

Russell Jacoby

## Graying of the Intellectuals

Conservatives and Dissenters in the '50s and '80s

In 1957 Norman Podhoretz participated in a symposium on "The Young Generation of U.S. Intellectuals." He was 27 years old, already an editor of *Commentary*. He observed that his generation, which came of age in the Cold War, "never had any personal involvement with radicalism." His peers breathed an atmosphere of "intellectual revisionism," characterized by "an intensive campaign against the pieties of American liberalism, which, for reasons we all know, had become the last refuge of the illusions of the '30s." Intellectual revisionism taught that liberalism lacked recognition of human and social limitations; nor did liberalism offer a "sufficiently complicated view of reality." Podhoretz concluded that, for the young intellectual "the real adventure of existence was to be found not in radical politics or in Bohemia" but in accepting conformity and adult responsibilities. "The trick, then, was to stop carping at life like a petulant adolescent."

Now, a quarter-century later, Podhoretz and many other intellectuals from the early and mid-'50s still loom large on the cultural terrain. Numerous commentators have sought to explain, and most often to approve, the conservative consensus that has settled over the country. Analyses abound of a skewed economy, the rise of a new right, the appearance of the neoconservatives, and so on. Yet a disturbing truth is ignored or slighted: the face of today's cultural scene closely tallies with the landscape of the early '50s. Except for the age of the participants, little has changed in 30 years. To this a corollary can be appended: there is a marked absence of younger intellectuals. Where are they? Is America's cultural life graying?

References to a "return" to the 1950s risk instant clichés and nostalgia. Nevertheless, even when undeniable differences between the '50s and '80s are registered—gains in civil and sexual rights or

the absence of a McCarthyism—the convergences are striking. Public radicalism has disappeared, replaced by alarm over crime and delinquency. Anti-communism grabs the cultural limelight. Demoralized leftists slink off; puzzled liberals hang on the news. A sobering routine of jobs and careers chills dreams of refashioning America. Conservatism and conformism waft through the culture. C. Wright Mills, in an essay entitled "The Conservative Mood," judged in 1954 that the "tiredness of the liberal" and the "disappointment of the radical" reinvigorate conservatism. "There is no doubt that the conservative moods are now fashionable."

Yet to speak of a return to the '50s is misleading. The '80s signal a continuation, not a restoration. A wide-angled view of post-World War II America suggests that the movements of the '60s only temporarily rattled a liberal-conservative consensus that comfortably housed the intelligentsia.

THE RECONSTITUTION OF A '50s CONSENSUS is less startling than the virtually identical cultural program; not only the plot but after 30 years the actors themselves have not changed. This is most obvious in regard to the conservatives. The continuity is less evident for radicals, primarily because deaths, too, have diminished their small ranks. And in the case of the radicals, continuity may be valid for their work, which remains pertinent and frequently unsurpassed. Yet in the cases of both conservatives and dissenters the extended reign rests on a vacancy; a younger generation—the intellectuals of the '60s—is missing.

Peter Steinfels, in his acute study of the neoconservatives, misdates their appearance. If new recruits, reeling from the '60s, recently joined up, many key figures enlisted in the '50s. Not simply William Buckley and *The National Review*, but Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, and Seymour



Martin Lipset made their mark almost 30 years ago. Describing the cultural scene of the early '50s in *Making It*, Podhoretz might be reporting the current mood. "Revisionist liberalism" permeated the air. "The effort was to purge the liberal mentality of its endemically besetting illusions regarding the perfectibility of man and the perfectibility of society." For Podhoretz and his friends, revisionist liberalism put to rest any lingering illusions about the Soviet Union and communism. Antiutopian in its core, it stressed "human imperfection as the major obstacle to the realization of huge political dreams." Even Daniel Bell, with a past steeped in radical politics, concluded in 1957 that the revolutionary illusions are finished. "What is left is the unheroic, day-to-day routines of living."

