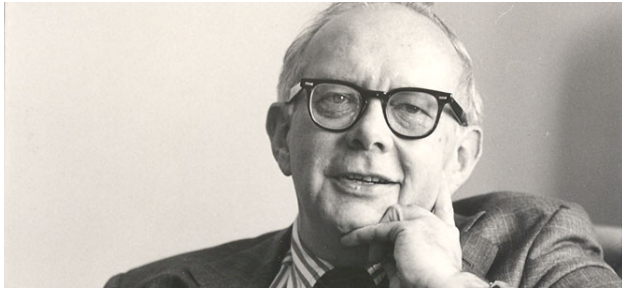


Irving Howe: A Socialist Life

If Howe's intellectual evolution has meaning for today's left, it is to be found in his struggle to transcend sectarian mindsets while remaining principled.

Mitchell Cohen Fall 2020



Irving Howe (Jill Krementz)

I

Walking on Manhattan's Upper West Side one chilly day in the 1980s—it was not long after a suggestion came from within the Reagan administration that ketchup replace vegetables in school lunches to save money—Irving Howe made a remark to me that captured a great deal about his own political journey: “I know how to debate with these guys about politics and economics, but how do you argue with social meanness?”

Howe, whose centennial we commemorate this year and who was Dissent's founding spirit, could have easily launched into a dissection of capitalism. His political awakening began in the 1930s and 1940s as a teenaged Marxist. A half century later his aversions hadn't much changed, but his ways of understanding had. Instead of an “analysis,” he expressed simple moral outrage. If his intellectual evolution has meaning for today's left, and certainly it does, it is to be found in his struggle to transcend sectarian mindsets while remaining principled.

Two factors were particularly important in his case. One was an ability to speak frankly about things that had gone wrong on the left. The other was how literature shaped his sensibilities. When this “liberal socialist” used the word “critical,” it was not just

against foes but to trouble his own deepest beliefs. Egalitarian humanism was at their core. However, the experiences of the twentieth century, particularly the damage inflicted on the very idea of socialism by Communist parties, taught him the need for modifiers. The word liberal implied not just individual freedoms but the importance of “self” and securing spaces for an individual’s life. Engaging literature fostered the self.

Political and economic unfairness made him bridle; he bristled if someone blamed those suffering social pain for their predicament. Howe, born Horenstein, said that he “stumbled” into socialism at the age of fourteen, but tripwires abounded: Depression at home, the rise of Hitler and Stalin abroad. And then there was the Bronx, to which his poor Yiddish speaking parents came from Bessarabia. Waves of Jewish immigrants had arrived in the “New World” fleeing upheaval and anti-Semitism. They felt, Howe wrote, as if always “on the edge of foreseen catastrophe.”

Varieties of radicalism sang compelling strains in Howe’s neighborhood of “narrow, five-story tenements, wall flush against wall.” Socialism’s melody was vibrant, and for many it was “an encompassing culture, a style of perceiving and judging through which to structure their lives.” There were parties, newspapers, and unions.

We read in *A Margin of Hope*, his autobiography, that when he was thirteen, his parents, then working in the apparel trade, joined picket lines in the “Great Strike” of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union. Its victory was not just symbolic for his family, it literally eased material life. “In later years,” he recounted, “whenever I heard intellectuals of the Right or Left attack unionism, I would be seized by an uncontrollable rage that then gave way to frustration. How to explain . . . what the strike of 1933 had meant, how to find words to tell of the small comforts the union had brought . . .”

He became a high school “agitator,” joining students protesting cafeteria prices. The principal called him in and forced him to admit that, well, he himself hadn’t been buying lunches. He brought his from home. But Howe insisted it was the principle of

the thing. The principal smiled, evidently leaving Howe a tad uneasy. He was perhaps a little young to ponder expansively on standing up to authority. Still, it was evident that everyone should have lunch.

