



# R E D SCARE RECONSIDERED

## step too far

The initial red scare also had a profound impact on some former Communists, Trotskyists and Socialists who had begun moving right in the late '30s. For people like Ralph De Toledano, the Hiss case had the same historical significance as the Sacco-Vanzetti case had had. Just as the Sacco-Vanzetti case made socialists of liberals, the Hiss case made conservatives or rightists of former Communists.

Within the government, the initial red scare—and the first two years of McCarthy's reign—redounded upon the policies it was initially supposed to sustain. The red scare led, finally, to the ouster from government of an entire generation of China hands and their replacement by dogmatic anti-Maoists like Dean Rusk, who later took 10 years to recognize the existence of the Sino-Soviet split.

Among the general public, the Truman administration and the Republicans got most—if not too much—of what they wanted from the initial red scare. A majority backed Truman's Cold War policies and the Marshall Plan. There was little opposition to American intervention in the Korean war. The Republicans scored impressive gains in the 1946, 1950 and 1952 elections. And Hoover got his budgets.

### Anti-Communism discredited.

In the second phase of the red scare many liberals abandoned ship, and eventually many other people left, too. Most of the liberals in the ACCF or ACLU had been critical of McCarthy from the beginning, but after the Republicans captured the Senate in 1952 and McCarthy assumed a committee chairmanship and the right to hold hearings, they became

genuinely alarmed.

One of McCarthy's first targets in 1953 was the Voice of America and the International Information Administration (IIA). McCarthy caused numerous resignations. He also initiated a campaign to remove 30,000 books by "Communist" authors from the IIA's overseas libraries. Among these authors were Schlesinger, John Dewey, Theodore White and Robert Hutchins.

McCarthy's Voice of America crusade proved to be the last straw for many liberals. (The population at large would abandon McCarthy after the next year's Army-McCarthy hearings.) Beginning in 1953, liberals like Schlesinger, Rovere, Bell and Macdonald made opposition to McCarthyism rather than Communism their priority. They broke with conservatives and rightists like Burnham, De Toledano and Eastman over McCarthy.

The *Partisan Review* editors expelled Burnham from the board for his "neutrality" toward McCarthy. When McCarthy attacked former Atomic Energy Commission Chairman J. Robert Oppenheimer, the ACCF championed Oppenheimer, and prominent physicists within the ACCF petitioned to have Burnham expelled for his support of the attacks against Oppenheimer. By 1955, Burnham, Chambers, Eastman and De Toledano had resigned from the ACCF.

ACCF members even tried to exert an anti-McCarthy discipline upon their staff. When the ACCF's executive director signed the same anti-Communist statement that McCarthy defender William F. Buckley had signed, Bell threatened to have him removed for associating with McCarthyites.

The change in the attitude of liberals

within the ACCF betokened a general shift back toward the left among many of those who had turned right under the impact of the initial red scare. In 1959, Rovere would publish his scathing biography of McCarthy. In the '60s, Macdonald and *Partisan Review* editor Philip Rahv would become prominent opponents of the Vietnam war. (Schlesinger's conversion back would be prevented by his fascination with the powerful.) The ACCF would eventually disband, but the ACLU would again become a defender of everyone's liberties.

In the early '60s, opposition to McCarthyism (as it came to be called) would animate the New Left. Perhaps, the first important demonstration by the predominantly white student left was the May 1960 anti-HUAC demonstration in San Francisco, in which 68 students were arrested. The discrediting of the red scare was also a necessary condition for the growth of popular opposition to the Vietnam war.

McCarthy's excesses seriously split the American right. While McCarthy inspired the right's lunatic fringe, he stirred doubts among conservative intellectuals. De Toledano wrote later, "Though the intellectuals who rallied to McCarthy did so for many reasons, a common denominator existed—the unvoiced, and ultimately suppressed, conviction that by clambering into the arena they were making certain compromises."

When William Buckley asked Whittaker Chambers to write a favorable blurb for the jacket of his and Brent Bozell's defense of McCarthy, *McCarthy and His Enemies*, Chambers refused. "None of us are [McCarthy's] enemies," Chambers wrote Buckley in early 1954, "but all of

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us, to one degree or another, have slowly come to question his judgment and to fear acutely that his flair for the sensational, his inaccuracies and distortions, his tendency to sacrifice the greater objective for the momentary effect, will lead him and us into trouble."