The '50s conservatives responded to events that would be roughly duplicated 30 years later. A revolutionary decade floated dimly in the past (the '30s and '60s), but its lessons—danger of utopia, communism, and political dreams—were very much alive; fresh events discredited Soviet communism (from the Berlin Blockade to Poland); American democracy was shining; a new anti-Communist literature sprang up; radicals retreated and brooded.

The cast of '50s dissenters also has seen few changes. From Irving Howe to Gore Vidal and Norman Mailer, they remain our cultural radicals. While there have been few additions, there have been many subtractions. The radicals of the '50s did not fare as well as the conservatives. Many died young, perhaps the cost of their isolation. If he had lived a full life, C. Wright Mills now would be 66. He died at 46, Paul Baran at 54, Robert Lindner at 41—all from heart disease. Precisely because they bucked a tide that has now returned, their contributions retain vitality and relevance.

Mills's *White Collar* (1951) reads almost as if it had just been completed. One might imagine that, after 30 years, a book drenched in empirical material would be impossibly dated. Not so. Much more than a dry study of middle-strata employees, it ranges over the mass media, new professional groups, academic entrepreneurs, and so on. *The Power Elite* (1956) contains more spunk and insight than much recent research. It also includes a chapter on the conservative atmosphere that speaks directly to the present. Many intellectuals "feel that they have somehow been tricked by liberalism, progressivism, radicalism. What many of them want, it would seem, is a society of classic conservatism."

That so many critical works of the '50s remain on target underlines the continuity of the '50s and

'80s; it also throws into relief the uniqueness of the '60s. Its literature, such as Theodore Rozak's *The Making of the Counter Culture* or Philip Slater's *The Pursuit of Loneliness* seem hopelessly dated. To jump back a quarter-century, however, to Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd* or William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* is to find works that seem current. For Whyte, a virulent conformism and careerism raced through the land. "In comparison with the agitation of the thirties," he wrote, college students do not "care too much one way or the other" about political and philosophical issues.

At least in tone, the '50s dissenters often differed from their successors. More isolated and beleaguered than their future compatriots, they were thrown back on their own resources. A note of hysteria frequently entered their voices. As Christopher Lasch has written, in a world partitioned by a discredited communism and an unpalatable liberalism, American radicals risked becoming "increasingly shrill, increasingly desperate." "A stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life," lamented Norman Mailer in 1957. "The only courage, with rare exceptions that we have been witness to, has been the isolated courage of isolated people." The isolation particularly afflicted academics and professionals. Unlike a loose community of poets and novelists, the professionals lacked a network of support and often complained of their isolation.

In both his strengths and weaknesses, Robert Lindner, today forgotten, exemplifies the '50s dissenter and perhaps illuminates the "missing" '60s intellectuals. In such books as *Prescription for Rebellion* (1952) and *Must You Conform?* (1956) he showed himself a trenchant, if sometimes strident, social critic. For Lindner a vast array of teachers, counselors, psychologists, priests, and officials systematically undermined an "instinct" to rebel that dwelled within the individual. A soporific existence oozed throughout America. Decades before R. D. Laing and "antipsychiatry" Lindner, himself a nonmedical psychoanalyst, blasted psychology for its blind ethos of adjustment. For the discontent of the original neurosis, psychology substitutes "the neurosis of conformity, surrender, passivity, social apathy, and compliance."

Lindner is important both for what he was and what he was not; the sharp limits of his work illuminate the course of American radicalism. A theoretical loner, his intellectual resources never equalled his moral and critical passion. It is almost as if he had to invent his radicalism from the

ground up. Perhaps he did. For this reason, he sometimes succumbed to the clichés of the time. For instance, "a thoroughly conventional kind of anti-communism and vision of the rise of the "mass man" marred his work.

