

In Socialism's Twilight:
Michael Walzer and the Politics of the Long New Left

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Abstract

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In Socialism’s Twilight is a study of the thought and politics of Michael Walzer and the travails of “democratic socialism” in the second half of the twentieth century. Using the methods of intellectual and political history, it situates Walzer’s political theory and criticism in the context of what might be called the “long New Left,” the overlapping generations of radicals that stretched from the beginning of the Cold War to its end and that supplemented the left’s traditional commitments to socialism with a politics of national liberation, radical democracy, and liberalism. By doing so, the dissertation hopes to trace the development not only of Walzer’s own commitments but also those of the socialist left. Caught in a period of frequent defeat and bitter controversy, socialists found themselves forced into a state of constant revision, as they moved from the libertarian socialism of the 1950s and 60s to the social democratic coalitions of the 1970s and 80s to the liberalism and humanitarianism of the 1990s and 2000s. Opening with the collapse of the Popular Front after World War II, the study follows Walzer’s search for a new left with radicals around *Dissent* and through his involvement in civil rights and antiwar activism. Examining his arguments with an older left over Vietnam and with a younger left over Israel, it then tracks Walzer’s movement toward the left-liberal politics of the 1970s and it concludes with chapters on his major works of normative theory and his later turn to humanitarian interventionism.

By revisiting his career, *In Socialism’s Twilight* seeks to identify some of the competing impulses of socialists in the second half of the twentieth century and explore the sometimes creative, sometimes unsatisfying ways they engaged with them. It also hopes to ask some of the questions facing the left today: How did these socialists reconcile their early commitment to radical democracy with their later one to the welfare state and social democracy? How did they pair their socialism with a politics of national liberation? How did a figure like Walzer, in part radicalized by the Vietnam War, end up with a more positive view of American force? And how do the often conflicting ideals of the long New Left sit with the socialism of a new generation?

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Introduction: The Perilous Tightrope

From the vantage point of the late 1990s and early 2000s, American socialism had arrived at a strange impasse. Socialism in the United States had always been a quixotic enterprise, toiling more on America's margins than its center. Yet for nearly a century and a half, it had also played its modest part in shaping American visions of equality and freedom, whether at the turn of the century as the Socialist Party began to take off, in the 1930s and 40s during the heyday of the Popular Front, or in the 1970s and 80s when a socialist-labor coalition had helped bolster the liberal flank of the Democratic Party. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, socialism had found itself in a moribund state. Several magazines still published under its banner—*In These Times*, *New Politics*, *Dissent*—and the Democratic Socialists of America, a group founded out of the rubble of the Socialist Party and the New Left (a “remnant of a remnant,” as Michael

Harrington put it), continued to exist as a small pressure group.¹ But socialists had no significant institutional presence, no sizable electoral party or large-scale membership organization, and no nationally known avatar. Socialism, in fact, had become such a dubious appellation that some of its longtime allies had started to turn down its organizations' endorsements. "The 'S' word' is definitely not something most politicians want to have anything to do with in this climate," a lead DSA activist told the *New York Times* after Jesse Jackson turned down the group's support.²

To make matters worse, many on the left who continued to identify as socialists no longer appeared to be all that socialist. One might have thought the end of the Cold War would have liberated radicals from the failures of actually existing socialism. "We no longer have this albatross on our backs," Cornel West, then a leading member of DSA, explained to a reporter in 1990. "Our values can now be played out."³ But the opposite proved to be true. Witnessing the attack on the welfare state by Republicans and Democrats, socialists felt forced to form a "left wing of the possible" if they were to salvage what little remained of American social democracy.

This was an understandable conclusion after the disappointments of the first two thirds of the twentieth century. But without a set of specific policies to anchor their vision, the socialists of the possible found themselves vulnerable to the whims of a political culture and, in particular, a Democratic Party that was moving ever farther to the right. Once plagued by what Daniel Bell called "the unhappy problem of being 'in but not of' the world," now socialists were forced to be too much of the world: Their programs and policies were, as the *New Republic* reported in 2013, now "best defined as a collection of economic positions a click to the left of liberal Democrats."⁴

¹ Robert Fitrakis, *The Idea of Democratic Socialism in American and the Decline of the Socialist Party* (New York: Garland, 1993), 280

² Michael Oreskes, "Jackson to Shun Socialist Backing," *The New York Times* (December 3, 1987)

³ Frank J. Priol, "Socialists Ponder a Changed World," *The New York Times* (October 10, 1990)

⁴ Daniel Bell, *Marxian Socialism in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton, 1967), 5. Marc Tracy, "The Dean of 'Dissent,'" *The New Republic* (April 10, 2013)

On foreign policy, these socialists of the possible also appeared disoriented. Long committed to an internationalism that sought to supersede national difference, they had hoped the end of the Cold War might mark a new age of global cooperation in which the program of decolonization might finally be achieved. Likewise, as more and more governments became liberal democracies, many hoped the binaries of the Cold war would be replaced by a new world order founded on a common set of liberal, if not socialist, visions of equality and liberty. Yet, neither proved true. Far from a program of egalitarianism, the globalization inaugurated by the end of the Cold War led to regimes of enforced austerity and economic liberalization that sapped the resources and social protections of weaker southern economies to the benefit of stronger northern ones. The disintegration of multinational states in the communist bloc also unleashed a fury of ethnic violence. Instead of an age of pacific collaboration, socialists now faced a more tribal and bellicose world. For many a “politics of rescue” and humanitarian intervention appeared all that remained. A “theater of displacement” took place, as one humanitarian advocate, Michael Ignatieff, noted. “Bosnia became the latest *bel espoir* of a generation that had tried ecology, socialism, and civil rights only to watch all these lose their romantic momentum.”⁵

September 11th only made matters worse. The left’s default of nonintervention appeared no longer to hold for many. “Standing outside my apartment on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn on September 11,” Adam Shatz, then literary editor of the *Nation*, observed, “I knew two things: (1) the American government—my government, for better or for worse—would respond; and (2) that despite my fear that the response would be disproportionate, I wasn’t going to be attending any peace rallies, at least not yet.”⁶ For others it only hardened their move toward intervention. Having backed the bombings of Belgrade during the Kosovo crisis, many of the socialists around

⁵ Michael Ignatieff, *Warrior’s Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 95.

⁶ Adam Shatz, “The Left and 9/11,” *The Nation* (September 23, 2002)

Dissent and DSA supported the Afghanistan War, arguing that it was “a legitimate act of self-defense,” as *Dissent* board member Ellen Willis explained, and an opportunity to liberate the country’s people from “an illegitimate, barbaric regime.”⁷ Others supported the Iraq War.⁸

Writing of the hawkish turn among an older generation of left intellectuals, Corey Robin observed that having once been united by an “animating faith” that “conquering armies from abroad” ran counter to their ideals, now many appeared “guided not by the light of justice but by the darkness of evil: by the tyranny of dictators, the genocide of ethnic cleansers, and the terrorism of Islamist radicals.”⁹ Even those who still advocated for socialism recognized that something had gone sour. While it remained the “name of our desire,” Robert Heilbroner lamented, “today, it is also the name of our disappointment and (sometimes) our despair.”¹⁰

As many of us know, the story of turn-of-the-twenty-first century socialism did not end there. Roused awake by the 2008 financial crisis, a growing number of young people have begun to rally under its banner. Frustrated by the limited achievements of the Obama years, and jolted into action by the election of Donald Trump, large numbers of Americans born in the 1980s and 90s now call identify with socialism. Membership in DSA has ballooned from 5,000 to 50,000. The circulations of socialist magazines like *Jacobin* have surpassed those of older liberal ones such as the *American Prospect* and the *New Republic*.¹¹ A socialist from Vermont, little known on the national stage before 2016, received over 40 percent of Democratic primary votes in his bid for that year’s presidential nomination and nearly a dozen socialist candidates from New

⁷ Ellen Willis, “The Realities of War,” *Boston Review* (October-November 2002)

⁸ Mitchell Cohen, “Symposium: War and Iraq,” *Dissent* (Winter 2003).

⁹ Corey Robin, “The Fear of the Liberals,” *The Nation* (September 8, 2005)

¹⁰ Robert Heilbroner, “Foreword,” *Why Market Socialism? Voices from Dissent*, edit. by Frank Roosevelt and David Belkin (London: Routledge, 1994), xv

¹¹ For DSA’s revival see, among others: Anna Heyward, “Since Trump’s Victory, Democratic Socialists of America Has Become a Budding Political Force,” *The Nation* (January 15-22, 2018). For the rise of *Jacobin*, see: Dylan Matthews, “Inside Jacobin,” *Vox* (March 21, 2016).

York to Hawaii are now running for local or national office.¹² Some, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib, have also begun to win seats in Congress. In a 2018 poll conducted by the University of Chicago, 60 percent of young Democrats held a favorable view of socialism. By 2020, these young Democrats will become the largest voting bloc in the party.¹³

The sudden revival of democratic socialism in America, however, raises many questions about its swift decline at the turn of the century. What historical forces, what contradictory impulses, what missteps and oversights led socialism to go astray by the early 2000s and what helped it recover its sense of purpose so quickly? What creative syntheses between liberalism and socialism, radical democracy and social democracy, internationalism and an anticolonial politics of national liberation helped sustain the images of socialism into the twenty-first century and which of these syntheses have held it back? As one *Jacobin* editor recently asked, what enabled the small number of mid- and late twentieth-century socialists to “survive a period of reaction without either being driven out of politics or becoming reactionaries themselves”?¹⁴ And what about their “particular combination of idealism, ruthlessness, and iconoclasm” made them well-suited for the struggles of the Cold War and yet so vulnerable to the shifting tides after it?¹⁵

By examining the political thought and activism of Michael Walzer, I hope to begin to contemplate many of these questions. There are many other socialist members of what might be called the “long New Left”—the overlapping generation of radicals that stretched from the beginning of the Cold War to its end—who could be examined and who feature in this study: Bayard Rustin, Michael Harrington, James Weinstein, Michael Lerner, Frances Fox Piven,

¹² Farah Stockman, “‘Yes, I’m Running as a Socialist,’” *New York Times* (April 20, 2018)

¹³ Cathy J. Cohen, Matthew Fowler, Vladimir E. Medencia, and Jon C. Rogowski, “Political Polarization and Trust Among Millennials,” Genforward Survey, University of Chicago (May 2018); William A. Galston, “Millennials Will Soon Be the Largest Voting Bloc in America,” Brookings Institution (July 31, 2017)

¹⁴ Peter Frase, “The Survivors,” *Jacobin* (July 5, 2016)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Staughton Lynd, Eugene Genovese, Barbara Ehrenreich, and Christopher Lasch, to name just a few. Many of these figures had more consistent politics and argued less with the lefts around them, socialist or otherwise. But I have chosen Walzer precisely because his politics evolved over time—and through his writing and arguments with the left, one can begin to see the wider arc of democratic socialism in the second half of the twentieth century, as it moved from the libertarian socialism of the 1950s to the citizen activism of the 1960s to the social democratic coalitions of the 1970s and 80s to the liberalism and humanitarianism of the 1990s and 2000s.

Born into a Popular Front family, Walzer began his political and intellectual career in conversation with the various anti-Stalinist groupings around *Dissent*, *Liberation*, Britain's *Universities and Left Review* and *New Reasoner*, the Cambridge-based New Left Club, and *Studies on the Left* that were also in search of a new synthesis of radical democratic and socialist politics and that took inspiration from the nonalignment socialism of the decolonized world. Involved in the civil rights and antiwar movements, he often tried to bridge the differences between the older and younger lefts before eventually growing disillusioned with the 1960s' politics and in the 1970s and 80s, Walzer followed many of his peers as they marched back toward the institutions and parties of liberalism under the banner of a "left wing of the possible." Having become one of the left's outspoken defenders of humanitarian intervention by the 1990s and 2000s—in a piece from 2002 critical of a younger generation of antiwar leftists, he argued that if "we value democracy, we have to be prepared to defend it, at home, of course, but not only there"—Walzer also helps us follow the story of socialism into the twenty-first century.¹⁶

In his published writings and public debates, one can also hear the bisecting and intersecting currents of the long New Left's politics at work: its socialism and its view that the

¹⁶ Michael Walzer, "Can There Be a Decent Left?" *Dissent* (Spring 2002)

formal equalities and rights of liberalism and social protections of social democracy are not enough; its radical democratic politics informed by the citizen activism and protest movements of the 1950s and 60s; its politics of collective self-determination and national liberation shaped by decolonization and the struggle for postcolonial economic and political independence; its pluralism; and its social democratic and left-liberal politics as it formed pressure groups around Democratic Socialists Organizing Committee, New American Movement, and the Democratic Socialists of America in the 1970s and early 1980s. In *Revolution of the Saints*, *Obligations*, and *Political Action*, for example, we find Walzer trying to situate the citizen politics of the 1950s and 60s within the modern liberal and socialist traditions, using the insights of intellectual history and normative political theory to offer an account of those duties born outside the realm of formal parties, churches, and state institutions, and in a set of uncollected essays on decolonization, Cuba, Latin America, Southeast Asia, Israel-Palestine, and Zionism, we can see Walzer struggling to weld the older left's commitments to socialist internationalism and egalitarianism with the newer left's commitments to national liberation and self-determination.¹⁷ In *Just and Unjust Wars*, we find him trying to fuse the long New Left's growing affinities for state-centered politics with his commitments to human rights and in *Spheres of Justice*, we find him trying to link his socialism to a more social democratic and pluralist vision of liberalism.¹⁸

Not all of these efforts were successful. Often one finds the tensions between the socialist left's conflicting tendencies to be particularly heightened and sometimes one finds Walzer ceding some of his socialist and radical democratic commitments to liberal, nationalist, and

¹⁷ Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1965); *Obligations: Essays on Disobedience, War, and Citizenship* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1970); *Political Action* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971)

¹⁸ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic, 1977); *Radical Principles: Reflections of an Unreconstructed Democrat* (New York: Basic, 1980); *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic, 1983).

statist ones. In his writings on international ethics, and in particular in his writings on Israel-Palestine, for example, one finds Walzer never fully resolved the incongruities between the egalitarianism and internationalism of his socialism and his own commitments to collective self-determination and a politics of national liberation. In his doctrine of nonintervention, one finds him favoring the rights of states at the expense of the moral and political agents that he had once championed in the 1950s and 60s. And while his spherical vision of justice offered a compelling and important critique of the ways in which the market had come to colonize too many other spheres of social exchange, in his pluralist insistence that each community has a right to define its own social arrangements, his egalitarianism had a tendency to reaffirm those forms of domination and hierarchy already native to a specific community and moral tradition. Rather than a moral compass, his theories of distributive justice and international ethics had the potential of reiterating a society's already bad sense of direction. Yet it is precisely because of these inconsistencies and internal tensions—and because of his continued effort to make sense of them—that Walzer offers a valuable guide to understanding many of the tensions, debates, and contradictions that have riddled socialism for much of the second half of the twentieth century.

