Anti-Anti-Communism

Lee Congdon

In 1957, the year after Nikita Khrushchev sent shock waves through the Communist world by denouncing Stalin and crushing the Hungarian revolution, I enrolled at a small liberal arts college north of Chicago. Among the few new friends I made was Mike S., a classmate whose love of baseball was, like my own, immeasurably greater than his ability to hit a curve. During one of those fugitive moments when we were not arguing about sports, he confessed that he was not at all optimistic about his future prospects. When I asked him why, he lowered his voice to a whisper. "My parents," he said, "are known to be members of the Communist party." I was dumbfounded, and fascinated. In the conservative Windy City suburb where I was raised, *Catholics* were still excluded from the local country club. And though my own father paid scant attention to politics, my mother believed every word she read in Colonel Robert McCormick's jingoistic *Chicago Tribune*, expressing indignation at the manner in which "they"—the senators who voted for censure—had treated Senator Joseph R. McCarthy. I did not question her judgment, though I do recall thinking that McCarthy's behavior during the army hearing was more than a bit peculiar.

In the fall of 1958 I transferred to another college and lost contact with Mike. Only much later did I learn that there were many other Americans, the so-called "red diaper babies," who had had upbringings far more like his than mine. Some of these, coming of age during the 1960s, were strident student radicals who wished to establish a leftist identity of their own, distinct from that of their parents. They were united in their contempt for the Old—pro-Soviet—Left's conspiratorial and authoritarian past, and in their firm conviction that times were a changin'. *Their* generation refused to conceal its intentions, demanding and expecting total and immediate "emancipation." For them, the past did not exist, except as a burden to be lifted.

But when reality proved to be stubborn and the Revolution was stillborn, these intense young men and women did an about-face and began to empathize with the Old Left's struggles and defeats. In recent years, those who exchanged their student rings for faculty gowns have produced scores of books and articles designed to rehabilitate the once scorned Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), and thus effect a reunion with their parents and predecessors. "It is this reunion," former *Ramparts* editor David Horowitz rightly observes, "that has given birth to the Left we see before us."

Maurice Isserman's career is particularly instructive in this regard. A veteran of SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), Isserman now teaches history at

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Smith College and is among the most prominent of the New Left academics who have made the CPUSA their special province. In a recent piece for *The Nation*, he discusses the existential circumstances that supposedly offer him an unobstructed view of the Party's past. "Although I was not yet born when Joe McCarthy waved his first fistful of documents at the television cameras, I grew up in the kind of family where there was no doubt as to who were the good guys and who were the villains in the 1950s." (Readers of *The Nation* require no further clarification.) By 1968, the year he began undergraduate studies, he thought he had learned everything that was worth knowing about the uninspiring history of the Old Left.

Now, however, he confesses that "about a decade later, a little older myself, and perhaps a little humbler, I took another look at the history of the Old Left, this time in the form of a doctoral dissertation resulting eventually in the publication of my first book, *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War*" (Wesleyan University Press, 1982). In the introduction to this study, we find him speaking candidly of his determination to recover a "tradition that could serve as both a source of political reference and an inspiration in what now was clearly to be a prolonged struggle."

Communism, Isserman now believes, was integral to that tradition, its ill-repute in America notwithstanding. Indeed, it is nothing short of slander to view the CPUSA as a subversive and conspiratorial organization slavishly subservient to Moscow's dictates. Despite the regrettable presence of zealots such as William Z. Foster, American communism exhibited little interest in violent revolution, concentrating its efforts on such quintessentially American aims as the extension of civil liberty and the initiation of democratic reform. Isserman takes pains, for example, to point out how often the Party allied itself with FDR's New Deal and how it advanced the cause of blacks.

