

## A REFINED IRVING HOWE

by Arnold Beichman

You don't have to be a sadist to enjoy Irving Howe's "autobiography" but it helps.\* Not being (I think) sadistic, I can't say that reading Howe, the memoirist, was a particularly pleasant experience, as pleasant, say, as reading his literary celebrations. The book reveals a New York intellectual, now in his early sixties, wriggling, twisting, ducking and dodging any possible accusation that, because he is critical of Communism, he might be mistaken for a—CONSERVATIVE; that somebody out there on the Left might accuse him of being a secret believer in democratic capitalism rather than "socialism." (The reason for the inverted commas is that since Howe says he is no longer a Marxist, the "socialism" in which he still believes is little more than a sympathy for justice, brotherhood, peace, and other laudable virtues.)

For example, he praises the *Federalist Papers* because their stress "on the need for countervailing powers in a democratic society represented an important truth"—but ever fearful of the accusation of being a you-know-what, Howe quickly adds that this important truth was "not rendered any less so by Madison's conservative opinions."

For heaven's sakes—Madison, an ally of Thomas Jefferson against Hamilton! It's 1787, just after Madison and his compatriots have won a revolution against colonialism, have invented a style and form of government without precedent in history; when they have created, in Seymour Martin Lipset's phrase, the first new nation; Madison, a towering intellectual force in the building of America, the product of Locke and James Harrington—and Howe feels duty-bound to impose his view of conservatism, via Charles A. Beard's fictions, no doubt, on James Madison,

turning him into a sort of eighteenth-century American Lord North. Really!

Howe describes the late Dwight Macdonald's long defunct magazine, *Politics*, as "a stopping place for independent leftists who were bored with Marxist sects yet refused Cold War conservatism." Was there no Cold War liberalism? Were Americans for Democratic Action being Cold War conservatives when they supported the Truman Doctrine against the USSR? Was Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. a Cold War conservative when he wrote powerful articles against Soviet foreign policy? And as for Macdonald himself, anyone who saw him operating as I did as an opponent of the Stalinist "Waldorf" peace conference in 1949 would quite properly call Macdonald a Cold War something. Macdonald eventually lapsed from this state of grace but not before serving a tour of duty as an editorial associate of *Encounter* magazine.

And then there is the sly Lionel Trilling, a man who exhibited "subtly conservative moods" and whose "critique provided a rationale for an increasingly relaxed and conserva-

tized liberalism"; Trilling the conspirator who "embarked on an oblique campaign to transform the dominant liberalism into something more quizzical and less combative than it had previously been." Trilling's work "had come to serve as a high-toned justification for the increasingly accommodating moods of American intellectuals." Accommodating to what—to the essential anti-Communism and anti-Stalinism of the postwar world, the Taft-Hartley Law, the Marshall Plan, midcult? As for Richard Hofstadter, the peerless American historian, he had, for Howe, "veered too far toward a conservative brand of liberalism." Everybody is marching to the wrong drummer except Howe, onetime Trotskyite, Marxist, isolationist, now preaching something he calls "radical humanism," a "maybe" Socialist. Isn't it possible that Hofstadter and Trilling were right then and, in the light of contemporary history, are still right?

There is worse yet. Howe wants his anti-Communism to be aesthetically

uplifting. So we have the silly business that in the 1950s "among once-radical intellectuals there now prevailed a coarse version of anti-Communism often ready to justify whatever the United States might do." (I wonder whether he would have called George Orwell's pro-U.S. anti-Communism "coarse.") And there are "Jewish trade unionists, 'old Socialists' as they still like to call themselves, worthy people who have done worthy things but are now locked into a single passion: a coarse [sic], monolithic anti-Communism."

These old Socialists, writes Howe, "keep talking about 'the Commies' and something about that phrase strikes me as marking a collapse of standards, a vulgarity of mind that will soon prompt some of them into alliances with the Far Right." And I suppose, in keeping with Howe's aesthetic sensitivities, we should never have referred to them as "the Nazis" but rather as National Socialists to avoid vulgarity of mind and collapse of standards.

The aesthetics problem for Howe knows no end. Early in his book, he writes that "there is something unattractive about a right-wing Social Democrat who has found his bureaucratic niche and makes a safe politics out of anti-Communism . . ." But just when you think he's going to fall into the morass of anti-anti-Communism, Howe makes a quick leap into the safety net by adding, ". . . correct as that anti-Communism may be."