When Buckley's *National Review* magazine first appeared in November 1955, several prominent conservatives—including T.S. Eliot, Peter Viereck and Allen Tate—refused to endorse it or appear on its masthead because of the editor-in-chief's support for McCarthy.

As Chambers feared, McCarthy ended up dividing and weakening the right that had earlier been strengthened by the Cold War and the Hiss case.

### The legacy.

In her memoir of the McCarthy period, *Scoundrel Time*, playwright Lillian Hellman suggests that the Nixon administration's attempts to suppress civil liberties, which were exposed during the Watergate hearings, were themselves a continuation of the McCarthy period. If Americans had understood the evils of McCarthyism they would never have elected Nixon in 1968: "It is not true that when the bell tolls, it tolls for thee: if it were true, we could not have elected, so few years later, Richard Nixon, a man who had been closely allied with McCarthy."

There is, of course, some truth in what Hellman writes. But Nixon knew when to disassociate himself from McCarthy. In March 1954, as vice-president, he delivered the speech that signalled the Eisenhower administration's break with McCarthy. Earlier, as a member of HUAC and as a House and Senate candidate in California, he had certainly done his part to exploit popular fears of Communism, but by 1968 Americans had forgotten this side of Nixon's past, as they had forgotten a similar side in Hubert Humphrey's.

Yet the lessons of McCarthy's fall lived on in 1968 during the Nixon administration. Faced with a popular opposition to the Vietnam war and a militant black movement, Nixon could not resort to the open red scare techniques of the Truman years. Attempts to use trials or HUAC hearings against the '60s radicals were uniformly unsuccessful. Instead, the Nixon administration had to employ covert operations like the FBI's COINTELPRO program. Likewise, Nixon could not hope to red-bait his Democratic opposition in the manner in which he had red-baited his congressional opponents in the '50s. Instead, Nixon had to resort to the kind of "dirty tricks" that led to the Watergate scandal.

The Watergate scandal strengthened the legacy of McCarthy's fall. Both the House and Senate subversive activities committees were finally dissolved. In 1975, Alger Hiss was even readmitted to the Massachusetts state bar.

In the '80s, McCarthy's fall haunts the Reagan administration's attempts to intervene in Central America. In the late '40s, the Truman administration used the red scare in order to convince Americans to back massive economic aid to Western Europe. In 1950, Truman officials used it to justify American intervention in Korea, which had been divided into two parts at the end of World War II. With American intervention in the Third World, the rationale was similar: if the U.S. did not intervene, the Soviet Union would increase its holdings and be that much closer to world domination.

During the Korean war, the argument took. During the Vietnam war, it did not. When McCarthy was discredited in 1954 and the red scare began to evaporate, Americans' traditional skepticism about entangling alliances and foreign intervention resurfaced. In the '80s, this skepticism has stymied the Reagan administration's attempts to increase military and economic aid to the autocratic regimes in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras and to the counter-revolutionary army in Nicaragua.

The Reagan administration has responded by trying to link the rebels in El Salvador or Guatemala with Moscow. While these arguments have had some impact, they have not taken hold. The red scare destroyed itself in the '50s. ■



By James Weinstein

On June 19, 1953, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed in the electric chair at Sing Sing prison in Ossining, N.Y. They were the first and only Americans ever put to death on the charge of conspiracy to commit espionage.

Yet, their deaths had little to do with the seriousness of the crime with which they were charged and everything to do with the politics of the Cold War. This was made clear in Judge Irving R. Kaufman's statement in passing sentence on the Rosenbergs. Their crime, he said, was "worse than murder." Their conduct "in putting into the hands of the Russians the A-bomb years before our best scientists predicted Russia would perfect the bomb has already caused, in my opinion, the Communist aggression in Korea, with the resultant casualties exceeding 50,000."

