

【연구논문】

Sidney Hook and Thirties America: From Self to Society

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I

In his 1985 letters to Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam, then co-chairmen of Council for the Promotion of Democracy in Korea, Sidney Hook expressed his dissatisfaction with their refusal to condemn the student occupation of the USIS building. He disapproved of the way in which the students showed their dissent, invading the premises of the United States. American soldiers were stationed in Korea, Hook maintained, to protect South Korea from the totalitarian North Korea where absolutely no dissent of any kind is permitted. He also claimed that “it is not true that American troops are in Korea *primarily* to serve American security interests,” and warned the two leaders not to take lightly the growing feeling among Americans that the U.S. should withdraw its troops from Korea if more anti-American demonstrations were to occur.¹⁾ Once American troops are withdrawn, they will not return. As soon as the U.S. forces depart, he added, Kim Il Sung will

1) Sidney Hook, letters to Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam, in *Letters of Sidney Hook: Democracy, Communism, and the Cold War*, ed. Edward S. Shapiro (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), p. 365.

invade South Korea.

The image looming large in the letters is that of a staunch anti-communist and Cold War warrior, which Hook had become after the World War II. He supported the Cold War, opposed student violence on campus, abhorred the counterculture, rejected the New Left, and found no sympathy with the radical wing of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s. And he received the Medal of Freedom from President Ronald Reagan in 1985. This metamorphosis is particularly interesting because Hook was “perhaps the leading American Marxist intellectual that America has yet produced,”²⁾ “certainly the most important American explicator of Marxian thought” in the early 1930s,³⁾ and “the first original Marxist philosopher in America.”⁴⁾ He supported the communist revolution at home and the interests of the Soviet Union abroad. In 1932 he called for the election of the American Communist Party’s presidential ticket of William Z. Foster and James Ford. He declared in 1934 that “only communism can save the world from its social evils”⁵⁾ and spent his life “at the barricades,” to use Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.’s phrase, as a Communist fellow traveler.⁶⁾ Hook wrote the two “best”⁷⁾ American interpretations of Marx, *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx: A Revolutionary Interpretation* (1933) and *From Hegel to Marx: Studies in the*

2) Paul Kurtz, “The Relevance of Sidney Hook Today: A Good Interpretation of Hook’s Work Still Awaits,” *Free Inquiry* 18 (Fall 1998), p. 61.

3) Shapiro, *Letters of Sidney Hook* p. 1.

4) Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 124.

5) Sidney Hook, “Communism without Dogmas,” in *Sidney Hook on Pragmatism, Democracy, and Freedom: The Essential Essays*, eds Robert B. Talisse and Robert Tempio (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), p. 145.

6) Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., quoted in Shapiro, *Letters of Sidney Hook*, p. 17.

7) West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, p. 116.

Intellectual Development of Karl Marx (1936). Both texts are his major contribution to Marxist scholarship.

What is peculiar about Hook's reading of Marx is his attempt to ground Marxist theory and practice in pragmatism, particularly in the social and scientific tradition of Charles S. Peirce and John Dewey.⁸⁾ Marxists of various stripes have rejected the blending of Marxism with what they see as the bourgeois philosophy of pragmatism. As a disciple of Dewey, Hook was skeptical about the dogmatic and authoritarian elements of Marxism and respectful of individual rights and democratic processes found within the American liberal tradition. In this paper I'll argue that both the young Hook's fascination with Marxism and his subsequent "betrayal"⁹⁾ attest to the strong grip of the belief in the distinctiveness of the United States and American liberal ideology on Americans including intellectuals even at the time of their dissent from the mainstream. The paper is divided into three parts: the first part examines the trajectory of pragmatism to provide a context in which to understand Hook's pragmatized Marxism better; the second part analyzes Hook's attempt to reconcile Marxism with pragmatism in the 1930s; and finally the third part discusses Hook's conversion into an anti-communist social democrat since the 1940s.

8) Sidney Hook, *Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. ix.

9) West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, p. 118.

