

# Partisans All

David Felix

**The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s**, by Alan M. Wald, *Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987. xiii + 440 pp. \$32.50 (paper \$12.95).*

IN THE 1930s an attachment to Leon Trotsky preserved for a valuable moment, Professor Alan M. Wald persuasively argues, the Marxian character of a major group of New York intellectuals as they recognized and condemned the enormity of Stalinism. Comfortingly, it also preserves the balance of Wald's personal Marxism, at least up to the moment when he completed his book, although he has been forced to yield up his intellectuals to apostasy. Conscientiously censuring them, he appears confident that he will not eventually follow their course.

Wald writes from "a contemporary Marxist point of view," while "reasserting the possibility and potential of a tradition of radical political and cultural activity that is both Marxist and anti-Stalinist." He insists upon the "profound difference" between the upper-case "anti-Communism," defined as "opposition by revolutionary Marxists to Soviet Communism" under Stalin, and lower-case "anticommunism," parenthetically and breathlessly defined as "(in the United States, an ideological mask for discrediting movements for radical change and supporting the status quo by amalgamating those movements with Soviet crimes, expansionism, and subversion)." Lacking the culture of a Lukacs or the philosophical imagination of a Gramsci, however, Wald is unable to use his Marxism for more than a hobble to thought. His vision sees little more than a

struggle against the evil of capitalist "hegemony," one of the most used-up commonplaces of recent Marxian or pan-Marxian idiom.

Wald's vision fails to penetrate as far back as the nineteenth century, and his Marx is mediated by twentieth-century thinkers and enemies of thinking. Indeed, his heroic Trotsky remains a blurred image lost in the mists of the earlier twentieth century. Moreover, Wald finds Trotsky in serious theoretical error. Ahistorically writing history, Wald offers an ideological exercise about a selectively seen past.

In justifying his book, Wald begins by variously damning the numerous other competitive studies of the New York intellectuals. Thus he attempts to trivialize Alexander Bloom's *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World*, reviewed in *Modern Age* (Spring 1986) justly and favorably by Paul Gottfried. Emphasizing ideology, Wald falsely suggests that Bloom limited himself to an ethnic success story "in terms of upwardly mobile Jews." Actually, while examining essentially the same group, Bloom has produced a straightforward account sensitively evocative, as Wald's is not, of the intellectuals' antecedents, personal culture, and individual humanity. Nevertheless Wald himself has written a work of value.

First, however, other delicts must be addressed. In the Marxian tradition Wald uses the *ad hominem* if nothing else will do. Because the philosopher William Barrett saw the danger of dictatorship in socialist revolution irrespective of a Stalin, "it is . . . doubtful that Barrett understands, or even understood, the basic Trotskyist critique of Stalinism." James Burnham "settled upon a vulgar anticommunist ide-

ology that would sustain his increasingly banal writings." Irving Kristol "resort[ed] to the use of such vulgar characterizations as the 'Soviet Mafia.'" Sidney Hook "was regularly characterizing everyone on the left in . . . vulgar dehumanizing language with which he himself had been traduced." "Many of the New York intellectuals became essentially hegemonic," and, specifically, Norman Podhoretz and Midge Decter "are engaged in a serious fight for winning ideological hegemony."

Even Trotsky, Wald's saving grace or saint of Marxism, is, ultimately, a doubtful quantity. First he must be apotheosized. It was "Trotsky who incarnated internationalism and cosmopolitanism, the Jew who shattered the manacles of religious identity and who strove to merge himself with the forces of world revolution in every country and culture." Yet Trotsky's "theory eventually would prove to be lacking in several important respects." He had incorrectly assumed that the Soviet Russian ruling caste was only temporary, but, contradictorily, he argued that its domination of the non-Russian communist parties would make them incapable of "abolishing capitalistic societies."

Wald ends his book in a Marxian gale that clears away all thinking. Addressing his fellow Marxists, he proposes, "The most appropriate stance would be one that is dialectical, that expresses the problematic aspects of both a willed commitment to a cause, a class, or a movement, and the retention of a critical consciousness—a 'partisan but objective' stance, as it were." He remodulates, "Perhaps the formulation 'independence within a committed position' best expresses the tension that often marks the linkage of a self-reflexive consciousness with a willed commitment to a cause."

In operating Marx's dialectical machinery he has simply doubled his oxymoronic

logic: partisanship achieves objectivity and "independence" is manacled into a state of higher freedom. The old revolutionary mole Marx would approve. In Wald's final words he would "advance the recovery of our radical heritage . . . correct the political amnesia that has marred our legacy, and . . . redeem the promise of socialist intellectuals first augured in the writings of Marx and Engels." If he is going around in circles, Wald is confident that he is traveling in the best circles.

Despite his concomitantly rigid judgment, Wald's commitment has inspired him to trace the marvelously intricate theoretical movements of his fleet-minded quarry. He has sought and found it in tiny Greenwich Village apartments, grimy Communist meeting halls, and in *Partisan Review*, *New Masses*, *Dissent*, *Commentary*, and other passionately read journals. He has tracked Dwight MacDonald from the *Partisan Review* to the *New Yorker* to television talk shows, and Herbert Solow from the *Menorah Journal* to golden *Fortune*. He carefully notes the splintering that produced three anti-Stalinist left-wing parties. He presents a series of scintillating duels: MacDonald *vs.* Philip Rahv, Max Shachtman *vs.* James P. Cannon, Delmore Schwartz *vs.* Sidney Hook, and the indefatigable Hook *vs.* Meyer Schapiro. In the latter case, Hook, having achieved apostasy, attacked his former Trotskyist allies for "failure of nerve." Schapiro's rebuttal, nicely entitled "The Nerve of Sidney Hook," eruditely noted Gilbert Murray's coinage of "failure of nerve" for the Hellenistic Age, defended the Trotskyists for the courage to advance unpopular views, and found Hook guilty of intolerance of his own past opinions. In their infinite variety and variety of positions, the New York intellectuals have performed splendidly on Wald's ideologically cramped stage.