

ARTICLE

SIDNEY HOOK'S PRAGMATIC ANTI-COMMUNISM: COMMITMENT TO DEMOCRACY AS METHOD

Courtney Ferriter

ABSTRACT

In recent years, opposition to Communism has emerged as Sidney Hook's central philosophical legacy in the eyes of scholars and historians, who tend to ignore all of Hook's pre-Cold War philosophical contributions. Furthermore, critics who treat Hook's anti-Communism often accuse him of abandoning pragmatism for dogmatism in his later career. In this essay, I argue that Hook's long-standing fight against Communism should be understood as an unwavering application of the democratic method in line with his mentor John Dewey's understanding of pragmatism as well as the commitment to scientific empiricism espoused by earlier pragmatists C. S. Peirce and William James.

Sidney Hook's intellectual legacy is steeped in controversy. Matthew Bagger calls Hook "an unjustly neglected figure [whose] relative obscurity owes [in part] to his renown as a cold warrior, which repelled the generation of scholars that came of age in the late nineteen sixties and seventies."¹ Indeed, for many scholars, a first point of reference for Sidney Hook is not pragmatism, nor even Hook's teacher and mentor John Dewey, but Hook's staunch commitment to anti-Communism. In 2004, Richard Rorty wrote of him that "at the present time (if perhaps not forever) our major interest in Hook will be in his crusade against the influence of Stalinism on US intellectual and political life,"² an assertion that has yet to be disproven in the years since. With few exceptions, critical scholarship surrounding Hook since the 1980s has tended to focus primarily on his anti-Communism, from the Committee for Cultural Freedom to the Waldorf Conference to Hook's denouncement and suggested suspension of academics who were Communist Party members. Perhaps even worse, Hook has been lambasted for being so swept up in his anti-Communist agenda that his stance becomes distinctly non-pragmatic. On this point, Robert Talisse writes that philosophers who consider Hook at all often

read him as “abandoning Deweyan pragmatism for some awkward combination of analytic philosophy and conservative politics”³ in his later career. In popular culture, Hook has become a celebrated figure for the American Right,⁴ who laud him for his unyielding anti-Communist stances before and during the Cold War, as well as his later opposition to affirmative action and the adoption of multicultural curricula by colleges and universities. Hook received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Ronald Reagan in 1985, and the National Association of Scholars has presented its Sidney Hook Memorial Award to notable right-wing figures including Thomas Sowell and Gertrude Himmelfarb.

Considering the controversy Hook has generated among scholars and academics, as well as the way in which he has been generally overlooked or dismissed by leftist philosophers and intellectuals who condemn his hard line Cold War stances, it is vital for his intellectual legacy (as well as pragmatism’s wider reputation) to examine his anti-Communist views closely and to determine their relationship to his Deweyan pragmatism. My reading of Hook indicates that he should be viewed as less of a Cold War villain and more as a victim of misreading. Richard J. Bernstein has written that a common way of thinking about Freud’s writings on religion⁵ “does the greatest violence to what he is trying to show us,”⁶ and I contend that a parallel situation has occurred with Hook’s staunch anti-Communist stances before and during the Cold War. I will argue that Sidney Hook’s long-standing fight against Communism does not constitute a deviation from or betrayal of pragmatism, as some scholars have concluded. Rather, Hook’s unwavering commitment to democracy as method is in line with both his mentor John Dewey’s understanding of pragmatism as well as the commitment to scientific empiricism espoused by earlier pragmatist figures like Charles S. Peirce and William James. In spite of pragmatism’s decline in popularity around mid-century,⁷ Hook nevertheless succeeded in championing an engaged and politically active philosophy centered on the application of the democratic method.

