The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left

If I Had a Hammer

Maurice Isserman

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For Marcia

Nothing more was expected by the organizers of this march than that, as usual, one hundred, or five hundred, or a thousand people would turn up, most of them known to one another, and disperse afterwards, while the newspapers commented sourly, if at all, and most of the inhabitants of these islands would know nothing whatsoever about it. Yet by the end of that particular Easter weekend several thousand people had been marching under the black-and-white banners, most of them young, and newspapers and television commented lengthily, and no one could have been more surprised than the organizers.

—DORIS LESSING
The Four-Gated City

Preface: A Renaissance in the 1950s?

> The title of this book will appear to many to contain a flagrant contradiction. A renaissance in the twelfth century! Do not the Middle Ages, that epoch of ignorance, stagnation, and gloom, stand in the sharpest contrast to the light and progress and freedom of the Italian Renaissance which followed? . . . The answer is that the continuity of history rejects such sharp and violent contrasts between successive periods and that modern history shows us the Middle Ages less dark and static, the Renaissance less bright and less sudden, than was once supposed.
>
> —CHARLES HOMER HASKINS
> *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, 1927

Once there was a time, 1968 to be exact, when I knew everything that was important to know about the history of the "Old Left." I was a seventeen-year-old college freshman and a proud new member of Students for a Democratic Society (I would say a "card-carrying" member, except things being what they were at the time in Students for a Democratic Society [SDS] national headquarters no one ever bothered to send me a membership card in return for my five dollars annual dues). I knew that the Old Left had existed an immeasurably long time before, back in the 1930s; terrible things had been done to it, and it had done (or at least believed in) some terrible things itself, then had disappeared. Utterly. Without a trace. The only survivors I knew of were a few relatives in my parents' generation, wonderful and well-loved people who kept the most recent copy of *Political Affairs* on a shelf in the bathroom for convenient reading, but who *were* getting on and were, besides—I thought a little guiltily—irrelevant.

About a decade later, a little older myself, and perhaps a little humbler, I took another look at the history of the Old Left, this time in the form of a doctoral dissertation resulting eventually in the publication of my first book, *Which Side Were You On? The American Com-*

munist Party During the Second World War.[1] By the time I entered graduate school SDS was a fading memory, and my investigation of the Communist party's history was inevitably informed by memories of the political disasters I had witnessed in the past decade. I wanted to know how it was possible for a movement seemingly as powerful as the Communist party had been during the Second World War to unravel so completely in the years that followed. Some of the answer, I decided, could be found in the failure of the Party's brief experiment with "Americanization" during the war. In the final chapter of the book I undertook a short survey of the Party's history in the late 1940s and early 1950s, climaxing in the "deStalinization crisis" of 1956 to 1958. I had conceived those years as a time when the Communists were, purely and simply, victims battered senseless by a relentless assault on the part of the FBI and the House Un-American Activities Committee. (If I glance over at my bookshelf to the section where I keep books on the 1950s, I can see such titles as *Scoundrel Time, The Haunted Fifties, The Nightmare Decade, A Journal of the Plague Years, The Time of the Toad, The Great Fear,* and two different books entitled *The American Inquisition.*)[2] Obviously any consideration of the political history of the 1950s has to include the enormous impact of "McCarthyism": the Left *was* victimized. But as I read over the letters to the editor of the *Daily Worker* in 1956, I was struck by some of the daring and sensible proposals to rebuild and redirect the Communist movement that were offered there. The letter writers were expressing notions that I thought of as the invention of the New Left. As it turned out, no matter how fresh their thinking at that moment, the Communists were involved in a doomed enterprise. In the closing pages of *Which Side Were You On?* I tried to suggest the historical irony involved in the fact that such a short interval of time separated the collapse of the Communist movement, the major component of the Old Left, from the appearance of SDS, the most important group in the New Left—nothing like the immense gap I had imagined back in 1968. In the last lines of the book I argued that the valuable political lessons Communists had learned from their own experiences in the years between the 1930s and the 1950s "came too late to be of use to the generation that had learned them, and too early to be of use to the generation that followed."[3]

Once again it turned out I had something to learn about the history of the Old Left. I still assumed there was a gap, albeit a shrinking one, that absolutely separated Old from New. But the more I looked into the history of radical movements in the 1950s, the more it be-

came apparent that I was laboring under a misconception about both the death of the Old Left and the birth of the New Left. I gradually came to understand that the early New Left had emerged from the Old Left in ways that made it difficult to perceive exactly where the one ended and the other began. Not only were "the dark ages" of the 1950s less dark and static than I had supposed, but the "renaissance" of the 1960s (I use the term advisedly) was also "less bright and less sudden" than I previously had assumed. The recent history of American radicalism began to seem less spasmodic, and more a continual process of unfolding. The ideas and the political choices made by earlier generations did affect later generations, though often in ambiguous and ironic fashion.

