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A Quixote in the American Century: Dwight Macdonald and the Politics of Imagination

Sophie Cavoulacos

University of Pennsylvania

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A Quixote in the American Century:
Dwight Macdonald and the Politics of Imagination

Sophie Cavoulacos

2009–2010 Penn Humanities Forum
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A Senior Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for Honors in History
Faculty Advisors: Ronald Granieri, Bruce Kuklick
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First and foremost, I would like to thank Professor Ronald Granieri for his guidance over the last three semesters. In addition to his patience and help every step of the way, he had faith in my project and abilities, and did not let me lose momentum when my European diplomatic topic morphed into an American intellectual one.

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**Introduction**  
*Dwight Macdonald and the New York Intellectuals*

This paper is concerned with Dwight Macdonald’s political writings and activity from the 1940s to the 1960s. In order to grasp the complexity of this New York intellectual – writer, editor and critic – it is necessary to understand Macdonald within the larger context of the New York Intellectuals. To provide contextual background and a historiographical overview, I will introduce The New York Intellectuals as well as major works that have shaped the dominant narratives around this group of writers and critics.

Norman Podhoretz, one of the group’s younger members, proposed in his memoir *Making It* that the best way to conceptualize the New York literary world was to view it a Jewish family: “neither the rival idea of a clique nor the posthumous idea of an Establishment can convey so accurately the true flavor of how it operated … these were people who by virtue of their tastes, ideas and general concerns found themselves stuck with one another against the rest of the world whether they liked it or not.”

Alexander Bloom, in explaining *The New York Intellectuals & Their World* in *Prodigal Sons*, focused his study on the common experience of growing up in Eastern European Jewish communities. Bloom depicts the immigrant ghettos as a formative experience for the group Podhoretz identifies as the Founding Fathers – Philip Rahv, Meyer Schapiro, Lionel Trilling, Sidney Hook, Harold Rosenberg, Paul Goodman, Clement Greenberg and Lionel Abel. Bloom argued that “maturing in a half-English, half-Yiddish environment” prompted the New York Intellectuals to always carry “with them some of that divided world.”

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Bloom identifies the coexistence of isolation and community as the most salient tension for the New York Intellectuals. Growing up, they were painfully aware of their marginalization from American society. William Barrett, Norman Podhoretz and Alfred Kazin all wrote about the symbolic weight that the separation between Brooklyn (“Brunzvil”) and Manhattan carried in their youth. Indeed, the first lines of Making It are: “One of the longest journeys in the world is the journey from Brooklyn to Manhattan.”³ Paired with this feeling was the overwhelming sense of community in the Jewish ghettos. Kazin remembered, “In one sense I had a hundred thousand Jewish parents when I grew up in Brownsville.” However, the community that nurtured its sons, protected them and dreamed for them also silently pressured them to succeed.⁴ Kazin verbalized the unspoken pressure he felt from his parents: “It was not for myself alone that I was expected to shine, but for them, to redeem the constant anxiety of their existence. I was the first American child, their offering to the strange new God.”⁵

The radical and socialist traditions that the immigrants brought with them to America were only heightened by the Great Depression. The elder New York Intellectuals found their pre-crash radicalism heightened, whereas the younger students were shaped by the poverty and dislocation of the Depression. Daniel Bell, for instance, recalled that in 1933 he was standing on street corners at the young age of fourteen, championing the socialist position. In addition to what Bloom calls the “education by shock” of their immigrant experience, most of the New York Intellectuals attended City College of New York (CCNY). By the mid-1920s, most American universities restricted the entry of Jewish students. The tuition-free City College was essentially the Intellectuals’ only option for higher education and was therefore a continuation of their past

⁵ Alfred Kazin, A Walker in the City, 21-22.
lives in the ghetto. The intensity and competitiveness of the classroom provided a natural arena for the street-smart confidence they had developed in the immigrant neighborhoods. Only Meyer Schapiro, Lionel Trilling and Diana Trilling, then Diana Rubin, were admitted to Columbia and Radcliffe before the restrictions. Philip Rahv, on the other hand, never went to college. In his memoirs, *The Truants*, William Barrett wrote that Rahv’s only alma mater was the public library at Jackson Square.

The budding Intellectuals participated in the flourishing of radical activity on the Left in Depression-era America. For the younger CCNY graduates, the 1930s coincided with a coming of age. Daniel Bell, for instance, recalled that joining the Young People’s Socialist League felt more meaningful than his bar mitzvah had. A number of the New York Intellectuals initially supported the Communist Party, but as the 1930s unfolded, they grew disenchanted with Stalinism. In 1934, *Partisan Review* was founded by the John Reed Club of New York, a cultural extension of the Communist Party. Over the next two years, however, its main editors, Philip Rahv and William Philips, grew increasingly disturbed by reports concerning Stalin’s regime and frustrated with the Party’s approach to culture, represented by a commitment to formulaic “proletarian literature” and the Comintern’s Popular Front policy. By the end of 1936, they terminated their association with the Communist Party and decided to relaunch the magazine on independent footing.


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from Yale who offered financial support. It was founded on a dual commitment to anti-Stalinist Marxism and cultural Modernism, that curious marriage of T.S Eliot and Leon Trotsky.\textsuperscript{10} Partisan Review is representative of the New York Intellectuals’ heyday because the magazine and its editors resided in an interstitial space where intellectuals could construct an independent identity for themselves. Indeed, they belonged neither to normative American institutions nor to the dominant counter-institution, the Communist Party.

This liminal space allowed the New York Intellectuals to see themselves as members of an autonomous vanguard and to use PR to define and validate a communal identity and program. The magazine acquired some of the characteristics of an institution: it registered the community’s concerns, regulated entry and standing in its orbit, and generally served as an emblem of their collective standing in the wider world. Indeed, its book reviews canonized works that upheld the core tenets of Marxism and Modernism while disparaging or ignoring those that failed to. The correspondence section entertained polemics, \textit{ad hominem} attacks and theoretical disputations alike.\textsuperscript{11} By the time some of the younger Intellectuals came of age, publishing in PR was the \textit{sine qua non} of acceptance within the group. In Making It, Podhoretz recounts the day he received a phone call from one of the two Patriarchs: “I remember, before the whole world started to swim, Rahv saying (‘Today you are a man’) that he wanted me to write for Partisan Review” and the ensuing “bar mitzvah ceremony in the Greenwich Village apartment of the Rahvs.”\textsuperscript{12}

Podhoretz’s testimony speaks volumes to the importance of Partisan Review in defining the New York Intellectuals. However, the fact that Podhoretz is a neoconservative voice in


\textsuperscript{11} Hugh Wilford, \textit{The New York Intellectuals: from Vanguard to Institution} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 33, 38.

\textsuperscript{12} Norman Podhoretz, \textit{Making It}, 166-167.
American politics today is a good way to turn to the unraveling of the New York Intellectuals. During the war, the editorial board of *PR* was fraught with discord, Rahv and Phillips backing the Allies and Macdonald advancing a steadfast anti-war position. Macdonald’s path is the subject of this paper, so the significant point here is that endorsing the war was the editors’ first commitment to American government policy and to the maintenance of American society as it existed.\(^{13}\) Although representing but one position among years of wartime polemics, the Patriarchs’ support of the war is symptomatic of the New York Intellectuals’ evolution in the postwar years, from vanguard to institution.

This last phrase is borrowed from Hugh Wilford, whose *New York Intellectuals* analyzes the institutionalization of the once-marginalized radicals. Wilford traces the evolution of *PR* to identify the economic and social pressures that eroded the unique locus occupied by the Intellectuals in their heyday. Wilford quotes Barrett’s memoirs: “Somehow in the loose-jointed society of America during the Great Depression there was enough open space so that a little magazine could be launched, without institutional ties or backing, and manage somehow to stumble along financially on a shoestring from issue to issue.”\(^{14}\) Wilford explains the movement from vanguard to institution by the disappearance of this open space. After the war, while printing and living costs soared in New York City, individual patrons became scarce if not extinct. At the same time, universities, foundations and publishing houses offered their support to the renowned publications of the New York literati. The Intellectuals essentially relinquished their autonomy in order to survive. Indeed, Morris funded *Partisan Review* only until 1938, although the editors were able to secure two relatively *laissez faire* patrons until 1951. In 1947, the last patron moved the *PR* offices from Greenwich Village to 45\(^{th}\) and Broadway. This was

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\(^{13}\) Alexander Bloom, *Prodigal Sons*, 131.
evidently a symbolic move from the territory of the avant-garde to that of commercial publishing, where Rahv would act as an intermediary for publishing houses engaged in the marketing of experimental and highbrow literature. In 1957, Rahv became a professor at Brandeis University, followed by Phillips who jointed Rutgers in 1963, and arranged to have PR affiliated with the university.\(^{15}\)

This narrative is replicated by the majority of the New York Intellectuals’ magazines, and indeed the Intellectuals themselves. Their movement from vanguard to institution can be explained by ethnic assimilation in addition to economic pressures. In the postwar years, the very society that had scorned them, and they once scorned, appeared much more hospitable. As Daniel Bell wrote in *The End of Ideology*, “the American Intellectuals found new virtues in the United States because of its pluralism, the acceptance of the Welfare State, the spread of education and the expanding opportunities for intellectual employment.”\(^{16}\) Indeed, the decline of anti-Semitism in academia allowed many of them to take positions in universities, where their knowledge of Modernism was suited to the recent incorporation of Joyce and Eliot in literary cannons and curricula.\(^{17}\) In addition to the *PR* editors already mentioned, Sidney Hook became the head of New York University philosophy department, Lionel Trilling was the first tenured Jewish professor in the English department at Columbia while Daniel Bell and Meyer Schapiro joined, respectively, the sociology and art history departments at Columbia then Harvard. Beyond campus boundaries, Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg became the two most important art critics in postwar America while Alfred Kazin was one of the best known literary critics.

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\(^{15}\) Hugh Wilford, *The New York Intellectuals*, 52, 121.


As the New York Intellectuals took their places in the cultural elite,\(^{18}\) the way they viewed themselves in relation to America drastically changed. *Partisan Review*’s 1952 “Our Country and Our Culture” symposium demonstrated the shift in perspective. The editors declared: “More and more writers have ceased to think of themselves as rebels and exiles. They now believe that their values, if they are to be realized at all, must be realized in America and in relation to the actuality of American life.”\(^{19}\) In their movement from the periphery of society to its center, the New York Intellectuals revisited their earlier tenets and attempted to reconcile the essential elements of 1930s radicalism with postwar America. Chiefly, their Marxism gave way to more centrist views influenced by Lionel Trilling’s *The Liberal Imagination* and Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s *The Vital Center*, two seminal works that championed liberalism. Liberalism presented an adapted version of their pre-war stance since it combined anti-Stalinism with their newfound affirmation of the American way of life. In the 1950s, the New York Intellectuals saw themselves creating a “vital center,” offsetting both powerful forces on the right and the threat of Communism at home and abroad.\(^{20}\)

The last part of the New York Intellectuals’ institutionalization is their role in American cultural diplomacy, notably the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF). The State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency turned to the world of arts and letters to wage the ideological front of the Cold War. By showcasing American culture abroad, the Cold Warriors sought to prove the superiority of the American system and especially dispel views of American provincialism in the Soviet Union and Europe alike. Many of the New York Intellectuals participated in the American Committee for Cultural Freedom (ACCF), the CCF’s American affiliate. The irony of the New York Intellectuals unwittingly being used by the CIA is that their

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\(^{18}\) Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology*, 314.


organizational activities of the 1930s and 1940s inspired the American cultural diplomacy programs. Indeed, in March 1949, Sidney Hook led an ad hoc opposition group to the Waldorf Conference, one of the Soviet Union’s first propaganda offensives. The self-proclaimed “Americans for Intellectual Freedom” caught the eye of Michael Josselson at the Central Intelligence Agency and became the model for the Congress for Cultural Freedom.21

Wilford’s multiple works on cultural diplomacy offer a nuanced analysis of the intellectuals’ role in the CCF. As Peter Coleman, an Australian historian and CCF participant noted, “at a unique historical moment, there developed a convergence, almost to the point of identity, between the assessments and agenda of the “NCL” [Non-Communist Left, the CIA’s sobriquet for the] intellectuals and that combination of Ivy League, anglophile, liberal can-do gentlemen, academics and idealists who constituted the new CIA.”22 Wilford argues the difference between convergence and identity, emphasizing both parties – CIA and intellectuals – sought to use the other to their own ends. The ACCF disparaged the CCF’s emphasis on culture over politics and argued that Soviet propaganda should be answered in kind. The CIA had initially endorsed the ACCF to create the impression of American participation in the European operation, but the New York Intellectuals exasperated the European masthead with their vocal polemics. Wilford notes the continual tension between autonomy and institution, but adeptly concludes that the ease with which the Intellectuals were recruited into the Cultural Cold War shows the weakness of their position, “caught in the process of institutional recuperation …

[and] guilty of a failure of imagination that prevented them from thinking of a radical alternative to the vanguard role of Marxist-Leninist revolutionary or Cultural Cold Warrior.”

This brief overview of the New York Intellectuals offers a backdrop and context within which to understand Dwight Macdonald. Chiefly, Macdonald does not quite fit into the narrative described above. As the recent *The New York Public Intellectuals and Beyond* anthology notes, “Dwight Macdonald had the (perhaps questionable) distinction of being cast … as the “typical New York Intellectual. Yet he is probably the most unusual candidate within their group for that dubious honor.” Indeed, he shared with them a commitment to anti-Stalinism and Modernism around *Partisan Review* and had personal relations with them, but, succinctly put, he was not a *Prodigal Son*. He did not receive the “education by shock” of Brownsville nor did he seek to “make it” in a society he had once been marginalized from. With Mary McCarthy, Edmund Wilson and William Barrett, Macdonald formed the small Gentile contingent of the group, adding a dimension of complexity to the snapshot offered above.

Macdonald and his peers intrinsically recognized these differences. In the introduction to his *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, Macdonald admitted, “I came late to the revolutionary movement … many of my Trotskyist comrades had begun handing out leaflets and marching in May Day parades while they were in short pants.” Although he joined the ranks of *Partisan Review*, he referred to Williams and Phillips at the “PR Boys,” implying that he himself was not one. William Barrett recorded Dwight’s departure from *PR* as “quitting the fold,” while also noting that Macdonald would barge into editorial meetings, “and plunge into argument with everyone.

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25 Macdonald served as the model for Mary McCarthy’s essay “Portrait of an Intellectual as a Yale Man” in *Company She Keeps*.
Outnumbered and outgunned in such arguments, Macdonald nevertheless seemed to be in his
element and thoroughly enjoying himself.”

Dwight belonged to the New York Intellectuals, he
undoubtedly was one of their most prominent members. Yet, he moved freely in and out of their
unfolding narrative, a far cry from Podhoretz, for instance, who recalled that when he was
offered the editor position at *Commentary*, he was ready “as a man is to embrace his destiny if he
is lucky enough to find it.”

