Introduction: From Great Refusal to Political Retreat

This book assumes that political thinking matters to the fate of American democracy and therefore to the prospect for decency in the world. It also has a more specific objective: to contribute to a new start for intellectual life on the left.

But surely this sounds presumptuous. Why should political intellectuals of the left need a new start? It is hard—perhaps impossible—to disentangle the practical from the philosophical reasons, for they are intertwined. All in all, the criticism of established arrangements—which is the left's specialty—does not convince a critical mass of the populace to put the critics in charge. Even if the critics are right to chastise the authorities as they see fit, many people do not see the critics as responsible, reliable, or competent to govern. They see them as another upper crust: a "new class" of "limousine liberals" and "cultural elitists." Those of the left's political-intellectual traditions that have flourished in recent decades, however worthy at times for moral self-definition, have led us into a wilderness. For all the intense emphasis in recent years on identity politics, political thought has purposes that reach far beyond self-definition. It has to make itself felt. It has to be useful.

This might, on the face of it, be a healthy time for an intellectual renaissance. The nation is deeply troubled, and for all the cant about optimism and faith, much of the nation *knows* it is troubled. Intellectuals in particular despair of public discourse—

reasonably so—and despair might prove, this time, to be the birth mother of invention. What resources, then, do Americans have for thinking freshly? Surprisingly few. The Marxism and postmodernism of the left are exhausted. Conservative thought has collapsed into market grandiosity and nationalist bombast. Surely, for more reasons than one, these are times that try men's souls—in terms that Tom Paine would have found sometimes familiar (the urgency, certainly) and sometimes strange. This nation (as well as others) is besieged by murderous enemies, yet beneath the repetition of stock phrases—"war on terror," "axis of evil," "root causes"—is precious little public discussion of how this state of affairs came to pass and what can be done about it. Rarely does a fair, thorough, intelligible public debate take place on any significant political subject. But that is not to say that the country is inert. To the contrary, the attentive populace is highly charged and intensely polarized. Eventually, even the ostrich side of the left had to recognize that since the mid-1970s it had been outfought by a disciplined alliance of plutocrats and right-wing fundamentalist Christians: that a political bloc equipped with big (if crude) ideas and ready for sledgehammer combat had seized the country's commanding heights. But many on the left do not recognize quite how they lost or understand how to recover.

During this period the hallmark of left-wing thought has been negation—*resistance* is the more glamorous word. Intellectuals of the left have been playing defense. It is as if history were a tank dispatched by the wrong army, and all that was left to do was to stand in its way and try to block it. If we had a manual, it would be called, *What Is Not to Be Done*. We are the critics—it is for others to imagine a desirable world and a way to achieve it. The left has gotten comfortable on the margins of political life, and for intellectuals it has been no different. The left speaks of "resistance" and "speaking truth to power." But resistance presupposes that power has the initiative—resistance is its negative pole.

"Speaking truth to power," an old Quaker ideal of virtuous conduct, is a more problematic approach than it appears at first blush, for it presupposes that the party of power is counterposed to the party of truth. In this scenario the intellectual is the torchbearer of opposition, invulnerable to the seductions of power—

indeed, the left posits that one can recognize the truth by being indifferent to power. That indifference verges on the definitional. Being powerful is proof that one has sold out.

So there is a purity to the will. There is also more than a little futility—what Herbert Marcuse in 1964 called the "Great Refusal," the absolute rejection of the social order.[1] At a time when the civil rights movement was on the brink of triumph and the New Left was ascendant, Marcuse was convinced that the United States exemplified a "one-dimensional" society, a state of intellectual impoverishment so all embracing as to have seeped into the seemingly inviolable identity of the person, body-snatched him so thoroughly as to have devoured his soul, and converted the denatured remnant into—in the title of Marcuse's once-influential book—a one-dimensional man. The Great Refusal plays to a hope of redemption in some glimmering future because it despairs of the present. Because the present is slammed shut, one finds solace in an imagined future—an act of faith that is, at the very least, naive, given the refuser's conviction that closure is fate. The Great Refusal is the triumph of German romanticism. (Even the initials are apt.) Inside the idea of the Great Refusal lives a despair that the left can—or, in truth, needs to—break out of the prison of its margins.

