

The Vegetarian's Bloody Utopia

Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba, 1928–1978, by Paul Hollander, *New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981. xvi + 524 pp. \$25.00.*

HEAVEN IS a place where all wants are satisfied, and tears are wiped from every eye; the heaven of atheists is an earthly utopia. One may even suppose, for the sake of argument, that one's utopia really exists; if it is inaccessible, and very little information can be obtained about the actual conditions of life there, one may come to believe in it oneself. Thus the eighteenth-century French *philosophes* idealized Russia as the progressive realm of "enlightened despotism," and venerated China, "that imbecile and barbarous government," Tocqueville said, as "the most perfect model for all nations of the world to copy." The utopian phenomenon occurred again in the twentieth century, with Russia and China still as the Kingdom of Heaven on earth; but the delusion persisted, even though intercontinental travel was rather easy, and the utopian intellectuals made a cult of visiting their paradise. Ideological rigidity kept them from seeing reality, even though it stood plainly before them. Since utopia is what one chooses to believe it is, that belief becomes an index of one's particular frustrations with one's own society, or, to speak in existentialist jargon, of one's "alienation."

Paul Hollander, a professor of sociology at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and a Fellow of the Russian Research Center of Harvard, has written a dispassionate analysis of the infallible pattern leftist intellectuals have followed in our time: disillusionment with their own society, idealization of a communist country, and pilgrimage to it. Because ideology consecrates a place, and the traveller (or fellow traveller) who visits it sees all by the light of faith, Hollander has named his book *Political Pilgrims*. What does not conform to the utopian vision the political pilgrim ignores, denies, conceals, or

explains away. While many visitors to Russia in the 1930s and to China, Cuba, and North Viet Nam in the 1960s were given very incomplete views of these countries by their hosts, and willingly believed that what they saw represents the whole truth, only a few saw things they were not supposed to see; and facing a crisis of honesty, even fewer revealed any disillusionment. Indeed the utopianism of the alienated intellectual is a psychological phenomenon of deception—of oneself as well as others.

"Alienation" was once a word denoting mental disease: a nineteenth-century mad-doctor was known as an "alienist." The constant comparison of past and present—of a past that never existed and a present only dimly perceived—makes for mental mischief, especially as the intellectual imagines a role of greater importance for himself than the world now willingly accords him. Dr. Johnson spoke of "hazards of imagination" imperilling the sanity of closeted academics. Hollander's conclusion considers some of the causes of intellectual alienation, and solipsism may be the greatest of these.

Most poignant of all the examples of leftist folly in Hollander's ample catalogue is that of the American vegetarians who visited the U.S.S.R. in the 1930s. Radical author Scott Nearing declared himself, quite typically, "a pacifist, a vegetarian, and a socialist" because of the "woeful discrepancy between riches and poverty, the inequity of exploitation and the wickedness of deliberate destruction and killing." The reality of human nature was too strong a meat for the ideological vegetarian. Nevertheless, journalist Eugene Lyons told in his book *Assignment in Utopia* (1938) how such vegetarians "swooned in ecstasy of admiration for Soviet slaughter-houses." Presumably the progenitors of the vegetarian superman would need to eat some meat, especially in the small quantities that collectivized agriculture was able to provide: for the end justifies the means. Similarly the pacifist gloried in the sight of Soviet military might, intended through horrendous bloodshed to inaugurate the messianic age of proletarian peace. The socialist marvelled at the success of the "private plot," explaining it as a patriotic hobby

pursued during leisure hours by enthusiastic collective farm laborers. The libertarian liberal rationalized coercing or even liquidating recalcitrant kulaks who stood in the way of the "withering away" of all government and constraint. The American intellectual vegetarian, feeding purely on the wholesome dogma of utopian ideology, admired the efficiency of Stalin's death-camps.

The delusion of the pilgrims depended on their willingness to believe only the good, to ignore the bad, to give the benefit of every doubt, to rationalize, to revise prior conceptions; it depended also on their vulnerability to flattery from their hosts. Their willful credulity amazed the communist guides who led them through carefully arranged exhibitions of collectivist plenty, efficiency, and felicity. When the pilgrims' faith remained intact even as they were taken behind the model stores, factories, farms, and prisons to see their seamy realities, they earned their hosts' contempt.

