

Revolution and Personal Crisis: William Z. Foster, Personal Narrative, and the Subjective in the History of American Communism¹

JAMES R. BARRETT

In early 1919, the progressive novelist Mary Heaton Vorse found William Z. Foster sitting in the tiny Pittsburgh office where he directed the Great Steel Strike, the largest industrial conflict in the history of the U.S. up to that time. Foster remained calm and collected, selfless in the midst of this great social movement:

He is composed, confident, unemphatic and impenetrably unruffled. Never for a moment does Foster hasten his tempo ... He seems completely without ego ... He lives completely outside the circle of self, absorbed ceaselessly in the ceaseless stream of detail which confronts him ... Once in a while he gets angry over the stupidity of man; then you see his quiet is the quiet of a high tension machine moving so swiftly it barely hums. He is swallowed up in the strike's immensity. What happens to Foster does not concern him. I do not believe that he spends five minutes in the whole year thinking of Foster or Foster's affairs.²

This was the image Foster projected throughout his early life and the reputation by which he was known: a brilliant strategist and organizational mind, an engineer and architect of working-class movements, a dedicated militant with no apparent personal life. Certainly for any historian looking for the links between the personal and the political, Foster does not appear to be a very promising subject.

But 14 years later in an October 1933 letter to his old friend and mentor Solomon Lozovsky, the Comintern's director of trade union work, Foster showed a very different side of his personality. Recovering at a Soviet sanatorium from a serious and complex illness with both physical and psychological dimensions, he was clearly depressed, subject to nervousness and anxiety attacks, bewildered by his current situation, and profoundly concerned about his future. "I am still very sick," he told Lozovsky:

Three months have passed since my arrival in the USSR, and the doctors say

¹Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Canadian Historical Association, the North American Labor History Conference, and a special conference on communist biography at the University of Manchester. For research assistance, I thank Adam Hodges and Nicki Ranganath and for their comments, Randi Storch, David Roediger, David Montgomery, Diane Koenker, Kathy Oberdeck, Marilyn Booth, and members of the University of Illinois History Workshop and the Pittsburgh Seminar in Working Class History, particularly Wendy Goldman. Portions of this article first appeared in James R. Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

²Mary Heaton Vorse, *Men and Steel* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1920), 60–61.

that my disease is nervous in nature, as if I am recovering, but the progress is so slow that I doubt any progress ... I feel that I cannot go on this way. Lying here, I am of no value to the movement, and the isolation is eating me up.³

This crisis forced Foster to turn from his usual whirlwind of public speaking and organizing to a life of writing. He left a series of memoirs, letters, and other personal texts which suggest some aspects of the relationship between the subjective—personal identity and representation, emotional experience—and the political—ideology, organization, and action. As Kathleen Brown and Elizabeth Faue note, historians of both the “Lyrical Left,” which preceded the Communist Party’s heyday, and the New Left, which followed it, have been particularly concerned with the relationship between the “personal” and the “political”. In contrast, most historians of U.S. communism have dwelt either on the machinations of the international movement and factional politics or on local studies of the Communist Party in action, seldom on the personal dimension of such political experience, a dimension that, as Brown and Faue argue, is critical to understanding this experience.⁴ What can an analysis of Foster’s crisis tell us about his career as a revolutionary and perhaps also about the relationship between the personal and the political in the experiences of American communists more generally? How might this neglected personal dimension, the subjective problems of identity and emotion, relate to research in labor history, which has tended to emphasize the material and the objective?

I will describe some of the influences that shaped Foster’s personality up to the time he joined the communist movement and the severe physical, psychological, and political crisis he faced in the mid-1930s just at the moment the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA) was becoming a mass movement. Next, I focus on Foster’s efforts in the late 1930s to reinvent himself as a communist writer and as a symbol of the party’s proletarian roots, particularly through two autobiographical works. Finally, I distinguish my own approach from earlier Cold War efforts to interpret American communism from a psychological perspective and I raise the broader problem of integrating the subjective elements of human experience into the materialist framework of most working-class historians.

As the Communist Party liked to remind people, Foster was a product of the Philadelphia slums. Bitter poverty, the deaths of most of his siblings, crime and violence in the streets of his own Philadelphia neighborhood, his father’s alcoholism and erratic worklife, and the failure of his mother’s hopes and dreams marked his early life. His early adult worklife could only have underscored the insecurities that encumbered his youth: enforced transiency, constant uncertainty about one’s livelihood, dangers embedded in many of his work situations.⁵

³William Z. Foster to Comrade Lozovsky, Sochi, USSR, October 19, 1933, Foster Personnel File, Comintern Papers, f. 495, op. 66, 11, 40–44, Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI), Moscow. I thank Dasha Lotoreva for translation of this document from the Russian.

⁴Kathleen Brown and Elizabeth Faue, “Social Bonds, Sexual Politics, and Political Community on the U.S. Left, 1920s–1940s,” *Left History* 7 (Spring 2000): 9; Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Origins of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Knopf, 1979).

⁵Foster provides his own accounts of his life in William Z. Foster, *From Bryan to Stalin* (New York, 1937) and William Z. Foster, *Pages from a Worker’s Life* (New York: International Publishers, 1939). The only other scholarly biography is Edward J. Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). The Communist Party’s conception of Foster and some notion of his standing in the party are conveyed in Arthur Zipser, *Working Class Giant: The Life of William Z. Foster* (New York: International Publishers, 1983); Joseph North, *William Z. Foster, an Appreciation* (New York: International Publishers, 1957); and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *Labor Own—*

Such experiences shaped a rather grim outlook on life, best conveyed perhaps in the language of Foster's early syndicalist tracts and in the zeal with which he embraced the hyperbolic revolutionary language of the Comintern's Third Period (1928–1935).⁶ The syndicalist, Foster wrote in 1912, has “placed his relations with the capitalists on a basis of naked power ... He knows he is engaged in a life and death struggle with an absolutely lawless and unscrupulous enemy, and considers his tactics only from the standpoint of their effectiveness. With him the end justifies the means.”⁷ “The only possible guard for the future security of the working class,” Foster told Congressional investigators in December 1930, “is the dictatorship of the proletariat and a Soviet government.”⁸ Writing in 1932, he concluded: “The working class cannot come into power without a civil war.”⁹ Such language reflected not only the international line but also the very real class violence of Foster's early life and the early depression years. It also characterized Foster's personality and political perspective throughout his life. Indeed, it seemed to Foster that his own experiences constituted a living indictment of capitalism. As an old man, he could not remember “the time when I was not imbued with that class hatred against employers which is almost instinctive to workers.”¹⁰

In his youth Foster fashioned a sense of his rather bleak surroundings from the ideas and values at hand, notably his mother's devout Catholicism and the Fenianism for which his father had been exiled from Ireland. He also embraced the comradeship, loyalty, and inchoate class pride that he found in his street gang and in early strikes. In his memoirs Foster describes these early influences as primitive thinking he left behind on his steady ideological progress toward communism. In fact, unlike Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and some other Irish-American communists, he did eschew all identification with his ethnic and religious background and was openly hostile to organized religion in some of his writings.¹¹ Yet Foster's revolutionary asceticism, his formulaic approach to matters of history, theory, and ideology, and his extreme discipline all suggest

Footnote 5 continued

William Z. Foster (New York: New Century Publishers, 1949). Foster's Comintern personnel file establishes his proletarian bona fides and suggests the high and low points of his career in the Party (Foster Personnel File, Comintern Papers). On the significance of Foster's relationship with his parents and childhood experiences for his later political development, see especially Edward J. Johanningsmeier, “Philadelphia, Skittereen, and William Z. Foster: The Childhood of an American Communist,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 117 (1993): 287–308.

