

Heresy, Yes – But Conspiracy, No

Sidney Hook

Editor’s Note: Sidney Hook was a social democratic philosopher, a secular humanist, and an antitotalitarian polemicist – ‘probably the greatest of the twentieth century’ according to Edward Shils. This article was published in the *New York Times Magazine*, 9 July, 1950. A controversial book of the same title followed in 1952, published by the American Congress for Cultural Freedom. [1]

What was Hook trying to do in this article? Faced with a totalitarian threat from Communism, Hook believed democrats had to learn how to distinguish between heresies against liberal democratic societies, which must be defended, and conspiracies, which should not be tolerated. ‘The failure to recognize the distinction between heresy and conspiracy is fatal to a liberal civilization’ he warned, ‘for the inescapable consequence of their identification is either self-destruction, when heresies are punished as conspiracies, or destruction at the hands of their enemies, when conspiracies are tolerated as heresies.’ One does not have to agree with Hook’s every conclusion to feel that he posed a question we face again today, and answered it with a seriousness that puts much current debate to shame. Hook’s answer should be a stimulus to us to work out our own. David Sidorsky’s ‘Sidney Hook,’ an online entry at the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, discusses the historical, biographical and philosophical backgrounds to Hook’s article and its critical reception. [2]

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The ‘hot war’ in Korea makes it even more urgent that we clarify our thinking on the ‘cold war’ of ideologies. At the heart of the matter are basic philosophical issues which in more settled times would have been dismissed as of no practical concern. One of them is the meaning of ‘liberalism,’ which becomes important because communism invokes the freedom of a liberal society in order to destroy that society. Many proposals have been made to cope with this problem. All of them must face the question whether in advocating such measures the principles of liberalism are themselves being consistently applied or compromised.

It is easier to say what liberalism is not than what it is. It is not belief in laissez-faire

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or free enterprise in economics – the temper of Great Britain has remained liberal despite the shifting economic programs and institutions of the last century. Neither is liberalism the philosophy of invariable compromise or the comforting notion that it is always possible to find a middle ground – if a man demands my purse, to grant him half of it is not a liberal solution. Nor can liberalism be identified with the traditional belief in absolute or inalienable rights – every right is, in fact, evaluated in terms of its consequences for society, and is, therefore, subject to modification if it endangers other rights of equal or greater validity.

When one right limits another, the final adjudication of their conflict, in a liberal society, is made in the reflective light of the total situation and of that set of rationally preferred freedoms whose preservation may require the temporary abridgment of some specific freedom. To say that we cannot preserve our freedoms by sacrificing them is, therefore, an empty piece of rhetoric. Our common experience brings home to us the necessity of sacrificing some particular freedom to preserve other freedoms just as we must sometimes surrender a genuine good for the sake of other and better goods. Here the readiness to reflect is all.

This provides a key to the abiding meaning of the liberal tradition from Socrates to John Dewey and Justice Holmes.

Liberalism is, in the memorable words of Justice Holmes, the belief ‘in the free trade of ideas that the test of truth is the power of thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market.’

There are at least two presuppositions of this belief in the free market of ideas. One of them, explicitly drawn by Justice Holmes, is that the free expression and circulation of ideas may be checked wherever their likely effects constitute a clear and present danger to public peace or the security of the country. The second presupposition is that in the free market of ideas the competition will be honestly and openly conducted. What the liberal fears is the systematic corruption of the free market of ideas by activities which make intelligent choice impossible. In short, what he fears is not heresy but conspiracy.

The failure to recognize the distinction between heresy and conspiracy is fatal to a liberal civilization, for the inescapable consequence of their identification is either self-destruction, when heresies are punished as conspiracies, or destruction at the hands of their enemies, when conspiracies are tolerated as heresies.