The history of these ideological and political ambiguities has often gone neglected. In part, this is because the history of socialism in the second half of the twentieth century has often gone neglected. Historians tend to view the New Left as primarily a post-socialist phenomenon, and they rarely examine the socialist roots of the 1960s left, nor, for that matter, consider how the socialist left continued well into the 1970s and 80s, sometimes even momentarily thriving.

Several histories of the American left have begun to do the work of recovering this socialist past. Maurice Isserman's *If I Had a Hammer* and Kevin Mattson's *Intellectuals in Action* locate the intellectual origins of the 1960s left in the postwar radicalism around *politics*

and *Dissent* and show the connections between the radical democratic activism and socialism of an early New Left and the communitarianism, libertarianism, and antiwar politics of the later New Left.¹⁹ Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps offer wide-sweeping social history of the left that helps bring into focus some of those socialist and nonsocialist activists often overlooked by other historians, and Gregory Sumner's *Dwight Macdonald and the politics Circle* and George Cotkin's *Existential America* give us useful genealogies of the nonsocialist tracks within the long New Left and show how there were many close points of intersection between a "First New Left," as Staughton Lynd once called the radicals around *politics* and *Dissent*, and later ones.²⁰

Yet none of these studies, with the exception of Brick and Phelps's *Radicals in America*, takes their histories past the late 1960s, and most of them do not focus on socialism as a central thread that ran from one end of the Cold War to the other. Likewise, these historians tend to miss the transnational nature of the left in the second half of the twentieth century. While earlier periods of the American left have received canonical studies of North Atlantic egalitarianism—books like James Kloppenberg's *Uncertain Victory* and Daniel Rodgers's *Atlantic Crossings*—few histories of the left in the second half of the twentieth century offer a similar treatment of the trans-Atlantic and international nature of radical intellectuals and socialism during the Cold War.

Through Walzer's political theory and his public arguments and activism, I hope to recover a small sliver of this history, capturing the intergenerational and transnational politics of

¹⁹ Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York: Basic, 1987); Kevin Mattson *Intellectuals in Action: The Origins of the New Left and Radical Liberalism, 1945-1970* (University Park: Penn State, 2002).

²⁰ Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps's *Radicals in America: The U.S. Left since the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2015). Gregory Sumner, *Dwight Macdonald and the politics Circle: The Challenge of Cosmopolitan Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1996); George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2003). Douglas Rossinow's *Visions of Progress: The Left-Liberal Tradition in America* (Philadelphia: Penn, 2009) does offer a study that looks beyond the 1960s and makes the case for a "left-liberal tradition" that stretches from one end of the century to the other but like Mattson his central frame is that of a "new liberalism."

a left struggling to redefine itself in the wake of the frustrations of the first half of the twentieth century. In addition, I also hope to show how, contrary to popular opinion, socialism continued well into the 1970s and 80s, no matter how modified and dimmed its visions of equality had become. Like Robert Westbrook and Daniel Geary's studies of John Dewey and C. Wright Mills, *In Socialism's Twilight* will make these arguments through contextualist intellectual biography.²¹ Using Walzer and his contemporaries' published writings as the central texts to narrate the evolution of socialist ideas during the Cold War, I will also employ political and social history, contemporary accounts of activism and events found in newspapers, records of public talks and debates, and little and big magazine journalism to better situate this evolution over time and in specific places. While at times I will highlight the limits of long New Left's socialism, the goal of this study is to "see things their way," as Quentin Skinner put it: I hope to understand not only the history of these socialists' ideas but what they were doing while they conceived of them.²²

This study also aims to better situate the rise of normative theory in the politics of the second half of the twentieth century and, in particular, to situate Walzer's own particular strain of it in the history of the left, liberalism, and socialism. There is only one published book-length study of Walzer's work, Brian Orend's *Michael Walzer on War and Justice*, and only one book-length study that examines all of Walzer's work, Jason Toby Reiner's dissertation, "Political Thought and Political Action."²³ As works of political theory both are primarily interested in answering questions internal to their field and while Reiner's dissertation does a good job demonstrating how Walzer's exposure to *Dissent* and the historicism of Harvard's midcentury

²¹ Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1991) and Daneil Geary, *Radical Ambition: C. Wright Mills, the Left, and American Social Thought* (Berkeley: California, 2009)

²² Quentin Skinner, *Vision of Politics: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2002), 3

²³ Brian Orend, *Michael Walzer on War and Justice* (Cardiff: Wales Press, 2000); Jason Toby David Reiner, "Political Thought and Political Action: Michael Walzer's Engagement with American Radicalism," (University California-Berkeley, 2011)

political theorists distinguished his contextualist approach to political philosophy from the neo-Kantian approach of Rawls and other normative theorists, Reiner also does not examine the other political influences on Walzer's thinking and the broader context of the left. Walzer's idiosyncratic approach to moral and political thought was not only produced by his exposure to *Dissent*, but also by his interactions with the British New Left, his involvement in the early civil rights and antiwar movements, his arguments with fellow activists and intellectuals over the politics of direct action, decolonization, Israel, and socialist strategy. Likewise, while Walzer drew considerable influence from his years as a graduate student at Harvard, his involvement with the Society for Ethical and Legal Philosophy, his time at the Institute for Advanced Study and collaborations with figures like Clifford Geertz and Albert Hirschman, and his developing notion of the "connected critic," all shaped his criticism of neo-Kantian moral and political philosophy and his own work in distributive justice and international ethics. Philosophy, as Walzer once explained, was always for him part of a "two-way movement" with politics.²⁴ "For...intellectual purposes, we draw a line between philosophical speculation about politics and actual political debate," he noted, it was always for him "politics reflected upon in tranquility."²⁵

Revisiting the arguments and debates on the left that shaped much of Walzer's thinking, I hope to show how the contextualism and communitarianism that is often attributed to his work is, in fact, the product of his longstanding commitments to a post-Marxist socialism, an anticolonial politics of national liberation, and his later commitments to the pluralism of the "new social movements," the social democracy and left wing of the possible of the 1970s left, and the liberalism and interventionism of many older long New Leftists involved with *Dissent* in the 1990s. Likewise the many unresolved tensions and internal contradictions in his work—in

²⁴ Michael Walzer, "Justice Here and Now," *Thinking Politically* edit. by David Miller (New Haven: Yale, 2007)

²⁵ Ibid.

particular between his liberalism and socialism, pluralism and egalitarianism, and internationalism and politics of national liberation—are also born out of the competing impulses of the long New Left and in particular of those socialists who found themselves a part of it.

Walzer always did his thinking and arguing within the cave of everyday political activity and intellectual production. “One way to begin the philosophical enterprise,” he noted in the introduction of *Spheres of Justice*, “is to walk out of the cave, leave the city, climb the mountain” and “fashion for oneself (what can never be fashioned for ordinary men and women) an objective and universal standpoint.”²⁶ But for Walzer, he always made his arguments, whether in an academic journal or little magazine, from “the cave, in the city, on the ground.”²⁷ This study aims to show how he did so, and the kind of caves, cities, and ground he stood within and upon.

Situating Walzer’s work in the context of twentieth-century socialism and the history of the left, I also hope to address some secondary questions provoked by his career and the political itinerary of American socialism since the end of World War II: How did socialists attempt to reconcile the tensions between their radical democratic politics and their commitment to national liberation and the sovereignty of self-ruling nation-states? Why did so many of the radicals from this period end up becoming defenders of social democracy and the liberal welfare state of which they had in the 1950s and 60s once been critical? How and why did some members of the long New Left begin to advocate a politics of humanitarian intervention and liberal internationalism?

A study of Walzer’s career and the history of the socialism of the long New Left cannot necessarily answer all of these questions, though it can help clarify some of the deeper roots of the current left’s history and commitments and some of its still outstanding tensions. On many subjects the new generation of socialists holds starkly different views from its forerunners.

²⁶ Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, xiv

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Having come of age after the Cold War, this new generation takes a different outlook on the history of American radicalism, on the value and applicability of Marxist thought, on the rise of populist left-wing parties in Western Europe and Latin America, and on the conflict in Israel-Palestine. Born in the twilight of the welfare state and in an age of austerity, this new generation also can no longer take for granted the basic social protections that Walzer and his peers in the long New Left saw as a protective umbrella under which a new radical politics could gestate.

Yet despite these differences, these two socialist lefts have more in common than what separates them. Organizing under the same banner of “democratic socialism, they define themselves against an authoritarian communism on one end and a social democratic liberalism on the other end and are really different ends of the same socialist tradition that emerged out of the “new radicalism” of the postwar years. For both, the path toward socialism runs along two distinct and nonsocialist tracks: those protest movements that seek to enhance the rights of women, people of color, LGBTQ, immigrants, contingent workers, and other disenfranchised members of society and the social democratic programs of unions and the liberal flank of the Democratic Party. For both, their strengths lie in their domestic politics, and it is in this field that both have made gains over the years, whether in helping spawn the social security and poverty programs of the Great Society (Michael Harrington is largely credited in being the catalyst for Johnson’s “War on Poverty”), or more recently having forced the Democratic Party to the left on issues of universal healthcare, a higher minimum wage, debt-free higher education, and housing as a right. And for both their weaknesses lie in the realm of international politics, where these lefts—while often committed to many of the same norms and political programs—remain fiercely divided. Assessing the strengths and weaknesses of this earlier socialist left, then, will help us assess the strengths and weaknesses of a future one. In an autobiographical reminiscence

from the 1970s, Michael Harrington observed that “the vocation of a radical in America in the last portion of the twentieth century” required walking “a perilous tightrope” between socialist commitments and nonsocialist movements and parties.²⁸ This was true of Walzer and many of his socialist peers within the long New Left, and it is also true of most socialists today. By recovering some of the controversies and limits of a previous era of tightrope walking—“those days of meetings, negotiations, polemics, friendships made and lost,” as Walzer put it—I hope to begin to also think about the possibilities and limits of our own.²⁹

²⁸ Michael Harrington, *Fragments of the Century: A Social Autobiography* (New York: Saturday Review 1973), 225

²⁹ Michael Walzer, “Dissent at Thirty,” *Dissent* (Winter 1984)

I. Starting Out in the Fifties

1. Coming Up for Air

Michael Walzer was born in the Bronx in 1935. His parents were second-generation Americans, outer-borough Jews whose families had immigrated from outer-borough—that is, Eastern—Europe. Politics was a course served at the kitchen table. At the time of his birth, it was also out in the streets. New York in the mid-1930s was a hotbed of working-class and socialist agitation. Soapbox proselytizers and sectarian evangelists stood on almost every corner. Rallies, picket lines, protests, and political meetings could swallow a day. Walzer's parents never joined the Communist or Socialist Parties. Nor were they drawn to the amoeba-like Marxist factions that broke off from them. But they, too, were absorbed by the decade's political mood. The family read *PM*, one of the left's leading dailies, "assiduously," as Walzer later recalled, and they were devotees to the columns of I.F. Stone and Max Lerner.¹ They rallied behind the social democratic programs of the New Deal, followed closely and championed the militant labor actions spreading

¹ Michael Walzer, "The Political Theory License," *Annual Review of Political Science* (2013)

across the country in the mid- and late 1930s under the CIO, and voted for the American Labor Party, a New York-based left-wing party that had been founded by socialists associated with the *Daily Forward*, the *New Leader*, the “old guard” in the Socialist Party, and the textile unions who wanted to create a left-wing alternative to New York’s Democratic Party.² “My parents weren’t on the far left,” Walzer later explained in a short autobiographical reminiscence that he published in 2013. “But they believed in equality; they didn’t cross picket lines; they voted for the American Labor Party...I literally learned to read by reading *PM* and Izzy Stone.”³

For Jewish families in New York City at the time, the Walzers’ mixture of socialist, labor, and liberal politics was not uncommon. Many working- and middle-class Americans, especially within the ethnic enclaves of the East Coast, were attracted to a combination of third-party socialism, working-class militancy, and the social-democratic and liberal public policies of the New Deal. There were exceptions: Pacifists within the Socialist Party who were grouped around Norman Thomas remained wedded to a strict third-party radicalism, and Trotskyists, who had broken from the Communist Party in the 1930s, also continued to keep their distance from these left-liberal coalitions. But nearly all of the rest of the North Atlantic left had come to an informal truce. The crash of 1929 and the global depression that followed had been one impetus for the cooling of old hostilities. The rise of fascism in Spain, Italy, and Germany was another. If economic calamity and far-right nationalism were to be defeated, then the left had to start getting along. What was needed was a “popular front” that transcended old political divisions and drew together liberals, socialists, communists, and other left and liberal groupings under one banner. “Linked with the hoop of antifascism,” as Irving Howe put it in an essay on the American Popular

² For a history of the American Labor Party, a neglected piece of New York radical history, see Robert Frederik Carter, “Pressure from the Left: The American Labor Party, 1936–1954” (PhD thesis, Syracuse University, 1965)

³ Walzer, “The Political Theory License”

Front, and inspired by a “popular blend of New Deal outlooks and CIO militancy...you could think of yourself as a revolutionary” and as a New Deal liberal.⁴ “You could even think of yourself as a liberal of sorts,” he noted, “and still lend support to the communist movement.”⁵

World affairs only deepened the Walzers’ commitment to the Popular Front in the 1940s, especially after the United States entered into an alliance with Britain and the Soviet Union. The fallout of the 1937-1938 recession also had a radicalizing effect on the Walzers: His father lost his job and the family was forced to move to Johnstown, Pennsylvania, where one of his mother’s relatives ran a jewelry shop and his father could find work.⁶ Located sixty-seven miles from Pittsburgh, Johnstown at first might have seemed like a strange place to continue cultivating one’s commitments to left-liberal and working-class radicalism. But as the Walzers settled into the city in the early 1940s, they soon found that the city had a large mix of Eastern European immigrant cultures of its own and that its working-class politics and solidarity very closely aligned with theirs. At a critical junction between the ore and coal of Appalachia and the Great Lakes manufacturing plants in Cleveland, Toledo, and Chicago, Johnstown was nicknamed “Little Pittsburgh” and served as a center for industrial-scale steel production at the time of the Walzers’ arrival. Nearly a third of the city was employed by Bethlehem Steel, one of the four “little steel” companies in America, and while few residents would have called themselves socialists, the Little Steel Strike of 1937 that had swept through the city and much of the Great Lakes region had transformed the city into a enclave of working-class agitation and organized labor politics. For a city with large numbers of Serbians, Poles, and Hungarians, the solidarity

⁴ Howe, “The Brilliant Masquerade: A Note on Browderism,” *Socialism and America*, 93

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Walzer, “The Political Theory License”

that this agitation built brought the community together.⁷ It also proved to bring the Walzers feel more at home. “Under the sign of the ‘people,’” as Michael Denning wrote in his history of working-class culture in the 1940s, a “Popular Front public culture sought to forge ethnic and racial alliances, mediating between Anglo American culture, the culture of the ethnic workers, and African American culture.”⁸ By “reclaiming the figure of ‘America’ itself,” the Popular Front helped families like the Walzers recognize that they, too, were part of American life.⁹

