

area perhaps wary of the pitfalls which seemed to be built in to it. And yet, as Draper has pointed out, the CPUSA was no New Left organization but an integral part of an international movement with all that this meant; it is then a question that cannot be skirted. Moreover the way the CPUSA dealt with anticommunism has to be explored further: was "hiding the face of the Party", that is not admitting membership even if subversion was not the motive, the best way to confront exclusionary tendencies in the society? How deep had in fact anticommunism remained during the most favorable period for the CP?

An attempt must also be made to evaluate the almost continually unsuccessful history of the CPUSA no longer as an exception in the international communist movement but as something which perhaps foreshadowed, in the 1950s, the general destiny of the entire movement born of the 1917 Revolution. Lastly one should continue to reflect on the ultimate meaning of the CPUSA experience. As some have already suggested it is possible that the efforts – heroic at times – of the CP led primarily to a softening of US capitalism's sharp edges and an inclusion of new strata in the great bourgeois synthesis.

Unfortunately, on these and other germane points of the Party's history Lewy has little to offer although it fits in quite well with a reading of daily newspapers. Perhaps greatly shortened, more directly personal and shorn of historiographical pretensions, it could have been a somewhat interesting political tract. In any case, that an entire period in the history of communism has come to a close cannot be taken to have retrospective application. Recent political victories on the international level give greater luster to old-fashioned anticommunism but research on the CPUSA will not advance by being harnessed to it.

*Malcolm Sylvers*

SEIDMAN, MICHAEL. *Workers Against Work. Labor in Paris and Barcelona During the Popular Fronts.* University of California Press, Berkeley [etc.] 1991. xiv, 399 pp. \$ 39.95.

This is an interesting but ultimately unsatisfactory book. Its unsatisfactoriness stems from the very disparateness of the project which makes for a very uneven level of analysis. To be fair, the problem identified here is closely bound up with the comparative 'genre' itself. Michael Seidman, in attempting a comparison of Paris and Barcelona illustrates the extreme difficulty of using the same term – Popular Front – to describe situations which, though they existed in the same chronological period, represented very different political conjunctures and socio-economic structures. As a result, both the comparisons and contrasts made by the author often seem forced and sometimes downright banal. The structure Dr Seidman adopts straight away alerts one to the difficulty. What we get is not really a thematic comparison but two more or less separate studies in one volume. While the author provides comparative elements in his analyses of the Spanish and French bourgeoisies, he is really telling two stories which reveal the abyss between the two national experiences in terms both of economic development and cultural projects. These sections, although providing an intelligent synthesis, really just illustrate the evident

way in which levels of economic and industrial development are a crucial determinant of capitalist praxis (including here demands made of the state). In turn, the contrastive responses of French and Spanish labour organisations demonstrate how a more complex state, with a greater array of seductive as opposed to repressive resources at its disposal, significantly alters the strategies employed in workers' economic self-defence. The French strategy of integrating or coopting labour through consumption was simply not feasible for basic economic reasons in Spain, reformist trade-union leaders notwithstanding. Although, in the case of France too, behind the social projects and legislation, coercion remained an option for capital and the state, as the events surrounding the failed general strike of 30 November 1938 demonstrate.

At the core of Michael Seidman's study, as his title indicates, is the question of workers' resistance to work. He argues that this response in essence has the same meaning whether it occurs in a context of relative stability for capital or during a transitional regime of class equilibrium such as the French Popular Front was, or even when it occurs during a time of potentially more radical social and economic transformation such as that experienced by the Barcelona proletariat at war. Irrespective of specific historical contexts, workers are observed reacting against productivist attempts to impose greater discipline and a faster work rate – whether these emanate from capital or their own union organisations. The symptoms of such resistance – absenteeism, sabotage, go-slows and other sorts of time wasting are the product of alienation, monotony, of the fact that their work has no meaning (especially once taylorist deskilling and subdivision of complex processes is underway). Whether this is in fact an adequate way of interpreting worker resistance across a variety of historical situations is a point which will be taken up later in this review. But, in so arguing, Dr Seidman suggests that other approaches to the analysis of work have ignored the kind of strategies of resistance with which he deals. This is somewhat overstating his case. Moreover, to claim that Marxist analysis ignores such a phenomenon because it focuses on the workplace as “a potential area for emancipation” where the “workers identif[y] with their vocation” seems somewhere to have left the concept of alienation stunningly out of the account.

Although his is not a political history, Michael Seidman's attempt to compare the French and Spanish experiences inevitably raises the problem of the different constitutions of the two Fronts in the period under scrutiny. And this was a difference, moreover, which stemmed from crucial social and economic disparities. In Spain the military coup and attempted revolution saw the eclipse of the liberal republicanism which was always a main constituent of the French experience. In May 1937 when the Spanish Popular Front re-emerged fully to head a reconstructed Republican state, it turned on a new socialist– communist axis. Of course in choosing Barcelona as his comparator, the one area of Republican Spain where republicans, in the shape of the *Esquerra*, managed to hang on to power, the author skirts this difficulty. But in so doing he risks leaving non-specialist readers with the impression that Barcelona was a microcosm of Spanish Popular Frontism, whereas Cataluña as a region was very much the exception.