II

In cultural matters the United States was largely dependent upon Europe in its earlier years. Political independence in 1776 did not mean cultural independence as well. Puritanism, rationalism, the Unitarian movement, and transcendentalism were the adaptations of the European concepts to the new conditions of American life. In their depth and breadth, they could not compete with the European counterparts. When Alexis de Tocqueville observed that Americans had no philosophical school of their own, his judgment was essentially true. He further suggested that Americans had little interest in philosophical matters. At the same time, however, he pointed out that Americans had a philosophical method common to Americans as a whole: they had a tendency "to accept the tradition as a means of information, and existing facts only as a lesson to be used in doing otherwise and doing better; to seek the reason of things for oneself, and in oneself alone; to tend to results without being bound to means."¹⁰ Compare this observation made in the 1830s with Frederick Jackson Turner's in 1893 about intellectual traits shaped from the life experience of the frontier:

That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness, that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients, that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends, that restless, nervous energy, that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and

10) Alexis Charles Henri maurice Clerel de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, The Henry Reeve text, ed. Phillips Bradley, vol. 2 (New York: Knopf, 1948), p. 3.

exuberance which comes with freedom.¹¹⁾

Although the validity of these claims is debatable, it is interesting that their observations have much in common with what is usually accepted as the basic traits of American pragmatism. Despite its diverse versions, as Hook points out, pragmatism stresses three things: "the universe was open--therefore possibilities were real; the future depended in part upon what human beings did or left undone--therefore man was not a slave of scientific or theological necessity; ideas were potentially plans of action--therefore thinking could and did make a difference to human affairs."¹²⁾

It has been often claimed that pragmatism is an indigenous American philosophy. According to this claim, pragmatism emerged out of a need to record a distinctive or unique experience of America. From this perspective, the emergence of pragmatism towards the end of the nineteenth century and its popular acceptance in America were not historical accidents. Pragmatism was a philosophy suitable for a country developing and growing. For critics of pragmatism, such an emergence meant the American glorification of action over theory, the justification of American commercialism and imperialism, and the expression of an immature optimism in American thought.¹³⁾ At the same time, for sympathizers, it meant the attainment of originality in

11) Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *An American Primer*, ed. Daniel J. Boorstin (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 546.

12) Hook, *Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life*, pp. 3-4.

13) George Novack, *Pragmatism versus Marxism: An Appraisal of John Dewey's Philosophy* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975), p. 12; Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 818; and Ellen K. Suckiel, *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), p. 7.

American thought and the eventual independence of America from European cultural colonialism.¹⁴⁾

A close examination of core concepts of the major pragmatic philosophers, however, reveals that pragmatism is not entirely what its critics or supporters want it to be. Pragmatism, despite its American originality, is in essence of European origin. The term "pragmatic" itself was adopted by Peirce through his study of Kant.¹⁵⁾ William James dedicated his book *Pragmatism* to John Stuart Mill from whom he "first learned the pragmatic openness of mind." If pragmatism, being rooted in European thought, should be understood in this context of European philosophical history, one must not see it as simply a philosophical version of the popular American mind, nor a glorification of American experience. Without doubt, the American environment did have an influence upon the formulation of pragmatism. If the positions of pragmatism had entirely disregarded the needs and attitudes of Americans, it would not have been so widespread in American culture. Pragmatism, however, was not a unilateral reflection of tendencies that prevailed in American life. It included critiques of the dominant tendencies in American society and an attempt to provide a direction to certain of its aspects.¹⁶⁾

In general, relating a philosophy to its country of origin or cultural source is less than meaningful. A philosophy is not typical of a time or a nation in the ultimate sense. Without going into details here about

14) Ralph H. Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1956), pp. 338-47.

15) Charles Sanders Peirce, "What Pragmatism Is," in *Pragmatism: The Classic Writings*, ed. H. S. Thayer (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982), pp. 102-3.

16) Sangjun Jeong, "The Originality of William James' Pragmatism," *American Studies* 16 (December, 1993), p. 121.

the issue of Americanness or Europeanness of pragmatism, suffice it to say that pragmatism emphasizes the practical consequences of ideas and the importance of human action; that in the way pragmatism has been understood its main features somehow correspond to what are usually considered as traits of Americans; and that pragmatism has come to be known as a distinctive American philosophy.

What had started in the late 19th century as a theory of meaning, then a theory of truth and a philosophy of life, pragmatism finally developed into a social theory in the 1930s. The crash of the stock market in 1929 meant more than just a failure of the economic system; it was regarded, at least among some intellectuals, as the spiritual and cultural collapse of the United States.¹⁷⁾ They began to reevaluate the liberal beliefs in intelligence, individual freedom and democracy. As the depression deepened, they pursued an alternative to the existing capitalist society. Community and collaboration gained precedence over individual and competition. As Robert M. Crunden aptly put it in the title of his book *From Self to Society*, "society should engulf the individual."¹⁸⁾ While Dewey, Hook's mentor, attempted to make liberalism relevant to the new collectivist conditions of American life during the depression, his heir pursued a different alternative.

17) Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 98.

18) Robert M. Crunden, *From Self to Society, 1919-1941* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. x.

