

Bryan D. Palmer, James P. Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism in the United States, 1928–38 (Boston: Brill, 2021)

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Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism in the United States, 1928–38* (Boston: Brill, 2021)

IT PACKS A WALLOP.

Fifteen years ago, Bryan Palmer achieved a historiographical milestone with the first book in a multi-volume biography of James P. Cannon (1890–1974), a crucial but neglected figure in US left/labour history. *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007) took us through Cannon's expulsion from the Communist Party he had helped to found, for defending the ideas of Trotsky's Left Opposition. Banned and persecuted in the USSR, Trotsky's movement was about to become international, a process advanced considerably by the adherence of Cannon and other early US Communists who recommitted themselves to the revolutionary ideals that had brought them into the movement in the first place.

Since the *Origins* volume, Palmer has published much new material, notably his thrilling monograph on the Trotskyist-led Minneapolis truckers' strikes of 1934. But as the years went by, impatience for the next installment grew – when would we have Part 2 of Cannon's life story in our hands?

It was worth the wait – and the new book is worth its weight, which, at over 1,200 pages, is considerable. This hard-hitting Depression story "*packs a wallop!*" – to echo the famous cartoon (reproduced in the book, with many other vivid images) depicting the victorious truckers' union decking a top-hatted representative of the defeated bosses. Like Palmer's earlier works, this book is imbued with the spirit of the struggles it brings alive. A scholarly goldmine, its contribution is not just to the studying and writing of

labour revolutionary history, but to the task of making it.

Taking seriously the *ideas* that animated Cannon and his comrades, Palmer shows why they gave up party office "swivel-chairs" and all to embark on an often lonely course; and how they wound up "leaving a militant, revolutionary footprint" (1153) in the land of the allegedly almighty dollar. In 1928, US Trotskyists set out the very idea of socialism itself as necessarily international. To claim the contrary, as Stalin now did, meant betraying the revolution, they insisted.

In response, "official" US Communism sought to stifle Trotskyism in the cradle, launching a wave of gangster attacks. Immigrant Hungarian women activists on the Lower East Side were among those standing up to the onslaught, insisting on their right to distribute revolutionary literature. As Palmer shows, they were part of a small "army" of early foreign-born recruits to the Communist League of America (CLA) – the first organizational form of the Trotskyist forces Cannon led). Drawing on connections from Cannon's past in the Industrial Workers of the World, his embattled forces upheld rights vital for all in the labour movement.

While maintaining that each new turn in Communist International policy was moving it further from the program of the October Revolution, Trotsky and his co-thinkers were unyielding in their defense of the state that revolution had created. Cannon stood fast for this, a position that eventually led Max Shachtman, early US Trotskyism's second best-known figure, to break from the movement. As Palmer examines the ups and downs of relations between these two leading figures, his account foreshadows the far-reaching split in US Trotskyism's ranks provoked by the outbreak of World War II.

Clarifying several key internal debates during the Depression decade, Palmer's

approach brings to mind Lenin's advice regarding such matters: never take "somebody's word for it"; study all sides' documents to grasp the "substance of the differences." (Issue 1 of the *CLA's Militant* featured Lenin's admonition on its masthead.)

Marshalling an astounding range of meticulous original research, Palmer helps present-day audiences understand a vibrant revolutionary movement that emerged amidst rapid social, political, and cultural changes almost a century ago. This is not easy. The ideas Cannon and his comrades gave their all for – often going hungry so *The Militant* could reach its working-class readers – were often complex. To further complicate the task, baseline understandings for them then (the meaning of industrial unionism, or a picket line, or working-class political independence) are quite alien to most self-described socialists today – "like a manifesto from another galaxy" (to adopt the image Palmer uses in a different context). Even in 1928, many were mystified by Cannon's willingness to be expelled for "basic principle" and insistence on issues of the political program being studied and discussed. (70)

Palmer tells the kinds of human stories that help bring issues and ideas to life. We are introduced to many colourful militants whose consequential roles have scarcely, if ever, been addressed before. Better-known figures are reintroduced here, sometimes from surprising new vantage points. And with an eye to the Trotskyists' role, Palmer carefully reconstructs the labour struggles of the 1930s.

For instance, he vividly narrates the 1934 New York hotel strike. "Out! Every son of Zeus, out like lightning!" A cleaver-brandishing Greek Trotskyist waiter exhorts countrymen in the kitchen of a Park Avenue hotel. We gain a heightened appreciation of Cannon's break with strike leader B.J. Field, briefly a *CLA*

member: a "big tent" accommodation of this "Napoleon among New York's French chefs," who relied increasingly on Roosevelt's Labor Board, would have been disastrous for the movement's future.

Excavating the Trotskyists' role and frustrated hopes in the Progressive Miners of America, Palmer also provides a rich account of the "Minneapolis militants" who would build the Teamsters into a powerful national union. In the development of Trotskyism's forces, Cannon relied heavily on this seasoned party nucleus, whose strike leadership paved the way for industrial union organizing later in the decade.

This volume spans ten crucial years when Cannon's life was enmeshed with world-shaking events occurring one on top of another. The book shows Cannon's frustration during US Trotskyism's "dog days" of isolation and internal frictions, and with the toll poverty kept taking on him and his family (including his companion, Rose Karsner, whose vital roles in the movement are a highlight of this volume) these sometimes pushed him into despair. But Palmer effectively shows how, in one key situation after another, his savvy combined with a commitment to principle, including his obdurate resistance to get-rich gimmicks and dead-end shortcuts, opened new paths. For the former Wobbly won to Bolshevism, bringing the movement's unalloyed program into the class struggle was not only fundamental to the survival of the organization that he led. In Cannon's view, it was the only way to keep alive authentic communism, the *raison d'être* of the movement, and the hope for humanity in a world beset by imperialism, fascism, and impending total war.

