

Sidney Hook

MEMORIES OF YADDO: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL POSTSCRIPT

A distinguished philosopher recalls the early days of a writers' colony where anti-capitalism flourished in plush surroundings.

I have never regarded myself as a wit or as a master of one-line repartee. But several times as a consequence of innocent or naive remarks, I have enjoyed a brief reputation as a formidable swordsman in the give and take of rejoinder. It didn't seem to improve anyone's liking for me but gave me immunity from the verbal horseplay in which literary intellectuals engage before establishing the pecking order whenever they appear as a group. My first experience of this occurred during the summers of 1931 and 1932 at Yaddo, the colony in east central New York state set up for writers and artists at the palatial mansion of Katherine Trask as a memorial to her by her devoted husband and life-long admirer, the capitalist-philanthropist Peabody.

Morris R. Cohen had spent a summer there, as had my friend Ernest Nagel, and I suppose I owed my invitation to their recommendation. It was a beautiful estate. All the needs of the guests with the exception of laundry were provided for by a large staff. Everything was grown on the estate and prepared by excellent chefs. Every guest had a large room in the mansion, or a spacious, well-appointed cabin if he or she was a painter or musician. I had the Tower Room in the main house, which commanded a magnificent view. It was my first taste of luxury, and was surpassed only by my experience at the Rockefeller Villa Serbelloni, another center for creative labor, years later. I completed a draft of my *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* at Yaddo as the capitalist system in the United States tottered towards total ruin.

During my first stay, on the opening day when we were assembled at the welcoming get-together, taking one another's measure in the typical fashion of creative and critical "in-

tellectuals," some brash writer, apropos of some observation I made, cocked his head, and sardonically said: "Methinks I have read that somewhere." To which I replied, in all innocence, "I am not surprised. I published it last week." (I no longer remember where.) This was considered, I was told, a devastating retort. At the same meeting, approaching us from the distant cabin to which she had been assigned, was a late-comer. She was a very attractive young woman who, I later learned, was very much interested in the theory of architecture, and under the influence of Lewis Mumford. She was walking barefoot on tiptoe, and making slow progress. I naively wondered aloud: "Does the poor girl suffer from fallen arches?" At this everyone collapsed into convulsions of laughter. I seemed the only one unaware of the fact that her mode of walking had become the rage at Radcliffe, Smith, Mt. Holyoke, and other elite institutions for young women. It was assumed that my ques-

tion was a witty way of pillorying the practice—something altogether absent from my mind. From that time on I was never the butt of any wisecracks and jeering criticisms the creative male spirits periodically directed against each other.

Although not related to Yaddo, another occasion comes to mind when a naive question and an honest answer produced unexpected effects. In the mid-forties, when Communist influence was still riding high in Hollywood in the wake of the euphoria of the U.S.-USSR co-belligerency against Nazi Germany and just before the Kremlin resumed its cold war against the West, I was invited by Morrie Ryskind to give a talk on Communism and Art. My lecture was somewhat abstract, based as it was on Soviet theoretical writings. Most of my concrete examples were drawn from the long and sorry history of Soviet repres-

sion of the arts and the extravaganzas of socialist realism. The question period was somewhat desultory until a gray-haired lady, who was later identified to me as the mother of Ginger Rogers, rose and angrily asked: "All you say is well and good, but what about Gregory Peck?" To which I answered, as I strode forward to hear her response, "And pray, *who* is Gregory Peck?" At which the audience broke into loud and tumultuous applause. Only a former student of mine at NYU, Ozzie Caswell, who had left the purlieu of the academy for the anticipated fame and fortune of writing music for Hollywood, and who was sitting in the balcony, realized that at the time I really didn't know who Gregory Peck was, and what his political connections were.

Taken that night or the day after to some famous eating place with an odd name—The Brown Derby—I upset my hosts by an honest answer to a question unexpectedly asked of me by one of the women at our crowded dinner table. An extraordinarily beautiful young woman had approached, been duly introduced, and had chatted gaily with some of my companions. As she turned away and was no longer in earshot, one of my table partners asked me whether I thought the young woman had a great deal of sex appeal. Her question seemed to get the attention of everyone, and all eyes turned to me. Thoughtlessly but honestly, I answered: "I don't know. I'm still in love with my wife." At which, after a pause, some of the women turned furiously on their husbands and I heard variations of the shrill complaint, "I'll bet *you* would never have said that!" It was all rather embarrassing because some of the men later implied that my remark was made with malicious intent.