As late as 1944 the charade continued, as Vice President Henry Wallace and Johns Hopkins professor Owen Lattimore toured the town of Madagan in the Soviet far east—a town whose chief industry was its political prison-camp. Past pilgrims had extolled Soviet prisons as having achieved the ideal of criminal rehabilitation through humane treatment; and there was no such thing, of course, as a political prisoner. Upon his return Lattimore wrote of the marvels of Soviet achievement he had witnessed in an article for *National Geographic*. Seven years later, one of the Madagan inmates, Elinor Lipper, escaped to the West and wrote a book about her experiences, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, in which she told of the amazement of the prisoners of Madagan as heaps of luxurious goods were poured into the windows of shops that had always been bare, how guard towers were removed along roads that the prisoners were building (at the cost of thousands of lives), and how the prisoners were locked in their barracks for three days to watch movies, so that Wallace and Lattimore would never suspect that the roads and buildings of Madagan that they so admired were completed at the cost of injustice and human suffering. Lattimore's

response to the book was to say that the NKVD tyrant who ran the camp must have "slipped up" as a destroyer of mankind if Lipper survived to tell her story.

It becomes evident that the pilgrims' admiration of the mythical Marxian paradise is only a reverse contempt for their own society. Hollander grants some honesty to intellectuals of the early thirties who, as impractical litterateurs, looked for a scientific alternative to the chaos of capitalism in depression; moreover, recovery of a sense of reality in the forties was hampered by the *Mission to Moscow*-style propaganda of World War II undertaken to make "Uncle Joe" Stalin palatable as an ally in the struggle against Hitler. By 1960, one could no longer call oneself a communist lest one be thought the agent of a totalitarian regime indistinguishable in its barbarity from the Third Reich. One then shuffled off the practice of Stalin and emphasized the theory of Marx; one called oneself a Marxist and looked for new utopias in China, Cuba, and North Viet Nam. In the case of the latter two, one minimized the involvement of the U.S.S.R. in fostering and sustaining the regime, and emphasized its "home-grown" quality. But Hollander grants no legitimacy to the motives of the pilgrims of this second wave; for them the crime of capitalism and freedom was success and boredom. The utopians of the counter-culture actually admitted at times that they sought in political change a solution to their personal psychological problems. Their utopia would not only abolish poverty and injustice, it would abolish parent-fostered neurosis. Intellectual alienation was now indistinguishable from mental alienation.

Hollander presents the whole panorama of Sixties' drug use, basket-weaving, and campus anarchy which will be only too well remembered by most readers of his book today. But if *Political Pilgrims* takes its rightful place as a classic study of the phenomenon, and is read in years to come, it will be necessary to recall the clash of establishment and counter-culture that led legions of middle-class youths to regard Mao and Ho Chi Min as their spiritual fathers, to consider themselves victims of what Marcuse

called "repressive tolerance," and to travel to Cuba to cut sugarcane. That tragic confrontation will be harder to recall when the counter-culture and the establishment have fully assimilated each other.

Just as one thought the illusion of this weariest of pilgrimages fully shattered by recent history, Professor Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. publishes his own latest eye-witness account of life in the U.S.S.R., "Russia Revisited: Life There Has Improved" (*Wall Street Journal*, August 17, 1982). Schlesinger assures us that the Soviet economy cannot be on the brink of collapse: "I found more goods in the shops, more food in the markets, more cars on the streets. . . . People were better dressed, more relaxed, more obliging and more communicative." The presence of Adidas T-shirts, eye shadow, and cassettes on the beach at Yalta completely distracts Schlesinger from the fact that the Soviet economy is bailing itself out with slave-labor, Western technology, and Western capital. The crisis in international relations results solely from "the international conspiracy of hardliners who, in weird lockstep, are marching the rest of us down the road to extinction."

Reviewed by T. JOHN JAMIESON