Palmer's work vindicates his view that Cannon's life story is crucial to understanding revolutionary radicalism's history and place in North American class struggles. It makes palpable the role of

Cannon's small, hard-bitten group of US reds in fighting to help illuminate the meaning of world events whose far-reaching consequences continue to reverberate today. There are three examples:

1) Trotsky insistently called for Germany's working class to use its mass numbers, organization, and power in militant common actions to stop Hitler's rise. With haunting prescience, he warned of the devastating result if this continued to be blocked by the workers' social-democratic and Stalinist leaders. The mortal danger and Trotsky's urgent calls to action were largely brought to a world audience through the intensive work of the few hundred led by Cannon.

2) When the Bolshevik old guard was being wiped out in Stalin's Moscow Trials, which named Trotsky as the chief defendant, the US establishment openly hailed or quietly approved the show trials, with few exceptions. The unmasking of the frame-ups by an authoritative independent Commission of Inquiry was made possible by the work of Cannon and his comrades.

3) When civil war and revolution broke out in Spain, leftward-moving workers and youth in the United States were transfixed by the events. Warning that the People's Front was opening the way to Franco's victory by stifling the revolution, Trotskyists faced a wall of de facto censorship in the US built by Socialist, Communist, and liberal proponents of popular-frontism. Cannon's efforts were instrumental in breaking through this and winning worker militants to a program for the victory of the Spanish Revolution.

Through intensive campaigns around these and other issues, it was brought home to the often parochial US milieu that political clarity – indispensable for action – could, as class struggles sharpened, quite quickly become a matter of life and death. Helping recruits

assimilate was vital to the Trotskyists' organizational advances, which began to take off in 1934. These included a merger with the American Workers Party (most importantly in the long run its experienced union and unemployed-league cadres) and then winning over hundreds more labour-movement and youth activists through the Trotskyists' entry into the Socialist Party (SP) beginning in mid-1936, a tactical turn that Cannon was decisive in keeping sharp, short, and politically principled. This volume incorporates an engaging examination of how and why "entrism" occurred and ended – politics and personalities on all sides involved – and why entry brought renewed tensions between Cannon and Shachtman.

By 1938, when the period covered by this book ended, Cannon "had personally provided the American left with a red thread of revolutionary continuity." (1152) By then Trotsky's collaboration with Cannon had also deepened. In September 1938, Trotsky wrote to Karsner that he wished the Fourth International had "a couple of Jims more. At least one for Europe" (1140) – a sentiment not always appreciated then (or later) by Trotskyist leaders there. When the new International was formally established that same month, its program had been worked out by Trotsky in consultation with Cannon. Key planks drew on experiences like those of the Minneapolis militants, and the program's call for workers' defense guards was soon put into practice in Minnesota to stop fascist attacks.

No hagiographical exercise, the book does recount a stumble here or a foible there, only to move quickly on. Entire sections are devoted to analyzing the drawn-out spell when Cannon was barely able to function (bringing years of recriminations from some fellow founders). Beyond this, Palmer digs extensively into

areas where he detects political inconsistencies and failures. Views on these will vary, but the seriousness of the approach – and the rigorous unearthing of relevant documentation – will encourage debate and further research.

Notably, Palmer documents promising early efforts to formulate an accurate analysis of the nature of black oppression in the US. While sharing Trotsky's emphasis on the centrality of North American revolutionary perspectives in the fight against this racist subjugation, Cannon's comrades mainly disagreed with Trotsky's speculation that African Americans might establish a separate nation-state. Yet the movement led by Cannon did not succeed in hammering out an adequate theory and program regarding the path to black liberation. Beginning in the 1950s, from within the movement, long-time militant Richard Fraser would analyze the key consequences of this failure.

As for trade-union work, while lauding the Trotskyist leaders of the great Minneapolis strikes, Palmer also probes weaknesses in understanding and dealing with "Farmer-Laborism," the dominant force in Minnesota politics. And where in Minneapolis the Trotskyist strike leaders made fruitful alliances with those local Teamster officials who accepted their terms, Palmer's exploration of other fields of trade-union work highlights some blocs in which real damage was caused, on bureaucrats' terms – particularly but not only in maritime.

A book of this breadth will include lapses and instances of imprecision, but I noted a few. I think readers might have benefited from a clearer discussion of the Trotskyists' view of the Spanish events, for example. And while wild horses could not drag me away from this book, now and then a metaphor (about dancing, perhaps?) gallops too far, fast, or frequently... Still, we stay the course, being rewarded

on virtually every page. Including the footnotes! As to its length: somewhere around the 900th page, this reader felt almost as if he were approaching the conclusion of a deeply absorbing novel: is it really going to end so soon? We want more, but we will have to wait for the next volume.

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Sean Wilentz, *No Property in Man: Slavery and Antislavery at the Nation's Founding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019)

IN *NO PROPERTY in Man*, Sean Wilentz provides an insightful account of slavery's place in United States politics from the nation's founding to the start of the Civil War. One of the leading political historians of our time, Wilentz draws on his extensive knowledge of the period to give readers fresh insights into historians' long-running debate over slavery's place in American politics.

Central to this debate is the question of whether the Constitution was a fundamentally proslavery document – a charter that facilitated slavery's expansion – or an antislavery one that was essential to eventually ending the institution. The former outlook found its loudest champions among the South's fire-eating defenders of the institution and, more surprisingly, among some northern abolitionists. On the other side of the question stood mainstream antislavery politicians, such as Republican Party leader Abraham Lincoln, who insisted that slavery could be abolished through the existing constitutional order.

The question has taken on new life in the 21st century as historians revise their understanding of American slavery. Newer studies have challenged an older interpretation of slavery as a dying