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## MOVEMENTS AND CAMPAIGNS

*The following essay was first presented at a memorial conference for Irving Howe held at the City University of New York in April 1994 and then, in a revised form, at the Locarno conference celebrating the fortieth anniversary of Dissent. We print here the Locarno version.—EDS.*

**I**n 1954, the year in which he founded *Dissent*, Irving Howe published an essay called “This Age of Conformity” in *Partisan Review*. *Partisan Review* was the organ of what has been dubbed (by T.J. Clarke) the “Trotskyite-Eliotic” culture of the New York Intellectuals of the 1930s. This was the culture of intellectuals who were not quite sure whether they were revolutionary Marxists or just social democrats. They were, however, very sure that modern art and literature had a lot to do with desirable social change, that literary and artistic modernism was part of the same large movement of the spirit as was socialism.

In his article, Howe contrasted the glory days of *Partisan Review*, the late 1930s, with the complacent passivity of the intellectuals in the United States at the beginning of the Eisenhower years. Here is his description of the cultural-political avant-garde for which *Partisan Review* wished to speak:

The achievements of Joyce, Proust, Schoenberg, Bartok, Picasso, Matisse, to mention only the obvious figures, signified one of the major turnings in the cultural history of the West, a turning made all the more crucial by the fact that it came not during the vigor of a society but during its crisis. To counter this hostility which the work of such artists met among all the official spokesmen of culture, to discover formal terms and modes through which to secure these achievements, to insist upon the continuity between their work and the accepted, because dead, artists of the past—this became the task of the avant-garde. Somewhat later a section of the

avant-garde also became politically active, and not by accident; for precisely those aroused sensibilities that had responded to the innovations of the modern masters now responded to the crisis of modern society. Thus, in the early years of a magazine like *Partisan Review*—roughly between 1936 and 1941—these two radical impulses came together in an uneasy but fruitful union; and it was in those years that the magazine seemed most exciting and vital as a link between art and experience, between the critical consciousness and the political conscience, between the avant-garde of letters and the independent left of politics.

I vaguely remember reading this essay as an eager young twenty-two-year-old. At that age, I thought that the end of desire was to get something published in *Partisan Review*. For that magazine seemed to offer the possibility of bringing together beauty and justice, high culture and human freedom, critical consciousness and political conscience. Irving Howe’s own essays, in particular, seemed admirable examples of such synthesis. Forty years ago, I probably believed every word of the passage I just quoted from Howe.

Rereading this passage now, I find that I believe very little of it. I do not think that the art and literature of the early twentieth century marked a major turning in the cultural history of the West. The cultural activity of the years 1900 to 1920 does not seem to me more distinguished, important, or path-breaking than that of later decades of the century. I find it hard to detect any sharp discontinuity between

those years and the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Virginia Woolf's claim that "Around December 1910, human nature changed" now strikes me as ludicrous. The most that changed was the sexual behavior of some of Woolf's friends and relations.

Furthermore, I cannot believe that the troubles of the early decades of our century are even a reasonable candidate for "the crisis of modern society." The terms in which the intellectuals of that period discussed social-political issues, and in particular the opposition between socialism and capitalism, no longer seem in point. The idea of "the breakdown of capitalism" has lost its force, as has the assumption that the world as a whole has entered upon a process called "modernization." The big question for the coming century seems to be something like "Can either the rule of law or the ideals of human equality and of global fraternity survive in an over-populated and poisoned world, most of which is under the control of semiliterate warlords brandishing nuclear arms?" When the historians of the thirtieth century look back, they may find that the best twentieth century prognosticators were the writers of fantasy and science fiction, rather than the sophisticated practitioners of social theory.