In his theoretical boundaries and isolation, Lindner personified the deracinated American radicalism that later bewitched '60s activists. Without an oppositional labor movement or an institutional base, American radicalism is always precarious and regularly disappears. Continuity between generations is frequently severed, compelling radicals to reinvent their radicalism. For this reason—to jump to the '60s—their radicalism, while novel and even vibrant, lacked the resilience of accumulated experience; it easily succumbed to creaking Stalinism and hip terrorism or literally vaporized into spiritualism. The absent '60s intellectuals may be a casualty of the discontinuous American radicalism.

I would suggest a more cynical response to the fate of the '60s intellectuals: there were none. Indeed, it is true that many intellectual luminaries of the '60s were hardly young. Earlier phases of radicalism informed the life and work of Isaac Deutscher, I. F. Stone, Herbert Marcuse, Paul Goodman, and Wilhelm Reich. That "under 30" new leftists banked heavily on aging leftists is not surprising; it is surprising that they have not (yet) significantly supplemented the older works.

When the list of '60s intellectual luminaries is expanded—Paul Baran, Erich Fromm—another feature jumps out; not only were the '60s intellectuals aging, they were largely European-born and -educated. This indirectly confesses to the weakness of American radicalism. By the end of the 1950s only those personally rooted in a European experience could mount a compelling social critique. Often emigré scholars served as conduits, introducing American radicals to European texts—for instance, Hans Gerth for C. Wright Mills or Joseph Schumpeter for Paul Sweezy. That American radicalism often owes its existence or vitality to external infusions of theory and people confirms its vulnerability.

Nevertheless, the congenital fragility of American radicalism does not pinpoint the specific factors that have paralyzed '60s intellectuals as a historical force; this is the novel situation of the '80s, the dependency of its political culture on older intellectuals. Their continuity draws not only on the reestablishment of a political mood, which renders their contributions once again germane, but on the absence of new and younger voices.

Insight into this situation can perhaps be glimpsed from the following: when Paul Baran died

in 1964, Paul Sweezy and Leo Huberman edited a memorial volume, "a collective portrait." It included some 38 "statements" about Baran by friends and associates. Consistent with the orientation of American radicalism, perhaps 80 percent were by older foreigners or foreign-born and -educated Americans. The list of contributions ran from Bruno Bettelheim to Isaac Deutscher, Ernesto (Che) Guevara, Eric Hobsbawm, Otto Kirchheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Ralph Miliband, Joan Robinson, and many others. It also included statements by four younger intellectuals: Peter Clecak, John O'Neill, Maurice Zeitlin, and Freddy Perlman.

The first three, at the time all assistant professors, went on to make important contributions to radical scholarship. They now all teach at major universities and are familiar figures in their disciplines. The last, Freddy Perlman, founded an anarchist press in Detroit, Black and Red, which has published some fine pamphlets and books. Today his name is probably recognized by a few cognoscenti of left literature.

While this is hardly a scientific sample, it does suggest the trajectory of younger radical intellectuals. While journalism, publishing, editing, freelancing, and the legal and medical professions attracted many, the lion's share entered the universities. Today in several disciplines—sociology, history, political science, economics, anthropology—an identification with radicalism or Marxism by younger faculty is not unusual.

THE FOOTHOLD IN THE UNIVERSITIES of radical intellectuals marks a fundamental change from the '50s. American radicals had been rarely or marginally academics. Or, from Veblen to Mills, the most significant were ostracized or sent packing by the universities. In the early 1950s only a handful of professors were publicly associated with Marxism or socialism: No longer. Not only do radicals teach at major universities, a series of dissenting journals (such as *Review of Radical Political Economics*, *Radical History Review*, *Insurgent Sociologist*, *Telos*, *New Political Science*, *Dialectical Anthropology*) serve as their forum.