⁶In 1928 the Communist International declared a “Third Period” of capitalist crisis and revolutionary ferment. In this era of “Class against Class”, communists were to shun cooperation with reformists and instead assert a strong revolutionary line in all of their political work.

⁷Earl C. Ford and William Z. Foster, *Syndicalism* (Chicago: William Z. Foster, 1912; reprint, London: Carl C. Slienger, 1978), 9.

⁸U.S. House of Representatives, *Investigation of Communist Propaganda: Hearings before a Special Committee to Investigate Communist Activities in the United States*, 71st Congress, 2nd Session, part IV, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1930), 359.

⁹William Z. Foster, *Toward Soviet America* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1932), 213–214.

¹⁰William Z. Foster, *The Twilight of World Capitalism* (New York: International Publishers, 1949), 157. For the continuity in Foster's hyperbolic rhetoric, see Foster, *Toward Soviet America*; William Z. Foster, *The War Crisis: Questions and Answers* (New York: Workers' Library Publishers, [January] 1940); William Z. Foster, “Leninism and Some Practical Problems of the Postwar Period,” *Political Affairs* 25 (1946): 99–109.

¹¹See, for example, Foster, *Twilight of World Capitalism*, 158–159. In considering the relationship between a religious background and future socialist activism among German working-class autobiographers, Mary Jo Maynes found that “religious skepticism appears frequently as an important step on the way.” (Mary Jo Maynes, *Taking the Hard Road: Life Course in French and German Workers' Autobiographies in the Era of Industrialization* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 166.)

the lingering effects of Catholicism. There are rumors, originating apparently with members of his family, that he requested and received the services of a priest when he was near death in Moscow.¹²

When he turned from the daily struggle for survival to the world of ideas, Foster acquired what he described as an “insatiable spirit of observation.” His mother encouraged his long hours in the Philadelphia Free Library, though it was here that he abandoned his religious faith for Darwin, Gibbon, and Spencer, and here that he began a slow journey to the political left. Leaving school after the third grade to contribute to the family economy, Foster remained an avid reader throughout his life, eventually learning to read in French and German, also picking up some Russian, and producing dozens of books and thousands of articles and pamphlets. Despite his formulaic approach in his writing and his reliance on the rather dogmatic language of orthodox Marxism–Leninism, this was a remarkable achievement, given his background.¹³

After the deaths of both parents and the disintegration of his family around the turn of the century, Foster drifted for many years around the country and throughout the world, working at a wide range of jobs: railroad laborer, camp cook, deep water sailor. Such experiences also shaped his worldview and provided him with an extensive anecdotal repertoire concerning working-class life, an encyclopedic knowledge of the labor movement and the world of work, and an almost instinctive sense about organization and strategy. Even his enemies acknowledged him as a master builder of workers’ movements. Between 1917 and 1919 he provided the organizational genius behind two massive organizing campaigns that swept hundreds of thousands of immigrant and African-American meatpacking and steel workers into the burgeoning wartime labor movement.

The instability in his own life produced a strong attraction for system, organization, science: first Darwin, Spencer, and the pioneer American sociologist Lester Frank Ward, later Marx and Lenin. In his early writings, he spent considerable time and effort in describing precisely what the new syndicalist society might look like and he located the solution to social and economic problems not in democratic representation and practice, but rather in technical expertise and systematic organization.¹⁴ Historians have argued for the attraction of system and organization for intellectuals and the new professionals of the early 20th century, Foster’s formative years. But the significance of strong, centralized organization, discipline, and planning likely meant something else to workers like Foster who had grown up with and endured for so long poverty, disorder, instability, and insecurity.¹⁵ In the unstable and chaotic environment in which he matured, he was strongly attracted to Ward’s vision of a society rationally organized on the basis of human needs. Ward provided Foster with his first notion that the rampaging market and the social carnage in its wake might somehow be brought under control.¹⁶ Searching for a systematic political way forward, Foster first found Marxist

¹²On a possible deathbed return to Catholicism, see Johanningsmeier, *Forging*, 353.

¹³Foster, *From Bryan to Stalin*, 22; quote, Foster, *The Twilight of World Capitalism*, 157.

¹⁴*Syndicalism*; Foster and J. A. Jones, “The Future Society,” *The Toiler* (1914), 7–8; William Z. Foster, “Is Government Necessary to the Operation of Industry?,” typescript, William Z. Foster Papers (WZF MSS), RGASPI, f. 615, op. 1, d. 86, ll. 26–35; William Z. Foster, *Russian Workers and Workshops* (Chicago: Trade Union Educational League, 1926); Foster, *Toward Soviet America*.

¹⁵On the Progressive era mania for system and efficiency, see, for example, Samuel P. Hays, *Response to Industrialism, 1885–1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967); Jerry Israel, ed., *Building the Organizational Society: Essays on Associational Activities* (New York: Free Press, 1972).

¹⁶On Lester Frank Ward, see Henry Steele Commager, ed., *Lester Frank Ward and the Welfare State*

socialism, then the syndicalist model, and finally Soviet communism. When he embraced communism and during his later Russian travels, he was most impressed with details of Russian industrial and union organization, not Soviet ideology. The fact that the Russians seemed to have created an effective, exportable workers' system was what attracted Foster, not Marxist–Leninist theory.

When he secretly joined the Communist Party at the age of 40 in 1921, Foster was already middle aged and at a political dead end.¹⁷ The impressive organizations he had built in the open shop bastions of meatpacking and steel, which had won him a reputation as his generation's most talented labor organizer, were largely destroyed. Blacklisted from the railroads where he had made his living, having passed through the left wing of the Socialist Party, the IWW, and a series of his own syndicalist groups, he was waiting impatiently for a new opening in the political scene.

Foster had, by this time, developed his argument that the "militant minority" of dedicated radicals must "bore from within" the conservative mainstream unions to transform them into effective class weapons. He had created a new organization, the Trade Union Educational League (TUEL), to achieve this end. As it happened, Lenin also urged boring from within, at least at the moment when Foster visited Soviet Russia for the first time in the summer of 1921. As the wartime revolutionary upheavals subsided and political reaction set in in capitalist societies throughout the world, Lenin urged revolutionaries to create "united fronts" with socialists, labor party supporters, and trade union activists. "It appeared that our ten year fight for work within the conservative unions was at last going to be successful," Foster later recalled. Searching for a way to galvanize his new TUEL, and swept up in the enthusiasm of the Russian Revolution, Foster joined the new party that fall and his TUEL became the American section of the new Red International of Labor Unions.¹⁸

Throughout the 1920s and beyond, Foster was by far America's most important communist—the party's perennial presidential candidate, the architect of its trade union work, a link to American radical traditions and to indigenous labor militants, and the person whom the public identified most closely with American communism. Deeply embedded in the world of industrial work, union organizing, and strikes, his Chicago-based party faction and subculture constantly battled the group they called the "City College Boys," a more urbane and cerebral group of professional revolutionaries in the New York headquarters. The latter held the party franchise through much of the 1920s, but Foster remained the great symbol of American radicalism and his group represented the only hope for a base in the labor movement. The result was almost constant factional warfare throughout the 1920s.¹⁹

Footnote 16 continued

(Indianapolis: Bobbs Merill, 1967); James Quayle Dealey, "Lester Frank Ward," in *Dictionary of American Biography*, vol. 19, ed. Dumas Malone (New York: Scribner, 1937), 430–431; Clifford Scott, *Lester Frank Ward* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976); and Richard Hofstadter's contrast between Ward and William Graham Sumner in *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Philadelphia). Foster had likely encountered Ward's *Dynamic Sociology* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944).