Robert Kaplan has suggested that the moral of current events in Iraq, Somalia, and Bosnia is that a majority of the planet's inhabitants "to whom the comfort and stability of a middle-class life is utterly unknown, find war and a barracks existence a step up." In a memorable image, he described people like ourselves—middle-class American and European readers of magazines like this one—as similar to riders in a stretch limousine, making our way through a mob of ragged and desperate people moving in the opposite direction. Kaplan's description of our situation amounts to saying that while Europe and America have been worrying about how to go forward from capitalism, a lot of the rest of the world has been hoping to advance to feudalism. Forecasts like Kaplan's make plausible Albert Hirschman's suggestion that we may find ourselves saying "God give us back the class struggle!" We may find ourselves longing for the old military-industrial com-

plexes, and for the old nation-states that they corrupted, just as the French found themselves longing for the return of *les rois fainéants*.

Reading some of Irving Howe's later work recently I came to realize that he probably would have had his own doubts about the passage I have quoted. Howe was too forward-looking to spend much time correcting or glossing his past writings. But by the time he wrote *A Margin of Hope* he was much more skeptical about the very idea of a "movement" than he had been thirty years before. In that book, written in the early 1980s, he pokes gentle fun at Philip Rahv's insistence that *Partisan Review* should "always seem to be moving somewhere." In one paragraph, indeed, he comes close to explicitly repudiating what he had written twenty-five years before. There he says:

The union of the *advanced*, much as it entranced and enabled, was an idea that could not long endure. Avant-gardes march forward, but not necessarily to the same tune or in the same direction. . . . [t]he union between cultural modernism and independent radicalism was neither a proper marriage nor a secure liaison, it was a meeting between parties hurrying in opposite directions, brief, hectic, messy.

What Howe says here was anticipated by his own practice in editing *Dissent*. The difference between that magazine and *Partisan Review* is that *Dissent*, and the group of writers around it, felt able to dispense with membership in a movement. They were content simply to throw themselves into a lot of campaigns. By a campaign, I mean something finite, something that can be recognized to have succeeded or to have, so far, failed. Movements, by contrast, neither succeed nor fail. They are too big and too amorphous to do anything that simple. They share in what Kierkegaard called "the passion of the infinite." They are exemplified by Christianity, nihilism, and Marxism.

Membership in a movement requires the ability to see particular campaigns for particular goals as parts of something much bigger, and as having little significance in themselves. This bigger thing is the course of human events described as a process of maturation. By

contrast, campaigns for such goals as the unionization of migrant farm workers in the American Southwest, or banning big trucks from the Alps, or the overthrow (by votes or by force) of a corrupt government, or legal recognition of gay marriage, can stand on their own feet. They can be conducted without much attention to literature, art, philosophy, or history. But movements must levy contributions from each of these areas of culture. For these areas provide the larger context within which politics is no longer just politics, but rather the matrix out of which will emerge something like Paul's "new being in Christ" or Mao's "new socialist man"—the mature stage of humanity, the one which will put aside current childishness.

**M**ovement politics, the sort that held "bourgeois reformism" in contempt, was the kind of politics that Howe came to know all too well in the thirties, and was dubious about when it was reinvented in the sixties. This kind of politics assumes that things must be changed utterly, so that a new kind of beauty may be born. Howe knew so well what it was like to belong to a movement when he was young that he was able to do without movements when he was older. So he, and the magazine he founded, were able to stick to campaigning. But of course this does not mean that he turned away from literature, art, and history. Howe stayed in contact with all of these (though not with philosophy—which, to him, as to most other American leftist intellectuals, had never seemed particularly important). What he stopped trying to do was to weave these together with politics. The difference between reading *Partisan Review* and reading *Dissent* was that one read the former in order to take one's own spiritual temperature, and the latter in order to get the details on how the strong were currently oppressing the weak, to learn exactly how the rich were presently cheating the poor. *Partisan Review* was something to be lived up to, but *Dissent* was, and is, a source of information and advice.