A heresy is a set of unpopular ideas or opinions on matters of grave concern to the community. The right to profess and advocate heresy of any character, including communism, is an essential element of a liberal society. The liberal stands ready to defend the honest heretic no matter what his views against any attempt to curb him. It is enough that the heretic pays the price of unpopularity which he cannot avoid and from which he cannot reasonably plead exemption, or use as a pretext for conspiracy. In some respects each of us is a heretic, but a liberal society can impose no official orthodoxies of belief, disagreement with which entails legal sanctions of any kind.

A conspiracy, as distinct from a heresy, is a secret or underground movement which seeks to attain its ends not by normal political or educational process but by playing outside the rules of the game. Because it undermines the conditions which are required in order that doctrines may freely compete for acceptance, because where successful it ruthlessly destroys all heretics and dissenters, conspiracies cannot be tolerated without self-stultification in a liberal society.

A heresy does not shrink from publicity. It welcomes it. Not so a conspiracy. The signs of a conspiracy are secrecy, anonymity, the use of false labels, and the calculated lie. It does not offer its wares openly but by systematic infiltration into all organizations of cultural life, it seeks to capture strategic posts to carry out a policy alien to the purposes of the organizations. There is political conspiracy which is the concern of the state. But there may also be a conspiracy against a labor union, a cultural or professional association, or an educational institution which is not primarily the concern of the state but of its own members. In general, whoever subverts the rules of a democratic organization and seeks to win by chicanery what cannot be fairly won in the processes of free discussion is a conspirator.

This suggests what the guiding principle of liberalism should be toward communism. Communist ideas are heresies, and liberals need have no fear of them where they are freely and openly expressed. The Communist movement, however, is something much more than a heresy, for wherever it exists it operates along the lines laid down by Lenin as guides to Communists of all countries, and perfected in all details since then.

‘It is necessary,’ so Lenin instructs all Communists, ‘to agree to any and every sacrifice and even – if need be – resort to all sorts of stratagems manoeuvres, and

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illegal methods, to evasions and subterfuges . . . in order to carry on Communist work.’ Further: ‘In all organizations without exception . . . (political, industrial, military, cooperative, educational, sports), groups or nuclei of Communists should be formed . . . mainly [in] open groups but also secret groups.’

There are no exceptions: ‘In all countries, even the freest, “legal” and “peaceful” in the sense that the class struggle is least acute in them, the time has fully matured when it is absolutely necessary for every Communist party systematically to combine legal with illegal work, legal and illegal organizations.... Illegal work is particularly necessary in the Army, the Navy, and police.’

Under present conditions of political and military warfare it is not hard to see what immense dangers to the security of liberal institutions is implicit in this strategy of infiltration and deceit. Even a few men in sensitive posts can do incalculable harm. These instructions, combined with explicit directives to Communists to transform any war in which their country is involved, except one approved by the Soviet Union, into a civil war against their own Government, indicate that members of the Communist party are not so much heretics as conspirators, and regard themselves as such.

There may be some justification for conspiratorial activity in undemocratic countries where heresies are proscribed, but Lenin, as we have seen, makes no exceptions.

How faithfully the Communist movement pursues the pattern laid down by its authoritative leaders in the political sphere is a matter of historical record. But unfortunately for the peace of mind of liberals the same tactics are followed in other areas of social and cultural life. The history of American labor is replete with illustrations.

Every large labor organization in the United States has been compelled to take disciplinary action against Communist party elements, not because of their beliefs their heresies – but because their pattern of conduct made the Communist party, and ultimately the Kremlin, the decisive power in the life of the union, and not the needs and wishes of the membership.

President Philip Murray of the CIO, in the recent expulsion of the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union, exposed the technique in detail. In all these situations it is not fear of Communist ideas which has led to disciplinary action. The charge against the Communists is that it is they who fear the open and honest confrontation of

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ideas. They operate through 'fronts,' the charge continues, because they fear that if the membership is given a free choice of honestly labelled alternatives they will be rejected; and once they slip into power they consolidate their position by terrorizing any opposition.

