

American Exceptionalism and Boomeranging Intellectuals:

An International Perspective

Few realize that the term 'American Exceptionalism' stemmed not from proud American nationalists but from one of the greatest communists of the twentieth century Joseph Stalin. This most fervent proponent of forced collectivism was not too sure that "American Exceptionalism" actually existed. By it, Stalin and other communist intellectuals meant the peculiar tendency of the American lower classes to avoid aligning themselves with a revolutionary party. Americans were "exceptional" some thought, because they were resisting a worldwide tendency toward communism. Stalin always believed that American Exceptionalism was overrated. Yet, Stalin was reluctant to acknowledge that this exceptionalism he spoke of, could exist elsewhere in the world and was not limited to America. Even though it seemed the rest of the world was conforming to communistic ideals, there were several countries in addition to America that followed a similar route of exceptionalism. But Stalin only concerned himself with the United States because of its great economic influence. Stalin believed that after the Great Depression and a few disastrous wars, the lower classes in America would slowly realize the impending doom in which they were headed. Sooner or later, the Americans would experience something like the Russian Revolution of 1918. Stalin believed that American Exceptionalism then was only a peculiar carryover of outmoded doctrines. It could not last long.

But could it? When examining the lives of important Americans who actually were intrigued in going Communist, one finds an interesting tendency. By "Congenital Individualism," I mean a tendency of American intellectuals to unconsciously embrace American ideology of "exceptionalism". American intellectuals like Lincoln Steffens, Dos Passos, and John Dewey, who seemed most likely to support communism, in the end never did. They could never compromise with what they viewed as an inherent right to be original.

They all moved to the left, and suddenly rejected the conformity of the left. This recoil is what I call congenital individualism, the often quirky ways in which leftists, stopped going left. Certainly the presence of congenital individualism among American intellectuals disposed to communism seems to suggest that American Exceptionalism was real. However, comparisons can be made between these American intellectuals and Australian intellectuals. Ten thousand miles to the west, Dorothy Hewett, Jane Devanny, and John Anderson shared similar tendencies to stray towards an individualist mindset after they had experimented with embracing communism. It is now possible to witness how a powerful and entrenched culture of individualism kept giving reasons to leftist intellectuals in both America and Australia to turn right, even as they risked charges of being inconsistent, and hypocritical.

One of the first of the proto-communist American intellectuals to suspect that American capitalism was too corrupt to save, was Lincoln Steffens. Born in 1866, he was an investigative and muckraking journalist in the Progressive Era from 1890 to 1920, and considered one of the leading reform-minded journalists of his time. Before graduating from the University of California at Berkeley in 1889, he believed through studying philosophy, he would be granted the answers of life and politics. After becoming a reporter on the *New York Evening Post* in 1892, Steffens found the cities rotting from within and gained the confidence to attempt to eradicate some of this corruption. He became engrossed with how deep corruption ran within the government and police, and his fascination led him to expose the shame of those in power. In 1902, Steffens gained more control over what he could publish, and became the editor of *McClure's Magazine*. This is where he began his career as a muckraking journalist and used the power of the magazine to campaign against corruption, publishing some of his most recognized series, *The Shame of Cities*.

a supporter of the rebels, and advocated revolution as the way to eradicate the evils of capitalism. Steffens now believed that capitalism and imperialism were destroying America. He embraced the Mexican Revolution as an attempt to drain the toxic pool of corruption that had swamped the United States

Steffens was careful never to join the Communist Party, not wanting to diminish his reputation or ability to do as he chose. However, it was evident he believed that the Communist Party might yet rescue the United States. Just to be sure, he visited the Soviet Union in 1921. Afterwards, he noted, "I have seen the future, and it works." Steffens was ecstatic meeting Vladimir Lenin and seeing the victory of the Bolshevik Revolution. He associated the economic system of capitalism with poverty and avarice and hoped to bring back the ideals of Lenin and incorporate them into the American government. However neither former President Woodrow Wilson, nor the current President Warren Harding were impressed with Steffens' insights. Steffens sounded increasingly dangerous. He talked incessantly about "the future" and accepted the Marxist notion of revolution, and believed it would come to the United States in two or three generations.⁴

