

POLITICS

David Horowitz and the Ex-Communist Confessional

by Justin Raimondo

The literature of recanting radicals has been with us since 1917: from the recollections of Russian Mensheviks, who rued the day they joined with Lenin, to Irving Kristol's "Memoirs of a Trotskyist," in which the neoconservative godfather fondly reminisces about his youthful dalliance with dissident communism. With each successive atrocity and betrayal—Kronstadt, the Moscow Trials, the Hitler-Stalin Pact, Khrushchev's admission of Stalin's crimes—library shelves grew heavier with the weight of accumulated *mea culpás*. At the height of the Cold War, a new subgenre grew up around the sensational revelations of ex-communists detailed in dozens of books, the most famous being Whittaker Chambers' *Witness*. This overpraised and overwrought work inspired many imitators, whose works became a staple of the anti-communist arsenal. With their lurid tales of a secret subworld of subversion, a hidden labyrinth of evil beneath the placid streets of postwar America, they thrilled their readers with a delicious fear.

The implosion of communism meant the end of the Cold War on the literary front. As the Berlin Wall was leveled and Lenin's heirs were deposed, an entire literary genre was wiped out, along with the Soviet Empire. With the publication of David Horowitz's *Radical Son: A Generational Odyssey* (The Free Press, 1997), a memoir detailing the author's involvement with the Black Panthers and the New Left hothouse of Berkeley in the 60's, we are hearing the last echoes of

the ex-radicals' self-abnegation.

The twin themes of recantation and retribution dominate these works, from the earliest—Benjamin Gitlow's *I Confess* (1940), *This is My Story*, by Louis Budenz (1947), Whittaker Chambers' *Witness* (1954), and several other works by lesser-known figures—to their 60's counterparts, Phillip Abbott Luce, author of *The New Left* (1966), and Horowitz. Like disappointed lovers, the authors of these works testify to the cruel seduction they were subjected to: all were innocent idealists led astray by temptation, but redeemed in the end. Budenz, like many of the ex-Stalinists, made a beeline for the Church; others, such as Jay Lovestone and Irving Brown, became right-wing Social Democrats and were instrumental in crafting the CIA's penetration of the European labor movement. In time, many—Chambers, Kristol, Luce, Horowitz—would join the conservative movement.

Taking Gitlow and Horowitz—the first, and, likely, the last—as examples, a biographical pattern begins to emerge: both were born into a family of Bolsheviks, New York Jewish immigrants who instilled their progeny with devotion to the God Who Had Not Yet Failed. Yet the biographical parallels also highlight their vivid contrasts in character, tone, and style. In *I Confess*, for instance, Gitlow recalls "the Socialist activities that emanated from our house"; his parents were active members of the Socialist Party. While acknowledging parental influence, he attributes his early conversion to socialism to a boyish spirit that was "thrilled at the stories of the underground movement, of the conspiring activities, how deeds of violence against the Tsarist oppressors were planned." Young Ben was particularly impressed by the story of "how they transmitted messages in code by a system of telegraphic knocks upon the wall." Gitlow's father and mother are briefly and respectfully portrayed in his book as poor but noble immigrants imbued with a passionate sense of justice. Although he is recanting a creed learned at their knee, there is nary a word of criticism of them. Nor does Gitlow attribute his subsequent career solely or even primarily to parental

influence: in describing the series of events that led to his recruitment, he makes it clear that he *chose* his own destiny.

Contrast this with the victimological whining of Horowitz: "What was my own choice? In the beginning, I hardly had one. I understood early that my parents' political religion was really the center of their moral life. This meant . . . that the condition of their parental love was that I embrace their political-faith." It would never have occurred to Gitlow to blame his father and mother for his political mistakes, but the Oprahization of American culture makes it possible for Horowitz to demonize his parents. While he prefaces each denunciation of their actions with a protestation of his undying love, he spares them nothing. These "permanent conspirators in a revolutionary drama" are described as virtual pod people, their true selves deeply embedded in an underground world of subversion. "Their real politics," he writes, "were conducted far from view, in the neighborhood cell meetings of the Communist Party. It was to this subterranean activity" that they owed their true allegiance. He likens them to "agents of a secret service" for whom "secrecy enveloped everything that was important to them." His father made cryptic references to "the Organization" and "the Party," but rarely said the C-word aloud.

