

Left to the end: Socialist in the wilderness

by [Gary Dorrien](#) in the [October 11, 2000](#) issue

The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington, by Maurice Isserman.

Countless times in his career, Michael Harrington heard himself introduced as “the author of *The Other America*, the book that sparked the war on poverty.” His other books on democratic socialism tended to get short shrift. Harrington was a friendly, generous figure, not inclined to chide a welcoming host, but these introductions were hard to bear. Sometimes he reintroduced himself: “I’ve written quite a few books since *The Other America*, some of which might interest you,” he would say. He could see his epitaph in the making: “Wrote *The Other America*, downhill after that.”

Maurice Isserman has given us a version of this epitaph that is long on early biographical detail and very short on the aspect of Harrington’s life and work that was most important to him—the struggle to create a democratic socialist tradition. On all counts except this one, *The Other American* is a splendidly conceived and meticulously researched biography.

Had Harrington been born anywhere in Western Europe, he would have become a major social-democratic party leader. As it is, he could have become America’s leading liberal intellectual. But he aspired to build a serious democratic socialist tradition in this country, and he had to settle for being America’s leading socialist, which, as William F. Buckley Jr. once teased him, was something like being the tallest building in Kansas.

Born in St. Louis in 1928, Edward Michael Harrington was educated by the Jesuits at St. Louis University High School, where he was called Ned, and by the Jesuits at Holy Cross College, where friends called him Ed. In later life he was sensitive to the resemblance between the Thomistic scholasticism in which he was trained and the Marxist scholasticism that he embraced as an adult. “I have long thought that my Jesuit education predisposed me to the worst and best of Marx’s thought,” he

acknowledged.

Having graduated from college near the top of his class at the age of 19, he had a few extra years to find himself. To please his parents he spent a year at Yale Law School, which bored him, and a year studying English at the University of Chicago, which he liked, but not enough to hang on for a doctorate. Harrington later claimed that he shed his right-leaning politics at Yale and that his “Damascus Road” conversion to social activism occurred during a summer job in St. Louis working for the public school system’s Pupil Welfare Department. Isserman couldn’t find a Yale classmate who remembered him as a socialist, however, and he reveals that Harrington worked for the Pupil Welfare Department for a total of three days.

It was in Greenwich Village that he started to become Michael Harrington, successor to socialist icons Eugene Debs and Norman Thomas. Upon moving to New York in 1951, Harrington moved into Dorothy Day’s Catholic Worker House of Hospitality, where he promptly took over the Catholic Worker newspaper and became a favorite of the founder. Harrington spent little time actually ministering to the poor in the Bowery—the newspaper proved more interesting—but he repeated the Worker’s standard answer to inquirers about why he was living at the House of Hospitality: in order to become a saint. For nearly two years he tried to adopt Day’s anarcho-pacifist politics and her devotion to Catholic orthodoxy, while spending his evenings at the White Horse Tavern. The White Horse was famous in Greenwich Village for the poets and writers who drank there, including Dylan Thomas, Delmore Schwartz, Norman Mailer, William Styron and Dan Wakefield. Young Democratic Party operative Daniel Patrick Moynihan was another regular.

For ten years Harrington was a fixture at the White Horse. He fancied himself a poet and Bohemian, smoked and drank every night, held court on politics and literature, took home a lengthy succession of women, and dropped Day’s anarchism, pacifism and religion, in that order. Under the influence of Bogdan Denitch, then a young operative in the Young People’s Socialist League, Harrington joined the socialist “movement,” as the YPSL cadre called their grouplet. He traded one sect for another, while telling himself that this time he was working to end the system that produced human misery rather than merely ministering to it.