On the latter point, he receives support from Mark Naison, professor of Afro-American Studies at Fordham University, who argues in *Communism in Harlem during the Depression* (University of Illinois Press, 1983), that when it came to the racial question, American Communists were motivated by a "vision of cultural interdependence, deeply American in its symbolism and psychology." Unfortunately, Naison weakens his own case by supplying evidence of the cynical manipulation that drove Richard Wright, the black author of *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, from the Party. In his contribution to Richard Crossman's classic symposium of ex-Communists, *The God That Failed*, Wright had described in bitter and ironic detail how the Party exploited black anger and hope for its own, and Moscow's, ends.

Isserman places his major emphasis on the role of Earl Browder, the apparatchik who led the Party until his fall from grace in 1945, and who, readers are informed, was an "Americommunist" long before the Eurocommunists appeared on the scene. Browder possessed an instinctive understanding of Amer-

ican conditions that gave a prophetic air to his pronouncements. If he appeared to be unimaginative during the years (1939–41) when Hitler and Stalin were allies, he was vouchsafed a new vision after the Man of Steel met with Roosevelt and Churchill at Teheran in 1943. If Uncle Joe was willing to cooperate with capitalist leaders, so was Browder; and by the end of the war, this unassuming man had convinced himself that God—or rather History—had called him to lead the Party "*away* from revolution" and toward a policy of reform that would flow gently into the mainstream of American political life.

Isserman interprets this adaptation of the contemporary, and temporary, Soviet line as evidence of Browder's peculiar revelation that American communism had to mean democratic socialism. Had he not been stripped of authority, Browder might even have become the "American Tito," leading his countrymen down an "American Road to Socialism."

For heresy of this kind, the German Marxists excommunicated Eduard Bernstein, but Isserman is eager to challenge the standard view, advanced most famously and convincingly by Theodore Draper, that the CPUSA acted only in response to Soviet directives. In *The Roots of American Communism* (Viking Press, 1957), Draper, himself a former Communist, concludes that "the periodic rediscovery of 'Americanization' by the American Communists has only superficially represented a more independent policy. It has been in reality merely another type of American response to a Russian stimulus. A Russian initiative has always effectively begun and ended it. For this reason, 'Americanized' American Communism has been sporadic, superficial, and short-lived. It has corresponded to the fluctuations of Russian policy; it has not obeyed a compelling need within the American Communists themselves."

For anyone conversant with the history of other Communist parties during the time of Stalin, Draper's argument will occasion no surprise. Moreover, in an outstanding new study of the depression decade, *The Heyday of American Communism* (Basic Books, 1984), Harvey Klehr of Emory University marshals additional evidence to bolster Draper's thesis. "The Party's lurches," he writes in summary, "were not in response to any internal changes in American society or the Party itself, but reflected the pull of an external force. If the needs of Russian policy dictated a revolutionary or sectarian Comintern policy, the American Communists swung over to the left. When those needs changed, they swung back to a more reformist or opportunistic line. Within the limits of their knowledge, American Communists always strove to provide what the Comintern wanted, no more, no less. . . . To pretend otherwise is to misunderstand and distort the history of American communism and to miss the essential clue about its nature."

In a review of this book, Princeton's Gary Gerstle complains that Klehr has failed to look carefully enough at the years 1935–39, a time when the Popular Front made it possible for American Communists to reveal their true reformist and anti-fascist selves. Had he done so, he would have discovered "the extent

to which American communism developed as an authentic expression of American radicalism." What Gerstle neglects to say is that the Popular Front was *itself* a Comintern tactic—and one of brief duration at that. True, American Communists supported the Popular Front, but they also backed the "anti-imperialist," anti-Roosevelt line required by the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939. After the German attack on Soviet Russia in 1941, they dusted off patriotism and anti-fascism—until 1945 when they received fresh instructions from Moscow. Whatever they may have believed in their hearts—assuming that they themselves still knew—they had long since surrendered their will to a foreign authority.

