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Reprinted with permission from The New American Magazine, July 1992

Former Radicals Think Again

The following is a review of the book, *Deconstructing the Left: From Vietnam to the Persian Gulf*, by Peter Collier and David Horowitz, Lanham, Maryland: Second Thoughts Books, 1991, 203 pages, paperback.

The best reformers begin with themselves. From their protracted days as anti-American radicals who allied themselves with the worst elements of the New Left, authors Peter Collier and David Horowitz had a long way to go before becoming credible critics of Marxists. Conversions attract mistrust. One is reminded of the sniggering in conservative circles years ago about the questionable number of ex-communists who then adorned the masthead of National Review.

Still, men do change, and the authors have been trying to atone for their previous trespasses. Without such conversions, inside stories frequently remain hidden; with transformations, revealing tales do emerge, tales that can only be recounted by those who have been there. From anecdotes about Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda to the early days of AIDS, and coveting topics ranging from racism to environmentalism, *Deconstructing the Left* is a compelling, if occasionally uneven, collection of essays by the former editors of Ramparts who have been having second thoughts publicly for some time.

Tom and Jane

Some crimson comrades, such as Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda, have muted their tones a mite for public consumption of late, but have expressed no shame or sorrow for their part in sedition and consigning millions in Southeast Asia to either carnage or living death under communism. Collier remembers Jane Fonda calling him from India, where she had been meditating with the Mahareshi, to ask how she could become involved with the New Left. It wasn't long before Jane would be writing, "All Power to the People!" with an adorable little circle under the exclamation point, and telling Dick Cavett on national television that the reason the U.S. was involved in Vietnam was because Eisenhower wanted a monopoly of "tung and tinsten."

Future California legislator Tom Hayden used to take target practice in the northern hills of the Golden State under the mentoring of the Red Family's minister of defense and did his utmost to make the Black Panthers into "America's Viet Cong." Communist Party theoretician Herbert Aptheker (a defender of the crushing of the Hungarian Freedom Fighters, and whose daughter became close friends with Angela Davis) arranged for Hayden and Staughton Lynd to visit Hanoi while its troops were killing Americans in the field. There Hayden and Lynd said that North Vietnam's "rice-roots democracy" was much like American town meetings.

Fonda and Hayden, in Collier's phrasing, matched her looks with his Leninism:



She went to North Vietnam and did her Hanoi Jane act. He formed the Indochina Peace Campaign after she returned and together they made sure, even after all the American troops were gone, that Congress cut off funds to the South Vietnamese government. After Hanoi had triumphed and spread night and fog throughout Southeast Asia, Joan Baez and some of the rest of us tried to protest, and Tom and Jane came down on us like a ton of bricks for betraying the Vietnamese revolution.

However, calling the duo the “Mork and Mindy” of California politics, as Collier does, is too dainty for this reviewer’s taste. Treason isn’t cute.

Bernstein and Davis

While conservative commentators have elsewhere made their case about student radical politics and such topics, it is the vignettes about personalities that make this collection different. For instance, two highlights are David Horowitz’s treatments of Communist Party stalwart Angela Davis (taken from a speech at Dartmouth College) and of the overblown investigative journalist Carl Bernstein (from an article in Commentary magazine).

Carl Bernstein’s father Al was a communist, as were Horowitz’s mother and father. When Carl wanted to write about the old days which, as Horowitz recalled of his own family, involved code names and comrades posing as Democrats who really considered themselves members of a revolutionary army, it turned out that the father may have left the Party but not the faith that made him a communist. Al Bernstein resisted his son’s spin on history; the Reds want to retain their own version for us.

Yes, there was a blacklist in Hollywood, but the communists did the original blacklisting. Even some liberals recognized that the Reds had earlier abused them, so when the tide turned on the communists in Hollywood, not all liberals were dismayed. As for “McCarthyism,” here Al Bernstein dug in his heels, saying: “The premise people eventually accepted after the McCarthy period was that the victims weren’t Communists. If you’re going to write a book that says McCarthy was right, that a lot of us were Communists, you’re going to write a dangerous book You’re going to prove McCarthy right, because all he was saying is that the system was loaded with Communists. And he was right.” The “reign of terror,” in the approved historical version, was caused by McCarthy, not Stalin.

Former vice presidential candidate Angela Davis (who seems to have lost out in a recent power struggle with old CPUSA boss Gus Hall, her sometime running mate for president) became a cause célèbre more than two decades ago for her commitment to George Jackson, the Black Panther field marshal who was armed by Angela Davis and participated in several murders. Jackson, who was himself later killed, was eulogized by Angela Davis as a hero. But David Horowitz remembers back to the late 60s, when Angela Davis became the lover and political comrade of George Jackson, a maximum security inmate in San Quentin prison, who was awaiting trial for pre-meditated murder. At the time, Angela Davis and other Leftists — including myself — defended Jackson as an innocent black victim of racist “Amerika.” But to intimates on his own defense committee, George



Jackson boasted that he was guilty as charged, and had killed twelve other men in prison besides. One of his revolutionary schemes was to poison the water system of Chicago, which was the city where he had grown up.