The middle portion of Isserman’s story is the one most likely to tax readers’ patience. This section details Harrington’s 20-year career of sectarian intrigue, faction-fighting and movement building as a Shachtmanite. Max Shachtman was a

charismatic autodidact, brilliant party hack and spellbinding orator who left his mark on a peculiar mixture of radicals and conservatives. He began his political pilgrimage as a communist and ended it as a father figure to the generation of right-wing socialists who later won high positions in the Reagan administration. In the 1920s Shachtman was a Soviet-style communist; in 1929 he co-founded American Trotskyism and was a close associate of Leon Trotsky; in 1940 he founded the post-Trotskyist Independent Socialist League, which espoused what Shachtman called "Third Camp" revolutionary socialism; in the 1950s his theory of "democratic Marxism" provided the ideological scaffolding for democratic socialists who considered themselves too "hard" to join Norman Thomas's Socialist Party; in the 1960s he moved to the right, joined the Socialist Party, and cozied up to the leadership of the AFL-CIO; subsequently he was revered by neoconservatives as the champion of militantly anticommunist trade unionism.

The Shachtmanites strenuously debated abstruse points of Marxist doctrine in sessions that often lasted through the night. Harrington later described his comrades as "determined but unhysterical anticommunists engaged in seemingly Talmudic exegeses of the holy writ according to Karl Marx." From Shachtman he inherited his signature theories of democratic Marxism and bureaucratic collectivism, as well as his socialist outrage at the communist perversion of socialism. Harrington recalled that when Shachtman gave one of his three-hour speeches on the evils of communism and reeled off the names of socialist leaders murdered by Joseph Stalin, "it was like hearing the roll call of revolutionary martyrs who were bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh." This schooling in the intensely anticommunist faction of the Old Left shaped Harrington's early conception of the democratic socialist mission but also limited his effectiveness in dealing with the youthful leaders of the New Left during the early 1960s.

In 1960 the nonyouthful socialists of the League for Industrial Democracy tried to regenerate their youth division by funding a new student organization, which was later named Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Having spent two years lecturing at colleges and universities across the country, Harrington was tapped to be the Old Left's bridge to the student generation. He met several times with Tom Hayden and other leaders of the student movement, trying to convert them to democratic socialism, but they resisted what seemed to them the unnecessary historical baggage of Harrington's socialism. They felt that a new American radicalism needed to invent its own language and politics, shorn of the

anticommunism and statism of the social democratic Old Left, and shorn as well of the Old Left's alliance with trade unions and Democratic Party liberalism.

"They were in favor of political realignment, but dismissed the liberals who were essential to it," Harrington later remarked. He found their anti-anticommunism inexcusable. For a brief period following the drafting of the Port Huron Statement, the founding manifesto of the SDS, Harrington advised the League for Industrial Democracy to stop funding SDS.

Harrington had been the youngest member of his high school class, his college class, his drinking gangs and his socialist sects; now he confronted younger student leaders who rejected his counsel, and he did not take it well. He damaged his reputation among young radicals just as they began to build a "new left" worth naming. He was right about the oppressive squalor of communism and the necessity of working with liberals, but his manner of admonishing the New Leftists was deeply alienating, and it took him several years to break free from his Shachtmanite muddle after Vietnam became America's consuming political issue.

Isserman corrects some often-repeated exaggerations about Harrington's bad relations with the New Left. Harrington never lost his access to the saner leaders of the New Left, and his fame as author of *The Other America*, which appeared in 1962, gave him an identity to a mass audience that knew nothing about Max Shachtman or the Port Huron Statement. Long after he became famous as "the man who discovered poverty," however, Harrington apologized repeatedly for his generational conflict with Hayden and other New Left leaders. He sorely regretted that he botched his one chance to shape the thinking of a significant student movement. He also sorely regretted that it took him until October 1969 to speak at an antiwar rally, and until January 1970 to call for American withdrawal from Vietnam.

The Other America had inauspicious beginnings. As a professional activist, Harrington was adept at writing and speaking on topics he knew little about. In 1959 he knew a good deal about communism, literary criticism and civil liberties, which were his staple topics for *Commonweal* and *Dissent* magazines. He knew little about poverty, aside from his brief experience at the Catholic Worker and various impressions from his lecture tours.

Liberal journals rarely mentioned poverty in the 1950s. They barely recognized that it still existed in America, much less that it deserved to be treated as an important

political issue. In 1959 most liberals believed that the basic structural problems of how government and business should work together had been solved. Continued economic growth would mop up the residual “pockets of poverty” left over from the Depression. John Kenneth Galbraith’s *The Affluent Society* and Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s *The Vital Center* were the bibles of the new prosperity-liberalism.

