

[*The New York Intellectuals Reader*, Neil Jumonville, ed., Routledge, 456 pages]

Made in Manhattan

By Paul Gottfried

The New York Intellectuals Reader is a sequel of sorts to editor Neil Jumonville's earlier work *Critical Crossroads*, which dealt with some of the same figures of the New York highbrow set. In *Critical Crossroads*, Jumonville focused on *Partisan Review*, a journal founded in 1940 by a circle of mostly Jewish Leftists who were then breaking—or had already broken—from the Communist Party. In *The New York Intellectuals Reader*, we are presented with excerpts from this group's contributions to *Partisan Review* and other periodicals that they and their disciples founded and maintained over several generations.

Almost all of the writers here excerpted—Philip Rahv, Clement Greenberg, Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Daniel Bell, Meyer Schapiro, Lionel and Diana Trilling, Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, and Sidney Hook—shared a similar ethnic background. They came from immigrant parents who had settled on New York's Lower East Side. The offspring of these immigrants studied and debated politics at City College of New York or Brooklyn College. Unlike the Sephardic and German Jews who had arrived before them in the U.S., the more easily identified and often radicalized Jews from Lithuania or the Ukraine encountered resistance throughout American society. Columbia and the other Ivies were reluctant to admit them as students and refused to hire them as professors until the 1950s. Of this group, the English professor Trilling and the art historian Schapiro were the first to make it onto the Columbia faculty. (Despite his adoption of Eastern European Jewish quirks, Richard Hofstadter,

who also joined Columbia, had a Protestant mother and had been raised as a Lutheran in Buffalo.)

Jumonville suggests that his subjects, having been denied other outlets for their theorizing energies, decided to found their own magazines. The reality was perhaps more complicated. With the exception of Dwight Macdonald, C. Wright Mill, Mary McCarthy and the German refugee Hannah Arendt, the *Partisan Review* circle seems to have been restricted to a specific Jewish subculture. *Partisan Review*, and later *Dissent*, *Commentary*, and *Encounter* were their publications of choice, magazines in which the contributors could present their own political, cultural, and existential concerns without having to please the gentile society from which they felt excluded. Each publication mirrored the mind and consciousness of the group that established it.

Jumonville divides his subjects into generational clusters, attaching certain attributes to each. He views the succession of generations—extending from such representative figures as Philip Rahv, to Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol, down to Norman Podhoretz—as moving steadily in a particular ideological direction. As his subjects became increasingly assimilated to and comfortable in American life, they shifted toward the center and then toward the right.

The anthologist also notes certain pivotal themes that interested each particular generation. The first generation sought a leftist socialist position that would allow them to support revolutionary change without being identified with Stalin's dictatorship. They denounced McCarthyism and other manifestations of post-World War II anticommunism while simultaneously depicting the Soviets as "totalitarian." At the same time, this generation tried to push a certain kind of Marxist esthetic, stressing the social background of artistic and literary works. For those adopting this perspective, the principal adversaries were the New Critics, such as Kenneth Burke, Yvor Winters, and Cleanth Brooks, who were dismissive of social influence in their literary studies.

The second generation, typified by Bell, Kristol, and S.M. Lipset, overcame the alienation from American life and constructed the influential theory that the U.S. was experiencing the "end of ideology." In a moderate welfare-state democracy, with a vigorous mixed economy, the social conflicts that had plagued Europe and even an earlier America were things of the past. Americans might quarrel over political issues; they were not likely, however, to be divided again by sharp class differences. In the third generation, represented by Podhoretz and other neoconservatives, the same tendency continued to unfold. The descendants of Eastern European Jewish immigrants who were active among New York's public intellectuals eventually claimed the mantle of American patriotism. The rise of this third cohort as leaders of the American conservative movement underscored this Americanizing process.

One of Jumonville's useful contributions is to note a frequently neglected characteristic of his first group. Members of the *Partisan Review* circle, exemplified by *PR* founder Rahv, flaunted their distance from American life. Until his death in 1973, Rahv went out of his way to call himself a "European." Although he and his colleagues had sprung from immigrant families that had come from the Eastern margin of European civilization, from Jewish ghettos in the Russian Pale of Settlement, they became eagerly European after arriving in the United States. This may have largely been a pose—in the same way that many of them sported French berets—but it reflected their deep anxiety about the "real America" across the Hudson, one that was imagined to be peopled by Protestant bigots and raving McCarthyites. Europe was safely at a distance, still ravaged from the last war, and Soviet armies had overrun the Eastern part of the continent. A prostrate Europe posed no threat to these intellectuals, who also incidentally showed little interest in Jewish nationalism.