He joined the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL), was a Trotskyist and then a devoted member of the "Shachtmanites." This splinter group emerged from debates in the years between the Moscow trials and the Second World War. Was Stalinism as much an enemy to socialism as capitalism? Was exiled Trotsky right to characterize Stalin as the fist of bureaucratic rule over what was still a workers' state? Or had the regime become "state capitalism"? Alternatively, had something new been created? Max Shachtman called it "bureaucratic collectivism" with a totalitarian state. Implied: political, social, and economic revolutions were needed. While this theory still sustained Leninism, it inoculated adherents against the lures of Communist parties. Among Shachtman's later followers would be an ex-activist in the Catholic Worker Movement who also went through YPSL, and whom Howe described (in a letter) as "the most selfless, & humane person I ever knew": Michael Harrington.

Howe left the Shachtmanites behind in 1952, deeming them sectarian. Still, his anti-Stalinism remained implacable. With Lewis Coser, a refugee from Germany and Dissent cofounder, Howe co-authored *The American Communist Party: A Critical History, 1919–1957* (1957). The book was a wide-ranging interpretation of the fate of the left from within. The future of the left depended, Howe and Coser believed, on a complete divorce from Stalinist myths and their attendant mindsets. Howe and Coser first presented what they thought appealing as well as problematic in the early American left. There was Eugene V. Debs's Socialist Party, which was internally pluralistic and, despite some dogmatism, rooted in varied ways in American life. There was the radical syndicalism of the Industrial Workers of the World with an "ideology" of "improvisations on the word 'sabotage.'"

The Communist Party (CP) that emerged in the 1920s, wrote

Howe and Coser, was the “political and moral opposite” of the Debsian left. Adherents often lived in Soviet or European mental universes. By 1928, it became, like Moscow, “a totalitarian monolith.”

Then came what Howe and Coser believed emblematic of everything that could go wrong on the left: the “Third Period.” The Comintern decreed that a “revolutionary offensive” against capitalism had lasted roughly from 1917 until Lenin’s death, but from 1924 to 1927 capitalism stabilized. Now a “Third Period” would bring its “death agony.” Reformers were “objectively” on the wrong side in a bifurcating world. This mentality proved catastrophic, particularly in Germany, where fighting Social Democrats—“social fascists”—became a priority. Howe and Coser cited a German Communist publication’s contention that coalitions with Social Democrats would be “a thousand times worse” than “an open fascist dictatorship.”

Howe would acknowledge that some joined the CP with the best intentions. But allegiance came with a waiver of any individual judgment. “Never underestimate,” he often said, “the role of cognitive dissonance in human affairs.”

Of course, there was context. “What kept the derangement of Third Period Communism from appearing more weird” than it was, Howe and Coser wrote, lay in the fact that “American society was grossly deranged. People were hungry, as the Communists said; men did feel themselves to be living without hope. . . .” When Third Period politics proved inimical to Moscow’s interests, the Comintern did a volte-face, embracing a strategy of “popular fronts,” even with “social fascists.” The New Deal, recently derided as reactionary, could now be hailed by the American CP. Communism was proclaimed true “Americanism.”

The idea of popular fronts—alliances of varied left-wing tendencies—might have created a healthy socialist movement, Howe later judged, had it not been a charade. After all, CP Secretary General Earl Browder’s 1938 pamphlet on “Traitors in American History: Lessons from the Moscow Trials” compared Trotsky to Aaron Burr.

II

Still, Howe retained a complex grasp of what movements provide to members. In a way, he attained a political wisdom by considering what was good and bad in his own experience of “life in a sect,” as he put it. In early 1991 we had a conversation about Trotsky. I had been to Bucharest after Ceausescu’s overthrow to interview aged Communists about the 1920s and 1930s. Although never a Trotskyist, my preparation included Trotsky’s writings from 1913 on the Balkan Wars. I remarked on how quickly he had grasped knotty events. Howe observed that it was partly because an intellectual framework allowed him to do so. Recently, Howe added, he had been rereading Trotsky’s diaries while preoccupied with “the moral passion of the old Tolstoy.”

Trotsky and Tolstoy: he held these figures together in his imagination for a long time. He told me at lunch on the Sunday before he died in May 1993 that *War and Peace* was the supreme novel, though he was rereading Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed* with “unalloyed joy.” And while no longer a Trotskyist, the Russian revolutionary remained for him heroic as an intellectual and writer who acted in history. But Howe’s socialism had become an ethical imperative—“radical humanism”—and not historical necessity. His 1954 essay “Images of Socialism,” written also with Coser, for *Dissent*, began with Tolstoy’s words: “God is the name of my desire.” They went on: “Without sanctioning the facile identification . . . of religion and socialist politics, we would like to twist Tolstoy’s remark to our own ends: socialism is the name of our desire.” It gave “urgency . . . to criticism of the human condition in our time. It is the name of our desire because it arises from a conflict with, and an extension from, the world that is.”