Between his contributions to Cold War anti-Communist politics and his endorsements by conservative scholars and intellectuals as a man who represented traditional American values, it comes as little surprise that there is no love lost between Hook and politically left-leaning scholars or academics. Ruth R. Wisse has observed that in several volumes published on the New York Intellectuals (NYI)⁸ in the mid-1980s, Hook “emerges [as] a favorite antagonist.”⁹ Alan Wald, for example, accuses Hook of not only betraying the socialist, revolutionary views of his youth, but of refusing to admit it. On this point, he writes, “Hook would never acknowledge that the change in his views could be explained by social pressures brought on him and . . . a loss of ability to view the world from the class perspective of the oppressed.”¹⁰ Russell Jacoby is more straightforward about why scholars have not been particularly kind to Hook, arguing that leftists “feel little affection for a philosopher who worked nights to establish the grounds to exclude subversives, communists, and student radicals from universities. Hook’s publications relentlessly raise the alarm that leftists,

communists, radicals, and what he calls 'ritualist liberals' endanger freedom."¹¹ Tity de Vries points out that many biographers of the NYI accuse the group, Hook included, of "sell[ing] out their critical and non-conformist position,"¹² explaining that the NYI are primarily studied by "liberal and left historians, who either [deny] an increasing conservatism among the NYI or who [attack] them for becoming conservatives in the 1950s and 1960s."¹³ While the NYI typically have socialist roots, scholars have noted a general trend toward neoconservatism in them. (Hook denied this accusation, insisting that he remained a democratic socialist and criticizing neoconservative figures like Hilton Kramer.) Taken together, these portraits suggest a fairly strong bias against both Hook and the NYI by academics, scholars, and historians who view them as having forsaken their socialist, Marxist roots in favor of what Nathan Abrams has called an "alliance with the anticommunist hegemony."¹⁴

Arguably worse than Hook's habitual casting as the villain of narratives surrounding the NYI, he has also been accused of being unpragmatic in his anti-Communist views. Cornel West writes that Hook's attachment to "tendentious cold war ideology"¹⁵ clouded and overshadowed his commitment to Deweyan pragmatism. Similarly, Robert Westbrook argues in a review of Hook's memoir *Out of Step* that after his break with Communism in the mid-thirties, Hook maintained "an inflexibly essentialist conception of communism, [. . . which resulted in] a curiously unpragmatic way of looking at the world."¹⁶ In his critique of Hook's Cold War politics, John Capps specifically points to Hook's argument in favor of a policy that excluded members of the Communist Party from university teaching positions. Capps argues that far from being pragmatist, "Hook's position is much closer to the sort of logical argument characteristic of early analytic philosophy"¹⁷ and that such a position is "at odds with other elements of his philosophical identity as a pragmatist."¹⁸ In particular, Capps takes issue with Hook's lack of consideration for individual cases and circumstances in his haste to declare that being a card-carrying Communist "constituted prima facie grounds for dismissal."¹⁹ Similar to Capps, Edward Shapiro observes in Hook a "tendency to substitute dogmatism for empirical evidence [in] the 1950s, when Hook maintained on *a priori* grounds that Communists should not be allowed to teach"²⁰ in universities. Both Capps and Shapiro conclude that Hook's lack of attention to context is distinctly unpragmatic.

Despite the criticism and controversy that surround his political and philosophical positions, Hook retains a small contingent of support, mostly from scholars who examine the relationship between his pragmatist philosophy and his anti-Communist views. These scholars acknowledge that while Hook's philosophical stances became more polemic and perhaps even dogmatic by the end of his life, his initial disdain for Communism and his strong anti-Communist stances during the Cold War are rooted in and connected to his Deweyan pragmatism. Matthew Cotter points to "the dangers associated with discussing Hook's significance exclusively in terms of his anti-Communism,"²¹ as this is insufficient "for an evaluation of his life's

