

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.¹ Stalin always believed that American Exceptionalism was overrated. Yet, Stalin also 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 the American ideology of “exceptionalism”. American intellectuals like Lincoln Steffens, John 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 from both America and Australia to turn right, even as they risked charges of being inconsistent, and hypocritical.

One of 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 was 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 who were 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 the Cities* in 1904 and *The Struggle for Self-Government* in 1906.² Corruption was the subject of all Steffens' writings until 1910, when he went to Mexico to report on Pancho Villa and his army. His journey to the left continued as he became

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 dam 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.³ He associated the economic system of capitalism with poverty and avarice. He 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,” 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 on 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 and remove the causes of them.”⁵ Steffen’s was recounting his venture to Russia, and believed that though revolutionary change was “confusing and difficult,” it was still necessary. Even though his *Autobiography* was published in 1931, he noted that he had already reached these conclusions by 1904. “Political corruption is not a matter of men or classes or education or character of any sort; it is a matter of pressure. Wherever the pressure is brought to bear, society and government cave in. The problem, then, is one of dealing with the pressure, of discovering and dealing with the cause or the source of the pressure to buy and corrupt.” However, he goes on to say that a problem of this nature and magnitude evades nearly everyone. There is always a tendency to assume that the appointment of honest men can rectify the government.⁶

There was never a well-defined turning point in his experience. However, Steffens’ turn to the right was increasingly evident as he began to reject communist principles toward the end of his life. In the 1930s, there was a massive decline in muckraking journalism and when Steffens returned home from his visits to Europe, his unorthodox beliefs lost him most of his audience. This decline began to give him doubts as to the effectiveness of muckraking journalism, which sparked uncertainties of the success communism would have on America if there was a shakeup of government. He still, however, also believed that reforms destroyed the symptoms of corruption rather than its cause.⁷ Embracing congenial individualism, he knew he would not be able to achieve the eradication of corruption through communism and believed there must be a democratic consensus to at least alleviate the worst evils.

Steffens never took the path that Stalin predicted. Steffens affirmed his ultimate allegiance to congenital individualism. But so too, the idea of American Exceptionalism, though on target in describing Steffens, was flawed. We can draw a comparison here between Steffens and Dorothy Hewett, an Australian novelist and poet. Throughout the 1920s, Steffens spent most of his time studying and observing the happenings in Italy and France. During this time he published *Moses in Red* in 1926. This was an important publication because Steffens defended dictatorship and advocated revolution.⁸ A comparison can be made to Hewett. She was a member of the Communist Party of Australia and her writing and politics intertwined throughout her lifetime. Hewett also moved into journalism for a period of time, contributing to an Australian Communist newspaper, the *Tribune*. Just as with Steffens, Hewett visited the Soviet Union a few times throughout her career and many of Hewett's writings involved communistic thoughts, which were regarded as Social Realism. Her first novel, *Bobbin Up*, a mostly autobiographical book written in 1959, followed the story of a young communist woman. It was highly acclaimed by leftists and was even translated into Russian.⁹ These two intellectuals show similarities in the stance of politics and subject matter each adopted. This is evidence of how even though Australia was considered less imperative for the shift toward a communist government, these intellectuals shared similar values and both used writing as a way to achieve this. However, the commitment of congenital individualism is also apparent with the case of Hewett. Her collection, *The Hidden Journey*, published in 1967, is evidence of her increasing disillusionment with communism.¹⁰ Hewett ceased all connection with the Australian Communist Party in August 1968, when the Warsaw Pact forces executed a brutal suppression of Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia led by the Soviet Army. This led to Hewett being criticized and attacked by other leftist writers. Just as Steffens doubted the value of communism and opted for individual freedom, Hewett could not be coaxed into staying left forever. This suggests that 'American Exceptionalism' appeared as well in Australia.