"Wisdom comes by disillusionment," George Santayana once remarked, and as the Old Left disintegrated organizationally, some of its adherents did the best thinking of their political careers. If we are to understand the 1960s as something more than a brief and bizarre aberration from the fundamental conservatism of post–World War II American political life, we need to examine how this older generation on the Left came to discard the dogmas to which they once subscribed, and in so doing, how they helped give new direction to an emerging generation of younger radicals.

"It's no accident" (as Marxists of a certain vintage are wont to say) that I turned to the history of a defeated movement in the early 1980s. Although the political dynamics shaping the Eisenhower and Reagan presidencies are by no means identical—Eisenhower actually administered the "American Century," whereas Reagan has merely pandered to nostalgia for that bygone era—the marginal position occupied by the Left in both eras is certainly similar. Historians are naturally attracted to periods in which the movements they study are at the peak of their influence (take, for example, my own research into the Communist party's history during the Second World War); but there is as much or more to be learned by studying these movements at their nadir. In defeat, the partisans of a political movement may reveal aspects of their thought, as well as capacities for reflection and change, that would have remained obscured in more propitious times. Political history should not be simply a chronicle of winners and losers: rather, it should seek to understand and portray the response of human beings to political victory and defeat.

It is a truism that history is usually written by the winners. The "winners" of the present era are those for whom the decade of the

1960s presents itself as a time of bizarre and even sinister maladjustment, now thankfully put behind us. It has long been a matter of journalistic convention to take the most violently apocalyptic moments in the history of the New Left and present them as the sum and substance of the movement; *Time* magazine, in a 1977 retrospective essay on the New Left, casually dismissed its history as the "long, wild hallucination of the '60s."[4] Essayists in journals with more ambitious intellectual agendas hold the New Left responsible for what they see as the "Vietnam syndrome" that has paralyzed American foreign policy makers; for the "blame America first" attitude that animates a large portion of the nation's opinion makers; and for a wide variety of other ills plaguing contemporary American government and society.[5]

There are marked similarities between the "politics of revenge" of the 1950s, with its preoccupation with the preceding "twenty years of treason," and the analysis that now scorns the twenty years of "adversary culture" that preceded the Reagan administration. The first book-length treatment of the New Left to embody this analysis is Stanley Rothman and S. Robert Lichter's *Roots of Radicalism: Jews, Christians, and the New Left*, in which the average New Leftist is portrayed as a seething cauldron of narcissism, self-hatred, sexual inadequacy, declining ego strength, irrational power drives, and other unpleasant characteristics.[6] While there is no reason to dismiss such interpretations out of hand, the discrediting of psychological interpretations of the appeal of communism written in the 1950s (all of which, like Rothman and Lichter's study, were supposedly grounded on the most objective clinical techniques available) does suggest that a degree of caution is in order.[7] *Roots of Radicalism* illustrates the problems inherent in devising such interpretations without adequate historical preparation. Rothman and Lichter rely upon existing secondary sources, anthologies of New Left writing, and autobiographies by a few New Leftists to illustrate the generalizations they draw from their questionnaires and Rorschach tests. The danger of such ahistorical theorizing becomes evident in their attempt to read back into the early 1960s the excesses of the New Left's last days. For their argument to work there could never be a moment of innocent idealism in the New Left's history; the movement had to have been born in sin, flawed from the start in ways reflective of its adherents' psychological infirmities:

The New Left was implicitly revolutionary from the beginning, despite an

initial reliance on liberal rhetoric. . . . Freedom meant the destruction of a decadent, rotten society, rather than access to its rewards. And "now" meant showing adults that there would be no wait for change, that no delay would be tolerated, that gratification must be immediate.[8]

