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MAURICE ISSERMAN

*Michael Harrington: An ``Other American''**

Michael Harrington was born in St. Louis in 1928, raised in comfortable circumstances, and educated at Holy Cross, Yale, and the University of Chicago. He moved to New York City in 1949, at the age of 21, hoping to realize the ambition he had cherished since the age of 10 of becoming a writer. Drawn to the political Left at a time when almost no one else of his generation was, Harrington soon made his mark in radical circles, first as a volunteer in the Catholic Worker movement, and then as an activist in anti-Stalinist socialist circles. Michael drew people to him by the force of his ideas, and his presence. When a young Los Angeles socialist by the name of Dave McReynolds came to New York in 1953, he soon encountered the 25-year-old Harrington in the back room of the White Horse Tavern (a celebrated bohemian watering hole in the West Village): ``Spent the evening listening to Mike Harrington tell of his experiences in the Catholic Worker," an awed McReynolds wrote to a friend back in LA, ``and realize how terribly superficial my whole life is."

In the later 1950s Harrington criss-crossed the country as a student organizer (the ``oldest young socialist in America," he started to call himself after awhile), while turning out a steady stream of reviews and articles for journals like *Dissent*, *Commonweal*, and the *New Leader*. In 1959 and 1960 he wrote several articles on poverty for *Commentary* magazine, which led to a book contract with Macmillan for what became *The Other America*.

Before his death, Harrington would write a total of sixteen books on a variety of political and cultural topics, but *The Other America* is certainly the one he will be remembered for the longest. Harrington's expectations when writing the book were modest. The

**This talk was presented at Sacred Heart University on February 17, 1993 as part of a lecture series in memory of Max Dickstein, Daniel Friedman Gottlieb, and Ned Gottlieb. It will be included in Prof. Isserman's forthcoming biography of Michael Harrington.*

year before it came out, he told a friend he would be pleased if the book sold as many as 2500 copies. Instead, two years after its publication *The Other America* had sold 125,000 copies in the United

States, and had been translated into seven languages. (It is now nearing its 1,300,000th sale.)

The Other America made two simple points. First, despite the prevailing consensus about the arrival of the "affluent society," widespread poverty continued to exist in the United States. There was "another America" of 40 to 50 million inhabitants living in the United States, "the unskilled workers, the migrant farm workers, the aged, the minorities, and all the others who live in the economic underworld of American life." Secondly, Harrington argued that "poverty is a culture." Poor Americans were "people who lack education and skill, who have bad health, poor housing, low levels of aspiration and high levels of mental distress. . . . Each disability is the more intense because it exists within a web of disabilities. And if one problem is solved, and the others are left constant, there is little gain." It was thus a delusion to believe, as many conservatives did, that poverty could be solved by exhortations to the poor to lift themselves up by their own bootstraps. And it was equally a delusion to believe, as many New Frontier policy-makers did, that the opportunities provided by an expanding economy would automatically solve the problems of poor people. "Society," Harrington concluded, "must help them before they can help themselves."

In January 1963 Harrington left the United States for a year in Paris. He returned to the United States in December to find himself a celebrity thanks to a long and laudatory review of his book by Dwight Macdonald in *The New Yorker*. (President John F. Kennedy was among those who read the review, and possibly the book, with interest.) Within a few weeks after his return, Harrington was summoned to Washington to take part in the early planning sessions for President Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty programs, many of which like the Community Action Agencies, Model Cities, and Operation Head Start, were intended to counter the effects of the "culture of poverty" by offering, as the slogan went, "a hand up, not a hand out." In November 1964 James Wechsler lauded Harrington in the *New York Post* as "a quiet thunderer" and "a man for all seasons" and predicted that he would emerge as the unifier of the "scattered legions among the liberal intellectual community, the civil rights activists and the more enlightened sectors of organized labor." That was exactly the role that Harrington attempted to play for the next

quarter-century, struggling to tug the Center to the left, and the Left to the center. Harrington was one of the few well-known intellectuals in the 1960s who could be counted as a friend of the labor movement. He also found an audience in the peace movement, the Catholic Church, and, for awhile, the New Left. "Harrington was pivotal," former Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) leader Todd Gitlin wrote in his history/memoir *The Sixties* (1987), "for he was the one person who might have mediated across the generational divide."