The Affluent Society brought out a few naysayers. Economist Leon Keyserling suggested that the established liberalism might be too complacent by half. In 1958 Keyserling noted that more than a quarter of American families reported annual incomes below \$4,000. He argued that Galbraith and Schlesinger underestimated the need for a New Deal-type employment policy. A few months later, the social democratic *New Leader* published a speech by Senator Paul Douglas of Illinois that called for a more aggressive government response to America’s lingering poverty problem.

Commentary editor Anatole Shub sensed a hot topic in the making. He commissioned an article from Harrington on poverty as a social and political issue. Harrington used statistics from the Federal Reserve Board and the U.S. Commerce Department to argue that there were 50 million poor people in the affluent society; as an aid to understanding how this could be true in 1959, he appropriated the “culture of poverty” thesis of anthropologist Oscar Lewis. The poor were not merely underemployed, he explained; they constituted “a separate culture, another nation, with its own way of life.” (This notion had a leftist spin in Lewis’s and Harrington’s usage. In later life Harrington had to defend his understanding of the term in the face of neoconservatives who used the “culture of poverty” idea to attack antipoverty programs.) A second *Commentary* article on slums decried America’s housing policy as cheap and lacking in compassion.

Harrington had to be convinced to turn his articles into a book, even after Edward R. Murrow’s documentary *Harvest of Shame* drew the attention of millions to the plight of migrant farm laborers. Poverty was a secondary issue for Harrington. He was deeply involved in the civil rights movement and was otherwise consumed by middle-class and trade union issues. He rebuffed various entreaties from publishers to write *The Other America* until Macmillan offered him an eye-popping \$500 advance. For that “enormous sum,” he later recalled, he wrote the book that changed his life.

The Other America padded out the argument of his *Commentary* articles. The land of the poor was invisible to middle-class Americans because it existed mostly in rural isolation and in crowded urban slums, he observed. This other America was the product of social neglect. “Until these facts shame us, until they stir us to action, the other America will continue to exist, a monstrous example of needless suffering in the most advanced society in the world.”

Dwight Macdonald praised the book for 40 pages in the *New Yorker*. After that Harrington was bombarded with requests for articles, speeches and media interviews. The book became required reading among social scientists, government officials, student activists, and intellectuals. Economic adviser Walter Heller gave a copy to President Kennedy, who may have read it before ordering a federal war on poverty three days before his death. When Lyndon Johnson declared war on poverty—“that’s my kind of program,” he told Heller—he appointed Peace Corps director Sargent Shriver to head the new Office of Economic Opportunity, who then appointed Harrington to the program’s organizing group. After Shriver briefed him on the agency’s mandate and budget, Harrington warned that America’s poverty would not be ended by spending “nickels and dimes.” Shriver replied, “Oh really, Mr. Harrington. I don’t know about you, but this is the first time I’ve spent a billion dollars.”

Harrington told that story often in later years to illustrate why America lost its war on poverty. Government spending did increase significantly between 1965 and 1968, he allowed, but this was largely to pay for the war in Vietnam and to fund increases in Social Security and Medicare. The war on poverty was funded at less than one percent of the federal budget.

Harrington wore his fame uneasily. He could have used it as a ticket to individual stardom as a liberal (*The Other America* never mentioned socialism), but instead he used his fame to promote democratic socialism and build new socialist organizations. He could have written pop-level best sellers to boost his name and income—publishers begged him to write a sequel to *The Other America*—but he persisted in writing scholarly books on socialism and the crises of late capitalism. He was a sensational speaker—expressive, flowing, charming, always with three well-outlined points—and he greatly enjoyed his lecture tours.