To return to the days of Yaddo, it was my reputation not as a wit that counted during those summers but



Sidney Hook's autobiography, *Out of Step: An Unquiet Life in the 20th Century*, was published last year by Harper & Row.

as the leading authority on Marxism and Communism. In short order almost all the guests became Marxists and Communist fellow-travelers of a sort. Musicians, painters, poets, dramatists, even members of the staff of the director, Mrs. Elizabeth Ames, rushed to embrace Marxism and Communism as if they were a species of religion. No one can understand this phenomenon who is unaware of the psychological mood generated by the depths of the economic depression. There were no viable alternatives of belief available on the domestic scene. Only the rosy propaganda of a planned society with no unemployment, circulated by the Soviet regime and disseminated by credulous pilgrims to the Soviet Union against the growing thunder of German Fascism, seemed believable. Meanwhile every frustration or loss, every absence of opportunity or failure of effort when opportunity was present, could be blamed on capitalism.

To be sure, there were various degrees of understanding and dedication among the neophytes to Communism. The way Lionel Trilling, with whom I had long talks on the subject, understood Communism was different from the way Marc Blitzstein, the musician, or Anton Refrigier, the artist, understood it. It was already clear in those days that there was a profound division within the mass movement to belief in the promised future. There were those who were seeking a transcendent faith that could withstand "the niggling criticism" of skeptics, as well as the "lies" of the bourgeois press. On the other hand there were those who saw in Communism primarily the hope for a better life and a higher culture and whose minds were open to evidence. The novelist Josephine Herbst, for example, was already among the faithful and would growl uneasily when, while defending the ideals of Marx and Marxism, I would criticize specific policies of the American and Russian Communist parties.

Although playing the role of St. Paul to the Gentiles, I could not suppress my heresies about the central dogmas of historical materialism and the class struggle, both of which I interpreted in a pragmatic and pluralistic fashion. In this way, I became more effective in stilling the doubts of those whose new faith had not yet eroded their critical intelligence. Oddly enough, most of those at Yaddo who were drawn to the Communist movement by my criticisms of the capitalist status quo and my expositions of Marxism remained faithful Stalinists when I took the field openly against the Communist movement at home and abroad after Stalin helped Hitler come to power in 1933.

There were some exceptions to the

mass conversions to Communism among the literati at Yaddo in the summers of 1931 and 1932. The most notable, as I recall, was Evelyn Scott, who had won some notoriety for her largely autobiographical *Escapade*. She was an attractive woman of great vivacity married to, or living with, a taciturn Englishman, also in residence, who was engaged in a study of Husserl,

The question period was somewhat desultory until a gray-haired lady, who was later identified to me as the mother of Ginger Rogers, rose and angrily asked: "All you say is well and good, but what about Gregory Peck?"

an unusual theme in that period for English philosophers. (His name escapes me.) I regret not getting to know them better. Evelyn Scott and I took an instant dislike to each other. She called herself an anarchist, which brought out my fiercest polemical instincts and blinded me to the fact that what the term probably meant to her was a courageous defiance of convention—which I really admired—and not a theory, which I detested, about the desirability of a complete absence of government. As I was to learn in a Truth Game we were to play—about which more later—she regarded me as something of an intellectual bully for resorting to argument when views were advanced as an expression of sentiment.

I have gone through many changes in thought, but from the time I began to think until today I have been an unalterable opponent of anarchism, which I have invariably found the last ideological rampart of socially irresponsible individuals and causes, including the many self-confused persons who preface their remarks with the disarming statement: "At heart I am really a philosophical anarchist."

As a young Socialist I was predisposed against anarchism because of its association with violence and the reaction it provoked, which often swept away the gradual reforms that had been so painfully won against the weight of tradition and lethargy. As a democrat, I had always been suspicious of anarchist critics who thundered about the tyranny of the majority, since the historical record revealed that human beings more often suffered from the tyranny of minorities and individuals than from the tyranny of majorities. Of course, majorities are not necessarily right and can do foolish and unjust things. But as Justice Frankfurter once put it, in a democracy the appeal from

an unenlightened majority must be made to an enlightened majority and not a self-denominated enlightened minority or individual. This was certainly Jefferson's view. It was Lincoln who recognized that democracy was the only alternative to anarchy and despotism. And long before Lincoln, Aristotle taught that anarchy was the rule of a thousand despots. That is why

if human beings are confronted with a choice between anarchy and despotism, they will prefer the latter.