Isserman's challenge to Klehr and Draper is therefore doomed to fail. To be sure, he is not wrong to suggest that, given sufficient time, the faces of universalist ideologies begin to display distinctive national features. That is particularly true when they assume responsibilities associated with political power. The Communist parties that have ruled in the post-Stalinist period have indeed become more national, even as they maintain, out of necessity or self-interest, a special relationship with the Soviet Union. Prior to Stalin's death, however, Soviet control was absolute and uncontested throughout the Communist world.

Isserman himself concedes as much in a carefully worded review of Klehr's book. But like Gerstle and other New Left academics, he wants to believe that by directing attention away from the Party's governing elite to its rank and file one can distill a "radical" essence that is uniquely American and identical to the spirit of the 1960s. He compares this process of distillation to rethinking the Sermon on the Mount. In both cases, he says, one comes away with a less dogmatic interpretation, a new resistance to messianism, and a fresh resolve to propagate lasting truths.

In this way Isserman hopes to persuade himself that the movement to which he belongs is not a destructive historical aberration, but the continuation and elaboration of a worthy tradition that binds him to a larger community, one that includes his "radical" forebears, biological and spiritual. By focusing on a radical tradition that purports to be independent of any concrete folly and evil, he and the other New Left historians dodge the question of responsibility for the crimes that Stalinists and Weathermen committed. They define the radical essence—"democratic socialism" or "radical democracy"—in such metaphysical terms that it can take its place, exonerated of wrongdoing, in the pantheon of abstracted lost causes that also includes Trotskyism, the various European "council" movements, Western Marxism, and the Spanish Republic. Indeed, "radicalism" is by now almost a Platonic Form, free of all empirical contagion. Any criticism of radical actions can therefore be deflected by the simple expedient of refusing to admit its relevance to the Idea of Radicalism.

Perhaps it is not so surprising, then, that most of those who have reviewed Isserman's book express approval and agreement. Writing in the *American*

Historical Review, for example, Kenneth E. Hendrickson declares it to be the best study yet produced on the American Communist party. According to *The New York Times* reviewer, Joe Klein, it is "scrupulous and balanced," a judgment that Henry F. Bedford seconds in the pages of *The Journal of American History*. Kenneth Waltzer and Alan Wald are more critical, but properly respectful as well. And all of them express enthusiasm for the ongoing reexamination of American communism that, according to the *Historians of American Communism Newsletter*, resulted in 23 dissertations, 35 books, and 58 articles between 1979 and 1984 alone. Clearly, we have to do here with an academic industry.

In more concrete terms, Isserman reports that the new history of American communism "has examined particular communities, particular unions, particular working class and ethnic cultures, particular generations, and other subgroupings within the Party." Its practitioners have in this way attempted to isolate the day to day struggle of idealistic men and women from the ends that their idealism served. According to Vivian Gornick, studies of communism that antedate her *Romance of American Communism* (Basic Books, 1977), fail to capture this human element. "Almost never do I see before me the flesh and blood people, or feel on the page the fierce emotional pull of that life—awesome, hungering, deeply moving [the American Communists] all led." It is a nice stratagem. When I finally met my friend's soft-spoken parents, I was impressed by their benign ordinariness. It would not have taken much to convince me that they were innocent victims of a paranoid and intolerant system that was defined by its anti-communism and opposition to progressive social change.

The theme of victimization is in fact of vital importance to the proponents of American radicalism. Undeserved suffering confers moral status, and, increasingly, legal and professional preferment. At the same time it fuels moral outrage, which must otherwise appear to be both inexplicable and synthetic. In the United States, Paul Hollander has observed, "there is simply no clear correlation between the volume and intensity of social criticism and the magnitude of the ills of society being exposed and condemned." By shifting attention from the Left's active to its passive history, from what it did to what was done to it, the theme of victimization supplies a historical myth that unites rather than divides radical generations and camps. This accounts, I believe, for the tenacity with which the Left clings to the belief that Sacco and Vanzetti, Alger Hiss, and the Rosenbergs were innocent victims. What is at stake is not merely the fate of a few individuals or even a particular reconstruction of the past; it is the viability of the Left's entire tradition of martyrdom.