A second major intellectual to underestimate his inner commitment to individual freedom was John Dos Passos. Born in Chicago in 1896, and a graduate from Harvard in 1916, Dos Passos had a “bad-dad” fixation. His father, John Randolph, of Portuguese descent, had him out of wedlock, and at first refused to take responsibility for Dos Passos. When his father finally married his mother after his wife’s death, monopolizing the one person he had in this world who loved him, Dos Passos loathed his father. It did not help that John Randolph was a corporation lawyer who championed free enterprise and capitalism. Dos Passos went off to Harvard in a huff, determined to be great, and hating the world of his father. This father had bequeathed to him features that seemed un-American to that generation, like a very round head; this made him seem foreign. Dos Passos went on to experience much as a young man, volunteering as an ambulance driver in World War 1 and traveling around Spain as a Newspaper correspondent. These experiences gave Dos Passos rich material for success as a writer.¹¹ His overarching theme focused on improving the quality of American life through radicalism and commitment to communist ideals. Writing over 40 novels, he was greatly recognized for his *U.S.A.* trilogy, published from 1930-1936. The trilogy was banned, debated, revered, and hated. It appeared that Dos Passos would influence many as he marched to an extreme leftist position.

But Dos Passos was never reluctant to acknowledge that as a creative, maverick writer he also had a fear of power. At first he applied this fear to corporations, and the maddening way American society stigmatized intellectuals. He thus promoted communist ideals and activities to achieve an eradication of the capitalists who held the power. Upon arriving home from his visit to the Soviet Union in 1928, he wrote the first of his trilogy, *The 42nd Parallel*, published in 1930. From this, it is evident that Dos Passos had adopted the basis of Marxist conceptions. He said, “The knot which our society must untie is the problem of controlling the power over men’s lives of these stratified corporations, which, whether their top management

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 that society was being controlled by large businesses. The democratic government would not allow its own people to be free of ‘despotic rule’.

Dos Passos was involved in communist activities until 1934. Then, there were a few surprises in which his commitment to individual freedom began to clash with his communistic thinking. The first, and most prominent event which affected Dos Passos was a riot that took place on February of 1934. A rally being held by the Socialist Party in Madison Square Garden protesting the suppression of socialist workers, was brutally invaded by the Communist Party, ending the riot.¹³ Dos Passos understood that the Socialists could not be trusted to initiate a true revolution, but did the Communists have to prove their passion for revolution by smashing the faces of their more lukewarm allies? Dos Passos panicked as he began to see the true, ruthless behavior of the Party. Starting to believe that the Communist Party was concerned with achieving and seeking power, rather than focusing on social reform, he wondered what might become of him, a writer with maverick tendencies. A second incident that was an eye-opener for Dos Passos came during the Spanish Civil War. Upon traveling to Spain in 1937, Dos Passos appeared at first, like one of many leftist journalists, there to help discredit the fascists under General Franco. But, Dos Passos was a great friend and admirer of the freethinker, José Robles Pazos, an anarchist and an officer fighting the fascists. We now know that Pazos was helping a Russian Communist officer translate sensitive information, but then he became a problem for the Soviets because he knew too much and was not a strict Stalinist. Soviet agents murdered Pazos, but also planted the story that the Spanish anarchist had become a double agent for Franco. Dos Passos, who had many long discussions with Pazos when he was in New York and New Jersey, disbelieved the story from beginning to end.¹⁴ Though American leftists like Ernst Hemmingway and Josephine Herbst supported the Soviet version,

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

Now Dos Passos' own congenial 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 1964.¹⁵ 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 compare 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 empower congenial 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, and contributed deeply to union affairs. Following in her father's footsteps, Devanny would join him at union meetings and Marxist study circles. Both Dos Passos and Devanny were at one time physically involved with communism, and gave support to communist activities. Devanny worked especially assiduously to spread the ideals of the Communist movement, being a regular speaker at rallies and meetings.¹⁶ And just like Dos Passos, many of Devanny's novels are known for exposing her communist ideology and principles.

But in the late 1930s, Devanny's commitment to individual freedom began to clash with the groupthink of the communist regime under Joseph Stalin. She was extremely

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 under 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 congenial individualism which was similar to Dos Passos' 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.¹⁸ By the 1920s, the no-nonsense academic was heading leftward at 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 John 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 price to pay for 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

into new forms of progress. Dewey thus felt that the American Constitution, Christianity and capitalism too must go by the waist side, because they enabled only a partial freedom. True freedom would—as with Hegel, come with the birth of a strong state. From this, Dewey extrapolated that his strong state would guarantee workingmen rights, and a foundation for betterment.¹⁹