The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens, published in 1931, was considered one of the most influential books during the 1930s. It provides a rich and detailed insight into journalism in the 20th century as well as offering a glimpse of Steffens' journey with communism. There was one pattern evident throughout Steffens' whole career, his search for a solution to abolish corruption in America. He refers to communism all through his *Autobiography*, however his enthusiasm for the possibility of a better future order has diminished. In particular, by 1931, he no longer preached in behalf of the Communist Party. This highlights again the strength of Steffens' congenital individualism. The main purpose of the book was to uncover and promote his two greatest discoveries. The first was that the reform of American cities within the current system was impossible. The immorality was too excessive. Interestingly he also found

individual politicians who practiced corruption, often likeable, pointing again to his inner love of individuality. But despite his uncertainty about the Party, and the future, Steffens still felt that the Russian Revolution was an example of the kind of path America should take. He wrote, "Soviet Russia was a revolutionary government with an evolutionary plan. Their plan was, not by direct action to resist such evils as poverty and riches, graft, privilege, tyranny, and war, but to seek out an

A second major intellectual to underestimate his inner commitment to individual freedom was John Dos Passos.

calls itself capitalist or socialist, are so admirably adapted by the pull of centralization to despotic rule.¹² Dos Passos believed that the government was purely focused on being in power; it could not see

Dos Passos, who had a better command of Spanish, had Spanish friends who corroborated his version.

Now Dos Passos' own congenital individualism began to come into play. He knew just how ruthless the communists could be. Dos Passos realized that in a leftist Soviet regime it could be his turn to die next. He began writing articles attacking communism, shocking everybody who knew him. In fact, Dos Passos moved as far right as he possibly could. He went from supporting and voting for a Communist President in 1932, to voting for the Republican nominee, Barry Goldwater in 1964. However, as a consequence, he lost connection with his previous readers, and his popularity plummeted.

Dos Passos' ricochet to the right, attested to his ultimate commitment to individualism, but it did not necessarily prove the case of American Exceptionalism. We might trace Dos Passos to Australian writer, Jane Devanny. Australia is often viewed as "less exceptional" on a Stalinesque scale than the United States, because of the power of its Labor Party. However the Australian experience with freedom worked as well to engender congenital individualism. Devanny was like Dos Passos. She too was a radical intellectual before World War II being an active member of the Marxist movement and joining the Australian Communist Party in the 1920's. Devanny's father was a miner that was involved in politics throughout his lifetime

passionate about free thought and an advocate for women rights, sexual liberation and women's sexuality. She was known for having "forthright avant-garde views" which led to many disagreements and disputes with the Communist Party. In 1949, Devanny was exiled from the Party because of her independence and individualism. She too was disgusted with the Party and their approach toward women in politics. She believed that a communist government, she would be able to maintain her beliefs.¹⁷ Shifting her views and boomeranging to the right, she became increasingly disillusioned with the possibility that a communist government would even care about women's rights. This ricochet to the right highlights Devanny's commitment to congenital individualism which was similar to Dos Passos's own commitment. Both appreciated their right to extol communism at first, but both recoiled when the system they supported seemed ready to suppress their own individuality.

"American Exceptionalism" had a good deal to fear from John Dewey, one of the nation's most remarkable intellectuals of all time. In fact with 40 books, 100s of articles, and over sixty-five years of teaching in higher education, Dewey has often been viewed as "the American philosopher," a kind of American Aristotle. By the 1920s, the nonsense academic was heading leftward at a rate that would stun many of his students and fellow intellectuals. Born into a modest family in Vermont, Dewey excelled rapidly through his education, obtaining a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University. He then found himself joining the University of Chicago in 1894, immersing himself in the newly formed Pragmatic Philosophy and developing his beliefs in Rational Empiricism. Arriving in Chicago during the time of the Pullman strike, he was deeply affected by the human price paid by frustrated workers. He noted that the destruction of railroad cars and yards was a cheap way of giving Americans an object lesson on how coercive capitalism could be, and how unequal American society could become. Indeed, like the Communist philosopher, Karl Marx, Dewey was deeply imbued with the philosophic notions of G.W.F. Hegel. Hegel had noted that true freedom always advanced

Trotsky in Mexico in 1937.¹ By the end of the 1930s, Dewey was heading speed toward the communist escarpment of radical change.