work in its full complexity.”²² Rather, Cotter highlights Hook’s “unflinching commitment to democracy as a way of life in the face of totalitarianism”²³ as a major defining quality of his thought. Avital Bloch explains that Hook “combined pragmatism, as a philosophical method, with anti-totalitarianism. He considered anti-totalitarianism a political belief that is the imperative conclusion of a pragmatist examination of politics.”²⁴ Considering Hook’s recommendation of suspending or firing Communist Party members among university faculty, Gary Bullert argues that Hook “was arguably applying the longstanding policy advocated by Dewey himself.”²⁵ Similarly, Robert Talisse contends that “there is nothing unpragmatic or anti-contextualist about [Hook’s stance]. To the contrary, when taken in the context of the Cold War and the threat the CP [Communist Party] was then reasonably believed to pose, it seems a fully pragmatic response.”²⁶ More recently, Laurence Jurdem has suggested that “his argument in favor of firing these academics returned Hook to his lessons in pragmatism, learned at the feet of John Dewey so many decades before, a pragmatism that stood as the key reason he had turned against Communism and the Soviet Union in the first place.”²⁷ Considered alongside one another, these critical examinations of Hook’s philosophy converge around the point that Hook’s anti-Communist views are more nuanced and more closely tied to his understanding of Dewey and pragmatism than other scholars have given him credit for.

My own argument adds to and extends the critical conversation surrounding the relationship between Hook’s pragmatism and anti-Communism by suggesting that Hook’s anti-Communist views are most accurately understood as an unwavering application of the democratic method. Furthermore, I connect Hook’s commitment to democracy as method with both Dewey’s understanding of democracy and the commitment to empiricism and scientific method espoused by Dewey’s and Hook’s classical pragmatist forerunners Charles S. Peirce and William James. In tracing a line of pragmatist figures who were all unyielding in their application of a method, I hope that scholars and historians of the Cold War, the New York Intellectuals, and twentieth-century pragmatism will see Hook in a new light and that future studies of Hook will add some much-needed nuance and complexity to his philosophical legacy.

Robert Talisse and Robert Tempio argue in the introduction to their edited collection of Sidney Hook’s essays that central to his political philosophy “is the radical conception of democracy that he inherited from John Dewey. It is with this conception that one must begin, and it is in the context of this conception that one must understand Hook’s other political commitments.”²⁸ Dewey saw democracy as cooperative and experimental, and he viewed freedom of thought as essential to maintaining a democratic society. In “Democracy and Education Administration,” Dewey argues, “The democratic idea of freedom is not the right of each individual to *do* as he pleases [. . . rather,] the basic freedom is that of freedom of *mind* and of whatever degree of freedom of action and experience is necessary to produce freedom of intelligence.”²⁹ He goes on to say that political democracy “must be

buttressed by the presence of democratic methods in all social relationships.”³⁰ In other words, Dewey believed that open and informed inquiry was of utmost importance to democracy and that democratic methods should be applied in the social as well as the political realm. Similarly, he writes in *Democracy and Education* that an undesirable society “is one which internally and externally sets up barriers to free intercourse and communication of experience.”³¹ Like Dewey, Hook viewed the abilities to freely collaborate, exchange ideas with others, and reach one’s own conclusions without being influenced by outside forces as cornerstones of democracy. Furthermore, Hook insisted on Dewey’s rule of applying the democratic method in social and political arenas alike to support free and open inquiry.

Democracy, for Hook, entails a commitment to a procedure and a method rather than any specific theory or belief system about how the world works. Talisse and Tempio argue that Hook opposed any movement that operated outside of democratic processes and any policy that could not be established using the democratic method.³² In fact, Hook believed that democracy had established itself as a superior social method. On this point, he argues,

Let us remember that when we are called upon to fight for democracy we are not asked to fight for an ideal which has just been proposed as a *merely possible* valid ideal for our times; we already have considerable evidence in its behalf, the weight of which, unfortunately too often, is properly evaluated by some critics only when democracy is lost or imperiled. We have every reason to believe that we are fighting for a truth [. . .] in contradistinction to others who fight for their truths, we are prepared to establish to reasonable men that democracy is the better alternative.³³

In Hook’s philosophy, democracy must be applied as a method; that is, there can be no absolutes in our beliefs about democracy except the way in which we test those beliefs. If society wavers in its application of democracy as a rule of living, then it ceases to follow the method and can no longer call itself democratic.