This was a call to sustain but disenchant socialist thinking. Fighting inequalities suffered by working people was atop any socialist agenda, but being a socialist meant rubbing a moral vision up against unpalatable facts while—to use a metaphor with contemporary resonance—developing antibodies that

prevent confusing visions with realities.

In *Socialism and America* (1985), Howe called for “articles of conciliation” between liberals and socialists. He rejected “get rich quick” versions of socialism—naïve revolutionism. There had been “authoritarian alloys” in socialist metals, he had concluded. An alloy is an additive, and is supposed to strengthen a metal or prevent corrosion. In socialist history, however, some brought lethal degeneration. But combining socialist and liberal precepts could bring fruitful amalgams. Liberalism (or many forms of it) failed to grasp something essential: the meaning of “human fellowship.” It was “a libel on humanity” to reduce men and women to no more than “economic” beings, as did many classical liberals (and many Marxists). Still, socialist imagination was at its best, he contended, in a dialectic with classical liberal ideas like individual freedom and tolerance. They provided each other with needed alloys. Howe spent much time pondering ideas of “market socialism,” like those in Alec Nove’s *The Economics of Feasible Socialism*.

His last article for *Dissent* was “Two Cheers for Utopia.” Three were dangerous; their din could deafen individuality or make disagreements inaudible. Two allowed for socialism as a regulative idea: humanity needed to pose possibilities of “a more attractive world” in order to judge the here-and-now but without concocting a “static fantasy” of a “final goal.”

“An inevitable mark of sectarianism in politics, especially radical politics,” we read in Howe and Coser’s *The American Communist Party*, “is the inability to distinguish between fact and desire, from which there often follows an effort to force the will of the frustrated sect upon the rhythm of social developments; the sect, unable to make history, feels tempted to violate it.”

III

What of his own sectarian experiences? In a memoir of the 1930s he recounted that being in “The Movement” gave “not merely a ‘purpose’ in life but, far more important, a coherent

perspective upon everything that was happening to us . . . One reveled in the innocence and arrogance of knowledge.” Yet it resulted in thinking “along too well-defined and predictable lines.” Howe recalled that last phrase, a comment by a professor on a paper he wrote, with embarrassment. Howe reached this conclusion: “We had a strong sense of intellectual honor, but only a feeble appetite for intellectual risk.” Writing while engaged in quarrels with the New Left—he would admit that he slipped sometimes in them into a sectarian voice—he also made this observation:

At least as crippling as its refusal to examine first principles was the attitude of the Movement toward what we called “bourgeois thought.” Perhaps the most insidious doctrine afflicting the radical world was the Leninist theory of the “vanguard party,” the notion that we possessed political truth, held the key to the future, and had, so to speak, signed a pact with history . . .

He recalled going down Fifth Avenue on a bus with a young movement leader who pointed to buildings around them and announced, “Some day it will all belong to us.” This haughtiness, wrote Howe, had a counterpart in “a barely disguised contempt for the thought and learning of the past, an intolerance of divergent thought, a condescension towards ‘bourgeois scholars’ who, it is true, occasionally accumulated valuable material but lacked the depth interpretation that ‘only Marxism’ provided.”

Sometimes, however, “Life would break through the crevices of our ideology and prompt us to unpolitical happiness and spontaneous feelings.” Here was the impulse behind Howe’s anti-totalitarianism and his later dissent from the 1960s slogan that “the Personal is the Political.” It imperiled, he thought, genuine notions of individual autonomy. That was also why, in ensuing decades, he was not drawn to the theorizing of structuralists, post-structuralists, and postmodernists. After I told him in a summer 1989 letter from Paris about my aversion to the idea of “theoretical anti-humanism,” popular among some left intellectuals, he wrote back, “Perhaps you’ll explain to me why Foucault & Co. are contemptuous of the idea of the self. I

don't 'get' it—I think it's one of the great revolutionary ideas of the modern era.”