Indeed, he continued, the Rosenbergs had "undoubtedly altered the course of history to the disadvantage of our country." Kaufman passed this sentence and made this statement even though he knew that, at most, the information provided Rosenberg by his brother-in-law David Greenglass and passed on to the Russians was of marginal importance. The judge knew that the Russians had been informed about the bomb in much greater depth over a period of years by an infinitely knowledgeable source—Klaus Fuchs, a British nuclear scientist who worked on the bomb in Britain and then with other top scientists at Los Alamos, N.M. Fuchs had freely confessed doing this, and had been sentenced to 14 years in prison, the maximum allowed under British law for passing state secrets to an ally in time of war.

At the time of their conviction, few Americans on the right or the left seemed to doubt the Rosenbergs' guilt. On the left, the Communist Party studiously ignored the case. Its leaders, if not its members, appear to have assumed the worst and were petrified by the possibility that Julius or Ethel would break down under threat of death. If either did cooperate with the FBI and implicate others who, like themselves, had been party members, Communists feared a final crackdown on the party, whose leaders were already being prosecuted under the Smith Act of 1940.

But the death sentences, particularly Ethel's, were so outrageously vindictive and so apparently political that it was only a matter of time—and not much time at that—before someone, or some group protested. Convicted in March 1951, the Rosenbergs found their first public defenders in August, when the *National Guardian*, an independent weekly newspaper edited by Cedric Belfrage and James Aronson, began a series of articles by reporter William Reuben. Those articles inspired the organization of the National Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case, a group that struggled valiantly to arouse public concern with limited success until November 1952, when the Communist Party in the U.S. (apparently convinced that the Rosenbergs would not talk) and Communist parties throughout the world joined the campaign and helped make the case an international *cause celebre*.

From the beginning, horror over the death sentences overshadowed concern with the Rosenbergs' guilt or innocence. Thus the two issues, which were in fact separate, became inextricably intertwined. The *Guardian* assumed, after consultation with Julius' lawyer Emanuel Bloch, not only that the death sentences were intended to "silence opposition to the government's imperialist war policies," but also that the Rosenbergs were simply "victims of an out-and-out political frame-up." Not even the death sentences, however, were purely political. They were also an attempt to force Julius to talk about his other espionage activities.

The Rosenbergs' defenders saw them as innocent pawns, mysteriously chosen for slaughter at the altar of the Cold War. On the other side, those who believed them guilty of atomic espionage generally saw them as deserving what they got.

From the beginning, however, there were individuals, like I.F. Stone, who believed that the Rosenberg executions were a legal form of political murder—even if, as appeared quite possible, they had been engaged in espionage.

But those holding such views were forced to maintain a low profile as the Rosenberg defense committees and the Communist Party made it an article of faith that Julius and Ethel were chosen, seemingly by chance, as the result of a government conspiracy to intimidate and discredit opponents of the Cold War. This was the view of the Committee to Secure Justice in 1951, and it is the view of the National Committee to Re-Open the Rosenberg Case, organized in 1974. (The latter group is responsible for securing the release of some 250,000 pages of FBI and other documents under the Freedom of Information Act.) This was also the view of Walter and Miriam Schneir's *Invitation to an Inquest*, the most substantial of the books written in defense of the Rosenbergs, published in 1965 and reissued this summer with 57 pages of new material.

#### The Rosenberg file.

Both Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton, authors of *The Rosenberg File, A Search for Truth*, were initially among those who believed in the Rosenbergs' innocence. But a close examination of the 250,000 documents secured by the Committee to Re-Open—inspired, as Radosh notes in this book, by a story I told him about my chance acquaintance with Julius Rosenberg—convinced him that Rosenberg was involved in espionage. In fact, Radosh believes Julius was the center of a group of amateur spies who decided on their own to help the Soviet Union develop and modernize its economy, and who also passed along information on military matters, including the atomic bomb.

Radosh and Milton conclude that Julius set up in 1943, on his own initiative, an espionage network consisting predominantly of City College engineering classmates and fellow Communists or sympathizers. His connection to the atomic bomb came about by chance when David Greenglass, Ethel's brother and an Army sergeant, was assigned to work in a machine shop at the Manhattan Project in Los Alamos, N.M., in the summer of 1944. A committed young Communist, David was an eager recruit who supplied information of marginal importance confirming material already passed on to the Russians by Klaus Fuchs.