By now it should be apparent that liberals in the twentieth century are confronted by a situation quite unfamiliar to their forebears. For they must contend, not with fearless heretics – indigenously elements of the community – who like the Abolitionists and revolutionists of old scorn concealment, and who make no bones about their hostility to the principles of liberalism. They find themselves in a unique historical predicament of dealing with native elements who by secrecy and stratagem serve the interests of a foreign power which believes itself entitled to speak for all mankind, and whose victory spells the end of all liberal civilization and with it the right to heresy.

The problems this creates for a liberal society are of tremendous magnitude. They cannot be dismissed by a quotation from Jefferson. Nor can they be solved by placing the Communist movement and its entire periphery outside the law by special legislation. They require constructive intelligence, the discovery and application of techniques in each field which will meet the conspiratorial threats to the proper functioning of liberal institutions without creating still greater ones.

Failure to take this approach is characteristic of some current wholesale responses to the problem. The first is that of frightened reactionaries who cannot distinguish between heresy and conspiracy, and in addition, identify communism with any decent thing they wish to destroy. By making reckless charges of conspiracy where there is only honest heresy, they prevent intelligent choice. And by labelling all progressive ideas as communistic they help the Communist strategy. If this reactionary movement gains momentum it will petrify the status quo and destroy the possibilities of peaceful social change.

Then there is a small but influential group of men who believe that they can check Communist conspiracy merely by passing laws against it and that they can protect institutions from subversives by requiring all individuals, particularly teachers, to take loyalty oaths. As if any member of the Communist party regarded any oath except one to the Communist party and the Soviet Union as binding!

A third group consists of those whom we may call ritualistic, as distinct from

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realistic, liberals. They ignore or blithely dismiss the mass of evidence concerning the conspiratorial character of the Communist movement in all institutions in which it is active. They regard communism merely as an unpleasant heresy, just a little worse than a crotchety theory of disease or finance. They sometimes characterize a prosecution of a conspirator for espionage or perjury as a persecution of heresy. This gives a new lease of life to the reactionaries who now tend to regard the ritualistic liberals as the dupes or accomplices of the Communists, thus confirming in turn the illusions of these liberals that there really is no problem of Communist conspiracy.

Ritualistic liberals legitimately criticize the dangerous nonsense of those who proscribe heresy. But they carry their criticism to a point where they give the impression that the country is in the grip of a reign of terror or hysteria much more dangerous than Communist expansion from without and infiltration from within.

Because some security regulations in government are questionable and because some blunders have been made, the ritualistic liberals intimate that no security regulations are necessary and that the existing laws against treason and criminal conspiracy are sufficient for all purposes. By artfully collecting instances of foolishness from the press and blowing up their significance, and by disregarding counterinstances of equal or greater significance, they paint a very misleading picture of the actual state of American civil liberties comparable to an account of American business composed only of bankruptcies, or an account of public order that featured only crime stories.

David Lilienthal, a realistic not a ritualistic liberal, has warned us against the ‘Scare-the-dopes!’ method of discussing nuclear energy. There is also a ‘Scare-the-dopes’ method of discussion of the problem of Communist conspiracy. It is used by those who with scandalous looseness employ the term Communist for any economic or political heresy, and who shout conspiracy where there is only heresy. It is also used by those who do not tell us how to meet the real dangers of Communist conspiracy but shout, ‘Hysteria’ and ‘Fascism’ or ‘Police State’ when the first faltering efforts are made to cope with dangers hitherto unprecedented.

The position of realistic liberalism in three troubled centers of American life in which overt conspiratorial activity of a criminal nature is not involved may be briefly indicated.

Where government service is concerned, the operating maxim for every sensitive and

policymaking post should be a principle enunciated by Roger Baldwin, former head of the American Civil Liberties Union: 'A superior loyalty to a foreign Government disqualifies a citizen for service to our own.' The difficulty is to determine what constitutes sufficient evidence to warrant the inference that a particular individual is unsafe. No hard and fast rules can be laid down in advance, for in some cases even past membership in subversive organizations is not conclusive. The criterion for establishing unreliability obviously must be less stringent than those which lead us to deprive an individual of freedom. The main problem is not punitive but preventive.

