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Rowan Cahill

University of Wollongong, rowanc@uow.edu.au

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Security Intelligence and Left Intellectuals: Australia, 1970

Abstract

In 1970 the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) identified the ideas of Antonio Gramsci as one of the root causes of dissent, opposition and cultural ferment. This document is an example of ASIO's concern about Marxist intellectuals and their Gramscian links.

SECURITY INTELLIGENCE AND LEFT INTELLECTUALS: AUSTRALIA, 1970.

Rowan Cahill

The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) was established in 1949 following Cold War pressure from the USA and UK. Modelled on Britain's MI5, its roots were in the intelligence community that developed in Australia from World War 1 onwards, in particular the trenchantly anti-communist military intelligence sector. During Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War (1962–72), universities became centres of opposition to the war and to the selective system of conscription introduced in 1964 to facilitate Australian military deployments in Southeast Asia. Ideologically in favour of the war, broadly suspicious of or hostile towards any challenge to conventional conservative politics and culture, ASIO responded, targeting dissident students and academics (for details, see Cain, 1994, 1983; McKnight, 1994; Capp, 1993).

On university campuses students and academics variously campaigned, organised, mobilised protestors and engaged in intellectual activity (research, addressing meetings and teach-ins, writing, publishing) that challenged the Australian government's justification of the war and conscription. In the process, radical scholarship burgeoned as analysis of the war, its origins and rationale, led to wider social and political critique. So for example, a Socialist Scholars' Conference at Sydney University in May 1970 drew between 300 and 400 participants for each of four days (21–24 May). As an ASIO report of the event noted, 85 per cent of

participants appeared to be academics or students; there were also a small number of trade unionists, recognised “principally because of their conservative dress and neat appearance” (ASIO, 1970a).

ASIO responded to the challenge (or threat, from their point of view): students and academics were recruited as informants; and break-ins, telephone-taps, postal intercepts and surveillance were used to collect raw intelligence data. Reports and briefing papers were produced; apart from their internal and official use, these were also selectively released to right-wing politicians and journalists, and to anti-communist organisations such as B.A. Santamaria’s National Civic Council and the Congress for Cultural Freedom. According to the ASIO world-view, the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) was at the root of the dissent, opposition and cultural ferment (see Cain, 1994: 200–04; McKnight 1994: 227–41).

The document reproduced below was created by ASIO in March 1970 (ASIO, 1970b). It has come into the public domain with the passing of the mandatory 30-year withholding period pertaining to official documents. Deletions in the text were variously made by ASIO under the exemption categories described by Section 33 of the Commonwealth of Australia Archives Act (1983) (for explanation of permitted deletions, see Fact Sheet 52); capitalisation of names replicates the original. The document is of interest as an example of a security organisation’s concern, in the context of a democracy, about Marxist intellectuals, and also for its Gramscian link. The literary style and mannerisms of the document suggest that the author had an academic background, or was, at the time, an academic.

“Communist Party of Australia Interest in Marxist Academics” reflects a number of ASIO concerns about Vietnam War-era dissent, opposition and the attendant cultural ferment. An ASIO view was that Australia was headed for “internal war”. According to this view, orthodox Australian communism was wedded to an insurrection or coup d’etat; however, among Vietnam-era leftists were those who sought nothing less than the complete restructuring of society through the use of urban guerrilla warfare. In developing this understanding ASIO tended “to accept at

face value” some of the Left’s “wilder fantasies”. Another ASIO fear was that international Trotskyists and anarchists would push the politics of the Australian left further to the left, so that revolutionary politics would become part of mainstream political discourse. Also alarming for ASIO was that the CPA was changing, transforming ideologically from its traditional authoritarianism and conservatism, and weakening its links with the Soviet Union. Of particular concern was that the party was endeavouring to act in a broad-left way, building relationships with other people and organisations, seeking what ASIO described as “great” and “fundamental” social change (McKnight, 1994: 232–4).

Of the eight “socialist academics” referred to in the first paragraph of the document, only Davidson, O’Neill, Playford and Wertheim were academics at the time; the younger group (Cahill, Kirsner, Laver, Osmond) comprised activists who had been prominent in the radical student movement during the 1960s (see Armstrong 2001; Gordon, 1970). What linked all those named was their involvement in radical intellectual debate and political views that had not precluded them from working with elements within the CPA. Cahill, Davidson, Kirsner and O’Neill had been members of the Editorial Board of the CPA journal *Australian Left Review* (ALR) since 1969. Playford was a significant contributor to the journal and acted as a “silent”, unacknowledged, advisor. Both Davidson (1969) and Playford (1962) had undertaken major scholarly studies of the CPA.

ALR commenced publication as a bi-monthly in 1966; it aimed at a broad audience. Editorially “no subject or line of thought (was) regarded as beyond the pale, whether or not it was in accordance with the ‘Party line’ or the prevailing theoretical orthodoxy” (Aarons 1993: 156). Between 1967 and 1968, it published a series of articles by Alastair Davidson under the title “Gramsci’s Marxism”; in 1968 these formed the basis of his pioneering study *Antonio Gramsci: The Man, His Ideas*.

The ASIO document refers to Eric Aarons and Bernie Taft; both were key members of the ALR editorial board and leading forces for change in the CPA, particularly as intellectuals influenced by developments in European Marxist thought. (Both

Aarons and Taft later wrote accounts of their lives within the CPA; see Aarons, 1993; Taft, 1994). During 1967, ALR published in book form the research report of the team headed by Radovan Richta that had helped to shape the short-lived “human face” socialism of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, extinguished by the Soviet invasion of August 1968 (Richta, 1967). The document also refers to Robin Blackburn and Roger Garaudy; both of whom visited Australia during 1970 for public and private meetings, courtesy of ALR. Professor Garaudy was under surveillance by ASIO during his week-long visit during which he mainly addressed academic audiences on topics relating to contemporary Marxist philosophy (see ASIO, 1970c; Garaudy, 1976).

