



HISTORICAL MEMORIES

Published

A World Remembered: 1925-1950

Bernard Smith

The Prophet's Children

Travels on the American Left

Tim Wohlforth

Forthcoming

Notebooks for the Grandchildren

Mikhail Baitalsky

Translated by Marilyn Vogt-Downey

HX
84
W63
A3
1994

THE
PROPHET'S
CHILDREN

Travels on the American Left

Tim Wohlforth



HUMANITIES PRESS
NEW JERSEY

#28421574

LAS VEGAS

First published 1994 by Humanities Press International, Inc.
Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey 07716.

© 1994 by Tim Wohlforth

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publications Data

Wohlforth, Tim.

The prophet's children : travels on the American left / Tim Wohlforth.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-391-03819-2. — ISBN 0-391-03802-8 (pbk.)

1. Wohlforth Tim. 2. Socialists—United States—Biography.
3. Socialism—United States—History—20th century. 4. Socialism
and youth—United States—History—20th century. 5. Socialism
—History—20th century. I. Title.

HX84.W63A3 1993

335'.0092—dc20

93-26388

[B]

CIP

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
without written permission from the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America



In Memoriam

I dedicate this book to the following people who have died since I began my political journey in 1953. They chose the difficult road of socialist politics for at least part of their lives. They were all exceptional human beings. Each touched my life in some fashion. They all deserve to be remembered. If my book serves no other purpose than to save them from oblivion, it will have been well worth the effort.

George Breitman (1916–1986)

James P. Cannon (1890–1974)

Ann Chertov (Chester) (1905–1983)

Bob Chertov (Chester) (1912–1975)

Pearl Chertov (1921–1992)

Farrell Dobbs (1907–1983)

Anne Draper (1917–1973)

Hal Draper (1915–1990)

Carl Feingold (1929–1993)

Arthur Felberbaum (1935–1979)

Art Fox (1920–1975)

Dick Fraser (1913–1988)

Cecil Frank Glass (John Liang, Li Fu-je) (1901–1988)

Fred Halstead (1927–1988)

Joe Hansen (1911–1979)

Mike Harrington (1928–1989)

Gerry Healy (1913–1989)

Rose Karsner (1889–1968)

Tom Kerry (1899–1982)

Sherry Magnan (Patrick O'Daniel) (1904–1961)

George Novack (William F. Warde) (1905–1992)

Art Preis (1911–1964)

George Rawick (1930–1990)

Evelyn Reed (1905–1979)

Max Shachtman (1904–1972)

Bob Shaw (1917–1980)

Carl Skoglund (1884–1960)

Arne Swabeck (1890–1986)

Murry Weiss (1915–1990)

George Weissman (1916–1985)

Steve Zeluck (1918–1985)

organize the first Trotskyist group in Mexico in the 1930s. The Libertarian League was emphatically not a lively neighbor; in fact months went by without our hearing a sound from its room. Then one day Russ showed up with a couple of young people and began taking out files and furniture. The Libertarian League was going out of business! If Russ had held out a few more years he would probably have done a roaring trade. Many of the SDSers were anarchists in their approach to life and culture but were simply unaware of the existence of such a tendency. The collapse of our neighbors was not a good sign for us.

By far our liveliest and most entertaining member was Dave Van Ronk, the folksinger. Dave had joined the SWP and our faction both in the last months before our split. He had been active earlier around the Libertarian League and as part of a faction in YPSL. Dave was really an anarchist in personal and political spirit, though he was with us intellectually. He was a very political person and participated fully in the internal life of ACFI. He had learned his music from folksingers and hung out in musical circles that included Bob Dylan and Tom Paxton. Shaggy hair flopped over his face; he had a gravelly voice and drank Irish whiskey.

ENTER LYNDON LAROUCHE, JR.