¹⁷Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking Press, 1957), 310.

¹⁸William Z. Foster, "A Statement of the Aims of the Trade Union Educational League," f. 615, op. 1, d. 86, ll. 5–6, WZF MSS; Barrett, *William Z. Foster*, 102–111; Foster, *Bryan to Stalin*, 138 (quote). For the evolution of Foster's thought from syndicalism through to his embrace of Soviet communism, see *Trade Unionism, the Road to Freedom* (Chicago: International Trade Union Educational League, 1915); *The Great Steel Strike and its Lessons* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, Inc., 1920); *The Russian Revolution* (Chicago, 1921); *The Bankruptcy of the American Labor Movement* (Chicago: Trade Union Educational League, 1922).

¹⁹James R. Barrett, "Boring from within and without: William Z. Foster, the Trade Union Educational League, and American Communism in the 1920s," in *Labor Histories: Class, Politics, and the Working Class*

The particular role he carved out for himself within the communist movement put a tremendous strain on Foster. In March 1930 he was arrested while leading a giant, violent, unemployed demonstration in New York City, one of several such mobilizations throughout the nation, which put the party's unemployed work on the map. Imprisoned at the age of 50 for six months in a small cell on Riker's Island, Foster was subject to all sorts of deprivation. He emerged at the end of 1930 and, instead of resting, quickly immersed himself in the party's unemployed organizing.²⁰ The following spring he assumed direction of the largest party-led strike to date, the 1931 bituminous coal strike. Touring the southwestern Pennsylvania, eastern Ohio, and West Virginia fields for several months, organizing picketing and relief work in the midst of extreme deprivation and considerable violence, Foster later admitted that he was "almost finished" by the end of the strike. In the midst of the strife, he clashed repeatedly with Earl Browder, who publicly accused him before the Comintern of neglecting party work in the interests of a hopeless struggle. When the strike finally collapsed in the fall of 1931, Foster took the blame.²¹

Foster's physical and emotional exhaustion were likely aggravated by his frustrations with party factionalism and the danger it posed to the industrial organizing he valued above all other political work, and by his disappointment with the elevation of Browder to party leadership in the early 1930s. All of this reached a climax in the fall of 1932, contributing to a severe crisis that took him out of the movement entirely for several years and left an indelible mark on his personality.

As the nation's most visible communist, Foster was the party's natural standard bearer in the 1932 election, but his nomination at once removed him from his industrial organizing and saddled him with a crushing itinerary. Beginning the campaign "already in rundown condition," he traveled more than 17,000 miles coast to coast, giving dozens of speeches.²² Crowds were often jubilant, local authorities less enthusiastic. He was driven out of an Illinois coal town by armed deputies, arrested in Lawrence, Massachusetts, beaten and jailed in Los Angeles. Foster never made it to a huge September 12 rally on Chicago's South Side. He suffered a severe heart attack and stroke and collapsed while addressing a crowd in Moline, Illinois. The party always referred to this illness as a heart attack, but the crisis clearly had emotional and psychological dimensions. Foster himself later described it as a "smash-up: angina pectoris, followed by a complete nervous collapse."²³

Footnote 19 continued

Experience, ed. Eric Arnesen, Julie Greene, and Bruce Laurie (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 319–331. The American affiliate of the Third International changed names several times in the course of the 1920s before emerging as the Communist Party of the USA in 1929. It was called the Workers' Party of America at the time Foster joined.

²⁰Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 33–34; Roy Rosenzweig, "Organizing the Unemployed: the Early Years of the Great Depression," *Radical America* 10 (1976): 40–41; *New York Times* March 7, 1930, 1, 2; *Daily Worker* April 12, 1930, 1. For Foster's description of his prison experiences, see Foster, *Pages*, 243–268.

²¹William Z. Foster, "The Coal Strike," *Communist* 10 (1931): 595; Theodore Draper, "Communists and Miners—1928–1933," *Dissent* 19 (1972): 377–380; quote, Foster, *Pages*, 180; "Minutes of the Central Committee Bureau on the Western Pennsylvania Coal Strike, June 5, 8, 9, 1931," CPUSA Papers, RGASPI, f. 515, op. 1, d. 2355, ll. 1–6, Moscow; "Transcripts of Speeches before the Anglo-American Secretariat of the ECCI," January 3, 1932, Comintern Papers, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 72, d. 164, ll. 3–86.

²²Foster, *Pages*, 283.

²³Federal Bureau of Investigation files; Solon Bernstein, MD to Earl Browder, New York, September 17, 1932, CPUSA Papers, f. 515, op. 1, d. 2710, 1. 75; unnamed physician to U.S. Attorney, Southern District of New York, Attention: Judge Harold Medina, November 4, 1948, document 61-330-485, FOIA

In his 1933 letter to Lozovsky, Foster revealed an uncharacteristic despair. Such a long recovery would have been difficult for any person, but Foster's self-image as a vigorous, selfless revolutionary made it "real hell." He could not research, write, or even play cards or chess, his favorite pastimes. If he tried to do anything, all of his symptoms returned. "The result of this endless isolation and frustration is that I am constantly agitated and nervous," he wrote:

You might say that I should ignore my loneliness, but I have struggled now for thirteen and half months, including five months flat on my back in bed, and it is very difficult to live with such involuntary rest ... I cannot imagine staying here week-by-week, waiting ... In the past, my strength had no limits. I could, and many years did, work sixteen-hour days without a rest, even on Sunday, not to mention a vacation. But now even unimportant things get me down.²⁴

Six months later, recuperating in San Francisco during the 1934 strike wave, Foster told Browder he felt, "just like one in chains." "[It] just about breaks my heart to be laid up in the midst of this developing struggle." A friend described him at this late point in his recovery: "He was in shocking physical condition," he recalled. "His head shook constantly, his hands trembled, and he walked with great difficulty."²⁵

Without being clear which condition precipitates the other, medical researchers now identify a very close relationship between heart disease and clinical depression. Foster was clearly plagued by both. Like many stroke victims, perhaps particularly those who had possessed great strength and endurance before the illness, he lost confidence in his abilities. He was often anxious, a condition that stood in stark contrast to the coolness he had displayed in even the worst situations before the early 1930s. For several years after his recovery, he required assistance crossing the busy streets near the party's Union Square headquarters. When he did speak publicly, he cut his usually long speeches to a minimum and always had a small glass of gin, indistinguishable from water, on the rostrum, apparently to steady his nerves. Oddly, Foster, who abstained from alcohol most of his life, never took a drink but he clearly derived some security from the glass being there. Some of these insecurities diminished over time, but he always seemed to be measuring out his strength so as not to risk another collapse. Foster estimated that he never regained more than half of his former stamina. This frustrated him enormously, but he "learned to live with himself." Foster's highly disciplined workdays at his small, crowded apartment near Yankee Stadium in the South Bronx involved a kind of ritual "to prevent the leakage of time": "So many hours for sleep, up early in the morning (6:00 a.m.) to scan the morning newspaper, then to write a thousand words."²⁶

Footnote 23 continued

File 270, 224; document number 61-330-485; *Daily Worker*, September 15, 22, 1932, 1; Foster quote, "Pre-Plenum Meeting ... , March 23, 1939," 3.