Even though Howe confessed in his autobiography to being troubled by an inability to

"reconcile my desire to be a writer with remembered fantasies about public action," he was the envy of his contemporaries, precisely because he was able to find the time to be both an accomplished man of letters and the unpaid editor of his country's most useful political magazine. Howe would have loathed being called a warrior-saint, but that term does help catch one of the reasons he came to play the role in many people's lives that Orwell had played in his. The young people who helped him with *Dissent* learned from him how one could combine the contemplative and the active lives without trying to synthesize the two. They learned how to look inward and outward on alternate days of the week.

Most of us, when young, hope for purity of heart. The easiest way to assure oneself of this purity is to will one thing—but this requires seeing everything as part of a pattern whose center is that single thing. Movements offer such a pattern, and thus offer such assurance of purity. Howe's ability, in his later decades, to retain both critical consciousness and political conscience while not attempting to fuse the two into something larger than either, showed his admirers how to forgo such purity, and such a pattern. For Howe made *Dissent* into a magazine that was more concerned with what the strong are doing to the weak than with deep questions about the spirit of the age or about deep underlying causes of social and cultural change. The difference between *Partisan Review* and *Dissent* was the difference between concern for being sufficiently sophisticated, sufficiently mature intellectually, and concern with evitable human suffering. *Dissent* remains pretty much the only leftist organ in the United States that is more concerned with spelling out tactics for fighting injustice than with maneuvering for strategic position in intellectual or political circles.

The epigraph of Howe's early book *Politics and the Novel* is taken from Max Scheler: "True tragedy arises 'when the idea of "justice" appears to be leading to the destruction of higher values.'" Someone whose identity is found within a movement, either cultural or political, hopes to avoid that kind of tragedy by purifying his heart, by having only

one yearning and only one fantasy. Such an aspirant will repeat over and over “Not my will, but the movement’s, be done.” Part of what helped Howe turn from movements to campaigns was the lesson he learned from political novels: a lesson about the dangers of such attempts at self-purification and self-surrender. A multiplicity of campaigns has the same advantage as a plurality of gods or of novels: each campaign is finite, and there is always another campaign to enlist in when the first fails or goes off the track. The realized impurity of a movement can destroy the person who has identified with that movement, but the impurity of a campaign can be taken in one’s stride: such impurity is just what one expects of something that is, like oneself, finite and mortal.

What Howe said of modernism is true of all movements, but of no campaigns: namely, that it “must always struggle but never quite triumph, and then, after a time, must struggle in order not to triumph.” If the passion of the infinite were to triumph, it would betray itself by revealing itself to have been merely a passion for something finite. Anyone who prides himself on having achieved purity of heart convicts himself out of his own mouth. So Howe, I think, raised just the right question when, at the end of an essay on “The Idea of the Modern,” he asks “How, come to think of it, do great cultural movements end?”

I would answer this question by saying that such a movement can only be killed off by another movement of the same kind. It takes a new sublime to kill an old sublime. As the century wore on, it became increasingly difficult for cultural critics to avoid demoting “modernism” from the sublimity of a movement to the finitude of a period: to avoid saying that Proust, Picasso, and the rest were characteristic neither of a change in human nature nor of a crisis of modern society, but simply of early twentieth-century art and literature, as Baudelaire and Delacroix had been characteristic of mid-nineteenth-century art and literature.

The increasing mustiness of modernism in the fifties and sixties caused the journals of that period to be filled with essays like Howe’s

“Idea of the Modern”—essays that tried, and to my mind invariably failed, to offer “formal terms and modes through which to secure” the achievements of literary modernism. Eventually such attempts were tacitly abandoned. But there were still people who could not live without a movement. So they invented a new one. They proclaimed that although the sublimity claimed by modernism had, unfortunately, proved spurious, one more turn of the screw will take us from modernism to *postmodernism*, and thereby enable us to attain *true* sublimity.

