

The Intellect as a Weapon for Freedom

John H. Bunzel: Past president of San Jose State University, former member of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, and senior research fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305-6010.

I never took a philosophy course from Sidney Hook, something I always regretted. But in the late 1970s I struck it rich. From 1978 until he died eleven years later, hardly a day passed that I didn't have an opportunity or a reason to spend time with Sidney at the Hoover Institution at Stanford, frequently over coffee in the afternoon but more often in his office or mine. We talked about everything because just about everything that provoked the clash of ideas was meat and drink to him and roused his love of argument and demanding skepticism. I admit unashamedly that I took unreasonable advantage of his generosity of mind and spirit.

"It's been a good day," Sidney once remarked. "I've had three fights." He was happiest in intellectual combat, when he could draw on his seemingly unlimited energy and passion and, by his aggressive mobilizing of clear-headed and logical distinctions, expose the foolishness of muddle-headed adversaries who were unprepared for the sheer compellingness and discipline of his thinking. It is little wonder that both his colleagues and students have remembered him for his brilliant teaching, his vision of excellence, and, above all else, his commitment to the cultivation of truth.

When Sidney started to write his autobiography, I suggested he call it "Rebel With a Cause." He shook his head disapprovingly. (He was right.) Some time later he decided on *Out of Step*, which he felt was what he had really been all of his life. This was especially true in an age of ideological fanaticism when he was relentlessly out of step with the headlong rush of intellectuals and fellow travelers who looked unblinkingly to the Soviet Union as the "future that worked." It is not surprising that Sidney Hook, the philosopher-teacher who insisted on the weighing of hard facts and on the power of critical inquiry, would be an enemy of the reigning orthodoxies and ideologies that stirred righteous passions, from the "horrendous excrescences" of Stalinism (which he denounced as early as 1934) to the unconscionable lies and accusations of McCarthyism.

Nowhere was Sidney Hook more out of step than in his lifelong belief in a naturalistic ethics without religious foundations. "I am a religious unbeliever, indeed an atheist," Sidney often said to the distress of conservative friends like Irving Kristol, who had the kind of "metaphysical itch" (the term is Kristol's) that made it impossible for him to take secular humanism seriously. ("Does Irving *really* believe in God?" Sidney once asked Kristol's wife.) But Sidney's systematic doubt concerning the search for "divine purpose" in the universe

or such basic religious principles as immortality and revelation was very much in keeping with his rational and scientific temperament. He rejected the premise of God as an ultimate cause because "there are no ultimate questions, only penultimate ones—because," he argued, "if an answer to a causal question is intelligible, we can always ask another question about it." This was vintage Hook. Still, while he himself never turned to the "consolations of a supernatural faith" in times of trouble or grief, he had no quarrel with those who did. He regarded religion as a deeply private matter and throughout his life defended the rights of believers and nonbelievers alike.¹

At the memorial service in the Stanford chapel on 18 July 1989, Benjamin Hook, a physician and research scientist, spoke movingly about his father's last thoughts in his hospital bed. Sidney had wanted his family to go on with their lives and not fuss unnecessarily:

He was never afraid of death but rather impatient for it so as to put an end to the disruptions in our lives. As a physician, I have seen death but never one such as my father's. For he faced death squarely. Shortly before he died, he coughed once. "Is that the death rattle?" he asked. "Well, rattle on, rattle, rattle, rattle, rattle, rattle, rattle!" If there was then the grim reaper of death in the room, visible only to him, I can only say this death did not rattle *him*, rather *he* rattled death.²

Each of us has a distinctive set of personal memories of Sidney Hook and his work. I remember especially two aspects of his career that touched me directly. The first is Sidney's role as an advocate of democracy and, in particular, of the unique contribution made to the democratic prospect by the American experience. The second is his role as a herald, critic, and defender of the free university in a democratic society.