Barcelona is for Dr Seidman the seat of the “Spanish Revolution”. Although the author never adequately defines his terms, the expression is used as shorthand for

the process of complex political and socio-economic reorganisation which occurred during the first ten months of the war. But there is a fundamental problem here. These months saw a dramatic *shift* in the locus of power, as the potential for a popular revolution was rapidly eroded by the strategies of the emerging Popular Front bloc of centre and centre-left politicians and reformist trade-unions leaders. The fact that Dr Seidman is not writing a political history does not exempt him from criticism for inadequate definition of terms, since the political developments which remain on the edge of his account bore directly on the lives of the Spanish workers he claims as the protagonist of his study. The most important of these developments was obviously the *failure* of the revolution. The effects of this on the Barcelona proletariat are addressed later in this review in relation to the theme of worker resistance to work. However, here one also needs to take issue with Dr Seidman's understanding of what the Spanish revolution constituted. His study suggests some six months of revolutionary change to which considerable sectors of the working class remained stubbornly impervious. But the revolution had failed by autumn 1936, precisely because the basis of state power was never destroyed by those forces which might have been expected to fulfill this vanguard function. (The Marxist-Leninist POUM was too weak and the libertarian movement was fatally handicapped by organisational division and ideological insufficiency (it had no adequate theory of the state).) The CNT may have controlled the streets of Barcelona, but this scarcely constituted the triumph of the revolution. That libertarians mistook the two in 1936 is understandable, but not that Dr Seidman should imply the same in 1990. And even if an unproblematically purist CNT leadership had existed, it would have been isolated by the dogged reformism and statism of Largo Caballero's socialist giant, the UGT, which refused to contemplate any inter-union alliance until it was far too late for it to fulfil any autonomous political function. And as regards the UGT, it must be said bluntly that Dr Seidman misrepresents its nature and dynamic in the 1930s. He calls it "revolutionary" and "radical" in seeking to contrast it with reformist French unionism. In fact it was only the polarised *context* combined with a revolutionary rhetoric which gave the UGT a veneer of radicalism. The whole point about the experience of the Spanish socialist movement in the 1930s – party and union, social democrats and "left socialists" – is that it was revealed as an *utterly reformist force*. Dr Seidman would have done better to have looked for the significant *similarities* between Marceau Pivert and Francisco Largo Caballero – in terms of revolutionary rhetoric and reformist practice. Instead the author resorts to a number of outworn clichés about the latter's radicalisation.

The reviewer's fundamental objection to this study, however, is that in order to sustain the comparisons he attempts, Michael Seidman vastly and consistently underplays the huge impact of the Spanish Republic's being *at war*. It was fighting for survival not only against the domestic enemy and its fascist supporters but also against the political and economic establishments of *democratic* Europe and North America (which from beginning to end judged the Republic's capitalist credentials to be seriously inadequate). Non-intervention involved an economic war of attrition. The resulting siege conditions had a devastating effect on the productive capacity of the Republic and therefore on the lived experience of the working class, both inside and outside the workplace. The material conditions of daily life outside the workplace rapidly deteriorated and these too impacted upon the responses of

many workers. At various points in the Barcelona case study the author shuffles between examples in 1936 and 1938. We learn that some workers were disengaged or uncommitted in 1936–1937, that others sought to avoid conscription in 1938, while those conscripted in the later stages of the war were demoralised. Yet all this is decontextualised, there is scarcely a reference to the excruciating deterioration occurring in the material and psychological state of Republican Spain between these dates. It is just not enough to catalogue the similar *symptoms* of workers' disengagement (in pre- and post-coup Barcelona and in Paris). For without more information about the wider social and political environment which shaped working-class responses we cannot speak of a monolithic phenomenon of worker resistance which the author seems so often to imply. The history of work, and of resistance to it, has to be about more than work alone.

Moreover, in this reviewer's opinion Dr Seidman also vastly underrates the impact of the war on the CNT's espousal of productivism. Indeed in his attempt to claim it as a constant of libertarian ideology he magnifies the movement's productivist faith in the pre-war period and exaggerates its acritical acceptance of quasi-Taylorism. Equally skewed is the analysis of the libertarians' desire to develop national productive forces in a way which freed them from control by foreign investors. This is described as a conflict between theoretical internationalism and nationalist practice. To be sure there was serious inconsistency and incompleteness in libertarian ideology – this was one of the causes of the wartime crisis from which the movement never truly recovered. But to describe the libertarian response thus is to miss the central point. Productivism and exhortations to national self-sufficiency were the inevitable pragmatic response to what amounted to an international capitalist siege, no less effective for its being submerged. In stressing libertarian productivism, Dr Seidman's main objective seems to be to demonstrate that Catalan anarcho-syndicalism was neither purist nor millenarian. He writes as if he is challenging a current orthodoxy here, whereas no such reductionism exists.