Michael Harrington had used the phrase "The Other America" once before he wrote the book which would make him famous. But he had used it that time in a different sense, not to describe American poverty, but to describe an *alternative* America. The article entitled "The Other America" appeared in the liberal Catholic weekly *Commonweal* in late May 1960 (a significant moment, midway between the start of the southern student sit-ins at lunch counters in February and John Kennedy's election in November). Harrington's article, subtitled, "Beyond the Neon Signs and the Coke Bottles, Another America Still Survives — as of Now," described the existence of what social commentators a few years later would refer to as "a counterculture." Harrington, however, was not talking about a minority of young people in rural communes or college towns wearing outlandish outfits and ingesting illegal pharmaceuticals. Harrington's counterculture, or "other America," cut across generational lines, and lay just beneath the surface, or just around the corner of mainstream America. In Seattle, Washington, for instance, Harrington wrote:

the people live in the presence of Mount Rainier. The Indians, it is said, once thought that this solemn peak was God. Their mistake is understandable. Driving in the city, one never knows when the turning of a corner will reveal the aspect of beauty. On a clear day, each hour, each period, is given a special definition by the mountain. And this geography enters into a culture. It is, of course, intermingled with the history of the region: logging, the IWW, the Seattle General Strike of 1919 (in this American city, they spoke of "Soviets" at that time), the

weather-beaten and brawling tradition of a port. Thus the coffee cups in many restaurants in Washington are bigger than they are in the East. Their shape developed out of an outdoor, working world and they are part of the texture of life in the area. At the trucker's stop in the Cascade mountains where breakfast is ten strips of bacon, four eggs, and a pile of home fries, these coffee cups are one of the forms defining a history and a way of living. They are related to the towering fact of the mountain.

There is a kind of unabashed lyricism in this passage which would rarely surface in Michael's later writings, but which I think underlay his view of the world. His weather-beaten, brawling, Washington truck drivers, like their coffee cups, are a little larger than life. They are romantic projections, literary archetypes.

Mike was the kind of kid who grew up with his nose in a book, and a good many of life's varied experiences — sex, love, grief, existential doubt, whatever — were ones he first encountered, imagined, and savored, in literary form. Harrington had a knack for self-creation. I mentioned that he had decided on a career as a writer at the age of 10 — he had also chosen a *nom de plume* by then, "Sir John Michael," an interesting choice for an Irish Catholic boy. He outgrew that. But he retained the habit of imposing on the world a kind of literary version of what things could be like, should be like, in which he could play a role commensurate to his talents.

Marty Corbin, who had been in the Catholic Worker movement with Mike, told me in an interview of a conversation he had with him in the early 1950s, in which he and Harrington discovered that they had both first encountered "the Left," or rather the idea that there was such a thing as a Left, from reading John Dos Passos' *USA*. Dos Passos' trilogy is a sprawling fictional exploration of the American experience in the years after the First World War; Dos Passos frequently interrupted the narrative of his trilogy with a device he called "The Camera Eye," a series of free verse meditations on current politics, culture, and society. In *The Big Money*, published in 1933, Dos Passos offered this reflection on the night that Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were executed in Charlestown prison:

America our nation has been beaten by strangers who have
 turned our language inside out who have taken the
 clean words our fathers spoke and made them slimy
 and foul . . . they have the dollars the guns the armed
 forces the powerplants
 they have built the electric chair and hired the executioner to
 throw the switch
 all right we are two nations. . . .
 but do they know that the old words of the immigrants are
 being renewed in blood and agony tonight do they
 know that the old American speech of the haters of
 oppression is new tonight in the mouth of an old
 woman from Pittsburgh of a husky boilermaker
 from Frisco who hopped freights clear from the
 Coast to come here in the mouth of a Back Bay
 socialworker in the mouth of an Italian printer of a
 hobo from Arkansas the language of the beaten
 nation is not forgotten in our ears tonight