The left-liberal movements and organizations spawned by the Popular Front helped remake the political geography of the late 1930s and much of the 1940s. But the Popular Front had always been an emergency politics. Its tenuous coalition of liberals, socialists, social democrats, communists, labor activists, and immigrants was maintained by the specters of fascism abroad and further economic devastation at home. For many left-leaning Americans its banner of egalitarianism offered less a politics of hope than one of self-defense and desperation. “The threat of fascism scared Isidor Feinstein,” I.F. Stone’s biographer explained, “the way nothing ever would or after. It scared him out of the Socialist Party; it scared him into the Popular Front. To understand how much he valued what he found there, to appreciate what the Popular Front gave him, and why he remained rooted in the values of the Popular Front long after the political conditions that gave it birth had passed from the scene, we first need to understand that fear.”¹⁰

⁷ Ewa Morawska, *For Bread with Butter: The Life-worlds of East Central Europeans in Johnstown, Pennsylvania 1890-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1985)

⁸ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 8

⁹ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 8

¹⁰ D.D. Guttenplan, *American Radical: The Life and Times of I.F. Stone* (New York: FSG, 2009), 120

The same politics of fear was likely to have also influenced the Walzers and their Bronx and Johnstown neighbors. Nothing seemed certain in the late 1930s and early 1940s, especially after the 1937-38 recession, the setbacks FDR and his New Deal administration faced by a resistant Supreme Court, and then the growing realization that the Nazis planned not only a program of European domination but also ethnic and racial cleansing. “Hope proved elusive,” Ira Katznelson noted in his recent examination of 1930s and 40s America. “The rumble of deep uncertainty, a sense of proceeding without a map, remained relentless and enveloping. A climate of universal fear deeply affected political understandings and concerns. Nothing was sure.”¹¹

For the Popular Front politics of the era, this at first had a salutary effect. Like I.F. Stone, much of the left was scared into creative collaboration. For the first time in the history of the North Atlantic left, many intellectuals and activists appeared willing to vacate longstanding rivalries and begin to work together to form a coalition of progressive and egalitarian forces. But the politics of fear and sense of emergency meant that the Popular Front always focused on the immediate tasks at hand and never developed a deeper synthesis of its liberal and left tendencies. While the Popular Front became the home for socialists, communists, social democrats, liberals, and labor militants, their competing visions of how a society should be organized never melded into one pot; they remained largely separate elements within a loosely held-together compound. Communists tried to further their agenda, as did the CIO. Socialists, trade unionists, and New Deal liberals never felt completely at ease with one another, and all three of these groups never fully trusted the Communists. The Soviet alliance with the Nazis in 1939 was a sore subject for many Popular Front members, as were Trotsky’s assassination and the revelations of the

¹¹ Ira Katnelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright, 2013), 12

Moscow Trials. As the New Deal moved away from its social democratic programs toward a military Keynesianism, socialists also began to grow wary of the liberal New Dealers.

When the war came to an end in 1945, many of these tensions began to come above ground. Socialists and liberals were aghast at the violent reprisals by the Red Army and its surrogates in Germany, Poland, and Hungary, when workers resisted the imposition of Soviet-backed communist regimes in their just liberated countries. The Communist Party of the United States, taking orders from Moscow, proved to do little thinking of its own. After the war, it expelled Earl Browder, who largely helped organize America's Popular Front, for "reactionary deviations" and appointed his rival, the ultra-left William Z. Foster, as the party's leader and the party's newspaper and internal organs began to uncritically champion Soviet Union policies. Liberals in the Democratic Party launched a venomous red-baiting campaign against communists, reneging on their commitments to civil liberties and free speech. Under pressure from the House Un-American Activities Committee and Joseph McCarthy's anticommunist campaigns, and devastated by Taft-Hartley Act, organized labor purged communists and other socialists from its rank and file, orchestrated a series of deals with management that put an end to widespread labor actions, and, in some cases, began to avow a more hawkish liberalism and anticommunist politics. Socialist Party members, having seen their membership peak in 1932, watched as their party dwindled to the low five digits. Communists, too, abandoned the CP.¹²

For the Walzers, the tensions in the left-liberal coalition became even harder to ignore by the end of the decade.¹³ When Harry Truman sought reelection in 1948, Henry Wallace, another

¹² For the history of the Popular Front in America and the American left during the New Deal and World War II, see, among others, Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?: The American Communist Party during the Second World War* (Middletown: Wesleyan, 1982); Irving Howe, "The Brilliant Masquerade: A Note on Browderism," *Socialism and America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997)

¹³ Oral history conducted by David Marcus with Michael Walzer, August 8, 2016 (Part I)

of FDR's vice presidents and then the editor of the Popular Front-leaning *New Republic*, entered the race. Recruiting Senator Glen Taylor of Idaho, as his running mate, Wallace hoped to duplicate Robert La Follette's bid from 1924, when La Follette pulled together Socialist Party members, left-leaning Republicans, the Midwest's Farmer-Labor Parties, and third-party Populists into a coalition that won the largest share of the popular vote by a third-party candidate (four times as large, in fact, as the share earned by Eugene V. Debs in his famed 1912 run). Yet, the United States of 1924 was a radically different country from the United States of 1948. Most of the left-liberal and farmer-labor tendencies were now resolutely committed to the Democratic Party; labor was at a crossroads in the wake of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947; and the Socialist Party, still distrustful of the communist elements backing Wallace, refused to offer Wallace its support. By running in 1948, Wallace, then, did not help consolidate the Popular Front for a new brave age of pacific internationalism and economic affluence; he helped undo what remained of it, forcing many to choose between their Popular Front and Democratic Party allegiances.¹⁴

For a young Walzer, the last straw, however, was the Berlin blockade.¹⁵ When the Soviets blockaded the western half of Berlin in the summer of 1948, Wallace refused to criticize their actions, insisting Truman's foreign policies, in particular the introduction of a West German currency, had instigated the crisis. He was not wrong; the introduction of the Deutsche Mark had been an effort to undermine Soviet authority in East Germany. But Wallace's unwillingness to support Truman's airlift as West Berlin teetered on the brink of starvation appeared particularly cruel and his refusal to denounce Soviet expansionism became an increasing sticking point for

¹⁴ For the Wallace's 1948 presidential campaign, see: Richard J. Walton, *Henry Wallace, Harry Truman, and the Cold War* (New York: Viking, 1976) and Thomas W. Devine, *Henry Wallace's 1948 Presidential Campaign and the Future of Liberalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2015)

¹⁵ Oral history conducted by David Marcus with Michael Walzer, August 8, 2016 (Part I)

Walzer as many Eastern European countries began to chafe at the idea that they were merely an extension of the Soviet Union.¹⁶ While “my politics,” he recalled, remained “‘progressive’ . . . in 1948, with a bit of teenage drama, I ‘broke’ with Henry Wallace over the Berlin airlift.”¹⁷

Walzer was not alone. Shortly afterward many of the Popular Front’s most prominent avatars broke from it and in particular from the Communist Party. While drawn to “Wallace’s visionary belief in the ‘the era of the common man’ in the early 1940s,” Max Lerner, his biographer noted, “refused to support the Wallace campaign for presidency when he saw that Wallace had . . . failed to appreciate the real threat of Soviet expansionism.”¹⁸ I.F. Stone, who held on a little longer, had his own reckoning after a short visit to Moscow in 1956. Invoking the image of a “swimmer under water who must rise to the surface or his lungs will burst,” he wrote to the readers of the *I.F. Stone Weekly*, “whatever the consequence, I have to say what I really feel after seeing the Soviet Union. . . *This is not a good society and it is not led by honest men.*”¹⁹

What progressive politics meant without the left-liberal politics and movement of the 1930s and ’40s was unclear, however. To make matters even worse the world in which a new politics would be formulated was equally confounding. With the economy’s stabilization in the last parts of the war years came a new affluence.²⁰ Industrial workers obtained higher standards of living, making working-class identification more inscrutable. Radical and working-class militants no longer had the same access to power they once had. Instead of large-scale movements and labor actions, Truman built a “pluralist” political system around the notion of

¹⁶ Oral history conducted by David Marcus with Michael Walzer, August 8, 2016 (Part I)

¹⁷ Michael Walzer, “Becoming a Dissentnik,” *Dissent* (Spring 2013)

¹⁸ Sanford Lakoff, *Max Lerner: Pilgrim in the Promised Land* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), xix

¹⁹ Guttenplan, *American Radical*, 327

²⁰ C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (Oxford: Oxford, 1951); John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958); Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003). For an excellent and accessible discussion of the “Great Compression,” see Paul Krugman, *The Conscience of a Liberal* (New York: Norton, 2007)

consensus in which elites representing various groups—organized labor, banks and industry, professional guilds—negotiated on behalf of their constituents. Under this system, new groups were often excluded from the bargaining table and old ones—industrial and trade unions, the Midwestern farmer-labor tendencies—were absorbed into the system that already existed. In “such circumstances,” noted Michael Harrington, then also a young radical in search of new politics in these years, “the socialist vocation becomes much more complex and nagging.”²¹

To compound problems, the institutions of the left were in disarray. The Communist Party had at least a half-million Americans pass through it from its founding as a splinter from the Socialist Party in 1919. By the late 1950s it had fewer than 10,000 members.²² The Socialist Party, too, was no longer a vital entity, struggling to recover from its abstention from the Popular Front. The Trotskyist circles were even more desiccated. Expelled from the Socialist Party, members of these groupings had founded the Socialist Workers Party, which then fractured into a variety of competing tendencies, including the Workers Party and the International Socialist League, which then themselves broke apart before eventually reemerging with the Socialist Party.

For Walzer, the break from Wallace and the Popular Front in 1948 marked only the beginning of his disorientation. While in an earlier era, he might have been able to fall back into one of the smaller groupings that had made up the broader left-liberal coalitions, in the postwar years most intellectuals were giving up on socialism and radical political activity altogether. “Ideology, heroism, success: none of these seems sufficiently compelling,” Walzer observed in one of his first published essays in *Dissent*. “The day of the youth league and its ideology seems to be over.”²³ Even more troubling, for Walzer was that the persistence of radical politics also

²¹ Michael Harrington, Introduction, *Radical Imagination* (New York: New American Library, 1967)

²² Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (Boston: Beacon, 1957), 499

²³ Michael Walzer, “In Place of a Hero,” *Dissent* (Spring 1960)

appeared to be uncertain. “Young people today have no spokesmen.... It might even be wrong to say that the young have heroes—models of courage, skill, commitment or self-sacrifice.”²⁴

When Walzer began to consider colleges, likely these considerations were far from his mind. But he could not have chosen better than Brandeis, where he quickly fell in with a set of socialist intellectuals who were themselves absorbed with the questions of how to revive the American left. Established outside Boston by a group of secular Jews in 1948, Brandeis had been envisioned by its founders to be an elite university that might rival those in Cambridge and New Haven. But after early feuding—and the departure of Einstein, who was one of Brandeis’s first backers, from its board—the university discovered it was difficult to persuade faculty members to leave their tenured jobs for an unknown university and Brandeis’s enterprising president, Abram Sachar, decided on a different tack: the school would build its faculty from the large number of radicals, intellectuals, and European émigrés who were without jobs in postwar America.²⁵ His recruits varied in educational backgrounds. Some, like Irving Howe and Philip Rahv, were radical intellectuals who, after years of hand-to-mouth writing, were seeking more stable forms of employment. Others, like Lewis Coser and Herbert Marcuse, had PhDs but, as recent émigrés and outspoken exponents of German Marxism, had few opportunities at more established institutions of higher education. But what nearly all of Sachar’s early recruits had in common was a certain independence of mind and politics and a disestablishment sensibility.

Walzer soon discovered this spirit of radical independence was common among Brandeis’s students as well. Composed of many students who grew up in Popular Front homes,

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Abram Sachar, *Brandeis University: A Host at Last* (Waltham: Brandeis, 1995)

the university's first classes of undergraduates were also on the hunt for a new politics—a politics both of and beyond that of the socialist egalitarianism and internationalism of the Old Left. “Erratic, cocky, shy, arrogant, seldom well-taught but marvelously eager,” Howe recalled, they “came from families that had...handed down [a] quarrelsome love of politics and literature...from their years of listening to kitchen debates at home, and from romanticizing the already romanticized stories their parents told about exciting movements and meetings.”²⁶ Viewing education not as “a matter of making oneself into a receptacle” but as a struggle, they came to class ready to engage in heated debate.²⁷ “Sparring, conflict, ‘acting out’ become a path to meaning,” Howe noted. “I would often come out of class with my shirt wringing with sweat.”²⁸

The acting out also happened outside the classroom. From the institution's founding, left-wing youth groups, protest campaigns, and radical student council planks were prominent aspects of college life. Many of the undergraduates were emboldened by the civil-libertarian protests against the HUAC hearings and organized with other students sit-ins and rallies. There were lively debates over communism and arguments about decolonization and the Korean War. The struggle for racial equality, especially after the Montgomery bus boycott, also proved to be particularly galvanizing for the student body. Its “impact,” Walzer later recalled, “was like the impact of the 1960 sit-ins on northern campuses.”²⁹ It provoked “extensive discussions about things like political decentralization—we didn't call it ‘participatory democracy’—but we were thinking, arguing along those lines.”³⁰

²⁶ Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1984), 186

²⁷ Howe, *A Margin of Hope*, 186

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Maurice Isserman interview with Michael Walzer March 20, 1986 (Tamiment)

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Walzer found this environment of political and intellectual ferment exhilarating. Editing and writing for the college's newspaper—a publication that Sachar recalled as “a scolding conscience”—Walzer ran for student government and served at one time as the undergraduate student body's president. He helped found a left-wing group, Student Political Education and Action Committee (SPEAC), “our version of SDS before SDS,” as he later described it, and participated in various civil libertarian and civil rights protest actions in the Boston area.³¹ “We were politically engaged in a way that was quite uncommon on American campuses at the time,” he recounted in an interview years later. “It was intoxicating, and I was completely engaged.”³²

In the class room, too, Walzer found that there was much to become engaged with. Turning to political theory and intellectual history, Walzer hoped he could understand how earlier radicals, after moments of disappointment, helped build new organization and movements. In particular, he was interested in those groups that preceded the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century revolutions in Europe. In the ideas and practices of the Puritans and Jacobins, he suspected a new left might find models and instructive lessons. Like the student activists on campus, these older radical formations began outside the institutions of the state and formed close-knit and disciplined political and moral communities that focused on particular causes and immediate needs; these groups also tended to move in tyrannical directions and Walzer wanted to understand why. How did their remaking of the modern radical subject also lead to new forms of tyranny and absolutism? How did the Puritans move from “reformed churches” to “holy commonwealths”? And how the Jacobins and later the Bolsheviks move from revolutionary vanguards to totalitarian states?