With the establishment of *politics* in 1944, Macdonald established his own family, the
*politics* circle. In secondary literature, his magazine is pitted against the trajectory of the New
York Intellectuals. Hugh Wilford conceptualizes *politics* as “post-modern possibilities” in
contrast to *PR*’s institutionalization, while Gregory Sumner analyzes “the challenge of
cosmopolitan democracy” in his detailed study of *Dwight Macdonald and the politics circle*.
Indeed, *politics*’ international character sets it apart from the rest of the New York literary world.
Two decades after its demise, Macdonald described *politics* as an “Italian-American co-
production,” referring to his remarkable partnership with Nicola Chiaromonte at the heart of the
journal’s transatlantic community. Chiaromonte was an antifascist writer who fled Mussolini’s
Italy in 1934 and immersed himself in the exile community in Paris centered around the
antifascist group *Giustizia e Liberta*. He felt duty bound to go to Spain in 1936 to fight on the
side of the Republic, where he served in André Malraux’s air squadron. Chiaromonte was the
inspiration for the character Scali in Malraux’s *L’Espoir*, the intellectual out of place in a world
of ruthless action, always reading Plato and raising ethical questions. As Paris fell to the Nazis in
1940, Chiaromonte joined the flood of refugees fleeing to the unoccupied south. After stopping
in Toulouse, Algeria (where he met Albert Camus) and Casablanca, he eventually reached New

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York City in 1941. He met Macdonald soon after his arrival and contributed his experience, insights and contact with European refugees to politics.\textsuperscript{29}

Sumner offers great detail about the various refugee writers who became associated with politics. Chiaromonte’s story alone suggests how distinct Macdonald’s community was from that of the \textit{Partisan Review}. If the latter embodied the marginalized immigrant experience of the 1920s and 30s, the former was a rallying point for the “Resistance generation” in Europe – and Americans such as Macdonald who asserted a similar critique of modernity based on their exposure to totalitarianism in the 1930s and 1940s. In this way, Sumner defines politics as a bridge between Europe and America, and pointing to the legacy of Macdonald’s ideas in the 1960s, a bridge between the Old Left and the New Left.\textsuperscript{30}

This paper does not claim to offer a complete study of Dwight Macdonald – I am indebted to Michael Wreszin’s formidable biography as well as his published anthologies of correspondence and interviews. Rather, I seek to trace the remarkable persistence of Macdonald’s radical writing and thinking from the 1940s to the 1960s. One more biographical note relevant here is that although Macdonald was born into an upper middle class family, he experienced the same financial pressures as his peers. His family lost most of their savings during the Depression and after his father’s death in 1926, Dwight had to support his mother. politics struggled financially for most of its existence and folded due to a lack on funds. Macdonald struggled financially throughout his life, so that when he arranged for Yale to archive his papers in 1974, Dwight was less concerned about his legacy than the much-needed $15,000.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{29} Gregory Sumner, \textit{Dwight Macdonald and the politics Circle}, 27-29.
\textsuperscript{30} Gregory Sumner, \textit{Dwight Macdonald and the politics Circle}, 3.
That is to say, faced with some of the same constraints as his peers, Macdonald never lost the anarchist tendency to unapologetically question institutions. Perhaps because he was not wedded to the temporally-specific immigrant narrative of his peers, he had the imagination and courage to pursue unanswered questions for nearly half a century. In his study of the New York Intellectuals, Neil Jumonville picks up on this eccentric quality: “Macdonald was an emissary from the early radical tradition. Had he been born a few years earlier he might have been an Imagist Poet, voted for Debs, read Mencken, and traveled with Harold Stearns to France.”

John Lukacs, historian and a friend of Dwight’s, also likened Macdonald to H. L. Mencken, in that he was “an American in the individualist tradition.”

In the Truants, William Barrett wrote of Macdonald: he “pursued politics with a passion and purity that were all his own … a kind of Don Quixote or Galahad, alternatively tilting at windmills or in quest of the Holy Grail.” I embrace this metaphor and seek to redeem Macdonald as a sort of Quixote who inhabited the heart of the American Century. Indeed, Macdonald was often better at posing questions than answering them and never was able to fix down his thoughts and write a book “in cold blood.” Yet, his propensity to question the world around him instead of submitting to it and “his extraordinary flair for significant fact and significant thought” made him a unique presence in American society from the Great Depression to Watergate.

33 John Rodden, “Memorial for a Revolutionist,” in The New York Public Intellectuals and Beyond, ed. Ethan Goffman and Daniel Morris, 94.
Chapter 1
*politics : commentary*

Dwight Macdonald reacted to the economic, political and social transformations that threatened the vanguard position of the New York Intellectuals in a different way than his contemporaries. Considering that Macdonald held himself as a distance from mainstream American society and was often very critical of it, an interesting way to embark on the analysis of his political writings is to quote his obituary in the *New York Times* on December 20, 1982. The writer quips: “He set out as a Stalinist, but then passed through Trotskyism, anarchism and pacifism and often seemed like a one-man anti-Communist Left movement all by himself. He was too much of an individualist and inborn skeptic to be beholden to any confining ideology for long.”\(^{37}\) This chapter’s discussion of *politics* will demonstrate that this epigraph is both true and false. Macdonald did indeed travel across the spectrum of Left politics and attempted though his magazine to create a radical niche outside of it.

His evolution, however, had little to do with “inborn skepticism” but instead denoted a critical reaction to the international power politics of the mid-1940s. At a time where few political commentators held the American war effort to much scrutiny and many intellectuals on the Left became Soviet apologists, Macdonald consistently offered lucid analyses of both sides of the conflict. This chapter will discuss *politics*’ observations on international and domestic events, while also examining Macdonald’s evolution from Marxism to radical meta-criticism, commentary that posits itself as a necessary and moral action within the global crises of World War II.

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From PR to politics

The most striking part of Macdonald’s political and intellectual progression is its atypical starting point: young Dwight graduated from Philips Exeter Academy in 1924 and Yale University in 1928. After a brief stint at Macy’s executive training program that convinced him of the corruption of marketplace values, Macdonald became a staff writer for the newly-established *Fortune*. Over the course of the 1930s, several factors prompted Macdonald’s political awakening, being part of Henry Luce’s empire during the Depression not the least of them. Macdonald’s marriage to Nancy Rodman in 1934 prompted his introduction to the leftist political activity of 1930s New York City. In a letter to Dinsmore Wheeler, a close friend from Exeter, Dwight wrote of Nancy, “she’s a sweet girl, even if she does let me in for drearily long-winded left-wing political meetings.” Soon thereafter, Dwight was immersed in the reading of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky, and was at loggerheads with Luce over *Fortune*’s lack of social consciousness. In 1936, he resigned over editorial disagreement regarding leftist tones in an article about U.S. Steel, and joined the newly-independent *Partisan Review* as an editor.

Although Dwight Macdonald initially entered the world of the New York Intellectuals as a Soviet sympathizer, or “fellow traveler,” he quickly became disenchanted with Stalinism and the American Communist Party. It is important to note that Macdonald’s rejection of these two entities were founded on slightly different critiques. On the one hand, the Moscow Trials of 1936-1937 dispelled any illusions of the nature of Stalinism and prompted Macdonald to rally to the defense of Leon Trotsky. On the other, although he acknowledged that the CPUSA was useful in calling attention to the shortcomings and contradictions of the capitalist system, its

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40 Dwight Macdonald to Nancy Rodman, July 20, 1934, in *A Moral Temper*, 49.
“dogmatism and the insistence on explaining everything by one system of thought” repelled him. Macdonald later described his decision to join the Trotskyists as a moral choice rather than an intellectual one.\footnote{Dwight Macdonald, \textit{Memoirs of a Revolutionist} (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), 17.} Although this distinction is perhaps a matter of emphasis, it elucidates Macdonald’s \textit{modus operandi} as both a political commentator and an ethicist – two roles which for him were inextricably intertwined.

Dwight contributed cultural and political articles to \textit{Partisan Review}, taking up the magazine’s dual tenets of anti-Stalinism and Modernism. His reaction to the outbreak of World War II demonstrates his Marxist methods of analysis. Macdonald collapsed the differences between fascism and capitalism, arguing that Allied leaders recognized in their Axis counterparts the exploitative tendencies of their own class system drawn out to their ultimate conclusion.\footnote{Dwight Macdonald, “Socialism and National Defense,” \textit{Partisan Review} 7 (1940): 252-3.} In addition, Macdonald invoked rhetoric of decay and historical determinism to analyze the emergence of fascism. Calling attention to Hitler’s use of German capitalism to sustain the Third Reich, Macdonald concluded that Nazism was neither socialism nor capitalism but “bureaucratic collectivism,” a term coined by the Italian political theorist Bruno Rizzi.\footnote{Dwight Macdonald, \textit{Memoirs of a Revolutionist}, 20.} Macdonald attributed the current state of affairs to the working class’ failure to lead a revolution: “unable to birth a natural child, history has whelped the monster, fascism, which combines the centralized state power and conscious economic planning of socialism with the most hideous social and political features of decaying capitalism.”\footnote{Dwight Macdonald, “Socialism and National Defense,” \textit{Partisan Review} 7 (1940): 251, 253, 255.}

Macdonald propounded that \textit{Partisan Review} take a stand against the surging tide of war hysteria. With Clement Greenberg, he published “Ten Propositions on the War” that outlined their refusal to support the Allies and their Trotskyist Third Camp position. Conceding that
fascism was “less desirable” that democracy, the authors declared that the real issue at hand was “not war but revolution.” Insisting that bourgeois capitalism was no match for the centralized efficiency of the Nazi war machine, Macdonald argued that only a class whose interests coincided with the organization of a planned economy could win the war. He envisioned that the masses of the world would unite in a common destiny, take revolutionary action against the belligerents and replace conflict with social progress. Philip Rahv replied with “Ten Propositions and Eight Errors,” condemning Greenberg and Macdonald for their “sheer romanticism” and “academic revolutionism.” He dismissed their program as a worn-out Leninist-Luxembourguian amalgam and affirmed that an Allied victory was the pre-condition of any progressive action in the future.

Macdonald’s tenure as a Trotskyist was short-lived, and the articles quoted above stand out against the rest of his political writing. If 1934 marked Macdonald’s political awakening, the early 1940s indicated his coming to political maturity with a break from PR and Trotsky. Macdonald repudiated Trotskyism due to perceived shortcomings in the movement’s theory and practice. He esteemed that Trotsky had “probed deeply and boldly and yet did not go deep enough,” and that his political thinking became obsolete when it failed to cope with new forms of class rule in interwar Russia and Germany. Macdonald criticized Trotsky for failing to reshape classical Marxist formulae to the current situation, and for neglecting to make the Marxist canon an object of scrutiny in itself. In addition, Macdonald rejected the movement as institutionalized through James P. Cannon’s Socialist Workers Party in the United States. Macdonald briefly participated in the SWP – under the party alias “James Joyce” – and was

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revolted by its hierarchical practices and narrow-minded orthodoxy. His break with the SWP in 1941 heralded an important shift that opened the politics era. Indeed, his resignation letter stated that “the replacement of capitalism with collectivized property form is only part – and perhaps no longer even the major part – of the task of social revolution today.”

As suggested above, World War II put pressure on the editorial board of Partisan Review. William Philips and Philip Rahv supported America’s participation in an anti-Nazi coalition while Macdonald advocated a Third Camp position. Furthermore, Macdonald condemned the tendency to eliminate discussion from PR’s pages. In addition to the lack of consensus among the editors, Rahv and Philips feared that the government would shut down the magazine if it took an antiwar position. Having worked so hard to establish the place of Partisan Review in American society, they considered the risks of opposition to the war too great. Armed with reservations about institutionalized Leftist politics and vehemently against the war, Macdonald resigned from Partisan Review in the summer of 1943 to create his own journal and niche: politics.

A new magazine

In February 1944, the first issue of politics appeared in newsstands with Dwight as the editor and Nancy as the business manager. The founding editorial boldly stated the magazine’s aim to “create a center of consciousness on the Left,” to bring together those who were critical of existing institutions and felt the need for radical change. In a July 1944 editorial, Macdonald

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49 Dwight Macdonald to the officials of the Workers Party, July 1, 1941, in A Moral Temper, 104.
equated thinking radically with thinking deeply. In a sense, this comparison encompasses the essence of dissent of the politics years. Macdonald resisted the wartime “national unity” discourse in the United States and offered lucid and unapologetic criticism of the Allies and Axis alike. The implications of his observations forced him to deconstruct inherited theoretical frameworks. Like his peers, he moved away from orthodox Marxism over the course of the 1940s. However, in contrast to their “exhaustion of political ideas,” Macdonald assembled his own usable radical tradition out of strains of anarchist, syndicalist and pacifist thought.

Commentary

Although Macdonald left Trotskyism behind when he left Partisan Review, he remained a vocal critic of the American war effort. It should be noted that this emphasis did not denote an implicit favoring of an existing alternative. Rather, Macdonald’s analyses sought to strip away the liberal veneer of the American system and reveal its objectionable realities. Indeed, he readily compared the USA and the USSR as unjust societies governed by imperialistic, militaristic and repressive States, noting that the difference between them was one of degree, “the above unpleasantness … carried a great deal farther” in the latter.

Macdonald first condemned the increasing politicization of labor relations – and the failure of the American working class to react positively to these changes. With the War Production Board laying out the blueprint for peacetime cooperation between industry and the armed services, Macdonald announced with much acuity the establishment of a “permanent war economy” in the United States. Foreseeing that control would lie in the hands of Big Business

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and politicians, he proposed a new model of class war. Instead of a traditional Marxist two-party struggle, the current state of affairs reflected a “three-cornered conflict between capital, labor and Government” in which the State, not management, was labor’s chief antagonist.\textsuperscript{56} Furthermore, Macdonald disparaged the American working-class for being co-opted into this new system. Responding to a reader who criticized politics’ reservations about capital-labor relations, Macdonald retorted: "I am not aloof from the class struggle. The class struggle is aloof from me."\textsuperscript{57}

He argued that unions were becoming integrated into the capitalist structure instead of pursuing political action independent of the major parties. At the 1944 Democratic Convention, the CIO’s Political Action Committee was instrumental as a pressure group for Henry Wallace’s vice-presidential nomination – and subsequently pledged its allegiance to the Roosevelt-Truman ticket when its interests were disregarded. Macdonald’s satirical tone denotes his contempt for the weak politics of the CIO: “the bogus nature of the whole struggle was revealed in the comments by the PAC leaders and by Wallace after the battle was lost. After having inflated the issue to the dimensions of Armageddon and given thousands of honest liblabs [liberal-labor] gooseflesh at the horrid consequences to human progress of a Democratic ticket in 1944 without Wallace, the leaders of the crusade, once the votes were in, swallowed hard, grinned, and said that Truman was a wonderful fellow, too.”\textsuperscript{58} Events such as this one persuaded Macdonald that the American working class was not an agent of social change. He dolefully noted in 1944: “our best hope for a better or even a humanely tolerable world after the war is for the common people to take things in their own hands in a series of popular revolutions which will be socialist as to

economics and democratic as to politics. The chances of anything like that happening in this country in the foreseeable future would seem to be as close to nil as at any time in our history.”

Other issues further alienated Macdonald from the working class, such as hate strikes against black workers in Philadelphia and unions considering atomic weapons solely as a source of jobs – the CIO even objecting to picketing for fear of losing its tolerated status within the War Department. In stark contrast to the battle cries of the “Ten Propositions,” Macdonald stated in 1946 that “the Radical can no longer assume that the labor movement is on his side.”

Macdonald also recorded the deplorable state of civil liberties in wartime America. He documented the Supreme Court’s refusal to review two contentious cases relating to new legislation. The first instance pertained to the Draft Act of 1940 that prohibited racial discrimination in the selection of draftees. Winfred Lynn, a black soldier, applied for a writ of habeas corpus to release him from the Army on the grounds that he was illegally selected under an all-black draft quota. Macdonald reprinted Lynn’s brief to the New York Court of Appeals in “Free and Equal,” a regular politics column devoted to race relations. It concluded: “How shabby is the conduct of an agency of the government which bends all effort to aid in establishing the ‘Four Freedoms’ abroad while maintaining a rigid barrier to achieving them at home!”

The Supreme Court’s refusal to review the case only heightened Macdonald’s condemnations of the government’s hypocrisy. He became involved in A. Philip Randolph’s March on Washington Movement and published a pamphlet on the topic, entitled “The War’s Greatest Scandal: The Story of Jim Crow in Uniform.”

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Secondly, Macdonald described the Smith-Connally Act of 1943, which allowed the federal government to seize industries threatened by strikes that would interfere with war production, as the most vicious attack on civil liberties since the Alien and Sedition Act of 1798. *politics* reported on the Act’s first case, in which eighteen Socialist Workers Party and union members were found guilty of charges as vague as “conspiracy to advocate overthrow of the government by force and violence” and “counseling insubordination in the armed forces.” The Supreme Court refused to review the conviction despite doubts about its constitutionality, and the “encyclopedic *N.Y. Times*” failed to print news about the incident. Macdonald was also critical of *The New Republic*’s coverage, which labeled the event “inexplicable.”

Liblab publications such as *The New Republic*, *The New Leader* and *PM* irked Macdonald to no end for shirking polemical judgments in the face of blatant transgressions. On the one hand he mocked them, offering an explication of his own. The “liblab Court is much slicker: Petition Denied. And the Trotskyists go to jail, the colored draftees continue to be jimcrowed. No fuss, no complications, and above all, nothing on the record. Who says the New Deal has no future?”

On the other hand, Macdonald gravely regarded such feeble commentary as irresponsible. In fine, Macdonald was alarmed by the dismal political landscape of the mid-1940s. He noted that President Roosevelt increasingly engaged with militaristic discourse, portraying himself as a Commander-in-Chief who had no right to leave his post in the context of the 1944 election; Macdonald commented: “the idea that The Leader is above politics because he is the servant of the people – here reinforced by the military appeal – is the essence of totalitarian politics.”