Peter L. Steinberg demonstrates his recognition of this when, in the preface to his book, *The Great "Red Menace": United States Persecution of American Communists, 1947-1952* (Greenwood Press, 1984), he blames the fall of the SDS and the Black Panthers on "government persecution." Such persecution,

he delights in telling the high school students he teaches, constituted a "continuation of policies began during the Cold War against another radical organization—The Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA)." Ellen W. Schrecker would undoubtedly agree. In her highly publicized book, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (Oxford University Press, 1986), she portrays the hundred or so academics who were dismissed from their posts during the 1940s and 1950s as noble scapegoats. "Neither dupes nor conspirators, [they] . . . were a group of serious men and women who sincerely hoped to create a better world."

With few exceptions, those who reviewed her book accepted that judgment without demur. They therefore accorded it what Sidney Hook describes as an "astonishingly" good reception. Isserman, who is politically and rhetorically moderate compared to Schrecker, gives his unqualified approval, commending her "dispassionate tone," and recalling the words of Dalton Trumbo: "It will do no good to search for villains or heroes or saints or devils because there were none; there were only victims."

Rutgers historian David M. Oshinsky might not agree so readily to dispense with saints and devils, but he too knows sacrificial lambs when he sees them. He concludes his *New York Times* review on a melancholy note: "Above all, it is the victims we remember, and the trail of broken careers." To which the respected Yale historian C. Vann Woodward adds amen in *The New York Review of Books*, observing that Schrecker had "produced a book that should receive respectful attention and the gratitude of the many readers it deserves." Although he concedes that academic freedom suffered more during the 1960s, when the Left ruled academia, he dwells at length on McCarthyism's seemingly numberless "victims," a word he repeats as if it were his mantra.

Not to be outdone, Brandeis' Stephen J. Whitfield speaks even more darkly of "purges" and "purged professors," summoning up visions of Stalin's judicial murders. I for one hope that the Russian émigré writer Vassily Aksyonov does not get wind of such rhetorical excess. Since arriving on our shores, he has found that he must repeatedly remind those of his new countrymen "who bring up McCarthyism that the senator's committee didn't destroy a hundredth of the number of lives that our [Soviet] 'organs' put away in a single day."

II

If the quest for a usable tradition is one reason for the extraordinary academic interest in the CPUSA, another is the conviction that anti-communism leads to "deradicalization," and an all-but-inevitable turn to the political Right. It is one thing, radicals contend, to be critical of certain of communism's excesses, but quite another to succumb to "the God that failed" syndrome. The argument is by no means new. The late Isaac Deutscher, Trotsky's admiring biographer, regularly raged against "renegades" who turned against commu-

nism because they were disenchanted with Stalin's Russia. He had in mind, above all, the contributors to Crossman's famous book: Wright, Louis Fischer, Arthur Koestler, Ignazio Silone, André Gide, and Stephen Spender. To his chagrin, these defectors were soon followed by Czeslaw Milosz, who, long before he won the Nobel Prize for Literature, achieved fame as the author of *The Captive Mind* (Knopf, 1953), the most devastating critique of communism to come from the disillusioned Left in postwar Eastern Europe. Milosz was a forerunner of such celebrated Eastern European Communists turned anti-Communists as Milovan Djilas, Leszek Kolakowski, Tadeusz Konwicki, Gyula Háy, Milan Kundera, Danilo Kiš, and György Konrád. Recently, the apostasy has spread to the once ideologically predictable Left Bank. French radicals of the 1960s, shaken by what they read in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, metamorphosed into "new philosophers," angrily critical of Sartrean fellow traveling.