III

Hook's social theory during the 1930's illustrates the extent to which pragmatism can be reconciled with Marxism and applied in an actual social crisis. With Hook "Marxism is neither a science nor a myth, but a realistic method of social action." Consequently, Hook rejects the epistemology of Engels and Lenin, calling it "the mechanical correspondence theory of knowledge," which states that "sensations are copies, photographs, images and mirror-reflections of things, and that the mind is not active in knowing."¹⁹⁾ With Marx, however, sensations are not knowledge but the stimulus to knowledge which completes itself in action.

Things are not revealed in sensation: sensations themselves arise in the course of man's activity on things. The starting point of perception is not an object on the one hand, and a subject opposed to it on the other, but an *interacting process* within which sensations are just as much the resultant of the active mind (the total organism) as the things acted upon them.²⁰⁾

In Hook's view, active interaction, rather than passive contemplation, is the way to knowledge. Specifically, only knowledge which contributes to the revolutionary reconstruction of the world is to be called knowledge. With Hook, "the objective truth of Marxism is realized in the informed revolutionary act."²¹⁾ Upon this ground, he claims that if

19) Sidney Hook, *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* (New York: The John Day Company, 1933), pp. 62-63.

20) *Ibid.*, p. 95.

21) *Ibid.*, p. 114.

the struggle against capitalism is worth fighting, the labor theory of value is worth saving. In essence, his argument is an adaptation of Dewey's epistemology. By emphasizing human action and will, and open possibilities for the future, Hook infuses Marxism with pragmatic overtones.

Hook transforms Marx's dialectic into Dewey's theory of inquiry, turning Marx into a "Left Deweyan."²²⁾ He believes that Marx's dialectic method is essentially the same method that Dewey has independently arrived at. It is Marx's problem-solving method:

For Marx every theory . . . is a guide to action of some determinate sort. Its meaning is an implicit prediction that certain consequences will follow upon certain actions; and its truth or falsity is established by the set of actions which realizes or fails to realize the predicted consequences. This is the basic proposition in Marx's methodology.²³⁾

A theory is to be judged by what it effects directly or indirectly, and its validity is tested by action. In Marx, Hook maintains, "there are no *a priori* truth, hard and fast dogmas, or certainties of any kind."²⁴⁾ Marx's conclusion is a tentative and contingent hypothesis that has to be tested by social and historical situations.

Consequently, in Hook's view, Marxism encourages neither complete self-reliance nor a fatalistic acceptance of the existing system. The strength of Marxism lies in the recognition that human beings operate within a specific situation wherein they are dependent upon one

22) West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, p. 116.

23) Sidney Hook, *The Meaning of Marx: A Symposium* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1934), p. 49.

24) *Ibid.*, p. 51.

another. At the same time, since they possess a certain amount of freedom to choose the ideas they will follow in the situation, they have the freedom to transform it to a certain extent. In other words, although men are conditioned by their environment, they can change that environment. Thus, Hook claims that "there are no musts in history; there are only conditional probabilities."²⁵⁾

When Hook declares that there is nothing inevitable about Marxian dialectic, he does not deny the existence of a degree of social and historical determinism. In Hook's view, society develops through the interaction processes between objective environment, human needs and action:

From objective *conditions*, social and natural (thesis), there arise human *needs* and *purposes* which, in recognizing the objective possibilities in the given situation (antithesis) set up a course of *action* (synthesis) designed to actualize these possibilities.²⁶⁾

For Hook, each stage of historical development generates its own unique problems and solutions. Thus, men should want what they can reasonably get. Even though social change must be willed by men, what is willed and when it is willed must be determined by objective conditions. When these conditions are fulfilled, the ends willed by men can be realized. Hook views Marxism the most practical alternative in thirties America not because it is absolutely good for all times, but because objective conditions of America during the 1930s make possible its realization. When Hook criticizes Dewey, it is not because

25) Hook, *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*, p. 172.

26) *Ibid.*, p. 84.

their basic goals are different, but because Dewey does not acknowledge class struggle as a means to change American society. In Hook's opinion, Marxism explains the crisis of America more accurately than any other theory. If a pragmatist does not become a Marxist in thirties America, he cannot be considered a true pragmatist.