Supposing, then, that the right-wing Social Democrat hasn't found his "bureaucratic niche" and still makes "a safe politics out of anti-Communism," is he still unattractive? And what kind of "bureaucratic niche" is Howe talking about—something like that of the late David Dubinsky who certainly made a "politics" out of anti-Communism, or George Meany? The "right-wing Social Democrat," says Howe, is to be reprobated because "he has lost that larger sympathy for the oppressed, that responsiveness to new modes of rebellion that a Socialist



\**A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, \$14.95.

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ought to have." Such prose from a man who can write clearly and even brilliantly when he wants to is simply unacceptable. What "new modes of rebellion" is Howe talking about? Castroism? Baader-Meinhof? Or is the phrase nothing more than Howe's trying, at his tiresome worst, to show where he really stands: no conservative he.

It is particularly distasteful to watch Howe engaging, to use his language, in "a masquerade of innocence" and even "posturings of rectitude" about his own past while seriously maligning the record of Sidney Hook, one of the bravest of American intellectuals in our century.

Howe tells us that in 1941 he became editor (actually managing editor on the masthead) of a Trotskyite journal, *Labor Action*, at the tender age of 21. Now the Trotskyites whether of the Cannon or the later Schachtman sect, were Leninists, just like their opponents, the official Stalinist Communists. As Leninists, they believed in the same ghastly ideology and tactics as the Stalinists, except that their prophet was Leon Trotsky, not Stalin. But like the Stalinists, they vilified Socialists and Social Democrats alike as betrayers of the so-called revolutionary working class.

Howe writes that his "main intellectual journey, difficult enough, consisted of a break from an earlier, orthodox, anti-Stalinist Marxism."

Such a break, however, was meaningless unless it subsumed opposition to an anti-Leninist Marxism as well. After all, it was just as totalitarian to be a Leninist Marxist, which is what Trotskyism was all about, as to be a Stalinist Marxist. As a Communist schismatic, Howe and his Schachtmanite brigadiers had to prove to their erstwhile allies, the Cannonites, that they were Leninists as true, pure, and orthodox as those from whom they had split.

Little of this is mentioned by Howe, who tosses off a euphemistic phrase that his faction "moved to what Marxists called a position of 'critical support' of the [Second World] war, though we didn't make this explicit."

Nothing could be further from the truth than to say that Howe's faction gave even "critical support" of the American effort in World War II, let alone made that support explicit. I have examined some of the copies of *Labor Action* from the period that Howe was managing editor. A week before Pearl Harbor, the Trotskyite weekly published its "Program Against the War." The Socialist Workers Party, it said, was "against both imperialist camps," meaning isolated Britain and Nazi Germany. It was "for the Third Camp of World Labor and the colonial peoples."† "Not a man, not a cent for Wall Street's War," the paper trumpeted. Jay Lovestone, expelled secretary of the Communist Party, USA, who was supporting the war, was described caustically as "a pure and simple war mongering bourgeois liberal." In an article dated December 8, 1941, the editors referred to "a war fought solely and completely for profits."

Most shocking was the post-Pearl Harbor issue which Howe edited. "All the solemn assurances that

peace would be preserved," read the front-page manifesto, "all the pledges that the United States would not enter the war have been flouted and discarded by the very statesmen who made them. . . . This noble hatred of tyranny has been cunningly exploited by the imperialist statesmen of the so-called democracies for the purpose of whipping up a pro-war sentiment among the masses of the people."

Since Howe now writes that his Trotskyite sect gave "critical support" to the war, let me remind him of just what the paper he edited wrote in its issue of December 15, 1941: The Socialist Workers Party, "as the uncompromising foe of capitalism and capitalist war, cannot and does not give any political support to the government and the war . . . this is not a war for national defense; it is a war of imperialist rivalry." And such language was not temporary nor were the ideas behind the rhetoric. In 1942, there were stories headlined "The bitter struggle for Singapore/Involves Vast Imperialist Stakes"; an editorial sloganeered, "Make the rich pay for their war." In March 1942, for example, Howe's paper still described the war as "a struggle for world mastery between two imperialist camps" and still claimed to be upholding "the banner of Lenin and Trotsky."

Under Howe's own name there appeared a story May 4, 1942 with the page-one headline "Exposing the Merchants of Death/Their Profits Born in Blood" and a paragraph that "this is the picture of the capitalist world gone mad—profits, profits above all. Everything else is just so much hogwash designed to trick the unwary into surrendering their lives for these profits."