The Great Refusal is a shout from an ivory tower. It presupposes that the intellectuals live in a play with two characters: the speakers of truth and the powers. The play challenges the onlookers to declare themselves: which side are you on? But in the world of ordinary life, the overwhelming bulk of the populace belong to neither camp. Most people live in an apolitical world and rarely feel that they need to choose sides. Moral purity tends to leave them cold. Indeed, as most of them see it, the intellectuals are more alien than the powers, who at least can feign "speaking their language." Despite the growing percentage of Americans who graduate from college—between 1960 and 2003, the percentage of college graduates in the adult population almost quadrupled, from 7.7 to 27.2 percent of those aged twenty-five and older[2]—anti-intellectualism has not receded: far from it. The powers' demagogic techniques—their propagandistic smoothness, combined with the media's deference—match up well with popular credulity. So those who do not normally concern themselves with poli-

tics feel closer to the powers than to the intellectuals. It is to the powers—or to celebrities or to each other—that they turn when they feel fearful, embattled, needy. To them the intellectuals tend to look like a sideshow of sneering, self-serving noisemakers.

I do not speak as a stranger to the feeling when I say that the rapture of resistance bespeaks a not-so-quiet desperation. In the joyful ferocity of the reaction, is there not a bit of a prideful recognition that the critic has, with the best will in the world, painted himself or herself into a corner? Doesn't defeat taste sweet in a good cause? The honest truth is that negativity has its rewards and they are far from negligible. Self-satisfaction is a crisp and soothing satisfaction. It grants nobility. It stokes the psychic fires. Defeated outrage cannot really be defeated. It burns with a sublime and cleansing flame. It confirms one's righteousness. It collapses the indeterminate future into a burning present.

This pride in marginality bursts out in many forms—crude and sophisticated, rhetorical and scholarly, intellectual and tactical. In presidential politics we saw it in Ralph Nader's doomed and reckless runs for the White House, in his unmodulated fury at the Democratic Party for its corrupt bargains with corporate interests, in the satisfaction he exhibited at the triumph of George W. Bush in 2000, in his refusal—reminiscent of Bush's—to acknowledge any trace of error, any miscalculation of cause and effect, in the bright, straight, heedless line of his crusade for the right and the true. In street politics we have seen it in the sort of militancy that seeks confrontations with the police or Starbucks, measuring triumphs by the tactical panache of its confrontations and boasting of its indifference to the reactions of the misguided and uncool multitude. This is closer to the triumph of spectacle than the triumph of politics. It is the joy of subjectivity—the displacement of the goal from power (an objective fact) to empowerment (a subjective experience).

In this tradition—for a tradition it has become—power is the spook, as Arthur Miller put it in a fine, neglected essay about the 1960s and the New Left's rebellion against the Old.[3] Fundamentally, Miller understood, the New Left was an anarchist movement—revolted by power wherever it found it, whether in Soviet communism, overweening corporations, or brutal U.S.

force in Vietnam. It was an opposition—not simply to the existing government but to power *period*. Oppositional anarchism is especially congenial for *student* movements. As the sociologists Irving L. Horowitz and William H. Friedland observed, student activists of the sixties were primed to be anarchists, requiring little (if any) formal organization in order to flourish, because students were rather well educated to run meetings, divide labor, communicate with each other, and otherwise make things happen—an accurate observation, in my experience.[4] The rise of the Internet makes the anarchist spirit even more efficacious, for massive lobbies and fund-raising apparatuses (like MoveOn.org) and giant demonstrations (like that in Seattle at the World Trade Organization meetings in 1999 and in New York at the Republican Convention in 2004) can be cobbled together without need of a central office or much formal structure.