Dos Passos' "husky boilermaker" and Harrington's
 weather-beaten truck drivers are clearly literary brothers, and "All
 right, we are two nations" is, very likely, a source of Harrington's
 inspiration for the essay "The Other America." As a committed
 radical in the 1920s, Dos Passos was as much an odd duck in that
 decade as Harrington would be in the 1950s (by which point,
 incidentally, Dos Passos had migrated far to the right ideologically).
 In the 1950s as in the 1920s, American intellectuals had found
 themselves estranged from the dominant culture. A common response
 in both decades was the retreat into a kind of injured aestheticism and
 political quietism, described in Malcolm Cowley's memoir of the
 1920s, *Exile's Return*. In the 1950s the form it took was a
 preoccupation among many intellectuals with the impact of "mass
 culture." The revolution had failed to appear on schedule in the 1930s,
 so the argument went, because the masses had been drugged by the
 opiate of popular culture. Mass movements were *passé* (or worse,
 only the vehicles for cranky, pseudo-populist, authoritarianism); for
 better or worse real politics was a matter to be left to the

professionals, policy experts, and informed elites. These were the assumptions that Harrington was challenging in 1960:

The other America is culturally heterogeneous: its coffee cups are different, so are its politics. Its vitality may well be a matter of cultural lag, of a historic impetus acquired in experiences which predate the era of mass culture. But the other America is real. . . . Here, in that part of the nation that is not dominated by gadgets and mass media, is the source of our creativity.

Harrington's political judgment can be debated on its merits (I'm personally sympathetic). But as his biographer, I'm interested in that combination of inclination, happenstance, and circumstance that led this child of the middle class to the seemingly unlikely role of tribune of the poor. Harrington's self-identification as an "other American" was a key element of this, and drew on a number of sources in his experience growing up.

It drew, first of all, on his Catholicism. He grew up in the Church, served as an altar boy, was educated in its schools, at a time when the Church still felt itself excluded from, embattled with, and wary of the appeals of the dominant modernist/materialist culture. In 1940 Harrington enrolled in the Jesuit St. Louis University high school. A line in Harrington's 1942 yearbook captures the spirit in which his teachers set about their enterprise, declaring that the most important benefit of a Jesuit education for its graduates was that it instilled them "with the necessary fortitude and enthusiasm to step forth into battlefield, college or workaday world, and strive towards the urgent conversion of a perverted, pagan universe." Michael left the Church as a young man, but as he was the first to acknowledge, he never shed its influence. Neither as a Catholic, nor as a socialist was he ever a fanatic. He could tolerate error. The sin he had trouble tolerating was sloth, the sloth of the unexamined life, and a self-indulgent individualism that paid no heed to the claims of community. The "committed believers and unbelievers" he wrote in 1983, thirty years after he left the Church, "have the same enemy: the humdrum nihilism of everyday life in much of Western society." A year before,

on the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *The Other America*, a television interviewer asked Michael what had been the source of the "moral indignation" that led to writing the book. "I grew up in [the Catholic Church]," he replied, "and from the time I was a little kid the Church said your life is not something which you are supposed to fritter away; your life is in trust to something more important than yourself."

Obviously, since not all Catholics of his generation wound up as bohemians or socialists, there were other factors shaping Harrington's eventual identification with "the Other America." Michael was the only and much loved child of a mother who inspired and/or pushed him to excel academically; having enrolled at kindergarten at the age of four, and skipping seventh grade, he wound up a freshman at St. Louis University high school at the tender age of 12 and would graduate and leave for college at 16. One of his St. Louis University high school classmates Richard Dempsey told me that when Michael entered high school he was "a little chubbier, a little more of a boy" than his classmates. Harrington would eventually grow to six feet tall, but a photo of him in his freshman year yearbook, standing among the news staff of the school newspaper, shows the other students towering over him. Set apart by age, something he could not control, he also *chose* to set himself apart in other ways. According to another classmate, Jerome Wilkerson:

We had some of the wealthiest kids in St. Louis at our high school and some of them looked like the cover of *Esquire*, with matching argyle sweaters and socks. [Mike] was never like that. He was always a little slovenly. I remember him with a big sloppy sweater. He didn't care about a lot of things that other kids cared about.

The remarkable thing about Michael's high school experience is that he doesn't seem to have been unpopular or picked on. He created an identity for himself that allowed him to stand out from the crowd (as a "gentle scoffer" one of his classmates put it) but also to make his mark within the community. Too small (and clumsy) to play sports, he became the sports editor of the school newspaper. He joined the

debate team, the yearbook, the Latin Club, the Library Club, the Radio Club, and the Sodality chapter (a group that, among other things, discussed ways of applying the papal encyclicals to contemporary social issues.) The 1941 yearbook commented that freshman Harrington "seems to be in about every organization he could find at school." He even marched around with the band one year, although he couldn't play a musical instrument. He particularly excelled in debate, where he was a star on St. Louis University High School's championship team. Bill Loftus, one of Michael's debate partners, recalled:

Many a time in high school, I saw Mike win a debate by standing there with his open Irish face, and blinking at the judges, and quoting brilliantly from a purely fictitious authority to prove his point. In one debate he even had the nerve to quote from "Dr. Dingbat Fu," and they bought it. He was very, very good.