The fatal flaw in every anarchist theory is the assumption that human beings can live for long without the emergence of some form of government or state power that enjoys within the community an ultimate monopoly of force. The view that human beings are by nature good and reasonable creatures who can compose their differences peacefully is incompatible with what we know of human behavior in recorded history. It is starkly utopian. Just as utopian are the views of those who believe that human conflicts arise only or primarily from conflicts over property and other material interests, and that where there are no conflicts over material possessions there is therefore no need or justification for the state. This was Marx's view, and is implied in the position of Jefferson and Madison. "If men were

angels," wrote Madison, "they would have no need of government," presumably because having no bodies, they would have no material needs or interests.

Madison could not be more wrong, and it is surprising that he should have forgotten so completely his Milton, who chronicles in poetry the revolt of Lucifer, as well as the hierarchies of order and power recognized in traditional angelology. Human beings, who are far from being angels, will fight over degrees of authority, of power, prestige, and precedence, over honor and love as well as over material things, even if not as often or always to the same degree.

Today every lapsed totalitarian poses as an anarchist to mask his anti-Americanism. Even those who glorify civil disobedience with respect to some special interest are insensitive to the fact that if civil disobedience were to become general—and human beings obeyed only the laws they morally approved—society would soon fall into a state of civil war. Order can exist without justice and freedom, as we well know, but justice and freedom cannot exist without order. On this rock every variety of anarchism founders.

There was one other disheartening discovery or rediscovery I made at Yaddo, and this was the bestiality of males under the influence of liquor. There were a lot of complaints by the guests those early years at Yaddo. Mrs. Ames had married a soldier later killed in the First World War and was an unhappy widow. She became involved with a man whose wife was in a mental institution and for obscure legal reasons couldn't divorce her. The result



seemed to be a definite partiality on Mrs. Ames's part towards unhappily married men and, during the two summers I was there, a rather close surveillance of the sexual behavior of the guests, justified by the necessity of allaying the gossip in Saratoga Springs that Yaddo had become a center of free love which might affect its tax status as a cultural institution. (I was always suspicious of the importance of the alleged gossip in view of the history of Saratoga Springs as a health resort and horse racing center.) All this, of course, was to change with the passage of years, but I am writing about 1931 and 1932.

The guests were there voluntarily. They could have left any time if they felt dissatisfied. They were informed of the rules when they arrived. It was expected that the creative artists and thinkers would remain in their studies (unless they came in for the daily gourmet lunch) until four p.m. The cocktail hour was at six and dinner for which everyone dressed informally was at seven. Sometimes there was a meeting after dinner. There was of course widespread prowling at night by males, but if it was discreet and noiseless, there were no repercussions. I know of only one guest who was asked to leave and that must have been for some egregiously scandalous reason, for shortly afterward he tried to throw the pilot out of a local airplane he had hired, and was committed.

The four p.m. rule was not strictly enforced, but I thought it had a good effect in that everyone admitted that he got work done. The food was too rich for some of us, and I remember once going into Saratoga Springs just to have a plate of plain corned beef and cabbage. But nothing that we had to endure justified the action one night of about a dozen male guests led by a soused short-story writer from Oklahoma. They urinated in the stone urns containing the choice flowers cultivated at Yaddo, and with muffled cries of "Down with capitalism"—muffled so as not to be heard by the night watchman—pushed one of these huge urns off its ledge to be shattered below. The next night we heard that some vandals had invaded the place. The episode revolted me, partly because of a sense of guilt in being an observer and a kind of silent accomplice, and because of doubts it raised in my mind about the kind of society these converts to the new faith would develop. Needless to say Lionel Trilling was not one of them.

There was one occasion in which we were properly punished for our lack of spirit in protesting against Mrs. Ames's impositions. I'm sure Evelyn Scott was not there at the time. Mrs. Ames announced a cultural evening at which

her sister, Marjorie, would sing and read some poetry. Marjorie was Mr. Peabody's favorite, we were told, and Mr. Peabody was the Maecenas of Yaddo. We all felt obliged to attend. Marjorie's thin voice could be endured, but when she began to read her poetry all of us were seized with a convulsive fit of laughter that could only be controlled by physical contortion and permanent damage to our insides. It would have been healthier if we had all exploded because Mrs. Ames, I suspect, knew how we felt but was doing her duty by Mr. Peabody and her sister.