Horowitz does not deny that people such as his parents were operating under the constant surveillance of government agencies, including the FBI and local police departments, and "the scent of inquisition was in the air. And yet," he writes, "what else could they have expected?" After all, they "wanted to overthrow existing institutions."

In other words, they deserved it. While this point may be arguable, it is unsettling and unseemly that their own son is the one to make it. While fingering ex-comrades and "naming names" was a major motivation of Gitlow, Budenz, et al., none ever went so far as to single out his own parents—at least, not until Horowitz.

Since the era of Gitlow, the stature of these recanters has slowly but surely

degenerated, along with the level of the culture at large. Compared to Horowitz, Gitlow—the fanatic avenger and consummate opportunist—is a veritable giant. While Horowitz was always a peripheral figure on the left, with no status as an activist beyond the Berkeley scene, Gitlow was one of the founding leaders of the American Communist Party, whose defection was front-page news all across the world.

It was a startling turn for a man whose entire life had been spent in the service of the revolutionary socialist cause. In 1909, Gitlow joined the Socialist Party; in 1917, electrified by the Bolshevik coup in Russia, he became a leading figure in what was the nascent Communist Party of the United States. He was scooped up in the infamous Palmer Raids of 1919, and sent to Sing Sing prison. Upon his release, he went on to become a leader of the American (i.e., English-speaking) wing of the communists, which at that time was a definite minority. Along with Jack Reed—dashing author of *Ten Days That Shook the World* and subject of an adoring movie, *Reds*—Gitlow led the fight to “Americanize” what was essentially a party of immigrants. As a top leader and organizer of the CP, Gitlow eventually ran afoul of the Comintern when his patron, party leader Jay Lovestone, fell out of favor with the Kremlin. On a trip to Moscow to appeal to Stalin himself, Gitlow and his confreres stood up to the dictator on his own turf, at a famous meeting of the Comintern Praesidium. At considerable risk to his own life and liberty, he spoke in defiance of Stalin’s order to turn the leadership of the American Communists over to a rival faction. In response, Uncle

Joe himself stormed to the podium and denounced the American deviationist. “When you get back to the United States,” he thundered, “only your wives and sweethearts will support you!”

Horowitz, on the other hand, is ambivalent about confronting the mini-Stalin of the Panther New Left milieu, Huey Newton, and he continually worried about the danger to his own safety. Typically, when he discovers that his Black Panther heroes are murderers and thugs, he blames other people: “Anger welled inside me. Why hadn’t Noel said anything before? Why hadn’t Charles? Or Troy? Why hadn’t they warned me? The answer was clear: they did not want to be accused of betraying the Left.” The Panthers had killed their accountant, Betty Van Patter, who had been recommended for the job by Horowitz himself, but he confesses that he “was now ruled by the principle of silence.” Although Horowitz knew who had killed Van Patter, and why, it took him years to go public—and he never really does come clean. For nowhere does he directly acknowledge his own complicity in her death, even though it was he who recruited her for the position that was to prove her undoing. He claims that he and other New Left activists were “blind” to the fact that the Panthers were, as Dick Gregory put it, “a bunch of thugs.” But this is not very credible: What else is one to think of a group that walks into a session of the California State Assembly armed with rifles and dressed in paramilitary uniforms? Huey Newton urged his followers to “pick up the gun.” What else did Horowitz and friends expect but that, one day, they *would* pick it up—and use it?

Unlike Gitlow, Chambers, et al., Horowitz was not an activist but a self-styled theoretician, a literary type who held a key post as an editor of *Ramparts* but who deliberately avoided any organizational loyalties except in running the “Learning Center” for the Oakland branch of the Black Panthers. In spite of his best effort to inflate his own importance to the growth of the New Left movement, Horowitz never exercised any appreciable influence over its activities or direction. When Gitlow was expelled from the Communist Party in the 1930’s, along with Jay Lovestone, they took several hundred members with them; when Horowitz, the great New Left guru, announced his support for Ronald Reagan, he took exactly one of

his ex-comrades with him: his longtime friend and literary collaborator Pe Collier.