The author declares early on that his is not a political study of the Spanish revolution – and he indeed repeats throughout the text, if somewhat vaguely, that the political categories of “most historians” are insufficient to allow us to understand its nature as a lived experience. Dr Seidman has a valid point. We certainly need to explore a whole range of popular responses to understand the degree of impact of the radical social and economic changes briefly attempted in Republican Spain. And current work, often via the use of invaluable oral sources, is contributing much to building a more nuanced picture of class and gender responses in 1930s Spain as a period of mobilisation and transition. But the fact remains that Michael Seidman's study does not attain the goals he claims for it. It certainly doesn't provide any sense of the “lived experience of workers” (either inside or outside the workplace). This is largely because of the sheer disparateness of the study. Dr Seidman aims for far too wide a coverage and on the Spanish side at least he falls frequently into the trap of superficial and sketchy analysis. The study of Barcelona is exceedingly opaque. One derives little sense of the determinants of worker responses – whether these constituted demoralisation, passivity or political engagement. The heavy-handed references *en passant* to women's “apoliticism” would have been better left out, as would the author's brief sortie into representations of women in Republican propaganda posters. This appears to draw the extraordinary conclusion

that gender roles were dislocated by the revolution. Not only is this a gross oversimplification *per se*, but that it should be based on an appreciation of women's depiction in Frontist posters is downright inexplicable. The rapid ascendancy of Popular Frontism stamped conventional gender roles firmly back on the face of propaganda. It was part and parcel of its counter-revolutionary logic that Republican women would be mobilised by an appeal to their traditional roles. By 1937, if one looks at the graphics alone, it is often hard to distinguish appeals made to Republican women from those made to their Nationalist sisters.<sup>1</sup>

Fundamentally, all meaning, including that of work, is socially produced. It is determined by the specific historical context in which it occurs. If this holds for work then it must also do so for resistance to work. The basic flaw with Dr Seidman's case is that he sustains the homogeneity of worker resistance by rather doubtful means – that is by decontextualising his accounts of the symptoms. In the Spanish case particularly, because of the extremeness of the situation, this leads to serious distortions in his interpretation. In avoiding discussion of the political dismantlement of a flawed and fragmented revolution he is not, as he claims, merely avoiding the better-trodden territory of political history. In fact, he is actively failing to provide the reader with an explanation of the process which shaped worker responses. State reconstruction, as has already been intimated, did not begin in 1937, it went right back to the appointment of the Largo Caballero government in September 1936. It is only by faulty periodisation that Dr Seidman is able to propose, in a singular case of the tail wagging the dog, that the primary impetus to state reconstruction was worker recalcitrance in the factories. Of course the CNT did not carry the entire Barcelona proletariat with it. In Barcelona, as in Paris, the working class embraced the committed and disengaged of all degrees. Triumphalism can only hinder our understanding of popular responses in the early months of the war. But it is not clear what Michael Seidman's disembodied and fragmentary assortment of illustrations of worker apathy and disgruntlement is intended to demonstrate. It scarcely alters the fact that state reconstruction was about curbing the economic power and political autonomy of the trade unions and militant sectors of the working class. One doesn't necessarily have to be arguing from an anarchist or left-communist perspective to perceive this.

In the factories and workshops of Popular Frontist Paris and "revolutionary" Barcelona the work experience remained for many an essentially alienating one. For the Spanish Republic, the primary consequence of wartime priorities made any radical change here completely impossible. Worker disengagement then, rather than illustrating the conscious "negation of the ideals of the Spanish revolution" could be said to reflect the fact that not only was the material reality of the work experience and daily life *not* qualitatively transformed, but in fact it actively deteriorated. If the revolution remained for many a political abstraction, then there can have been nothing for them to "negate". The major problem here, however, was not the left's creative vacuum. Michael Seidman's criticism of its failure to elaborate alternative models for the development of the productive forces reveals a startling disregard for the constraints and urgency imposed by the economic war of attrition

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the recent (April 1991) exhibition of Republican and Nationalist posters, Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid.

being waged from outside against Spanish democracy. The results of blockade – acute shortages, inflation, hunger, misery, a harder and longer working day – and, of course, savage internal political divisions – ended by destabilising the Republic from within. The strategy proved as successful in the European arena of the thirties as it has much more recently elsewhere.

In the course of this desperate battle for production which was crucial to Republican survival, union leadership cadres and militants went for the lowest common denominator – an economically conservative practice. Nevertheless, the unions in Republican Spain were the crucial force in a process of industrial concentration and rationalisation which, as Dr Seidman points out, had long been on Spain's historical agenda. In stressing the technical importance of this process, the author compares it with the effects of Franco's developmentalism three decades later. However, there is a major danger here in that the comparison ignores the central underlying disparity which was at the heart of the civil war itself. Union agency invested the rationalisation process with a democratic intentionality which was, by definition, always absent from later Francoist projects. After all, what was at stake between Nationalists and Republicans in the war was not modernisation *per se* but the model to be adopted. The Nationalists may have had recourse to a neanderthal discourse, but what they really opposed was the *democratic* model of modernisation proposed by the Republic because of the cost involved for elite groups. To imply that developmental Francoism unproblematically assumed a neutral technocratic mantle from the 1930s is to leave stunningly out of account a crucial historical stage – the triumphalist Francoism of the 1940s and early 1950s.

*Helen Graham*