³¹ Sachar, *Brandeis University*, 146; Williams, “Criticism and Connection”

³² Williams, “Criticism and Connection”

Answering these questions became the subject of Walzer's undergraduate thesis, which examined the movement of Puritans from marginal political communities to the center of the post-English Civil War state (he later recalled he chose this subject because his French was not good enough to study the French Revolution).³³ Working with Frank Manuel, a European intellectual historian, Walzer set out to examine what were both the promising and destructive impulses of a politics that began first outside institutions and then eventually moved toward them.³⁴

Walzer also took classes with two other important faculty members who left a lasting influence on his thinking: Irving Howe and Lewis Coser. The pair had similar political and intellectual trajectories. They had begun their political careers involved in social democratic and socialist party politics, then after the Depression hit moved into the insular Marxist sects of the 1930s, before arriving at a post-Marxist radicalism that drew as much from libertarianism as it did from socialism. But until the late 1940s, their paths rarely intersected with one another.

Born in the Bronx in 1920, Howe grew up in a working-class, Yiddish-speaking home and had been active within first Socialist Party and then Trotskyist circles in the 1930s and 40s before moving toward the libertarian radicalism of Dwight Macdonald and the intellectuals—Paul Goodman, C. Wright Mills, Mary McCarthy, Hannah Arendt, Daniel Bell, Nicola Chiaromonte—around the small left-wing magazine *politics*.³⁵ Seven years older than Howe, Coser was born into a middle-class Jewish family in Berlin and cut his political teeth in the “feverish, tormented, destructive, as well as creative, years of the Weimar Republic” as a youth

³³ Williams, “Criticism and Connection”

³⁴ Michael Walzer, “Reformed Church and Holy Commonwealth: A Study in English Puritanism, 1652-1662,” Brandeis University Archives (1956)

³⁵ See: Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982); Gerald Sorin, *Irving Howe: A Life of Passionate Dissent* (New York: New York University, 2005)

militant within the German Social Democratic Party, before fleeing to Paris, where he studied sociology at the Sorbonne as “a self-proclaimed Marxist” in the “world of ‘bourgeois scholarship,’” and then to New York along the same route through Spain that Arendt took.³⁶ Shortly after his arrival in New York, Coser fell in with the same circle of *politics* radicals as Howe.³⁷ While Howe edited the post-Trotskyist magazine, *The New International*, Coser and Daniel Bell edited a magazine, *Modern Review*, that also had broken from Trotskyism. But both wanted to break once and for all from the insular infighting and dogmatism of Marxism. “We live in the shadow of defeat,” Howe and Coser explained in an early essay written together. “To retain...the image of socialism” would now mean “a constant struggle for definition.”³⁸

In their desire to help imagine a post-Marxist socialism, Coser and Howe found common cause. Unlike Dwight Macdonald and many of the intellectuals around *politics*, they wanted to salvage what they could of the socialist tradition. Macdonald hoped his magazine might work out a politics that would transcend the limitations of the liberal and socialist traditions and return radicalism to the “root” of its emancipatory politics—the individual. Howe and Coser were not unsympathetic to their project. But they also believed that socialism could still be revived in the second half of the twentieth century, and as they abandoned their editorial roles at the respective Marxist magazines they were working at, the two of them began to plot founding their own rival magazine to dissent from both the chastened liberalism of figures like Lionel Trilling and Reinhold Niebuhr and the libertarian tendencies prevalent among the *politics* circle. For Howe and Coser there was another path for the postwar left. “*Politics* as now constituted,” Howe wrote

³⁶ Lewis Coser, *A Handful of Thistle: Collected Papers on Moral Conviction* (London: Routledge, 1988)

³⁷ For an excellent study of the group around *politics*, see Gregory D. Sumner’s *Dwight Macdonald and the Politics Circle: The Challenges of Cosmopolitan Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1996)

³⁸ Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, “Images of Socialism,” *Dissent* (Spring 1954)

to Macdonald in a letter, “does not, I think, fit into the ‘mainstream’ or mainpuddle of American radicalism. That may be a compliment, but I think it’s a fact. And I want to puddle or muddle along in a way you don’t.”³⁹

Efforts to establish their own magazine were stymied throughout the early postwar years, with Coser struggling to finish his PhD at Columbia and Howe living in Princeton and making ends meet by writing reviews for *Time*, until their arrival at Brandeis. Recruiting a group of likeminded veterans from the 1930s and ‘40s left—A.J. Muste, Sidney Lens, Stanley and Simone Plastrik, Erich Fromm, Meyer Schapiro, Henry Pachter, George Woodcock, Bernard Rosenberg, Richard Wright—and a small amount of donations they launched the magazine in the winter of 1954. “The accent of *Dissent* will be radical,” the *Dissent* collective wrote in its opening editorial. “Its tradition will be the tradition of democratic socialism” but it will also “try to reassert the libertarian values of the socialist idea... a belief in the dignity of the individual” coupled with “a refusal to countenance one man’s gain at the expense of his brother.”⁴⁰ While hoping to revive the left’s faith in socialism, this “affirmation of a positive belief” did not mean “the ‘socialism’ of any splinter or faction or party, but rather the ethos and the faith in humanity that for more than 100 years have made men ‘socialists’ ”—the “intellectual conviction that man can substantially control his conditions if he understands it and wills to.”⁴¹

Walzer was in his sophomore year at Brandeis and taking classes with both Howe and Coser at the time the magazine was founded and so when *Dissent* debuted early that winter, he was invited to the launch party. Little did he know his introduction to the socialists at that party would become a central part of nearly all of the rest of his intellectual and political career.

³⁹ Irving Howe quoted in Neil Jumonville’s *Critical Crossings: The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America* (Berkeley: University of California, 1990), 80

⁴⁰ Opening statement, *Dissent* (Winter 1954)

⁴¹ Ibid.

Writing in *Commentary*, a young Nathan Glazer noted that *Dissent*'s constant struggle for definition meant that the *Dissenters* spent much of their energy criticizing either those on the left who they believed had moved too far the right or those on the left who they believed had moved too far to the left. Without "suggest[ing] any alternatives to the policies of which *Dissent* disapproves," Glazer insisted, the magazine appeared to rebel against everything but not offer any "positive ideas" of its own.⁴² *Dissent* found itself dissenting without finding way to affirm.

In many ways, this was a fair assessment of the early *Dissenters*. In the first several issues, the editors and contributors mostly focused on negation. Macdonald, Trilling, Niebuhr, David Riesman, Arthur Schlesinger, John Kenneth Galbraith, Adlai Stevenson, Henry Wallace, Howard Fast, and the remnants of the Popular Front—no one was spared. Howe wrote a sharply biting essay on his liberal contemporaries' obsession with Adlai Stevenson.⁴³ C. Wright Mills dashed off a pair of brilliant examinations of postwar American politics, one on the concentration of power, the other on the growing tendency toward conservatism.⁴⁴ Harold Rosenberg parodied the "couch liberals" of Morningside Heights and their self-styled moral exhaustion.⁴⁵ But early on there were also moments of affirmation, movements they found salutary, and images of socialism they championed as breaks from the politics of the old and suggestions of the new.

Inspired by Hungarian and Polish rebellions in 1956, Yugoslavia's declared independence from the Warsaw Pact countries, and the nonalignment socialism beginning to take root in the

⁴² Nathan Glazer, "Philistine Leftism: *Dissent: A Socialist Quarterly*" *Commentary* (February, 1954)

⁴³ Irving Howe, "Stevenson and the Intellectuals," *Dissent* (Winter 1954). For Howe's other unrelenting assault on the conservatism of postwar liberals, see: "The Shame of U.S. Liberalism," *Dissent* (Fall 1954); "Liberalism—A Moral Crisis," *Dissent* (Spring 1955); "An Exchange on the ADA Convention," *Dissent* (Summer 1955); "America, The Country, and the Myth," *Dissent* (Summer 1955)

⁴⁴ C. Wright Mills, "On the Conservative Mood," *Dissent* (Winter 1954); "On Knowledge and Power," *Dissent* (Summer 1955)

⁴⁵ Harold Rosenberg, "Couch Liberalism and the Guilty Past," *Dissent* (Fall 1955)

decolonized and developing world, the *Dissenters* tried to carve out what Howe called “a second-and-a-half camp” when it came to foreign policy, a politics that sided with the North Atlantic’s efforts to stunt Soviet expansionism in Europe but that stood fast with nations in the developing world that sought to liberate themselves from both sides of the Cold War.⁴⁶ The 1955 Bandung Conference, in particular, excited the editors of the magazine and after the conference, the magazine began to direct its energy toward covering decolonization, dedicating dozens of articles and several special issues to the subject and forging ties with nonalignment socialists like Asoka Mehta, who helmed India’s largest trade union and became head of the Praja Socialist Party, and Messali Hadj, one of the socialist founders of the Algerian anti-colonial movement.⁴⁷ Writing shortly after it, Coser, observed with excitement that “the year 1955 may mark a turning point or at least a temporary halt in this deadly drift...from Bandung to Vienna, from Belgrade to Geneva, all seem to point in one direction: the trend toward a total polarization of the nations is coming to an end and new semi-independent, semi-autonomous power centers are emerging.”⁴⁸

Howe and Coser also began to direct more of their energy toward engaging with and writing about the emerging protest movements that were spreading across the United States. Running articles by figures like Roger Hagan, George Houser, and Roy Finch, they covered the emerging disarmament and pacifist movements and wrote about the direct actions staged in

⁴⁶ Gerald Sorin, *Irving Howe: A Life of Passionate Dissent* (New York: New York University, 2005)

⁴⁷ To get a sense of the wide-range of the essays in *Dissent* on decolonization and nonalignment socialism, see: Jack Rader, “Indochina: End of an Epoch,” (Fall 1954), Edouard Raditi, “Letter from Algeria,” (Winter 1955) Sidney Lens, “A Report on Asian Socialism,” (Summer 1955), Asoka Mehta, “Can Asia Industrialize Democratically?” (Spring 1955), A.J. Muste, “Coexistence, Neutralism, or Third Force,” (Fall 1955), George Eckstein, “But What About the Underdeveloped Countries?” (Winter 1958), Norman Thomas, “Notes on Socialism in the Middle East,” (Summer 1958), Tahseen Basheer, “The Rise of the Arab Fellaah,” (Summer 1958), A.M., “The Sickness of South Africa,” (Fall 1959). The Magazine also dedicated its summer issue in 1956 to covering the decolonization in Africa. Stanley Plastrik, “Africa Find its Voice”; Habib Bourguiba, “Algeria is a Nation”; Martin Kilson, “Behind the Mau Mau Rebellion”; Olapido Onipide, “African Nationalism”; Keith Irvine, “The New West African Nations”; Peter Abrahams, “South Africa: Ordeal and Hope”; George Houser, “Is South Africa Near Revolt?” (Summer 1956).

⁴⁸ Lewis Coser, “Thaw in the Cold War,” *Dissent* (Summer 1955)

protest of the HUAC hearings and loyalty oaths on campuses.⁴⁹ They also followed the struggle against segregation in the South, especially after the Montgomery bus boycott, which as with Walzer, proved for Howe to be “one of the most encouraging events in twentieth-century American life... what all of us have been waiting for.”⁵⁰ Soliciting writing from various black intellectuals and civil-rights activists they knew, including Richard Wright, Julian Mayfield, James Farmer, Pat Watters, and Jervis Anderson, they also sent correspondents to the struggle’s front lines.⁵¹ Lawrence Reddick, a historian teaching based at Alabama State College in Montgomery, became a particularly significant participant-observer for the magazine, writing a searing critique of “white liberalism” in the South and producing a series of firsthand reports on the early actions of the 1960 sit ins, which led to his firing at Alabama State.⁵²

Recognizing that the civil-rights, civil-libertarian, and disarmament movements often spoke in a liberal language of rights rather than a socialist one, Howe, Coser, and others around *Dissent* nonetheless found in these campaigns succor for a more democratic and libertarian vision of socialism. Instead of an emphasis on those forms of socialism, whether reformist or revolutionary, that sought to change society through state institutions, the *Dissenters*’ images of

⁴⁹ For *Dissent*’s writings on pacifism and disarmament before 1965 and the Vietnam War, see: Allan R. Brick, “Civil Disobedience,” (Winter 1959), Norman Thomas, “Toward Total Disarmament,” (Spring 1960), Stephan Thernstrom, “The New Pacifism,” (Fall 1960), Edward Speyer, “The Brave New Scientists” (Spring 1961), Robert P. Wolff, “The Insanity of Realism,” (Spring 1961), Stephan Thernstrom, “Civil Defense of the New Frontier,” (Winter 1962), Michael Walzer, “Students in Washington,” (Spring 1962), Roger Hagan, “The Young Radicals: A Symposium,” (Spring 1962), Staughton Lynd, “The Young Radicals,” (Spring 1962), Roy Finch, “The New Peace Movement—Part I” (Winter 1963), Edgar Freidenberg, “The New Peace Movement—Part II” (Spring 1963).

⁵⁰ Irving Howe, “The Southern Negro Speaks Up,” *Dissent* (Spring 1956).

⁵¹ For *Dissent*’s early civil rights and racial equality coverage, see: Bob Bone, “The Changing Status of the Negro,” (Spring 1955), L.D. Reddick, “The Boycott in Montgomery,” (Spring 1956), Irving Howe, “Reverberations in the North,” (Spring 1956), Travers Clements, “American Negroes Find Their Own Way,” (Spring 1957), Richard Wright, “White Man—Listen!” (Fall 1957), L.D. Reddick, “The Anxious South,” (Summer 1957), Irving Howe, “A New Political Atmosphere in America” (Winter 1959), Michael Walzer, “A Cup of Coffee and a Seat,” (Spring 1960), Michael Walzer, “The Politics of the New Negro,” (Summer 1960), L.D. Reddick, “The Negroes Act: The Students v The State,” (Summer 1960), and Julian Mayfield, “The Young Radicals: A Symposium,” (Spring 1962).

⁵² L.D. Reddick, “The Boycott in Montgomery,” *Dissent* (Spring 1956), L.D. Reddick, “The Anxious South,” *Dissent* (Summer 1957), L.D. Reddick, “The Negroes Act: The Students vs. The State,” *Dissent* (Summer 1960).

socialism now stressed the way radicals could operate below them, helping democratize civil society and building a more egalitarian culture that might eventually trickle upwards. Taking Marx as just one of many socialist thinkers, they insisted that the essential mission of socialism was not a command economy but the autonomy a socialist society could bring about; the ultimate aspiration of socialists was not unlike that of the civil rights activists: not more social control but liberation, and liberation not just from capital, but also liberation *for* individuals. “In practice,” Henry Pachter, one of the magazine’s founding editors, argued, “socialism has usually come to be identified with ‘collectivism,’ and two of its best known features are public ownership of the means of production and a comprehensive ‘plan’ of production and distribution. These are indeed characteristics of states that now call themselves ‘socialist,’ but a moment’s reflection will show that they are inadequate to define socialism.” Instead, socialism aspired “to emancipate people from serving goals that have been imposed on them either by arbitrary masters or by abstract laws of economic development. They aim to make people responsible for their own destiny and to give everybody a chance to fulfill his or her aspirations as a person.”⁵³

For Walzer this vision of a more libertarian and radical democratic socialism, one that departed from the bureaucratic politics of both social democracies in the North Atlantic and communism in the Soviet bloc was very attractive, mapping very closely to his own political trajectory at the time and many of those undergraduate radicals with whom he was involved at Brandeis. But not all within his or Howe and Coser’s generations were drawn to *Dissent*. *Liberation*, founded two years later in the hopes of continuing to explore a nonsocialist track of postwar radicalism, was also an important venue for the early New Left radicals. So was *Studies on the Left*, established in 1959 by a group of graduate students at the University of Wisconsin–

⁵³ Henry Pachter, “Freedom, Authority, Participation,” *Beyond the Welfare State*, edited by Irving Howe (New York: Schocken, 1982), 42-43.