Not all the books that describe themselves as about “the postmodern” are up-market media hype. Gianni Vattimo’s and Zygmunt Bauman’s books, for example, are not. But books like Jean Baudrillard’s and Frederic Jameson’s are what Vincent Descombes calls “philosophies of current events.” These books are meta-hypes, hyping the very process of media hyping, hoping to determine our fate by examining the entrails of our magazines. The readers of such books ask themselves whether the latest building, television program, advertisement, rock group, or curriculum is properly postmodern, or whether it still betrays traces of mere modernism.

Reading such postmodern philosophies of current events leads one to wonder just how much of modernism itself was media hype, and whether Howe himself did not succumb to the hype put out by Pound, Eliot, and others when he wrote that their period had marked “one of the major turnings in the cultural history of the West.” I suspect that someday we may look back on Stendhal’s and Baudelaire’s insistence that it is absolutely necessary to be modern as the beginning of a public relations campaign that, though begun with the best of intentions, eventually got out of control, and ended in involuntary self-parody. We may also look back on Weber’s distinction between traditional and modern society as a useful tool insofar as it provided suggestions for campaigns, but as an unfortunate re-enchantment insofar as it inspired a new philosophical problematic.

I hope that our successors in the next century will turn away from this problematic—the problematic of “the nature of modernity”—and

will write the sociopolitical history of the West without mention of modernism, postmodernism, or any other such “major turning.” I hope they will write a narrative of a very large number of overlapping campaigns, rather than of a few great movements. I hope they agree with Bruno Latour, who called his latest book *We Have Never Been Modern*, that history is an endless network of changing relationships, without any great big climactic ruptures or peripities. I hope they decide that terms like “traditional society,” “modern society,” and “postmodern society,” as well as “traditional art,” “modern art,” and “postmodern art,” caused more trouble than they were worth.

**T**he discourse of twentieth-century intellectuals never quite got over the habit of asking questions about the spirit of the age. It never got over the kind of trend-spotting that Hegel and Marx made seem so attractive and so profound. I see the effort to spot, or create, a trend called “postmodernism” as the beginning of a welcome anti-trend-spotting trend, but as having picked exactly the wrong label. It has defined itself by opposition to the modern, thereby taking for granted the existence of something it would have done better to question. Lyotard is right that we need to give up on grand narratives. But his critics are right that we have to find a way of doing so that will not dramatize our own achievement. For such dramatization will result in one more grand narrative, namely, the kind of philosophy of current events that tells us how excitingly different we intellectuals have just now become.

To give up on modernism, we shall have to start thinking about the similarities, rather than the differences, between where we are now, where we were before Auschwitz, and where we were before the French Revolution. We are still trying to think of ways to minimize injustice and maximize equality. We are still trying to create beauty—thought of, with Stendhal, as “the promise of happiness.” But in trying to create both ordinary human happiness and promises of new sorts of happiness, we are not engaged in a process of

emancipation or enlightenment. For there is neither a true humanity to be emancipated nor a built-in natural light (called “reason” or “conscience”) by which such emancipation is made possible. Instead of taking our cue from Hegel, we should take it from Darwin and Mendel, and say that History or Humanity no more has an immanent teleology than does Life. The evolution of Western society has been, and will continue to be, as jerky, hit-or-miss, and unpredictable as was the evolution of the primates.

If we think of both biological and social evolution as a process of random mutation, partially determined by an equally random fit or lack of fit with rapidly changing ecological niches, we shall find the nature of modernity as unprofitable a topic as the nature of man. There was nothing called Life that intended the mammals and regarded them as a great improvement on the reptiles. There was nothing called Reason or History that intended the industrialized democracies, or that will regard the warlords who may replace them as either an improvement or a decline. We shall see the warlords, and the vastly increased injustice and misery that their rule will bring, as a decline, just as the more intellectually inclined reptiles may have seen the mammals as a decline. But there is no entity larger than ourselves or the warlords to adjudicate the issue, just as there was no entity larger than the mammals and the reptiles. There are various campaigns we might undertake (for example, a campaign for a vast increase in the numbers of the UN’s Blue Helmets, and a proportionate decline in the sizes of individual nations’ armies) to lessen the probability of the coming of the warlords. But there is no movement into which to throw ourselves, and no historical moment whose significance we have to grasp.