This is "critical support" of the war, though we didn't make this explicit? For shame. Now look at what he writes about Sidney Hook.

Howe says that Hook, "once a leading Marxist," saw "merit" in the "infamous Smith Act." While Hook, according to Howe, was not for the passage of the law, Hook "had doubts about the wisdom of repealing it." This statement is palpably unfair. Hook opposed the Smith Act and especially its use by the Roosevelt Administration against the Trotskyites. Recognizing the Smith Act's dangers to civil liberties, Hook proposed amending the law to prevent possible abuses in its application. The amendments would have made the act congruent with the "clear and present danger" criterion imposed by Supreme Court Justices Holmes and Brandeis. If Howe has any doubts about Hook's position, I

recommend he read Hook's book, *Heresy Yes, Conspiracy No* (1952), Chapter 5.

Howe also accuses Hook of taking a blanket position against the employment of professed Communists as teachers through the device of "declaring categorical bans." In actual fact, Hook was criticized in a *New Leader* article by Arthur Lovejoy, the eminent co-founder of the American Association of University Professors for not urging a categorical ban on Communist teachers. In his recent book, *A Better World*, Professor William L. O'Neill says that Howe, among others, was "imputing views to [Hook] that he did not hold."

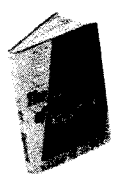
What then can we say about Howe? He has made serious misstatements of Sidney Hook's politico-cultural positions and unjust criticisms of Hofstadter and Trilling among others. He has glossed over (to put it mildly) his own political past. Are these the casual judgments of a memoirist trying to compose grand, sweeping intellectual, rather than factually exact, history? Or is the pattern of this autobiography, with its emphasis on "socialism" and its omnipresent mistrust of "conservatism" and "anti-Communism," a pattern which reflects a writer's desire somehow to make peace with his past and present without jeopardizing his intellectual future? Is it the strategy of the Great Copout?

"To quit a movement," says Howe, "in which one has invested one's strongest feelings can be terribly painful—at least as painful as leaving home or starting a divorce." It is especially difficult to quit when one is editing a magazine like *Dissent* which seeks miracles—a new radicalism, a new humanism, a new ethic, a new socialism, a new social change, a New Utopia—and when all around you are to be found ghastly Communist or socialist dictatorships, whether in Africa or Asia, the Caribbean or Eastern Europe, and nothing—but nothing—brings certainty, let alone hope, for tomorrow.

It is really time—and it's late in the day—for Howe to realize that the enemy is not Sidney Hook, or Irving Kristol,‡ and to stop pretending that

‡Howe writes about " . . . the conservative ideologue Irving Kristol, whom I confess to having recruited to the City College Trotskyite youth group in 1938 . . ." but forgets to mention that he was instrumental in expelling Kristol from this same group because Kristol pressed for a reading list which would go beyond Marxist-Leninist propaganda tracts.

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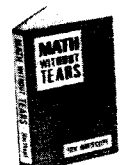


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there is such a thing as benevolent Trotskyism; or that by a process of self-mystification one can create out of nothing a Third Force, a Third Camp and thereby avoid having to make nasty political choices.

The enemy is neither the White House nor democratic capitalism. The enemy is the head of the Soviet secret police who, in changing jobs, has taken over half a world and brought George Orwell's frightening

prophecies into a reality earlier than had been expected.

In short, it is time for Irving Howe to dissent from *Dissent* and to seek his fulfillment, not in re-writing history or dreaming up

new strategies for old politico-cultural frauds, but to free himself from a faith which, in his "intellectual autobiography," has driven him to forget his chosen vocation as scholar. □



EMINENTOES

## CHECK-OUT TIME

This takes us back, conservative-feud-wise. Hang around the right wing for a while, and you soon meet veterans who grunt, "I was for Barry when Irving Kristol/Jerry Falwell was still a socialist/preacher, and I'll be damned if I'm going to have my agenda set by any *Public Interest/Moral Majority*." More rarely, you find those who did not like Ike. There are those who remember the hectic days when everyone seemed to be Birching (perhaps they Birched themselves), those who still wonder who promoted Peress. Thomas Dewey, three times governor of New York, twice Republican presidential nominee, and execrated no more, is from another era. He has accepted, as Eliot said of Milton and Charles I, the constitution of silence. He came before the cusp.