Madison who drew much of their inspiration from the Cold War revisionism of William Appleman Williams and C. Wright Mills and the theory of monopoly capitalism developed by Paul Baran, Paul Sweezy, and the *Monthly Review*. For those gathered around *Studies on the Left* and *Monthly Review*, the *Dissenters'* more humanist socialism represented a diluted libertarianism at a far distance from the structural analyses and class conflict imagined by Marx and his followers in the Second International and one that ignored the centrality of the state, no matter how repugnant it often tended to be in modern politics. Meanwhile for those involved with *Liberation*, *Dissent's* socialism was too nostalgic, seeking to resurrect a tradition that they believed was no longer apposite to the moment, and too soft on the state, in particular when it came to supporting the North Atlantic countries in their effort to slow Soviet expansionism.

Yet for Walzer, no matter how inchoate and contradictory the *Dissenters'* politics was, their images of socialism appeared to be a smoke signal of hope and possibility, set off against a bleak horizon and marking a direction in which an emerging new left might head. Here was “a leftism liberated from the Marxist sects of the Depression years,” Walzer later recalled, with “a two-pronged dissent: against the conformism and growing conservatism of American politics in the 1950s...and against Stalinist apologists on the European and American Left.”⁵⁴ While many around *Dissent* still focused on this two-pronged dissent, and often to the disadvantage of formulating any affirmative politics upon which to build a new socialist left, “early readers and young writers like myself had a somewhat different view. I thought that what was going on in the magazine was the re-creation, even the reinvention of socialist ideas.”⁵⁵

As Walzer soon discovered, *Dissent* was not the only post-Marxist magazine avowing an image of a libertarian socialism. In England, he would come into contact with two British

⁵⁴ Walzer, ““*Dissent* at Thirty”” *Dissent* (Winter 1984)

⁵⁵ Walzer, “*Dissent* at Thirty,” *Dissent* (Winter 1984)

magazines whose politics evinced a similar set of ambitions—*Universities and Left Review* and the *New Reasoner*—and in graduate school he would develop close relationships with another set of socialists on the hunt for a new post-Marxist radicalism. But, at the time, *Dissent* appeared to offer something novel and exciting for Walzer. The mood around the magazine may have been full of painful uncertainty. Yet for Walzer the magazine marked a new beginning. “Does a historical movement ever get a second chance?” Howe asked, recalling the heady salad days as the magazine began to take off. “Suppose Saul of Tarsus and the rest of the original ‘cadre’ had been destroyed or had committed some incredible blunder, could Christianity have regained its momentum after an interval of loss and despair? We had no ready answer, but this was the question to which we wanted to devote ourselves.”⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Howe, *A Margin of Hope*, 236

2. The Smoke from Budapest

Upon graduating from Brandeis, Walzer spent the summer working for Howe and Coser as a research assistant on their book *The American Communist Party*.¹ One of the first large-scale social and political histories of the organization, the book traced the rise of the American Communists from their 1919 break with the Socialist Party to their dissolution in the postwar years. The book's only competition was Theodore Draper's *The Roots of American Communism*, which came out the same year.² But while Draper's account mapped the party's decline, tracking how it had betrayed a genuinely novel "expression of American radicalism" by transforming into "the American appendage of a Russian revolutionary power," Howe and Coser offered a more dialectical narrative.³ American Communism, they argued, swung between two poles—open phases, in which activists sought to use the party to build a broad-based egalitarian movement in

¹ Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (Boston: Beacon, 1957)

² Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking, 1957)

³ Draper, *The Roots of American Communism*, 395

America, and closed ones, in which the party turned inward and imposed a strict, unquestioning discipline on its membership. In this way, what caused the failure of American Communism was more than just the obeisance it made to Moscow; it was that, in this dialectical movement, the party revealed a more fundamental problem faced by socialists and nearly all radicals in America—the difficulty of coming to terms with the seemingly intransigent nature of capitalism in America.

In his 1952 essay “Socialism: The Dream and Reality” (later published in book form in 1967 as *Marxian Socialism in the United States*), Daniel Bell had observed a similar problem confounding American Marxism as a whole.⁴ Borrowing from Luther’s famous construction, Bell argued that because of Marxism’s desire to see the entire political and economic system overturned in a society that rarely even allowed meliorist forms of change, “it was trapped by the unhappy problem of being ‘in but not of’ the world.”⁵ As a result, “It could never resolve the basic issue of either accepting capitalist society, and seeking to transform it from within as the labor movement did, or becoming a sworn enemy of that society, like the communists.”⁶

Howe and Coser agreed but added a significant amount of depth and detail to Bell’s argument, which had offered only cursory analyses of the Communist and Socialist Parties in the 1930s and ’40s. For Howe and Coser, the socialists had found a way to make their peace with liberal democracy in this era in a more substantive way than the communists. While the Socialists embraced the centrality of liberal democracy and its bourgeois rights to a socialist program, the communists never truly viewed liberalism as integral to the project of economic

⁴ Daniel Bell’s essay first appeared in the 1952 anthology on radical politics in the United States but then was published in full in 1967: Daniel Bell, *Marxian Socialism in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton, 1967)

⁵ Bell, *Marxian Socialism in the United States*, 5

⁶ Ibid

and political democracy even when they helped form the social basis for what became the Popular front.

When engaged in left-liberal coalitions, communists embraced the politics of liberal democracy but only, in Howe and Coser's view, for purely instrumental reasons. The Popular Front had built a wide-ranging movement that drew liberals, socialists, organized labor, and communists together under the same banner but the ideological compounds never fully alloyed: The communists within the movement saw embracing the principles of liberal democracy as only a necessity not as a matter of improving upon a socialism that had its own authoritarian tendencies.

This meant that in the open phases of American communism, under Browder, the Communist Party and its followers were wedded to a liberal democratic politics as well as socialist ones. But as soon as they moved back to a closed phase, there was nothing to stop them from resurrecting their antipathy for liberal norms. Howe and Coser recognized that this was not the case for many of the young communists and fellow travelers involved in the Popular Front. "No matter how hostile one may be towards the politics of these young Communists," they noted, "honesty requires the admission that some of them were among the best of their generation, among the most intelligent, selfless, and idealistic."⁷ But it was the tragedy of American communism as a whole; its politics never was of, even when it was in, the world of American liberal democracy.

There is much truth in their assessment, but the book, as with the case of Draper's was a document of insiders who had felt burned by the way American communism had deviated from a course to which they themselves once been committed. And despite all of the closely observed

⁷ Howe and Coser, *The American Communist Party*, 198-199

analysis, and the sheer scope of detail they included in the book, *The American Communist Party* was ultimately a history guided by polemic. No matter how shameful the party's fealty to the Soviet Union, and how doctrinaire and reductive the Popular Front's expressions of Marxism could be, American Communism had found a way to bring socialism, liberalism, and communist and trade unionism together. It also found a way to Americanize the visions of social equality socialists hoped might supplement liberalism's formal visions of equality. Some party members may have looked toward 1917 and toward Moscow for models of social change, but many other Popular Fronters drew from the American canon—Thomas Paine, Fanny Wright, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass—to demonstrate how the egalitarian politics they were advocating was not all that far from a native-born American egalitarianism. Likewise, while communism may have collapsed in the United States as a result of the red scare and rising standards of living among American industrial workers, the Communist Parties in Europe demonstrated an alternative path that American communism might have taken. The Italian and French Communist Parties suggested that there was nothing preordained in Western communism that had made it so susceptible to its closed phases and to the ultra-leftism of William Z. Foster and its most doctrinaire elements. Communist Parties could be in and of the world, working in tandem with socialist, social-democratic, and liberal parties.

For Walzer, however, working with Howe and Coser on the book proved to be a critical turn in his political and intellectual formation. Having spent the summer reading through reams of the Communist Party's newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, and its in-house newsletter, the *Activist*, he too felt that the central failure of the communist movement in America was its inability to embrace America's native liberal traditions or to break from Moscow.⁸ The lesson he took away

⁸ Harry Kreisler, "Political Theory and Social Criticism: Interview with Michael Walzer"

from his work with Howe and Coser was a clear one: Instead of having to abandon one's commitments to social equality and progress, one had to recalibrate them, supplementing the socialist tradition with a set of libertarian and liberal norms. As Walzer later recalled of this period, it was through Howe and Coser that "I learned you could be an anti-communist leftist."⁹

Walzer's research for Howe and Coser on *The American Communist Party* also created an opportunity for him to write for *Dissent*. Following Khrushchev's 20th Congress speech, in which he denounced Stalinism, the American and European Communist Parties moved once again into an open phase. This marked a new opening for communism around the world. It also put to the test the notion that if communism did not embrace a more liberal worldview it would fail to sustain its own gains. Almost as soon as the Communist Parties in Europe opened up, worker uprisings in Eastern Europe erupted in several industrial centers, including in Tbilisi, Georgia, then a Soviet republic, and in Poznan, Poland, then under the tight-fisted grip of the Soviet-imposed Communist Party. Like the Berlin uprising earlier in the decade, both uprisings created two possible paths for the Communists in Eastern and Central Europe: they could move in the direction toward democratization and autonomy from the Soviet Union or they could follow Moscow's order swiftly and brutally put down the uprisings. In Tbilisi, the Red Army and Georgian police opened fire on a crowd of nearly 70,000 killing hundreds; in Poznan, the Polish Army brought in 10,000 infantrymen, and to the horror of everyone, opened fired on the striking workers and protesters, estimated to be around 100,000, and killed several dozen if not more. Under pressure from Moscow to fall back into line, the Polish and Georgian communists acquiesced, marking the closing of the communist system just as it was beginning to open up.

⁹ Harry Kreisler, "Political Theory and Social Criticism: Interview with Michael Walzer"

The American Communists now found themselves in a bind: Were they supposed to continue in the direction suggested by Khrushchev's speech and denounce the actions in Georgia and Poland that they found reprehensible, or did they need to return to old ways and offer apologies for the Soviet's expansionism and their surrogate's excess use of force? Drawing from the Communist newspapers he had been reading all summer, Walzer tracked the party's disappointing swing back to the old Stalinist orthodoxies and fidelity to Moscow. Observing in his essay, "The Travails of U.S. Communists," Walzer noted that the Communist members faced a moral as well as political test in 1956. But when push came to shove, the party leadership and many of its members inevitably fell back into a phase of reflexive loyalty.¹⁰ "Hardly had the leaders of the U.S. Communist Party proclaimed their newly discovered critical mind," he observed, "then the workers of Poznan gave them a dramatic opportunity" to return to a "thirty-odd year history of unthinking obedience."¹¹ For Walzer, the events of that summer proved to be the final death knell in the party's legitimacy—both the party within the Soviet Union and those still in the West. "It may well be to the interests of the larger international political movement it represents," Walzer concluded, "that locally it should dissolve itself as an organization."¹²

After completing his research for Howe and Coser, Walzer set off for England. Having won a Fulbright scholarship in his last year at Brandeis, he had settled on continuing his studies on the Puritans and the English Civil War at Trinity College, Cambridge.¹³ Cambridge marked a stark contrast to Brandeis; it was duller and more pastoral, marked by the deprivations of the war years

¹⁰ Michael Walzer, "The Travail of U.S. Communists," *Dissent* (Fall, 1956)

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ "Class of '56 Wins Fellowships," *Brandeis Justice* (May 17, 1956)

and governed by mores unfamiliar to Americans. But postwar England contained its own excitements. The class system had been considerably disrupted by the war and both Oxford and Cambridge were filled with many working-class veterans as well as many from the commonwealth and former colonies and from the United States, Canada, and the Caribbean, and many of the students that Walzer met were also on the hunt for a new radical egalitarianism.

Among the *Dissenters*, Walzer was one of the youngest members of the group, still very much a junior partner to a project run by an older generation. But in England he discovered a group of younger socialists, closer in his age and political orientation, who were also in conversation with an older generation of disillusioned Marxists.¹⁴ Parallel to the group of former communist intellectuals around the *New Reasoner*—figures like E.P. and Dorothy Thompson, John Saville, Doris Lessing, Claude Bourdet, Ralph Miliband, Eric Hobsbawm, and Malcolm MacEwen—Walzer met a set of intellectuals in the process of forming their own magazine called the *Universities and Left Review (ULR)*. These intellectuals had come to socialism through a variety of different tracks: Charles Taylor, a Quebecois Rhodes Scholar, had grown up in a home suffused with Christian socialism, and who was now seeking a way toward a more secular politics, one that might be a bit more of the world but that did not fall trap to the materialism and dogmatism of Marxism.¹⁵ Stuart Hall, another Rhodes Scholar, was from Jamaica and had become radicalized through anticolonial agitation and was likewise on the hunt for “a new politics somewhere between the old forms of social democracy and Stalinism.”¹⁶ And Raphael

¹⁴ Perry Anderson’s essay “The Left in the Fifties” (*New Left Review*, Winter 1965); Michael Kenny, *First New Left: British Intellectuals after Stalin* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995); Duncan Thompson, *Pessimism of Intellect? A History of the New Left Review* (London: Merlin Press, 2006), Scott Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory: E.P. Thompson, the New Left, and Postwar British Politics* (Manchester: Manchester, 2011).