Since the 1930s, Sidney was regularly (and often viciously) attacked because of his relentless opposition to totalitarianism and his defense of democracy. Because belief systems and illusions die hard, it will take some time before the news of democracy's growth is fully assimilated into the lives and scholarship of many academics whose sympathies for closed societies and hostility to open ones have nowhere been described with more mordant insight than by Sidney Hook. His mastery of the most arcane arguments of classical Marxist theory, his tenacity in combating ruthless Soviet activities, his upholding of the virtues of freedom and of freedom's importance to the examined life were probably unparalleled in the United States.

Sidney's commitment to democracy in its generic form and to its American version was powerfully expressed in a constant stream of books, lectures, and articles in journals of opinion and newspapers for more than half a century. Contrary to the canards of his critics, he never faltered in his belief in pluralism and the inviolability of intellectual dissent, whether he personally agreed with the dissenter or not. For Sidney, heresy was an inevitable companion of

freedom. Conspiracy, on the other hand, crossed the line by violating the rule of law and need not therefore be tolerated by democracy. Many of us as individuals, and our society as a whole, owe him a profound debt for his heroism in defending democracy and his unsurpassed clarity in mounting arguments against those of a totalitarian temper. It is a measure of his intellectual power that Sidney had some of the best enemies a man could have—and a number of them could easily have named their first ulcers after him.

Long before it became fashionable, Sidney Hook believed that the “greatest political question of our time” was not a choice between socialism and capitalism, but totalitarianism—and, more urgently, “whether our democracy is up to the continuing challenge of such regimes, as well as coping with our own domestic problems.” He always felt Churchill said the last word on that—that democracy is the worst form of government except for everything else that has been tried. “I put my faith in democracy,” he said, “but if I lived in a democracy whose citizens freely and fairly chose to live under a dictatorship, in the interest of freedom I would have to surrender my belief in democracy.”

Although he never wrote much about it in the last years of his life, he frequently said in private conversation that “socialism” no longer remained the kind of “utopian value” he had championed back in the 1930s. He had seen with his own eyes the realities of Soviet socialism and how they led to the Gulag. Still, he could not come to the “lamentable conclusion” that the only alternative open “to those who love freedom is support of the free enterprise system.” The truth is that Sidney was caught in something of a dilemma that he was never able to resolve even to his own satisfaction: he knew that “we must recast the idea of socialism,” but Adam Smith (no more than Karl Marx) would not be his prophet. He proclaimed himself a “democratic market-socialist,” which was his way of rejecting what he now judged to be an irrational devotion to wholesale nationalization and concentrated government power, while still believing in “the judicious development of the democratic welfare state pruned of its bureaucratic excrescences.” In short, he felt that government had a moral responsibility to help preserve our basic democratic values by (among other things) mitigating the harsher effects of an uncontrolled free-enterprise economy. “Morality,” he once wrote, “must have primacy over all social phenomena.” As for “socialism,” it was not a word or concept with which he any longer felt comfortable.

The second of Sidney’s massive portfolio of causes that I was privileged to observe was his personal engagement in the struggle to prevent the universities of the Western world from being overwhelmed by the riptide of politicization that started in the late 1960s. Sidney stood tall, and often alone, in carrying the argument for the freedom to teach and to learn into every conceivable forum, rallying the fainthearted by identifying the folly of each new depredation against the integrity of the university. It was a source of great comfort to know that Sidney was there—and he seemed to be everywhere—

fighting to preserve a noble part of our democratic heritage. I have always felt that his unmatched dedication to the cause of the free university constituted his finest hour.

"I put freedom first," Sidney Hook never tired of saying. But in his long life he had discovered that "many who professed to believe in freedom betrayed it when the betrayal served their immediate interests. They refused to extend the freedom and tolerance to those who differed from them which they demanded for themselves when they were dissenters." He particularly had in mind the kind of intellectual and moral failure of senior faculty members who would defend a professor's academic freedom when it was attacked by right-wing groups from off campus but looked the other way when one of their fellow professor's classes was disrupted by leftwing students. Fashionable leftwing heroes such as Angela Davis—they were easy to defend. Yet faculty, chary of offending the prevailing leftwing sentiments, remained silent as activists closed their campuses to recruiters from the military or from leading American corporations.