Ethel was at most peripherally involved in this activity. Her arrest had little or nothing to do with her own deeds, according to Radosh and Milton, but was ordered as a means to make Julius talk—a "lever," in the words of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. Radosh and Milton also see the death sentences primarily as levers designed to make Julius talk, though the authors do note that the first discussion of execution came from high up in the Truman administration—from Gordon Dean, chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, who, according to his diary, had discussed this with the attorney general before the trial began. Radosh and Milton do not explore this point, but it seems likely that these men would also have discussed the matter with the President, and that the sentences were as much a part of the politics of the Cold War as of a narrow prosecution strategy.

*The Rosenberg File* is a thoroughly and carefully researched book. Its conclusions flow from an overwhelming mass of evidence, carefully checked for corroboration wherever possible. It seems to me that any reader not encumbered with an ideological axe to grind would find Radosh's and Milton's conclusions convincing, though, as the authors state, this is not the final word because much documentary evidence is still unavailable.

Yet this does not mean that the book is not controversial. Walter Goodman in the August 14 *New York Times Book Review* section, commented that "having succumbed to the facts," Radosh and Milton are "ripe for excommunication" from the left. And, indeed, in the *Guardian* and other sectarian left publications

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they have already been accused of being sellouts and trying to revive the Cold War. (Soon, it will probably be discovered that their mothers were Mensheviks.)

There are not a large number of people who have an ideological stake in the Rosenbergs' innocence, but those who do see any suggestion that the Rosenbergs might have been engaged in espionage as an attack on the left in general and as giving

fodder to the Reagan administration and its bellicose policies. But nothing could be further from the truth. First of all, as *Time* magazine's review of *The Rosenberg File* indicates, the parts of the book that will have the greatest impact on most readers are those that reveal the improper, unethical and sometimes vicious behavior of the prosecution, the FBI and Judge Kaufman. Outside of the small cir-



## BOOK REVIEW

The Rosenberg File:  
A Search for the Truth

By Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton  
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# nd victims

ments, for an understanding of Communists' motivation for giving aid, even in the form of illegally gathered information, to the Soviet Union in the years before Nikita Khrushchev's 1956 report on Stalin's crimes.

## Aiding the revolution.

Putting aside for a moment the question of Julius Rosenberg's involvement in espionage, we know that Communists and their sympathizers had strong reasons for wanting to help the Soviets in these years. First, starting with the initial five-year plan in 1929, Russia—Europe's most backward nation—was engaged in an unprecedented period of forced industrialization. Second, it was doing this in the face of hostility on the part of all capitalist nations. Third, initially all socialists and, by the late '30s, the Communists and their sympathizers viewed the Soviet Union as the embodiment of socialist principles and as the leader of the world revolutionary movement. Thus help for the Soviet Union was not understood to be in any way detrimental to the American working class but only to the American ruling class—because, Communists believed, Soviet modernization could only strengthen democratic forces throughout the world.

We also know that the Soviet Union, like every other nation, engaged in espionage and that it had a particular need for information about industrial processes and military materiel, which was either unavailable through normal channels or cheaper to steal than to buy. In that situation, most Communists would likely have engaged in information-gathering if asked—unless they were unwilling to take the personal risk of doing so.

This, of course, does not mean that Julius Rosenberg or any other Communist was a spy. In fact, it was unusual for party members to be asked to engage in espionage, both because of the likelihood that they would be more easily detected than non-Communists and because of the danger to the party if it was identified with spying.

If Radosh and Milton are correct in their findings, Rosenberg—who, along with Ethel, was a party member in the early '40s—was not asked to become a spy but decided on his own to feed information about electronic processes to the Soviets. And as soon as he made contact and was accepted as an agent, he and Ethel dropped out of the party. By 1950, when they were arrested, Julius and Ethel had not been involved in political activity for seven years. Thus there was little reason for them to be chosen by the Truman administration as a warning to "progressives"—as their defenders claim.

The Schneirs and other Rosenberg defenders say that Greenglass' implication of the Rosenbergs, which was the basis for their arrest, was a lie motivated by anger over a dispute between Julius and David over business matters. That is a possibility, though it seems unlikely, considering the consequences. But while it was David and Ruth Greenglass' testimony that convicted Ethel and Julius, there is a web of circumstantial relationships and events having nothing to do with the atom bomb that Radosh and Milton relate and that has always seemed to me to be as convincing as the Greenglasses' testimony.