There was a positive side to this obsession with things European. This

anthology is full of intriguing references to modern European literary and artistic figures, including such stars of the cultural Right as Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Gottfried Benn, and T.S. Eliot. In 1949, Dwight Macdonald in his own magazine, *Politics*, published an enthusiastic endorsement of the Bollinger Committee's decision to award its annual literary prize to the Modernist poet Ezra Pound. Pound had been arrested and submitted to especially grim treatment after World War II for his pro-Axis speeches delivered in Mussolini's Italy. Furthermore, the work for which he received the Bollinger Prize, *The Pisan Cantos*, included grossly anti-Semitic references. Yet for Macdonald and perhaps others in the New York circle, Pound's achievements as a literary innovator trumped his unfortunate political associations and anti-Jewish opinions. And while the *Commentary* crowd gave a cold shoulder to Southern literature, earlier New York intellectual publications treated the genre sympathetically. Both *Partisan Review* and *Dissent* talked up the novels of William Faulkner and pointed approvingly to his stream of consciousness technique.

One critical reason, treated by Alexander Bloom in *Prodigal Sons*, for Norman Podhoretz's break with other New York Jewish intellectuals was their lack of concern about anti-Semitism. Podhoretz complained that his mentors had praised authors who transmitted anti-Jewish ideas. He was further troubled by the reluctance of older-generation Jewish intellectuals to take strongly pro-Zionist political positions. Given his worldview, he was of course correct. *Partisan Review* and in its early years *Dissent* would never reveal the same militantly Zionist edge as *Commentary* under Podhoretz's watch. Nor would one find in the latter any sympathy toward European thinkers and authors who were critical of Jews or Jewish influence.

Jumonville's focus on the intergenerational journey toward Americanization may have its limits. Although Alfred Kazin scandalized his peers in 1942 when he published *On Native Grounds*,

his patriotic appraisal of Faulkner's works, this hymn to "our American culture" was not entirely out of place among the Jewish New York cognoscenti. It was only premature. By the 1950s, academic and professional barriers to Kazin's co-ethnics were coming down, and by the 1960s the New York Jewish immigrants and their children—whose alienation had been poured into *Partisan Review* and *Dissent*—were achieving a social success that had once been unimaginable.

It would be wrong to insist, however, that the uneasiness about a strange land that had been present among the first generation disappeared with the shift from the second to the third. That sense of marginality persisted, for example, in the stress on the "paranoid style" of heartland Americans and in their association of Goldwater Republicans with the "extreme Right"—both preoccupations that one could find in Bell and other representatives of the second cohort. Like the American Jewish Committee's sponsored anthology on prejudice, *The Authoritarian Personality*, the emphasis of the New York intellectuals on white Christian psychic disorders could be described as sociological window dressing. It expressed their persistent fear that outside of New York, things were still grim for urban Jews.

Even more importantly, another process, starting with the second generation and continuing into the third, reduced the sense of alienation felt by New York intellectuals. Jumonville's subjects set about revising American history in such a way as to close the distance between their concerns and those of the United States. These new "consensus" ideas presented a narrative of American progress leading toward pluralism, public administration, and the welfare state. The challenge to this non-ideological, consensual position was, for Bell and Lipset, not merely Communism but the Goldwater Right, which questioned the New Deal and the rising pluralist order. Fortunately for the New York intellectuals, American politics veered left after the Eisenhower years, so that the national experience

conveniently intersected with the course they wished to see in the American experiment. It would, of course, be inadequate to tell someone who is measuring the distance between two objects that A is moving toward B without also notifying him that B is moving toward A with equal speed. This kind of comprehensive information, however, is never furnished in conventional accounts of how Jumonville's second and third cohorts became absorbed into the American Right and eventually became its most influential voice. What happened is less that these generations steered toward the Right than that those who accepted them as leaders of the American conservative movement shifted leftward with society as a whole. In the upshot, those who had once defined themselves as the anticommunist Left suddenly appeared to belong to the Right. Advocates of a large centralized welfare state with strong Zionist sympathies were embraced as natural allies of the Right, to the extent they opposed the moral revolution of the 1960s counterculture and favored a strong defensive posture vis-à-vis the Soviets.