A feature called "Senior Spotlight" in the student newspaper in 1944 called him a "stellar member of almost every school organization during his four outstanding years at the high school." His activities made "Harrington one of the most famous and popular '44 graduates."

There were, in other words, rewards for Michael to garner, despite the fact he was standing outside the mainstream. The pattern repeated itself at Holy Cross (where many of his classmates were considerably older veterans of the Second World War). He was again an editor of the student newspaper, and of the literary magazine. He began seriously to think of himself as a writer. He had already discovered literary modernism in high school (pleased that T.S. Eliot was, like himself, a native of St. Louis). Now he was writing his own poetry, working every day on poems baldly (and badly) derivative of James Joyce.

There was room in a Jesuit education for poetry; in high school the students were required to learn how to compose a sonnet. But this was uncertain terrain. A reporter who did a profile of Harrington in 1987 wrote of him, "He still smiles remembering the household horror when he announced that he intended . . . to become a poet. . . . In those days, he grins, 'being a poet' meant just one thing, you had to

be gay — or as they called it then, 'a faggot.' "

Harrington's own sexual orientation was decidedly hetero-sexual; socially backward in high school, he made up for lost time after Holy Cross; in the 1950s he garnered a reputation as a "womanizer." But I've learned that a number of his colleagues on the literary magazine at Holy Cross were, in fact, homosexual. Holy Cross was not exactly receptive to gay liberation in the mid-1940s; this was not only a forbidden behavior, it was a forbidden topic of discussion. According to a Holy Cross classmate, who prefers to remain anonymous: "Two people who were our seniors on several of the publications were frank homosexuals. They liked to talk about it . . . [and we liked to listen.] This was *only* discussed in a dormitory room with the door closed. Or in the office of the publications with the door closed." This same classmate would room with Mike when they both moved to New York in the early 1950s. A gay man himself, he emphasized to me that "Michael was not attracted to men, and he was not attractive to men." But Mike was fascinated by this outlaw subculture, and when he moved to New York, he gravitated to gay and even lesbian bars, became a fan of the ballet, which was an art form with a strong gay presence (he told his roommate that the woman of his dreams was a lesbian ballerina), and, according to other acquaintances from the period, was quite proud of his knowledge of the folkways and his command of the slang of the gay world. You could not get more "other" in the America of the early 1950s than by frequenting gay bars in Greenwich Village, unless you become something as outlandish as a socialist, which would be Michael's next step.

What I'm suggesting is that the emergence of Michael's political radicalism was bound up in some fairly intimate ways with issues of personal identity. He found satisfaction in his identity as rebel and outsider, in his knowledge of arcane and forbidden cultural and ideological folkways. That is not to trivialize the political choices he made. The concerns he expressed were significant in themselves, in the real world, apart from whatever gratification he took in voicing them. The fact that Michael was a little unworldly, "literary," and self-created, turned out to be an advantage at a critical moment in his career. Identifying with outcasts and outsiders, he was inclined to look beyond the surface complacency of the "affluent society." Sometimes it is the romantics rather than the realists who glimpse the hard

realities.

Let me leave the last word to one of Michael's St. Louis University High School classmates. My standard closing question in the interviews I've done for this book is to ask, "If you were writing a biography of Michael Harrington, what question would you want to find the answer to?" John Padberg, Michael's high school classmate (who is today a Jesuit priest), offered this response:

I guess the question that still is unanswered for me is how did somebody from an upper middle class, ambitious, staunchly Catholic, St. Louis (a conservative city) family who had had a very good high school and college education, but a pretty conventional one, how did he summon up the imagination to do what he did? Because I think it's probably imagination more than anything else that would have led him to get involved with the Catholic Worker, and socialism, and to write *The Other America*. It's imagination that impelled him.

Isserman: Why do you say that?

Padberg: Because I think most people do not lack good will. Most people do not lack intelligence. He certainly lacked neither of them. What he had more than other people was imagination.