²⁴Foster to Lozovsky, October 19, 1933, Foster Personnel File, Comintern Papers, f. 495, op. 66, ll. 41-44.

²⁵Foster to Browder, March 7, 1934, Browder Papers, Microfilm Edition, Reel 1, Section 29; Sam Darcy to James R. Barrett, November 6, 1986, letter in possession of the author.

²⁶Gil Green, interview by author, New York City, March 10, 1994; Paul Douglas, *Six Upon the World* (Boston: Little, Brown 1954), quote, 118-119. On the close relationship between depression and heart disease, see *New York Times*, January 14, 1997, 1, 8. (I thank David Montgomery for calling my attention to the medical research). On Foster's work routine in the postwar era, see also Arthur Zipser, taped comments in response to questions from James R. Barrett, November 28, 1986; Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism*, 268; and Steve Nelson, James R. Barrett, and Rob Ruck, *Steve Nelson, American*

In the wake of this severe crisis, Foster reinvented himself, turning to two types of writing. First, he drew on his vast experience and reputation as a “practical” militant for a series of pamphlets aimed at industrial union organizers. His *Organizing Methods in the Steel Industry* (New York, 1935) became what Elizabeth Cohen calls a “blueprint for CIO policy.” Loaded with detailed advice, this and similar pamphlets often included remarkable insights.²⁷ They represented a sort of substitute for the field organizing and speaking tours Foster was no longer capable of sustaining, allowing him to connect with the industrial work that he always stressed. Given the importance of communists in the industrial union organizing, these pamphlets and his continuing contacts with organizers gave Foster an important, if less direct role in the 1930s upsurge.²⁸

In the late 1930s, he turned to a far more ambitious project—his own life story. Why did he make this choice and why at this moment in his life? One possible motivation was simply his age and the recent brush with death. It would not have been unusual for a person with Foster’s experience to be thinking about the meaning of her/his life. The idea that the autobiographical impulse also was prompted by political considerations, however, is suggested not only by Foster’s declaration of his aims, but also by the whole trajectory of his career. Judging from the didactic quality of his memoirs, he did his writing “for the party” with regard to both his intended audience and the work’s function. He aimed for an audience composed primarily of party activists, in the U.S. certainly but perhaps also abroad—Soviet and Comintern leaders. In fact, the books were translated and read in socialist countries throughout the world. In this sense Foster, like other socialist autobiographers, saw himself placing his practical experience and insights at the service of the party, hoping activists and the movement would benefit from his story. Displacing his typical industrial organizing efforts to his writings, he may also have aimed to retain a place for himself in the party at a time when he was politically marginalized. At the very moment of the mass upsurge of the 1930s, precisely those activities he most prized had been placed well beyond the limits of his physical strength and endurance. As Browder centralized party authority in his own hands, he pushed Foster to the margins. Yet through his writing Foster remained a powerful symbol of the party, particularly among industrial organizers. “Although Browder supervised the behind-the-doors contacts with top CIO brokers,” veteran activist Dorothy Healey recalled, “most of us in the unions assumed that the Party’s chairman,

Footnote 26 continued

Radical (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981), 291. My thinking on the various aspects of Foster’s illness has been stimulated by conversation with Howard Berenbaum, Department of Psychology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

²⁷Steve Nelson, interview by author, November 1986; John Brophy, interview by William Goldsmith, Washington, DC, notes, Daniel Bell Papers, addendum, Box 1, Folder 20, Tamiment Institute, New York University; Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago 1919–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 314; Foster, *A Manual of Industrial Unionism*, quoted in Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, fn. 39, 502. The pamphlets included *Unionizing Steel* (New York: Workers’ Library Publishers, 1936); *Organizing Methods in the Steel Industry* (New York: Workers’ Library Publishers, 1936); *What Means a Strike in Steel* (New York: Workers’ Library Publishers, 1937); *A Manual of Industrial Unionism Organizational Structure and Policies* (New York: Workers’ Library Publishers, 1937); *Railroad Workers, Forward!* (New York, 1938); and *Halt the Railroad Wage Cut* (New York: Workers’ Library Publishers, 1938).

²⁸On the importance of communist organizers in steel and elsewhere in the CIO, see Irving Bernstein, *The Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933–1941* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 451–455; Max Gordon, “The Communist Party and the Drive to Organize Steel, 1936,” *Labor History* 23 (1982): 254, 257–258; Bet Cochran, *Labor and Communism: The Conflict that Shaped American Unions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 96–97; Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 227–238.

William Z. Foster, was an equal spokesman when it came to trade union affairs ... In our eyes he remained the authoritative public spokesman on issues confronting the labor movement."²⁹

His autobiographical writing can no more be taken as a direct and unmediated reflection of Foster's personality than any other personal narrative. Autobiography, Phillippe LeJeune writes, "is necessarily in its deepest sense a special kind of fiction, its self and its truth as much created as discovered realities." Regina Gagnier suggests that workers' biographies are best used "not as historians have, as data of varying degrees of reliability reflecting external conditions, but as texts revealing subjective identities embedded in diverse social and material circumstances." Most important are the narrative choices an author makes and the plot he or she develops in telling the story. What we learn from Foster's autobiographies comes partly through silences—his calculated inattention to his own personal identity and relationships—and partly through the structure of the narratives in his two autobiographical works.³⁰

In 1937 Foster published *From Bryan to Stalin*, which he accurately described as not so much an autobiography as "A contribution to the history of left wing trade unionism in the United States during the past forty years" and an "outline of the development of the Communist Party."³¹ Both books, which were rather well reviewed in the mainstream press, served important functions for the party. Organizational in form, formulaic in tone, *From Bryan to Stalin* stood in for an official party history until Foster produced *History of the Communist Party of the United States* (New York, 1952). Reflecting Foster's explicit goals in writing it, *From Bryan to Stalin* is peculiarly impersonal. He divides his narrative into pre-Communist Party and post-Communist Party sections. In the first, Foster himself enters the story only through his organizational efforts. Even then, the real genius he displayed in some of these early efforts has no independent role, but is subordinated to the narrative of movement building, with all roads leading toward communism. In the section of the book dealing with the Communist Party and its various organizational efforts, Foster hardly appears at all. When he does, he refers to himself in the third rather than the first person, as if not to distract readers from the narrative of party development. The book is full of individuals but not personalities. People enter the story in so far as they affect the success or failure of the movement.

Two years later Foster published *Pages from a Worker's Life*, a series of fascinating, often humorous, sometimes touching pieces drawn from his experiences at work and on the road. *Pages* offered a more personal, anecdotal perspective: "the hopes and illusions, the comedy and tragedy, the exploitation and struggles of an American worker's life." Right around the same time Foster was writing *Pages* he criticized communists and other radicals for a "hyper-objective tendency" and being "too cold and impersonal" in their mass agitation, a flaw that created "a barrier to establishing the broadest

²⁹Dorothy Healey and Maurice Isserman, *Dorothy Healey Remembers: A Life in the Communist Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 74–75. On Foster's influence on organizers in a range of industries, see Herbert March, interview, October 21, 1986, 17–18, 27, United Packing House Workers of America Oral History Project, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison; Vicky Starr, interview, August 4, 1986, 915, 921, *ibid.*; *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers*, ed. Alice and Staughton Lynd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 74–75; Art Shields, *On the Battle Lines, 1919–1939* (New York, 1986), 217; and Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 314, 502.