With regard to foreign affairs, Macdonald’s examination of Allied strategy in Europe exposed the undemocratic practices of the alleged liberators. Editorials traced the discrepancy

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64 Dwight Macdonald, “Hail to the Commander-in-Chief!” *politics* 1 (1944): 195.
between the United States and Britain’s lofty rhetoric and their self-interested policies. For instance, neither the terms of the armistice on which Italy surrendered nor the State Department blueprint for the Dumbarton Oaks conference were made public, prompting Macdonald to ask, whither Wilson’s “open covenants, openly arrived at?” politics was especially critical of the Allies’ treatment of independent popular movements, showing that it disregarded the promised national self-determination of the Atlantic Charter. After the liberation of Paris, the American command allowed captured German soldiers to keep their weapons, lest they fall in the hands in the French frans-tireurs which counted many communists in its ranks. Roosevelt also looked coldly on Charles de Gaulle and delayed formal recognition of his government, purportedly to give the French people a chance to freely choose their government. Macdonald argued that Roosevelt’s attitude was strategically motivated, since de Gaulle would hardly be docile and allow Anglo-American intervention in postwar French politics.

For Macdonald, the series of conferences that determined the power structure of the post-war world were quintessential of these patterns. politics ran two series on Poland and Greece that described the carving out of Europe between the emerging Cold War hegemons, whereby “England was to get a free hand in Greece and Italy in return for Russian dominance in Poland, Central Europe and the Balkans.” In Warsaw, the Kremlin orchestrated an insurrection of the Polish Resistance against the Germans by implying that Soviet support would be forthcoming if such an uprising were initiated. However, the Kremlin halted the Red Army for six weeks at the city’s gates while the Germans battered the Resistance forces to pieces. While this tactic was clearly devised to eliminate post-war Polish leadership and secure Soviet domination in the country, not a word of criticism was heard from Downing Street or Washington. Macdonald

stands out as both an exceptional editor in his collection of facts and an admirable commentator, unapologetically revealing the corruption of official slogans. He rebuked President Roosevelt’s claim that he was unaware of the arrangement in an satirical editorial: “Roosevelt is said to have been temporarily absent – perhaps in search of the Men’s Room – while Churchill and Stalin cooked up their deal. If he had heard word of it, we may be sure that he would have put a speedy end to such shenanigans, so characteristic of European power-politics and so happily unknown in our own foreign policy.”

When The Nation reported “we’ll know the truth in a hundred years; until then, we must suspend judgment” and The New Republic barely covered the uprising, Macdonald dismissed these magazines as the “perfect specimen of liblab evasion.”

With respect to Greece, Macdonald offered month-by-month documentation of Britain’s machinations to eliminate EAM, the popular left-wing resistance group, from postwar Greek politics. Although EAM was eager to enter into a coalition government with the liberal Papandreou government, Downing Street vetoed two compromises that the Greeks reached among themselves. Furthermore, the British cast EAM and its military arm ELAS, as antagonists of the Greek people. Under the pretext of preventing a coup, Churchill ordered a military intervention, relocating the Allied military commander in the Mediterranean “away from the trivial job of fighting the Germans in Italy” to direct operations against ELAS. Macdonald described Athens and Warsaw as illustrations of the “real character of this war and the real aims of ‘our’ political leaders.” Published dispatches from Athens even put the Allied liberators on par with the Germans, dolefully commenting on the Royal Air Force strafing of ELAS forces: “the Nazis never used planes.”

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Macdonald’s discussion of Germany further drew analogies between the Allies and the Axis. Four decades before W.G. Sebald’s *On the Natural History of Destruction*, *politics* reported on Allied saturation bombing of German cities. Macdonald noted in May 1945 that for every ton the Germans had hurled at Britain by bomber plane or v-bomb, they received 315 tons in return.\(^{70}\) In January 1946, *politics* published epistolary accounts of “The Last Days of Berlin” that recounted the respective horrors committed by Nazi, Anglo-American and Soviet forces. First, the Brown Terror (from SA’s shirts and the national militia’s armbands): soldiers and civilians hanging from streetlamps all along the Friedrichstrasse for charges of treason. Second, the Red Terror: plundering and systematic rape to the extent that “one would simply not believe it if a young woman said she had not been raped.” And finally, Terror in the Air, such as an Allied air attack in February 1945 that left 50,000 Berliners dead in 45 minutes.\(^{71}\) Macdonald also stated that for obvious reasons little had appeared in the domestic press about American looting in Europe while a great deal had been printed on the Red Army. Publishing testimonies from American, Canadian and British commanders, *politics* offered evidence that Allied soldiers also engaged in plunder and rape.\(^{72}\)

Macdonald’s paramount condemnation was directed at American aid policy. In addition to the abrupt termination of the Lend-Lease agreement, the United States was slow to deliver foodstuffs to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). Military and civilian markets were put ahead of pledges to UNRRA, although American contributions counted for 75% of the program. Furthermore, while Europe faced mass starvation, food production reached record heights in 1945, and was planned to be reduced in 1946 to protect prices. According to *Time*, the USA had sent “liberated” Europe only 10% of the food and

supplies that had been furnished to “enslaved” Europe by the Nazis. Macdonald decried that the “self-styled 'antifascist' victors will have perpetuated a horror on a scale approaching if not exceeding anything the Nazis ever did.”\textsuperscript{73} \textit{politics} published letters sent from Berlin that described scenes at the railway station “being like Belsen all over again – carts taking the dead [here, wandering refugees expelled from the territories ceded to Russia] from the platform.” Macdonald’s denunciation compared the United States to the Nazis (“the Nazis were less hypocritical”) and Stalin (“the kulaks in 1932, the political opposition in 1937-8 […]thus we are now treating the people of Germany.”) Above all, Macdonald likened the United States to Pontius Pilate, “who permitted injustice not because he profited from it directly but simply because it was more expedient” and concluded: “it will take a great deal of water, more than we can ever get, to wash from our hands the blood of the X millions of Germans who will perish this winter because of our expedient indifference.”\textsuperscript{74}

\textit{Ethics After Hiroshima}

In addition to critically reporting on American war policies, Dwight was deeply affected by the conflict. He broke definitively with socialism and used \textit{politics} to pursue ethical questions. It was almost as though Dwight’s Marxist interlude, while whetting his critical tools, had been an intellectual burden. In the wake of the Holocaust and Hiroshima, it could be abandoned along with the articles of faith that accompanied it, chiefly the revolutionary potential of the masses, class conflict, the historicity that promised a socialist future, devotion to scientific rationalism

and the notion of inevitable human progress. All this could now be openly challenged in the name of a realistic, rebellious, resistant individualism and anarchic anti-statism.\textsuperscript{75}

In the introduction to his essay “The Responsibility of Peoples,” Macdonald wrote of the war: “What does it mean about our civilization, our whole system of values? This is the great moral question of our times.”\textsuperscript{76} The role of modern technology in the war prompted Macdonald to question Enlightenment faith in progress, reason and scientific materialism. Indeed, the real horror of the death camps was that they represented the pinnacle of twentieth century society rather than a nightmarish aberration from it. Macdonald portrayed the Nazi death camps as “rationality and system gone mad.” In enclaves as efficient as the Chicago stockyards, modern science and business organization were applied to ends so perverse that reality had caught up with Kafka’s imagination. Macdonald referred to “In The Penal Colony,” in which the prisoners’ sentences were tattooed on their bodies, as one of these disturbing similarities. He concluded of the death camps: “it all reads like a sinister parody of Victorian illusions about scientific method and the desirability in itself of man's learning to control his environment. The environment was controlled at Maidanek. It was the human beings who ran amok.”\textsuperscript{77}

The dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the second seminal event that prompted Macdonald to reject the concept of teleological progress – the locus of both Enlightenment thought and Marxism. On the cover of the August 1945 issue of \textit{politics}, a last-minute editorial read: “this atrocious action places ‘us,’ the defenders of civilization, on a moral level with ‘them,’ the beasts of Maidanek.” He declared to his readers: “THE CONCEPTS ‘WAR’ AND ‘PROGRESS’ ARE NOW OBSOLETE. Both suggest human aspirations,

\textsuperscript{75} This passage is highly indebted to Michael Wreszin, \textit{A Rebel in Defense of Tradition: The Life and politics of Dwight Macdonald} (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 165.


emotions, aims, consciousness.” Macdonald viewed the Bomb as the product of American society, “as easy, normal and unforced an expression of the American Standard as electric iceboxes.”

President Truman’s effort to depict atomic weapons as a national collaboration between science, industry, the military and labor only confirmed Macdonald’s dismal outlook. “The effort to ‘humanize’ the Bomb by showing how it fits into our normal, everyday life also cuts the other way: it reveals how inhuman our normal life has become.”

The war also exposed the desolate position of the individual in the era of modern mass politics. Macdonald pointed to the depersonalization of modern warfare, in which aerial and artillery bombardment – “killing by remote control” – removed any sense of the physical effect of attack. He commented: “the psychological and the statistical aspects of modern war move in opposite directions: the more powerful the weapons the greater the slaughter and the less the killer’s consciousness of it.”

Macdonald also evoked the oppressive nature of modern social fabric in terms of hindering individual initiative. To explain why food aid to Europe was reduced to a trickle although a majority of polled Americans favored such help, he asserted that citizens were “not organized so as to make their wishes overbalance the inertia of private-capitalism ways of doing things.”

From such observations, Macdonald offered two conclusions about the direction of modern politics. First, while peoples had less and less control over the policy of their governments, they were becoming increasingly absorbed in these governments’ mechanistic bureaucracies. In other words, “it is not the law-breaker we must fear today so much as he who obeys the law.”

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Second, modern man tended to think of peoples as responsible and individuals as irresponsible, and to attribute the faculties of will and choice to nations rather than to individuals.

Herein lies the crux of Dwight Macdonald’s outlook onto the ravaged world of 1945. Due to the oppressive nature of mass systems, the present task was to relocate political and philosophical discourse to the individual level. Indeed, in discussing the Manhattan Project, Macdonald argued that those who followed their assignments and produced the Bomb “thought of themselves as specialists, technicians, and not as complete men.” Macdonald’s vision of a better future reinstituted an essential holistic quality to human life, for individuals to think and behave as whole Men.  

By forging a project of radical humanism, Macdonald took the ultimate step in his break from Marxist theory. He wrote in June 1946: “serious political activity towards socialism is not now possible on a party or a mass basis … we must begin again in a much more modest, and directly personal, way.” Macdonald’s perspective was influenced by Simone Weil, a French philosopher published in politics. Weil attributed the atrocities of the modern era to the pursuit of absolute mastery, total victory and messianic ideologies. She advocated that an ethic of human limits was essential to a society of equality, solidarity and dialogue. Macdonald echoed Weil in discussing atomic fission in term of hubris, positing that in both cases lack of restraint in success invited the punishment of the gods (a comparison that should also note both Macdonald’s resolute atheism and his affinity for Classical letters).

In light of these discussions, Macdonald put forward an imperative: “to relate ethics to politics – or put differently, the individual to history – is … the most significant task which

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84 Dwight Macdonald to Mr. Ludowyk [politics reader], June 28, 1946, in A Moral Temper, 133.
85 Gregory Sumner, Dwight Macdonald and the politics Circle, 60.
political thought can accomplish.” In *politics*, Macdonald sought to redefine the relation of the State to the individual and to put socialism in dialogue with ethics – as, he argued, anarchist thought had before Marx. In “The Responsibility of Peoples,” Macdonald rejected the attribution of collective guilt to the German people for Nazi war crimes, widespread in 1945 and epitomized by Secretary of State Henry Morgenthau’s plans to transform Germany into a pastoral landscape after the war. Macdonald distinguished Nazi leadership from the German people, arguing that only the former could be held accountable for the Holocaust. However, he posited that the latter group was culpable in another capacity. Especially in comparison with popular Spanish resistance to Franco, Germans were guilty of taking no effective action against National Socialism. In *Why We Fought*, Robert Westbrook argues that Macdonald’s essay failed to take into account “the ‘desk murderers’ who had functioned as part of the machinery of administrative massacre,” later the object of Hannah Arendt’s writings on the Holocaust.

Although Westbrook’s claims may be fitting, Macdonald’s essay retains its importance. Macdonald later wrote that “The Responsibility of Peoples” should not be conceived as a matter of crime and punishment, but one of self-criticism. This comment contextualizes his writing – in “Responsibility” and in the magazine as a whole – within a newly-defined ethical project. It suggests *politics* as an exercise in the ethics Macdonald championed in print. In this way, Macdonald’s *politics* should be interpreted in a two-fold fashion, as criticism and meta-criticism, as critique and moral justification of critique. On the one hand, Macdonald exposed the bankruptcy of modern society and warfare. On the other, he posited his rigorous critique as the only morally acceptable stance in the era of Hiroshima and Auschwitz. In *politics*, Macdonald

90 Robert Westbrook, *Why We Fought*, 119-120.
consistently justified his position against claims of negativism, exemplified by the following question from a reader: “You’re anti-Stalinist, anti-Roosevelt, anti-Churchill, anti-Wallace. What are you pro?” Macdonald defended his uncompromising radicalism against this repeated accusation – “it is precisely because we still believe in the possibility of large-scale progress that we react so violently to the imperfections of the present” – and argued that choosing the lesser of two evils was an act of resignation.

Macdonald also addressed the methodology of political (or indeed any) thinking, pitting his honest and acute commentary against the “illusions and hypocrisies of the liberals and the labor movement.” He regularly condemned the failure of liblab publications to offer meaningful criticism on current events. For instance, Max Lerner of The Nation and PM was a recurrent point of derision (Macdonald labeled him a Futilitarian) and critique. What Macdonald found most depressing was that he disagreed with PM not over values but methods, “on the war as a means to advance social progress, on Roosevelt as a Friend of the People; or, on hysteria and half-truths and evasions and suppressions as a means of propagating democratic values.” Macdonald believed that it was the role and responsibility of the intellectual to challenge established wisdom, practice the fine art of negativism and remain aloof from corrupting power. The irresponsible and weak behavior of those in a position to shape public debate gave Macdonald a dismal outlook onto the American Left and prompted him to pursue his own mission. He wrote: "I have no illusions that politics will overthrow capitalism. But I think it can be a force in American intellectual life … The task now seems to be one primarily of criticism.

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96 Michael Wreszin, A Rebel in Defense of Tradition, 381.
This is in one sense a modest aim, but not in another sense: for the critical analysis of old ideas and institutions is the precondition for the construction of new ones.”

Dwight Macdonald stands out as a critical commentator and a radical humanist. As John Lukacs observed, the choice of every word was not only an aesthetic choice but a moral one. Politics was an oasis in wartime, providing much-lacking information and analysis. Macdonald also brought together soldiers, European intellectuals in exile, Conscientious Objectors and critical Americans of all extractions in a transatlantic community. Chapter 2 will turn to communitarian aspect of the publication, discussing the circle as a theoretical laboratory and as an attempt to enact human-scale interactions within Weil’s “ethics of limit.”

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97 Dwight Macdonald, “‘Here Lies Our Road!’ said Writer to Reader,” politics 1 (1944): 251.
98 Michael Wreszin, introduction to A Moral Temper, xvii.
Chapter 2

politics: community

While politics functioned as a means of expression for Macdonald – “the terrible last years of the war … and the gray dawn of ‘peace’… all of this demanded attention, reporting, exposure, analysis, satire, indignation, lamentation” – it would be misguided to strictly describe the journal as a personal organ. As Hannah Ardent wrote two decades later, politics “was less a one-man magazine than a one-man institution, providing a focal point for many who could no longer fit into any party or group.” Indeed, Macdonald’s project was not solely one of criticism. As outlined by its founding editorial, the objective of politics was to create a center of consciousness on the Left. In this capacity, the magazine functioned as a forum and a vehicle for radicalism aloof from dominant political institutions.

A center of consciousness on the Left

Like many “little magazines,” politics had a small but vocal readership. It began with a circulation of 2,000 which quickly grew to 5,000 where it stayed for most of the magazine’s existence. Macdonald noted from survey prepared by C. Wright Mills that issues regularly passed through more than one pair of hands, prompting him to estimate real readership around 11,500. According to this questionnaire, the readers were mostly young (67% under the age of 35, 22% students), male (81%), college graduates (90%), urban (66%) and without party ties but of an independent socialist bend (52% without party ties – of those belonging to parties: 24% Socialists, 12% Democrats, 4% Republicans and 3% Troskyists).  