IV

A subtle articulation of this viewpoint came earlier in *Politics and the Novel* (1957). Howe pointed to two brilliant moments in Victor Serge's novel *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*. Serge was a remarkable figure and probably the first person to call the Soviet Union “totalitarian.” A one-time anarchist, he supported the Bolsheviks, and then Trotsky. Imprisoned, he was able to leave the USSR due to appeals from writers abroad.

In the first moment, an old Bolshevik, soon to be shot, meets friends in similar straits in the woods. They have a “desultory” political conversation in freezing weather. But then “their life-force is stirred by the coldness and the purity of the snow, by the warmth and pathos of this, their final meeting.” They start to throw snowballs, as if school boys. “Take that, you theoretician,” roars one.

In the second moment, Ryzhik, another old revolutionary, anticipates yet one more attempt by Stalin's police to get him to “confess,” probably before facing a firing squad. He finds himself in a cell with an old comrade, Makarenko. They hug and Makarenko cries out, “Our meeting is extraordinary . . . an incredible piece of negligence on the part of the security services . . . Why are you alive, why am I?” When Ryzhik responds with a political analysis, Makarenko interjects: “I am a Marxist too, but shut your eyes for a minute, listen to the earth, listen to your nerves.”

Howe's nerves were obviously speaking too as he looked at a fictional “counterposition of ideology and emotion—in a dialogue between two men who are surrendering their lives” for their beliefs.

V

No less striking than Howe's political journey was his route as reader and writer. They were connected. Here he is describing how he came to understand what during the Depression: “To

be poor is something that happens; to experience poverty is to gain an idea as to what is happening.” His father was forced to become a peddler in 1930 and the family became very needy. Still, Howe tells us, he had no “acute sense” that he was “the victim of social injustice.” But “the idea of poverty” began “creeping into my consciousness” as he read reports about hunger and union-led strikes in North Carolina textile factories. His “own handicap” became “vivid” through learning “about the troubles of people I did not know.”

Evidently he decided that he had to know about the author of those reports, Sherwood Anderson. Anderson had also written an important novel, *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). Designed as interlinked stories, it sought to show the confines of life in a Midwestern town. Reading it introduced Howe, a New York City boy, to the “small towns that lay sprinkled across America.” The weekend before entering the army in 1943, he hitchhiked on a “pilgrimage” to Clyde, Ohio, where Anderson grew up and from which he drew for his novel.

Howe’s minimal responsibilities in Alaska, where the military posted him, allowed him to spend hours in the base library. He estimated that he read 150 books. As he did so, “the idea of an inner life took on new force.” In ensuing years, he “lost” his “singleness of mind” and became “enchanted with language in its own right.” Anyone who compares political articles written in his Shachtmanite persona before and after the war with those he began writing for “common” readers will discover diverging styles. The further from sectarianism, the better his prose became.

His shift was due partly to what he learned after his return to New York when he worked on a magazine called *Politics*, edited by Dwight MacDonald. (Howe was also an assistant to Hannah Arendt at Schocken Books.) MacDonald, a brilliant if eccentric radical of independent mind, wrote with exceptional flair and clarity. Howe’s experience with him contributed to his later hopes for *Dissent*. Accessible, journalistic fluidity marked Howe’s first book, *The UAW and Walter Reuther* (1949), co-authored by union activist B.J. Widick. It aimed to show new

political possibilities opened by industrial unionism. In the meantime, Howe was already interested in *Partisan Review*, the intellectual flagship of the “New York Intellectuals.” Comrade Howe sent a “curt note” to editor Philip Rahv with an article chastising the journal’s “postwar retreat from Marxism.” This “cheekiness” earned an invitation to meet. Since you’re a Marxist, he was told, “you ought to understand why we don’t want to act against our own interests” by publishing your attack. Howe protested: Marxism concerned classes struggling, not editors and individual writers. It didn’t work. Crestfallen, he prepared to leave when Rahv pointed to some books and asked if he was interested in reviewing one. Howe chose stories by Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem. Rahv smiled—perhaps the smile reminded Howe of his high school principal and the college professor.