One striking difference between the ex-commie confessionals of yesteryear and Horowitz’s tome is stylistic; while Gitlow is concerned with exposing the inner workings of the communist movement, its front groups, strategies, and subterfuges, Horowitz is mainly interested in self-revelation. We learn everything we never needed to know about the messy little ups and downs of his personal life: an affair with a “psychic healer” who “heals” him out of his marriage; his relationship with a crack-addicted drifter who left him suddenly after draining him of considerable sums of money; an affair with Abbie Rockefeller. Particularly maddening is the fact that the author, in detailing this Bacchanalia, keeps asserting his growing disenchantment with the countercultural values and lifestyle of his generation.

This genre has never been bereft of sex; the focus of previous memoirists, however, was not on the sexuality of the author but on the licentiousness of his ex-comrades. In *The Whole of Their Lives* (1948), Gitlow charged that “in New York and in other communist centers, the youth had built up a communist Sodom and Gomorrah.” Describing a commie orgy with some degree of realism, Gitlow argued that promiscuity aided in “the deadening of the mind with communist ideology.” Whatever the merits of the argument that young communists would be too tired from these gymnastics to resist indoctrination, at least Gitlow bothered to make a political argument. Horowitz, on the other hand, in detailing his *own* psychosexual peccadilloes at such length—while all the time proclaiming his growing devotion to conservative family values—succeeds only in proving his own hypocrisy.

Reflecting the self-absorption so typical of his generation, *Radical Son* chronicles Horowitz’s every mood swing in excruciating detail. To relieve the tedium, the author recalls his brushes with the glitterati: how he hung out with some Kennedy kids as they snorted coke and mingled with the Hollywood crowd, dropping plenty of names along the way. But the star of this show is the author. In a prologue that reads like a marketing strategy, the tirelessly self-promoting Horowitz declares, “I was like Whittaker Chambers in their generation—a young man, inspired by the high-minded pas-

LIBERAL ARTS

THE LEOPARD AND HIS SPOTS

“Two prison inmates driving in a state-owned van were arrested for allegedly soliciting a prostitute, police said. Both inmates had work-release privileges, which allowed them to be in public. . . . The men, ages 37 and 41, are inmates at the St. John’s Correctional Center on Milwaukee’s east side. They were on their way to a job-placement interview with a temporary-help agency.”

—from the *Beloit Daily News*,
March 28

sions of the Left who had broken through to the dark underside of the radical cause. Like Chambers, I had encounters with totalitarian forces that involved betrayal and death. Like him, I had been demonized for my second thoughts. . . . Like Chambers, I had become the most hated ex-radical of my generation.”

Here is a narcissism so inflated that it explodes in a burst of pure absurdity: Picture Chambers, defying the establishment, taking on a man like Hiss, and standing up to the power of the Soviet Empire. Now look at Horowitz: he swims with the tide, not against it, and breathlessly announces, at this late date, that socialism is evil and the Black Panthers were not Boy Scouts. As for comparing the resources and power of the Soviet Union to what is little more than a street gang, Newton was no Stalin, but an ordinary street thug. Horowitz is no Chambers, nor even a Gitlow or a Budenz, but an ordinary disillusioned liberal with nothing of interest to reveal but his own self-obsession.

While Chambers held his audience spellbound with tales of secret papers in the pumpkin patch, and Gitlow mapped the route by which Moscow’s gold flowed into communist coffers, all Horowitz has to offer is a couple of friendly dinners with an unnamed Soviet official. These discussions were always held at the best restaurants, and on such occasions Horowitz claims to have argued against Soviet repression; until, one night, as they were walking in the street, the official “stuffed a thick white envelope into my left pocket.” Horowitz says he “knew instinctively what was in the envelope,” but claims to have been “so frightened that I didn’t dare remove it until I reached home. Without taking off my coat, I went into the bedroom and closed the door, laying the envelope on the bed. Inside were 150 one-dollar bills.”

Although he says he returned the money “at our next meeting,” a question arises: Why did he open the envelope? If he “instinctively” knew it was money, then he must have wanted to know *how much*. His KGB contact had done this before: all those one-dollar bills stuffed into an envelope made it *look* as if it might be a considerable sum. Clearly, the temptation to open it was too much. Horowitz claims to have been “enraged” by this incident, but this was clearly a delayed reaction. Whether he actually

considered the offer, if only long enough to be disappointed (and perhaps “enraged”) at the paucity of the bribe, is unknown; perhaps the author will enlighten us in *Radical Son, Volume II*.

