

# A NEW APPROACH TO HOWARD FAST

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The article is devoted to the 4 novels by Howard Fast written about the American Revolution. In each of the novels analyzed in the article Fast poses the question whether and to what extent revolutionary violence could be put up with if necessary for the victory of the glorious cause. His final answer to this question is given in the last novel of the revolutionary sage- "The Proud and the Free", in which he denounces revolutionary violence, violence over man once and for all, which accounts for his further disappointment with Marxist theory.

The profound changes in the role of the author in the American historical novel demonstrate themselves most vividly in the novels by H. Fast. Especially "The Proud and the Free" presents this important change in the author and the hero bond.

Key words: revolution, violence, Marxist theory, dictatorship, to denounce, evolution of political views.

## INTRODUCTION

The theme of the article is the problem of co-relation of the great aim of liberty and revolutionary violence necessary to achieve it. This question-whether liberty, happiness for all can be achieved by suppressing people, even a part of it, is the eternal question which poses itself from time to time and accounts for the actual character of any work devoted to it. The problem mentioned above is tackled in the article by the analysis of 4 novels by Howard Fast written about the American Revolution. The article also tackles the problem of the profound changes in the role of the author in the American historical novel which demonstrate themselves most vividly in the novels by H. Fast.

The methods applied in the article are cultural-historical and comparative.

## THE MAIN PART

Among the writers whose work and political stand in the 30-s and up to the 50-s make them the target of interest for the discussion in this workshop there is one whose political evolution during this period was truly remarkable. Howard Fast, a communist writer, member of the Communist party of the U.S.A. was one of the few American writers whose work was acknowledged in the Soviet Union and, consequently, denied any artistic value in the U.S.A. where literary critics called him a sociologist in literature. His resignation from the Communist party in 1956 caused a real scandal in the Soviet literary circles and brought about accusations of the betrayal of the interests of working people, of selling out to capital and so on. None either at that time or afterwards tried to understand why and how this ideological change has taken place within Howard Fast.

Thorough literary analysis of four of H. Fast's books devoted to the American revolution ("Conceived in Liberty", 1939, "The Unvanquished", 1942, "Citizen Tom Paine", 1943, "The Proud and the Free", 1950, "April Morning", 1961) shows that from book to book he puts to test the main notion of Marxist-Leninist doctrine concerning revolution, that is, the dictatorship of the proletariat. In each of the novels Fast poses the question whether and to what extent revolutionary violence could be put up with if necessary for the victory of the glorious cause. If in the first novel "Conceived in Liberty" Fast admits revolutionary violence as a necessary measure for achieving revolutionary goals, in "The Proud and the Free" he denounces this idea completely. In this novel he denounces revolutionary violence, violence over man once and for all, and that accounts for his further disappointment in Marxist theory. His resignation from the Communist party of the USA was the next

logical step accelerated maybe by the denunciation of the cult of Stalin at the 20<sup>th</sup> Communist party congress in Moscow in 1956. Since then he would write fine historical novels dealing with ancient times and with Jewish history. In the 30s and the 50s he was among writers who spoke against extremism on the left or the right.

The article is devoted to the 4 novels by Howard Fast written about the American Revolution with the aim of revealing the evolution of political views and values of the writer from novel to novel.

So the first novel of the revolutionary cycle is "Conceived in Liberty" (1939) devoted to the hibernation of the Continental troops in Valley-Forge in the terrible winter of 1777-1778. Fast reconstructs one of the most dramatic periods of the War for Independence when Washington's army, without food, without warm clothes spent winter in the camp where hundreds of soldiers died from hunger and frost. Class antagonism lying at the bottom of the American revolution is the main concept of history of Howard Fast, and this concept is realized through the delineation of the characters of the novel, its conflict and its plot. The intensity of class antagonism in this novel corresponds to the atmosphere of "the red 30-ies", a year before "The Grapes of Wrath" by John Steinbeck was published.