Such are the heroes of the Left; even two decades later, presumptive feminist role model Davis was being paid huge honoraria to speak to college students at elite schools.

Early Days of AIDS

A collaborative effort of the two authors, which brought on picketing by “gay activists,” dates to a California magazine article in 1983, a time when but 1,500 cases of AIDS were confirmed. In terms of what has subsequently happened, the piece seems out of a time machine: Many homosexuals were ignoring the sexual spread of the epidemic, while others were purposefully broadcasting the disease, angered that their days of promiscuity might be numbered. The so-called “bathhouses” that provided a perfect atmosphere for the vile practices that spread the disease were accessories to “homocide.” Yet the co-chairman of a “gay freedom parade” in San Francisco saw “the proposals to close the bathhouses as ‘genocidal’ and [compared] them to the order requiring homosexuals to wear triangular pink shirt patches in Nazi Germany.”

The authors quote a homosexual reporter discussing a proposal to close the bathhouses for the “freedom” weekend. As Randy Shilts of the San Francisco Chronicle noted: “if one guy has sex with ten guys in a night — and some do — the risk becomes one in 33 for this guy. And he can take his dormant case of AIDS back to Iowa or wherever and start it going there.” Ironically, Shilts commented: “People organizing the march want large numbers so they can have a show of force to press the federal government on AIDS research.”

Today, of course, society (that is, the taxpayer) is still blamed for not spending enough to cure those who won’t stop the behavior that kills them. This selection in the book may well offend the sensitivities of some in the homosexual community. Denial is like that.

Activism and Racism

A couple of definite failings of the authors may be due to their own perspectives. For example, they claim to have pressured radicalism onto the faculties of universities (where the old radicals now do the inculcating). Well, the New Left were not the first Fifth Columnists, and student rioting and dropping acid and advocating treason would not have prospered without help from the media and government, among others. It is perhaps a matter of ego that these former radicals give themselves too much of the blame.

In their eagerness to indict, say, a racist demagogue such as Stokely Carmichael, the authors absolve Martin Luther King, Jr. of his own dire culpability in matters of subversion, incitement to riot, and other transgressions. From their own knowledge of communism, the authors know better than to claim that just because the perhaps more radical Trotsky may have tactical differences with Lenin meant that Lenin should be defined as a moderate. For all the myths that they expose in Deconstructing the Left, and they are abundant and substantial, their willingness to swallow the



fables about King are injurious to the unvarnished truth. Do they really think that communist backers of King, some traced with funding directly from Moscow, had the best interests of blacks and America in mind?

Yet the penchant of liberal critics to charge opponents with “racism” has not prevented the authors from mentioning other stark facts, including: the double standard of the media in racial matters; that blacks at the University of California were being admitted with SAT scores averaging 400 points below whites; that Elijah Muhammad and Louis Farrakhan were real purveyors of racism; that radicals really need groups such as the KKK; and that — propaganda to the contrary — genuine progress has been made in matters such as black income and black business ownership.

Slavery as an excuse just doesn’t cut it. The authors cite black sociologist William Julius Wilson, who pointed out that in 1940 only 17 percent of black families “were headed by women and most of them by women who were widows, not abandoned. Seventeen percent in 1940 and 70 percent today [1989]: how could the heritage of slavery have gotten so much more oppressive as we have gotten fifty years farther away from it?”

In these days when Vice President Quayle is ridiculed for bringing up the importance of family values, it is instructive to recall another prominent American, quoted in this volume, who was alarmed in the '60s that 21 percent of black families were headed by single women (relatively low compared to now). The “one unmistakable lesson in American history,” said this observer, is that a country that allows “a large number of young men to grow up in broken families, dominated by women, never acquiring any stable relationship to male authority, never acquiring any set of rational expectations about the future — that community asks for and gets chaos. Crime, violence, unrest, disorder — most particularly the furious, unrestrained lashing out at the whole social structure — that is not only to be expected; it is very near to inevitable.” Those were the findings of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, now a senator from New York. With the smoke from the Los Angeles riots still figuratively hanging in the air, it is hard not to agree with Collier when he argues that the black Left wants not solutions, but more rhetoric and gestures.

There is little doubt that David Horowitz and Peter Collier have said good-bye to their radical past, and it would be churlish to be too harsh on them because they haven’t yet gotten all the way home. It’s already been a very long march.