The autobiographical literature of ex-communists is permeated by a single emotion: hatred, not only of their old political idols (Stalin, Huey Newton), but of old friends who cross the street at their approach. Horowitz describes running into an old friend in Berkeley. After being “warmly greeted” by Horowitz, she says, “You know, David, people really hate you.” As Horowitz said of the persecution of his own parents: What else did he expect? *No one* likes an informer, not even those who benefit from the information he provides.

As a literary subgenre, the ex-communist confessional reached its height with Koestler, and it has been downhill ever since. By the time the 1960’s rolled around, the communist ideal was so tarnished that no one with any sensitivity or intelligence was being taken in any longer. The defectors from the movement who bothered to detail their experiences were of a decidedly lower order, and the genre inevitably degenerated: *Radical Son* is not only likely to be the last, but also the low point of the lot.

Yet, among the Washington-New York conservative cognoscenti, this book was touted so loudly and insistently that the din was deafening. Bill Bennett sang its praises. George Gilder effused that Horowitz had written “the first great American autobiography of his generation.” P.J. O’Rourke, that master of unintentional humor, declared: “I think the last political book that affected me this strongly was Hayek’s *Road to Serfdom*!”

Horowitz and Collier have managed to stay on the cutting edge of political fashion since the early 60’s; when it was chic to shout “Free Bobby—Off the pig!” they shouted the loudest. When the political winds shifted, this fearless duo was one step ahead of the crowd. When the pendulum swings leftward again, and “extremism” on the right comes under fire, what is to prevent these Second Thinkers from having *Third Thoughts*? You can almost count on it.

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On David Horowitz

It's a pity that *Chronicles* chose a shallow and vindictive reviewer like Justin Raimondo ("David Horowitz and the Ex-Communist Confessional," June) to vet *Radical Son* for the *Chronicles* audience. Justin's animus toward me (based on a public clash we had some years ago) is transparent enough, but his reading of my text is so bizarre that the *Chronicles* audience is offered little clue as to the contents of my book, let alone insight into its place in the literature of anticommunist memoirs, which is the pretense under which his review is written.

To set me up for invidious comparison, Raimondo praises the ex-communist Benjamin Gitlow for writing "nary a word of criticism" of his parents, nor attributing any aspect of his career to "parental influence." (Raimondo makes no attempt to justify why this should be praiseworthy in any writer of autobiography.) Then Raimondo turns to my text: "Contrast this with the victimological whining of Horowitz":

What was my own choice? In the beginning I hardly had one. I understood early that my parents' political religion was really the center of their moral life. This meant that the condition of their parental love was that I embrace their political faith.

The passage in which this offending comment occurs actually forms the prelude to my entrance into a communist-run nursery school at age 18 months. But this does not phase Raimondo: "It would never have occurred to Gitlow to blame his father and mother for his political mistakes, but the Oprahization of American culture makes it possible for Horowitz to demonize his parents."

Readers of *Radical Son* will know that I do nothing of the kind. Other reviewers have described my account of my relationship with my father, for example, as "poignant" and "poetic." Raimondo is so determined to demonize me that he winds up defending the communist community I grew up in. Thus, at another point in the text I observe that the people in this community were "permanent conspirators in a revolutionary dra-

ma" who posed as "progressives" to disarm the unsuspecting public while "their real politics were conducted far from view." Raimondo offers this as a further example of unfair attacks on my parents. Defending them, he writes: "Horowitz does not deny that people such as his parents were operating under the constant surveillance of government agencies, including the FBI and local police departments, and . . . yet he writes, 'what else could they have expected?' After all, they 'wanted to overthrow existing institutions.' In other words, they deserved it." Well, yes.

Raimondo's defense, of course, is the Communist Party's own explanation of its deceptions and Fifth Amendment demurrals—the FBI and the government red-baiters made us do it. In other words, if we (communists) refuse to answer honestly as to what our real politics are, it is because we will be persecuted for our ideas. *Au contraire*, Justin. It was the conspiratorial activities of the communist movement that made them dishonest and made it necessary for the FBI to surveil them.

Because Raimondo's agenda is to attack me personally rather than to review my book, he manages to get everything wrong, even its central drama, which is my involvement with the Black Panthers. "Typically, when he discovers that his Black Panther heroes are murderers and thugs, he blames other people":

Anger welled inside me. Why hadn't Joel said anything before? Why hadn't Charles? Or Troy? Why hadn't they warned me? The answer was clear: they did not want to be accused of betraying the Left.

