“My Song Is My Weapon”

People’s Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-50

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Preface

What happens to a song after it is written? No matter what the writer’s intentions, the fate of a song depends on political, historical, and cultural contexts that we understand most clearly with hindsight. No one guessed that Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land”—without the militant verses and spirit in which it was written—would become a national anthem for school children.

The reexamination of culture going on in all parts of the world today adds new dimensions to my inquiry into the left-wing folk movement of the 1930s and 1940s. Some of the problems faced by People’s Songs in the 1940s are similar to those that artists and critics face today in China, Nicaragua, Chile, the United States, and the Soviet Union. For example, today there is a new openness toward art in the Soviet Union, where the official government policy of glasnost has unleashed much energy and confusion. Artists can experiment in literature, poetry, graphic art, theater, film, dance, and music. Soviet citizens can now read Boris Pasternak and attend a Marc Chagall exhibit. They can now see films that sat on shelves for twenty-five years and new documentaries that address such touchy issues as the war in Afghanistan. Musicians publicly call for more candor in rock lyrics and urge that young people be allowed to dance at rock concerts. It is unclear where this process will lead, but it once again raises intriguing questions about the relationship between art and politics.

In a broad sense, my concern here is with the political uses of art. My starting points are the large historical and theoretical questions outlined below. At the same time, the motivation for this study was not only intellectual, but personal as well. I grew

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up in the 1960s with many of the songs of the Old Left, sung by my father (a former People’s Songster) at gatherings of family and friends. I also heard the songs on records and even on the radio, when some of them became part of the 1960s folk revival. I became curious about what these songs had meant to participants in the Communist movement and, in turn, to the broader American culture. What traditions had people who sang and wrote these songs drawn on; what had inspired them; why had they persisted? How could they continue to sing these songs with such fervor twenty and thirty years later, yet be so critical of the political movement that had nurtured the songs? Why did the older people I knew sing “Bread and Roses” and “Song of My Hands” with such passion and sing “Put It on the Ground” and “Friendly Henry Wallace” with a knowing twinkle in their eyes? The evidence led me to conclude that the politics and culture of the movement were inextricably linked and that this link was an essential, yet relatively neglected, component of the story of American Communism.

From 1946 to 1949 a small group of left-wing cultural workers organized to sing out for labor, civil rights, civil liberties, and peace. People’s Songs, Inc., continued a tradition and left a legacy of protest singing that continues to this day. In spite of the organization’s brief lifespan—indeed, in some ways because of it—the story of People’s Songs provides us with a number of insights into cold-war America, the American Communist movement, and the experience of left-wing cultural workers.

The founders of People’s Songs shared some distinct characteristics: youth, musical talent or interest, and a commitment to folk music and communism. Neither big names in show business nor political leaders on the Left, People’s Songs activists demonstrated aspects of a rank-and-file commitment to communism which, until recently, have received little attention from scholars. People’s Songs had no formal ties with the Communist Party U.S.A. (CPUSA). Individual People’s Songsters—active members of the organization, many of whom were musicians—were not all party members. Yet the group as a whole was part of a broader Communist movement, an identification and commitment that account significantly for People’s Songs’ accomplishments and failures.
To illustrate this, one has to look at the variety of contexts that shaped People's Songs: personal (ethnic, religious, class backgrounds), socio-historical (the significant changes in American society brought about by the Depression and World War II), political (the communist movement), and cultural (the "discovery" of American folk music). The story here, then, is about the politics of culture of the Old Left, with special attention to the internal life of the movement (the "movement culture") and the use of song as a weapon. It is not about music per se, but rather about the attempt to use music for political purposes during a particular time period and within a particular cultural-political milieu.

The CPUSA was dominant on the Left in the 1930s and 1940s, until a combination of cold-war repression and the Communists' own sectarianism led to the end of the movement's political influence in American life. Its cultural influence did not end, however. For instance, the Old Left's use of folk music, focus on issues, hootenannies, and even specific songs ("Joe Hill," "The Hammer Song") helped lay the foundations for the culture of protest that developed in the 1950s and 1960s. My conclusion suggests some of the links between Old Left and New Left culture; the songs, singing, and issues that characterized People's Songs' work provided critical links between the radicalism of the 1930s and the civil rights movement and New Left of the 1950s and 1960s. When People's Songs dissolved, People's Artists continued its work, serving an increasingly isolated, sectarian movement. At the same time, the Weavers, a group with left-wing roots, achieved popular success singing folk-style songs, initiating the commercial aspect of the folk revival. Protest movements continued to rely on folk-style songs to express discontent and solidarity. A book on the movement culture of the New Left, with a focus on music, could treat fully the important and fascinating links between Old and New Left culture which are only suggested here. Coffee houses and college campuses, civil rights and antiwar organizing, Bob Dylan and Peter, Paul, and Mary—organizations, movements, artists that shaped the culture of a new movement deserve sustained attention, a book in their own right. But this book is about the movement culture of the Old Left.