But as the cases of Wright and Fischer suggest, such conversions have not been limited to Europe. In *Up From Communism: Conservative Odysseys in American Intellectual History* (Basic Books, 1984), John P. Diggins describes the dramatic careers of four well-known ex-Communists—Max Eastman, John Dos Passos, Will Herberg, and James Burnham—all of whom ended their intellectual/spiritual journeys at the station marked William F. Buckley, Jr., and the *National Review*. Whittaker Chambers, who had the temerity to bear witness against Alger Hiss, traveled a similar path, as did Karl August Wittfogel, who in a previous incarnation was a theoretically sophisticated contributor to such German Communist journals as *Die Linkskurve* and *Unter dem Banner des Marxismus*.

Cautionary tales, every one. And yet it is not these men who send the blood pressure of New Left academics climbing; rather, it is those whom Michael Harrington referred to dismissively as "neoconservatives." Indeed, the increased interest in the CPUSA has run parallel to the rise of neoconservatism. And with good reason. Nothing distinguishes that controversial intellectual movement quite so much as its anti-Communist fervor. Schrecker, for example, identifies Sidney Hook, who despite his protests is usually counted among the neoconservatives, as the most brilliant, and hence blameworthy, opponent of Communists in academia.

During the 1940s and 1950s, she argues, Hook and other liberal anti-Communists—neoconservatives *avant la lettre*—acted more shamefully than Old Rightists. To be sure, conservatives "were probably more antagonistic, but [liberals] were more powerful. And it was the latter, those moderate and respectable professors who, as the established leaders of the faculty on most campuses, discouraged strenuous opposition to the witch hunt and so in that way collaborated in its implementation." To this Hook responds eloquently, and without in the least backing away from his oft-stated view that submission to an organization that compels actions incompatible with professional respon-

sibilities should be a disqualification for academic employment. While he's at it, he also points out that New Leftists such as Schrecker—who has taught at Harvard, N.Y.U., the New School for Social Research, and Princeton—are far more numerous on the nation's campuses than Communists ever were. Free of the Party's stigma, they do not find it necessary to conceal their efforts to politicize higher education.

Norman Podhoretz has rightly described Hook as "one of the fiercest and most consistent critics of Communism." The distinguished and combative octogenarian belongs to a loose coalition of ex-Communists and fellow travelers whose ruling passion is "a hatred of Communism and a suspicion of Communists." In addition to him and Podhoretz, that coalition includes Irving Kristol and William Phillips, as well as the circles gathered around *Commentary*, *Partisan Review*, and *Encounter*. More recent recruits include Allen Weinstein and Ronald Radosh, two leftist academics who moved perceptibly, if reservedly, to the right when they set out to demonstrate the innocence of convicted Soviet agents—only to discover that the preponderance of evidence failed to support the defense's case.

When Weinstein began the research for what was to become *Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case* (Knopf Publishers, 1978), he was a history professor at Smith College and a liberal Democrat. Though never wholly convinced of Hiss' innocence, he inclined to that view. By the time he had completed his exhaustive study, however, he could no longer accept Hiss' testimony at face value, concluding that "the body of available evidence proves that he did in fact perjure himself when describing his secret dealings with Chambers."

Enraged by this betrayal of the cause, John Chabot Smith, one of Hiss' most vocal apologists, charges that Weinstein's every judgment can be faulted, and accuses Chambers, and other familiar rogues—Richard Nixon, J. Edgar Hoover, James F. Byrnes, and Bernard Baruch—of having concocted an elaborate conspiracy against Hiss. He is joined in the counterattack by Victor Navasky, editor of *The Nation*, who identifies Weinstein as one of the "cold-war intellectuals who presumably sleep better at night secure in the knowledge that there *was* an internal Communist espionage menace."

