

The Peter Shaw Award Acceptance Address: An Immigrant Sociologist

Paul Hollander

I have several excellent reasons for expressing pleasure and appreciation at receiving the Peter Shaw award. The most general and obvious is, of course, that we all like a measure of recognition for our work or efforts, and especially from groups or organizations we value and identify with. I have been a member and supporter of NAS from the beginning of its existence, although my contribution to its goals has been more indirect than organizational: mostly by way of writings, including those which appeared in *Academic Questions*. NAS is the only organization I belong to at the present time, aside from those dedicated to the welfare (though not the rights) of animals and the preservation of the natural environment.

I will give you two examples of our current cultural-political condition that makes it all too clear that NAS has not outlived its usefulness: 160,000 copies of the latest diatribe of Noam Chomsky have been sold (on 9/11 and U.S. responsibility for it and for all evil in the world), and he remains a non-stop speaker on the campus lecture circuit; the second example is the acclaim, the respectful and glowing reviews and near best selling status of the volume *Empire*, published by Harvard University Press (ten printings so far) coauthored by an Italian terrorist and American professor of literature. A rare critical reviewer wrote of the book that it “plunder[s] every imaginable source of academic foolishness from postcolonialism, to queer theory, to French post-structuralism and wed[s] it to Marx, Lenin and . . . Mao.” So much for the bad news.

It is also a source of pleasure that the award I am receiving was named after Peter Shaw. Few have been as articulate and clear-sighted as he was about the threats to free expression, rationality, and honesty in academic and intellectual life.

Getting this award puts me into the company of past recipients, I greatly respect and admire. They are Robert Conquest, John Ellis, Mary Lefkowitz and Herbert London. I am tempted to say that being associated with them raises my self-esteem.

Paul Hollander is professor emeritus of sociology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. His books include *Discontents: Postmodern and Postcommunist* (Transaction, 2002).

There is another more personal aspect to the satisfaction occasioned by the award. As all of you listening to me cannot fail to realize, I am not a native of this country and to this day, after exactly 43 years and most of my adult life spent here, I remain uncertain as to the degree to which I can or should consider myself an American—about the extent to which I have become a part, a member of this society. During all these years, I was inclined to think of myself as a “rootless cosmopolitan”—a term introduced a long time ago by the great Andrei Zhdanov, the Soviet cultural commissar under Stalin. I hasten to add that such rootlessness was far from intolerable; I have been quite comfortable with my unresolved sense of national identity and questionable sense of belonging—a state of affairs reflecting the good-natured tolerance that still survives in this country.

This award helps to resolve these questions and uncertainties; it represents a token of acceptance and appreciation by a group of fellow intellectuals with whom I have much in common and who stand for authentic American values and beliefs. My attraction to these values—and the institutions protecting them—contributed greatly to my living here.

I often thought in the course of the more than four decades I spent in academic settings in this country (as graduate student and teacher): “what’s the point of behaving—as many of my colleagues did—as if I still lived in communist Hungary? What was the point in coming to and living in what I experienced as a free society (without quotation marks) if I continued to act as if I still lived in a closed and repressive one? Why not express my reservations about the type of orthodoxy that came to be known as political correctness?”

I do not think for a moment that it required great courage for a tenured professor to express occasional public dissent in word or writing from the all-too-familiar conventional wisdoms that came to prevail in academic life since the late 1960s. I will, of course, never know if I could have had a more distinguished career had I not expressed the views that contributed to my becoming a recipient of this award. Nor will I know how many, if any, grants I did not get because of my political incorrectness. (But I note here that I did get a Guggenheim Fellowship in the early 1970s to begin work on my *Political Pilgrims*, and, in the early 1980s, the Rockefeller Foundation admitted me to its Bellagio Study Center to begin working on *Anti-Americanism*.) I did not suffer any major and obvious injustice at the institution (University of Massachusetts–Amherst) where I spent most of my academic career.

I often speculated that being a foreigner and coming from communist Eastern Europe might have diminished the personal and political animosity my views had stimulated; it is quite possible that some of my colleagues regarded these utterances as a form of relatively harmless eccentricity perhaps comparable to my great fondness for green peppers—a mystifying attribute of someone emerging from a distant and poorly known land, who spoke with an accent.