One of the main problems in Fast's philosophy of history is the problem of revolutionary violence. In each of his revolutionary novels he poses the questions whether violence over man is necessary and justified for the triumph of the revolution, whether it's possible for the leader of the revolution or its participant to avoid it. In "Conceived in Liberty" in one of the key episodes of the novel Fast trusts Hamilton to express his own point of view upon this problem. Hamilton is appointed for the defense of three deserters in court and he explains to Washington why he is against capital punishment for them. He says: "...if at least one life is cut short unjustly, if at least one man must die from envy and hatred, our cause doesn't exist any longer. It's not worth suffering for it." (Fast, 1945,141) On Washington's remark "We are in hell, and hell can't be tender" Hamilton replies: "We are human beings in hell. As soon as we stop being humane there's no use in our struggle." (Fast, 1945,143). Man must preserve his humaneness in revolution-that's the gist of Fast's concept of the revolution.

This idea is brought to test and expressed in the novel through three main characters of the book: Allen, the protagonist, Ali and Jacob. Allen prefers Ali, not only for his devotion to the revolution but because "...he is the spirit, he is love" (Fast, 1945,56), and doesn't trust Jacob whose credo is "Man is nothing, Revolution is everything." (Fast, 1945,52). Fast is against fanaticism, revolutionary fanaticism included. His hero says: "Jacob is the man of the idea, but people of ideas lose all humaneness." (Fast, 1945,159).

In this first novel about the revolution Fast puts up with the necessity of revolutionary violence considering it the necessary means for the triumph of the revolution. He makes Allen realize what is at stake: "A new life, a new world for people" (Fast, 1945,93) and remain in the army he has hated so much. He has even become a commander of the brigade. But this new Allen Hail having rejected everything dear to him before, having devoted his life to revolution suddenly comes to the understanding that he has become a machine for killing. "I'm not a man anymore. I've found Jacob in myself." (Fast, 1945,238). In 1939 Fast considered that a revolutionary soldier can't be otherwise, that to be a soldier of the revolution he must pay this price-the loss of humaneness.

From Fast's point of view a person possessed by a great idea is always lonely. A revolution demands that everything humane in a person should be suppressed. This is the emotional core of the characters of Washington, general Wain, Jacob in "Conceived in Liberty", that's the core of the character of Thomas Paine in the novel devoted to him.

"Citizen Tom Paine" presents a more profound analysis of the revolution as a social phenomenon than the previous two novels. Citing Benjamin Rush Fast reveals his own conception of the revolution: "Force is in the hands of revolutionary masses. I don't judge the ideas or whether it's right or wrong, good or bad, I don't judge its morality, because all these are concepts, slogans, but force is the only weapon. Tyranny rests on force, force of the few. Force of the majority is revolution." (Fast, 1945,116).

So Fast stresses the idea of immorality of any revolution, the incompatibility of morality and revolution. Violence, the inalienable part of any revolution, is unacceptable both for the writer and for his biographical hero. Fast emphasizes the idea that this particular circumstance determined his hero's tragedy in advanced age: the revolution which he witnessed in France went in its natural development too far, and Paine couldn't put up

with its "dictatorship of the crowd, its anarchy", its terror. His position nearly cost him his life. The choice of the hero, the sympathetic treatment of his ideological and moral stand on this issue, the negative delineation of Jacobins let us deduce that at the time when "Citizen Tom Paine" was being written (1943) Fast himself denounced the idea of revolutionary violence; that his moral attitude to it outweighed his speculations on the necessity of dictatorship for the triumph of the revolution.

The most profound analysis of the American revolution is provided in the next historical novel by Howard Fast "The Proud and the Free". This novel tells about the insurrection of eleven International brigades of the Pennsylvanian army and reconstructs the events of the winter of 1781 when soldiers coming from various countries of Europe, of various nations and religions having despaired of hunger, cold and oppression on the part of the gentry-officers who killed soldiers for any trifling fault held the Congress, elected the revolutionary committee of sergeants and drove away officers from their brigades. The novel is based on social, class conflict, and in none of Fast's novels this conflict is as sharp and severe as in "The Proud and the Free". In this novel Fast fully embodies his concept of the War for Independence as class struggle, in which the rich and powerful gentry was at the head of the poor and the powerless in the struggle against Englishmen being in their station of life closer to the enemy than to their own countrymen and comrades-in-arms. The soldiers in revolt feel this class antagonism very keenly and stress that they are ready to die "for freedom, but not ...for the property of any dirty lord and a fat boss in Jersey, not for tobacco plantations and commercial fleet of Boston, ...but for freedom and dignity of those who have no property." (Fast, 1956,117). Fast emphasizes through all the time dignity and pride of the soldiers in revolt, dignity and pride which they acquire in the struggle for freedom as part of their great aspirations.