It is, however, a mistake to assume in the mechanism of Marx's dialectic that the objective condition is a sufficient condition for social change. According to Hook, human consciousness is a necessary part of it. Here, a social theory plays the role of bringing men to self-consciousness. However, the existence of class-conscious masses does not guarantee the success of a revolutionary movement. It depends, in part, upon the intelligence and courage of those who lead the masses that have been indoctrinated against their own interests by the existing dominant ideology and social oppositions. The role of the intellectuals is thus of tremendous importance in evoking, intensifying and directing the class struggle. Hook concludes:

All the factors are determined, but there is no one independent variable of which all the others are necessary functions. And one of the factors which determines or fails to determine the conjunction of all the necessary conditions into one complex sufficient condition is the activity which we undertake now after reflection.²⁷⁾

In Hook's interpretation, Marxism is compatible with pragmatism in its view of the relation between an individual and society. In bourgeois society, egotistic man becomes the basis of society rather than social man. However, no man can escape the social bond in his daily expe-

27) Hook, *The Meaning of Marx*, p. 121.

rience. In Hook's view, as with Marx, society is an order out of which individuals arise. Society does not exist apart from individuals; nor can it be reduced to the individual. For Hook, man's ideals and hopes are meaningless outside the context of society.

Hook's emphasis on organic society is not opposed to the development of individuality. He rejects the attempt to dogmatize "collective man"²⁸⁾ as shown in proletarian culture because the effort takes only the political aspect into consideration. Marxism, he asserts, is "hostile to individualism, as a social theory, and not to individuality, as a social value."²⁹⁾ In his view, in capitalist society, uniqueness and creative originality are fostered only for a few. Marxism, on the other hand, seeks to encourage the free development of personality among the masses by providing material security for them. Marxism emphasizes the importance of society over an individual to realize the individuality of every man rather than to eliminate individuality for the sake of society. According to Hook, Marx has never thought that a socialist society can realize "a perfect society, a perfect man."³⁰⁾ Limitations and failures are inherent features of human experience which Marxism cannot eliminate. However, with Marxism, the fact that a perfect society is not attainable does not justify the existence of any kind of man or society. Here, human action and will to make the existing situation approximate perfection take on a tragic meaning. "Under communism," Hook maintains, "man ceases to suffer as an animal and suffers as human."³¹⁾ In Hook's version of pragmatism, the tragic meaning of human existence becomes explicit.

28) *Ibid.*, p. 141.

29) *Ibid.*, p. 142.

30) Hook, *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*, p. 100.

31) *Ibid.*, p. 101.

In his attempt to apply Marxism to thirties America, Hook interprets Marx in pragmatic terms. Marx becomes a "Left Marxist,"³²⁾ the forerunner of American pragmatists, and Marxism becomes a hypothesis that has to be tested against social reality. Human action becomes the necessary condition to realize the truth of Marxist theory, and the theory is confirmed in its consequence. With Hook, such subtle difference in logic as Peirce makes between consequence and consequent, or conceivable action and actual action does not matter significantly. This lack of attention to the logical subtlety is understandable, considering the situation under which the majority of the population struggle for their primary problems of social existence. For him, the purpose of philosophy is to change the world rather than to contemplate it. However, Hook follows Peirce in his awareness of fundamental human limitations and the consequent role of society and the endless pursuit of a perfect society.

IV

Hook was disappointed and disillusioned by the course of events in the late 1930s: the rise of fascism and Stalin, the show trials in the Soviet Union, and the failure of communism as a defense against fascism as evidenced in the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939. After World War II he came to believe that the primary conflict in the world is between democracy and its enemies, or between "the absolutist and the

32) Lewis S. Feuer, "From Ideology to Philosophy: Sidney Hook's Writing on Marxism," in *Sidney Hook and the Contemporary World*, ed. Paul Kurtz (New York: The John Day Company, 1968), p. 41.

experimental temper of mind".³³⁾ His confidence in democracy stems from his observation that it provided more freedom, prosperity, and security than any other political system. Any just society, he insisted, should respect free elections, the legal right of opposition, free press and speech, due process of law, and other principles of democracy. Perhaps Hook's attempt to reconcile Marxism and pragmatism was fated to be a failure from the beginning. As early as 1934, he was suspicious of the deterministic elements of Marxism and opposed to Stalin's dictatorship, at the same time that he declared communism is the only way to save the world in "Why I Am a Communist." In the 1940s he abandoned the Marxism that guided and sustained him for over two decades. He regretted his Marxist past including his support for Foster in 1932 and his seminal book *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* in 1933. As revealed in one of his 1951 letters, he was "a democrat first, and a socialist only to the extent that socialist measures achieve a more abundant life for free human being." This means that he does not believe in "total solutions; and that his socialism is a piecemeal affair, a matter of more or less to be decided in the light of . . . the democratic faith."³⁴⁾ Individual freedom and democratic processes cherished in the American liberal tradition seems always more important to him than any other things.