The academization of the intelligentsia may mark a fundamental turn in American cultural life. It goes far in explaining the continuity of '50s intellectuals and the "disappearance" of those who succeeded them in the '60s. The two phenomena are inextricably linked. The intellectuals of the '50s and their works continue to speak to us not only because of the similarity of political culture. From C. Wright Mills to Paul Goodman, Gore Vidal, Paul Sweezy, and Dwight Macdonald they were





independent intellectuals or marginal academics. They were and are committed primarily to a public universe and discourse and only secondarily, and often not at all, to a professional discipline. For this reason they lucidly addressed public issues to a cultural lay audience.

The successor generation of '60s intellectuals flowed into the universities. Consequently, in their writings, they have essentially reversed the loyalties of the independent intellectuals; they are devoted first to professional colleagues, and second to a wider public. This is not a judgment on the honesty and quality of left scholarship over the last 20 years, or on its quantity; neither can be denied. It is a judgment on the nature of the cultural discourse; now primarily directed to and read by colleagues.

A recent collection, *The Left Academy* (edited by Bertell Ollman and Edward Vernoff) surveys Marxist and radical thought in the universities. Surely, 30 years ago its content, taking up almost 300 pages, would probably have been covered in 10; the change is startling. However, with the exception of some works in the field of history (significantly, the least technical of the disciplines)—works by Christopher Lasch, Eugene Genovese, William A. Williams, Herbert Gutman—and occasionally one by a sociologist or political scientist, very few will be recognized outside a university community. Even the most important contributions, for instance, Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World System*, do not tempt a wider public.

The monopolization of intellectual life by the universities is not simply a cultural but also an economic fact. The independent producer, inventor, or intellectual belongs to the past. The material existence of the nonacademic intellectuals—always precarious—has become impossible; even painters; novelists, and dancers affiliate with institutions or find another trade. This structural tendency is compounded by the job squeeze. The migration into the universities ended some years ago and is slowly being reversed. Untroubled by a vigilant student movement and blessed by a conservative consensus, universities and colleges easily, and regularly, terminate the employment of radicals.

This reality profoundly affects younger intellectuals. The situation is not entirely new, but the ante has been upped. The academic parks, already suffering purges by conservative managers, enclose the only patches of unregulated thought. And if they too are regulated, camping outside the park is risky, if not prohibitive. Obviously, this exacts a toll

from those who like to think. The effort of maintaining the good will of colleagues supplants that of addressing larger issues or, perhaps more crucially, a larger public. Anything can be written as long as it is unreadable. And so the missing '60s intellectuals are lost in the universities.

Some of these observations can be turned upside down; it could be argued that the academization of the intelligentsia will break the curse of American radicalism, its lack of continuity. With a secure base in the universities—teachers, journals, students—the traditions that regularly dissipate will remain alive. Perhaps. An alternative, however, is equally plausible; the translation into disciplines and subdisciplines encapsulates radical thought in dead and arcane languages. This is the danger: when a public is ready to hear another message, the radical intelligentsia will have lost command of the vernacular.

The long view of post-World War II cultural life refutes belief in the perpetual rejuvenation of America. The political culture has not fundamentally changed in 30 years; nor have there been many new faces. While the aging industrial plant of America sparks much discussion, few mention the aging intellectual plant. The universities have occupied and preoccupied the most recent generation of intellectuals, depriving the wider culture of youthful talent. A future without independent intellectuals, now an endangered species, promises endless reruns. □

Emanuel Gellman

## Who Killed Carlo Tresca?

It has been 40 years since Carlo Tresca was gunned down on the streets of New York, at 5th Avenue and 15th Street (January 11, 1943). Who killed him? Mussolini's Fascists? The Stalinists? Mafioso hirelings working for either (Genovese hit men?), or those Tresca called "ex-Fascists"?

Immediately after the murder, then New York District Attorney Frank Hogan and the police launched an active investigation. There were leads a-plenty, clear lines of investigation—and, then, nothing. Silence. Case closed. It might be too late to unravel the leads and suppositions. But we can remember.