³⁰Phillippe LeJeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. with a foreword by Paul John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), ix; Regina Gagnier, "The Literary Standard, Working Class Autobiography, and Gender," in *Revealing Lives: Autobiography, Biography, and Gender*, ed. Susan Groag Bell and Marilyn Yalom (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 94.

³¹William Z. Foster, *Pages from a Worker's Life*, 11.

mass contacts.” Communists and other progressives must bring a “human element” into their work. Perhaps, as Ed Johanningsmeier has suggested, this new memoir was an effort in that direction. Certainly it was more engaging than his previous effort. But it is still difficult to chart any sort of personal development, something that clearly held little interest for Foster. Indeed, here there is no explicit plot at all, just “sketches, recollections and snapshots.” He understood even this more personal book in explicit, rather narrow political terms, emphasizing “the forces that led me to arrive at my present opinions.”³²

Judged by the standards of bourgeois autobiography, then, as personal investigations, both books were failures. Yet Foster’s neglect of the personal was not an oversight, but a conscious narrative choice and to some degree also a reflection of his personality. As his friend and fellow Wobbly Elizabeth Gurley Flynn observed in her review of Foster’s autobiographical works, “[*From Bryan to Stalin*] was a veritable guide book to the American labor movement in the past half century.” If you wanted to know something about the “actual experiences of Bill Foster,” however, they had to be “glimpsed between the lines.” Even when Foster did recount personal experience, as in *Pages from a Worker’s Life*, “there is no ego here; no cultivated ‘complex’; no soul searching to find himself; no personal glory, amorous conquests nor ‘success’ recipes ... This is the key to Foster,” Flynn concluded. “He lives and moves and has his being as a worker; conscious of his class and its struggles, its needs and what its final aims must be. He has no personal life nor ambition outside of theirs.”³³

Peculiarly impersonal from the perspective of bourgeois autobiography, with its emphases on the individual, the personal, and self-realization, Foster’s personal narrative is characteristic of radical and, to some degree, most working-class memoir literature. This notion of the individual as “social atom” is, as Regina Gagnier notes, characteristic of working-class autobiography more generally and helps to distinguish it from the more introspective bourgeois genre. Foster’s tendency to stress the insignificance of the personal and to subordinate the individual to the collective is predictably strong not only in American communist personal narratives, but also in the memoirs of socialist revolutionaries worldwide, though his autobiographies provide a particularly striking case.³⁴

To the extent that *Pages* can be taken in some sense as a reflection of Foster’s life, what is perhaps most remarkable about its episodes is the almost total absence of women. The most striking case is Esther Abramovitz Foster, the remarkable woman whom he met in 1912 and married soon after and with whom he lived until his death in 1961. A Russian Jewish immigrant garment worker, Esther was an anarchist militant, a free love advocate, and the mother of three children (none of them with Foster, who from his early syndicalist days counseled revolutionaries against raising families). Friends might describe their relationship as warm and loving, but Foster’s few references to her are all very impersonal. He dedicated *From Bryan to Stalin* to her, but

³² William Z. Foster, *Pages from a Worker’s Life*, 11; William Z. Foster, “The Human Element in Mass Agitation,” *Communist* 18 (1939): 346–352, quotes, 347, 349; Johanningsmeier, *Forging*, 27–71.

³³ Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, “The Life of a Great American Working Class Leader,” *Communist* 18 (1939): 476–477.

³⁴ Regina Gagnier, “Social Atoms: Working-Class Autobiography, Subjectivity, and Gender,” *Victorian Studies* 30 (1987): 338; John Burnett, David Vincent, and David Mayall, eds., *The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated Critical Bibliography*, vol. I (New York: New York University Press, 1984), xvii–xxix. See also Maynes, *Taking the Hard Road*, 33; and Diane Koenker, “Scripting the Revolutionary Worker Autobiography: Archetypes, Models, Interventions, and Markets,” 8, forthcoming in Marina Balina, ed., *Fictions of the Self: Rethinking Contemporary Russian Autobiography*.

described her in characteristic political terms: “An intelligent and devoted comrade ... my constant companion and a tower of strength to me in all my activities for these many years.” Esther maintained a very low profile throughout their married life—and certainly in Foster’s memoirs. Foster mentions her once in the 345-page *From Bryan to Stalin*, in a brief paragraph concerning her role in his Syndicalist League of North America, once in *Pages*, in relation to his recovery from his illness, and almost never in any of his other writings.³⁵

Foster’s silence about Esther and heterosexual relationships more generally is explained in part at least by the homosocial worlds he inhabited much of his life. His early work environments—isolated lumber and metal mining camps and saw mills, sailing ships, and railroad freight yards and boxcars—were exclusively male settings. His life as a hobo was also an experience that accentuated both male bonding and the alienation typical of transient workers’ lives. In *From Bryan to Stalin* individuals are mentioned only in relation to particular organizations or political activities, never in terms of their relationships with Foster. *Pages from a Worker’s Life* contains a few references to personal friends and companions from these early years, but these are virtually all to other men. To the extent that Foster developed the kind of close personal relationships that Brown and Faue argue were crucial to sustaining the left, and it is difficult to judge this from his narratives, such relationships were most likely with men who shared not only his political orientation but also his personal experiences as itinerant worker and organizer. Likewise, although he mentioned and sometimes worked with women comrades, Foster’s political spaces, populated largely by men, resonated with an ostentatiously proletarian and “muscular” form of trade union-based politics. This was true of his TUEL circle and his Chicago Communist Party faction in the 1920s (“a rough-and-ready group” with “few niceties in mutual relations”), and his earlier engagements with the left wing of the Socialist Party, the IWW, and his own succession of syndicalist groups. The Communist Party was far more open to women’s participation and even leadership than most heterosocial organizations of the time, but very few women served in the top leadership during Foster’s first decade in the party. The proportion of women on the central committee rose throughout the 1930s, but Foster’s illness largely removed him from these circles in the years preceding his autobiographical writing in the late 1930s. He had a close friendship with Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, another “old Wobbly,” throughout his life, and he apparently had at least two extramarital affairs. Yet Foster’s worlds of work and politics were largely male worlds.³⁶

Fortunately, in trying to understand Foster, we can draw not only on his own

³⁵William Z. Foster, *From Bryan to Stalin*, 59; Lucy Robbins Lang, *Tomorrow is Beautiful* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 49; Paul Douglas, *Six upon the World*, 119. See also Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of Labor* (New York: Duffield and Co., 1907), 290–291.