In the course of the insurrection members of the revolutionary committee begin to realize that they don't know real ways to freedom, to the new republic and won't be able to find them. Howard Fast looks upon the War for Independence as a bourgeois revolution in which people is the most active driving force, but can't win by itself, and he makes his heroes understand it too.

This novel sums up Fast's long reflections on revolutionary violence and the right of its existence in revolution, whether it's moral and can be admitted, whether the idea can be prior to human life. He reveals and solves these dilemmas through the character of the protagonist of the novel, James Stuart. He chooses the hero whom he can endow with the features of orthodox devotion to the idea, and by the readiness in the name of this idea to sacrifice the interests of the people and people themselves.

James Stuart, an orphan, a son of white slaves, can't but hate the rich. He is devoted to the idea of fighting for freedom, he voluntarily joined the Army of the Congress at 17 and became one of the leaders of the insurrection at 22, having realized that the worst enemy of the poor soldiers is the rich, their own officers. He gets his first task from the Revolutionary committee - and himself is amazed at his fanaticism, at his readiness to kill a friend if he appears to hinder the Great Cause (of Freedom!). Fast is psychologically correct when he shows how the idea subordinates morality, how the prevalence of idea produces a new understanding of morality. James Stuart remains in the course of the insurrection a revolutionary fanatic, an orthodox of the idea. When questioned by his soldiers whether he would shoot at light cavalry that was sent to suppress the insurrection he answers positively. His friends are appalled at his readiness to kill his own comrades-in-arms.

But Jamey learns the main lesson of the insurrection-soldiers don't know the way to freedom, they don't know how to achieve it and what to do with it. Thus, at the crucial moment after the insurrection, when seven of his friends, former members of the revolutionary committee have risen against the officers again and he knows if he joins them the army will support him, and the officers will be swept away and his friends saved, and a new insurrection will begin, doesn't join them in spite of his class hatred, because he realizes this will bring about civil war which will mean "stains of blood and death upon us who have killed their brothers and...turned the war into the slaughter of brothers. I felt the hopelessness of it, the deep bitter wretched uselessness of it, because it was one more road into nowhere, to the hope and the dream that couldn't be realized." (Fast, 1956,303). Any price of human blood neither Fast nor his protagonist doesn't want to pay. Fast makes other characters of the novel come to the same conclusion. At the start of the insurrection the members of the Revolutionary committee decline the most logical offer to go to Philadelphia, the seat of the Congress, realizing that this move would cause the beginning of Civil war and would help the crown to crush the

Colonies. At the end of the insurrection wise Bauser, one of the leaders of the revolt convincing the soldiers to surrender to the officers says: "We think that a man's life shouldn't be experimented on. We have no other way but to spill the blood of our own countrymen. But one mustn't turn brother against the brother, and that's why we refused to follow this way. We did right, not because we are weak but because we are strong!" (Fast, 1956,230).

Fast is against civil war, even if it is waged for the interests of the country and its people, even if it's the only way for the triumph of social justice. Maybe that's the reason why in his historical novels Fast never turned to the theme of the Civil war.

This ideological and moral stand which was the result of long years reflections on the problems of dictatorship, of the justification of violation of human rights, explain his resignation from the U.S. Communist party in 1956 after he learned how the principles of class struggle were implemented in the Soviet Union through the death of thousands of people. If Soviet literary critics read the historical novels by H. Fast and followed the evolution of his ideological outlook they could foresee his deed as natural and predictable.