VI

When Howe got back to New York, he also returned to Anderson. If his first reading of *Winesburg, Ohio* as a teenager opened, he recalled, “new depths of experience touching on half-buried truths” for which he was unprepared, it was time to explore them. His book *Sherwood Anderson* was published in 1951. He was struck by conflicts portrayed in *Winesburg* between the inner lives of its characters and the surrounding world. Howe deployed and Americanized, but with a light touch, one of Trotsky’s ideas to present the novel’s backdrop and what the novelist assimilated from it.

Marx’s theory presented a triadic succession: agrarian feudalism, capitalism, and then communism. Trotsky—I simplify—proposed a bypass might be possible if Marx’s stages “telescoped” in “backwards countries” (think of feudal Russia or lands victimized by imperialism). Revolutionary struggles could be triggered by “combined and uneven development,” that is, if archaic social structures were disrupted by innovative (read: capitalist) economic techniques imposed by emerging or implanted “advanced” classes. Howe saw something similar in Ohio, as the frontier receded and manufacturing and commerce

rose. There were sharply contrasting forms of social organization together, and instead of forecasting revolution due to Ohio's combined and uneven development, Howe proposed that a novelist could witness and make a novel out of a small town in which people with "rural qualities" strained for "urban successes."

The novel's main characters communicate only with a young reporter. George Willard is, however, introduced through someone else, an old author of a never published book, one rather like that awaiting Anderson's reader. In it, people become "grotesques" grasping for truths in stifling but changing circumstances. But trying to live by a truth warps them. Willard then engages various townsfolk, all with their own difficulties, and through them attains self-understanding—perhaps like the younger Howe did through Anderson's reports on poverty.

Willard sees finally that he must abandon his hometown. His "mind was carried away by his growing passion for dreams . . ." On the departing train, he perceives his earlier life there as "but a background on which to paint the dreams of manhood." It is easy to imagine Howe pondering this leave-taking, with the old writer and town behind, with images telescoping into troubling suggestions about the self and ideology, about the Bronx and a changing America.

Howe asserted that Anderson's novel was possible due to its author's intimacy with a sector of the country—the sector he transcended. Because his Ohio was changing and dissolving, Anderson was "contaminated" by cosmopolitanism, leaving a novel of conflicted human sensibilities that went beyond "sectoral" (Midwestern) literature. But going beyond required coming to grips with what was left behind.

Howe would always be compelled by fictional presentations of men and women in fraught times and places, where a world was vanishing and another emerging. Like a motif, this preoccupation winds through his subsequent treatments of Faulkner (with his Southern roots), Hardy (with his English country roots), modernism, New York intellectuals, and Yiddish, Holocaust, American-Jewish, and Israeli literature.

And it points us to Howe's embrace of his ambiguous Jewish self. While a Trotskyist, he saw in the "Jewish Problem" something that would dissolve through socialist universalism. But as the Holocaust registered on him, an existential change came. In the early 1950s he began editing anthologies of Yiddish literature—that of a murdered civilization and its American transplants. This would inform his literary judgements.

In 1972 Howe wrote a famous critique of Philip Roth. He didn't find his Portnoy's Complaint anti-Semitic (as some claimed). It was indeed funny satire, but he judged it to be series of culturally thin skits with no real bond with the long tradition of (often humorous) Jewish self-criticism. Roth's send-up of 1960s American Jewry failed where other writers—Anderson, Faulkner, Hardy—succeeded. They drew from the past of their changing or disappearing worlds in order to transcend them. Howe reiterated his point in *World of Our Fathers*, his prize-winning book on Eastern European immigrant Jewry in America. It too was about a fading world, but Howe recognized how much he had gotten his own bearings from it. Where Roth's Portnoy cries that he is sick of being a Jew all the time and wants to be just "human," Howe asks, "Who, born a Jew in the twentieth century, has been so lofty in spirit as never to have shared this fantasy? But who, born a Jew in the twentieth century, has been so deluded as to stay with this fantasy for more than a few moments?" Roth's later work, which (in my view) included several masterpieces, often seems like rejoinders to Howe.

Then there was Israel. Young Howe shared Trotskyism's "internationalist" hostility to Zionism. Reevaluation came with the Holocaust and the 1967 war and he became a non-Zionist, sympathizing with the Israeli Labor and peace movements. While a frequent dissenter from Israeli policies, he recoiled from the venom spouting from some anti-Zionists; it seemed to have a Third Period flavor.