The profound sense of disillusionment Hook had after he gave up Marxism seems to have helped him develop a sensibility which he called "a tragic sense of life" in 1960, although this strain is detected in his interpretation of Marxism in the 1930s. He concurs with James,

33) Sidney Hook, *Political Power and Personal Freedom: Critical Studies in Democracy, Communism, and Civil Rights* (New York: Criterion Books, 1959), p. 183.

34) Hook, in *Letters of Sidney Hook*, p. 165.

whom he once called a “mystical” nominalist.³⁵⁾ no matter how intelligent our actions, James says, there are “real losses and losers” in a precarious and hazardous world in which we live. “Ineluctable woes and losses” and “genuine sacrifices” form part of life. “Something permanently drastic and bitter,” James adds, “always remains at the bottom of the cup.”³⁶⁾ Hook imbues pragmatism with the tragic, which is puzzling because the common perception links pragmatism to optimism and possibilities. The tragic for Hook is a moral phenomenon involving the choice in conflicting situations.³⁷⁾ The natural phenomena of sickness and death, if pitiful, are not tragic. History is the battleground for the profoundest moral choices in which “some legitimate right has always been sacrificed, sometimes on the altars of the god of war”:

Irony is compounded with tragedy in the fact that many of the rights we presently enjoy we owe to our ancestors, who in the process of winning them for us deprived others of their rights. In some regions of the world the very ground on which people stand was expropriated by force and fraud from others by their ancestors. Yet as a rule it would be a new injustice to seek to redress the original injustice by depriving those of their possessions who hold present title to them. Every just demand for reparations against an aggressor country is an unjust demand on the descendants of its citizens, who as infants are not responsible for the deeds of aggression.³⁸⁾

35) Sidney Hook, *The Metaphysics of Pragmatism* (Chicago: Open Court Pub. Co., 1927), p. 9.

36) William James, quoted in Hook, *Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life*, p. 5.

37) West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, p. 120.

38) Hook, *Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life*, p. 17.

Hook acknowledges complexities in human life, clearly sympathizes with the victims on the historical arena, and morally condemns the power politics in the process of history. But in the end, as Cornel West points out, Hook “accepts the historical verdict of the ‘winners.’”³⁹⁾ Hook infuses pragmatism with an existential strain, but is tilted toward the winners of history rather than the victims. Losers such as native Americans and Palestinians have no other option but to accept the status quo. This is contrary to his conception of pragmatism as “the theory and practice of *enlarging* human freedom” in a “tragic” world⁴⁰⁾ and his former stance on behalf of the victims during the great depression. Historical circumstances since the 1940s might have made him tougher-minded than his predecessors in pragmatism.

Hook does not uphold the United States as an ideal for the world to emulate; rather he presents it as “a lesser evil.”⁴¹⁾ The young Hook had to make a moral choice between “a proven evil” and “a possible good,” or between American capitalism and Soviet communism. He chose the latter. And the later Hook concluded that “the old ‘proven evil’ appeared more and more good,” whereas “the possible good proved to be more and more evil.”⁴²⁾ As Philip Gleason argues, the “growing self-consciousness about the distinctiveness of American culture” led Hook and other intellectuals during the late 1930s and the World War II to emphasize democracy as the defining element of American life.⁴³⁾ Democracy became the essence of the United States.

39) West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, p. 121.

40) Hook, *Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life*, p. 25. [Italics added.]

41) Hook, *Ibid.*, p. 19.

42) West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, p. 227.

43) Philip Gleason, *Speaking of Diversity: Language and Ethnicity in Twentieth Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 221.

Opponents of democracy, in turn, were taken to be not simply misguided but treacherous. They must be realistically dealt with:

The grim fact, however, is that there is sometimes no desire to reason, no wish to negotiate except as a holding action to accumulate strategic power, nothing but the reliance of one party or the other upon brute force even when other alternative may exist. In such case, moral onus rests clearly upon those who invoke force. . . . The intelligent use of force to *prevent* or crush the use of force, where a healthy democratic process, equitable laws and traditions and customs of freedom make it possible to vent differences in a rational and orderly way, is therefore justifiable even if on prudential grounds one may forgo such action. This means that tolerance always has limits--it cannot tolerate what is itself actively intolerant.⁴⁴⁾

It is ironical that Hook's pragmatic perspective on life, which is grounded in freedom, democracy, and a tragic sense of life, ends up advocating the "intelligent use of force" and intolerance towards "what is itself actively intolerant" in light of the brutal realities of the mid-twentieth century.

44) Hook, *Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life*, p. 23.