People's Songs drew on the traditions of abolitionists, labor
organizers, populists, socialists, and others who had used songs in their efforts to change the world. The organization was formed during a decisive period in American politics in order "to create, promote, and distribute songs of labor and the American people." To this end People's Songs produced records, filmstrips, songsheets, and a songbook; staged concerts and hootenannies; and taught classes in the use of music for political action. People's Songs held one national convention, in 1947, and devoted a major effort to Henry Wallace's 1948 presidential campaign. At its height People's Songs had between two and three thousand members, with strong chapters in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Its Board of Sponsors included Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Oscar Hammerstein II, and Paul Robeson.

In March 1946 People's Songs elected a National Board of Directors that included Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, Alan Lomax, Earl Robinson, Woody Guthrie, Bess Hawes, Millard Lampell, Felix Landau, and Walter Lowenfels. In October, Benjamin Botkin, Tom Glazer, and Waldemar Hille, among others, were added to the list; later additions included Mario "Boots" Cassetta, Irwin Silber, Betty Sanders, and Sonny Vale. Pete Seeger was national director during the entire three-year lifespan of People's Songs. In the spring of 1947, as a result of attempts to base day-to-day activities on a more solid institutional structure, Irwin Silber became executive secretary, Waldemar Hille became full-time editor of the Bulletin, and Leonard Jacobson took over the bookings. After this the organization functioned more efficiently until a combination of financial and political problems forced its sudden dissolution in March 1949.

Their personal backgrounds help explain People's Songsters' passionate commitment in the face of the domestic cold war and the contradictions of the Communist movement. Some had spent significant parts of their youth in left-wing circles—at summer camps, square dances, educational functions, and political meetings. In such settings they developed their political outlook and creative talents, while finding inspiration in shared activity. In turn, People's Songsters were an integral part of the process through which the culture of the Communist movement evolved. This culture served as a powerful unifying force, si-
multaneously sustaining the movement and contributing to its isolation.

Maurice Isserman suggests that what sustained the commitment of Communists in times of crisis were the social bonds that united them. “They tended to live in the same neighborhoods, they spent most of their social life with other Communists, and their children played together. Breaking with the Party . . . would have meant accepting a status as a social pariah.” In a similar vein William Alexander, author of Film on the Left, claims that for some people the Left furnished a substitute family. “The attraction of people who worked together and shared resources in a common cause was immense.” Such statements suggest an approach to understanding the experience of American Communists that demands further development.

In his work on American Populism, Lawrence Goodwyn develops the theory of a “movement culture,” which offers people hope and a vision of an alternative to the “received culture.” The movement culture yields “a mode of conduct antithetical to the social, economic, and political values of the received, hierarchical culture.” While late-nineteenth-century Populism and twentieth-century Communism are not analogous—the latter was not a mass democratic movement—the concept of a movement culture illuminates many aspects of American Communism. The Communist movement culture, like that of the Populists, offered hope and a vision of an alternative social system to its participants. It played a critical part in building and maintaining the “individual self-respect” and “collective self-confidence” necessary to challenge the “received culture.”

Goodwyn’s concept of a received culture is given more dimensions by Antonio Gramsci’s analysis of the function of hegemony: “the ‘spontaneous consent’ given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group.” Gramsci distinguished hegemony from “direct domination,” in which the apparatus of coercive state power enforces discipline in moments of crisis when spontaneous consent fails.

In his elaboration of the concept of hegemony, Raymond Williams offers the following definition:
It is a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole body of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values—constitutive and constituting—which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives. It is, that is to say, in the strongest sense a "culture," but a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes.  

A lived hegemony, in Williams's theory, is a process rather than a system or structure. While the hegemonic is by definition dominant, it is neither total nor exclusive. "It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified... At any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in the society" affecting the hegemonic process. The Communist movement culture was in some ways such an alternative, in Williams's terms a "counter-hegemony."  

Much of the most accessible and influential work of the counter-hegemony, argues Williams, is historical—the recovery of discarded areas and interpretations that challenge the hegemonic's selective tradition. The activity of People's Songs may thus be classified in important ways as "residual," based on "a reaching back to those meanings and values which were created in actual societies and actual situations in the past, and which still seem to have significance because they represent areas of human experience, aspiration, and achievement which the dominant culture neglects, undervalues, opposes, represses, or even cannot recognize." The movement culture addresses vital points of connection, where the dominant culture's version of the past is used to ratify the present and to indicate directions for the future. These are the points where a selective tradition is at once powerful and vulnerable—powerful because of its skill at making active selective connections, vulnerable because the real record is recoverable. "The residual, by definition," says Williams, "has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process... as an active element of the
present. Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social and cultural institution or formation.”

Counter-hegemonic activity may also be “emergent,” according to Williams. New meanings, values, practices, and relationships are continually being created. Emergent culture can only be defined in relation to a full sense of the dominant in order to distinguish elements that are substantially alternative or oppositional. What must be understood, says Williams, as a way of defining important elements of both the residual and the emergent, and as a way of understanding the character of the dominant, is that no dominant culture ever exhausts all human practice, energy, and intention. What distinguishes emergent culture is that “it depends crucially on finding new forms or adaptations of form.”