The survey also indicated that *politics'* readership overlapped with other publications on the Left. Chiefly, a third of Macdonald’s “fascinated readers” also identified themselves as *Partisan Review* readers. However, these two publications forged relationships with their readers in a completely different way. The editors of *PR* put out a magazine geared towards the community of writers whose work it published rather than its audience. Contributors were encouraged to “talk to their own kind and never mind being unintelligible to the uninitiated.” Furthermore, the editors were so bent on bolstering their Modernist credentials that they snubbed individuals who did not share all of their values and concerns. Editor Philip Rahv contemptuously called those outside the *PR* circle Luftmenschen – men of the air, lacking institutional rooting. Acceptance in the group proved difficult. Paul Goodman, for instance, repeatedly submitted short stories only to have them returned to him with a rejection slip. This systematic neglect was due to his unconventional style and subject matter, as well as his bisexuality. Similarly, *PR* was not interested in the literary innovation of the Beat Generation; rather, the editors were repelled by the younger writers’ unorthodox writing and lifestyle.102

In stark contrast to this closed boys’ club, Macdonald sought to involve his readers as active members of an intellectual community, aiming to appeal “with special force to other individuals of like minds.” Hannah Arendt remarked that the “feeling of companionship among its readers had something almost embarrassingly personal about it” partly because the editor treated “his readers … as his intellectual equals.”103 Indeed, Macdonald affectionately described his readers as a “responsive, irritable” lot “who wrote many letters-to-the editor, most of which I printed, especially the most unfavorable ones.”104 In the early stages of planning *politics*,

Macdonald made a conscious decision to seek out new contributors rather than to engage with the anti-Stalinist Old Left of the New York Intellectuals. These were “all good men, honorable men, and sound politically. Maybe too sound – was it worth all that trouble to get out another edition of so well-established a text?”

Decidedly it was not. Isolated from his peers at PR over his anti-war position, Macdonald committed politics to providing a forum for marginalized groups, notably “younger, relatively unknown American intellectuals.” C. Wright Mills, Irving Kristol, James Agee, Paul Goodman and Daniel Bell published in politics as young and relatively unknown writers. Macdonald also understood that in the 1940s, debates about militarism, the bureaucratic state, gender relations and the moral autonomy of the individual were all eclipsing the class issues of the Old Left. For this reason, he sought out original writing and focused his attention on movements that might attract a wider constituency in the future, such as the nascent civil rights movement. politics also had a large readership in the armed forces, where the magazine passed from hand to hand and functioned as a badge of dissent. “Free and Equal” and “The Solider Reports” were regular columns shaped by the 22% of readers who were in uniform, the former exposing scandals of Jim Crow in the army and the latter offering testimonies from wartime Europe.

In addition, Macdonald regularly featured news of Conscientious Objectors and became an enthusiastic publicist for the small subculture of “revolutionary pacifists” emerging from World War II. He condemned military bureaucrats for their violation of Congress’ mandate on the treatment of C.O.’s, decrying that 6,500 of them were still detainted in federal prisons and government camps in 1946. politics documented the Civilian Public Service strikes and called

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attention to C.O. activism and experimentations in communal living.\textsuperscript{108} For instance, Macdonald reported on a group of C.O.’s who participated in a medical study that gauged, through six months of malnutrition, the effects of starvation on Europe’s devastated populations.\textsuperscript{109} Furthermore, the magazine became an important forum of discussion and debate among Conscientious Objectors. George Woodcock, the radical Labour Party politician, reported on “The English Community Movement” and “Conscientious Objection in England.” Don Calhoun, a pacifist at the University of Chicago, contributed “The Political Relevance of Conscientious Objection” which argued that the C.O. stood out “as the possible nucleus for the only movement which can shatter the confidence of the state to effectively make war \textit{if and when it wishes}.\textsuperscript{110}

Dwight welcomed C.O. contributions to the magazine, applauding their thinking as “politically conscious in that it sees the coercive power of the State as the major problem.”\textsuperscript{111} Indeed, besides being outraged by the injustices war resisters suffered, Macdonald considered the viability of pacifism as a political stance. On the one hand, he idealized experiments in rural communal cooperatives, such as the “Macedonia Community” in Georgia, as enclaves of personal interaction aloof from the abstract relations of mass society.\textsuperscript{112} On the other, he was skeptical of the dissenters’ isolation in CPS camps, arguing that “one can more effectively fight for one’s ideas if one does not isolate one’s self from one’s fellow-men.”\textsuperscript{113}

As a result, Macdonald became a member the War Resisters League and the more militant Peacemakers to concretely advance his new-found principles. When the Truman administration announced plans for permanent conscription, he joined WRL members A.J.

\textsuperscript{111} Dwight Macdonald, “Conscription & Conscientious Objection, Editor’s Note” \textit{politics} 2 (1945): 165.
\textsuperscript{112} Gregory Sumner, \textit{Dwight Macdonald and the politics Circle}, 94-95.
\textsuperscript{113} Dwight Macdonald, “How to Win the War, Editor’s Note,” \textit{politics} 1 (1944): 45-46.
Muste, David Dellinger and Bayard Rustin to protest the bill. In February 1947, Dwight was one of the main speakers at an anti-conscription rally where 63 youths destroyed their draft cards in front of an audience of several hundred. In his speech, which was reprinted in *politics*, Macdonald advocated pacifism as a way to actively struggle against injustice and to assert individual morality. “When the State tells me I must ‘defend’ it against foreign enemies … I deny altogether the competence – let alone the right – of anyone else … to decide for me a question as important as this,” he told the crowd.\footnote{Dwight Macdonald, “Why Destroy Draft Cards?” *politics* 4 (1947): 54-55.} In this way, Macdonald’s engagement with pacifism fit with his ethical and anarchist inclinations, and his continued notion of communards who would translate their ideas into effective political action while transforming their own lives in the process.\footnote{Michael Wreszin, *A Rebel in Defense of Tradition: The Life and politics of Dwight Macdonald* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 192.}

The second group that Macdonald mentioned in his founding editorial, “those many leftist refugees who can produce informed analysis of European events but at present have no satisfactory means of communication with advanced American opinion,”\footnote{Dwight Macdonald, “Why *politics*?” *politics* 1 (1944): 6.} gave *politics* a Euro-American character that set it apart from other journals on the Left. For European contributors, *politics* functioned as a forum for physically and ideologically displaced voices, “a lighted torch around which to rally,” as the Russian-Italian intellectual Andrea Caffi wrote from exile in France.\footnote{Andrea Caffi, “The Automatization of European People,” *politics* 2 (1945): 335-7.} Correspondence from Europeans shaped the magazine’s factual assessment of the situation in Europe and its theoretical discussions on new directions in radicalism in the wake of the war.

Some of the Europeans in the *politics* circle, like Caffi, never set foot in New York. Victor Serge, the anti-Stalinist Bolshevik, corresponded with Macdonald from exile in Mexico,
as did Jean and Andrea Delacourt, two French socialists. Simone Weil died six months before the magazine appeared and was published posthumously, influencing Macdonald and others with her concept of an ethic of human limits. From Britain, George Orwell provided occasional articles while George Woodcock wrote semi-regular “London Letters,” updating American readers on the failures of the Labour Party. Hannah Arendt was a close friend of Dwight’s but contributed only indirectly to the magazine. Notably, her 1945 “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility” essay published in *Jewish Frontier* prompted Macdonald to investigate the question of collective guilt in “The Responsibility of Peoples.”

Lewis Coser and Bruno Bettelheim, exiles from Germany and Austria, also became members of the politics circle in the 1940s. Macdonald discovered Bettelheim’s “Behavior in Extreme Situations” buried in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*. politics reprinted Bettelheim’s account of the year he spent in prewar Dachau and Buchenwald, shocking the American intellectual community with revelations about the process of personality disintegration in concentration camps. The magazine’s most prominent European connection was Italian, with Nicola Chiaromonte, Andrea Caffi, and Niccolo Tucci – an expatriate who wrote a playfully sardonic column “Commonnonsense” – appearing regularly in politics. Chiaromonte, especially, was at the heart of politics’ transatlantic community. During his years of exile in New York, Chiaromonte became Macdonald’s closest friend and mentor. In an April 1947 letter, Dwight encapsulated his friend’s influence in the following way: “I’ve learned a great deal from you, Nick, and you’ve changed my whole intellectual outlook (you and the atom bomb).”

To recall Benedict Anderson’s discussion of the vernacular press in forging nationalism, politics’ readers could imagine far-removed individuals published in the magazine as part of a

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same community unified not by a nation, but by an ethic of resistance. European refugees and antifascists, striking Civilian Public Service inmates, soldiers standing up to Jim Crow in uniform and cultural radicals each, in their own way, exposed spaces of freedom in an apparently closed system.\textsuperscript{120} In this way, \textit{politics} attempted to create a viable alternative to Marxian socialism and American liberalism. It existed as a refuge for homeless radicals and created a small but vibrant oasis aloof from the bureaucratic apparatus consolidating in mid-century America.

\textit{New Roads Where The Root Is Man}

\textit{politics} also functioned as theoretical laboratory that sought to redefine Left tenets in the wake of the war. The “New Roads” series best illustrates the forum of ideas created. Starting in December 1945, this series was established “to criticize the dominant ideology on the Left today – which is roughly Marxian – in the light of recent experience, and to suggest and speculate on new approaches to the central problem: how to advance towards a society which shall be humanely satisfying.”\textsuperscript{121} Over the course of the following year, essays by Don Calhoun, Nicola Chiaromonte, Andrea Caffi, Paul Goodman and other appeared, as well as Macdonald’s “The Root is Man.”

In this article, Dwight attempted to pass from commentary to theory, transforming the criticism of Marxism embedded in his editorials into an extensive analysis. He argued that the scientific method had intrinsic limitations, the greatest of which was its inability to determine moral values. Instead, Macdonald situated “the locus of value-choice (and hence of action) … within the feelings of the individual, not in Marx’s History, Dewey’s Science, or Tolstoy’s

\textsuperscript{120} Gregory Sumner, \textit{Dwight Macdonald and the politics Circle}, 109
Macdonald also stressed the need to redefine a political vocabulary, positing that Nazism and Stalinism combined elements from the Left and Right as traditionally conceived and rendered this spectrum obsolete. He proposed that the Left be divided into “Progressives” and “Radicals.” The former, encompassing everything from New Dealers to Stalinists, held the centralized state as the main agent of positive change, viewed events in collective terms and focused attention to the “objective” flow of “historical process.” The latter, including anarchists, Conscientious Objectors and renegade Marxists – in which Macdonald included himself – rejected the concept of progress and sought to redress the excessive presence of scientific thinking by emphasizing the ethical aspect of politics.

Although Macdonald’s self-stated objective in “The Root is Man” was to find a basis for political action, he failed to coherently articulate a program for ethical politics. In his search for a “vital core” at Man’s root and values “outside the historical process,” Macdonald put forward the vague exhortation that men should “begin with what we living human beings want, what we think and feel is good … what one’s heart tells one men should be like.” Throughout 1946, the “New Roads” series generated discussion in the magazine, and Dwight’s essay received much criticism. Chiaromonte found the essay naïve, confused and fatally imprecise. Lewis Coser and Irving Howe considered the article an escapist retreat from political engagement. James Farrell attacked the entire magazine as a vehicle for the editor’s shifty thinking and “egomania.” In addition, many readers took issue with Macdonald’s assault on Marxism and disliked what they saw as abstract moralizing in “The Root Is Man.” In Mills’ questionnaire, about half of the readers criticized such articles as unintelligible: “too much space to obscure discussions of left-

wing theologies, ivory tower stuff.” “For God’s sake stop searching for absolutes!” wrote one reader, while another described the series as “splinter group hairsplitting on esoteric radical points.”

The “New Roads” series provides a snapshot of Macdonald in 1946. While falling short as a rigorous theorist, he excelled as a mediator, bringing together disenfranchised voices in an forum dedicated to discussing questions he was perhaps incapable of answering himself. Undoubtedly, Dwight left few indifferent: in the same survey, several answered the “Like Most” and ‘Like Least” sections with a simple “D.M.”126 Furthermore, “The Root is Man” represents a critical turning point for Macdonald with a final disavowal of Marx. However, having extricated himself from the scientific method, Macdonald lacked the tools to formulate a substantive argument. The intensity of Dwight’s writing evinces the inability to translate an emotive response – “what one’s heart tells one men should be like” – into a tenable theory. It also denotes a sense of urgency to develop new directions in radicalism in the wake of World War II and under the pressure of the nascent Cold War.127 Influenced by the existentialist vision from Europe, Macdonald wrote: “the ‘trick’ in living seems to me to reject all complete and well-rounded solutions and live in a continued state of tension and contradiction which reflects the real nature of existence.” Indeed, this passage from the “The Root is Man” passage echoes Albert Camus’ “Neither Victims Nor Executioners,” which Dwight translated from French and published in politics: “We live in terror because persuasion is not longer possible; because Man

has been wholly submerged in History … because we live in a world of abstractions, of bureaus and machines, of absolute ideas and crude messianism.”

Transatlantic solidarity

politics fostered more than intellectual affinity and fruitful debates, it also created personal relationships. As a concrete extension of his writing on oppressive statism, Macdonald was concerned with creating a modern humanism that could hold its own in the face of enormous bureaucracies and the atom bomb. For instance, politics acted as a refuge for European writers in several ways. Macdonald envisioned the magazine as an environment physically and politically favorable to free thought that could nurture the “transplanted spores” of European culture endangered by totalitarianism and war. In addition to creating a forum in which intellectual discourse could come to fruition, politics also introduced first translations of European writings to its American audience. Notably, the Summer 1947 “French Issue” featured works by Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Georges Bataille, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre and others. On a more practical level, the Macdonalds had been active in emergency relief efforts since 1940. Nancy, who then was the business manager of Partisan Review, set up a “Fund for European Writers and Artists.” The project raised hundreds of dollars and made a life or death difference for dozens of dissident refugees. Nancy was adept at navigating immigration

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129 Gregory Sumner, Dwight Macdonald and the politics Circle, 26.
bureaucracy and helped many European intellectuals obtain travel visas to the United States or Mexico.\(^{131}\)

Macdonald discussed the psychological effect of the war in the pages of *politics*, describing the trauma as the “Automatization of European Peoples.” In letters from Paris, Andrea Caffi recounted “the paralysis of spontaneous, daring, passionate initiatives, the absence of that swarming of ‘clubs’ and plans however naïve, bizarre, messianic, which characterize a truly revolutionary ferment … [and] the strange will to obey, to be subject to a hierarchy and not have to reflect, shown by those who would ordinarily be the active nuclei of the nation and form the cadres of the organized parties.”\(^{132}\) Caffi’s report distressed Macdonald, who saw it as evidence of the dismal place of the individual in the modern era as well as the reiteration of the need to “‘GET’ THE MODERN NATIONAL STATE BEFORE IT ‘GETS’ US” as outlined in his Hiroshima editorial.\(^{133}\)

For this reason, Dwight reported and celebrated human interactions that overcame bureaucratically imposed barriers and national animosities. He eagerly published testimonies of soldiers spontaneously defying color barriers and accounts of American troops refusing to follow the order of non-fraternization in Germany. An American sergeant described German civilians crawling out of their cellars to give him beer, bread, jam and pretzels. Another soldier recalled that a Frankfurt resident helped him find the rubble of Goethe’s birthplace, evoking “a returning sense of the dignity of people, of the independence and honesty and character of a human being.”\(^{134}\) These accounts offered an antidote to the prevailing sense of despair that lingered after the war. Responding to a reader who advocated re-establishing socialism as a moral idea,

\(^{131}\) Gregory Sumner, *Dwight Macdonald and the politics Circle*, 24.
Macdonald wrote: “the very fact that a letter like the above is written seems to me a cause of optimism. So long as a minority rebel violently against the ‘numbification’ that is undoubtedly going on in modern political life, we may still hope. The human spirit is tougher, more resilient and tenacious than the more mechanical varieties of bourgeois and Marxist thinking might indicate.”

In this way, Macdonald’s aspiration for the postwar was to rescue the fragmented individual from the throes of the militaristic and mechanical twentieth century – a humanism adapted to the age of Hiroshima.