One evening we played the game of Truth. And after observing its

There was one other disheartening discovery or rediscovery I made at Yaddo, and this was the bestiality of males under the influence of liquor.

consequences I have never played it again. A person is selected or volunteers to leave the room. Each one of those remaining then writes a sentence which he believes truly characterizes the person who has left the room. After all the sentences have been written, their subject is called back. Each sentence is then read aloud, and the subject is required to guess who penned it. I volunteered to be "it." The first sentence about me that was read out ran "A Socratic Mantis" and I correctly guessed Evelyn Scott (as I did the authors of all the other characteriza-



tions of me). Evelyn Scott declared I was psychic, but that reflected her own naiveté. I suppose my ego was so strong that I didn't mind the "truths" uttered about me, not even Evelyn's dagger thrust. But as others left the room and the game continued the atmosphere became increasingly pained and painful. When Marc Blitzstein was out, I thought I would say something to his credit and wrote, "A musical reed that will bend to the passing wind but will never break." He failed to identify the writer and when I owned up he stalked over to me, burst into tears, and exclaimed: "Is that what you really think of me? And I considered you my friend." He had completely misunderstood my meaning, taking what I wrote

as a charge of opportunism. The game broke up at that point and was never resumed.

I had become quite friendly with Marc Blitzstein because he helped me to conduct a musical experiment. I had become acutely aware of my lack of sensibility with respect to the interpretation of music and painting. I envied the keenness of musical perception which enabled a musical critic to declare that Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* was pantheistic rather than Christian or critics of modern painting to see what I could not by invoking a recondite symbolism. I had read somewhere a learned essay contending that musical tones had intrinsic meanings, which was reminiscent of the claims of some early nineteenth-century German *Naturphilosophen* that certain colors had intrinsic meanings. With Blitzstein's help we selected a dozen or so little known musical passages. He played them before the sophisticated Yaddo audience with the request that its members indicate the meanings, if any, they associated with the music. The results showed that there was the widest variation imaginable, except with some correlations on the rhythms. No one would characterize a lively tune as funereal. But a slow movement could suggest the most disparate meanings, which was no surprise to anyone who knew that the music of a Christmas carol was also the music of the English revolutionary song "The People's Flag."

I managed to assuage Marc Blitzstein's feelings that I had betrayed him in my effort to stress his sensitivity, but he remained distrustful. The last time we met was by chance in a New York

subway train after the American Workers' party was founded and he was in the close embrace of the Communist party. When I offered him a copy of the program of the American Workers' party he rejected it with a smile saying: "You can't influence me anymore, Sidney."

Someone who stayed out of the Truth game at Yaddo was Marion Greenwood, a very talented painter whose striking and luscious beauty provoked unjustifiable doubts about her capacities. She had droll tales to tell about distinguished guests in past summers who had tried to pull her down during the postprandial walks that were a common exercise. "This is the bush behind which I fought Waldo Frank off," she would say. It was clear that she didn't fight everyone off. She asked me to sit for my portrait and I consented. Without abbreviating the size of my nose, she did an interesting study of me which everyone recognizes although some think it is too flattering. When she was through, she said to me as if bestowing an accolade: "You are the only man who sat for me who hasn't made a pass at me." I couldn't claim any special virtue for that because at the time I was head over heels in love with someone even more beautiful!

To my astonishment, I learned many years later in a biography of Josephine Herbst that she and Marion Greenwood were lovers. I have long since given up the attempt to understand such things. If true, all I can say is: What a waste!

After I left Yaddo I did not keep in touch with Mrs. Ames and developments there. I know she moved progressively to the left politically and learned that Yaddo had become a kind of winter hide-out for Agnes Smedley, a dedicated Communist fellow-traveler at the time and an early supporter of Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese Communists who, Miss Smedley certainly knew, were *not* merely "agrarian reformers." There was some kind of official investigation that cleared Mrs. Ames. Long before this I had concluded on the basis of their membership in certain political groups that one of Mrs. Ames's secretaries and her husband had become Communists without knowing too much about the subject of Communism. Impressed and persuaded by a succession of distinguished guests that Communism was coming, in their simple-minded way they took out what they probably thought was an insurance policy and joined the Communist party, and became involved in activities that ultimately attracted the attention of state and federal authorities. □

William Tucker

OUR HOMESTEAD PLAN FOR THE POOR

Welfare reform will come to no good unless it allows the underclass to work *and* have families.