My own experience (related by Radosh and Milton) with Julius Rosenberg occurred in 1949 and 1950, four years after Greenglass allegedly passed on to Julius whatever information he had about the Manhattan Project. It indicated that the information being collected by Julius had to do with electronic equipment. Radosh and Milton detail a series of other relationships and events that seem to make sense only if there indeed were a network of friends and political associates engaged together in industrial espionage. These revolve around a group of engineers, all classmates of Julius at City College and one-time members of the same Communist Party club.

The two whose stories are most conclusive, Joel Barr and Alfred E. Sarant, disappeared either at the time of Greenglass' or Julius' arrest. Barr disappeared from his Paris apartment the day David was

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of leftists who equate any suggestion the Rosenbergs' guilt with a conspiracy to revive the Cold War and McCarthyism, the overwhelming majority of Americans—if they have any knowledge of the case at all—already assume that Julius and Ethel were guilty. The effect of the book, therefore, will be to discredit the prosecutors of the Rosenbergs and certainly not to heat up the new Cold War.

Beyond that, Radosh and Milton have done the left, and particularly the socialist left of which they are a part, a great service in writing this book—whether their conclusions are right or wrong. First, because the American people in the past two decades have come to distrust politicians and political groups on both the left and right whose ideological commitments prevent them from examining

their assumptions honestly and fearlessly. And second, because it is important for the left to understand its own history and the reasons for its continual failure to gain popular credibility.

Radosh and Milton do not directly address this second point, although they present a good deal of material, especially in letters between David and Ruth Greenglass and in Harry Gold's state-



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By Morris Dickstein

**W**HEN E.L. DOCTOROW'S novel *The Book of Daniel* appeared in 1971 it was greeted with respectful enthusiasm. Inspired by the Rosenberg case—then widely considered a gross miscarriage of justice—and galvanized by the revival of radicalism in the 1960s, a decade embodied in the explosive passions of the book's young protagonists, the book tapped political and personal energies that eluded most other novelists. Without becoming a best seller, it quickly developed a cult following not only as a powerful work of literature but also as one of the best books ever written about the fate of the American left in the postwar period. A revisionist view of the Cold War was in the air—hardly a likely subject for fiction, but Doctorow turned it into the kind of electrifying political novel that many thought had died 20 years earlier with Norman Mailer's *Barbary Shore*. In short, the world was ready for *The Book of Daniel*.

A dozen years later in a very different political climate, when a new book by two left-wing historians (see review pages 8-9) argues that the Rosenbergs were actually guilty, a film version of Doctorow's novel called *Daniel*, directed by veteran filmmaker Sidney Lumet, has been released to a chorus of angry criticism. At the eye of this storm of controversy sits E.L. Doctorow, who both wrote and co-produced the movie, with an equal say over everything from casting to the final cut, and who some reviewers now accuse of having done less than justice to his own book.

On the day I interviewed him in the tranquil backyard of his home in Sag Harbor, Long Island, it was hard to believe that a movie on this subject had been made at all, let alone that it was receiving a daily barrage of barbed attacks from film reviewers. *Time* had contemptuously dismissed the movie in the light of the new Rosenberg book, which the reviewer gave no evidence of having read. Pauline Kael had lambasted it in *The New Yorker* as a piece of Jewish masochism and paranoia, and had even dredged up old vilifications of the Rosenbergs by Jewish intellectuals of the '50s. *Newsweek* and the daily *New York Times* had been thoughtfully critical. *New York* magazine had accused Doctorow of being "naïve about transferring his material to the screen," trying to fit everything in and producing "a half-textured, undramatic reduction of his book." Just the previous day, the *Village Voice* had devoted no less than three long articles to him, two of them exceptionally vituperative. Neoconservative reviewers would no doubt be heard from soon at much greater length.

It was no surprise that Doctorow professed to find the reception of the film as fascinating as its subject, but he spoke in the quiet, measured tones of someone who knew his own mind and was not to be derailed easily by the opinions of others.