This mode of analysis offers insight into the Communist movement culture’s challenge to the hegemonic process and, specifically, People’s Songs’ promotion of traditional, rural folk music and topical songs in opposition to what they saw as a corrupt, mindless popular culture. Much of People’s Songs’ activity may be classified in significant ways as residual and/or emergent. Folk songs had been created by “the people,” often in opposition to the dominant culture, and sung in forms that brought people together to form a community. People’s Songsters saw themselves as both recovering a tradition and adding to it by writing lyrics that commented on current political issues and implicitly suggested visions of an alternative future. They also offered ways for people to participate in counter-hegemonic activity by adapting residual forms of singing—the hootenanny and political campaign singing—to their own purposes.

Songs and singing were important within the Communist movement and, indeed, sometimes reached people outside the movement. The composers and performers also merit attention because their experience challenges the characterization of American Communism as cynical, manipulative, and destructive. The latter view provides the framework for much of the scholarly work on American Communism, including the major
book on folk music and the American Left, R. Serge Denisoff’s *Great Day Coming*! My analysis is based on a critical view of the American Communist movement, emphasizing People’s Songs’ connection to that movement, for better and worse. Yet I have avoided the terms “Stalinism” and “Communist front,” used too often as abusive terms and as excuses to dismiss the work of the Communist movement as totalitarian, conspiratorial, and duplicitous. Such labels do not contribute to a balanced analysis of left-wing thought and activity, nor do they reflect how cultural workers such as People’s Songsters viewed themselves. They did not identify themselves as “Stalinists” nor their organization as a “Communist front.” Because the point of this study is to indicate the possibilities opened up by a broader approach to American Communism—focusing on the contradictory experiences and ideas of rank-and-file participants—I have found it preferable to avoid using terms that re-affirm a way of thinking that reduces Communists to either cynical manipulators or malleable objects.

In recent years scholars have begun to challenge the negative stereotype of American Communism, focusing on positive contributions to American life in such areas as labor organizing, civil rights, and the arts. My own argument is that there is a significant connection between the failures and weaknesses of American Communism on the one hand and the contributions and strengths of the movement on the other. These contradictions and accomplishments simultaneously characterized, and became the legacy of, the American Communist movement. We cannot choose one and omit the other if we are writing a balanced history of American Communism, no matter on which period or group of Communists we choose to focus. The temptation in my own study is to simply condemn the political style and mistakes of the American Communist movement while praising its cultural contributions. Yet this would be missing the point. Without the wholeness and quality of the movement’s internal life, sectarianism and lack of democracy notwithstanding, the depth of commitment that led to significant creative work would have been lacking. While their commitment to the Communist movement drastically limited the impact of People’s Songsters—because of domestic anticomunism and
the American movement’s subordination to Soviet Communism—the same passionate commitment explains their positive contributions to American life.

Beyond the question of the political and cultural legacy of American Communism, what is at stake here are issues concerning the role of culture in constituting people’s lives and world views. Debate continues about how important the cultural realm really is in the process of challenging hegemony and achieving social change. This is where focusing on the movement culture has distinct advantages over previous approaches to the study of American Communism. Manipulation, corruption, and betrayal—explanations that characterize much of the scholarship on the subject—give way to emphasis on how a variety of forms of domination are experienced, internalized, and challenged. Cultural activity is also extended a more central role in expressing and constituting people’s sense of reality. Cultural expressions, as Williams argues, are related to “a wider area of reality than the abstractions of ‘social’ and ‘economic’ experience.” Cultural work and activity are elements of a hegemony which “to be effective has to extend to and include, indeed to form and be formed from, this whole area of lived experience.”

Yet even if we agree on the significance of culture, we are left with numerous unanswered questions about the politics of culture in our own time. What is the best way to reach people with an alternative political message? What is the relationship between form and content? What meaning do the old songs have today? Who has access to the means of cultural production and in particular to the mass media? Do audiences simply consume passively what is presented to them as culture? To what extent are creativity and participation part of cultural life? People’s Songsters’ outlook and experience hold some interesting lessons for us here.

In addition to insights drawn from contemporary cultural theory and primary sources from the 1930s and 1940s (New Masses, Daily Worker, People’s Songs Bulletin), my analysis relies on personal interviews. I interviewed influential members of People’s Songs, from its founders in New York and Los Angeles (the most active branches) to writers, performers, and organiz-
ers; from the editor of the People’s Songs Bulletin to those who subscribed to it. I also talked with people who were active in the Communist movement at the time but had no direct connection to People’s Songs. These interviews were an invaluable source of information about people’s backgrounds and perceptions of their own activity. They do not always provide the “facts” more accurately than other sources, but there is no better way to ascertain the social meaning of experience, which must then be evaluated.

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