Ronald Radosh, who teaches at the Graduate Center/CUNY, has also incurred the wrath of the pro-Communist Left by smashing two more of its icons: Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. In the prefatory note to *The Rosenberg File: A Search for the Truth* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1983), a book he co-authored with Joyce Milton, Radosh tells how, as a high school student, he had joined with thousands of other New Yorkers in a deathwatch vigil for the Rosenbergs, whom he then believed to be "victims of a government-sponsored conspiracy." Only years later, thanks to an insider's tip, did he begin to entertain doubts about the couple's innocence. When the government released documents relating to the case under the Freedom of Information Act, he resolved to examine the evidence for himself.

Radosh and Milton conclude that Julius Rosenberg was the coordinator of an extensive espionage operation and that his wife Ethel acted as an accessory. They are, to be sure, extremely critical of the government's handling of the case, of J. Edgar Hoover, and above all, of the death sentences. Not critical enough, however, to redeem themselves in the eyes of the Left, particularly when they indict the CPUSA for exploiting the Rosenbergs' deaths for purposes of propaganda. After Radosh published a preliminary finding in *The New Republic* in 1979, people he had known for years refused to speak to him. "Others suggested that I had become by this one act an 'enemy of the people,' a traitor to the heritage of the Left."

In *The Nation*, the beleaguered but always inventive Navasky does his best to salvage the situation. By raising a series of hypothetical questions concerning peripheral issues, he seeks to muddy the waters. The entire case, he insists, was shot through with ambiguity; no one could say, with any assurance, where the truth lay. What one *can* say is that Radosh and Milton "maintain the dubious cold war assumptions of liberal anti-communism, especially in the way they link the American Communist Party to the Soviet espionage apparatus." They and other accusers do something far worse to the Rosenbergs than anything the Rosenbergs had done to America, "whether or not [they were] part of a conspiracy."

Navasky's academic allies share his profound aversion to people like Weinstein and Radosh because they know that neoconservatism arose partly in reaction against the New Left, posing most unequivocally both a challenge and a threat. "Will there come a time," Isserman asks plaintively, "when the liberals and radicals who figure so prominently in the demonology of neoconservative polemics have to be rooted out by the method of the 1950s?" He raises the specter of McCarthyism not because he believes that unique historical moment will recur, but because he recognizes that neoconservatives have been more successful in winning a national hearing than members of the Old Right were. With more forums, more money, and more political and academic clout, they cannot safely be ignored.

But there is something more and, I believe, deeper. Many neoconservatives, like many New Leftists, are Jewish, and animosity against members of one's own group is always greater than against outsiders. That is why, of course, civil wars are so savage and the old Communist-Socialist split so emotionally charged. In a recent *Commentary* piece, "The New York (Jewish) Intellectuals," Ruth R. Wisse examines several books, almost all of which were written by Jewish leftists. All are outspoken in their hatred of neoconservatism.

In *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (Basic Books, 1987), Russell Jacoby, a sometime professor and Frankfurt School enthusiast, offers an invidious comparison between Jewish and non-Jewish leftists. The latter, he maintains, are more likely to stay the radical course. Men such as Dwight MacDonald, C. Wright Mills, and Michael Harrington are to be preferred to Podhoretz, Daniel Bell, and Lionel Trilling. "Did," Jacoby

asks, "the radicalism steeped in anxiety [that of Jews in a Christian civilization] slide into conservatism, while the Texan, Puritan, or Scottish identities of Mills or [Edmund] Wilson or [Gore] Vidal or [John Kenneth] Galbraith gave rise to a bony radicalism more resistant to economic and social blandishment?"

In *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left From the 1930's to the 1980's* (University of North Carolina Press, 1987), Alan Wald, a University of Michigan professor, is, like Jacoby, concerned to "allay the process of deradicalization" and to denounce "The Great Retreat" of neoconservatives "who had long sought ideological acceptance by government." Writing in *The Nation*, Schrecker describes Wald's analysis as "chilling" but claims nevertheless to sniff the odor of neoconservatism in his Trotskyism, from which, to be sure, not a few neoconservatives *did* begin their political odysseys. Once that first step away from the Party's Stalinism had been taken, Schrecker maintains, "others followed and ultimately the break . . . encouraged the New York intellectual to question Marxism as well. Deradicalization was under way." It followed, she concludes, that "anti-Stalinist left" was an oxymoron; by defining their political identity "primarily in terms of their opposition to the Communist Party . . . the New York intellectuals had already abandoned the left."

