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**Reading Otherwise: Ian McKay's "Fairly
Straightforward" Misrepresentation of Canadian
Communist Party Historiography**

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Congratulations for the recent Volume XXI of *Canadian Jewish Studies*, a special collection of essays to honour the scholarship of Gerald Tulchinsky. I taught with Jerry for many years at Queen's University and was disappointed that I could not present a paper at the conference from which these proceedings grew, due to a previously-scheduled public lecture in England.

Ian McKay's essay, "Joe Salsberg, Depression-Era Communism, and the Limits of Moscow's Rule," addresses Tulchinsky's book *Joe Salsberg: A Life of Commitment* and offers a statement on what it meant to be a communist in Canada from the 1920s to 1939.¹ This necessitates addressing Stalinism. McKay insists the current historiography answers the question of what it means to be a "'Stalinist,' or 'loyal communist,'" with "a fairly straightforward answer: it meant subservience to Moscow."²

In actuality, understandings of what it meant to be a Stalinist are not straightforward at all. As I show below with reference to my own writing, which McKay largely ignores yet manages to quote out of context in ways that distort egregiously my interpretive intentions, there are many complications embedded in the works of those who have written on Canadian communism. Indeed, the motley crew McKay assembles to assert his "Moscow Rules" historiographic consensus should not be considered a true unit. Lumping William Rodney, Ian Angus, Norman Penner, Ivan Avakumoic, and myself in one congealed analytic mass, as McKay does on the first page of his article, should give anyone with serious interest in Canadian communism cause to pause.

The historiography of Canadian communism, according to McKay, is an "essential 'traditionalist' narrative" in which Party leaders and "the broader small c-communist movement they influenced" worked as one to champion the Soviet Union and follow slavishly the "Moscow Rules" as they emanated from the Communist International.³ According to McKay, this perspective blinds us to the rich legacy of communist rank-and-filers, many of whom were Jews like Salsberg and who fought for, and accomplished, a great deal.

To sustain this representation of the historiography a responsible scholar should provide actual quotations from the authors he or she cites to establish, beyond question, the validity of his or her sweeping claims. McKay does no such thing. The assertion of scholarly agreement around what he labels "'transmission belt' authoritarianism,"⁴ in which Communist leaders conditioned a Pavlovian-like obedience from their ranks, is inaccurate. Even if some scholars McKay cites have views congruent with those of the "Moscow Rules" school, significant differences among them should be recognized. Others can only be placed in this framework through a misreading of their actual research and writing.

Nothing in my publications, for instance, can be marshalled to sustain such a caricature. And I am the *only* scholar quoted directly by McKay in his making of this misrepresentation. Let me offer a blunt refusal of his characterization of my position:

- McKay's only direct citation or quotation of my writing on Communism refers to two–pages in my book, *Working Class Experience*.⁵ This overview of labour history addresses the revolutionary left at various points over two centuries. However, it is hardly a source that should qualify as a historiographic centerpiece on the topic of Canadian Communism.
- The single quotation McKay uses from these two pages highlights the words "revolutionary posturing." I used this term to describe some of the activities of the Canadian Communist Party in the Third Period (1928–1935). Most reasonable assessments of the policies emanating from the Comintern in this era address the ultra–left sectarianism that encouraged what John Manley described similarly as "confrontational posturing." What makes McKay's quotation of my work troubling is that he neglects to mention that the pages he cites deal only with this particular Third Period era; and that he ignores later sections of *Working–Class Experience* where I outline gains made by the Communist Party in trade union organizing through agitational propaganda, through the arts, and among the unemployed.
- Furthermore, a look at the entire paragraph in which I make reference to the Communist Party's revolutionary posturing in the Third Period shows beyond doubt that McKay lifted these words out of context and misrepresented what I actually said about Canadian Communism. Here is the entire passage: "In this period of revolutionary posturing, much was lost on the political and cultural fronts, as well as in the industrial realm. These were years that set the stage for the irrational, for the blind faith in the "party line," however far removed from Canadian reality it may have been. The late twenties and early thirties served as an introduction to the drastic shifts in Communist policy resulting from the wartime needs of the Soviet Union in 1939–41. *As such, these years have presented historians with ample ammunition to disparage and discredit the entire Communist experience, to denigrate the accomplishments of rank–and–file Communists, and to erase the achievements of militancy, struggle, and resistance – often paced by Communist effort – from the pages of Canadian history.*"⁶ (Italics added.) In short, what I wrote in this particular text does indeed address the problem of Moscow ruling, but it also abundantly makes clear how this was not the totality of Communist experience. I cannot be assimilated into McKay's "Moscow Rules" school of historiography.