Hook’s commitment to method is evident from his earliest writings. In his dissertation *The Metaphysics of Pragmatism*, he argues that scientific rules or laws “can only be established by *experiment* and cannot be deduced from *a priori* notions or assumed to hold for one set of properties on the ground that they hold for any other.”³⁴ Here Hook emphasizes the necessity of experimentation as a means of verifying scientific principles—using the scientific method to test results. He later asks how a proposition is determined to be false and offers by way of response that it is “not by a leap of intuition but by a test of its implications—and the implication to be recognizable must be of a type which is evidenced in some *experienced context*.”³⁵ Thus, for Hook, testable, observable experience is critical to determining the truth or falsity of an idea, once again highlighting the importance of applying the scientific method to verify one’s results.

Hook applies his thinking about the scientific method—the notion that science is self-corrective—to his understanding of democracy. Because our society is ever changing and we are consistently faced with new situations or ideas, Hook advises that the most important question is “What *method* shall we follow in developing new beliefs and testing the old? For it is clear that no matter what belief we come to regard as valid, the evidence of its validity will depend in part, at least, upon the method which has been followed in reaching it.”³⁶ Hook identifies three values central to a democratic way of life: first, a belief in the “intrinsic worth or dignity”³⁷ of individuals; second, a belief in the value of diversity and variety; and finally, “a faith in some method by [which] conflicts are resolved.”³⁸ On this last point, Hook elaborates, “Since the method must be the test of all values, it would not be inaccurate to call it the basic value in the democratic way of life. [. . .] In a democracy it must be directed to all issues, to all conflicts, if democracy is not to succumb to the dangers which threaten it from both within and without.”³⁹ Therefore, the democratic method, which Hook equates with free and open inquiry and application of the scientific method, is the cornerstone of any society that calls itself a democracy. Throughout his life, Hook maintained that the “democratic process is more important than any predetermined program,”⁴⁰ and this ideal was particularly evident in his dealings with Communism.

In his early years, Hook had similarly viewed Marx’s dialectical method as an empirical method of verification. Christopher Phelps argues that in Hook’s 1933 volume *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*, Hook recommends “an experimental intellectual method, with knowledge considered hypothetical, fallible, and provisional, ideas held true only insofar as verifiable in experience or practice, and knowledge created and obtained, not solely received as sense-impression.”⁴¹ Like the scientific method, the dialectic method was experimental and its results were contingent upon verification in experience. Phelps concludes that for the young socialist Hook, “historical materialism *was* experimental naturalism,”⁴² and indeed, Hook himself writes in 1936 that “properly understood, dialectical materialism is a form of historical, experimental naturalism which stresses the role of human activity, under determinate conditions, in transforming the social world.”⁴³ Yet just four years later in 1940, Hook wrote a letter to Albert Einstein in which his view of dialectical materialism had changed significantly. In this letter, Hook reveals, “I am at work on an extended critique of ‘dialectical materialism,’ the state philosophy of Soviet Russia, which seems to me every whit as false and pernicious as current ‘philosophical’ doctrines in Germany.”⁴⁴ Hook’s reversal on dialectical materialism stems from the same source as his certainty that Communism was a threat to democracy.