That year we got our next wave of recruits from the SWP, and we could not have done worse. We began discussions with Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr. (Lyn Marcus). I had known Lyn just a little when I was an SWP member. He lived in a nice apartment on Central Park West with his wife, Janice, and small child. Lyn earned his living at the time as an economic consultant. He was a close friend of Murry Weiss and was totally inactive in the party, playing no role at all in the party discussions in the 1961 to 1964 period. After we had all left, LaRouche suddenly stirred from his slumbers and started submitting lengthy documents to the SWP discussion bulletin. He developed positions that at least appeared to be close to ours, and we began a collaboration. He had by then left his Central Park West wife and was living in the Village with Carol Larrabee (Schnitzer, White), a woman who had joined the SWP during the regroupment period.

LaRouche had a gargantuan ego. A very talented, brilliant fellow, he was convinced he was a genius. He combined a strong conviction in his own abilities with an upperclass arrogance that, happily, I rarely encountered in radical circles. He assumed that the famous comment in the *Communist Manifesto*, that a "small section of the ruling class cuts itself adrift, and joins the revolutionary class" was written specifically for him.

The characteristics of LaRouche's thinking process, which he would later develop to such reactionary extremes, were already present when I knew him in 1965. He possessed a marvelous ability to place any event in the world within a larger perspective, a talent that seemed to give the event meaning. The problem was that his thinking was schematic and lacking in factual detail, and ignored contradictory considerations. His explanations were just a bit too perfect and his mind worked so quickly that I always suspected that his bravado covered superficiality.

LaRouche had the "solution" to anything and everything. It was almost like a parlor game. Just present a problem to LaRouche, no matter how petty, and without so much as blinking his eyes, he would come up with the solution, usually prefacing his remarks with "of course."

I remember private discussions I had with LaRouche in 1965 when he went on at length about Kennedy, Rockefeller, and the Tri-lateral Commission. LaRouche held to a view that there existed a network of foundations and agents of the more moderate, internationalist-oriented, Eastern-based capitalists who sought to avoid unrest at home through reform projects and to avoid revolution abroad through development programs like the Alliance for Progress. He was very much a believer in conspiracy theories. I, even in my most ultraleft days, was a bit of a sceptic. For LaRouche, even as a radical, the *liberals were the main enemy*.

I was disturbed by LaRouche's thinking process in those days. I do not claim to have realized then where he would end up, but he definitely made me uncomfortable. He seemed to be an elitist with little interest in the plight of ordinary people. His ideas were too schematic and mechanical for my taste. I could not agree with the position he expounded in that period that the Vietnam War was a battle over Vietnam's capabilities of becoming the breadbasket for the industrialization of Asia. I also was suspicious of conspiracy theories.

LaRouche stayed with us only six months—I think our little group was not big enough to contain him—and he moved on to Robertson's Spartacist League. Unable to win this group over to "LaRouchism," Lyn and Carol left after a few months. Sometime later we got a letter from him in which he announced that all factions and sections of the Trotskyist Fourth International were dead and that he and Carol were going to build the Fifth International. I suppose, in a way, this is what he thinks he has done.

I continued to follow LaRouche's political evolution after he left our group. Dennis King, who has made a study of LaRouche, has noted that I was "one of the first observers to spot something amiss."⁴ In the beginning of 1967 LaRouche and his wife joined a relatively broad coalition of New Left intellectuals called the Committee for Independent Political Action

(CIPA). He gained control of the West Village CIPA branch and started gathering a coterie of young intellectuals. He had finally discovered his milieu, and success swiftly came his way. Through a combination of rather high-level classes and spirited polemics, LaRouche won over a group of graduate students, most of whom were members or sympathizers of Progressive Labor. Progressive Labor was in that period at the height of its strength within SDS. LaRouche's gifted young intellectuals included Ed Spannaus (who is still with him), Nancy Spannaus, Tony Papert and Steve Fraser (two who led his work at Columbia), Paul Milkman, Paul Gallagher, Leif Johnson, and Tony Chaitkin.