³⁶Brown and Faue, “Social Bonds, Sexual Politics, and Political Community,” 15–27. On the gendered quality of the party’s propaganda and line during the Third Period, when Foster was in his element, see Van Gosse, “To Organize in Every Neighborhood, in Every Home: The Gender Politics of American Communists between the Wars,” *Radical History Review* 50 (1991): 109–142. On the “Foster group’s” subculture in 1920s party, see Alexander Bittelman, manuscript autobiography, Alexander Bittelman Papers, Tamiment Institute, New York University, 398–399 (quotes), 407–408, 434–435. On women in the party leadership, see Harvey Klehr, *Communist Cadre: The Social Background of the American Communist Party Elite* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), 70–82. On the homosocial world of the migratory worker and hobo, see Frank T. Higbie, “Indispensable Outcasts: Seasonal Laborers and Community in the Upper Midwest” (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1999). On Foster’s affairs, see Klehr, *Communist Cadre*, 72 and Johanningsmeier, *Forging*, 324.

writings, but also on the observations of those who knew him. During his early party career Foster's insecurity found expression particularly in the realm of theory, where he clearly felt inadequate. These tendencies became more pronounced in the Popular Front years, when the Communist International encouraged activists to work in broad political formations with reformist organizations and to focus less on revolutionary transformation and more on the struggle against fascism.³⁷ Foster visualized himself as a class warrior and was simply far less comfortable than Browder with the more expansive theoretical renderings and the social democratic drift of the Popular Front era. Less theoretically inclined than that of other party leaders, his own thinking remained what political scientist and communist veteran Joseph Starobin called "an amalgam of his trade union origins and his 'fundamentalist' understanding of Marxism."³⁸ Having matured politically in the rough and tumble world of hobos and industrial workers, strikes, and Wobbly free speech fights, Foster based much of his approach to revolutionary change on his experiences in the labor movement. Nor surprisingly, perhaps, he preferred the company of radical workers, and not only because their ideas and strategies seemed to square better with his own, but also because he felt more comfortable around them than with intellectuals and professionals. Yet Foster's apparent anti-intellectualism was more complex than it appeared. Though clearly not a profound thinker, he had an active intellect and read widely—history, biography, and science, as well as politics—and enjoyed classical and folk music. He had a great love of learning from an early age. The disregard Browder and other leaders showed for his ideas clearly bothered him.

Foster's career as a party leader was one of repeated frustrations, notably with the party's persistent, humiliating factionalism, which often derailed his projects to radicalize the American labor movement. He clashed repeatedly with Jay Lovestone, the party's consummate factionalist, and bitterly opposed the 1928 international turn from "boring from within" to dual revolutionary unions, a tendency he had fought throughout his adult life. After a long conflict, Foster lost control of his own faction and came close to expulsion before finally capitulating. Stalin was particularly irritated with Foster's factionalism and the enduring effects of his struggle against Lovestone. Up to this point, Foster's politics had been shaped by his strong syndicalist tendencies and an eclectic application of his own ideas and experiences to party policy, an approach some party activists called "Fosterism." His final capitulation on the issue of dual unionism marked a decisive turn in his career. His role in the factionalism of the late 1920s and his stubborn resistance to the dual union line—all carefully noted in his Comintern

³⁷On the Communist International's declaration of the Popular Front at its Seventh World Congress in the summer of 1935 and the broader political and cultural implications in the U.S., see Fraser Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States: From Depression to World War II* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 75–105; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York and London: Verso, 1996), 3–7, *passim*.

³⁸Joseph Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis, 1943–1957* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), quote, 54; Gil Green, interview by Anders Stephanson, in Michael E. Brown et al., eds., *New Studies in the Politics and History of U.S. Communism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993), 310. On Foster's feelings of inadequacy regarding theory, see Sam Darcy, interview by Theodore Draper, May 11–15, 1957, microfilm series 2.3, roll 8, Theodore Draper Papers, Woodruff Library, Emory University; Benjamin Gitlow, *I Confess* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1940), 191. For an emotional and revealing acknowledgement of his own limitations as a theoretician and party leader, see Foster's remarks before a closed 1939 national committee meeting. ("Pre-Plenum Meeting of the National Committee, March 23, 1939," typed stenogram, p. 3, Philip Jaffe Papers, Box 35, Folder 4, Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, microfilmed material, reel 1.)

file—cost him leadership of the party. It went instead to Foster's "clerk" and "man Friday," Earl Browder, who reigned throughout the party's heyday in the 1930s and World War II. James P. Cannon, who knew both men well, recalled "The appointment of Browder to the first position in the Party with Foster subordinated to the role of honorary public figure without authority, really rubbed Foster's nose in the dirt." In this sense, Foster's crisis had practical political effects. Conversely, these political effects shaped his psychological state in the depression and war years. When he regained the upper hand with the reassertion of orthodox Marxism–Leninism at the end of the war, it was on the eve of severe political repression and decline. He spent his final years in the mid-1950s locked in another factional battle, defending orthodoxy against those who sought to reform the party along more democratic lines.³⁹

Oddly perhaps for one who steeped himself in American work environments and consciously identified with American radical traditions, Foster sustained himself throughout his career with international connections and recognition. His early travels in Europe before World War I provided him a purer form of syndicalism that linked him with revolutionaries throughout Europe and influenced his approach long after joining the party. On the heels of the steel strike defeat, he found exhilaration and vindication of his strategies on his first trip to Soviet Russia, where he was pleased to learn that Lenin had read his book on the strike. Elected to the executive committees of both the Communist International and the Red International of Labor Unions, Foster visited the Soviet Union frequently and maintained relationships with communist leaders throughout the world. Often viewed as a "practical" trade union communist in his own party, he eventually found recognition abroad as a great Marxist thinker. The historical works he produced during the 1950s might meet with contempt in his own country, but their translations into Russian, Polish, German, French, Italian, Japanese, and other languages brought adulation in the international communist press. They introduced the U.S. to a generation of youth and party activists in the Soviet bloc. In March 1956, on his 75th birthday, in the midst of severe government repression and a dramatic decline in party membership, on the eve of the organization's greatest crisis, Foster set his eyes on the Soviet world and remained optimistic. "In this period of capitalist decay and socialist advance," he told the crowd of well-wishers, "It gives me the boundless satisfaction of knowing that my life's efforts have been spent on the side of progress, and that the great socialist cause is marching on rapidly to triumph throughout the world." Foster was particularly thrilled when at the very end of his life he received an honorary professorship at Moscow State University in recognition for his writing. In his view, this "splendid and exclusive honor" was the highest form of recognition for a Marxist intellectual.⁴⁰

³⁹Quote, James P. Cannon, *The First Ten Years of American Communism* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1962), 114; Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis*, 224–237; Stalin's speech before the Anglo-American Secretariat of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, May 6, 1929, quoted at length in *Spravka* signed by Comrade Nisov, July 4, 1938, f. 495, op. 66, d. 261, l. 73, Comintern Papers, RGASPI and "secret memo" by Comrade Belov, January 15, 1938, ll. 69–70 in Comintern Papers, RGASPI. On Foster's final struggles against the "revisionism" of the mid-1950s, see Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism*, 255–267, and on the general context for the fight, Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 1–34.

⁴⁰William Z. Foster, "Birthday Speech," March 9, 1956, William Z. Foster Papers, f. 615, op. 1, d. 65, l. 7; Bill to Esther, Sylvia, and Joe, Moscow, March 23, 1961, William Z. Foster Papers, f. 615, op. 1, d. 6, l. 85. See also Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism*, 247–249, 256–257, 269, 270.

What can all this personal stuff tell us? The easiest piece of the story for us to grasp is the political significance of the personal crisis. Foster's breakdown, his long and painful recovery, his loss of confidence were all *products* in some sense of his political work over the previous decade or longer. At the same time they had political *effects*, removing him from the field at a critical turning point in the party's history; clearing away the personality most clearly identified with its proletarian elements and the Third Period's class war rhetoric; making room for Browder, the person most clearly identified with the Americanist reform language of the Popular Front.