¹⁵ Akeel Bilgrami, “An Interview with Charles Taylor,” Institute for Religion, Culture, and Public Life, Columbia University

¹⁶ Stuart Hall, “The ‘First’ New Left: Life and Times,” *Out of Apathy: Voices of the Left Thirty Years On* (New York: Verso, 1989). For Taylor’s involvement in the British New Left, see Akeel Bilgrami, “An Interview with Charles

Samuels, a student of the Marxists Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, and other members of the Communist Party Historians Groups based at the time in Oxford, had broken from the CP and was also in search for a new radicalism that was more to the left than the Labour Party.¹⁷

Walzer was also likely drawn to the ULR circle because of its ecumenism and inclination to experiment. Coming out of the hard-fought battles within communism, the Thompsons, Saville, Lessing, and the *New Reasoners* had a narrower project in mind: they wanted to tether their socialism to native traditions of English dissent. Composed of children of immigrants and recent transplants, the *ULR* circle on the other hand was less drawn to the antinomian strains of English Protestantism and more open to the Marxism of Hobsbawm and Isaac Deutscher and the Fabianism of G.D.H. Cole and Harold Laski. “The idea,” Taylor later noted, “was to let us have an open discussion in which all kinds of ways of being on the left could be put on the table.”¹⁸

ULR captured this ecumenism in its first issue, which included contributions from not only their own Oxford and Cambridge circles but also the editors of the *New Reasoner*, and many British Communists and social democrats who were willing to challenge the conventions of their own traditions. Hall wrote on the conservative drift of British politics. Taylor penned an excoriation of the neutrality of contemporary political philosophy.¹⁹ Hobsbawm, who was still a member of the Communist Party, wrote on the future of Marxism in the social sciences and Thompson, who had disavowed his affiliation, wrote on the need for English intellectuals to break from Old Left institutions.²⁰ G.D.H. Cole wrote a defense of postwar social democracy,

Taylor,” Institute for Religion, Culture, and Public Life, Columbia University

¹⁷ “Raphael Samuels, 1934-1996,” *Radical Philosophy* (March-April 1997)

¹⁸ Akeel Bilgrami, “An Interview with Charles Taylor,” Institute for Religion, Culture, and Public Life, Columbia University

¹⁹ Stuart Hall, “The New Conservatism and the Old,” *Universities and Left Review* (Spring 1957); Charles Taylor, “Can Political Philosophy Be Neutral?” *Universities and Left Review* (Spring 1957)

²⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, “The Future of Marxism in the Social Sciences,” *Universities and Left Review* (Spring 1957); E.P. Thompson, “Socialism and the Intellectuals,” *Universities and Left Review* (Spring 1957)

and Joan Robinson, who later became one of Keynes's best-known critics, explored the possibilities of full employment in Britain.²¹ "The age of orthodoxies," the *ULR* group wrote in its inaugural editorial, "has, once again, been outstripped by historical events.... The pressing need, now, is that socialist intellectuals should face the damage which Stalinism and Welfare Capitalism have done to socialist values.... What is needed, therefore, is the regeneration of the whole tradition."²²

Walzer's time at Cambridge also coincided with what were perhaps the two most significant events for the emerging new lefts taking root on both sides of the Atlantic: The Hungarian Revolution and the Suez crisis. Taken together, they offered emblems of what was wrong with the parties and institutions of both Soviet communism and North Atlantic social democracy. They also pointed toward the necessity of a different kind of politics, one that took a more critical view of the state and that began to look for other sites in which the left could realize its ambitions.

Hungary struck first, and there was much for the *ULR* and *Dissent* lefts to cheer. After Poznan, a pro-reform movement had sprung up in Poland still insisting on the country breaking from the Soviet Union's iron-fist grip over the Warsaw Pact countries. Fearing further reprisals, and equally interested in developing a reform movement in their own countries, activists throughout the Eastern bloc began to mobilize solidarity campaigns and marches. The largest of these was in Hungary, when a group of 20,000 students in Budapest, standing in solidarity with Poland's pro-reform movement, toppled a statue of Stalin and surrounded a local radio station in the hopes of seizing it to broadcast their demands. As Hungarian police and army began to clash

²¹ G.D.H. Cole, "What is Happening to Capitalism?" *Universities and Left Review* (Spring 1957); Joan Robinson, "Full Employment and After" *Universities and Left Review* (Spring 1957)

²² Unsigned opening editorial, *Universities and Left Review* (Spring 1957)

with a growing number of street protesters in Budapest, the country seemed to erupt spontaneously into rebellion, eventually forcing the CP's leader Matyas Rakosi to step down and allowing the Communist reformer Imre Nagy to take over, at the time with Moscow's blessing.

How far Nagy would be able to go toward democratizing Hungarian communism was unclear, but for the American and British New Lefts what was particularly exhilarating was neither the revolutionary component of the rebellion nor the reformist consequences; it was that the Hungarian rebels appeared to offer the North Atlantic left a model for its own activism. Forming small political-education groups throughout the country called Petofi Circles, a small band of intellectuals had created a base through which a mass of workers and professionals could then be mobilized in protest. They also marked a "second-and-a-half" camp—a politics that demanded autonomy from the Cold War but that also viewed the necessity for Western power to intervene in Europe to check Soviet expansionism. "How rich was their capacity for creating new social forms that no one had anticipated," Howe wrote of the uprising. "The Petofi Circle, a club of Communist writers, became...a center of revolutionary opposition and dual power!"²³

Developments in the decolonized world, however, proved how tenuous any form of dual power might be and even more tenuous the prospects of a nonalignment socialism. Over the summer, Egyptian president Gamal Nasser had nationalized the Suez Canal and imposed levies on Western ships, frustrating European trade and economic interests in the Middle East. Parallel to the canal's nationalization, Egypt barred Israel's passage through to the Straits of Tiran, thereby cutting the country off from shipping to the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Britain and Israel had had cool relations ever since partition, but now all of a sudden their interests were aligned. So were Israeli and French interests. And the three countries began to plot a coordinated,

²³ Irving Howe, "Hungary: And They Still Fight Back!" *Dissent* (Winter 1957)

multipronged attack on Egypt that might open up the canal and straits all at once. Israel would parachute troops into Sinai while Britain and France would seize the Suez Canal—all of which they pulled off that fall, while the rest of the world was watching the events in Hungary. Furious that he had not been consulted, and worried that the conflict might draw the Soviet Union in on the Egyptian's side, Eisenhower pressured all three parties to evacuate, forcing an end to the conflict. But the lesson for the left and for the decolonized nations was clear: Nonalignment countries, no matter their autonomy, would always be at risk to a resurgent neocolonialism.

Meanwhile, as the Suez crisis wound down, Soviet expansionism provided a similar lesson for the left in Hungary. Backed by a growing majority, Nagy withdrew Hungary from the Warsaw Pact and declared his country, while still socialist, to be neutral in the Cold War; he also began to plan a reworking of the Communist Party and the Hungarian socialist system. The Soviets, who had given him their blessing when he was appointed, were infuriated—Khrushchev above all. A reformer was one thing, and not a far departure from Khrushchev's own call for a new openness within the communist system. But a total break from the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet sphere of influence threatened Soviet control over the eastern half of Europe and might weaken the Soviet's position vis-à-vis the North Atlantic. Hungary's withdrawal might mean Poland and Czechoslovakia, which had their own dissident movements, might follow.

Khrushchev sent in the tanks—hundreds of them. In a radio address broadcast across Europe, Nagy called on the North Atlantic bloc to intervene on Hungary's behalf, hoping that a second-and-a-half camp position might emerge but his appeal went unheeded. After several days of bloody fighting, more than 2,500 Hungarians were killed, 25,000 injured, and another 30,000 arrested as the Soviet Army seized Budapest, deposed and executed Nagy, and put Moscow loyalist Janos Kadar in charge. Any possibility of an anti-Cold War camp emerging in Eastern or

Central Europe had been quashed, almost as swiftly as had the possibility of postcolonial self-rule in the Mideast.

For Walzer and the American and British New Lefts the outcomes of the late fall of 1956 were despairing. Just a year after the Bandung Conference, it was clear that a third camp—or even a second-and-a-half camp—was not going to emerge. The world was now cut up between two soft empires, a Soviet and North Atlantic one, both of which would impose its will at the point of a gun if needed. Aghast, the *Dissenters* led their winter issue with editorials from Howe denouncing the Soviet crackdown in Hungary and Stanley Diamond denouncing the neocolonial machinations in Egypt. For Howe, Hungary was a confirmation of what he already had predicted, but the devastation of the Petofi circles made his remarks particularly bitter. “If anyone still had any doubt as to the political-moral nature of the whole Communist world, let the events in Hungary teach him the truth.”²⁴ For Diamond, the events in Egypt warned of a new era of Western supremacy over the decolonized worlds, demonstrating the fallacy of trusting the North Atlantic to work in the interests of a second-and-a-half camp. “We should...condemn the combined attack on Egypt as a special instance of immoral...political behavior.”²⁵

The *ULR* circle offered a slightly more sophisticated reading of the two events, and one with a little more hope too. For them, the two events highlighted the failures of both socialisms in the world—the social democracies of the North Atlantic and the communism of Russia. “Socialists,” Hall wrote, “after ‘Hungary’ must carry in their hearts the sense of tragedy which the degeneration of the Russian Revolution into Stalinism represented for the left in the twentieth century.” And socialists after Suez must recognize “the enormity of error in believing that lowering the Union Jack in a few ex-colonies necessarily signaled the ‘end of imperialism,’ or

²⁴ Howe, “Hungary: And They Still Fight Back!”

²⁵ Stanley Diamond, “Eruption in the Middle East,” *Dissent* (Winter 1957)

that the real gains of the welfare state and the widening of material affluence meant the end of inequality and exploitation.”²⁶ But while the moral and political failures of socialism in the world were disheartening, Hall added that they pointed toward an alternative path, toward the politics of direct action that no longer turned to the state or parties in order to achieve its ends. A new left, Hall remembered, “was born in 1956, a conjuncture—not just a year—bounded on one side by the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution by Soviet tanks and the other by the British and French invasion of the Suez Canal zone.” In “a deeper sense,” Hall added, “it also “defined for people of my generation the boundaries and limits of the tolerable in politics.”²⁷

Writing from England, Walzer drew considerably from Hall’s analysis in a letter Howe and Coser published in *Dissent*.²⁸ Chastising the Communist and Labour intellectuals who failed to criticize Khrushchev’s action—interestingly G.D.H. Cole, the libertarian socialist so important to the early *Dissenters*’ views was one target—Walzer noted that 1956 signaled the collapse of the last of the Old Left. Yet, for Walzer, there was, as with Hall, some reasons for hope. The Petofi Circles, the student protests against Suez in England, the New Left Clubs founded by Samuels and the *ULRers*, the civil rights movement in the United States—all of these pointed toward a new form of citizen power that might be built and fomented in the “intermediate zones” between the state and household. In the early stages of the Hungarian Revolution, Walzer noted, one found the “foundation upon which a new program for socialist activity might be built.”²⁹ Even more important in Walzer’s view was that when coupled with Yugoslavia and the other Bandung initiates, Hungary still represented the promise of a third-camp socialism and one that

²⁶ Hall, “Life and Times of the First New Left”

²⁷ Hall, “Life and Times of the First New Left”

²⁸ Michael Walzer, “London Letter: “Hungary and the Failure of the Left” *Dissent* (Spring 1957)

²⁹ *Ibid.*

could still inspired the Western left. For “by recognizing in Hungary the image of international socialism, of anti–cold war socialism, might Western socialists not have found it again in themselves?”³⁰

Walzer returned to the United States in the fall of 1957. His year in England had sharpened his understanding of the tasks before the socialist left in the North Atlantic: The left must pursue a radical democratic politics at home; it also must keep its eyes trained on the nonalignment socialism of the decolonized world and continue the Hungarian Revolution’s “demand for an alternative to the cold war.”³¹ Socialism, in the years after World War II, could never just be a national project; it required seeking an equality between nations in the international sphere as well as an equality between citizens in the domestic one. Walzer’s year in Cambridge also reaffirmed a suspicion already gestating during his Brandeis years that the avatars of this new leftism were not necessarily going to be the working-class revolutionaries imagined by Marx but a new generation of college-educated young people who were growing impatient with the backwards looking tendencies of an older Marxist left, whether in the North Atlantic or Soviet blocs. Here was a cohort of socialist intellectuals his age who were hoping to carve out a middle path between social democracy and communism. As he concluded his letter from London, to find this “alternative ought to be a socialist task.”³²

Before embarking on such a task, however, Walzer and his young socialist and radical peers first needed to find a way to make a living. Later in life Walzer would observe that had he

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Walzer, “London Letter: “Hungary and the Failure of the Left”

³² Ibid.

been born in Europe, he might have become a party intellectual, editing or contributing to a socialist-party newspaper or working on its policy platform.³³ But by the late 1950s there was no socialist political organization in the United States to which a young radical might dedicate his or her energy, so Walzer chose what appeared to be the next best thing: a career in the academy.

This choice was not unlike that of many other intellectuals at the time. After spending the Depression and war years doing hand-to-mouth editing and writing, many of the New York intellectuals had now found jobs in universities, which at the time were experiencing a dramatic growth in student enrollment.³⁴ Howe, Coser, Philip Rahv, Hebert Marcuse, and Max Lerner were all at Brandeis; C. Wright Mills, Richard Hofstadter, Lionel Trilling, Meyer Schapiro, and Daniel Bell at Columbia; Sidney Hook, Ralph Ellison, Irving Kristol, and James Burnham were at New York University. Hannah Arendt spent the 1950s between teaching posts at the New School, University of Chicago, University of California, Berkeley, and Princeton University. Heinrich Blucher, Randall Jarrell, and Mary McCarthy taught at Bard, and Dwight Macdonald briefly flirted with the idea of a university appointment. While a handful of them held PhDs, many others obtained jobs primarily based on their growing prominence as editors and writers.³⁵

Walzer's generation of left intellectuals also looked to the academy. Like Walzer, many of the *ULR* editors got PhDs in the late 1950s and Walzer's peers in America were doing the same. Staughton Lynd, Christopher Lasch, Eugene Genovese, and James Weinstein had all

³³ Jeffrey Williams, "Criticism and Connection: An Interview with Michael Walzer" *symplokē*, Vol. 20, No. 1-2 (2012)

³⁴ For a discussion of the expansion of the postwar university and the role intellectuals played in sustaining it, see Thomas Bender, "Politics, Intellect, and the University, 1945-1994" *Daedalus* (Winter 1997) and David Haney, *The Americanization of Social Science: Intellectuals and Public Responsibility in the Postwar United States* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 2008). For the New York intellectual's specific involvement, see: Richard Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (Hanover: Wesleyan, 1985)

³⁵ Thomas Bender, "Politics, Intellect, and the University, 1945-1994," *Daedalus* (Winter 1997)

embarked on graduate work in American history at Columbia.³⁶ Martin Sklar, Ronald Radosh, Eleanor Hakim, Saul Landau, Walter LeFeber, and a set of historians around *Studies on the Left* were working on similar degrees at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.³⁷ Norman Birnbaum, Gabriel Kolko, Stephan Thernstrom, Barton Bernstein, Robert Paul Wolff, and Marshall Berman were all at or about to attend Harvard. “The only way you could be an intellectual in those days,” Walzer later explained, “was by becoming a professor and being an intellectual on the side.”³⁸

Walzer had initially considered continuing work within history, which appeared to be the default choice among his “middle generation” of long New Leftists, but he was dissuaded by his Brandeis adviser, Frank Manuel, who warned Walzer that he would have to spend all of his time in archives.³⁹ Walzer also considered a degree in literature, which was the field for many of the earlier generation of New York radicals in the academy; Walzer, in fact, had written several reviews and pieces of literary criticism for *Dissent* in the 1950s, including essays on the British “angry young men,” J.D. Salinger, and John Wain.⁴⁰ But he had come to the conclusion that “there were other things I did better.”⁴¹ Uncertain about what field to work in, he followed Manuel’s advice. “Manuel...told me that political science was the right discipline because it wasn’t a discipline, and I could do anything I wanted if I went into [it]. So...I did political theory.”⁴²

³⁶ For a discussion of the graduate student radicals of the late 1950s at Columbia, see Barker, “War of Position”

³⁷ See: Tim Barker, “War of Position” for the *Studies on the Left* intellectuals at Madison as well as Kevin Mattson’s *Intellectuals in Action*, Matthew Levin’s *Cold War University: Madison and the New Left in the Sixties*, and Paul Buhle’s anthology *History and the New Left: Madison, Wisconsin, 1950-1970*.

