting Disillusionment." Here Hollander examines the trajectories of over a dozen well-known westerners, including E. P. Thompson, Noam Chomsky, Alexander Cockburn, Edward Said, and Ramsey Clark, in order to understand how "identity-giving political beliefs and commitments" can prevail, undeterred by political reality. Among this group, we find striking examples of how disillusionment is kept at bay by a series of familiar processes: rationalizing, neutralizing, compartmentalizing, or simply discrediting information that challenges one's commitments. Chomsky illustrates several of these processes at work: first he famously refused to believe the reports that over a million Cambodians had died under the Pol Pot regime, and then, once Chomsky could no longer evade the facts, he nonetheless tried to "explain them away," and shift blame away from Pol Pot's policies and back to the U.S.

As for the historian Eric Hobsbawm, he is an excellent example that Koestler's doctrine of unshaken foundations persists, as if nothing had undermined it in the 50 years since Koestler wrote of it. As late as 1994, Hobsbawm averred that even had he known, in the early 1930s, that

millions would die in the Soviet experiment, he would still have supported the mere chance of creating a new world. Especially from a distance, one is tempted to add.

Although selective perceptions and personality differences played a large part in western sympathizers' capacity to stave off troubling information, Hollander finds that in both east and west fixation on long-term goals made it easier to reduce awareness of the crimes committed in the name of those goals. And yet, as his work persuasively demonstrates, those exiting nirvana came around to similar positions. From countries all over the world, each with its different culture and tradition but all pressed into the Communist mould, former acolytes and Communist functionaries became apostates, no longer able to ignore the hypocrisy and corruption, not to mention sheer murderousness, which lay behind all the fine rhetoric.

The ideas these disaffected Communists end up holding are surprisingly consistent, as if indeed not that many options are available, and a tolerable way of life in the modern world depends on a few basic and unmistakable principles: that individual freedom must be respected; that "equality" is an elusive goal, always useful to those who would impose conformity and forced allegiance; that democratic values must be supported; that freedom to criticize is essential; that political orthodoxy can only be maintained by oppression and corruption; that attacks on individuality and personal allegiances destroy people's lives, as well as their initiative and imagination. And that all the delusions promoted by Communist leaders must rest on a conflation of the private and public sphere, state intrusion into private lives and thoughts, and the view that the people are there to serve the will of the leader—inevitably justified by the claim that the leader occupies the moral high ground and will usher in the long-dreamed-of better world, and that his critics are all destructive and evil people.

Even today, however, recognition of the disastrous reality that accompanies messianic aspirations is hard to come by, as political rhetoric often echoes familiar old claims. The initial enthusiasms, commitments, and hopes (a new age is dawning; everything will change), the adoration and deification of the leader, the quasi-religious fervor of supporters (what Khrushchev meant by "cult of personality")—all these are still visible in some societies today, and not only in Communist ones or in Islamic theocracies. As are the intense and often pathos-laden aspirations of many people for a better world, aspirations used to justify dangerous moves that can only produce failure. As Susan Sontag noted: When you want to change everything, you're forced to oppress. . . . If you want 'total' change you are asking for totalitarianism.

To recognize the significance of the experiences that led so many Communists to defect to the west, however, means renouncing, even if not totally, the comfy anti-Americanism

that is a key component of the self-image of many western intellectuals. Meanwhile, like the explanations once sought to make Communist crimes fade into insignificance, now, with the USSR and its satellites mostly out of the picture, a corollary set of excuses is being dredged up by many western intellectuals in relation to Islam. Thus we find feminists stating that it is "racist" to criticize honor killings, and that clitoridectomy isn't really different from male circumcision, or from breast implants and other "patriarchal" impositions that define the western cult of beauty. And gay activists abound who don't seem inclined to condemn regimes such as those of Iran where homosexuals are executed. Denial of the real differences between political systems still exists, and a facile "equivalence" is asserted between western liberal democracies and Islamist theocracies. "Root causes" are endlessly sought in America's own sins, which deflects attention from the openly proclaimed hatred of various Muslim leaders. On the other hand, double standards still prevail: enslavement of dark-skinned people by other dark-skinned people gets a pass, while whites are charged with collective guilt that presumably endures forever. Local cultures must, of course, be respected in the Third World; but certainly not in the U.S., hence American Mormons or Christian fundamentalists (but not homegrown Islamists) must be denounced. The ugly old games of blaming and excusing continue. The targets have changed, but the procedures have not.

Hollander cites a comment by Christopher Hitchens, who broke with his long-term leftist comrades over their unwillingness to recognize the necessity of struggling against Islamic terrorism and their preference for endlessly searching out the famous "root causes" in U.S. policy: "The very first step we must take," Hitchens wrote, "is the acquisition of enough self-respect and self-confidence to say that we have met the enemy and that he is not us but someone else."

What is new about the current situation is that anti-Americanism can now be detached from a pro-Communist attitude and its proclaimed commitments to social justice. Instead, anti-Americanism has taken on a life of its own. It makes no sense to argue that leftists today, who cultivate anti-Americanism and are unwilling to criticize Islamist objectives and methods, do so out of a belief that radical Islam will bring about a better world. Thus, we seem to be arriving at a new situation, where the negative energy that drives anti-Americanism thrives, serving as its own end, without any compensating positive goal at all, simply a will (rhetorical? actual?) to see the United States defeated.

Yearning for "social justice" will continue, of course. What is needed is a critical stance toward that yearning, and an appreciation of the gap between ideals and realities. This means political and social ideals need to be evaluated not merely in terms of their inherent value, even if many might

agree on these, but in terms of the consequences of the policies that would be needed to enact them. It is along those lines that the discussion could become more realistic—and fruitful. Paul Hollander’s entire body of work is an indispensable tool in thinking through the major events of the twentieth-century, and in all likelihood the twenty-first as well.

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