**I**f, following Latour’s and Descombes’s suggestions, we were to start writing narratives of overlapping campaigns and the overlapping careers of conspicuous individuals and groups—narratives *not* broken up into chapters with titles like “the Enlightenment,” “Romanticism,” “Literary Modernism,” or “Late Capitalism”—we

should lose dramatic intensity. But we might help immunize ourselves against the passion of the infinite. If we dropped references to movements we could settle for telling a story about how the human beings in the neighborhood of the North Atlantic, over the course of two hundred years, made their futures different from their pasts at a constantly accelerating pace. We could still, like Hegel and Acton, tell this story as a story of increasing freedom. But we could drop, along with any sense of inevitable progress, any sense of immanent teleology. We could drop any attempt to capitalize History, to view it as something as big and strong as Nature or God.

If we want the discourse of the next century's intellectuals to be interestingly different from that of the twentieth-century intellectuals, we could try forgetting about postmodernism and about movements, and stick to campaigns. This would mean giving up on the whole idea of *maturation*. It would mean getting back behind Hegel and ceasing to ask the question that, as Foucault has acutely remarked, dominated Kant's political thought: the question about the significance of "today," the question about how mature we have succeeded in becoming so far, and how far we yet must go. It would mean limiting questions about "today" to empirical attempts to predict the future.

It is one thing to predict that the wars of the next century will be between warlords rather than between nation-states. It is another to ask about the significance of this event. It is one thing to predict that whole parts of the world (Thailand, for example) will be depopulated by AIDS, and another thing to try to fit AIDS into a story about the development of humanity. That would be like the dinosaurs trying to fit whatever comet or plague wiped them out into a story about the development of Life. Hegel's claim that the real is the rational meant, if it meant anything, that the increase in Spirit's self-consciousness could not be ended by a comet. To give up on that claim would mean acknowledging that the past two hundred years of diminishing suffering and increasing equality in a relatively small portion of the planet was just a very fortunate happenstance—a happenstance very much worth perpetuating,

but one that was no more *rational* than the world of the science-fiction dystopias.

It is sometimes said that the nineteenth century believed in inevitable progress, whereas ours gave it up early on. There is some truth to this, but it is one thing to give up on inevitability and another to give up on philosophies of current events. We shall be tempted by such philosophies as long as we look not merely for predictions of what is likely to happen and ways of influencing what will actually happen, but for an understanding of something extra called the *significance* of events. This idea of significance is parasitic on the idea of maturation—the idea that there is a more grown-up point of view, a more mature description, of what has been going on lately than has been given by our predecessors.

If we are to get rid of the lurking assumption of immanent teleology we have to be content with evaluating redescrptions by their utility rather than by their maturity. We shall look for redescrptions of current events that make a difference to our ideas of what is to be done here and now—that help in a specific campaign—as opposed to redescrptions that suggest that it is time to get off the bandwagon of one movement and shift over to that of another.

The turn away from movements to campaigns that I am suggesting is, in philosophical terms, a turn away from Kant, Hegel, and Marx and toward Bacon, Hume, and Mill—considered not as empiricists but as protopragmatists. It is a turn away from the transcendental question, "What are the conditions of possibility of this historical moment?" to the pragmatic question, "What are the causal conditions of replacing this present actuality with a better future actuality?" the intellectuals of our century have been distracted from campaigns by the need to "put events in perspective," and by the urge to organize movements around something out of sight, something located at the impossibly distant end of this perspective. But this has made the best the enemy of the better. A lot of intellectual and spiritual energy has been wasted defining movements, energy that could have been better spent prosecuting campaigns. □