In *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*, Hook distinguishes his analysis of Marx from what he terms “orthodox Marxism,”⁴⁵ which he understands as “an emasculation of Marx’s thought.”⁴⁶ One specific fault Hook finds with orthodox Marxism is its insistence on seeking the unity of Marx’s thought through his conclusions rather

than his methods. On this point, he writes, "If Marx's thought possesses unity, it is not to be found in his specific conclusions but in his method of analysis directed by the revolutionary purposes and needs of the international working class. The method, to be sure, is to be checked in the light of his conclusions; but the latter are derivative, not central. They are tentative and contingent."⁴⁷ He goes on to explain that it is therefore possible "to dissociate the Marxian method from any specific set of conclusions, or any particular political tactic advocated in its name. This is another way of saying that there is nothing *a priori* in Marx's philosophy; it is naturalistic, historical and empirical throughout."⁴⁸ However, Hook criticizes so-called orthodox Marxists for their misuse and abuse of dialectical materialism, claiming that "whereas Marx projected it as a *method* of understanding and making history, his disciples have tried to convert it into a *system* of sociology."⁴⁹ Hook believed that this misinterpretation of Marxism led to unchallenged dogmatism among Communists. In an article on Marxism published the same year as *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*, Hook argues that refusing to distinguish Marx's analysis from the subjective view of economic classes inherent to his (Marx's) philosophy "has led to the mischievous myth that Marxism is an objective science which can demonstrate both the inevitability of communism and its inherent moral superiority."⁵⁰

After dialectical materialism became the official doctrine of the U.S.S.R., Hook observed that rather than remaining flexible, resulting in tentative conclusions (as he believed it had in the writings of Marx and Engels), any flexibility inherent to the dialectical method was "sacrificed for unverifiable dogma."⁵¹ Hook saw that discovering knowledge or truth was far less important to Communists than asserting official state doctrine. In a 1940 review of Engels's book *Dialectics of Nature*, Hook scathingly criticizes this sacrifice of knowledge on the altar of the Party's authority. He writes, "Although it possesses no scientific importance whatsoever, Engels's manuscript is none the less extremely valuable as a source book of the current state philosophy of the U.S.S.R., dialectical materialism. Whenever the party line changes in science, the justifying quotations are taken from Engels, who did not even have the status of a gifted amateur in science."⁵² Hook concludes that the book's preface, written by J.B.S. Haldane, who claimed to have cured himself of stomach irritation by reading Lenin, "is a pitiful illustration of what happens to a fine intelligence when it gets political religion." In his autobiography *Out of Step*, Hook recalls that after the Moscow Trials, Dewey admitted that "regardless of the accuracy of [Hook's] interpretation of Marx, it was largely an intellectual conceit: To the extent that ideas counted in the world, Marxism in our time, he said, was the state philosophy of the Soviet Union and its satellites."⁵³ Hook felt similarly about the dialectical method. In a 1937 article entitled "Dialectic and Nature," he concludes, "the dialectic method can claim to have meaning and validity only when it is understood to be synonymous with scientific method [and] since in its traditional formulation it is burdened with many misleading and mistaken conceptions, it would be

more conducive to clear thinking if the phrase were dropped.”⁵⁴ In other words, in spite of whether Hook’s assessment of the Marxian dialectic as method in volumes like *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* was correct, dialectical materialism had been verified in experience to be the version espoused by orthodox Marxists and orthodox dialectical materialists. The dialectical method was no longer open to empiricism and experience; it was closed to all ideals except those of the CP.

In addition, Hook’s experience with Communists cemented his belief that Communists were only concerned with advancing the goals of the Party. Communism, as it was implemented by the Soviet Union, was irreconcilable with the communally agreed upon nature of inquiry and truth provided by the method of democracy because it was totalitarian. Avital Bloch explains that totalitarian regimes “violated individual liberties and free culture, whose protection was for Hook the primary condition for any political order calling itself a democracy.”⁵⁵ A pragmatist like Hook is necessarily anti-totalitarian because pragmatism supports open inquiry and exchange of ideas. In fact, Peirce defines truth as “the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate,”⁵⁶ linking scientific inquiry with the search for truth. Scientific truths are confirmed by a community of inquirers who arrive at the same conclusion, and in order for such a conclusion to be reached, people must be free to investigate ideas. For Hook, democracy operates under parallel principles: people must be free to apply the democratic method by ensuring that as many voices and opinions as possible are welcomed and considered. Totalitarianism is by its very nature opposed to such a goal, as it operates under the method of authority⁵⁷ Peirce discusses in “The Fixation of Belief” wherein opinions are regulated by a governing body (in this case, the Communist Party) and any dissent from the knowledge or truths espoused by this body is stifled.