Perhaps no problem poses a greater danger to the future of American society than the emergence of a seemingly permanent "underclass" built around the single-parent, female-headed household. Previous generations of Americans have known poverty, but to none did it seem so hopeless. All saw America as a land of opportunity, and even among the poor there was a strong sense that hard work and long-term effort would pay off—which, with astonishing regularity, it did. The experience of recent immigrant groups, most notably Asians, proves that the system still works. But among today's underclass, particularly among American blacks, efforts at improvement seem to lead backwards. For the underclass, things are actually worse now than they were twenty-five years ago, when the most concentrated attempts in our history to remove institutional racism began.

The litany of problems in black, lower-class communities needs no introduction. Half of all black children are now being raised in single-parent homes—up from 20 percent in 1960. Almost 60 percent of black babies are born illegitimate. These "welfare families" form a solid core of poverty around which a tangle of pathologies cluster.

More and more, poor blacks are becoming irrevocably alienated from the mainstream of American culture. Crime rates soar. Children bring guns to school. Youngsters who try to do well at school are ostracized by their peers for "acting white." Drug dealers run neighborhood empires, using the shield of the juvenile-justice laws to arm teenage couriers with automatic weapons. Several cities—Detroit, Washington, and Los Angeles, for example—have undergone "murder explosions," where rates of mortality among youth gangs suddenly ap-

proach the levels of guerrilla combat.

Meanwhile, the black family continues to disintegrate. The *Wall Street Journal* recently visited a Los Angeles high school where one-quarter of the female student body gives birth *every year*. Across the country, many urban schools have given up all pretense of maintaining moral behavior and are turning themselves into day-care centers.

What is going on here? How did this disintegration of family life—truly unprecedented in history—ever occur? And since black teenagers now have the highest rate of fertility in the world—almost nine times that of some Western populations and four times the rate of middle-class blacks alone—how long will it be before such anti-family, anti-social behavior completely overwhelms our society?

For many years, the standard explanation was that the black family was destroyed during slavery and never recovered. Daniel Patrick Moynihan

worked from this premise in his 1965 *Report on the Black Family*, which first raised alarms about the growing black matriarchy. Moynihan was concerned because black female-headed households had reached 20 percent. (This is now the rate for all families.)

The argument that slavery is at the root of black family problems has since been discredited. In a remarkable piece of scholarship, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (1976), historian Herbert Gutman proved that the black family remained intact throughout slavery and long thereafter. Using plantation ledgers that meticulously recorded births and marriages, Gutman showed that the vast majority of blacks—about 75 percent—lived in stable, monogamous, two-parent families throughout slavery. Slaves practiced their own marital restrictions (no cross-cousin marriages) and had their own wedding ceremonies ("jumping the broomstick"). After Emancipation, nearly all these slave marriages were

legally sanctioned by Reconstruction authorities. In one year alone—1866—60 percent of the adult female population of several Southern counties were legally married before civil officials.

This same pattern persisted right up through 1925 (when Gutman, perplexingly, ends his study). In cities both North and South, the majority of blacks lived in two-parent homes. The percentage of single mothers was always a little higher than among whites—about 20 percent as opposed to 10 percent in the general population—but this seems to have been due to higher rates of widowhood. A 1905 survey of 15,000 recently immigrated black families in New York found only *one* woman heading a single-parent family with more than two children. The contemporary phenomenon of the "welfare mother," who has a string of four-to-six children fathered by a variety of men without ever marrying, was virtually unknown.



In another much-discussed analysis, William Julius Wilson, a University of Chicago sociologist, argues in *The Truly Disadvantaged*¹ that "structural unemployment" has been the deciding factor in the disintegration of poor black families. Wilson maintains that the American economy has been buffeted by "severe economic downturns" and "a decline in manufacturing industries" over the last twenty years, which have unduly affected black men. The loss of income has made black men less attractive marriage partners for black women, leading to a decline in family formation.

A somewhat different explanation has been offered by journalist Nicholas Lemann in "The Origins of the Underclass," a two-part series in the *Atlantic*

William Tucker is The American Spectator's New York correspondent.

¹*The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass and Public Policy*. University of Chicago Press, \$19.95.