³⁸ Rosenblum, “A Conversation with Michael Walzer”

³⁹ Williams, “Criticism and Connection”

⁴⁰ Michael Walzer, “John Wain: The Hero in Limbo,” *Perspective* (Summer–Autumn, 1958); “Politics of the Angry Young Men,” *Dissent* (Spring, 1958) and “In Place of a Hero,” *Dissent* (Spring, 1960)

⁴¹ Williams, “Criticism and Connection”

⁴² Kreisler, “Political Theory and Social Criticism”

Walzer received offers from Harvard, Yale, and Johns Hopkins but settled on Harvard. There were probably several reasons for this. Political science at the time was in a state of considerable change. Many departments were embracing more empirical and behaviorist approaches to the study of politics that used new social-scientific techniques in mass psychology, economics, and political sociology to examine voting behavior and interest group dynamics in America's mass democracy.⁴³ Harvard's Government Department, however, had not yet made this turn. Much of its faculty had fought in World War II or participated in war-time administrations and therefore had remained wedded to interwar approaches to social science that heavily leaned on the neo-Hegelian idealism that was then in vogue and that was more closely akin to the kind of intellectual history Walzer did in college. Invested in what some historians and political theorists today have come to call the "Ideas and Institutions" school, the department's theorists—William Yandell Elliott, Carl Friedrich, Samuel Beer, Louis Hartz—viewed intellectual and political history as divining rods for understanding contemporary politics. "Moral philosophy, the theory of the state, and constitutional history," as Robert Adcock and Mark Bevir explain in their brief history of this school, were all held together by "a diffuse idealism."⁴⁴ To practice political theory at Harvard meant also being an intellectual historian.

There were variations of this diffuse idealism. Elliott's idealism stemmed from his tutelage under Alfred North Whitehead and from his disdain of the instrumentalism he believed had crept into American social science in the early twentieth century.⁴⁵ Samuel Beer, an Elliott

⁴³ On the history of behavioralism and the "policy sciences" in postwar political science, see Bernard Crick, *The American Science of Politics* (Berkeley: California, 1967); Charles Lindblom, "Political Science in the 1940s and 1950s," *Daedalus* (Winter 1997); and Robert Adcock, "Interpreting Behavioralism," *Modern Political Science: Anglo-American Exchanges since 1880* edit by Mark Bevir and Robert Adcock (Princeton: Princeton, 2007).

⁴⁴ Robert Adcock and Mark Bevir, "The Remaking of Political Theory," *Modern Political Science: Anglo-American Exchanges since 1880* edit. by Robert Adcock, Mark Bevir, and Shannon C. Stimson (Princeton: Princeton, 2009), 212

⁴⁵ William Yandell Elliott, *The Pragmatic Revolt in Politics: Syndicalism, Fascism, and the Constitutional State* (New

student as well as a student of A.D. Lindsay, drew his idealism from Whitehead but also from the neo-Hegelianism and liberal socialism of Lindsay, T.H. Green, and L.T. Hobhouse.⁴⁶ And Friedrich drew his understanding of idealism from Kant, Hegel, and the neo-Kantians at Heidelberg. But at the center of nearly all the Harvard theorists' work was a view that to understand politics, one could not focus only on political behavior and macrosocial structures; one had to examine its development in the historical context of both norms and states.

The appeal of the Harvard theorists for Walzer likely also came from the political project underpinning much of their work. Like their British and American forebears, the Harvard theorists viewed the work of political theory as one of fortifying a new democratic politics for the modern age. Having witnessed the collapse of liberal democracy in the 1930s, they had come to the conclusion that for it to survive in the future it required considerable ideological as well as political renovation; something had gone terribly wrong within the very liberal tradition. Just as Green, Hobhouse, Dewey, Laski, Holmes, and Ely all insisted that liberalism needed to embrace many of the features of socialism if it were to survive in an increasingly interdependent world, the Harvard theorists were all in pursuit of a new set of ideas to fortify liberalism in an age of totalitarianism and the liberal welfare state. As Hans Morgenthau, a frequent interlocutor of the Harvard theorists, argued in his 1958 work on liberalism's crisis, *Dilemmas of Politics*, "What liberalism had to say about the nature of man, society, and politics is at odds with what we have experienced" during economic and geopolitical upheavals of the first half of the 20th century.⁴⁷

York: Macmillan, 1929)

⁴⁶ Samuel Beer, *City of Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1949); *British Politics in a Collectivist Age* (New York: Knopf, 1965); For Beer's biography, see: Peter Hall and Harvey Mansfield, "Samuel H. Beer," *PS: Political Science and Politics* (Summer 2009) and William Grimes, "Samuel H. Beer, Authority on British Government, Dies at 97," *New York Times*, (April 18, 2009)

⁴⁷ Hans Morgenthau, *Dilemma of Politics* (Chicago: Chicago, 1958), 341

“More specifically,” the modern liberal tradition “had been unable to reconcile its original libertarian assumptions and postulates with its latter-day philosophy of the administrative and welfare state.”⁴⁸

In many ways, this research program intersected with the projects of ideological renewal undertaken by the American and British New Lefts. Like the Harvard theorists, those around *politics, Dissent, Liberation, Universities and Left Review*, and the *New Reasoner* all believed the left needed to move beyond the scientism of Marxism and back into the realm of ideas and history. Also like the Harvard theorists, they believed that this was imperative because the modern political tradition, in both its liberal and socialist expressions, had collapsed into itself in the first half of the twentieth century; intellectual history and philosophy might be able to save liberalism and socialism for the second half. “We had to turn in upon ourselves,” as Howe later recalled of the dark, uncertain years of the mid and late 1950s, “questioning first principles (mostly our own) yet fighting hard against opponents who wanted summarily to dismiss those principles.”⁴⁹

The desire to examine the entwined history of institutions and ideas in order to salvage what was worth rescuing from the past and discard what was not proved to be central to Walzer’s graduate work at Harvard and in particular, his dissertation, which he published as *Revolution of the Saints*.⁵⁰ Drawing from the Harvard theorists’ methodological approach, he departed in one critical way: Instead of focusing on state institutions and the norms that undergird them, he

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ As quoted by Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer...*, 93

⁵⁰ Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1965)

focused on ideas and institutions that emerged outside formal centers of power such as the state, the established church, and political party and that, Walzer argued, marked the origins of modern radical politics. What Walzer wanted to examine was how new forms of power, and new ideas about social order, took root in a society, and, in particular, he wanted to examine how bands of private citizens, organized around a dissenting political point of view, got thrown into public life, and what the consequences of their activism was once these individuals eventually seized power.

For Walzer, these were the questions raised by the Russian and French Revolutions but also by the Holy Commonwealth built by the Puritans in the seventeenth-century England and that, in his view, helped mark the shift from a medieval absolutism to a politics that begins its life in civil society and then eventually takes root in formal establishments of power. They were also, Walzer believed, the questions that the new citizen-led social movements should be asking. As new moral and political communities grouped around intellectuals and activists emerged what were the particular ways to protect these groups from devolving into the tyrannical bodies that ended up inverting many of the initial accomplishments of the French and Russian Revolutions?

Walzer had initially considered the study of the French or Russian Revolutions, but because of his limited proficiency in French and Russian he chose to engage with these questions through the English Puritans of his undergraduate work, examining how their politics took shape, what ideological frameworks organized their institutions, and what led some of them to eventually become the heralds of Cromwellian tyranny once they seized the English state.⁵¹ For his dissertation, Walzer also hoped to expand the scope of his inquiry, broadening the temporal and geographical frame to include the origins of Protestantism, the differences between Lutheranism and Calvinism, and the experiences of the Marian exiles in the Netherlands and the

⁵¹ Williams, "Criticism and Connection"

French Huguenots in England, before then turning to the rise of the Puritans in the middle of the seventeenth century in England and examine their path toward political and social control.

By doing so, Walzer wanted to map out a larger pattern of institutional and ideological formation that he believed was common to many radical groups: small cadres of private men and women, organized around a particular worldview, form tightknit voluntarist associations within civil society. From these tightknit associations come new nonhierarchical forms of power and organization, new bonds and duties, and new spaces in which modern politics can take place. Sometimes, these groups tend toward revolutions and, in moments of upheaval, insinuate themselves into the chaos in order to redirect it for their purposes, and as a result, these groups, when successful, often end up in the seats of power they had once resisted. Like Howe and Coser in *The American Communist Party*, Walzer both admired and was critical of his subject matter. He wanted to understand not only what led to seventeenth-century Calvinists to their swift rise to power but what caused them to swing between open and closed phases? The Calvinists, Walzer insisted in *Revolution of the Saints*, “appealed to men who had in some way been set loose” by the breakdown of the older forms of authority and by the rise of capitalism.⁵² While helping create new havens in this increasingly heartless world, and helping challenge older forms of absolutism, the Calvinists, Walzer noted, also instituted new forms of domination. They “brought conscience and coercion together,” Walzer argued, much “in the same way as they were later brought together in Rousseau’s General Will” and then in the French and Russian Revolutions.⁵³

To tell his story, Walzer began by setting up the differences between Lutheranism and Calvinism. Luther and Calvin, Walzer argued, marked two unique paths for Christianity in the wake of the Reformation. The church and state had stripped Europeans of their autonomy and led

⁵² Walzer, *The Revolution of the*, 29

⁵³ Walzer, *Revolution of the Saints*, 47

Christians to follow a deviating path away from god. In response, Luther and Lutherans turned more and more to the self, viewing in the spirituality of antinomian dissent the recovery of an earlier Christianity that centered not on institutional life but on personal revelation and faith. A good Christian, above all else, embodied divine freedom; his or her faith was a matter of individual choice. Augustine had famously divided the world into earthly and heavenly cities, the former dominated by the absolutism of declining Roman empire and its heathen excesses and the later dominated by a divine humanity, where god is the “joy of every heart.” Luther repeated this separation between the secular world of politics and formal institutions like the state and church, where no Christian could redeem him or herself, and the spiritual world of personal conviction and piety in which all Christians could return to the true path of Christianity, the one carved out by Jesus and his solitary dissent from Israelite society and from its formal religious institutions.

Calvin did not entirely disagree with this vision: The worldly church in Rome had hampered divine revelation, as had those absolutist monarchs of the late medieval period who insisted that they were granted a divine right to rule. But while Luther sought to separate the secular and spiritual worlds, reasserting the dominance of the latter over the former, Calvin came to the opposite conclusion: The only path toward a revived Christianity was to tear those false forms of Christianity and divine right apart and to thread new forms of them back together. If Calvinists did not attack old bodies of power and build new ones, those worldly institutions would continue to persecute the true Christian; more importantly, if they did not invent new forms of social and political control, they would be left having to rely on those that already existed, ones that become deformed by years of spiritual deviation and human excess. For Calvin, this was a practical matter as much as an abstract one. Following Luther and the first generation of Protestant dissidents, Calvin believed that the lessons of the early Reformation

pointed to the dangers of entirely disavowing the earthly institutions. To be liberated from the moral and political absolutism of the medieval church and state, Protestants needed to act as public, political figures and build their own. To “resist the religious compulsions of the personal and the emotional,” as Walzer put it in *Revolution of the Saints*, dissenting Christians, Calvin believed, had to imagine and eventually build an alternative world—a “Holy Commonwealth.”⁵⁴

This worldliness, Walzer argued, made Calvinism a unique form of Protestantism that broke from the more spiritual forms of dissent embodied by Luther and his followers. Weber had argued that Protestantism and, in particular, Calvinism had taught the Europeans how to become good capitalists, endowing them with visions of a protestant work ethics, delayed gratification and secularized understandings of an individual’s calling (*beruf*); in following the arguments made by the English socialist R.H. Tawney, Walzer contended Protestantism and, in particular, Calvinism had taught Europeans to become organized radicals opposed to established power.

“Luther,” Walzer wrote in *Revolution of the Saints*, “never really devoted his best energies to the theoretical problems of ecclesiastical organization, perhaps because he had not originally intended to face them at all; he had not planned a new church. Calvin, however, who belonged to the next generation of Protestants, was from the beginning of his career a man committed to systematic innovation, and his innovations were far less important in theology than in moral conduct and social organization.”⁵⁵ This is why Calvin’s most important work, *Institutes*, focused on founding a new set of institutions, of imagining “the church which would replace Rome and...the method of that replacement.”⁵⁶ At the center of the Calvinist worldview was not a vision of individual salvation, which served as the bedrock for Lutheranism and for

⁵⁴ Walzer, *Revolution of the Saints*, 22

⁵⁵ Walzer, *Revolution of the Saints*, 23-24

⁵⁶ Walzer, *Revolution of the Saints*, 24

later thinkers like Kant, who helped secularize this vision of individual conscience; instead the Calvinists, ripped out from the familiar world of medieval autocracy and papism, sought to devise new forms of moral discipline, community, and social and religious order. Theirs was always a political vision as much as a moral and theological one. Calvinists, driven by their *beruf*, believed Christians could only act in coordinated and disciplined collective action and they could only do so by forming vanguards of a true Christianity that would be able to seize and remake the institutions of the state; they were, in other words, Europe's first revolutionaries.

Calvin established these kinds of institutions in Geneva and very early on the revolutionary impulses of Calvinism led to the kinds of tyrannical repression Walzer worried about and that Howe and Coser contended was inherent in the Leninist strands of communism. But Calvinism did not often take power in other parts of the North Atlantic and Calvinist Saints were forced to build longer standing vanguard institutions to sustain their political ambitions. For Walzer, in these institutions one glimpsed at not only modernity's first revolutionaries but also its first radical citizens, associated men and women acting in nonhierarchical and often transnational institutions within civil society and that existed just below the state and church.