The evidence they produce to document this assertion is a single "keynote speech" by an unnamed speaker at a 1962 SDS conference on "Race and Politics" held at the University of North Carolina, a speech in which the speaker declared: "We shall succeed through force—through the exertion of such pressure as will force our reluctant allies to accommodate to us, in their own interest." This is a bloodcurdling threat, to be sure, and seems to substantiate the Rothman-Lichter thesis—until one refers to the source cited in the footnotes in *Roots of Radicalism* and discovers that the speaker in this instance is not Tom Hayden, nor Al Haber, nor any other person central to the founding and early development of SDS. It turns out to be Tom Kahn, who although technically an SDS member in 1962 was hardly a typical "New Leftist," as anyone who reads the final chapter in this book will discover. In fact, within a few years of making this speech, Kahn would become as strident a critic of SDS as Rothman and Lichter—and would share roughly the same political perspective. If their psychological portrait does fit Kahn—I have no more basis for deciding whether or not it does than they do—then I suppose one could argue with equal validity that it is lapsed-radicals-turned-neoconservatives who hate their fathers, and envy the sexual potency of blacks, and so on and so forth.[9]

Before we can pretend to understand the psychological or sociological "roots of radicalism" in the 1960s, we would do better to become familiar with the actual historical roots of the movement, and that is the project I have undertaken in this book. What follows will not be a narrowly descriptive narrative; I see no virtue or even possibility of fashioning a historical treatment that offers "just the facts" about the emergence of the New Left. I am offering a political interpretation of the New Left's history that resembles Rothman and Lichter's thesis to the extent that it, too, seeks to establish connections between the character of the early and late New Left. The difference is that my interpretation presupposes the good intentions and psychological soundness of those involved (when I think otherwise, as in a few instances, I indicate as much). One need not have been suffering from any psychological disturbance to have been appalled by the prospect of nuclear war, or the conduct of the Vietnam

War, or the persistence of American racism in the 1960s. The New Left's radicalism consisted not in any inherent propensity for violence, irrationalism, or sympathy with totalitarianism (though all three became far too prevalent among sections of the New Left by the end of the 1960s) but rather in the attempt to understand the interconnection of such diverse issues as the danger of nuclear annihilation, the war in Southeast Asia, and racial injustice. If sane and well-meaning people can create movements that ultimately culminate in something like the Weathermen, the violence-obsessed faction that led Students for a Democratic Society in its final apocalyptic days, then it is all the more important to understand the internal political dynamics of such movements.

Chapters 1 through 4 of this book examine, in sequence, the American Communist party; the various groups led by Max Shachtman; the journal *Dissent*, edited by Irving Howe; and the Committee for Non-Violent Action. The emphasis in each instance is on how those groups influenced—and failed to influence—the "New Left" that emerged at the end of the 1950s. If the adherents of these groups could agree on little else, they at least arrived at a rough consensus in the course of the decade that the New Left, whenever it should appear, should represent something very different from what came before it. When the New Left finally did appear, there existed among its youthful adherents the belief that they *were* different, that their elders had compromised themselves, and that honesty, openness, and moral intensity would prevent them from repeating the mistakes of the past. As it turned out, honesty, openness, and moral intensity were not enough.

This book does not pretend to be an encyclopedia of the Old Left. Not every group's history comes under scrutiny. In choosing which groups to focus upon, I used two criteria. First, I was interested only in those groups that underwent a significant shift in perspective in the course of the 1950s (thereby excluding sects like the Socialist Labor party, whose ideas remained pure, unchanging, and sterile throughout). And second, I was interested only in those groups who either went on to develop a significant influence within the early New Left, or who might have been expected to have such influence (thereby excluding such lively but obscure groupings as the followers of C. L. R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya, who figured into the history of the Detroit Left in the 1960s but who developed little influence elsewhere).[10]

The underlying theme unifying these chapters can be summed up

in two words: Politics matters. The civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, and the campus radicalism of the 1960s did not just materialize out of thin air. Nor, obviously, were they simply summoned into existence by small groups of radical conspirators. The upheavals of the 1960s were produced by a complex interaction of demographics, economics, and politics (both mainstream and radical). The political climate would probably have remained much the same as in the previous decade had it not been for the following factors: the baby boom and the resulting postwar expansion of American higher education; the redistribution of the black population from the rural South to the urban South and North and the resulting increase in potential black voting strength; the general prosperity that prevailed in the early 1960s and the resulting willingness on the part of politicians and opinion makers to consider the plight of the "other America"; and finally, a lessening of the immediate prospects for nuclear confrontation, resulting in a greater public willingness to question or at least to tolerate questions about the direction of American foreign policy. Given the new situation created by these factors, it then *did* begin to matter what political choices radicals made. Veterans of the radical movements of the 1950s provided a political language in which those swept up in the new movements of the 1960s could begin to make sense of their own discontents and desires.[11] Although the New Left did not respond with equal enthusiasm to all the advice proffered by the Old, I will argue that the movements of the 1960s were set on a particular trajectory because of that initial interaction of Old Left with New.