In the final paragraph, the document author discusses developing tensions and conflicts within the CPA. The observations were prescient. In 1971 the CPA split and the pro-Soviet interests formed the Socialist Party of Australia.

By 1991, declining membership levels and finances, and philosophical changes within the Party, had led to the CPA winding itself up; and in 1996 the Socialist Party of Australia renamed itself the Communist Party of Australia.

Document

SECRET

AUSTRALIAN SECURITY INTELLIGENCE ORGANIZATION [sic]

No. 2/70

13th March, 1970

COMMUNIST PARTY OF AUSTRALIA INTEREST IN MARXIST ACADEMICS

The Communist Party of Australia (CPA) has, for some years, pursued a policy of drawing certain socialist academics closer to its fold. The personalities involved include John PLAYFORD, Alastair DAVIDSON and Douglas KIRSNER of Melbourne; Dan O’NEILL, Peter WERTHEIM and Brian LAVER of Brisbane; and Rowan CAHILL and Warren OSMOND of Sydney. The private ideologies of these people centre on differing schools of thought, some drawing inspiration from GRAMSCI or MARCUSE, some from

TROTSKY. Without exception, however, their views are Marxist, explicitly revolutionary, and to the left of those espoused by the CPA.

Fundamentally, these academics are not as issue-oriented as the Party, and tend more to relate specific points of grievance to their relatively systematic personal ideologies. On the whole, their emotional commitment to a Marxist (usually not Marxist-Leninist) world-view, and their inclination away from democratic centralism and towards a seemingly anarchic individualism, substantially reduces their effectiveness as a potential revolutionary force, and, paradoxically, reinforces their ultimate dependence on what they doubtless regard as the “reformist” CPA, with its useful organisational apparatus.

Thus, the Party’s relationship with these academics plays a dual role: firstly, it allows the CPA to tap the intellectual resources of these persons, and thereby to gain, not only a broader view of the common, basic ideology, Marxism, but also a channel of influence into the Universities, which are seen as the breeding-grounds of future social leaders, and (what will be equally important for the Party if the influence of the academics takes stronger hold) the political “Red bases”, the points from which “the revolution” will be exported into society; secondly, the relationship gives the academics the benefit of the Party’s organisational capabilities (including finance, space in Party publications, and (the faintest pretence of) a mass base). [sic]

With its present dearth of intellectual Party members, the CPA can ill afford to lose the goodwill of these academics, and therefore accepts a certain amount of criticism from them. From one point of view, the essence of the relationship is that the academics are long on critique and short on prescription, while the Party seems to have the opposite tendency.

It is for these reasons the Party is beginning to take considerable pains to ensure a continuation of the relationship, and the latest manifestation of this concern has been the recent decision by Eric AARONS and Bernard TAFT to invite Roger GARAUDY to visit Australia. GARAUDY, a leading Marxist theoretician (particularly in the Christian-Marxist “dialogue” field), was excluded from the Politburo of the Communist Party of France in February, 1970, because of his public condemnations of Soviet actions in Czechoslovakia.

[.....] plans to visit Australia in August-September 1970. In addition [.....] Ernest FISCHER and Franz MAREK, two important “independently minded” Austrian Marxists, [.....].

[.....] Perry ANDERSON, an acquaintance of Robin BLACKBURN’s [.....] ANDERSON was, in 1969, the editor of the British periodical “New Left Review” (Trotskyist-oriented). It is planned to raise \$1000 to cover ANDERSON’s travelling expenses, of which [.....] has already indicated that he can raise \$200.

The CPA leadership (operating primarily through TAFT and Eric AARONS) probably sees several dividends accruing to the Party from these visits. Firstly, it is hoped that the presence in Australia of Marxist intellectuals who agree

with the pro-Czech stand of the CPA leadership will help to draw support away from the pro-Soviet group within the Party. The sense of international isolation which many Party members undoubtedly feel may be sensibly diminished by the knowledge that they enjoy a measure of overseas support from outstanding individual Communists. Secondly, the CPA's "coalition of the left" policy (of which the cementing of friendly relationships with radical and revolutionary socialist theoreticians in the universities is becoming the focal point) may receive a fillip from the prestige of people who may be seen as international advocates of "left co-operation" (with reference particularly to BLACKBURN and ANDERSON). In connection with the "coalition of the left", CPA cultivation of Australian Trotskyists may be advanced through Party sponsorship of overseas intellectuals possessing Trotskyist inclinations.

From the Party's point of view, Australia is currently suffering from a severe shortage of Marxist philosophers, and consequently there is a low level of dialogue among Marxists themselves, and between Marxists and others. The position in Australia is therefore in marked contrast to Europe, from which all the visitors, so far, are to come. The Party (and its academic sympathisers) will no doubt be hoping that the visitors will have the effect of improving the current position in Australia by their example – by their prominence in the field and by the experience they have in dialogue.

The CPA, however, may soon find itself having to strike a firm balance between two sections in the Party – the "liberals", much of the youth, and the strongest advocates of co-operation with Trotskyists etc. on the one hand, and pro-Soviet members and the trade union base of the Party, on the other. While the overseas visitors may attract support for the leadership, they may also aggravate the tensions and strains already evident in the Party by further alienating members of the second category. The problem of balancing the claims of these two groups will probably be an important question in the affairs of the CPA for several years to come.

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