The Moscow Trials are often cited by scholars and historians of the New York Intellectuals as a turning point in the group’s relationship to Stalinism, and Sidney Hook was no exception. Neil Jumonville writes of the NYI: “After the wrenching Moscow Trials of 1936, their bitter hatred for the centralization, deceit, murder, anti-intellectualism, and undemocratic nature of Stalinism led them to become anti-Stalinist socialists.”⁵⁸ Alexander Bloom observes that after the Moscow Trials, the NYI’s “prevailing anti-Stalinist ethos had not yet turned anti-Communist. Stalinism, not communism, emerged as the enemy.”⁵⁹ While not yet as critical of Communism in the mid-1930s as he would be in later years, the trials nevertheless had a profound effect on Hook and set the stage for his later anti-Communism. Hook discusses the Moscow Trials and their impact in *Out of Step*, calling them “a decisive turning point in [his] intellectual and political development,”⁶⁰ when he “discovered the face of radical evil—as ugly and petrifying as anything the Fascists had revealed up to that time.”⁶¹

Aside from the general disillusionment of the NYI with Stalinism after the Moscow Trials and the Hitler-Stalin Pact,⁶² Hook’s experience with the Waldorf Conference also led him to believe that Communists were not interested in

intellectual freedom or knowledge generated from open and communal inquiry, two qualities Hook saw as essential to democratic progress. Neil Jumonville writes that of the NYI, Hook was the most adamant “about the Waldorf Conference’s betrayal of intellectual values, and his passion on this point was a hallmark of his life and ideals.”⁶³ Hook had requested that he be allowed to speak at the Waldorf Conference (formally known as the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace but called the Waldorf Conference because of its location). Hook was concerned about the conference because it was promoted as an event for intellectuals to discuss current affairs; however, Communists dominated among the speakers.

Hook wrote to Harlow Shapley, one of the conference organizers, requesting to read a paper at the conference, but he was denied, which Hook interpreted as intellectual dishonesty. According to Jumonville, “Hook told Shapley he would argue that there were no national, class, or party ‘truths’ in science, and that international peace and science had been ‘seriously undermined’ by those doctrines.”⁶⁴ Like Peirce and James before him, Hook firmly believed that we gain knowledge and insight based upon our observation and analysis of facts, and *not* based upon our preconceived notions or feelings about the facts. Like Dewey before him, Hook was determined to reject “party discipline in favor of freedom of thought.”⁶⁵ In other words, Hook saw Communism as distorting and obfuscating scientific truth and progress for the sake of pushing its own agenda, and to Hook, this was fundamentally antidemocratic. In “Naturalism and Democracy,” Hook writes, “scientific empiricism as a philosophy is more congenial to a democratic than to an antidemocratic community, for it brings into the open light of criticism the interests in which moral values and social institutions are rooted.”⁶⁶

Considering what had become of dialectical materialism in the Soviet Union, the Moscow Trials, and his experience with the Waldorf Conference, Hook was convinced that Communists had no interest in scientific progress or the pursuit of real knowledge, for they had made clear their stance that the Party trumped free and open communication and exchange of ideas. In so doing, Communism had revealed itself to be directly in conflict with democratic progress. Hook explains in *Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life* that “the only reliable evidence”⁶⁷ of a person’s change of heart on a subject is “the change in his habits, his deeds, his personal and public behavior.”⁶⁸ Ultimately, the Waldorf Conference cemented for Hook that Communist Party members would have no change of heart with respect to putting free and open discussion above their concern for advancing the Party. Robert Talisse has argued that Hook “sees free consent and free discussion as *epistemic* matters”⁶⁹ integral to democracy and that “in particular, citizens must be able to inquire.”⁷⁰ For Hook, Communists cared more about their political agenda than about scientific or communal inquiry, and thus, the Communist Party was a threat to the democratic method.