It was the Columbia University occupation and student strike in 1968 that established LaRouche on the left. The student movement there was being led by SDS. There were two main factions in SDS, reflecting a split developing in the national organization: Mark Rudd's Action Faction, and a somewhat more moderate group known as the Praxis Axis. The rather appropriate names were coined by LaRouche. The Rudd group was interested only in provocative demonstrations and punch-ups with the cops. It would soon emerge as the Weatherman group of underground terrorists. The Praxis group was influenced by the French intellectual André Gorz, who held that a new working class was being created by modern technology. The students were the vanguard of this new working class. Gorz's ideas gave the group a kind of mainstream "student power" perspective.

LaRouche captured most of the PL-SDS group at Columbia and was able to come forward as a relatively strong third alternative. He presented a plausible program for linking the struggles of the students with the struggles of the surrounding poor black community. This was a period when many students radicalized by the Vietnam War and the black struggle were beginning to look for a way to carry the leftist struggle beyond the campus gates. LaRouche appeared to some to have a program that could fulfill this wish.

After quickly regrouping his followers into the SDS Labor Committee (later to become the National Caucus of Labor Committees), LaRouche began to hold meetings in the Columbia area. From time to time I attended these meetings. Some twenty to thirty students would gather in a large apartment not far from Columbia. They would sit on the floor surrounding LaRouche, by now sporting a very shaggy beard. The meeting would go on at great length, sometimes for as long as seven hours. It was difficult to tell where discussions of tactics left off and an educational presentation began. The students were given quite esoteric assignments, such as searching through the writings of Sorel to discover the anarchistic origins of Rudd, or studying Rosa Luxemburg's *The Accumulation of Capital*. For some

reason, perhaps because the SDS movement was strong on spirit and action but rather bereft of theory, LaRouche's ruminations found a home.

LaRouche in this period developed a series of ideas by extracting and distorting some theories from the Marxist tradition. Even today, from his right-wing position, he retains this element in his thinking. He held these ideas, in an elementary way, even in the period of his membership in our organization. Most important was his *Theory of Hegemony*. He wrote in 1970:

One must start with the recruitment and education of a revolutionary intelligentsia. By necessity rather than choice, the source of such cadres is mainly a minority of the young intellectuals, such as student radicals, rather than the working class, black militant layers, etc., themselves. . . . The selection from the ranks of (mainly) radical-student intellectuals (as distinct from merely "educated" radical students in general) is necessary on the basis of those persons who are willing to commit themselves to a total re-education and life of the most intensive study as well as activism.⁵

LaRouche drew this notion from his own interpretation of Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?*, where Lenin speaks of intellectuals bringing socialist consciousness to the workers. He then expanded it by drawing from Gramsci's notion of hegemony. LaRouche's goal was to forge an intellectual elite corps that would gain hegemony on the left and then capture from on high the allegiance of the masses. I am not arguing that LaRouche's interpretation of Lenin and of Gramsci was in any way an accurate one—Gramsci, for example, was a strong believer in an autonomous working-class movement—but only showing which strands of the Marxist tradition appealed to LaRouche and motivated him and his followers in his radical period.

A necessary corollary of LaRouche's concept of a superior intellectual revolutionary elite is the concept of an inferior class. Here LaRouche distorted Marx's distinction between the class in itself (ordinary consciousness) and the class *for* itself (socialist consciousness). He also made heavy use of Lenin's polemics against the "economists" in Russia who, in Lenin's opinion, were adapting to the backwardness or ordinary consciousness of the workers. It appeared that LaRouche and his followers, even in their radical stage, had a low opinion of ordinary human beings. In 1969, for

example, LaRouche followers Steve Fraser and Tony Papert wrote about forcing “working people and other groups to begin to part with their habitual swinish outlooks.”⁶

The second strand of LaRouche’s thought was his *Theory of Reindustrialization*. This concept remains the heart of his current economic theory and rightist agitation. LaRouche began with a rather orthodox theory of capitalist crisis derived from Marx’s *Capital* and Luxemburg’s *The Accumulation of Capital*. He was convinced that capitalism had ceased to grow, or at least ceased to grow sufficiently to meet the needs of the country’s poor. This created an economic crisis that would only worsen. He believed international capitalism was on the brink of entering what he called the “third stage of imperialism” (see his pamphlet by the same name published in 1967). The “third stage of imperialism” was an attempt by the developed nations to overcome stagnation at home and revolution abroad by fomenting a new industrial revolution in the third world. LaRouche expected this to take place in India. His idea was that the advanced nations would use their unused capacity to make capital goods and export them to India, setting up factories that would employ the country’s surplus work force.