The term "Old Left" carries with it (at least for someone of my generation) a connotation of unbending rigidity, but in reality the politics of some of the established radical groups were in the midst of a process of dynamic change in the 1950s. A debate about fundamental beliefs took place within each of the groups examined in these pages. Precisely because the political climate was so unfavorable, radicals were forced to reexamine earlier assumptions. They had to respond to the great social, cultural, and political changes of the postwar years, however much they might have preferred to cling to the verities of the depression era. In the course of the 1950s many radicals came to reject the notion that an American version of the Bolshevik Revolution was inevitable, necessary, or even desirable. The dilution of ethnic working-class cultures brought about by Hollywood, television, and *Life* magazine, the dispersal of ethnic working-class neighborhoods brought about by suburbanization,

VA mortgages, and the interstate highway system, left radicals bereft of the old reliable constituencies and issues and suggested the need for new organizational forms and new political priorities. The growing stockpiles of nuclear weapons in both camps of the Cold War meant that war, rather than serving as the midwife of revolution, could spell an end to all human aspirations, revolutionary and reactionary alike. The debates in radical circles over how to respond to these dramatic changes tell us much about the Left in the 1950s, and they also can tell us something about the United States in that same period. American radicalism has never been blessed with much power, but it has on occasion found itself in possession of some insight. In the course of the 1950s the Left discarded many old illusions and developed new ideas of continuing relevance. If "renaissance" is too grand a word to describe the process, it was at least, as one Communist wrote in July 1956, "a period of discovery . . . giving us freer eyes, ears, and hearts to perceive the world with."[12]

In considering the chapters that follow the reader should bear in mind that what is being described is a very small and somewhat incestuous community. For narrative and analytic reasons I have chosen to treat each of these groups as if it stood apart from the others, but a careful reader will soon note that many of the same names reappear in successive chapters. The debates and changes taking place within one group were related to those taking place in the other groups. Imagine standing at the edge of a small pond and tossing a handful of stones into the still water. Each stone independently sends out its own spreading ring of concentric circles, but very soon the circles will overlap, intermingle, and disrupt the initial simple pattern, until, at the end, only a kind of general disturbance laps up against the shore. The pond is the Left in the 1950s, the stones are the various groups of the Old Left that I have chosen to examine, the shore is the New Left of the 1960s.

Halfway through the writing of this book I had the interesting experience of sitting, literally and figuratively, in the middle of a panel devoted to the history of the American Left in the 1950s, with a former Shachtmanite to one side and a former Communist to the other. The two of them went at each other tooth and nail (hammer and sickle?) throughout the session, neither willing to concede a single criticism that the other had to make of their respective political pasts. I tried to keep my head down. It so happened that I had previously interviewed these two seemingly inflexible dogmatists for

this book—on separate occasions, of course—and listened while each of them offered self-critical judgments just as damning as any of the charges that their ancient and unesteemed factional opponent had to offer on this more public occasion. Interviews with participants many years after the events being described can be of uncertain value as historical evidence, but on the whole it has been my good fortune to have interviewed people who themselves really care about history. Far from being self-serving, their reminiscences often prove to be too self-deprecating—even if they would never give "that damn Stalinist" or "that damn Trotskyite" the satisfaction of hearing them say the kinds of things they were willing to tell me. I could not have written this book were it not for the candid and insightful recollections offered to me by Stanley Aronowitz, Paul Buhle, Joseph Clark, Lewis Coser, David Dellinger, Betty Denitch, Bogdan Denitch, Ralph DiGia, Hal Draper, Barbara Epstein, Harry Fleischman, John Gates, Emanuel Geltman, Todd Gitlin, Albert Glotzer, Max Gordon, Michael Harrington, Gordon Haskell, Dorothy Healey, Richard Healey, Irving Howe, Julius Jacobson, Phyllis Jacobson, Arthur Lipow, Gail Malmgreen, Steve Max, David McReynolds, Debbie Meier, David Montgomery, Juanita Nelson, Steve Nelson, Wally Nelson, Joni Rabinowitz, Ronald Radosh, George Rawick, Vera Rony, Bernard Rosenberg, Andre Schiffrin, Michael Thelwell, Freijof Thygeson, Dorothy Tristman, Michael Walzer, George Watt and Saul Wellman. I also appreciate the helpful letters I received from Sam Bottone, Sidney Lens, Ralph Shapiro, and Ernest Erber, and the copies of some of his private correspondence from the 1940s that Erber sent along with his letter.

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