How to return a sense of dignity to the human being? With news of food shortages in liberated Europe and of the American government’s inadequate response, *politics* launched a Food Packages Abroad program. The Macdonalds designed the operation as a political experiment with minimal overhead management, urging their readers to “adopt” a European family to whom they would send food parcels and letters. The objective was to galvanize the *politics* community into forging lasting transatlantic ties. “By your packages, your letters, you can show them that they are not forgotten, that they have friends over here, and that international fraternity is not completely destroyed” wrote Macdonald. Packages Abroad became a successful enterprise, with 11,590 packages containing 158,000 pounds of food and clothing sent to 800 European families from November 1945 to April 1947.

Correspondence published in *politics* gave voice to the extreme dearth of nearly everything in postwar Europe but also to the dignity and resilience of the human spirit. Macdonald considered that “the human ties whose formation the arrangement makes possible may turn out to be at least as important as the material help provided.” For instance, many of the American participants requested to be matched up with antifascist German families. In the words

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of one reader: “I want my contribution to go to a German family because I want this German family to know there is at least one American who is ashamed of her country’s cruel and callous treatment of a defeated people.”\textsuperscript{138} A German response read: “Whatever you may send is a dear sign of your human help. This humanity we vote for again and again; it finally will and must remove the boundaries among nations.”\textsuperscript{139} Packages Abroad was a worthy model for the type of action at the “personal” level advocated by Macdonald. Indeed, it involved ordinary people transcending the constraints of bureaucracy, nation and even their daily inertia to realize impulses for friendship and solidarity.\textsuperscript{140}

Yet, Packages Abroad remained an ad hoc arrangement which could hardly form the basis for a viable Third Camp position in the late 1940s. Around this time, another project presented itself as a potential and broader vehicle for such a movement. In 1946, Albert Camus delivered a talk at Columbia University later known as “The Crisis of Man” lecture. Macdonald met Camus on this occasion and discussed the possible creation of an international magazine and transnational communities of thought.\textsuperscript{141} Camus had much in common with the politics intellectuals, chiefly an aversion to centralized power and an admiration for the notions of moderation and limits as defined by Simone Weil.\textsuperscript{142} Macdonald and his New York peers attempted to establish a grassroots Third Camp movement, a “psychological community” based on loose notions of international brotherhood. In the spring of 1947, Chiaromonte traveled to Europe after years of exile to establish contacts and widen their network. In the meantime, the New York contingent formalized the project. The Europe-America Groups (EAG) were

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\textsuperscript{140} Gregory Sumner, \textit{Dwight Macdonald and the politics Circle}, 192.
\textsuperscript{141} Dwight Macdonald to Albert Camus, May 17, 1946, Dwight Macdonald Papers. Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, Box 108, Folder 516.
\textsuperscript{142} Gregory Sumner, \textit{Dwight Macdonald and the politics Circle}, 193.
\end{flushleft}
inaugurated in the Macdonalds’ apartment in March 1948 under the chairmanship of Mary McCarthy. Niccolo Tucci, Alfred Kazin, Isaac Rosenfeld, Sidney Hook, Philip Rahv, William Phillips, William Barrett and Delmore Schwartz were also present to sign the founding manifesto. Their statement of purpose read: "We are a group of people from many different intellectual professions in America who have gotten together to provide some center of solidarity with and support for intellectuals in Europe who find themselves outside of mass parties.” Beyond this vague guiding principle, the manifesto stated that a course of action would emerge from the experience of the groups, from the "multiplication and intensification of each individual's powers and convictions that would take place if a truly fraternal, communal brotherhood could be established.”

EAG failed to achieve its most basic goals and was dissolved within a year. The first obstacle was finding Europeans to participate in the enterprise. Despite initial enthusiasm, Camus became increasingly engrossed in postwar French politics and literary circles. He pursued his own experiments in Third-Campism – *Groupes de Liaisons Internationales* – and became wary of the United States and the Cold War. EAG was especially undermined by factionalism in New York. The *PR* editors were bent on an anti-Stalinist approach that would focus on Eastern European intellectuals while the *politics* group sought to stake out a independent position in the Cold War. Macdonald and his circle attempted to create an alterative to the rapport the State Department was forging with Europe at the onset of the Cold War by engaging in their own Atlantic dialogue. After the initial rift, the organization rapidly declined. EAG wound down and dissolved in the spring of 1949 due to a fundamental lack of brotherhood. As Macdonald wrote

143 Draft of EAG Prospectus, Dwight Macdonald Papers. Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, Box 108, Folder 516.
to Chiaromonte, "EAG has to survive as a 'band of brothers' or not at all. And there is not much brotherhood about it now … Unless EAG is a fraternal, communal group, it is nothing."\textsuperscript{144}

\textit{End of politics, retreat from politics}

The demise of EAG coincided with the faltering of \textit{politics} due to a lack of funds and motivation. Rising production costs had already forced the Macdonalds to cut back from a monthly to a quarterly in 1947. In the winter of 1948, Dwight wrote to his readers: “This has been a one-man magazine and the man has of late been feeling stale, tired, disheartened and – if you like, demoralized.”\textsuperscript{145} Macdonald experienced a crisis of his inner circle with his marriage to Nancy falling apart and the demise of EAG creating a rift in the New York community. Mary McCarthy recounted her distress at EAG’s failures in \textit{The Oasis}, a roman à clef and satirical account of an attempt by a group of urban intellectuals to establish a rural commune. Dwight was cast as Macdougal Macdermott, leader of the “Utopian” faction, while Philip Rahv became Will Taub, at the head of the “Realists.” Many in the New York Intellectual community were upset that McCarthy had made so public a caricature. Indeed, Macdonald described the heightened tension to Chiaromonte: in 1949, there had been “more rows, clashes, feuds and factional conflicts in the NYC literary world this winter than at any time in the past.” In 1950, he wrote that “the degeneration of everything is frightening … nothing is happening, all ties of sociability and intellectuality have snapped.”\textsuperscript{146}

\textsuperscript{144} Dwight Macdonald to Nicola Chiaromonte, December 10, 1948, Dwight Macdonald Papers. Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, Box 10, Folder 241.
Furthermore, Macdonald became increasingly disenchanted with the prospect of pacifism and political action independent of the Cold War hegemons. In the summer of 1948, Macdonald stated in *politics* that a pacifist stance towards the Berlin blockade would mean “just what Munich meant: not peace-in-our time, but appeasement, and would thus strengthen, not weaken, the Stalin regime.”\(^{147}\) The assassination of Gandhi only confirmed his growing reservations about pacifism as a viable tactic since it failed to confront “the tragedy of life, the incredible difficulty of actually putting into practice an ethical concept.” He wrote that Gandhi “was the last political leader in the world who was a person, not a mask or a radio voice or an institution. The last on a human scale. The last for whom I felt not contempt nor indifference but interest and affection.”\(^{148}\) Dwight withdrew from the War Resisters League and the Peacemakers, due to doubts about pacifism’s “possible effectiveness and also its ethical justification.”\(^{149}\) In an effort to explain his retreat, he gave a talk in May 1949 declaring “Goodbye to Utopia” at a Packages Abroad discussion meeting at the Rand School. Macdonald reiterated his view that neither socialism nor pacifism could provide any solution to the menace of Soviet expansion. Echoing Camus once more, Macdonald repudiated attempts to find “any consistent pattern for understanding reality” and welcomed political thinking that assumed “reality is contradictory, subtle, complicated and ALIVE.”\(^{150}\)

The view from 1949 was a dismal one. Indeed, The Communist coup in Czechoslovakia, the victory of the Chinese Communists, the Berlin blockade, the Soviet detonation of the atom bomb, the Alger Hiss case and the House of Un-American Activities Committee Hollywood investigations had dominated the headlines in the past year. Reacting to the Berlin crisis,

\(^{149}\) Dwight Macdonald to A.J. Muste, April 19, 1949, in *A Moral Temper*, 166.
Macdonald observed that three years after saturation bombs, American planes were dropping food packages. He concluded that “there is indeed a logic to both actions, but it is not a human, not a rational or ethical logic. It is rather the logic of a social mechanism which has grown so powerful that human beings have become simply its instruments.”

These events in international relations indicated to Macdonald that political engagement was futile. In 1952, during a debate with Norman Mailer at Mount Holyoke College, Dwight publicly stated, not without regret or despair: “I Choose the West.” Abandoning his inner circle, his wife Nancy and his life as a political partisan, Macdonald took a position at the *New Yorker*, where he engaged with cultural criticism as a substitute for politics. His political consciousness was never far below the surface, however, and was brought once more to the fore in the 1960s.

**Postscript to the 1940s**

How to evaluate Macdonald? Although his vision of a Third Camp based on international brotherhood failed to materialize, the political experiments of the *politics* years remain significant for several reasons. First, Macdonald is often associated with esotericism and elitism, notably for his essay “Masscult & Midcult” that deplored “the tepid ooze” of American popular culture. While Macdonald was undoubtedly elitist (at Philips Exeter Academy, young Dwight founded an exclusive club named The Hedonists whose motto was “Pour Epater les Bourgeois: Cynicism, Estheticism, Criticism, Pessimism”), his most engaged political years indicate a compelling humanism derived from a response to World War II. The editors of *Partisan Review* were the ones operating a closed boys club while Macdonald reached out to scattered writers and readers to create a forum of radical voices. One sign of *politics’* legacy is that Lewis Coser and

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Irving Howe founded *Dissent* in 1954, self-consciously styling their journal as the same kind of forum as Macdonald’s. Dwight noted in his *Memoirs* that from running across so many nostalgic readers in the 1950s, he had the impression of being better known for *politics* than for his articles in the *New Yorker*, whose circulation was seventy times greater.\(^{153}\)

*politics* also plays a part in the narrative of cultural diplomacy and the shifting role of public intellectuals at mid-century. Chiefly, Macdonald serves to dispel the crude notion that American (and European) intellectuals immediately embraced the State Department’s liberal anti-communist consensus. Although he was incapable of proposing an alternative that could hold its own against Cold War binaries, Dwight did not abandon his convictions to become part of the CIA’s “Non-Communist Left.” Macdonald was aloof from the Congress for Cultural Freedom, and the ACCF’s belligerence and equivocation concerning civil liberties worried him. He was convinced that the real menace in America was not Communism but the witch-hunt atmosphere fostered by Senators Joseph McCarthy and Patrick McCarran.

Macdonald also complicates the narrative of Atlanticism as based on cultural diplomacy and the Congress for Cultural Freedom. First, he participated in the organizational activities that inspired the CCF, hosting the planning meetings for Sidney Hook’s “Americans for Intellectual Freedom” in his apartment. Furthermore, in a completely different way than the government, Macdonald initiated his own kind of transatlantic dialogue. The State Department sought to dispel notions of American provincialism and convince Soviets and Europeans alike that America had the cultural credentials necessary to assume world leadership. Macdonald, on the other hand, looked to European intellectuals, to Camus, to Chiaromonte, to Caffi, to create an Atlantic community aloof from government institutions and bent on preserving European culture. These two types of Atlantic dialogue occurred in the same window of time and had

fundamentally opposed visions of postwar reconstruction. Cold War pressures eclipsed the latter endeavor which consciously limited its scope to spontaneous human interactions. Macdonald’s failure to sustain a transatlantic community points to the dislocation of intellectuals at mid-century and especially the disappearance of venues where political tenets could be renegotiated as in the hothouse 1930s and 1940s.
Chapter 3
politics in the 1960s?

Dwight Macdonald’s retreat from political activity at the end of the 1940s presents significant differences from the overarching narrative of the New York Intellectuals’ deradicalization. He did not partake in the ritual of confessional literature that provided a collective sigh of sorrow and regret around works such as The God That Failed.\(^\text{154}\) Years later, in 1957, Macdonald did publish an anthology of political essays named Memoirs of a Revolutionist, referencing the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin, whose autobiography bears the same name. In a self-deprecating tone, Dwight assessed his active years: “we were really engaged not in politics but in metapolitics, which the Oxford Dictionary defines as ‘theoretical political sciences,’ adding ‘often derog.’ ” Yet, unapologetic, he noted, “we did believe in a great cause and we did make real sacrifices for it.”\(^\text{155}\)

More importantly, even Macdonald’s disillusioned withdrawal from political life signaled creative possibilities for renewal; his retreat was not synonymous with an exhaustion of political ideas. Rather, the texts that marked his farewell to the politics years already suggested elements of his political rebirth in the 1960s. In a 1950 Partisan Review article, Macdonald admitted the impossibility of significant action in a world of vast super-states, echoing the failure of Third Campism in the United States and Europe alike. Intertwined with his disenchantment, however, was the indication of a new direction divested of Marxism. “The questions that now interest me are not the ‘big’ ones: What To Do About Russia?” Macdonald wrote, “it is the ‘small’ questions that now seem to me significant, What is a good life? … What are the most important human needs – taking myself, as that part of the universe I know best, or at least have been most closely


associated with, as a starting point? How can they be satisfied best, here and now? Who am I? How can I live lovingly, truthfully, pleasurably?''

While many of his peers embraced the consensus politics and culture of the fifties as epitomized by Daniel Bell’s *The End of Ideology*, Macdonald remained in the spirit of dissent. Indeed, Dwight’s cultural writings demonstrated a continued rejection of the status quo as he attacked what he saw as the banality and passivity of American life in his *New Yorker* column. Roused from his political hibernation by the renewed debate and activism of the sixties, Macdonald assumed once more the role of critic. Although in many ways Macdonald picked up the thread of negativistic comment from where he left it in 1950, the tone of his writing sets this second volley of analyses apart from the *politics* years. In the same way that the founding editorial of *politics* named Marxism as a method of criticism, Macdonald later championed anarchism as a philosophical guide to political action. As early as 1950, Macdonald wrote: “I consider myself an anarchist – that is, the free development of the individual seems to me the only reasonable purpose of political institutions, and this I think must be a “here and now” matter, not some distant goal, as with Marx, to be won by coercion, suppression, and other means which bind the individual.”

Even during his politically lean years, one of his standard talks, “The Relevance of Anarchism,” acted as a political counterpart to his diatribes against mass culture.

The second salient difference to note in Macdonald’s return to the political fore was his audience. As discussed in the previous chapter, *politics* created a small, intimate community

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aloof from society at large. Indeed, Macdonald later confessed that a New York Intellectual in the politicized thirties and forties had no contact with government officials, businessmen or labor leaders.160 Throughout the 1950s, Dwight achieved celebrity as a cultural commentator through his *New Yorker* column. In addition to “Masscult & Midcult,” Macdonald wrote scathing reviews of The Great Books of the Western World (“its massiveness, its technological elaboration, its fetish of the Great [are] inappropriate”), the Revised Standard Version of the Bible (“to make the Bible readable in the modern sense means to flatten out, tone down and to convert into tepid, expository prose what in K.J.V [King James Version of the Bible] is wild, full of awe, poetic and passionate”) and James Cozzens’ *By Love Possessed* (“the failure of literary judgment [the book’s reception as a best-seller] in l’affaire Cozzens indicates a general lowering of standards”).161 From a fringe political journalist, Macdonald became recognized as a cultural authority and arbitrator. For instance, he was invited to teach a course at the Salzburg Seminar in 1956 and to speak at the prestigious Princeton Gauss Seminar in Criticism in 1958. In 1964, he was granted an honorary doctorate from Wesleyan along with Martin Luther King, Jr. Basking in more renown than he had ever experienced, Dwight used his reputation to serve his ideas, and his writing to deliver the same kind of honest, stubborn, restless thinking162 that had filled the pages of *politics*.163

Throughout the 1960s, he wrote a film column for *Esquire* and continued to contribute to *Partisan Review*, *Commentary* and the newly-established *New York Review of Books*. In 1966, he traded the film section for a political column at *Esquire*, which earned the disapproval of Nicola

Chiaramonte who felt that a mid-cult publication like *Esquire* was not a platform for serious political writing. Macdonald, however, was pleased with the column. It was not scholarship, nor investigative reportage, but an intelligent critic’s commonsense view of things, which he hoped would engage his readers and provide them with arguments and information buttressing a stance against the Vietnam War. Macdonald was motivated by that mass audience and he felt that through this work he could make a difference.\(^{164}\) From inhabiting a marginalized oasis during the *politics* years, Macdonald became part of visible intelligentsia engaged in public debate around the Vietnam War, civil rights and the cultural wars of the sixties.\(^{165}\)

*Back to the Barricades*

In 1960, Macdonald’s “The Candidates and I” article in *Commentary* signaled a renewed interest in political criticism. Recalling that he had only voted a few times in his life (mostly due to “youthful inexperience” in 1928, 1932 and 1936), Macdonald articulated his aversion to electoral politics. He contended that national politics in a country as large as the United States diverted the civic-minded from local, practical matters. He wrote: “certainly it is good for citizens, all other things being equal, to have a chance to vote freely on Candidates 1960. But this is a minor good compared to the real political issues, which, except in some local elections, are not touched at all; I mean issues like … in New York, the successful efforts of that great planner and public servant, Robert Moses, to destroy such slight remnants of community life as remains in this urban wasteland.” Indeed, the article called attention to the national talent for voluntary groups, from taxpayers’ leagues to parent-teacher associations, garden clubs, charity organizations and alumni groups, as part of the anarchist tradition of free cooperation. In


addition, Macdonald condemned the demagogy of electoral campaigns as a symptom of the dehumanizing effect of mass politics. He attributed his 1952 ballot for Adlai Stevenson to the latter’s intellectual clarity and moral seriousness. “Stevenson in 1952 was an actual person” echoes a 1948 politics editorial: “Gandhi was the last political leader in the world who was a person, not a mask or a radio voice or an institution.” Alas, by 1956, Stevenson was behaving like a politician (“or even, God help us, a statesman”), prompting Macdonald to hold his ground behind calls for anarchism and local action across theory and practice.