While lecturing one evening in 1965, however, he nearly collapsed from a nervous breakdown. His devastating depression required four years of psychoanalytic

treatment; to his understanding—maternal and paternal influences aside—the culprit was his unexpected fame. He kept giving lectures, but for years he could not speak without feeling a flash of anxiety that another meltdown was coming. He felt guilty about the money that he earned from his lectures and books; he was conflicted about how to make use of his good fortune. A decade later he embarrassed many of his comrades by spending the money on a move to the suburbs, for the sake of his children, all the while realizing that his wife and children suffered from his long lecture-touring absences from home.

By 1972 Harrington was finished with the right-leaning Shachtmanites, but not with the dream of building an American democratic socialist movement. The Shachtmanites hated the Democratic nominee for president, George McGovern, and made no secret of their belief that a Nixon presidency was preferable. To Harrington and his friends at *Dissent*, the phenomenon of “socialists for Nixon” deserved a name. Harrington reached for the term *neoconservative*. The neoconservatives derided the ’60s generation of newly educated progressives as a “New Class” of self-seeking bureaucrats and opportunists. Harrington saw the same group as the hope of a new “conscience constituency” in American politics. He sought to bring together the McGovern wing of the Democratic Party, the social movements left over from the ’60s, the progressive unions and the progressive wing of the Socialist Party.

Harrington then walked out of the Socialist Party and in 1973 formed the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC). This organization attracted a strong core of supporters that included sociologist Bogdan Denitch, literary critic Irving Howe, educational leader Deborah Meier, labor leader William Winpisinger, feminist leader Gloria Steinem and Congressman Ron Dellums. DSOC worked primarily as a socialist caucus in the liberal wings of the trade union movement and the Democratic Party. It enjoyed strong support from the Machinists, the Communications Workers and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, and in the mid and late 1970s it made impressive inroads in the Democratic Party, especially at the national party’s mid-term conventions.

A further step toward healing the generational Old Left-New Left split occurred in 1982, when DSOC merged with a predominantly New Left organization, the New American Movement, to form Democratic Socialists of America. This merger brought such figures as feminist writer Barbara Ehrenreich, labor historian Stanley Aronowitz and black studies professor Manning Marable into the new organization and reversed the longstanding American socialist tradition of splintering into ever-smaller sects.

Until his death in 1989, Harrington chaired or co-chaired DSA. Remarkably for a '50s-generation Shachtmanite Marxist, he came not only to respect the feminist, ecological and New Left currents in his organization, but also to reconceptualize his socialist vision in the light of their criticism.

Isserman faithfully tracks the in-house debates of DSOC and DSA, in this case informed by personal experience. He belonged to Harrington's organizations in the '70s and '80s, and his admiration for Harrington is evident; he calls Harrington "Michael" throughout the book. In one important respect, however, Isserman is atypical of the DSOC progressives of his generation. Isserman made his scholarly reputation as a historian of the Old Left, but from the mid-1970s on, DSOC and DSA mostly attracted members who knew and cared very little about the old sectarian left. Their frame of political reference began in 1965 or 1968 or 1972 or even later. They joined DSA or, especially, DSOC because they heard Michael Harrington give an inspiring speech at their university. Except for an occasional aside ("Here's a note for the Marxologists among you," he would say), Harrington was usually careful to keep his sectarian socialist past in the past. Some of his books rehashed Marxist debates at length, but never his campus lectures. He knew that there was little in the Old Left to commend to young activists, and he had learned the hard way that they were not interested in any case.

Isserman tracks all of Harrington's movement activism with commendable clarity, but he takes a light pass at Harrington's thought. The 11 books that Harrington wrote after *The Other America* were terribly important to him, especially *Socialism* (1972), *The Twilight of Capitalism* (1976), *Decade of Decision* (1980), *The Next Left* (1986) and *Socialism: Past and Future* (1989). Isserman barely mentions them. On Harrington's scholarly work he settles for a footnote that refers the reader to one of my early books on democratic socialism and to a monograph by Robert Gorman. One problem with this bifurcation of Harrington's life and thought is that it underwrites the kind of dismissive judgment that sociologist Alan Wolfe recently made against Harrington in the *New Republic*. Harrington's books after *The Other America* were failures, Wolfe says, "because Harrington was too busy fighting forgotten battles to concentrate on the writing of them." Harrington kept plugging for democratic socialism long after he should have gotten his clock fixed. Though Isserman probably does not agree with this judgment, there is nothing in his book to counter it, because he does not let Harrington argue in his own voice.

