Have Communists the Right to Think?

By Will Herberg

"HAVE Communists the right to think?" This question has been raised in a very painful form by the present intolerable regime in the Communist International which meets every sign of initiative or ideological self-reliance with immediate threats of suppression and expulsion. The entire bourgeois intellectual world has taken advantage of this unfortunate situation to launch a determined offensive against Communism under the slogan: *The Communist does not think; he accepts and conforms! The Communist is an automaton!*[1] Sympathetic workers and even Party comrades are beginning to ask themselves the same question. The following letter recently received from a sympathizer places the whole problem in a very striking manner:

> *"No one can become a Communist who has not done some thinking. Why must thinking and the free expression of opinion stop when one has signed the rolls? If I join the Communist Party and refuse to stop thinking, would I be 'kicked out'? What stand does the Communist Party-majority fraction take on this question?"*

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In capitalist society there can be no real "freedom of thought." In a class society, thought is "class thought." It is determined by the conditions and the strivings of some class—which it in turn expresses. The whole history of human culture is a continuous proof of this fact. Socially effective thought cannot be "free" from the influence of classes and their struggles; it grows out of them and reacts upon them. Of nothing is the bourgeoisie—is any ruling class—so jealous as of its power to suppress new ideas which its class instinct tells it constitute a menace to its rule. True, once upon a time, when it was fighting feudal reaction, the young bourgeoisie held aloft the inspiring banner of the "freedom of thought." But its own victory and the rise of the proletarian movement soon convinced it of the "danger of thought running wild and undermining the very foundations of society, morality and religion." In fact, it is precisely in capitalist society that the suppression of all significant new thought has been refined to the most deadly point, while at the same time it is hidden under the cloak of a formal and abstract "freedom of thought." The real substance of this "freedom of thought" is only too well known to every radical teacher, to every imprisoned agitator. The rule of the capitalist class is the most deadly enemy of free thought.

On the other hand, it is precisely the proletarian revolutionary movement—the Communist movement—that holds out the promise of the realization of free thought as an actual reality. For the historical aim of the proletariat is not the establishment of a new regime of class exploitation but rather the ultimate elimination of all classes and systems of class rule. The proletariat has no fear of the future and therefore sees no threat in the free and unhampered unfolding of human thought. Since the capitalist system has already outlived its historical role and become obsolete, the progressive development of thought necessarily constitutes a devastating critique of capitalist civilization in all its phases. For this reason—and on the basis of its own class interests—the Communists fight against any attempt to hamper the development of science and thought on the part of the forces of reaction. The historical alliance of the proletariat and science is not accidental and temporary; it is inherent and permanent—it is rooted in the great social role of the proletariat as the emancipator of the whole of society, of all social life, of all social thought!

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The Communist Party is a voluntary political association. Membership in the Communist Party is based upon agreement with its fundamental aims and ideas. What these fundamentals of Communism are is well known: the abolition of capitalist private property and its replacement by social property thru a transition period leading to a classless, stateless society—Communism, the role of the bourgeois state as the dictatorship of capital and the necessity for its overthow and replacement by a proletarian state, the proletarian dictatorship, the Soviet system, the necessity for a political Party of the proletariat as the organization of its vanguard, etc. These fundamentals have arisen not as external revelations or dogmas; they represent the collective concentrated experience of human history, and particularly of the age-old struggle for the emancipation of mankind.

If one disagrees with the fundamental cardinal points in the political program of Communism he has no place in a Communist Party, not because these political doctrines are heavensent dogmas which one must not violate but because they represent in concentrated form the interests and historical strivings of the proletariat.

The "limits" of freedom of thought in a Communist Party are therefore clear: they are determined by the fundamentals of Communism. These limits—if indeed they can be called limits at all—are self-imposed and necessary since upon them is based the very possibility of a Communist Party.

But within these very broad general limits determined by the very class nature of capitalist society *there is the fullest freedom of thought in the Communist movement.* Not only have the Communists the *right* to think—they have the *duty* to think. Without continuous and systematic study, investigation and theoretical work on the part of the Communist movement collectively as well as on the part of individual comrades, any real progress of the revolutionary movement is impossible.