Dewey worked hard to swing America to the left, and had a fund of energy, working incessantly every day, writing more and more pages of deeply reasoned, perceptive prose. Since American capitalism was only a “cesspool of selfishness” and Christianity a form of “spiritual retardation,”²⁰ Dewey believed that every step leftward was a righteous act. However, being an extremely prestigious philosopher, Dewey was careful to never fully associate himself with a political party. His great reputation might suffer. Groupthink might also start encouraging him to compromise his philosophy. In 1928, he visited the Soviet Union, searching for a way to vindicate his designs. In the hugely dysfunctional, and traditional economy that he surveyed, Dewey inexplicably found great hope. His work published during his visit, *Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World*, exposed his hope for the success of Vladimir Lenin’s Bolshevik experiment. Dewey noted that communism represented “a release of human powers on such an unprecedented scale that it is of incalculable significance not only for that country, but for the world.” Dewey wisely did not describe anything specific in Russia as superior, only that the release from the “coercive contracts” of free enterprise—some terrific energy that Dewey evidently felt—would of necessity be a great plus. When the Great Depression, and the apparent dysfunctions of capitalism followed his trip, Dewey became increasingly confident of the seeming successes of communism. In 1935, he wrote that, “Any liberalism which is not also radicalism is irrelevant and doomed.” Suddenly the philosopher of what was, was so filled with conviction, that he had become the prophet of what would be. Given his mission, Dewey went out of his way to visit the Soviet exile, Leon

Trotsky in Mexico in 1937.²¹ By the end of the 1930s, Dewey was heading full 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.²² 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 sixty-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-communist political philosophy—“democratic socialism,” which resisted Soviet propaganda.²³

Dewey’s views on democracy also allowed him to bounce to the right. Though he agreed that capitalism constrained democracy, coercive communism, he now saw it, did as well. Dewey, however was extremely optimistic that limited democracy would lead to better democracy. His own books were already transforming the “democratic political machinery” of America. So why lose his chance to continue this process of change? In Dewey’s book, *Democracy and Education* in 1916, he said, democracy is “more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.”²⁴ People had the right to be original, the right, to be freed from any kind of coercion, the right to change their minds, the right to recombine, and learn more about life. The bottom line was that Dewey, unlike the Russians, was so open to change and individualism that he could easily sail right past communism, and embrace something else. Dewey’s brand of pragmatism, and

experimentalism involved changing truths. The truth he wanted most of all during the war years of the 1940s was that he was a brilliant, and respected scholar. He may have even reasoned that if he protected his reputation, he could insure that his benign influence would benefit the drift of American democracy. This shift in political beliefs proves that Dewey retained an ultimate allegiance to congenital individualism. His own individuality had every right to hold out against the needs of the Communist collective.

Stalin underestimated the culture of individualism in the United States. But he also underestimated its presence elsewhere. The idea of American Exceptionalism can once again be reevaluated with a comparison to one of Australia's leading philosophers of the twentieth century, John Anderson. Though Dewey's influence was pervasive, Anderson was the father of "Australian Realism," and thus developed a kind of philosophy that aligned in essence with his own nation. Though born in Scotland, Anderson accepted a special Challis Chair of Philosophy at the University of Sydney in 1927, and stayed there until 1958. His brother, William, was described as the most influential philosopher in New Zealand. At first, Anderson was smitten by the Communist Party of Australia. He contributed to their journals, and got drunk with its supporters at local pubs. He composed and sang bawdy, blasphemous drinking songs. He had fast, heated relationships with the female devotees of Communism. Anderson dreamed of a new world order of prosperity and equality. Then in 1932, Anderson began to hear rumors about Stalin's purges and began to reevaluate his commitment to communism. At first he aligned with Trotsky, to escape the association with Stalin.²⁵ But, by the end of the 1930s, Anderson had boomeranged rightward. He thought the Communists were coercive and repressive. He respected their atheism, but hoped he could influence Australia's repudiation of Christianity, which he viewed as a religion of slavery. Anderson actually then went way right of Dewey, though he remained an ardent freethinker like Dewey. By the 1950s, Anderson had adopted a strong anti-communist stance and supported the government against striking

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 own thoughts, opinions, beliefs, and philosophies. Not yet knowing why 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 inherently different 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. The comparisons of these American intellectuals with Australians intellectuals, Dorothy Hewett, Jane Devanny, and John Anderson, shows that curiosity, and individualism may go one way, but then another. Boomeranging thought patterns, and an adherence to congenial individualism outside the United States showed the limitations in Stalin's thinking.

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