It might be of some interest to say something briefly about the circumstances

that led me to the views and beliefs which made me a supporter of this organization and which found expression in my writings.

My background, already referred to, provides the best, although not altogether complete, explanation of my worldview as it has equipped me with certain comparative-historical standards and perspectives.

If, as Marxists believe, "existence determines consciousness," it is easy to understand the path I traveled from being a "builder of socialism to free floating intellectual and politically incorrect sociologist."¹

Let me note more specific aspects of my background that helped to immunize me against the left-of-center conventional wisdom that still flourishes in our academic settings. Being force-fed Marxism-Leninism in Hungary when I was growing up was one such experience. (The force-feeding took place largely in school.) More important was the fact that the disastrous social experiment imposed upon Hungary and Eastern Europe was legitimated and guided by Marxism, or certain tenets thereof. I could not avoid concluding that there was *some* connection between theory and practice, which led me to have little sympathy for any version of Marxism. Nor could I embrace the view that capitalism was the source of all evil in the world.

Not only did I become immunized against the charms of Marxism, more significantly I also developed skepticism toward utopian movements and strivings which in turn made me skeptical toward and critical of much of the spirit of the 1960s and the social movements of the period that reflected it. This is not to deny that there was idealism too in those movements, but to note their degeneration into anti-intellectual, anti-rational, and antidemocratic trends and mindsets.

I should also add here that a key aspect of political correctness—preferential treatment of, and a special solicitousness for, designated minorities—did not appeal to me because, as an immigrant, I was not in a position to feel guilty about sins my ancestors did not commit. Moreover, my experiences in American academic institutions failed to make credible the increasingly routinized claim that this is a profoundly and incorrigibly racist society.

Having grown up in a rather troubled part of the world also implanted an awareness that political freedom, free expression, political pluralism, and tolerance are historically rare and precious commodities. I could never take them for granted, let alone dismiss them as unimportant luxuries or, worse, cunning devices of "repressive tolerance."

Let me make a final point about the problem we face when we take certain stands as reluctant or willing participants in the "culture wars," and when we engage in well-founded criticism of the prevailing orthodoxies and their representatives.

How can we avoid becoming consumed by a cause, even by a good one? How are we going to demonstrate that the personal is *not* political, that these realms can and should be separate? How do we avoid becoming ideologues

when rebuffing ideologues? Politicized when rejecting politicization? How do we remain properly judgmental without becoming dogmatic and self-righteous? How do we make sure that we do not partake of the attributes of people, movements, and their ideologies of which we are critical?

As we so often say, there are no simple answers to, or solutions for, these dilemmas. To some degree, these are matters of style and a sense of proportion. A sense of humor also helps, as does the determination to retain a measure of moderation and balance.

In conclusion, let me suggest that you don't have to be a former refugee from a communist country in order to subscribe to the values and convictions that brought NAS into existence. The members of this organization and the millions of Americans who support what NAS stands for without knowing that it exists, prove that being critical of orthodoxies, conformity, double standards, and self-righteous intolerance need not be a by-product of growing up in a highly repressive and openly intolerant society.

Note

1. See Paul Hollander: "From a 'Builder of Socialism' to 'Free Floating Intellectual': My Politically Incorrect Career in Sociology," *American Sociologist* (Fall 2001).

The Notes and Comments department in the *New Criterion* (vol. 22, no.5) focused interestingly on the following "Proposal for the 2003 Delegate Assembly Meeting" of the Modern Language Association:

Whereas in wartime, governments commonly shape language to legitimate aggression, misrepresent policies, conceal aims, stigmatize dissent, and block critical thought; and

Whereas distortions of this sort proliferate now, as in the use of the phrase "war on terrorism," to underwrite military action anywhere in the world, against whomever our government sees as opponents; and

Whereas we are professionals committed to scrupulous inquiry into language and culture;

Be it resolved that the Modern Language Association supports its members in conducting critical analysis of war talk, in public forums and, as appropriate, in classrooms.