At this point in the argument LaRouche borrowed from his Trotskyist background to develop a *transitional program* that would, he hoped, motivate the masses to support him so that he could resolve this worldwide crisis of capitalism. Trotsky proposed a program that addressed the immediate needs of masses of people in the hope that the struggle around these demands would lead the people to realize the need for socialism. LaRouche hoped to win the support of American workers by promising that his program would supply jobs. For example, during the Vietnam War his idea was to reconvert the war industries to this peaceful reindustrialization process.

This entire economic schema, which made up the bulk of LaRoucheite writings and agitation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was presented in an increasingly frenetic manner, bolstered by predictions of economic doom. LaRouche was a crisis-monger of the first order—though our group gave him a run for his money. LaRouche and his followers became increasingly convinced that the fate of the world rested with their group and with their leader, Lyndon LaRouche, Jr. The resources, both technological and human, were present for this glorious economic transformation. The problem lay with the cursed stupidity of the nation’s leaders and the swinishness of the masses. If only LaRouche were in power all the world’s problems would be dealt with swiftly.

In the early 1970s, as the Left in the United States shrank under the impact of conservative times, LaRouche lashed out with a series of attacks on the SWP and the CP. Soon his group was denouncing all leftists and

seeking support from extreme right-wingers. The LaRoucheites began mouthing anti-Semitic phraseology, promoting the nuclear power and arms industry, advocating a Star Wars defense, and baiting gay people. The old Trotskyist, a member of my own small organization, had emerged as a Fascist! Shocking as the political evolution has been, I am most struck by the elements of *continuity* in LaRouche’s thinking. This is where I believe there are lessons for the Left.⁷

Most important is LaRouche’s *elitism*. Ordinary human beings were viewed by LaRouche the leftist and by LaRouche the Fascist as a swinish element to be manipulated. LaRouche never absorbed the *humanist* and *compassionate* side of the Marxian socialist tradition. He is not alone in expressing this defect. We need only think of Stalin, who could ruthlessly permit the death of millions of peasants and consciously purge and murder hundreds of thousands of his own Communist cadres, all in the ostensible interests of “history.” A more recent example is Pol Pot’s conduct in Cambodia. Only socialism rooted in humanism can any longer be considered socialism. Once an individual, party, or state is no longer anchored in this view, then terms like “left” and “right” lose any significance.

In fact it is quite remarkable how the “new” LaRouche organizes his followers in a Leninist cadre fashion, drives them with a vision of their historic tasks and the necessity of their actions, and successfully reaches layers of society with “transitional” slogans that appeal to economic needs or old prejudices.

AN INTERLUDE WITH THE SPARTACIST LEAGUE

In the fall of 1965, Healy and Lambert began to plan for a conference of the International Committee. They felt a need to counter the attractive power of the United Secretariat, and they began to look around for possible new allies to bring to the conference. Healy struck upon the idea of Robertson’s group, the Spartacist League. Our own growth since the split in the Minority Tendency had been modest, and we now had a little group of just over thirty supporters. Robertson, who had been expelled from the SWP a year earlier with a larger group, now had about sixty members. The group appeared attractive to Healy, who suddenly proposed that we unite with the Spartacist League.