It is, I think, indicative of the Left's current obsession with neoconservatism that even such relative moderates as C. Vann Woodward can sing the praises of someone like Schrecker, who at this late date refuses to condemn Stalinism, lest she give aid and comfort to the enemy. Still it remains true that Woodward and most other spokesmen for the moderate Left are more at home with anti-Stalinism, Rutgers historian William L. O'Neill being a notably articulate case in point. In *A Better World: The Great Schism: Stalinism and the American Intellectuals* (Simon and Schuster, 1982), O'Neill enters a detailed and devastating brief against the pro-Soviet Left that Schrecker so defiantly defends. In conscious opposition to Navasky and the notorious Lillian Hellman, he does not refrain from criticizing those who hedged, lied, or remained silent during the House Un-American Activities Committee's investigations of Communists and fellow travelers in the motion-picture industry.

And yet, for all his criticism of the Stalinists, O'Neill gives no quarter to neoconservatives. If communism is bad, he argues, so is anti-communism. Thus he applauds Max Lerner's starry-eyed proposal that the United States should "oppose both Communism and anti-Communism on behalf of democratic and socialist movements everywhere"—never mind that a *tertium datur*, even if desirable, is rarely present. Only the anti-Stalinist Left, he insists, continues to reprobate Stalinism without making any unseemly concessions to the Right. Theirs is a pure radicalism, uncontaminated by compromise, *au-dessus de la meleé*. As O'Neill sees it, the primary task of the present historical moment is to increase the size of this principled, if otherwoldly, Left, for the "Michael Harringtons and Irving Howes are so few."

It is not difficult to understand why O'Neill admires Howe, a prolific writer

and able editor who has long been a leading spokesman for the anti-Communist Left as well as a truculent critic of neoconservatism. In his intellectual autobiography, *A Margin of Hope* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), Howe labors to explain why it was that, having abandoned Marxism and admitted that equality without liberty is slavery, he continues to espouse the cause of "socialism." A lifetime of devotion to that cause, he pleads in his own defense, is simply impossible to disown; it is a question of loyalty. That Kristol and Podhoretz, former friends, broke Socialist ranks, is reason enough for Howe's unrelenting and—at first glance—surprisingly vitriolic opposition to neoconservatism.

The conservative thought of the 1950s, he now believes, "can seem fairly benign when compared with the rougher, meaner versions of three decades later." Generous in his praise for veteran conservatives such as Peter Viereck and Russell Kirk, Howe cannot bring himself to forgive the neoconservatives who, as he sees it, turned on the Left in its hour of need. Once, upon espying Norman Thomas, the Grand Old Man of American Socialism, in an airport terminal, Howe "wanted to run over and say a few words of gratitude for his unspoken decision to see his commitment through to the very end."

In different words, Isserman now says much the same thing about Howe. The pivotal chapter in his new book, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (Basic Books, 1987), is a statement of solidarity. Yes, he writes, Howe, Harrington, Lewis Coser, and Michael Walzer are anti-Communists, but they never gave any quarter to McCarthy. Moreover, their identification with the West "stopped well short of the hard anti-communism of other New York Intellectuals as expressed in the 1950s by *Commentary* and *Partisan Review*." Like such ex-Communists—and academic superstars—as E.P. Thompson, David Montgomery, and Eugene Genovese, they "offered no apologies for their previous allegiances."