The New Left revolt against power was also a revolt against authority—sometimes, that is, against *legitimate* power. It wasn't only economic, political, and military power that the student movement resisted: it was the claim to knowledge, the bedrock of professionalism itself. Again and again in various settings the New Left—and, even more, the counterculture—asked, What is the standing of those who speak? Who needs them? Why listen to *these* journalists (corporate-fed creatures), *these* intellectuals (mouthpieces for vested interests), *these* doctors and lawyers and city planners (speaking for their own vested interests)—even *these* leaders of the student movement itself (or at least those whom the media anoint as their spokesmen)?[5] So, in a certain respect, the New Left was a self-undermining movement. Some of the later New Left's hero worship of revolutionary leaders and Marxist-Leninist movements abroad—or at home, in the domestic slice of the Third World—was, I believe, a displaced and distorted accommodation to authority on the part of a movement that was reluctant to acknowledge any authority of its own.

When the left-moving tide of the sixties had run out, minds moved on, and so did the search for realigned principles of authority. The New Left's graduates and successors pursued their quarrel with the universities in manifold ways. Historians promoted "history from the bottom up." Literature professors elevated the

writings of the obscure. Philosophers of science punctured what they saw as the pretenses of objectivity. In effect, all were pursuing justifications for their own authority. Through their disciplinary choices and otherwise, the professionals who evolved from the student movement were playing out its core ambivalence toward authority—on the one hand, deeply doubting the legitimacy of experts, on the other, becoming experts themselves. How would ambitious young intellectuals manage this delicate task?

One answer was "theory"—the welter of poststructuralist, literary-critical, psychoanalytic, neo-Marxist, feminist, queer, and related writings that gathered prestige in the humanities and social sciences in the 1970s, thanks to their European (usually French) lineage, the glee and often breathtaking ingenuity with which the concepts were tossed around, and the blithe freedom from draggy old empirical proof. Another answer was categorical opposition to U.S. foreign policy—a hostility that, however justified in particular instances, spilled out so unreservedly as to negate any possibility of a reformed America that would be worth fighting for. But neither "theory" nor the big anti-imperialist No could engage real political dynamics or possibilities. Both were, in the end, metaphysical.

This book consists of essays that I have written since 1988 and rewritten for this occasion to clarify their thrust. They add up to an argument that intellectual life on the American left must recover from its main drift and transcend its accommodation to political defeat. At a time when radical intellectuals imagine themselves floating free of national connection, fearful that *national* automatically means *nationalist* and *practical* means *corrupt,* liberal and radical intellectuals—those who deeply value liberty and equality—should commit ourselves to political recovery and a regeneration of American possibilities. In a previous book, *Letters to a Young Activist* (2003), I defended practical efforts at politics toward that end. *The Intellectuals and the Flag* aims to contribute to the

work of putting an intellectual foundation under such efforts.

This book is divided into three parts. The first reviews the work of three exemplary intellectuals of past decades—mentors of mine (David Riesman and Irving Howe in the flesh, C. Wright Mills on the page)—and honors the scope of their work while exploring their limits. The second reviews the situation of left-wing intellectuals in our institutions of higher learning, asking why Riesman, Mills, and Howe have gone without clear successors. The third aims to resurrect a liberal ideal of patriotism in the awful aftermath of September 11, 2001, refusing to bow to the notion that the proper reply to mass murder is plutocracy, zealotry, and indiscriminate war.

Notes

1. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1964), p. 63.
2. U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2003* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, 2004), no. 212.
3. Arthur Miller, introduction to Ken Kesey, *Kesey's Garage Sale* (New York: Viking, 1973), p. xv.
4. Irving L. Horowitz and William H. Friedland, *The Knowledge Factory: Student Power and Academic Politics in America* (Chicago: Aldine, 1971), p. 10.
5. On dilemmas of leadership in the New Left under the media spotlight, see Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), chap. 5.