The driving theme of Harrington's major works was that modern industrialized societies are moving ineluctably toward some variable form of collectivism. Isserman mentions that Harrington inherited the idea of bureaucratic collectivism from Shachtman, but he does not show how Harrington developed this idea and brought it into debates that had little to do with the nature of communist regimes. For Harrington the serious question was not whether economic planning would take place in the future, but the form in which it would take place. The trend under modern capitalism, he argued, was toward a top-down, command-model bureaucratic collectivism in which huge oligopolies administered prices, controlled the politics of investment, bought off the political system, and defined cultural tastes and values while obtaining protection and support from the state. It is not a good thing, he warned, that under modern capitalism effective control over investment, credit and social planning is increasingly vested in the hands of unelected elites that hold their own class interests and which valorize their own class-determined notions of the public good.

For Harrington, democratic socialism was essentially a vision of an alternative future in which an inevitably collectivized society was effectively democratized. It had almost nothing to do with economic nationalization and everything to do with economic democracy. As he explained in the *Nation* in 1986: "The issue of the 21st century and of the late 20th century is, can that collective tendency be made democratic and responsible? Can it be made compatible with freedom?" He believed that freedom could survive the ascendance of monopoly corporations and globalizing markets and technology only if it took the form of decentralized economic democracy. Harrington opposed economic nationalization on both philosophical and programmatic grounds. Unlike the various authoritarian forms of collectivization—including state socialism and monopoly capitalism—his form of socialism promoted decentralized worker and community ownership and regionally based economic planning. His increasing emphasis on decentralized forms of socialization reflected the influence of green politics on his thinking throughout the 1970s and '80s. Upon being criticized in the *Nation* for selling out socialism, he characteristically replied: "To think that 'socialization' is a panacea is to ignore the socialist history of the twentieth century, including the experience of France under Mitterrand. I am for worker- and community-controlled ownership and for an immediate and practical program for full employment which approximates as much of that ideal as possible. No more. No less."

In his conception, the purpose of democratic socialism was to empower ordinary people and thus preserve and extend democratic freedom. He pointed to the Meidner Plan for Economic Democracy in Sweden and to other experiments in worker and social ownership as examples of the decentralized democratic socialism of the future. Though he took seriously his moral obligation to inspire hope in his campus audiences, he could be brutally realistic and analytical in the drinking sessions that followed his lectures. Even his lectures always warned American audiences that they would never live to see economic democracy in their country. In his last book, Harrington expounded a “visionary gradualist” strategy that conceived the democratic socialist movement as a persistently reformist pressure for further gains toward democratic self-determination. He may have been wrong about the future of capitalism and the viability of democratic socialism, but he did make arguments about these matters that deserve to be taken seriously.

I had my share of arguments with Harrington, mostly about religion and Marxism. An unbeliever with a religious sensibility, he took a Marxist view of religion while sincerely welcoming and respecting religious comrades. His organizations were never lacking in religious leaders; prominent among them were philosopher Cornel West, cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson, labor activist John C. Cort, *Dissent* editor Maxine Phillips, church activists Norm Faramelli and Jack Spooner, and theologians Harvey Cox, Rosemary Ruether and Joe Holland.

Near the end of Harrington’s life, I strongly criticized some of his arguments, and I waited anxiously for his reaction. “So you think I don’t know how to read Marx, do you?” he teased. “Well, you’re in good company.” He relinquished the hope of ever straightening out people like me. But what delighted him in his last years, he said, was that he finally belonged to a socialist organization in which people could criticize each other without generating destructive intrigues, factional schisms and personal attacks. This was, in large part, a personal achievement of Michael Harrington.

It is not only the left that is poorer today for having no one like him. American politics is poorer. Bill Clinton has tacked further and further to the right during his presidency because, lacking any ballast on the left, the politics of triangulation necessarily tilts to the right. Whatever his illusions, this is a political truism that Harrington understood very well indeed.