Perhaps not, but it would take a jeweler's eye to discern the difference between Howe and the neoconservatives on the question of communism. In their 1957 history of the CPUSA, Howe and Coser charge that "for nearly four decades the Communist party exerted a profoundly destructive and corrupting influence upon American radicalism." What is more, Howe has been a tireless publicist for anti-Communist Eastern Europeans from Djilas to Konrád. What really moved Isserman was that Howe and the *Dissent* circle's initial response to the New Left "was one of enthusiastic praise and support." And even when they turned away, they did so with a heavy heart and without jettisoning the effort to rebuild "*a radical political community*." Here, he believes, is the most important link connecting the Old with the New Left.

III

But what is it, precisely, that Howe stands *for*? The melancholia that informs his autobiography is not merely the result of neoconservative infidelity; it is

also a consequence of his recognition that the yearning for a better world has repeatedly ended "in muck, foul play, [and] murder." The simple truth is, according to Howe, that socialism is inherently problematic and it dare not be anything more than "a loose egalitarian creed, a stubborn refusal to accept the given as immutable." It can offer only a "margin of hope" for "what may yet be." All in all, his is a socialism for people who do not much like socialism, an ideology so empty of content and so ethereal—it exists "at no point in time and space"—that it is irrelevant to any conceivable world of men.

Like Howe's, Isserman's conception of "democratic socialism" is ambiguous. He speaks grandly, but vaguely, of "a patient, long-term approach to building movements," "winning small victories as part of a strategy preparing the way for larger ones," setting "limited goals," and cultivating "a sense of historical irony." One is entitled to ask, however, whether or not this adds up to anything more than an extension of welfare state liberalism.

For that matter, what can Wald's neo-Trotskyism or Schrecker's *de facto* Stalinism mean in the United States in the 1980s? To ask the question is to answer it; they can mean nothing at all. Lacking a realistic program, the proponents of all three ideologies prefer to emphasize the critically destructive. For American radicalism in practice is, above all else, critique. Wrongs and injustices, real and imagined, are stimulants that work to sustain righteous indignation—as Isserman all but concedes: "The Cuban missile crisis, Birmingham, Neshoba County, Berkeley, Selma, Watts, the bombing of North Vietnam, Detroit, Newark, the Tet offensive, the May 1968 uprising in Paris, King's assassination—all fed a sense of outrage. . . ."

It is because of this that reviewers, even those who do not belong to the New Left, are so prepared to praise books that attempt to cast the CPUSA in a softer light. As enemies of Western societies, Communists have few equals. In this, at least, they serve as an example to most American intellectuals, very much including those who live in New York. In the finest book yet written about the latter, *The Truants: Adventures Among the Intellectuals* (Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1981), William Barrett calls attention, without malice, to his old friends' negative spirit because he sees it as characteristic of modern intellectuals generally.

"What was it that was 'negative'—or nihilistic, if you prefer the more philosophical word—about modern intellectuals as a class?" It was, Barrett maintains, their anger at having lost a sense of meaning in the secular, disenchanted world they themselves did so much to create. Paul Hollander agrees. In the conclusion to his masterful *Political Pilgrims* (Oxford University Press, 1981), he observes that "capitalist societies engender hostility in intellectuals partly because they cannot meet their needs for meaning and purpose in life—an incentive to hostility quite different from the discernment of exploitation and other forms of social injustice."

In attempting to convey something of American communism's appeal, Viv-

ian Gornick only confirms Barrett and Hollander's point. One of the soul's great hungers, she writes, "is the need to live a life of meaning. The motive force is the dread fear that life is *without* meaning." Despite the often acknowledged evils of historic communism, many American intellectuals, in and out of the academy, retain a certain reverence for it. When all is said and done, communism, unlike anti-communism, proclaims a faith, and faith, Whittaker Chambers wrote in a Dostoevskian vein, "is the central problem of this age. The Western world does not know it, but it already possesses the answer to this problem—but only provided that its faith in God and the freedom He enjoins is as great as communism's faith in Man."