I was less than enthusiastic about the idea. I was not convinced that there was a political basis for such a unification. The two groups had clashed that summer over tactics in the antiwar movement. A broad umbrella organization had been formed called the Fifth Avenue Peace Parade Committee. It was headed by A. J. Muste but had been created primarily as a result of the

very hard work of the Socialist Workers Party. I felt it was a reasonably principled coalition, as it was committed to the demand "End the war in Vietnam now." I favored a more radical approach, seeking to connect the war to other issues affecting the American working class, but I felt it was principled for us to join the committee and press our views within it.

The group organized a powerful march on 5th Avenue of around thirty thousand people. We participated in the march along with the Tompkins Square Neighbors for Peace. This local group on the Lower East Side contained some talented artists and had made signs and banners with large dollar signs and skeletons that through symbolism linked the war with capitalism. This way we got around the restriction of limiting the march to only the one agreed-upon slogan. It was a good beginning for us as a small group participating in a broad coalition yet beginning to put forward our more specifically radical policies. We had already become the dominant element in the Tompkins Square group.

The Spartacists denounced the Fifth Avenue Committee as a "popular front," an unprincipled coalition with capitalists. We were attacked for participating in the committee. I was convinced they were dead wrong and were displaying a sectarianism that was deadly to a small group, a sectarianism they had also expressed in their extremist attitude toward the SWP during the internal party discussion. I was afraid that unification, with Robertson's people in a majority, could hurt our ability to grow.

I was also worried about the deep animosity between the two groups. The Spartacist members had absorbed many highly factional documents concerning our break in 1962 and were deeply embittered toward us and, of course, toward me in particular. It was the kind of group that learned to hate the most intensely those closest to it politically. This meant that in any unified organization I would find myself a minority in a hostile, cliquish political atmosphere.

There were, in addition, problems within our own small group. We remained very isolated, just beginning to grow and to find ways to participate in political life outside our circle. We recruited people who were attracted to *ideas* and did not mind an isolated existence given to propagating ideas. The problem is that some of those we recruited *preferred* such an existence and were therefore much like the members of the Spartacist League. A kind of ill-defined semifactionalism was developing within the group with some comrades largely hanging out among themselves and developing criticisms of our group that had little or no political content.

Most disturbing was the way Gerry Healy organized his unification campaign. He approached Robertson directly, without first discussing the proposal with our group. It was as if our four-and-a-half years of extremely loyal support meant nothing to the man. I felt deeply hurt and undercut,

and I suspected that Gerry was dealing with Robertson behind my back.

Healy decided to come to Montreal to meet one weekend with our group and the next with the Spartacist group to spur on the unification. Our whole New York group got into cars and drove up to Canada. LaRouche and his wife volunteered to pick up Healy at the airport in their beat-up old Volkswagen, no doubt hoping to gain his ear before he met with the rest of us. Carol smoked a pipe while Lyn lectured Gerry about his various theories as if he were talking to a schoolboy. It was a long ride in from the airport, and, as Healy reported the incident to me that day, he almost decided to head back to London.

Healy made his presentation and then I spoke. I agreed to proceed with unity discussions but I insisted that we had to realize that Robertson was not a Marxist. Healy jumped all over me for making this statement, suggesting that I was trying to sabotage unification. He went on to take up the Spartacist's position on the Fifth Avenue Peace Parade Committee. He then spent the rest of the weekend quietly meeting individually with the other comrades, encouraging those who were critical of me and sympathetic to Spartacist. Dave Van Ronk told me years later that Healy had attacked both Robertson and myself as "Shachtmanites," saying that the only difference between us was that I had been more loyal to the International Committee.

I returned to the United States thoroughly demoralized. I went through the motions of unity negotiations, letting the comrades who most favored unification take the lead. I became convinced that I must have been wrong on the Fifth Avenue Committee position, I confessed my error, and we withdrew from the group. At the same time, for the first time in my life I was actually enjoying my job. I was working for a trade magazine dealing with diesel trucks, of all things.