Not surprisingly, Macdonald was suspicious of Camelot and critical of those in Washington who championed technocracy and pragmatism. Dwight took little interest in Kennedy’s first months in office until the Bay of Pigs galvanized him into growing skepticism. To his friend Barbara Deming, he wondered how “Kennedy and Schlesinger and all those bright decent young liberals have gotten us into THAT mess.” Macdonald advised that they read Leo Tolstoy’s “Stop and Think,” reflecting his instinctive uneasy feelings about the means and ends of the New Frontiersmen’s policy. This quip also evinces the historical texts and tools that Macdonald used to make sense of the world around him. politics had reprinted Tolstoy in 1946, the same year that Macdonald was struggling to write “The Root is Man.” Unfettered by Marxist frameworks, in 1961, he championed what had co-existed with socialist tenets since the decision to look beyond dogmatic Marxism with the founding of politics: anarchism and radicalism in the tradition of dissenters such as Tolstoy.

Macdonald especially rebuked the alleged “best and brightest” intellectuals who supported, and indeed served, centralized power in Washington. Notably, he condemned Arthur

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168 Michael Wreszin, A Rebel in Defense of Tradition, 375.
Schlesinger Jr. in his review of the latter’s *The Politics of Hope*, published in the first installment of the *New York Review of Books*. In “To the White House,” Macdonald traced Schlesinger’s change of tune with the political tide. In 1956, when Eisenhower was firmly in power, Schlesinger had criticized *Time*’s noncritical attitudes towards American institutions and advocated that the historical role of the American intellectual was one of protest. However, in *The Politics of Hope*, he advanced the idea that the Executive abrogate the Constitution in the face of “war, revolution or economic chaos.” Macdonald was appalled that Schlesinger used his position of Special Assistant to the President to invite abuses of power in lieu of keeping with the spirit of protest he paid homage to during the Ike Years. In fine, Macdonald regretted that his friend, “a witty, clever, sensible and decent fellow” ever got involved in high politics.\(^{169}\) Schlesinger was unfazed by the review. His later response to a suggestion regarding the Warren Committee epitomizes Schlesinger’s attitude towards Macdonald and surely the New York Intellectuals as a whole: “Why don’t you amateurs keep your big feet out of history and leave it to us pros?”\(^{170}\)

Macdonald, naturally, did no such thing. He was aware that the country was heading towards a breakdown of consensus regarding foreign policy with nightly television coverage bringing the Vietnam War to America’s living rooms. Initially, Macdonald was distrustful of rhetoric that romanticized Ho Chi Minh as a Vietnamese nationalist and felt uneasy about an absolute pacifist position. Quickly, however, his opposition to American policy hardened.\(^{171}\) In a letter to the editors of *Partisan Review*, Dwight deplored the United States’ “Kiplingesque idealism, shouldering The White Man’s Burden” in South East Asia. Responding to the argument that protesters had not considered what would happen to the South Vietnamese if the

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United States pulled out, Macdonald replied that the wrong question was being posed. “What was happening to them so long as America stay[ed] in?” Macdonald’s criticism grew with the war’s escalation. In August 1965, he testified before a congressional hearing on the war conducted by a New York Representative. Macdonald described the war campaign as a kind of Global McCarthyism that did “little damage to the Communists and much damage to innocent bystanders, including our own democratic traditions.” Quoting the Duke of Wellington about his troops at Waterloo, Macdonald said of the American military forces in South East Asia: “they may not scare the enemy but by God they scare me!” Vietnam alarmed Macdonald in the same way that World War II had, in that both conflicts revealed the depraved core of society rather than an aberration from it. Indeed, both the form and content of politics’ Hiroshima editorial were reiterated in a 1967 article in Commentary: “In Vietnam we see the darker side of our technological productivity and our mass industrial society – a sinister extension of ‘the American way of life.’ “ In the same way that he lamented the liblab magazines’ lack of pointed comment in the 1940s, Macdonald noted in 1966: “the back-tracking of the N.Y. Times in the last six months on Vietnam is an ominous sign.”

Opposition to the war coalesced previously isolated intellectuals as the excitement of meetings, planning and camaraderie shattered the anonymity of the silent 1950s. In 1965, Dwight wrote to Mary McCarthy, then living in Europe, to urge her to return to America because it was “becoming just like the thirties.” In the earlier decades, Macdonald’s battle grounds were limited to Second Avenue lecture halls and the correspondence section of the Left

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175 Dwight Macdonald to Mary McCarthy, April 11, 1966, in A Moral Temper, 376.
177 Michael Wreszin, A Rebel in Defense of Tradition, 406.
intelligentsia’s little magazines. In 1965, however, Macdonald used his public personality as a platform to make his views widely heard. When the White House announced it was going to host a Festival of the Arts, the intellectual community reacted with suspicion to what appeared to be a ploy to quell mounting opposition to the war. The Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Robert Lowell declined his invitation and submitted his rejection to the New York Times, which printed it the following day on the front page. Although Macdonald supported Lowell, he accepted his invitation – he had been invited as a distinguished film critic – with the intention of covering the event for the New York Review of Books. At the Festival, Macdonald circulated a brief “Statement to the Press” that reiterated his support for Lowell and emphasized that his attendance did not imply tacit support for President Johnson’s foreign policy. Together, Macdonald and Lowell achieved their goals as political tacticians. Front-page stories recorded the disturbance and by the end of the month the Soviet daily Izvestia had cited Dwight as a leading participant in the “rebellious spirit that prevailed.” The White House Festival was a step in the early stages of the protest that would contribute to the downfall of the Johnson presidency and lead to the charge that the war was lost at home.

The success of the White House demonstration galvanized the intellectual and artistic communities around vocal opposition to the war. Until Johnson’s March 1968 speech reporting that he would not seek reelection, Macdonald was involved in a flurry of protests against Vietnam. After the Arts Festival, he gave his support and name to an Artists Protest Committee that ran a large ad in the New York Times. Their June 1965 “End Your Silence” manifesto included 630 signatures across liberal and Left circles who found common ground in opposition

179 Michael Wreszin, A Rebel in Defense of Tradition, 398, 404.
to the war. Macdonald explored the legal dimensions of an initiative to impeach Johnson with Dave McReynolds of the War Resisters League. He also responded eagerly to Noam Chomsky’s idea of withholding a segment of their taxes as a way of undermining the war machine. In effect, he sent in three-quarters of his 1967 income tax to the Internal Revenue Service, refusing to pay the portion that would go to “Johnson’s increasingly senseless and genocidal war.” In the fall of 1967, the despair-ridden protests to the war culminated with the March on the Pentagon, captured in Norman Mailer’s vivid *The Armies of the Night*.

As the frustration and national tension mounted, Dwight turned to civil disobedience as the most viable strategy and antidote to Johnson’s war. In the *New York Times Magazine*, Macdonald evoked Henry David Thoreau and argued that “two years of writing, speaking and acting against the war had not got through to our president and that we objectors must do a little escalating ourselves.” The escalation took the form of “A Call to Resist Legitimate Authority,” a tract sponsored by Macdonald, Benjamin Spock, Paul Goodman, Robert Lowell, Norman Mailer, Noam Chomsky and William Sloane Coffin. Under the moniker “Resist,” they gave public support to young men who refused to be conscripted and urged professionals to rally to their position, ultimately accruing some two thousand signatures. In December 1967, Macdonald and Dr. Spock held a press conference designed to provoke government prosecution, in which they proposed to shut down a Manhattan induction center. The following month, a grand jury in Boston indicted the ring-leaders of Resist for “conspiracy to counsel, aid and abet young men to violate draft laws.” Dwight had not been arrested and was disappointed to not have the recognition of being one who acted on his principles. Nevertheless, he rallied around public

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support of the Boston five.\textsuperscript{183} Along with McReynolds, Paul Goodman and others, Macdonald staged a public mail-in of draft cards to the Attorney General, which was publicized with a 12-inch article the following day in the \textit{New York Times}.

It is important to recall Macdonald’s 1947 participation in a public draft card burning to discuss the continuities and ruptures between the 1940s and the 1960s. Aversion to statism and war stand out as the striking similarities between these two episodes. As for critical differences, Macdonald’s “Why Destroy Draft Cards?” was published in \textit{politics} at the height of its debate over the moral and practical implications of pacifism. In 1968, however, Macdonald was less concerned about the latter than about his ability to make his criticisms publicly heard. This does not mean that he disregarded ethical debates. On the contrary, he continued to identify himself as a moralist with regard to politics. Indeed, echoing “it is not the law-breaker we must fear today so much as he who obeys the law” from “The Responsibility of Peoples,” he wrote in \textit{The New York Review of Books}: “it seems to me more moral to break a law with Dr. Spock than to obey it with President Johnson.”\textsuperscript{184}

The difference between 1947 and 1968 suggests a shift from an existential grappling with ideology to an acceptance of unresolved tensions that allowed Macdonald to reemerge from the end of ideology. At the end of the 1940s, he wrote: “more and more I come up against the fact that we must face and live with contradictions of this kind (Justice is both historically relative, as Marx said it was, and absolute, as Plato did).”\textsuperscript{185} Looking back in an 1972 interview, he commented: “I would say that I haven’t changed my principles, but I have changed my

\textsuperscript{185} Dwight Macdonald to Daniel Bell, July 1, 1946, Dwight Macdonald Papers. Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, Box 7, Folder 138.
application of them, due to experience. And *experience* should change one.”

Macdonald’s use of his public persona suggests an adaptation of his *modus operandi* as a result of the failures of the 1940s. Indeed, Dwight embraced the *New York Review of Books* as an “intellectual center of consciousness,” mirroring the phrasing of the founding editorial of *politics*. Rallying around such a visible publication was undoubtedly different from his *politics* oasis. Nevertheless, it was a way of bringing his anarchism and humanism out of the defunct Marxist hothouse years into the 1960s.

*New Left, Black Power*

Dwight’s relationship with the younger cohort of radicals also stands out against the collective experience of the New York Intellectuals. While his peers criticized the new generation’s ideology and lifestyle, Macdonald had expressed interest in younger writers and activists since the 1940s. The inclusion of Paul Goodman and C. Wright Mills in the *politics* community especially evinces a meaningful link between the magazine and the New Left. Goodman, who was ostracized by the *Partisan Review* circle, became one of the mainstays of *politics*; Macdonald published as much of his writing as he could when nobody else would. Dwight’s admiration for Goodman’s “shrewd, original, deeply imaginative mind” was shared by the youth of the 1960s, for whom *Growing Up Absurd* was a seminal text.

As for Mills, Macdonald had met the young sociologist in 1943, and took to him “because of a temperamental affinity: we were both congenital rebels, passionately contemptuous of every received idea and established institution and not at all inarticulate about it.” Mills supported Macdonald’s early

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186 “Please, High Culture: An Interview with Critic Dwight Macdonald,” in *Interviews with Dwight Macdonald*, 69.
187 “Unpublished Response to a Questionnaire,” in *Interviews with Dwight Macdonald*, 34.
plans for an anti-war publications and suggested politics as a title instead of Dwight’s preliminary sketches for The Radical Monthly or The New Left Review.189 In 1960, Mills popularized the term with his open “Letter to the New Left,” which was published in Britain and the United States, and later as a pamphlet by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). The New Left hailed Mills as the “intellectual father of the Movement” although Mills’ attributes – “a social critic and pamphleteering moralist … attacking liberalism and the old, ‘futilitarian’ left” – apply to Macdonald as well.190

Macdonald’s influence was not simply a matter of serendipitous connections. His writing in politics resonated deeply with the New Left’s diatribes against technocracy, technology and war, and its attempt to restore the politics of conscience.191 While the young radicals generally accused the Old Left of trahison des clercs, they expressed their indebtedness to Dwight and politics.192 SDS’s Todd Gitlin quipped that reading politics was like sipping rare old wine. Staughton Lynd claimed to have read through all of the magazine’s back issues when most disoriented by the events of the late 1960s, to find that “there was more good sense and fresh thinking in this one magazine … than in all the left journals from that day to this.” Lynd situated Macdonald within the First New Left, “an international group of seekers” associated with politics who anticipated the struggles of the 1960s.193 Noam Chomsky recalled reading “The Responsibility of Peoples” as an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania. During the

191 Sandy Vogelgesang, The Long Dark Night of the Soul, 162.
1960s, he asserted that the article had lost none of its power or persuasiveness, and updated its argument in light of the Vietnam War in “The Responsibility of Intellectuals.”

Indeed, what had been solitary and steadfast negativism in the 1940s came to full fruition with the generation of the 1960s. The last section of “The Root is Man” became a seminal document in New Left circles, frequently reprinted in search of a usable past. Dwight’s indictment of the status quo, insistence on moral values as the foundation of serious politics and need for active participation in decision-making coincided with the thinking of the New Left.\textsuperscript{194} The Port Huron Statement, written in 1962 by Tom Hayden, mirrored the concerns and even the style of Macdonald’s 1946 essay. The SDS manifesto bemoaned “the felt powerlessness of ordinary people, the resignation before the enormity of events” and expressed the malaise of a generation growing up with The Bomb and the impersonality of bureaucratic control. Hayden claimed that “power in America is abdicated by individuals to top-down organizational units, and it is in the recovery of this power that the movement becomes distinct from the rest of the country and a new kind of man emerges.” He echoed Macdonald’s assail on “the estrangement of man from his own nature by the social forces he himself generates” and mission to “emphasize the emotions, the imagination, the moral feelings, the primacy of the individual human being.” Likewise, the sociologist Frank Lindenfeld’s desire for “a decentralized world built more to human scale” recalled Macdonald’s attempts to counter the depersonalization of mass society with the \textit{politics} community and the Europe-America Groups.\textsuperscript{195}

Dwight held generally favorable views towards the New Left. He liked the younger generation’s challenge to authority and readily agreed with their attack on American foreign policy, describing them as “the best generation I’ve known in this country, the cleverest and the

\textsuperscript{194} Michael Wreszin, \textit{A Rebel in Defense of Tradition}, 371.
most serious and decent.”

He saw in them the verification of his argument in “The Root is Man” that “small groups without the idea of appealing to the masses in the way that Marxist parties do” could be the agent of social change. Macdonald also acknowledged that the New Left’s program was superior to the Old Left’s, pointing to the civil rights movement and Tom Hayden’s work with the Newark Community Union Project. In contrast to his distaste for the crisis managers of the Cold War, Dwight saw many of the young critics as imaginative, innovative and interesting. His toleration for the counterculture’s romantic excesses and his endorsement of the New Left’s anti-Americanism outraged Macdonald’s stalwart anti-Communist peers. Macdonald replied to Lindenfeld’s manifesto on the dialectics of liberation – a “Make Love Not War” type document – with the retort: “I can imagine how my old pals, Irving Howe and Philip Rahv would snort with contempt … ‘infantile leftism! petty bourgeois romanticism!’”