Readers of *Radical Son* will know that I am not exculpating myself here but only explaining why all leftists, myself included, were so ready to cover up the crimes of the left. On the page before this passage I wrote: "[My parents'] political ideals had embarrassed them, making them complicit in others' crimes. I had resolved that I would not repeat their mistake. Now I was guilty myself." Get it, Justin? Guilty *myself*.

There is not a substantive statement I have made that Raimondo doesn't ques-

tion, unless it suits his prosecutorial purposes. Raimondo refers to a passage in my text where I am approached by a KGB agent, who invites me to a series of lunches. Raimondo: "These discussions were always held at the best restaurants [as though I had chosen them!], and on such occasions Horowitz *claims* to have argued against Soviet repression." [Emphasis added.] On one of these occasions, the agent stuffed an envelope in my pocket. Raimondo: "Horowitz says he 'knew instinctively what was in the envelope,' but *claims* to have been 'so frightened that I didn't dare remove it until I reached home.'" [Emphasis added.] At home, I opened it and discovered that it contained 150 one dollar bills, and returned it.

Raimondo: "Although he *says* [my emphasis] he returned the money 'at our next meeting,' a question arises. Why did he open the envelope? If he 'instinctively' knew it was money, then he must have wanted to know *how much*." In fact, the reaction I had to the money was not delayed and was this: "I was not so much surprised [by the money] as dumbfounded. How could these people be so stupid in their own interest, and so reckless with mine? . . . they thought nothing of putting my work (to say nothing of my life) in jeopardy by attempting to recruit me as an agent. The thought enraged me."

Now I ask the reader of this passage 1) Why would I report this incident if I was actually tempted by the offer and only haggling over the price, especially if I wanted to conceal that fact? 2) Why would I recount another incident in which I actually *did* commit treason, if I was intent (as Raimondo implies) on covering up a mere flirtation with treason earlier? In fact, my account is exactly the way it happened, and Raimondo's attempt to prosecute me for allegedly failing to admit what I freely admit a few pages later only shows how relentless is his determination to put me in a bad light, and how pathetic his execution of that task.

There is really no point in going further, but I cannot resist one additional comment. With typical reckless disregard for the facts, Raimondo accuses me of being an opportunist: "Horowitz . . . swims with the tide, not against it, and breathlessly announces, at this late date that . . . the Black Panthers were not Boy Scouts." Readers of *Radical Son* will know that I risked life and limb, lost fam-

ily and friends, to bring the story of the Panther murders to light—over a 20-year period—and have been punished professionally by the liberal literary culture for doing so. If it were not for my efforts, no one—not even Justin Raimondo—would know about the Panther murders described in *Radical Son*.

—David Horowitz

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Mr. Raimondo Replies:

It is truly odd to be called vindictive by a man who celebrates the persecution of his own parents. This unattractive theme is further illustrated when Horowitz defends the firing of his father from his job as a teacher because he refused to deny that he was a member of the Communist Party: after all, "what actually happened to my father" wasn't all that bad. American Communists "were neither executed nor tortured, and spent hardly any time in jail." In Horowitz's book, his father should have been grateful to his persecutors instead of defiant: *Radical Son* is a case study in the distortion of personality by ideology—in this case, neoconservative ideology.

In spite of his strenuous attempt to wriggle out of it, Horowitz never explains just why he didn't simply hand that money-filled envelope back to the KGB agent right there on the street. Horowitz reports an incident that raises questions he is not prepared to answer because, in works of this kind, vanity trumps common sense: after all, the KGB had deemed him important enough to recruit.

Horowitz justifies police state methods and the virtual outlawing of the Communist Party on the grounds that its members were engaged in "conspiratorial activities" and that it was therefore necessary to "surveil them." Like so many of those who have made the odyssey from left to right, Horowitz has merely changed the color of his flag, while retaining the statist core of his beliefs. At a time when it is the right that is under attack from government agencies, and when the threat of government surveillance is quite real in an atmosphere of anti-"extremist" hysteria, how long before Horowitz is calling for the same methods to be used against his enemies on the right?

As for any personal "animus" on my part, I should state for the record that its genesis had nothing to do with his enraged response to my attack on Martin Luther King, Jr., at a 1993 National Review conference, for at the time I hardly knew the man. But Horowitz should know that one of the risks of autobiography is that the author will inadvertently reveal himself to be a thoroughly disagreeable and even contemptible person.