In labor organizations the existence of Communist party readerships is extremely dangerous because of the Communists' unflinching use of the strike as a political instrument at the behest of the Kremlin.

The history of Communist-led trade unions here and abroad is instructive enough. The most effective way of meeting this situation, however, is not by requiring non-Communist oaths on the part of union officers, for this can be circumvented by delegating office to individuals who are faithful non-card holding Communists. The most intelligent procedure here is to let labor clean its own house. Free and independent trade unions which are essential to a democracy cannot be liberated from the organizational stranglehold of the Communist party by government intervention. Only an aroused membership can do it.

The question of freedom and control in the schools is not political. It does not involve civil rights but the ethics of professional conduct. Heresy in the schools, whether in science, economics, or politics, must be protected against any agency which seeks to impose orthodoxy. For the scholar there are no subversive doctrines but only those that are valid or invalid or not proved in the light of evidence. The primary commitment of the teacher is to the ethics and logic of inquiry. It is not his beliefs, right or wrong, it is not his heresies, which disqualify the Communist party teacher but his declaration of intention, as evidenced by official statements of his party, to practice educational fraud.

The common sense of the matter is clear and independent of the issue of communism. An individual joins an organization which explicitly instructs him that his duty is to sabotage the purposes of the institution in which he works and which provides him with his livelihood. Is it necessary to apprehend him in the act of carrying out these instructions in order to forestall the sabotage? Does not his voluntary

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and continuous act of membership in such an organization constitute prima facie evidence of unfitness?

This is a matter of ethical hygiene, not of politics or of persecution. And because it is, the enforcement of the proper professional standards should rest with the teachers themselves and not with the state or Regents or even boards of trustees. The actual techniques of handling such issues must be worked out but the problem should not be confused with the issue of heresy.

Liberalism in the twentieth century must toughen its fibre for it is engaged in a fight on many different fronts. Liberalism must defend the free market in ideas against the racists, the professional patrioteer, and those spokesmen of the status quo who would freeze the existing inequalities of opportunity and economic power by choking off criticism.

Liberalism must also defend freedom of ideas against those agents and apologists of Communist totalitarianism who, instead of honestly defending their heresies, resort to conspiratorial methods of anonymity and other techniques of fifth columnists. It will not be taken in by labels like 'left' and 'right.' These terms came into use after the French Revolution but the legacy of the men who then called themselves 'left' – the strategic freedoms of the Bill of Rights – is everywhere repudiated by those who today are sometimes euphemistically referred to as 'leftists' but who are actually Communists more reactionary than many parties conventionally called 'right.'

Realistic liberalism recognizes that to survive we must solve many hard problems, and that they can be solved only by intelligence and not by pious rhetoric. It recognizes that our greatest danger today is not fear of ideas but absence of ideas – specific ideas, addressed to concrete problems here and now, problems of such complexity that only the ignorant can be cocksure or dogmatic about the answers to them.

Finally, liberalism conceives of life not in terms of bare survival or peace at any price but in the light of ideals upon which it is prepared to stake everything. Among these ideals are the strategic freedoms of the liberal American tradition which make the continuous use of intelligence possible.

Sidney Hook (1902-89) was a professor of philosophy at New York University and the author of many books. The best collection of his political writings is *Sidney Hook on Pragmatism, Democracy and Freedom*, edited by Robert B. Talisse and Robert Tempio, foreword by Alan Ryan (Prometheus Books, 2002). 'The Social Democratic Prospect,' Hook's speech to the 1976 Convention of Social Democrats USA, was published in *Democratiya 3*.

References

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Sidorsky, David (2008) 'Sidney Hook,' *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. See <http://www.science.uva.nl/~seop/entries/sidney-hook/>

Notes

[1] Hook 1952.

[2] Sidorsky 2008.