Hook’s application of democracy as a method has a direct parallel to the empirical method in the classical pragmatist writings of Peirce and James. In “The Fixation of Belief,” Peirce describes four methods of belief and explains why, of

the four, the method of science is the most logical choice. The first method is the method of tenacity. This is the “ostrich-with-its-head-in-the-sand” method of belief, where one dislikes being undecided and as a result feels that holding on to a belief that does not waver will provide satisfaction and calmness. Second, the method of authority is the method of some governing body that concerns itself with regulating people’s opinions on certain matters and preventing or quashing any opinions that contradict the views this governing body has adopted. The third method, the *a priori* method, allows us to adopt any propositions that we find ourselves inclined to believe. But Peirce’s preferred method is the method of science, which he explains as follows: “There are real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; [. . .] by taking advantage of the laws of perception, we can ascertain by reasoning how things really are, and any man, if he have sufficient experience and reason enough about it, will be led to the one true conclusion.”⁷¹ Therefore, by communal inquiry through application of this method, we will get closer to the truth and increase our collective knowledge about the world. Peirce argues that no doubts about the scientific method arise from its practice, as is the case with each of the other three methods of belief, for the method of science is the only method that presents a distinction between a right and wrong way of carrying it out. On this point he writes, “The test of whether I am truly following the method is not an immediate appeal to my feelings and purposes, but, on the contrary, itself involves the application of the method.”⁷² This means that a person following the scientific method will reach a conclusion through direct experience and observation of the facts, and not through his or her *feelings* about the facts.

Peirce believed that the scientific method proved itself to be the best method of increasing our knowledge and coming closer to the truth because our conclusions are revisable, which enables science to withstand the test of time. While it is true that we may reach faulty conclusions, these will eventually be corrected. Sidney Hook held a similar view of democracy. If democracy is a method, then “the self-corrective procedures of democracy”⁷³ will result in greater knowledge and a greater number of people who are able to contribute to society over time. As with science, the test of whether the method of democracy is being followed involves applying it: ensuring individual rights and the ability to participate freely in the democratic process.

Like Peirce, William James argues in *Pragmatism* that the pragmatist “turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins.”⁷⁴ This stands in contrast to what James calls “the empiricist temper,”⁷⁵ which is concerned with facts, action, and experience. Similar to what Peirce says about the method of science, James believes empiricism to be a superior method of thinking because it is based on our observation of facts and incorporating those facts into the stream of our experience. The empiricist decides the validity of conflicting ideas by “tracing [their] respective practical consequences.”⁷⁶ In Hook’s conception

of democracy as a method, those who follow it must likewise examine the practical consequences of adopting one policy over another, lest those decisions serve to *reduce* democracy rather than increase it.

Hook's experiences with the Communist Party convinced him that advancing a predetermined set of objectives was more important to them than allowing for intellectual differences and rational debate countenanced by the democratic method of government. Robert Talisse observes that while it is possible to judge "with the hindsight of fifty years that Hook overestimated the threat that the CP [Communist Party] posed,"⁷⁷ in considering Hook's philosophical and political positions regarding Communism, the question is "about what *Hook* was justified in believing, not about what we should *now* believe—again with all the clarity of hindsight—about the severity of the threat."⁷⁸ Similarly, Richard Rorty argues that those who did not live through World War II "may find it hard to appreciate how necessary [Hook's] crusade [against Stalinism] was,"⁷⁹ particularly since it was difficult for many on the political Left in the US "to admit the existence of the gulag."⁸⁰ Indeed, Hook writes toward the end of *Out of Step* that the arc of his thought had shifted over time, stating, "I no longer believe that the central problem of our time is the choice between capitalism and socialism but the defense and enrichment of a free and open society against totalitarianism."⁸¹ Thus, while it is easy to conclude from the safe distance of a post-Cold War world that Hook's staunch anti-Communism was unnecessary, Hook and many others genuinely believed that totalitarian Communism posed a real and significant threat to American democracy based on their experiences with Communists and the CP.