Richard Norton Smith, author of *Thomas E. Dewey and His Times*,\* is unaware of his subject's datedness. He calls his book a biography of the "maker of the modern Republican Party," which is quite wrong. If today's GOP has any makers, they are Clif White, William Rusher, and the late John Ashbrook, founders of the Draft Goldwater movement. Still, Dewey's life is interesting, even for what it does not teach us, and Smith lays it exhaustively (and exhaustingly) before us.

He was born in 1902, in Owosso, Michigan, in the heart of the lands where to be on time is to be fifteen minutes late. Perhaps he was not entirely happy there; he left for New York City to study law at age 21, and never looked back. But the punctiliousness and workaholicism of his home, particularly his mother, had been scrubbed into him as with a

bristle brush, never to be washed out. For his third birthday, Mrs. Dewey gave him a bicycle, with the warning that if he fell off it would be taken away for a year. He did, and it was.

From the men in his family, he received a conviction (the evangelical terminology seems appropriate) of the truth and justice of the GOP. The Deweys had been partisans from day one. Thomas's grandfather attended the first Republican rally in 1854, and the *Owosso Times*, the newspaper he founded and passed on to the family, lectured Michiganders in passionate tones on the wickedness of Democrats and drink. "Tammany Hall," declared Dewey's editor-father, "represents all that is evil in government."

Dewey père was not so far off. Social scientists, for whom acculturation (never mind how or to what) is the *summum bonum*, are apt to look on Tammany and similar institutions with a mild eye these days; and the old machines did indeed take boatloads of immigrants whom nobody particularly cared about and Americanize them. In the process, however, they reduced politics to job seeking; and with each job went a letter of marque for fiscal piracy. When Dewey arrived in New York, millions were pouring down Tammany's maw each year. During the twenties, the city's budget increased sixteen times faster than the population.

The political criminals worked in cahoots with desperadoes of a more mundane sort. Tammany's connections with the mob were fraternal and intimate. In return for payoffs and assorted political favors (Dutch Schultz and his gang served as Democratic poll watchers), complaisant district attorneys gave the lampreys a free ride, and they bled the city ashen. Everything that was

bought, sold, or serviced in New York—from artichokes to laundry—was traded by a racket. The underworld's exactions were estimated to have raised the cost of living twenty percent.

Fiorello LaGuardia beat Tammany at the polls. Dewey, as U.S. Attorney, special prosecutor, and District Attorney, worsted the mob in court. He brought to his task all the energies he had once focused on not falling off bicycles. Nothing was too tedious or trivial, and nothing was sacred. Dewey and his lawyers sifted mounds of receipts and shelves of ledgers; they tapped phones and cold-shouldered the press. The crooks didn't stand a chance. Hollywood made movies about him. Schultz wanted to murder him. FDR simply wanted to destroy him.

Dewey rode his fame to Albany in 1942 (after a near miss four years earlier), and brought to the governor's office the same aggressive orderliness he had shown at the prosecutor's table. In twelve years, he managed to cut taxes, balance the budget, and inaugurate a series of new projects—a thruway, a state university. This was one major

difference between Dewey's era and ours. The talismanic words "waste, fraud, and abuse" actually meant something then. Government had been so slipshod that it was possible, with strict efficiency and common honesty, to lessen the taxpayer's burden while increasing services. When Dewey spoke of humane Republicanism or pragmatic liberalism, he thus meant something quite different from Nelson Rockefeller or Jacob Javits, who used such talk to steal bases for the omniscient state. Dewey represented, when it was still possible, a real middle of the road—moderately paternalistic and genuinely frugal. He provided, it is true, no bulwark in principle against the free-for-all liberalism of his successors. But he didn't practice it, either. "I like you," he once told Rockefeller, "but I don't think I can afford you."

The other great difference between then and now concerns America's role in the world, and America's conception of its role. Dewey was an establishment internationalist—not the best of all possible worldviews, maybe, but what else was there in the GOP? On Dewey's left, Wendell Willkie, the down-home Wall Street lawyer, a fatuous narcissist who barnstormed his way to the Republican nomination in 1940, and was still a contender in 1944. This John Anderson of the producing class took a world tour in 1943, and wrote a book, *One World*, that would have done honor to Eleanor Roosevelt:

Men and women all over the world are on the march, physically, intellectually and spiritually. After centuries of ignorant and dull compliance, hundreds of millions of people in Eastern Europe and Asia have opened the books. They are beginning to know that man's welfare throughout the world is interdependent. They are resolved, as we must be, that there is no more place for imperialism.



\*Simon and Schuster, \$22.50.

Richard Brookhiser is editor at National Review.