In the late 1960s and well into the 1970s, Sidney was especially contemptuous of the many liberal and moderate university professors who refused to stand up to the "barbarians of virtue" when they sought to impose their will by threats or coercion. What came home to him with special force is that instead of speaking out in opposition to the intimidation of rioting students, "men of intelligence simply caved in and kowtowed to those who abused them." In private they would assure him of their support for his own open criticism of actions that violated the principles of academic freedom, but in public they were afraid to do so. He would later admit it was a turning point in his life. "That was when I had it impressed on me that elementary moral courage could be lacking in men of impressive intelligence," he said. "It was a very disheartening discovery."

Sidney Hook was so powerful a prime mover in the world of ideas that he became for many of us in the academic community the true north of our intellectual compass. No matter the subject or problem that drew his attention, he never departed from what the distinguished sociologist Edward Shils called his "inexhaustible alertness and indefatigable rationality in argument." Equally important, however, was the fact that Sidney—unlike most of those whom he engaged in countless debates—had a coherent philosophy of higher education and, in particular, of the nature and role of a university. This meant that, at a time when campuses across the country were under attack from within by the militant left wing, he was able to articulate a well-defined set of principles and standards which he used both to oppose the assaults of student disrupters and to defend the university's core values.

For more than fifty years Sidney Hook championed the cause of the underdog. He fought hard for the rights of labor as well as for those of blacks and other minorities. Equality of opportunity for all Americans was, for Sidney, as

much a conviction as it was a commitment. Yet his advocacy of equality in a democracy was grounded in the firm belief that cherished values like equality and freedom are often in conflict with each other. His opposition to affirmative action quotas and race-based preferences did not mean he valued equality less. It simply meant that, unlike those who seem to think that equality is an absolute or the only goal of a free society, Sidney believed that equality derives its meaning as well as its limits from the larger system of democratic values to which it belongs. Framed this way, he understood that there would always be tension between the ideal of equality and, for example, the liberal values of individual merit and achievement. He disagreed strongly with those who were willing to see merit dissolved in egalitarianism. Thus, he said, it was not enough to ask if one is in favor of equality. The important question is what kind of equality, how much, in what areas, for what reasons, or at what cost? In Sidney's view, this was but another example of the moral predicaments that arise when important values clash—what he called the “agony of choice” that each of us confronts when “right conflicts with right, good with good, and sometimes the right with the good.”

Sidney Hook's gift of reason and polemical skills were especially formidable when he took on the “new movement” of educational change inspired by developments in “minority and feminist militancy”—a movement that sought a radical transformation of the university curriculum. I can still remember the day he came into my office in a state of great agitation because he had just learned that the leaders of the black and Chicano students at Stanford were demanding the abolition of the entire core list of readings that constituted the skeletal structure of the popular course in Western culture. (They did not succeed.) What particularly upset him was not the incorporation of “great works” by women and people of color (or classics worthy of study from different cultures) into the curriculum. He knew from long experience that, in the natural course of events, changes and innovations have always been made from time to time. But he objected strenuously to the changes being proposed that would “alter the entire *orientation* of the old courses in Western Culture”—under the guise of “purifying” them of “their alleged racism, sexism and imperialism—charges,” he maintained, “never proved.”

When Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* was placed on the required list of readings in the “new” Western Culture course, Sidney did not protest its appearance. He knew it had become a favorite of third world terrorist groups and that it preached revolutionary violence and force against colonialists and other “oppressors of the oppressed.” But that did not bother him. “True, it is a very bad book,” he wrote. “But one of the limitations of Great Books courses is the absence of the study of some very bad books that have had momentous historical significance like Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.” What is “scandalous,” he said, was the “absence of any replies to the cult of violence. Let the students read Fanon but also Gandhi; if not Gandhi, then Martin Luther King,

Jr., or the most powerful of all voices in behalf of non-violence, Leo Tolstoy." Sidney was assuming, of course, that "as educators we are primarily interested in stimulating or clarifying the minds of our students and not in stirring them to some sort of political action." It was an assumption not always shared by many of his faculty colleagues.