## An independent mind.

Doctorow's fiction gives plenty of evidence of a writer who has always charted an independent course. None of his five novels resembles the others: they are written in different tones and rhythms, set in different periods and use little material from his own life. Besides *The Book of Daniel* they include an off-beat Western (*Welcome to Hard Times*), a science-fiction novel (*Big as Life*), a cartoon-like collage of the ragtime era full of out-of-

the-way lore about real historical figures (*Ragtime*) and a 1930s road novel dappled with patches of labor history (*Loon Lake*). But *Daniel* occupies an exceptional place in Doctorow's canon. Though suggested by history, it is by far his most personal book, composed in an almost strident tone of hysterical edginess, intellectual quest and burning intensity. Doctorow really gets inside Daniel, as he avoids doing with most of his characters. Writing at a time when next to nothing was known about the fate of the Rosenberg children—they only went public in 1973—he grafts his own deepest emotions and background onto the battered trunk of the Rosenberg case. He gives the public material a vividly subjective reality, as few political novels manage to do.

Doctorow did not like the movies made from *Welcome to Hard Times* and *Ragtime*, over which he had no control. He said that "there are some beautiful things" in Milos Forman's film of *Ragtime*, especially in the decor and period feeling established in the first 20 or 30 minutes, when "it looks as if it's really going to take off." But he found the film too "spare" and pared down from the abundance of his novel.

His main aim with *Daniel*—ironic after all the accusations of self-betrayal—was to "guard the integrity" of his book and to "have meaningful participation in the making of the film." Doctorow was perfectly aware of how difficult it would be to translate a novel that largely takes place inside Daniel's mind onto the screen. Where a film like *Sophie's Choice* can only profit from the near-elimination of novelist William Styron's overripe and self-indulgent narrative prose, the loss of Doctorow's edgy, quicksilver voice in *Daniel* can only seem like an amputation (though several extraordinary performances provide real compensation).

Doctorow told me he hoped he had been able to suggest, "however subliminally, that the movie was taking place in Daniel's head," through the character's close-up recitations about capital punishment, memories of his childhood and his "imaginings of his parents' life before he was born or when he was an infant"—which are part of the troubled quest into his legacy and origins. According to Doctorow, "The structure of the film is novelistic rather than simply narrative," making it unlike most films that are "linear narratives" with "no more content or scope than a short story." Doctorow resists the notion that his own fiction, with its quick cuts and abrupt transitions, its layering of fragments akin to montage, is intrinsically cinematic. But he admits that movies have "accelerated the rate of perception or the speed of response for readers," so that "we don't have to do as much exposition."

## Restrictions of film.

Doctorow described to me in pungent detail how he had first written the novel in the third-person past tense, only to discard it as boring and "really awful" after 150 pages. Then, feeling "devastated," with a "great sense of reckless despair" about his future as a writer, he sat down at the typewriter and began the novel as we now know it: Daniel's book rather than a book about Daniel. Doctorow clearly chafed at the task of transposing that breakthrough—the crackling language of Daniel's point-of-view—into scenes of straight dialog. Unfashionably, he denigrates film as a "restrictive" medium in which everything must be "told in the conventions of drama," confined by "the limited amount of information an audience can receive" and by a film's "temporal" nature, which means the audience "can't ruminate, can't specu-

late, can't stop and think." He argues that "fiction is a far more deft and flexible form, which can do anything and everything, as film can't."

Others might suggest that this simply indicates his basic literary commitment and his inexperience at handling cinematic conventions. But it's hard to deny that film is a visceral medium that resists being turned into a vehicle of ideas and veers always toward the tricky but concrete evidence of the senses. *Daniel* itself demonstrates this very well. The first 15 or 20 minutes, which fill in some of the historical and ideological context of the "progressive personality," are relatively flat just where the novel was at its strongest—this despite director Sidney Lumet's background in just such a milieu.

But starting with a scene in which the children are passed like inert missiles over the heads of a turbulent crowd at a pro-Rosenberg rally, the movie grabs us by the throat and holds on right through the starkly realized execution scenes, which are unlike anything ever mounted in an American movie. I can't imagine that any of the reviewers failed to be moved by many of these scenes, even some that don't quite build up to a dramatic payoff. Indeed, the angry overkill in many of the reviews indicates more than the presence of offensive ideas or the critic's affinity for pure cinema over social consciousness; it suggests resentment at being manipulated, at feeling things that your mind—and your preconceptions—tell you to reject.



E.L. Doctorow Essays and Conversations