- Quoting me out of context is one issue. Another is what McKay ignores. In a number of writings on Canadian and United States communism from the 1980s to the present, I have attempted (with subtle analytic shifts over time) to develop a two-sided appreciation of communism: While I insist Stalinism be defined carefully and addressed critically, I acknowledge the important contributions and commitments of communists in their struggles for social justice that involved issues such as building revolutionary parties and organizing the working class. Among these writings are my oral biography, *A Communist Life: Jack Scott and the Canadian Workers Movement, 1927-1985*;⁷ my article "Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism,"⁸ to which *American Communist History* devoted an entire issue, publishing the essay, four critical responses, and my rejoinder; a 2005 *Labour/Le Travail* article on Maurice Spector, the Jewish Left Oppositionist who struggled to build a Trotskyist alternative to Stalinism in Canada in the late 1920s and 1930s;⁹ and my book *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928*, which brings to life the experience of United States communism in ways that address *both* the debilitating impact of Stalinism *and* the often admirable struggles of committed communists.¹⁰ McKay refers to none of this work is in his misrepresentation of the historiography. That these publications are not all Canadian in their focus is not a reason McKay can claim for excluding them from his historiographic consideration, for he cites other international literature when it suits his purposes.
- As McKay's essay reveals, there is an analytic binary opposition in the historiography of communism. On one hand, the revolutionary communist project can be reduced crudely to Stalinism's overarching capacity to impose "Moscow Rules." The major architects of this view are mainstream academics, many of whom were and remain Cold War warriors of liberal/conservative leanings, though some on the left have bent their pens in this direction.

On the other hand, there is a tendency, associated with some New Left-inclined scholarship and some defenders of mainstream Soviet-aligned Communist Parties, to close one's eyes to the emerging bureaucratization of the Communist International in the mid-1920s as well as the Stalinization that undermined the revolutionary character of the Soviet Union, and the ways these affected international developments and national decision-making in the world's communist parties. This approach tends to deflect attention away from how the twists and turns in the Communist International's policies affected national and local activists, and stresses instead the independence and autonomy of communist secondary cadre and rank-and-file militants.

- My own two-sided interpretation complicates these oppositional simplifications. The decision to join the Communist Party and the commitment and discipline shown in aligning with a Communist International and defending the actions of the Soviet Union and its many shifts in programmatic orientation must be taken into account when evaluating the Communist experience. At different times this meant different things, but by the 1930s there was no mistaking the extent to which Stalinism's influence had achieved a certain hegemony, meaning that all of those associated formally with the Communist Party, leaders *and* rank-and-filers, bear certain responsibilities. That someone like Salsberg stuck by the Communist Party throughout the 1930s and 1940s and part of the 1950s, in spite of evidence of Soviet anti-Semitism and bureaucratic suppression of revolutionary dissidents' political rights (to curtail the list of 'problems'), cannot be swept under the rug of what McKay calls "living otherwise."¹¹ Another Jewish communist, Maurice Spector, also "lived otherwise."¹² Unlike Salsberg, Spector chose to live out his revolutionary commitment in a decisive, early, and publicly-proclaimed break from the official Communist Party, not in 1956-57 but in 1928. This does not mean that Salsberg and other communists who remained with the Party for so long did not also struggle against injustice, commit their lives to what they thought was a better world, and stand against powerful forces of opposition, often heroically.

The difficulty in insisting on this two-sidedness is that critics who are more one-sided in their approach can easily maneuver quotations and positions to accent one side of the argument rather than others. McKay does precisely this in his historiographic pigeon-holing of what he labels "Moscow Rules."

McKay has previously admonished authors writing on the Canadian left to avoid "scorecard history," assigning "stars and demerit points based on his or her present-day politics."¹³ Of the thousands of books, articles, and theses he claims are relevant reading for those pursuing an appreciation of the history of the left in Canada, McKay claims that a good many serve up a potent brew of "sectarianism and sentimentality. Sectarianism: *our tradition* has the goods, and every other approach to the left is mired in error and illusion. *Here* we have the truth. *There* you find the erroneous errors. Sentimentality: *our heroes* were never complicated, cowardly or inconsistent."¹⁴

Good advice is always easy to give. It can be hard to follow. McKay's historiographic misrepresentation is a scorecard of sorts: It comprises an undeniable downplaying of specific writing; a refusal to quote fairly and acknowledge past historiography fully, which betrays a certain kind of sectarianism; and it sidesteps Stalinism and its complicated meanings, which has all the trappings of sentimentality.

Let there be interpretive difference. By all means, let us argue through conflicting assessments. This is as it should be. But let such discussion and analytic disagreement proceed on the basis of fair-minded and responsible use of existing writing, however much that complicates our dialogue.

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1

Gerald Tulchinsky, *Joe Salsberg: A Life of Commitment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

2

Ian McKay, "Joe Salsberg, Depression-Era Communism and the Limits of Moscow's Rule," *Canadian Jewish Studies*, Oyfñ Veg Essays in Honour of / Mélanges en l'honneur de Gerald Tulchinsky 21 (2014): 131.

3

Ibid, 132.

4

Ibid, 132.

5

Bryan D. Palmer, *Working Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992).

6

Ibid.

7

Bryan D. Palmer, ed., *A Communist Life: Jack Scott and the Canadian Workers Movement, 1927-1985* (St. John's: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1988).

8

Bryan D. Palmer, "Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism," *American Communist History* 2, no. 2 (2003): 139-173.

9

Bryan D. Palmer, "Maurice Spector, James P. Cannon, and the Origins of Canadian Trotskyism," *Labour/Le Travail* 56 (2005), 91-148.

10

Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

11

McKay, "Joe Salsberg, Depression-Era Communism and the Limits of Moscow's Rule," 133.

12

Ibid.

13

Ian McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise: Leftists and the People's Enlightenment in Canada, 1890-1920* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2008), 1.

14

Ian McKay, *Rebels, Reds, Radicals: Rethinking Canada's Left History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2005), 22.