But then, just like that, Dewey boomeranged back to the right. This came to a shock to his counterparts and audience because Dewey always remained about as radical as one could go in America without inciting protests. There could be a few reasons for this dramatic diversion in thinking. During this time, he was being investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.² The archives of the FBI contain hundreds of pages of commentary on Dewey today. We can see that Dewey would not risk his comfortable academic life to go to jail. We recall here that the very American system Dewey criticized and wanted to reform, gave him a constant income, and prestige for his ~~six~~ ^{five} years in higher education. Another reason that contributed to the shift in thinking came when he dedicated himself to “experimentalism.” Experimentalism involved the constant addition of new evidence, changing points of view, and an interest in the revision of terms. This now allowed him to formulate a new, ~~trans~~ ^{non}communist D that in tre

workers, and even quietly supported those who wanted to ban the Australian Communist Party.²⁶ Finally he supported Australia's involvement in stopping Communist penetration in Korea. This was the last straw for his former friends. But Anderson shrugged it off. By not going too far left, he could preserve his reputation as a major shaper of Australian thought.

The ideal of individual freedom has been deeply ingrained in the American experience. Americans do not always realize the extent to which they uphold the right to have one's thoughts, opinions, beliefs, and philosophies. Not yet knowing that the United States sustained this culture, or lacked a strong Communist Party, Joseph Stalin referred to 'American Exceptionalism' Stalin despised the United States for being indifferent and incomparable. Still he thought it was changing. Lincoln Steffens, John Dos Passos and John Dewey seemed after World War I to be conforming to Stalin's hopes moving to the left. However, each could not resist the gravitational pull towards congenial individualism, and actually then supported the framework of America remaining "exceptional" But this term itself may now be called into question.

⁴ Hicks, Granville. "Lincoln Steffens: He Covered the Future: The Prototype of a Fellow-Traveler." *Commentary Magazine*, 26 July 2016, www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/granville-hicks/lincolnsteffenshe-covered-the-future-the-prototype-of-a-fellow-traveler/.

⁵ Hicks, Granville. "Lincoln Steffens: He Covered the Future: The Prototype of a Fellow-Traveler." *Commentary Magazine*, 26 July 2016, www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/granville-hicks/lincolnsteffenshe-covered-the-future-the-prototype-of-a-fellow-traveler/.

⁶ Hicks, Granville. "Lincoln Steffens: He Covered the Future: The Prototype of a Fellow-Traveler." *Commentary Magazine*, 26 July 2016, www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/granville-hicks/lincolnsteffenshe-covered-the-future-the-prototype-of-a-fellow-traveler/.

⁷ "Lincoln Steffens." *School History*, <https://schoolhistory.co.uk/notes/lincolnsteffens/>

⁸ Hicks, Granville. "Lincoln Steffens: He Covered the Future: The Prototype of a Fellow-Traveler." *Commentary Magazine*, 26 July 2016, www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/granville-hicks/lincolnsteffenshe-covered-the-future-the-prototype-of-a-fellow-traveler/.

⁹ Jones, Phillip. "Obituary: Dorothy Hewett." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 5 Sept. 2002, www.theguardian.com/news/2002/sep/05/guardianobituaries2

¹⁰ Jones, Phillip. "Obituary: Dorothy Hewett." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 5 Sept. 2002, www.theguardian.com/news/2002/sep/05/guardianobituaries2

¹¹ "John Dos Passos (1896-1970)." *Annenberg Learner*, www.learner.org/series/american-passages-a-literary-survey/modernist-portraits/johndospassos-1896-1970/.

¹² "Dos Passos: A Reassessment". *The University Bookman*.