I received my instructions from England and was told I must make plans to go to London in April to attend the conference of the International Committee. I had not earned time yet on my job for vacation and I was afraid I might endanger it if I pressed the point. I decided I would not go to England, and our group sent Fred Mazelis instead. I know that the real reason I did not go to that conference was that I had become deeply demoralized by the whole process leading up to it. I could not stomach being thrown back into the kind of bitter personal factional atmosphere that had characterized the Minority Tendency during the battle with Robertson in 1962. I felt I could not openly oppose the unification, but I did not believe in it, I did not really wish it success. I came as close as I had in years to simply dropping out of the movement.

very proper behavior, and more mature than my fling with Deborah. In a week or two Karen and I had a relationship going.

Very soon after Karen and I got together, Carl had to go into the hospital for a heart operation. He had been born with a fused heart valve, which meant that he did not grow quite as fast as other children. In time he would die if it was not surgically opened. We put him in Lenox Hill Hospital, and they performed open-heart surgery. I remember visiting him there after the operation. He was so very small with tubes coming out of him and his heart throbbing away on a television screen. I was convinced that I had to watch the screen to be sure it continued to pulse, as none of the nurses were paying the least attention. No one told me that a buzzer went off if there was a failure. So I could hardly concentrate on Carl, so preoccupied was I with the screen. Martha was there too and we hugged, the last time we ever touched each other.

Karen and I lived together quite well for about five years. After two years we decided to get married, primarily at my urging, a reflection of my fear of losing a woman. My father, quite unexpectedly, treated us to a honeymoon in Bermuda. We had a wonderful time in a little cottage right on the beach at the Elbow Beach Club and whipped around the small island on rented mopeds. Afterward we moved out of Stuyvesant Street to Brooklyn, where Karen felt more comfortable. By then the Workers League had also moved its offices to 14th Street. Our East Village Days had come to an end.

Notes

1. *Bulletin of International Socialism* (New York, September 14, 1964).
2. *Bulletin of International Socialism* (New York, September 6, 1965).
3. Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), pp. 196–97.
4. Dennis King, *Lyndon LaRouche and the New American Fascism* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), p. 19.
5. *Campaigner* 3, no. 1 (New York).
6. *Campaigner* 2, no. 2 (New York).
7. I agree with Dennis King's assessment that the LaRouche group reflects a unique form of American Fascism. See Dennis King, *Lyndon LaRouche and the New American Fascism* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), pp. 39–46, 274–85.
8. Joseph Hansen, ed. *Marxism vs. Ultraleftism: The Record of Healy's Break with Trotskyism* (New York: Socialist Workers Party, January, 1974), pp. 75–101.
9. Organisation Communiste Internationaliste. Formerly known as the Parti Communiste Internationaliste, the Lambert group took this name in 1965.
10. This group was founded by a Romanian Communist named Barta who passed through France on his way to fight in the Spanish civil war. He was recruited to Trotskyism and never made it to Spain. Just prior to World War II Barta's

supporters withdrew from the factionalized Trotskyist movement and devoted themselves to clandestine work in factories. Trotskyists outside of France lost sight of them until they emerged in 1956 with a small but well-organized group. They began to recruit substantial numbers of *students* attracted to their workerist orientation and activity. They became a sizable group on the extreme left in France, not quite as large as the OCI or La Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (the section close to Mandel). Among their distinctive political views was the notion that all of East Europe remained capitalist because it was not, like the USSR, the product of a genuine workers' revolution. Rose Jersawitz (Kay Ellens) formed a small group within Spartacist supporting their politics. See A. Belden Fields, *Trotskyism and Maoism: Theory and Practice in France and the United States* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1988), pp. 73–84.

11. *Bulletin* (New York, November 7, 1966).
12. "Freedom Now: The New Stage in the Struggle for Negro Emancipation and the Tasks of the SWP" *SWP Discussion Bulletin* 24, no. 13 (New York, May 1963), p. 7.
13. *Young Socialist Discussion Bulletin* (New York, 1989 and 1969).
14. *Bulletin* 2, no. 6 (New York, March 22, 1965).
15. *The Jewish Question—A Marxist Interpretation* (Mexico City: Ediciones Pioneras, 1950).