Nevertheless Fast doesn't renounce either struggle for freedom or the dream of a new just society. The end of the novel testifies to it. In the epilogue old James Stuart helps the abolitionists and points to them as his followers, as the next chain in the struggle for a new free just society, as to the people who continue the cause of the soldiers of the American revolution. But Fast considers the realization of this dream impossible in the nearest future, and never agrees that the way to it must involve bloodshed and violence over man. Written in the times of maccarthism Fast's novel expresses the animosity of the democrat and the humanist to any forms of violence over man, to any forms of despotism, spiritual, intellectual despotism included.

The profound changes in the role of the author in the American historical novel demonstrate themselves most vividly in the novels by H. Fast. In "Conceived in Liberty" this form is in its embryo form yet. It doesn't cause those profound changes in the co-relation of the author and the hero, in the chronotop of the novel. "Conceived in Liberty" doesn't contain the double vision of reality, produced by the simultaneous existence in the novel of two perceptions of reality- by a young hero and his aging self, who having acquired rich life experience comments on the events described in the novel. There's no gap between these two perceptions belonging to one and the same person, which provides the evaluation of the events from the point of view of another epoch.

Only "The Proud and the Free" presents this important change in the author and the hero bond. Here the narrator is one of the main characters of the novel. He is constantly present in the novel, he moves freely in time either getting ahead of the time of the narration and predicting the further development of events or plunging into reminiscences. His character is motivated socially and psychologically by H. Fast. This circumstance prevents from identifying him with the author of the novel and, second, provides the historical perspective to the events described in the novel, so that the struggle for freedom of common people during the American revolution gets its continuation in the novel in the abolition movement during the old age of the hero-story-teller and, on the level of the reader's perception, in all the other times marked by sharp social conflicts including the reader's own time. So the time of the narration expands, contains more historical events, provides the reader's more active participation in them. At the same time this expanded novel time separates the author farther from his hero, notwithstanding the fact that the hero expresses the author's point of view. The author never appears in the novel. He expresses himself and his point of view not only through Jamie, but through various other characters of the novel: Bauser, Levi, Malony. Thus, he gives the reader an opportunity to comprehend complex historical truth by plunging into the general mosaic picture of events composed of many perceptions of reality of various characters, people of various nationalities and life experience.

### CONCLUSION

This ideological and moral stand which was the result of long years reflections on the problems of dictatorship, of the justification of violation of human rights, explain his resignation from the U.S. Communist party in 1956 after he learned how the principles of class struggle were implemented in the Soviet Union through the death of thousands of people. If Soviet literary critics read the historical novels by H. Fast and followed the evolution of his ideological outlook they could foresee his deed as natural and predictable.

Fast's novel marked a turning point in the treatment of history by the American historical novel of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It marked the deviation of the historical novel from glorifying the struggle for a new just society by showing the impossibility of creating such a society under present social conditions. The authors of the next historical novels will tackle the problem of the individual revolt of their heroes, the revolt of individual consciousness against certain historical conditions.

The profound changes in the role of the author in the American historical novel demonstrate themselves most vividly in the novels by H. Fast. Especially "The Proud and the Free" presents this important change in the author and the hero bond.

1. Fast H. 1945. *Conceived in Liberty*. N.Y.
2. Fast H. 1947. *The Unvanquished*. N.Y.
3. Fast H. 1945. *Citizen Tom Paine*. N. Y.
4. Fast H. 1956. *The Proud and the Free*. Boston.

### НОВЫЙ ПОДХОД К ГОВАРДУ ФАСТУ

Статья исследует четыре романа Говарда Фаста, известного американского писателя, посвященные Американской революции. В каждом из этих романов Фаст ставит вопрос, насколько революционное насилие, насилие над человеком, допустимо и оправданно в революции, если оно необходимо для достижения высокой цели. Ответ на этот вопрос Фаст дает в последнем романе своей революционной тетралогии, романе «Гордые и свободные». В этом романе Фаст отвергает революционное насилие, даже во имя будущего счастья человечества. Эволюция мировоззрения Говарда Фаста, очевидная при анализе этих четырех романов, созданных на протяжении двенадцати лет, позволяет понять его дальнейшее разочарование в марксистской доктрине.

Ключевые слова: революция, насилие, марксистская теория, диктатура, отвергать, эволюция политических взглядов.