The theoretical accomplishments of Marx, Engels and Lenin do not represent the "end of all wisdom"; they have not put an end to the necessity for all further thought and investigation. Such an idea is the very contrary of the spirit of Marxism. The scientific achievements of Marx are significant precisely because they provide us with a basis and a method for the pursuance of new and independent investigations in a fruitful manner. Marxism does not fetter the freedom of thought; it frees thought and renders it socially effective.

Moreover, tho membership in a Communist Party implies agreement with certain broad fundamentals, it does not follow that a comrade must agree with every implication or proposition of the Marxian world-view—or out he goes! This would convert the Communist Party from a political party into a religious sect. Lenin long ago pointed out that *"a political organization cannot examine its members as to whether their conceptions are in agreement with the program of the Party"*[2] as long as they carry out the program faithfully in practise. Take the case of religion. Atheism is, of course, an essential element of Marxism, dialectical *materialism;* religion, moreover, is one of the most powerful instruments of class domination. The Communist Party therefore carries on a struggle against religion as an organic part of its general struggle. But does this mean that good militant workers who still believe in God are not to be admitted into the Party—or are to be expelled from the Party? Lenin answers:

> *"Not only must we not exclude from the Social-democratic (now: Communist) Party workers who still retain the belief in God, but we must even try to get them in with redoubled energy . . . in order to train them in the spirit of our conceptions."*[2]

The Communist Party cannot become a Catholic or Episcopal Chuch with inquisitions and heresy-hunting. Adherence to the Communist Party depends upon agreement with certain great fundamentals; *"within the Party we allow full freedom of opinion, within of course certain limits"*[2] *determined by the character of the Party as the vanguard of its class.*

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This is the viewpoint of the CP-Majority Group. But it is not a group viewpoint— it is the viewpoint of Marxism and Leninism, it is the viewpoint corresponding to the best traditions of the proletarian revolutionary movement and, until recently, it was the viewpoint of the Communist International. It is a tragic manifestation of the present crisis that this viewpoint should have been deserted by the official leadership of the Communist International in favor of a semi-theological dogmatism that spells stagnation and ideological impotence.

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1 *These expressions were actually used in an editorial in the* New York World. *See also the recent remarks of Heywood Broun in the* New York Evening Telegram.

2 *Lenin: On the Relation of the Party of the Proletariat to Religion, Proletaryi, May* 13, 1909, *No.* 45..

The Swedish Party Aga

On the Expulsion of the CP of Sweden

by E.

IN the Comintern for the last period of time the Communist Party of Sweden has been an outstanding exception. It was one of the the few Parties that developed in a normal manner. Since the removal from the Party of the opportunist elements under the leadership of Hoglund in 1924, the Party has continually increased its influence among the workers and has organizationally strengthened its roots among the masses. It experienced a normal inner-Party life; an old cadre of leaders developed in the great struggles of the past against the reformists in the Social-democracy, against the humanitarian and petty bourgeois reformers in the Left-socialist Party and against the centrists in the C. P. of Sweden—a cadre of leaders that had the full confidence of the membership. The successes of the Party in every field became clearer every day.

After the split of 1924 the C. P. S. consisted of 7,011 members (263 local organizations). Since then the increase has been steady so that by the first half of 1927 there were 13,058 members and 312 locals. Towards the end of 1927 the number reached 15,497; by 1929, over 18,000!

The leading cadres of the C. P. S. were trained in an old revolutionary school. Today branded as "renegades", "social-democrats", "social-fascists" and "inciters of war against the Soviet Union" (!) they do not have to defend themselves against such slanders; they have shown thru years of activity that they are devoted revolutionists and know how to win the masses for Communism. Oskar Samuelsson, the secretary of the Party, has been in the revolutionary movement for over 25 years (since he was 17 years old). For a long time he was chairman and secretary of the youth league. Kilboom, Flyg, Nerman, Hinke, and others in the leadership can count decades of devoted revolutionary service to their record.