An exaggerated emphasis on a neo-conservative march toward the Right also diverts attention from certain other significant facts. Jumonville's anthology includes essays by Kristol and Podhoretz, published in the 1950s and 1960s, about McCarthyism and racial minorities that are far more reactionary than anything the authors would have published in the 1980s. Moreover, the first of the generations also seemed the least encumbered by Jewish parochialism. Despite their estrangement from gentile America, Jumonville's first cohort sometimes showed remarkable enthusiasm for made-in-America cultural products. One would be hard pressed today to find in *Commentary* the appreciations of Southern literature that were once taken for granted in *PR*. ■

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The Geek Shall Inherit

The United States remains the world's technological leader—for now. Various factors probably contribute, from the entrepreneurial spirit to a certain maverick

attitude: “Who says I can't do that? Watch me.” The crucial element, however, has to be trained brains. People of almost unimaginable intelligence invent science, the merely brilliant turn it into useful things, and the rest of us buy it. Where do our phenomenally smart people come from?

Harvard is perhaps the country's pre-eminent university. The best figures I can find are that the average IQ at Harvard is 130, which is the entry level for Mensa, the high-IQ society; 17 percent of the students are said to be National Merit Finalists. That's bright.

There is a brutally difficult math course at Harvard, Math 55, regarded as the hardest at the school and probably in the country. A recent article in the Harvard *Crimson*, the student newspaper, noted, “The final course drop forms are dutifully submitted. The class roster: 45 percent Jewish, 18 percent Asian, 100 percent male.”

That Jews are bright is perhaps not breaking news. “Asian” is vague, being a geographical rather than an ethnic or genetic category. Still, if you take Jews as 2 percent of the population, and Asians as 6, you have 8 percent of the population producing 63 percent of the class. Since they were all male, the 8 percent becomes 4 percent. It being unlikely that Harvard has some secret means of discriminating against utility whites, Christians, or females, it follows that the students are there on their merits.

If the foregoing were a fluke, we might ignore it. But it isn't. A friend, writ-

ing a book about Harvard, puts the studentry at roughly a quarter Jewish and a quarter Asian—half the school from 8 percent of the population. At the University of California at Berkeley, the flagship of California's state universities, so many Asians gained entry that whites wanted a protective quota.

In my guise as technology writer for the *Washington Times*, I have often read the staff lists at high-end research facilities, for example Bell Labs. The numbers vary. Sometimes Asians predominate. More women appear in the life sciences. Schools of lower rank look more like America. At the top, it's Math 55.

Now, if 1 percent of the population—Jewish males—produce 45 percent of Math 55, one might reasonably conclude that ability is not evenly distributed through the population and that certain groups carry much more than their weight in maintaining the country's competitive position. Wisdom might suggest staying out of their way and letting them do it.

It is not acceptable, however, to say that smarter people are smarter and even less acceptable to suggest that the differences may be genetic. The notion arouses endless political furor, but has a depressing way of fitting the facts. Among people engaged in mental testing, it is well known that at the extreme levels of ability, mathematics is a man's game.

Discrimination is a poor explanation. College-track students in high school take very much the same

courses. College students can major in anything they choose. Environment? Karl Friedrich Gauss, widely regarded as one of the world's three greatest mathematicians, grew up in a family of German peasants. So did tens of thousands of other children. On the environmental theory, all of them should be among the world's three greatest mathematicians. If I had grown up in Michael Jordan's family, presumably I would have an intercontinental jump shot.

Feminists, of course, see the dominance of males in the field as a consequence of prejudice. To remedy this presumed injustice, we now see attempts to apply the “gender equity” provisions of Title IX of the Education Act to education in the sciences. Although the argument tends to be stated as seeking equality of opportunity, anything short of statistical proportionality will be seen as evidence of discrimination. It always happens. Women are 51 percent of the population, and therefore should be 51 percent of mathematicians and, one might argue, weightlifters and NASCAR drivers.

The same reasoning suggests of course that we should reduce the Jewish presence in the sciences to 2 percent and get rid of most of the Asians. And, since women earn more Ph.D.'s than men, we should reduce their numbers to 51 percent. Any takers?

The sciences are the basis of America's position in the world. We can't play games with them. Classes to which students are admitted by measures other than ability inevitably will be watered down. Politically appointed professors will inevitably teach at a lower level than those chosen by ability. It's a road to the Third World. If Math 55 looks like America, America won't. ■