We are all still on familiar ground here—putting the personal experience in the broader (and presumably more important) political context. But what happens when we turn to less familiar terrain and try to place the political in the context of human experience and personal development? At the very least, Foster's physical and psychological illnesses and particularly his crisis of confidence throughout the 1930s suggest the enormous personal toll revolutionary politics could exact from even (or perhaps particularly from) as tough and highly disciplined an individual as Foster.⁴¹ More broadly, Foster's story begins to suggest some fit between personal experience and political expression. His early insecurities, for example, rooted in material conditions, and his later ones, rooted in party factionalism, each contributed to particular ideological inclinations, the first to his quest for system and method, the latter to his tendency toward Marxist–Leninist orthodoxy.

Foster's and other communist memoirs, as well as the large spate of personal narratives produced over the past two decades through the collaboration of New Left with Old, all suggest a tendency to submerge the personal in the political. While most communist autobiographers made this decision to eschew the details of personal life, however, gender seems to make a difference. Men's memoirs—of those who remained in the party as well as those who left long before writing—are very short on personal information and largely devoid of emotional content. Any personal narrative is subordinated to the story of movement building. Women party activists, representing well over one-third of party membership during the Popular Front era, were also supremely political people. "As to the personal problems each of us had," Peggy Dennis wrote, "none of us was equipped by our Party experience to respond to each other on a simple human level ... I was too calm, too impersonal, too political." In fact, Dorothy Healey recalled, for the party "there was no such thing as a division between your personal and your political life. You were supposed to be totally selfless and dedicated to the revolution."⁴² But the balance between the personal and the political in women's memoirs, including those by Dennis and Healey, is different from that in the male narratives. They were more likely to deal with relationships and emotions, to structure their stories around crises that were personal as well as political. Anyone interested in grasping the personal dimensions of the communist experience is much more likely to find them in the autobiographies and interviews of women veterans than in the best of the male narratives.⁴³ Still, the political overwhelms the personal in both groups of memoirs. Why?

⁴¹The personal toll emerges most clearly perhaps in the memoirs of Bolshevik women activists in the midst and in the wake of the Russian Revolution. See, for example, Barbara Clements, *Bolshevik Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁴²Peggy Dennis, *The Autobiography of an American Communist: A Personal View of a Political Life, 1925–1975* (Westport: Lawrence Hill and Co., 1977), 215; Healey and Isserman, *Dorothy Healey Remembers*, 30. See also Vivian Gornick, *The Romance of American Communism* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 57.

⁴³Ellen Kay Trimberger, "Women in the Old and New Left: The Evolution of a Politics of Personal

The proletarian writer Joseph Freeman developed a close relationship with Foster in the late 1920s and made an observation in the midst of his friend's personal crisis that seems to apply to other veteran communists. "Foster talked chiefly about the class war," Freeman noted, and only mentioned personal experiences to make some broader political point. "Actually, Foster was a man of wide cultural interests; his library was as full of literary classics as of socialist classics ... But when he questioned me about Europe, he wanted to know about the trade unions, the growth of the communist movement, international politics. Anything he said about himself was a parenthetical illustration of a general law of revolutionary strategy or a trade-union principle." Foster tended to see personal conduct and values strictly in relation to the political struggle, Freeman wrote. "The problems of personal conduct which agitated us in the [Greenwich] Village, did not seem to matter to him. He was ascetic by a standard which determined all his actions. The class struggle was the most important thing in the world, and for that struggle he wanted to keep physically, mentally, and morally fit." Most significantly, Freeman found that Foster identified so closely and personally with the working class that his own identity tended to fuse with that of his class. His recollections echo Gurley Flynn's observations about Foster's tendency to describe his own experiences as part of the class struggle. "Within the Party, Foster had an engaging modesty," Freeman wrote, "but in contact with the class enemy there emerged a powerful pride in which his person and his class were identical."⁴⁴

This fusion of personal identity with political struggle, which is apparent in so many communist memoirs, undoubtedly made Foster a brilliant organizer, but it limited his ability and language in analyzing and understanding his own personal situation. His

Footnote 43 continued

Life," *Feminist Studies* 5 (1979): 432–449; for similar observations regarding Russian, German, French, and English militants' memoirs see Koenker, "Scripting the Revolutionary Worker Autobiography," 10; Maynes, *Taking the Hard Road*; and Gagnier, "Social Atoms." The American communist memoir literature is voluminous. For examples of male memoirs, see, for example, Nelson, Barrett, and Ruck, *Steve Nelson*; Nell Irvin Painter, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979); John Williamson, *Dangerous Scot: The Life and Work of an American "Undesirable"* (New York: International Publishers, 1969); Hosea Hudson, *Black Worker in the Deep South* (New York: International Publishers, 1972); Ben Davis, *Communist Councilman from Harlem* (New York: International Publishers, 1969); George Blake Charney, *A Long Journey* (Chicago: Quadrangle Press, 1968); Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago: Liberator Press, 1978); Shields, *On the Battle Lines*; Al Richmond, *Long View from the Left* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973). For examples of the women veterans' narratives, see Dennis, *Autobiography of an American Communist*; Healey and Isserman, *Dorothy Healey Remembers*; Jessica Mitford, *A Fine Old Conflict* (New York: Knopf, 1977); Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *I Speak My Own Piece: Autobiography of the Rebel Girl* (New York: International Publishers, 1955); Vera Buch Weisbord, *A Radical Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977); Christina Looper Baker, *In a Generous Spirit: A First-Person Biography of Myra Page* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996). For two biographies that successfully develop both the personal and the political, see Martin B. Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1988); and Rosalyn Baxandall, *Words on Fire: The Life and Writings of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987). Vivian Gornick, *The Romance of American Communism*, which is based on interviews with veterans of the movement, demonstrates that it is possible to trivialize the political by *over-emphasizing* the personal.

⁴⁴Joseph Freeman, *An American Testament* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1936), 294–295. Adulation of Foster's selfless devotion to the cause emerges clearly in the celebration of his 60th birthday before a crowd of 18,000 in Madison Square Garden. See *Daily Worker*, March 16, 1941, Section 1, p. 6, Section 2, p. 4; March 18, 1941, pp. 1, 3, 7; Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 652, fn. 35. The dictionary definition for the term "ascetic"—"anyone who lives with strict self-discipline and abstinence"—seems quite appropriate (*Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language*, Unabridged Second Edition [New York: Fawcett Popular Library, 1983], 108). I do not subscribe to the Freudian use of the term that suggests

asceticism facilitated while it rationalized the extreme sacrifices and deprivation he endured throughout much of his life, but it also made it difficult for him to deal with personal crisis and particularly with the crisis of confidence he faced in the 1930s. The strikingly impersonal quality of his life narratives undoubtedly reflected the conscious conviction of a devoted revolutionary that the personal simply did not count, but the submergence of the self in the struggle was also a reflection of Foster's personality.