Despite his overall enthusiasm towards the young radicals, Dwight chastised the leaders of the student movement for their principled refusal to learn from the lessons of the past, not unlike Christopher Lasch who rebuked the New Left’s nihilistic, anti-intellectual militancy in *The Agony of the American Left*. Macdonald contrasted his own attitude with the anti-historicism in vogue in the 1960s: “I assumed the next generation would have the same respect we had for the positive achievement of the bourgeoisie, following the lead of our 19th century ancestors – Marxist, Anarchist or Utopian Socialist … Also, like our ancestors, we considered ourselves the legitimate heirs of bourgeois culture, and a heir may detest his parents, even

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murder them, but he is not indifferent to his heritage.”

He criticized the younger generation’s failure to make meaningful connections between their struggles and the age-old anarchist tradition, deploiring SDS’s political line as “anarchistically porous” and “alienated to the point of nihilism.” In 1967, Macdonald participated in a symposium hosted by *The American Scholar*, “Confrontation: The Old Left and the New,” along with journalist Richard Rovere and Tom Hayden and Ivanhoe Donaldson of the junior generation. During this discussion, Dwight did agree with some of Hayden and Donaldson’s arguments, pointing to a common ground in the desire to “get the decisions politically and socially down to the smallest possible unit where people know each other and where they can control their own fate, instead of up there in the big abstractions of President.” However, he also criticized their lack of historical sensibility and their naïve sympathy for Maoism and North Vietnam.

The best illustration of Macdonald’s ambivalent relationship to the New Left is his involvement in the Columbia student strike. In the spring of 1968, SDS and Columbia’s Student Afro Society occupied campus buildings in protest against the university’s involvement in weapons research and its plans to build a gymnasium on city-owned land in Morningside Park. Dwight made his way to the campus on April 26, four days before the New York Police Department violently quashed the demonstrations. He was received as a celebrity and was escorted across windowsills into occupied buildings, where he offered support and encouragement to the students. While critics, including many of his New York Intellectual peers, focused on incidents of rudeness, disrespect and violence, Macdonald was enthralled by the atmosphere of “exhilaration, excitement – pleasant, friendly, almost joyous excitement.” Finding

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a campus where students milled around, debating the relationship of the university to the State, its position on class, race minorities, women and the surrounding community, it was as though “Hyde Parks suddenly materialized.” He likened the “mood of liberation from an oppressive, and, worse, boring tyranny” to Stendhal’s description of the Milanese population after Napoleon had driven out the Austrians. Macdonald was also impressed by the participatory democracy and communal organization in the occupied buildings. He invoked landmarks of the Russian Revolution and described the SDS stronghold in the Mathematics building as the Smolny Institute of the revolution. Fayerweather Hall, led by students willing to compromise if the administration met some restructuring reforms, became the more moderate Menshevik center.

Despite his enthusiasm, Dwight did express reservations about sporadic violent and obscene incidents. For instance, he was appalled by “the view of some student rebels that libraries were not sacred” and their disordering of file cards. Nevertheless, Macdonald supported the breaking up of a “heartless, stuffy machine of learning” where there was a gulf between the faculty and the students.

Indeed, Columbia had a reputation for faculty indifference towards students, partly because salaries were relatively low so that professors often sought outside projects. In May, Dwight appealed to many of his old leftist friends, soliciting funds for SDS in a letter that concluded: “on balance, I’m for SDS and I think the Establishment needs its shoving and I hope you’ll help SDS to survive – and to keep shoving.”

It was reprinted in the New York Review of Books, prompting fury from his peers, many of whom were faculty members and had endorsed the use of police force to quell the assault on their sacred institution. Dwight supported the strike until the end, although he favored the Students for a Restructured University

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203 “Interviewing Dwight Macdonald,” in Interviews with Dwight Macdonald, 155.
(SRU), a group of more moderate, reformist students who split from the SDS-dominated strike committee.

On June 4, 271 members of the class of 1968 walked out of Columbia Commencement to attend a counter-commencement organized by SRU. Dwight delivered a speech at the event that encapsulated his mixed sentiments towards the New Left. He first commended the student strike, comparing it to the Boston Tea Party, but most of his speech conveyed a cautionary message. Macdonald warned that disruptive tactics could not be used indefinitely without doing more harm than good to the university, rebuking Tom Hayden’s call to “create one, two, three, many Columbias” à la Che Guevara. He expressed apprehension that non-violence would give way to militant tactics and that education be rendered impossible by chronic strikes and disruptions. In this respect, Dwight’s speech was not so different from the Commencement address being delivered by Columbia historian Richard Hofstadter a few blocks away. Indeed, Hofstadter acknowledged that the students were justified in reacting to “two facts of the most fundamental consequence for all of us – the persistence at home of poverty and racial injustice, and abroad of the war in Vietnam.” However, like Dwight, he argued that to “imagine that the best way to change a social order is to start by assaulting its most accessible centers of thought and study and criticism” was to develop a self-destructive strategy for change. The similarities between these speeches point to the astute thinking of the two men. It also defends Dwight’s support of the student strike against the condemnation he received from his peers. Diana Trilling, for instance, stated that she and Lionel would never be able to consider Dwight a “politically serious man”

after his SDS appeal. The speech above, however, suggests a serious attitude that marries open-mindedness with reasoned criticism.

Macdonald’s relationship with the civil rights movement followed a similar pattern. He had long supported the plight of African Americans and had decried “Jim Crow in uniform” in politics. At the beginning of the 1960s, Dwight applauded the bus strikes and the lunch counter sit-ins. He situated them within the anarchist tradition of free cooperation and praised the Congress for Racial Equality for its organizational structure and tactics: small chapters, nonviolent social action, grass-roots social change and individuals bringing about change in the everyday aspect of their lives. However, by the end of the decade, mounting tensions, race riots and the splintering of the civil rights movement prompted Dwight to lose confidence. In his Esquire column, he decried the deterioration of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC): “racial hatred, a neurotic delight in violence, corny melodrama, ignorant fanaticism – how did all that dedication and idealism sour so rankly in two or three years?”

In September 1968, Dwight attended the National Conference for New Politics (NCNP), organized by SNCC’s Julian Bond and Simon Casady, the chairman of the California Democratic Council. He called it “the most futile, depressing and weakest left-wing gathering” he had ever attended in that it confirmed his “worst fears about [B]lack [P]ower and the New Left.” Although the conference was aimed at debating a third-party ticket for the 1968 election, Vietnam and poverty issues, the black delegates formed a separate conclave upon arrival that became the crux of the convention. The “Black Caucus” cut all communication from the conference until they emerged with a 13-point resolution that announced: “Revolutionary change

207 “Ex-‘Revolutionist’ Visits Yale,” in Interviews with Dwight Macdonald, 6.
does not mean systematic exclusion of Blacks from the decision-making process as was done here in this convention. This exclusion raises serious doubts that white people are serious about revolutionary change.” Macdonald first noted that this preamble was inexact, since nine of the twenty-five members of the steering committee were Black, more than three times the percentage in the American population. He then criticized the Caucus’ demands, such as total support for wars of liberation in the Third World, fifty percent representation on all committees and immediate reparations for the historical exploitation of Black people. This last point especially irked Macdonald, who saw the desire for such revenge as illogical and unfounded, recalling his argument on collective guilt in “The Responsibility of Peoples.” Even worse was the white delegates’ vote to approve the resolution in toto, eschewing rational argument in favor of a theatrical setting of accounts. Macdonald deplored the factionalism, extremism and lack of serious thought, noting with regret that the conference’s most applauded speech barked “every Jew in American knows another Jew that hates niggers so if we hate Jews, that’s just even, baby!”

_Sui Generis_

Looking back at the 1960s, Dwight noted the suddenness with which the New Left disappeared so completely and so suddenly. He speculated that it was due to the younger generation’s short “history-span,” their inability to root their experience in the historical narrative of dissent. Macdonald, in contradistinction, sought to “conserve the past as a bridge to the future.” In this respect, Dwight identified himself as a conservative anarchist in the later

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decades of his life, prompting his biographer Michael Wreszin to call him “A Rebel in Defense of Tradition.” Macdonald’s criticism of the New Left was hardly nominal or patronizing; when he declared in 1960 that “the young people of the USA today need to hear about Randolph Bourne,” he himself was using Bourne as a guide to interpreting the world around him.

Indeed, Macdonald hailed Bourne as one of his cultural heroes for half a century. Bourne’s name first figured in Dwight’s writing in a 1939 *Partisan Review* article, appeared subsequently across the pages of *politics* and cropped up frequently in his personal correspondence. Bourne was one of many names that were constantly renegotiated within a dynamic canon that shifted according to Dwight’s experience, urgently renewed in an almost existential fashion. During the 1940s, a series in *politics* named “Ancestors” sought to “supplement and reshape the Marxist heritage” of the magazine. The seven profiles point to Dwight’s crisis of faith in the tenets of Marxism as well as his creative assembling of an eclectic and personally meaningful tradition. Leo Tolstoy and Max Weber signaled his criticisms of modernity, William Godwin, Alexis de Tocqueville and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon indicated his desire to revitalize the public sphere, and Alexander Herzen and Kurt Tucholsky reflected a deepening mood of alienation and impasse in the last years of the magazine. In 1950, Macdonald invoked Christ, Socrates, Diderot, Jefferson, Thoreau, Herzen, Proudhon, Tolstoy, Gandhi, Simone Weil and Albert Schweitzer as the thinkers he found most helpful. In 1973, Dwight republished his introduction to the Herzen installment of “Ancestors” as the preface of a newly-edited autobiography of the Russian thinker, maintaining that Herzen’s “unsystematic, skeptical, free-thinking (also free-feeling) approach” in the wake of 1848 remained relevant

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211 “Portrait of a Man Reading,” in *Interviews with Dwight Macdonald*, 43.
during both the lib-lab treachery of the 1940s and the “Johnsonnixonesque Vietnamization of the republic” in the 1960s.\footnote{214}

This chronicling may seem overplayed, but since cultural references do not figure uniformly across Dwight’s writing, they seem to suggest a piecemeal effort to make critical connections with the past rather than esoteric name-dropping. Indeed, \textit{politics} was so powerful compared to the National Unity rhetoric precisely because it employed blunt, unadorned language to describe the unpleasant but real implications of American foreign policy. The amalgamation of writers and philosophers past in Dwight’s mind point to the spontaneity and dynamism of his thought process. Much of the time, historical texts were evoked in a nonacademic fashion, making their way into marginalia, drafts and letters across half of a century. To slip Baudelaire’s “hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère” into a footnote, to speak of Vietnam in terms of the Peloponnesian War, Coleridge’s “Fears in Solitude” and the Napoleonic Wars, to invoke Voltaire’s “écrasez l'infame” in a 1944 editorial on Warsaw – these are all instances of Dwight’s seamless incorporation of history and literature in his way of looking at the world.\footnote{215}

In addition, the richness and complexity of Dwight’s thought is apparent in his ability to be both engaged with historical canons and contemporary debates. He experienced the 1960s in a fundamentally different way than his New York Intellectual peers in that the resurgence of political activism appealed to both his intellect and imagination. For instance, Lionel Trilling was so far removed from the student body at Columbia, where he had been teaching for three decades, that he ignored the existence of student organizations until they occupied the president’s

office. Interviewed in 1968, he esteemed that the issues at stake in the student strike were “largely factitious,” “gratuitous,” ”adventitious,” and “symbolic.” Similarly, Norman Podhoretz disapproved of the Beats and the New Left, claiming that in the 1950s and 60s, there was nothing that he wanted more than “to take my rightful place as an adult among other adults.” In stark contrast, Macdonald never retired his youthful spirit of rebellion and curious combination of “innocence and cynicism, optimism and skepticism.”

Conclusion

In 1968, Hannah Arendt wrote a preface to a reprint edition of *politics* and wrote that looking back on the forty-two installments of the magazine was much more than an exercise in nostalgia. Rather, she asserted that the issues raised by Macdonald, “far from being outdated, let alone resolved, by the enormous changes in our everyday world, have only increased in urgency.”219 Indeed, questions of race relations, mass culture, the military-industrial complex and the breakdown of democratic processes in democracies spoke to the fiery 1960s – and remain unanswered and urgent questions today.

What is so striking about Macdonald is that he remained in motion and mostly aloof from institutions his entire life. Dwight was neither a Cold Warrior nor a New Mandarin but spoke in a “wised-up, cant-free voice…as if fear and conformity were foreign to his nature.”220 He had the singular quality of being keenly perceptive of events, institutions and trends around him while keeping in mind overarching questions about ethics and the pursuit of a good life. Dwight Macdonald dispels Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s conception of intellectuals in *A Thousand Days*, split between “pragmatists [who] accept the responsibility of power, and thereby risk corruption [and] the utopians [who] refused complicity with power and thereby risked irrelevance.”221 Indeed, Macdonald remained at a critical distance from the government, engaged with perhaps “utopian” questions but had a concrete, meaningful, “relevant” impact on those around him. The creation of a community around politics and his impact on the 1960s generation are a testimony of the power of his writing and persona. His book review of *The Other America* – the longest in the

219 Here and throughout the paper I have cited the preface as reprinted in NYRB; Hannah Arendt, “He’s All Dwight,” *New York Review of Books* 11, no. 2 (1968): 31.
New Yorker’s history – brought Michael Harrington’s book out from relative obscurity and onto President Kennedy’s agenda, demonstrating the impact political journalism, at its best, can have on policy.

However, as an article celebrating the centennial of his birth notes: “you can't dine on clippings and the bones of old controversies, so what did his versatile output amount to after decades of pounding the typewriter?” For years before his death, Macdonald was frustrated, fatigued, battened down by alcohol and plagued by the feeling of failure for never having written a robust work, a “book in cold blood.” He especially felt despairsed because he identified himself as a writer: “I am a writer and I must keep in contact with my mother earth or like Antaeus I begin to die. If character is destiny, MY character is a monochrome = 100% writing.”222 The article compares Dwight to his friend James Agee, who burnt himself out in a frenzy of nicotine and all-nighters – but at least with Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and a posthumous Pulitzer Prize for A Death in the Family.223

In 1958, John Lukacs wrote that Macdonald might become “the American Orwell,” noting that Dwight’s “lonely and courageous positions” coincided with George Orwell’s stance among the British intelligentsia.224 Macdonald’s legacy, however, pales in comparison to Orwell’s. Having privileged the fleeting, spontaneous form of the journalistic essay, Macdonald did not leave a robust oeuvre to anchor his name in posterity. In this sense, Macdonald stands out as a tragic figure, one who squandered his abilities on passionate diatribes and polemics that seem dated today. “Masscult, midcult – who cares anymore? It's all one big postmodern

mishmash.” On the other hand, his writing on technology, war and the need to relate politics to ethics remain brilliant pieces of writing that both encompass mid-century debates and point to issues in our contemporary society.

Asked in a 1964 interview about his legacy, Dwight stated that he was less concerned with large audiences or posterity than with “here and how…more communication, more of making an effect on people’s minds.” Macdonald undoubtedly succeeded in that respect and was one of the most colorful, spirited, and compelling characters of the New York Intellectual circle. Nevertheless, his political writing remains insightful and forceful generations after his persona wilted. “He was ‘committed’ in the modern sense, only to himself, to his own neuroses, prejudices, whims, tastes and interests, but these were enough. The fusion [of the particular and the general] was so complete that some of his most casual jottings have had great consequences.” “He was able to bring out, with marvelous clarity and directness, the general issues involved in the particular instance. Most of what he says seems to be wonderfully to the point today.” “[He] reacted simply as a thoughtful and humane individual which makes his stand all the more heroic, in a sense.” These quotes are Macdonald’s writing on three of his cultural heroes – Edgar Allan Poe, Leo Tolstoy and Randolph Bourne, respectively. I think they describe these icons as much as they do Macdonald. Without a masterpiece, Macdonald has been cheated of a bona fide legacy. Yet, his acuity, imagination and propensity to update the past in the light of the present deserve a place in historical renderings of the American Century, and in ours as well.

Why politics?

A good way to define what this magazine is about is to consider its name. In common American usage, "politics" has either mean or innocuous connotations. It suggests "ward politics"—graft, baby-kissing, petty chicanery. Or else an illegitimate putting forward of special interests at the expense of society as a whole, as when the press used to accuse Roosevelt of "playing politics" with unemployment relief. The word "politician" is practically a term of abuse.