Sidney Hook's was often a lonely voice. Yet it was seldom ignored. If someone's comment or statement struck him as an example of slovenly thinking, Sidney was quick to respond—such as when the assistant dean of undergraduate studies at Stanford, a supporter of the new curriculum changes, came to the defense of Franz Fanon. "Fifty years ago," the dean wrote to the *Wall Street Journal*, "John Locke seemed indispensable in answering a question like 'What is Social Justice?' In 1989, with a more interdependent world order, a more heterogeneous domestic population, and mass media and communications systems that complicate our definitions of 'society' and 'individual,' it may be that someone like Fanon, a black Algerian psychoanalyst, will get us closer to the answer we need."

Sidney would have none of it. "What a curious and irrelevant defense of the new program!" he replied. Then he proceeded to demonstrate once again, sharply and cleanly, that his battlefield was ideas:

John Lock's first notable work is about the theory of knowledge, the second about the philosophical foundation of human rights, which should be more relevant to the human rights revolution of our times than any of the new works in the course. On the other hand, Fanon has nothing to say about 'social justice' or even about psychoanalysis. *The Wretched of the Earth*... does not treat seriously any of the complex phenomena listed as bearing on the modern quest for social justice.

If one were concerned with theories of social justice in 1989, Hook pointed out, one would require the study of excerpts from John Rawls's *Theory of Justice* and Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, as well as writings from their critics. These, he said, would provide students with more intellectual nourishment than Fanon's jeremiad. Then Sidney confronted the dean directly:

If we are looking for works that 'will get us closer to the answer we need,' how does he know that the answer we need is a true or adequate answer? A purported answer to a question may meet our needs or hopes but it may not be a true or adequate answer to the question. A university is an institution that should study with critical care and understanding *all* proposed answers to the central questions and problems of our time. It cannot as an institution become a partisan advocate or agency of any proposed solution. That is the function of legislative bodies in our democracy.

Those who knew and appreciated Sidney Hook's huge talents as a "warrior of knowledge" would agree, I think, that he has been absorbed into our consciousness. His work, his presence, his fearlessness, his autonomy as a person

are all part of his remarkable legacy. Yet some of his greatest admirers have wondered if he did not misuse his exceptional moral and intellectual qualities by becoming so active in polemical battles and organizational work that it ended any chance of his name being placed in the "great philosophical pantheon." The philosopher Ernest Nagel, for example, believed that Hook could and should have been another Karl Marx. Perhaps. Who knows what he might have become had he chosen differently? What we *do* know is that "the times and Sidney Hook coincided"—that when he came to social consciousness, he became what Shils has termed "the instructor of a generation." When Hitlerian fascism or Stalinist communism were for many the wave of the future and democracy seemed "bourgeois, weak and failing," Sidney never lost his passion for bringing the weight and substance of carefully reasoned argument wherever his skeptical and penetrating intellect led him in his search for "truth as the highest good."

Sidney's former student and close friend, emeritus professor of philosophy Ralph Ross, said it best: "Another Karl Marx? But we already have a Karl Marx and do not need another one. Could Sidney have been another John Dewey? Why? We already have one. What we needed, and fortunately got, was Sidney Hook."

Notes

1. In a perceptive essay in *Encounter* magazine in 1985, author and editor Nathan Glick described one of Sidney Hook's frustrations when an opponent would invariably avoid his "logical strictures and venture into realms closed to him." When attacked by Hook, Tillich always replied "I agree with everything you have said..." and Hook found himself "embraced as a fellow religionist crusading for the Holy Grail of Being." About Niebuhr's concept of the mystery of the Christian faith, Hook wrote that "to hold him to rigorous analytic discourse would be like imposing a proper logical syntax upon a poem." And Jacques Maritain said he loved to debate with Hook because he felt that if he could only find the perfect argument he would be able to convert him—a tribute, observed Glick, to Sidney's "openness and passion for reasoned discourse."
2. In one of his last interviews, he emphasized that he had no "moral repugnance to the existence of God if his or her existence could be established, especially if God were a finite creature." When a neighbor asked him, "What will you do if after you die, you discover there really is an afterlife and you are called to judgment by the Almighty?" Sidney replied, "I will say, 'Forgive me Lord, but you did not give me enough evidence.'"