It may be, however, that the whole notion of a "private life" needs redefining in the case of revolutionaries. Wendy Goldman writes: "dedication to an ideal of revolution in a revolutionary situation is synonymous with a fully 'public' life." The human and individual costs can be enormous and should be a part of the story we tell. "But the gains were great as well. The powerful sense of comradeship as something going deeper than friendship or love, the sense of mission and purpose, the feeling of possibility, the new avenues for talents, potentials never before known, the excitement ... the power to create a new future."⁴⁵ It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to reduce this experience to an emotional balance sheet, but the personal dimension of the experience is relevant and worth exploring. Even if it is only political motivation that we seek to understand, it seems likely that the more personal aspects of life are relevant.

To avoid misunderstanding, let me conclude by explaining what I am *not* suggesting. The last time issues of personal psychology were raised in relation to American communism was during the 1950s, when the movement was analyzed not as the product of social and economic conflicts, but rather as a form of psychological deviance. This idea of communism as neurosis permeates much of the Cold War era analysis of the CPUSA, though its roots are older.⁴⁶ Some scholars explained communist activism as the product of "social disorganization" leading to feelings of isolation and vulnerability, others as a form of secular religion fulfilling deeply rooted human needs. Most employed some kind of psychological approach to explain what they viewed as a political aberration. After interviewing nearly 300 former communists and considering a range of answers to the question "Why did they join?," Morris Ernst and David Loth concluded: "The party would appear to be heavily populated with the handicapped—some of them physically, but more of them psychologically, to a point that might be called emotionally crippling ... In the Communist party they find a certain amount of relief, often temporary, but always welcome."⁴⁷

In *The Appeals of Communism*, perhaps the most sophisticated of these studies, Gabriel Almond and his colleagues analyzed the question of motivation comparatively,

Footnote 44 continued

an ideal personality type who unconsciously derives political principles and behavior as the result of "displaced libido." See Bruce Mazlish, *The Revolutionary Ascetic: Evolution of a Political Type* (New York: Basic Books, 1976). Compare the Freeman quote with Vorse's observation, cited above: "He lives completely outside the circle of self ... swallowed up by the strike's enormity. What happens to Foster does not matter to him."

⁴⁵Wendy Z. Goldman to James Barrett, October 18, 2000.

⁴⁶For what may be the seminal work, see Harold D. Lasswell, *Psychopathology and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930), which explained such allegiances and behavior in terms of Freud's categories of childhood personality development and Oedipal conflicts. The subject's ambivalent relationship to his father was displaced to the political movement. (Lasswell and his followers tended to assume male subjects.)

⁴⁷Morris Ernst and David Loth, *Report on the American Communist* (New York: Henry Holt, 1952), 127. For a summary of postwar approaches to explaining Communist motivation, see Gabriel Almond et. al., *The Appeals of Communism* (Princeton, 1954), 183–185. See also Eric Heffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951); Nathan Leites, *A Study of Bolshevism* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1953).

using a sample of 221 former communists in France, Italy, England, and the U.S. It was misleading, they concluded, to speak of *an appeal*; “rather we must talk of types of appeals, to various types of persons, in different kinds of situations.” Still, “types of neurotic susceptibility” loomed large in their analysis. Noting that the incidence of neurotic isolation was higher among American and British subjects, they attributed much of their motivation to hostility, self-rejection, or isolation. “The image of the Communist militant is that of a dignified, special person, dedicated, strong, confident of the future ... These aspects of Communism have an obvious attraction for persons who carry within themselves feelings of being weak and unworthy.”⁴⁸

Psychohistorians embraced Freudian theories in the 1960s and 1970s. While somewhat different in their interpretations of particular individuals, many believed it was possible to identify an ideal “revolutionary personality.” Bruce Mazlish combined Weber’s notions of ascetics and charisma with Freud’s of displaced libido, uneven psychological development, and the crisis of adulthood to produce a new personality type—the “revolutionary ascetic.” He traced this revolutionary type all the way back to the Puritan revolutionary and then transformed him into a Bolshevik in the early 20th century. Both Wolfenstein and Mazlish were confident in employing rather abstract personality theories to generalize over hundreds of years of political agitation and conflict in strikingly diverse political and cultural settings.⁴⁹

Today most psychologists have abandoned the quest for ideal personality types. Their Cold War political and intellectual context helps to explain these psychological theories, just as our own situation in the post-communist era undoubtedly shapes our interpretations of communist militants in various settings. In their case, a particularly optimistic reading of postwar American politics and living standards produced the search for a psychological explanation for the “aberration” of American communism. With the fall of communism and the rise of more conservative interpretations of the party’s history, perhaps such theories will re-emerge as some scholars return to a view of American communism as an irrational malignancy.

Yet for decades, communist movements throughout the world won and held the loyalty of millions of people from a wide variety of class and cultural backgrounds. To employ psychology as the ultimate explanation for the development of such social and political movements is to oversimplify a complex political phenomenon and understate the significance of both individual and group reason and agency. The rise and fall of major social movements cannot hinge on the psychological states of even their more important participants. They are best understood in terms of the broad social, economic, and political contexts within which they operated, rather than as collections of more or less neurotic individuals.

It seems reasonable to consider psychological, as well as social and political, factors that influenced a person to join the party, sustained them through decades of thankless work and extreme hardship, and perhaps eventually shaped their decision, in the midst of the party’s ultimate crisis, to leave or to stay. But only if one concedes that such factors are at work in all political commitments and indeed in other types of individual dedication to impersonal goals. As historian Leo Ribuffo puts it, “Earl Browder entered

⁴⁸Almond, *Appeals of Communism*, 260–261, 279.

⁴⁹E. Victor Wolfenstein, *The Revolutionary Personality: Lenin, Trotsky and Ghandi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967); Bruce Mazlish, *The Revolutionary Ascetic*.

public life to satisfy drives and dreams, but so did Herbert Hoover, Alfred E. Smith, and Abraham Lincoln.”⁵⁰

Much of the recent, more sympathetic scholarship on the Communist Party has tended to ignore this subjective dimension of the experience.⁵¹ Psychological factors and personal relationships are apt to show up more frequently in personal narratives and correspondence, particularly in accounts of the extreme pressure brought to bear on cadres during the political repression, underground activity, and subsequent factional struggles of the 1950s. To consider psychological along with other factors at the level of individual motivation and rationalization can be an important interpretive strategy, one that historians of social movements as well as biographers might use to better understand the experiences and motivation of activists.

It is probably not a coincidence that labor historians have turned increasingly to biography over the past decade. A biographical approach to American communism and other aspects of working-class life allows us to consider elements of individual development and personality in relation to broader social and political contexts. Foster’s own politics were molded in part by the subjective—his individual personality—which in turn was shaped by experiences in his childhood and early adult life, by the crises he faced at various points in his life, and by the quality of the relationships he forged. But they were also shaped by his experiences in a variety of industrial and political situations, by his own efforts to understand these, and, finally, by the exigencies of life in an international Marxist–Leninist party.

Foster’s trouble grasping the personal dimension of his crisis tell us something not only about him and other working-class revolutionaries, but perhaps also about ourselves as labor historians. We have been experiencing our own crisis in the past few years, one that involves the place of the subjective in our understanding of historical change: problems of personal identity, emotion, and experience and the relationship of these to what we term “politics.”⁵² Foster’s story suggests *both* the importance of considering this relationship and the fact that it was sometimes as difficult for our historical subjects to grasp its meaning as it seems to be for us.

⁵⁰Leo Ribuffo, “The Complexity of American Communism,” in Ribuffo, *Left, Right, and Center* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 149.

⁵¹For an exception, see Brown and Faue, “Social Bonds, Sexual Politics, and Political Community.”