This would seem to be a curious attitude. "Politics" to the Greeks, who were experts at it, had no such connotation. Webster defines the word in Aristotelian terms as "the science and art of government", which would seem exceptionally enough. We can understand the bad odor of the word, however, if we consider the blunter contemporary definition: "who gets what, and how". The conception of "politics" thus appears to be something like "sex" or "profit", an overexplicit formulation of relationships, the bourgeois society prefers to keep hidden. It renders the fiction that all is harmonious and equitable within society. The bourgeois theory is that there is no necessity for politics, since the economic system distributes goods with Loriah impartiality, and every man has a chance to get precisely the amount of honor and possessions his individual qualifications entitle him to. By definition, the interference of the politician must always be to pervert this self-adjusting system for the unfair benefit of some special interest. The ideal is, therefore, "A Businessman in the White House".

This objection to politics is pretty old-fashioned, and is vanishing along with the antiquated laissez-faire ideology it expressed. (The sad experience of the last "businessman in the White House", and the brilliant record of his super-political successor, helped along the demise of the concept—though it may be that theCondition of being possible these days.) The modern attack on politics comes from another quarter: the ideal of national unity. In the United States at war, all respectable folk pay lip service to this ideal, and Roosevelt prefers the non-political role of Commander-in-Chief to the political one of President.

The National Committee of the American Communist Party, in recommending the party's dissolution, invoked the "national unity" concept, defining the future function of Communists as "to aid the struggle for the unity of the people in support of the nation's war policies, without partisan or class advantage." In the totalitarian nations politics has vanished completely, at least in the sense of open, institutionalized contests between various interest groups. There are no parties because there are no parties, only the whole, and there are no elections, except in form, because only one choice is, even formally, presented to the voter. (That different candidates compete against each other in Russian elections does not alter the picture, since all candidates have the same program and choice among them is, at best, a question of choice among their individual qualifications. Such elections might be called "administrative" rather than "political"). In Nazi propaganda the term "politician" is even more invidious than in American usage. In Soviet propaganda, it has disappeared completely; the very conception has been banished from the consciousness of the Russian masses.

Thus "politics" is a most unpopular term in a world in which ever-thicker veils of official ideology swathe the brutal realities of power. Yet as long as class societies exist, the only hope of the submerged majority to change things in their favor will rest on political action, breaking through the fiction of organic unity between the lion and the lamb and setting class groups off openly against each other. In a classless society, of course, politics would cease to exist because it would have no further function. "We are very well off as to politics," says old Hamcard in William Morris's News from Nowhere, "because we have none." The essence of reactionary politics is to try to get people to behave in a class society as though it were a classless society, i.e., to stop "playing politics".

Actually, by one of those dialectical turns so common in history, the more the anti-political concept of "national unity" gains, the wider the power of the State can be extended and the more thoroughly can all of society become politicized. In the totalitarian countries, where politics is most severely repressed, all aspects of personal and cultural existence have become subject to political control. The same process is going on over here. It would therefore seem useful to have a magazine which, beginning with its very title, will constantly emphasize the political reality of anti-political ideology and practices.

The Magazine's Aims and Editorial Policies

In more concrete terms, the aim of POLITICS will be:

1. to create a center of consciousness on the Left, not coming all varieties of radical thought;

2. to seek out the long-range trends in the welter of daily phenomena. Most political writing today is superficial because it limits "politics" too narrowly to the policies of certain parties and leaders, and because it concerns itself too largely with the immediate future, keeping basic principles in storage for use only on state occasions. POLITICS will try (1) to broaden political concern so as to include all kinds of social, technological, cultural and psychological factors; and (2) to measure month-to-month developments with the yardstick of basic values.

3. to print work by younger, relatively unknown American intellectuals—cultural, sociologists, critics, journalists, trade union and Government experts; and by those many blacks, reds, and others who can produce informed analysis of European events but at present have no satisfactory means of communication with advanced American opinion.

4. to consider art, music, literature as social and historical phenomena; to pay special attention to that vast "popular culture" so strangely neglected hitherto by American intellectuals.

Although POLITICS will not have a "line" on specific political issues, it will have an editorial policy. The au-
Appendix: “why politics?” founding editorial, February 1944

February, 1944

suspicion will be that its readers and contributors are basically critical of existing institutions and feel the necessity for radical change. The magazine’s political tendency will be democratic socialist. Its predominant intellectual approach will be Marxist, in the sense of a method of analysis, not of a body of dogma. (These terms, of course, means different things to different people. Not the least important task of the magazine will be precisely to elucidate these different meanings.) It will be partisan to those on the bottom of present-day society—the Negroes, the colonial peoples, and the vast majority of common people everywhere, including the Soviet Union. Its motto might well be Marx’s words: “To be radical is to grasp the matter by the root. Now the root for mankind is man himself.”

The Editor’s Political Views

It only remains to state my own political approach. Naturally, a not unimportant personal motive in undertaking to publish a new magazine was to express these views, and to afford some place where others with similar views might also write. There are two important questions on which my views conflict with those of large sectors of the Left, namely, the nature of the Soviet Union, and the proper socialist policy in the present war.

I do not consider the Soviet Union to be any sort of socialist or “workers’” State, whether “degenerated” or not, but rather a new form of class society based on collective ownership of the means of production by the ruling bureaucracy. This new kind of society, which might be called “bureaucratic collectivism”, and which I see existing in modified form also in Nazi Germany, is a third alternative to capitalism and socialism. It will dominate the future if the masses fail to make a socialist revolution. It is not only not socialism, but it is a form of society profoundly repugnant to the ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity which have been shared by most radicals, bourgeois or socialist, since 1789. That it is based on collectivised property, and that it is the heir of the first successful proletarian revolution (in much the same sense as Nazism is the heir of the Weimar Republic)—these facts call for a revision of traditional Marxist conceptions.

The most important attempt to apply traditional Marxist theories to the development of Soviet Russia was, of course, Trotsky’s. His analysis seems to me wrong in two major respects: (1) he expected the counter-revolution to come in the form of a restoration of capitalist property relations; (2) he saw a basic antagonism between the collectivised economy and the totalitarian political regime. These judgments flowed from his traditional Marxist belief that capitalism and socialism are the only historical alternatives today. In the turning-point year 1928, Trotsky therefore considered the chief threat to the revolution to come from the kulaks and nepmen, with Bukharin as his spokesman. Stalin he actually termed a “centrist” who would soon be brushed aside once the resurgent bourgeoisie had consolidated their position—or, given a more favorable turn, after the workers had rallied to Trotsky’s own socialist platform. When the next year Stalin crushed Bukharin, began to liquidate the kulaks, and instituted the First Five Year Plan, Trotsky was compelled by the logic of his traditional-Marxist theories to salute all this as a “leftward” step. Actually, I think Anton Gill is right, in his remarkable book, The Russian Enigma, when he presents the First Five Year Plan as the foundation of the totalitarian society Stalin has built in Russia.

Because he saw a fictitious antagonism between collectivism and dictatorship, Trotsky insisted that the Stalinist bureaucracy were Bonapartist usurpers, a gang of bandits who had grabbed control of the collectivised economy but who were forced, in order to maintain their political power, to take actions which clashed with the needs of this economy. But it would now appear that there is no such conflict, that economic collectivisation and total dictatorship can exist peacefully side by side, their gears meshing in smoothly together. The very thing which today is to many people an indication of the progressive nature of the Soviet Union, namely the successful resistance to German invasion, seems to me to show something quite different: that the decisive contradictions Trotsky saw between collectivism and dictatorship do not exist. Trotsky always predicted that this alleged contradiction would cause great internal political difficulties for Stalin in the event of war, especially if the war began with big defeats. The strain of war would widen the alleged fissure between the masses and the bureaucracy, he thought. But the actual course of events has been quite different: although the war began with the most catastrophic large-scale defeats, not even a rumor has reached us of any political opposition to the regime at any time. This does not mean Stalin’s regime is therefore progressive; Hitler also had wide popular support. Modern totalitarianism can integrate the masses so completely into the political structure, through terror and propaganda, that they become the architects of their own enslavement. This does not make the slavery less, but on the contrary more—a paradox there is no space to unravel here. The historical “point” is that the two great totalitarianisms, Germany and Russia, have met the supreme test of a modern class society, namely war, more successfully than the bourgeois democracies have. Bureaucratic collectivism, not capitalism, is the most dangerous future enemy of socialism.

It is admittedly much more difficult to take a clear position on the war than on the nature of the Soviet Union. For this war is an incredibly complex business. I think we can start out from the proposition that this war is not a struggle between Good and Evil, or Democracy and Totalitarianism, but rather a clash of rival imperialisms. This is now admitted much more widely in liberal-labor circles than it was at the beginning of the war. But to say it is an imperialist war does not exhaust the matter. For there certainly are important differences between fascism and democratic capitalism, and the outcome of the war certainly does “make a difference” to the working class in this country and elsewhere (including Germany). We of the Left cannot simply draw aside and say, it’s none of our business, we don’t care what happens.

From this, most of the Left, even those who agree to the imperialist nature of the war, have drawn the conclusion that we must give support—“critical” support, of
course— to the United Nations. Alexander Herzen remarks of two Russian liberals who made their peace with Czar Nicholas I: “I shall be told that under the aegis of devotion to the Imperial power, the truth can be spoken more boldly. Why, then, did they not speak it?” So, too, with the critical supporters of the war—why, then, do they not criticize? The difficulty is that the war, like the Caesarian system, is a phenomenon of such historical weight that to accept it, with whatever reservations, means one is paralyzed on apparently secondary issues. One might imagine, for example, a policy of all support to the war effort combined with uncompromising struggle, through strikes and political action, for a progressive conduct of the war on the home front and in foreign policy. This is formally imaginable. Yet it is a historical impossibility, which is why the impact of the lib-libs on the conduct of this war has been so negligible. The interests of the present ruling classes of England and America cannot be reconciled with those of the masses in those countries, and so long as the war is conducted within the framework of the status quo, it cannot be wrenched around to serve the interests of a "people’s century". This war has its own logic and its own drive, which the labor movement submits to in supporting it.

The proper policy would have been to insist on taking the fight against Hitler into the hands of the workers, to press for certain policies by means of strikes and political action regardless of the immediate effect on the war effort. This would have involved the risk of a Nazi victory? Of course. But risks are involved in any course, and the present policy of the Left does not even offer risks: it is leading straight to postwar reaction on a world scale, the redivision of Europe and the colonial regions between the three dominant imperialisms. The great aim of Roosevelt-Stalin-Churchill is to prevent “chaos” and “anarchy”—i.e., social revolution—in postwar Europe. But future hopes of progress will come out of “chaos”, not out of “order”.

It all comes down to: what are you interested in? If one is interested in basic social change, one weighs the risks and gains on one set of scales; if one is interested in buttressing the status quo as a “lesser evil”, then one uses another set. The British labor movement, for example, had the one chance this war has so far offered of making a basic social change, in the period after Dunkirk. Koestler describes it vividly:

If ever there was a chance for socialism in Britain, it was in the period from Dunkirk to the fall of Tobruk. Popular discontent against the conduct of the war was at its peak. In a dozen or so by-elections the Government was defeated. Even Masters of the Fox Hunt suddenly talked with popular soap box inflections. The Government had been invested with the power of nationalizing all individual property in the country; the transition to State-socialism could have been achieved merely by political pressure, without revolution or civil war . . . However, the workingclass lacked the political maturity to grasp its opportunity. Intelligent Tories have to this day not recovered from the surprise that capitalism survived the Dunkirk-to-Singapore crisis.

(N. Y. Times, Nov. 7, 1943).

Nothing came of this opportunity because the British
Appendix: “Hiroshima Editorial,” August 1945

At 8:15 on the morning of August 6, 1945, an American plane dropped a single bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. Exploding with the force of 20,000 tons of TNT, the bomb destroyed a twelfth of the city, including, presumably, most of the 343,000 human beings who lived there. No warning whatever was given. This atrocious action places “us,” the defenders of civilization, on a moral level with “them,” the beasts of Maidanek. And “we,” the American people, are just as much and as little responsible for this horror as “they,” the German people.

So much is obvious. But more must be said. For the “atomic” bomb renders anticlimaxical even the ending of the greatest war in history (which seems imminent as this goes to press). (1) THE CONCEPTS, “WAR” AND “PROGRESS,” ARE NOW OBSOLETE. Both suggest human aspirations, emotions, aims, consciousness. “The greatest achievement of organized science in history,” said President Truman after the Hiroshima catastrophe—which it probably was, and so much the worse for organized science. Such “progress” fills no human needs of either the destroyed or the destroyers. And a war of atomic bombs is not a war. It is a scientific experiment. (2) THE FUTILITY OF MODERN WARFARE SHOULD NOW BE CLEAR.

Must we not now conclude, with Simone Weil, that the technical aspect of war today is the evil, regardless of political factors? Can one imagine that the atomic bomb could ever be used “in a good cause”? Do not such means instantly, of themselves, corrupt ANY cause? (3) ATOMIC BOMBS ARE THE NATURAL PRODUCT OF THE KIND OF SOCIETY WE HAVE CREATED. They are as easy, normal and unforced an expression of the American Standard of Living as electric iceboxes. We do not dream of a world in which atomic fission will be “harnessed to constructive ends.” The new energy will be at the service of the rulers; it will change their strength but not their aims. The underlying population should regard this new source of energy with lively interest—the interest of victims. (4) THOSE WHO WIELD SUCH DESTRUCTIVE POWER ARE OUTCASTS FROM HUMANITY. They may be gods, they may be brutes, but they are not men. (5) WE MUST GET THE MODERN NATIONAL STATE BEFORE IT “GETS” US. The crazy and murderous nature of the kind of society we have created is underlined by the atomic bomb. Every individual who wants to save his humanity—and indeed his skin—had better begin thinking “dangerous thoughts” about sabotage, resistance, rebellion, and the fraternity of all men everywhere. The mental attitude known as “negativism” is a good start.

This index covers all issues in the first four volumes of Politics: Vol. I, No. 1 (Feb. 1944) through Vol. 4, No. 4 (July-Aug. 1947). Listings appear with the month first, the year second, and the page number third, as: May 46 164.

Each volume of Politics corresponds to a year. Pages are numbered consecutively within each volume. Each issue has a “Volume Number” and a “Whole Number” and the former shows its relation to the yearly volume, the latter to the whole series since the first issue. Thus, the November, 1946, issue is No. 10 of Volume 3, and is also Whole No. 33.

* The January, 1947, issue bears an incorrect Whole Number. The correct Whole Number for that issue is 35.

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We are a group of people from many intellectual professions in America who have gotten together to provide some center of solidarity with and support for intellectuals in Europe who find themselves outside the mass parties. Like ourselves, these intellectuals are isolated not only from the great power blocs that divide the world, but also to a large extent from each other. More than a decade of fascism, war, hunger, and mass suffering has left Europe in a situation which Stalinism now exploits.

Many people have unwillingly resigned themselves to passivity in the face of the extreme polarity of Soviet and American power. Independent democrats and socialists lack either the power to frame alternatives or the confidence or the hope that such alternatives will be effective. Our purpose is to combat this spirit of discouragement.

In Europe material factors limit and hamper communication. Here a different kind of isolation is a fact for most non-party intellectuals. Without having suffered the ravages of war, the repressions of fascism or Stalinism, we find ourselves unable to make our opposition, real as it is to us, felt in any practical way. The result has been a loss of communication which we, through material help and intellectual collaboration, may help to restore. We want, above all, to show disinterested Europeans that they are not alone, and that certain basic ideas of freedom and social equity remain for us common ground.

We hope to provide an atmosphere in which new political thought is possible, in which there can be an actual exchange of ideas and a confrontation of differences. We feel that only out of such an exchange can come that new force on the democratic left whose absence is so acutely felt everywhere.

We came together on the following basis:
1. We regard Stalinism as the main enemy in Europe.
2. We want to help any tendencies toward the formation of a new “left” which is independent of both the Soviet and American governments.
3. Our main emphasis is on free communication between American and European intellectuals—i.e., the creation of what Albert Camus calls a “community of dialogue.” What we support in Europe today is not any specific program but the re-examination of political questions through controversy and discussion.

Concretely, we want to do three things:
1. To give material help to individuals and small groups, beginning with France and Italy.
2. To supply them with books, magazines, and other sources of information.
3. To form a group in this country which will (a) promote public discussions on political and cultural matters; (b) raise funds for the purposes given above; and (c) establish some regular channels of communication with our friends in Europe.

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Other Writings by Dwight Macdonald

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Volker Berghahn, interview by author, University of Pennsylvania, 17 October 2009.