Howe was taken by a novel published in 1977, the year in which Israel's social democrats were defeated by the right.

“Labor Israel” was still alive but combined and uneven forces threatened it. Author Yaakov Shabtai presented them through the death of a father, the suicide of a son, and characters who seemed lost in the modern city of Tel Aviv, all as the Labor movement “succumbed to old age and debility.” It was fiction, not a report, although its Hebrew title, Zikhron devarim, renders roughly as “a memory” or report of “things” or “words.” Davar was also the title of Labor’s newspaper. Howe heard a “culture quarreling with itself . . . a social elegy whose tone is sober and unsentimental.” He compared Shabtai’s work to Faulkner’s in his “merciless” approach to “the very myth upon which his book rests and to which he seems residually attached.”

VII

In 1952 a symposium appeared in *Partisan Review* on “Our Country, Our Culture.” In it, many onetime radicals declared themselves now comfortably at home. Howe rejoined with an essay, “This Age of Conformity,” and *Dissent* magazine was the obvious next step. During the next quarter century, many New York Intellectuals who, like Howe, began in the anti-Stalinist left became neoconservatives. In the 1980s they marched through the spiritual asphalt of Reaganland, driven partly by an increasingly thoughtless anti-leftism.

For neoconservatives, Howe’s sin was in still calling himself a socialist—even when chastising authoritarianism within the left. He made for a bad stereotype as neoconservatives, with Irving Kristol as their dean, became increasingly fevered. Howe didn’t let their zealotry pass. One of his “great mistakes,” he remarked, was to recruit young Kristol into Trotskyist ranks at the City College of New York, where the anti-Stalinist left grouped in Cafeteria Alcove 1 and the Stalinists, including Julius Rosenberg, in Alcove 2.

One of my first articles for *Dissent*, in 1986, was a critique of Kristol. When I delivered it, I remarked to Howe on the difficulty of taking seriously Kristol’s salutes to “bourgeois virtue.”

Moreover, his smirks at “liberals” seemed to issue from a Gog versus Magog mindset, reminding me of the “Third Period.”

Howe laughed. Undoubtedly he had often made the comparison himself. But he had a practical observation: Kristol's real achievement was not his ideas but his ability to convince the "business class" that it needed ideology, and to fund think tanks and journals (Dissent had a post box and no office).

Not long after Howe's death, Daniel Bell sent me an article by Kristol, suggesting that Dissent publish some choice words from it in a box. Bell and Kristol, once neoconservative collaborators, had fallen out some years before. In 1976 Bell declared that he was socialist in economics, liberal in politics, and conservative in culture; Kristol, in his eyes, had become an "ideologue." Following the Berlin Wall's fall Kristol was warning of a threat still at hand—liberals: "There is no 'After the Cold War' for me. So far from having ended, my cold war has increased in intensity, as sector after sector of American life has been ruthlessly corrupted by the liberal ethos. . . . Now that the other 'Cold War' is over the real cold war has begun." Bell found this "preposterous."

That essay I wrote censuring Kristol originally included a critique of Bell. Howe asked me to take that part out. I did, but was perplexed. I only understood his reasons later. One was friendship; he and Bell knew each other from Alcove 1, although they had since taken to opposed sides in many disputes. The other: Howe, thinking as an editor, wanted a pluralistic Dissent and saw value in having Bell in its pages. One evening in 1990, Howe asked me to come to an Italian restaurant in the East 80s for a small dinner with Bell. Pasta, wine, and amicable conversation continued until something remarkable happened. These two men, both about seventy, broke into an argument about Trotsky, as if back in college. Trotsky remained gallant for Howe. Bell, though "anti-ideology," was not prone to mild demurrals. He repeated: "Kronstadt, Kronstadt." (At that naval base near St. Petersburg in 1921, a rebellion by once pro-Bolshevik sailors was repressed bloodily by War Commissar Trotsky at Lenin's behest.)

Just as the exchange threatened to become fierce, Howe and

Bell pulled back. At the same moment, or so it appeared to me, both decided that preserving friendship, together with an ability to wrangle genuinely but civilly, was more important than old discords.

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