Robert Talisse points out that, throughout his life, Hook never displayed "a refusal to argue, a reluctance to listen to an opposing view, or an unwillingness to reconsider his own position in the light of opposing considerations."⁸² Given Hook's adherence to the primacy of open inquiry and discussion as well as to both the scientific and the democratic method throughout his lifetime, I must conclude with Talisse, and contra many Cold War and NYI scholars and historians, that Hook did not betray or abandon pragmatism in his hardline stance against Communism. Rather, he demonstrated a sustained commitment to the scientific and democratic methods, which was in line with the philosophy of earlier pragmatists, including Peirce, James, and Dewey.

In an essay on the common philosophy that democracies share, Hook argues, "We cannot make absolutes of doctrines, tastes, or principles without inviting the evils of fanaticism. Nonetheless, there must be one working absolute on which there can be no compromise, about which we must be fanatical: the rules of the game, by which we settle differences."⁸³ For Hook, the "rules of the game" meant democracy, which explains why he so fanatically defended it from any perceived threats. As Peirce and James were committed to the method of empiricism, so was Hook committed to the democratic method. He adds, "There is no inconsistency whatsoever in being intolerant of those who show intolerance."⁸⁴ To Hook, Communists had shown themselves to be intolerant of

open discussion and intellectual inquiry, and thus, their goals were not compatible with the goals of those who wished, like Hook, to preserve and extend democratic freedoms. During the Cold War, Communism loomed large in the national consciousness as a potential threat to democracy, and Hook was determined not to let intellectuals who were affiliated with the Communist Party subvert free inquiry for the sake of a politics where intellectual progress and scientific contributions were not valued or given consideration.

Hook's work, like that of his mentor John Dewey, points to democracy as an action that must be realized, open to continued growth and change rather than mired in old ways of thinking about ideas or serving the needs of one group or ideology at the expense of others. Hook's anti-Communism was ultimately concerned with preserving the democratic ideals of freedom and open inquiry that we often take for granted. For this reason, pragmatism likewise played a significant role before and during the Cold War as the source of Hook's fervent commitment to democracy. In an increasingly politically polarized society, Hook's legacy of democracy as method seems more important than ever if Americans are to come together in support of the democratic method rather than remaining divided by our devotion to the goals or doctrines of a single figure or political party.

NOTES

1. Matthew C. Bagger, "Dewey's Bulldog: Sidney Hook, Pragmatism, and Naturalism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79, no. 3 (2011): 565.
2. Richard Rorty, "Afterword," in *Sidney Hook Reconsidered*, ed. Matthew J. Cotter (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004): 282.
3. Robert B. Talisse, *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 115.
4. Despite the fact that, as Talisse points out in *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy*, "at no point did Hook adopt any particular party line wholesale" (130).
5. Specifically, the view that Freud gives a reductive account of religion that discredits its significance.
6. Richard J. Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 40.
7. Noted by John Capps and Robert B. Talisse in 2003 issues of *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* as well as by Louis Menand in his 2001 book *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux).
8. A group including Sidney Hook, Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, Leslie Fiedler, Philip Rahv, and Lionel Trilling, among others.
9. Ruth R. Wisse, "The New York (Jewish) Intellectuals," *Commentary* 84, no. 5 (1987): 30.
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Courtney Ferriter recently received her PhD from the Department of English at Auburn University. She is currently a lecturer in the Department of Writing and Linguistics at Georgia Southern University.