In the shock and awe of modernization, Calvinists were forced into antinomian positions against the state, nation, and church and forced to create their own voluntarist communities. If the modern era was ripped loose of traditional economic, religious, and political structures—if the enclosure put an end to the feudal system of commons; if the reformation ended the unchallenged authority of Rome; if peasant rebellions and bourgeois commerce unsettled the aristocratic system—then the Calvinists were going to create their own forms of moral and social order. Persecuted by state religions and national monarchies, they sought to build a politics that rested on transnational political organization that existed outside the realm of Medieval Europe's

politics. In a pattern that Walzer believed was integral to nearly all liberationist politics, whether anticolonial or the struggle against segregation, it was through the Puritans exile from the world of politics as it existed that they were driven into the intermediate zones of civil society in which they began to develop new models of social, economic, and religious organization. Out of the fury of political and economic development, came a radical new figure of modernity: associated men and women forced to create their own voluntary associations and forms of political duty. Citing the argument R.H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, Walzer argued that what made the Puritan revolutionaries of the English Civil War emblematic of this new radical figure was that they had effectively "appealed to men who had in some way been set loose from" the medieval orders of power and therefore were forced to find ways for "conscience and work" to enter "the political world together...form[ing] the basis for the new politics of revolution."⁵⁷

"A politics of conflict and competition for power, of faction, intrigue, and open war is probably universal in human history," Walzer recognized.⁵⁸ But the Calvinist vanguard offered something else: a vision of intellectual radicalism that demonstrated the power of "detached appraisal of a going system," of "programmatic expression of discontent and aspiration," and the "organization of zealous men for sustained political activity."⁵⁹ "It is surely fair to say," Walzer concluded, "that these three together are aspects only of the modern, that is of the post medieval political world."⁶⁰ Turning from Calvin's Geneva to the French Huguenots and the English Marian exiles spread out in Europe, Walzer examined how the Calvinist diaspora built these communities and without necessarily leading to repressive or hierarchical communities and then he turned to the role the Calvinist Puritans played in the English Civil War. Like the Jacobins

⁵⁷ Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints*, 29

⁵⁸ Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints*, 1

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

and Bolsheviks that followed them, the Puritan saints were initially a small intellectual vanguard, driven by conscience and only one part of a much larger revolutionary upheaval, that eventually seized power and sought to integrate their moral and political commitments into a new form of power. “The first of those self-disciplined agents of social and political reconstruction who have appeared so frequently in modern history,” Walzer argued in *Revolution of the Saints*, the Puritan saint proved to be “an extraordinarily bold, inventive, and ruthless politician, a man who has ‘great works’ to perform.”⁶¹ Inadvertently laying the groundwork for the intellectual activists of the French and Russian Revolutions, and for modern radical activists in general, they began by building their power in civil society, through congregations and groups that were often highly nonhierarchical and shared the burdens and spoils of their collective organization. Yet once they came to power, much of the reasons they were so effective as radical made them so tyrannical as rulers. Their discipline, their boldness, and their intransigent convictions led them to force their worldview onto society as whole. Having helped create a greater pluralism in civil society before their rule by helping create a more vibrant diversity of religious and moral persuasions, now vested in the institutional power of church and state, they became pluralism’s greatest adversary.

The Puritan Saints, Walzer explained, marked a “new integration of private men...into the political order,” but because this integration was “of *chosen* groups of private men, of proven holiness and virtue,” their particular views then became the ruling dogmas of the entire society.⁶² For Walzer, in this way, the saints were a model for postwar radicalism and a warning. The saints became “godly magistrates, elders and fathers in much the same way and for many of the same reasons as 18th-century Frenchmen became Jacobin and active citizens, and 20th-century

⁶¹Walzer, *Revolution of the Saints*, vii

⁶²Walzer, *Revolution of the Saints*, 2

Russian Bolsheviks and professional revolutionaries [became] in Lenin's words 'leaders,' 'managers,' and 'controllers.'"⁶³ What was once voluntary and nonhierarchical became repressive. Cromwell, Walzer insisted, was the modern age's first Lenin, the Puritans the first totalitarians. The Puritan saint, he explained, was "the destroyer of an old order for which there is no need to feel nostalgic," but in the process of this destruction he became "the builder of a repressive system."⁶⁴ If radicals were not careful, this same dialectic might swallow their politics. For Walzer, at least, this was the lesson of the Marxist radicals in the first half of the twentieth century, as they swung between open and closed phases, before turning on their own in an endless series of hygienic cleanses. Concluding with a quote from the Bolshevik poet Sergei Esenin, Walzer noted that this was the danger of liberation—a theme that would become central to almost all of his work and that he would bring to the surface in both *Exodus and Revolution* and then later *The Paradox of Liberation*.⁶⁵ Collective self-determination was a worthy of pursuit, and for Walzer it would always be a central component of the program of a radical left, but as it was a worldly pursuit, vested in the collective agency of a group, it was always at risk of undermining itself, of working against its own interests, of undermining the very civil society and pluralism from which it so often emerged. The temptation for total discipline could turn the most emancipatory of politics into a tyranny, if the forms of self-sacrifice that led to emancipation persisted into the society that these civil society activists aspired to build. "The good old cause / had quickly become only a memory," Sergei Esenin lamented in the poem Walzer quoted at the end of his study. "What a misfit I've become / ... a foreigner in my land."⁶⁶

⁶³ Walzer, *Revolution of the Saints*, 310

⁶⁴ Walzer, *Revolution of the Saints*, vii

⁶⁵ Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic, 1985) and *The Paradox of Liberation: Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions* (New Haven: Yale, 2015)

⁶⁶ Walzer, *Revolution of the Saints*, 320

Walzer's dissertation concluded with a sense of despair and uncertainty—with the “paradoxes” of liberation that would become a central theme in his later work—but underlying his study of the Puritans was also a growing sense of self-recognition and hope. Political creativity was possible in an age of mass politics; the tacit consent that formed the fictional basis of the social contract could in fact be given concrete meaning through the political commitments and obligations that come through civil society's associations. The Puritan, Jacobin, and Bolshevik revolutions may have concluded in dictatorship, but their early phases offered a novel form of citizen self-organization. They began as clubs as much as parties, as congregations of the likeminded as much as states. The intense, close-knit organization of private citizens and the sense of shared responsibility and camaraderie all pointed Walzer toward a new kind of political actor and a new set of tactics that might help launch the new libertarian socialist politics of his comrades gathered around *Dissent* and *ULR*—a politics that centered around the citizen-activist and intellectual who hoped to transform political life through those civil society associations between the household and the state. Their politics demonstrated the power of moral arguments and it demonstrated how new forms of moral and political obligations can be created outside the state, an argument that Walzer would later expand in his early normative theory on civil disobedience and political duty.

Walzer also believed that this form of civil society activism was also ascendant outside the socialist left. In fact, it was primarily the politics of those nonsocialist radicals on both sides of the Cold War and in the decolonizing world that offered examples of a civil society vanguard that might begin forming its institutions and ideology outside the state before influencing it. The civil-rights, civil-libertarian, and disarmament movements in the United States, in particular, all

captured the potential for an engaged citizenry forming voluntary associations outside the realm of conventional politics and harnessing the moral outrage of a small group of citizens into disciplined nonviolent political action that might eventually serve as the basis for a large-scale social movement. And Walzer was not alone in detecting the power that can come from political organization within civil society. Jurgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, among other works, signaled a wider recognition of the role citizens, acting outside the realm of the state, can and should play in building their society.⁶⁷ But the question was: What would happen when these citizens were successful? Had they formed political ideologies pluralist and liberal enough in nature to prevent themselves from falling trap to the citizen movements that had emerged and seized power in the past? The failure of the Popular Front, in Walzer's view, was not only institutional but also ideological: The communists within it refused to accept the liberal norms that might have pluralized their worldviews. Would a new left suffer from the same mistakes? What kind of ideological synthesis of liberalism and socialism was needed?

In the late 1950s, the saints were still spread out among many communities, the terms of their complaints were still in formation, the problems had yet to fully reveal themselves, and so Walzer did not yet even have a sense of the power that might be out there to seize. But he was already aware of the dangers and recognized that many tough questions remained on the horizon. The Puritans offered a novel form of self-organization that could help modern political subjects resist the encroachments of the administrative state at home and abroad and recover some of their lost agency and sense of membership. But the dangers of self-determination were

⁶⁷ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* translated by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT, 1982) [originally published in German in 1962]

omnipresent and radicals had to always be on guard. Finding a way to “cop[e] with disorder,” Walzer noted near the end of *Revolution of the Saints*, “meant being reborn as a new man, self-confident and free of worry, capable of vigorous, willful activity,” but with the disciplining of a society also came a considerable loss.⁶⁸ “It should not be forgotten” that the saints marked not only the inauguration of a new politics but a triumph “over free thought and spontaneous expression.... This was the sacrifice the saints found necessary in their terrible struggle for self-control.”⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Walzer, *Revolution of the Saints*, 314

⁶⁹ Ibid.

3. Out of Apathy

Compared to Brandeis and the campus agitations of the early New Left in England, where the mantra “out of apathy” spread throughout the country’s campuses in the late 1950s, Harvard at first appeared to Walzer to still be stuck in the quiescence of the early postwar years. Young faculty members and graduate students, uncertain about their careers, mostly focused on grades, fellowships, jobs, and tenure. Senior faculty members, having not fully departed from their wartime and Depression-era responsibilities, continued to commute to Washington and work with or at various civil agencies. Radicals who made their start at Harvard in these years found the university a bleak place for intellectual and political life. Sheldon Wolin, another student of the Harvard theorists, complained that the faculty were more often in Washington than Cambridge.¹ Stanley Cavell, in his memoirs, despaired over the dreary conformity and cloistered, Alexandrian nature of the human sciences—in particular, of philosophy.² The university’s

¹ Oral history conducted by David Marcus with Sheldon Wolin, April, 2015

² Stanley Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Palo Alto: Stanford, 2010)

“cultural and moral climate,” Norman Birnbaum, a PhD student in sociology, recalled, “was exceedingly competitive, and the competition never ended. Those who climbed one rung of the ladder could hardly congratulate themselves or pause: they had to scramble higher. Undergraduates strove for high grades, recognition from their peers and teachers, membership in literary societies. Graduate students struggled for teaching assistantships.... Those who did obtain junior appointments promptly began to worry about their chances of being made permanent and the permanent party spent its energies and time in relentless pursuit of inner certainty that they were entitled to their obvious privileges of rank.”³ Even for those involved in the intrigues of postwar Washington, ambition and a desire to be close to power were often almost as much their guiding motive as their commitments. “Harvard’s political functions,” Birnbaum recalled, “provided a third road to status.”⁴

When Walzer arrived in 1957, he had hoped to bring with him some of the activist spirit he had absorbed at Brandeis and in England. But he struggled in his early years at Harvard to find meaningful sites for intellectual debate and political activity. Walzer nonetheless did what he could. He continued to spend time with the *Dissent* circle, and he contributed a number of essays to the magazine. He also befriended the few radicals on campus, including Birnbaum, Robert Paul Wolff, Gabriel Kolko, Joyce Kolko, Barton Bernstein, Stephan Thernstrom, and Barrington Moore, and he helped organize a New Left Club modeled on those the *ULR* had set up throughout England.⁵ His ties with civil rights activists and those protesting the Cold War helped him recruit a younger generation of left-wing for *Dissent*, including intellectuals not just in Cambridge but also in places like New York City, Ann Arbor, Berkeley, and Madison. A

³ Norman Birnbaum, *From the Bronx to Oxford and Not Quite Back* (New York: New Academia), 103-104

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ For a discussion of The Thernstroms’s involvement with the New Left Club and their political and intellectual trajectories see Adam Shatz, “Thernstroms, Black and White,” *American Prospect* (December 10, 2001)

symposium Walzer organized in *Dissent* in 1960, including contributions from the New Left Club's Wolff and Stephan Thernstrom, *Studies on the Left*'s Staughton Lynd, civil rights activist Julian Mayfield, pacifist Roger Hagan, Young People's Socialist League leader James T. Burnett, and the Beat novelist and feminist journalist Barbara Probst Solomon.⁶

Yet these early friendships and collaborations felt like modest recompense. The New Left Club was composed of a group of leftists hoping to sustain the socialist project in a period of defeat. While, as Wolff recalled, it was "the liveliest circle of critics and activists" on the campus, it initially remained cut off from the protest movements off campus, serving more as an oasis in the midst of Harvard's docility. "We weren't really a club," Wolff confessed, "just some like-minded men and women who enjoyed hanging out together and talking politics."⁷ The group was so small that, according to Wolff, it struggled even to get intellectuals to speak to them. When Erich Fromm came for a talk, he was so dismayed by the "little handful [who had] dutifully turned out to hear him," Wolff recalled, that he "turned tail and headed south again."⁸

The dreariness of the Harvard campus comes up in several pieces Walzer wrote during his first years in graduate school. In an essay penned shortly after his arrival on campus, Walzer noted that "For the young today, the importance and excitement of the adult world have become somewhat problematic. On the one hand this can lead to that odd combination of indifference and professionalism which one sometimes encounters in college students. On the other hand, it produces an earnest confusion, less often critical than nostalgic, which contemplates without enthusiasm or alternatives its possible maturity."⁹ In another, he complained of the "sort of mild

⁶ Michael Walzer, Robert Paul Wolff, Stephan Thernstrom, Roger Hagan, Julian Mayfield, Barbara Probst Solomon, James T. Burnett, Staughton Lynd, "The Young Radicals: A Symposium," *Dissent* (Spring 1962)

⁷ Robert Paul Wolff, "Chapter 6: Coming of Age in Harvard Square," unpublished memoir, 255-257 (<http://people.umass.edu/rwolff/memoirchaptersix.pdf>)

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Michael Walzer, "In Place of a Hero," *Dissent* (Spring 1960)

and increasingly invisible indignation [that] has been established as the proper attitude for proper young men...the ritualized discontent which continues to echo from our twenty-year-old past, clothed now in the overcoat and galoshes of responsibility. After all, we are told, the Welfare State is established, prosperity has endured the dangerous post-war decade, Russia has shown us what happens when people get too enthusiastic, and we ought at last to be content to pursue modestly our slight careers.”¹⁰

The year 1960, however, changed the cloistered world of Cambridge; it also changed nearly all of America. Soon the overcoats and galoshes of responsibility were shucked off. In part, this was because of Kennedy’s election in the fall of 1960, which ignited many of the students’ and faculty members’ enthusiasm, drawing the Harvard campus ever closer to Washington and the elites making its policies. In part, it was due to the frustration that followed from this enthusiasm and the growing disillusionment as a generation watched the promises of the New Frontier morph into the inactivity and mishaps of Kennedy’s first two years, which saw an inexperienced and arrogant politician blunder his way through a series of domestic and geopolitical crises, achieving little on the domestic front and nearly setting off a world war. “Even Harvard’s dissidents,” Todd Gitlin, an undergraduate student of Walzer, explained, “took the Kennedy administration personally.”¹¹ Yet the true source of inspiration for Walzer and those around the New Left Club was the Greensboro sit ins that came just before Kennedy’s election. If Hungary and Suez in 1956 had been an important turning point for postwar radicals, marking a break from both Old Left, then Greensboro in 1960 helped bring in the radical visions of a New Left.

¹⁰ Michael Walzer, “The Politics of the Angry Young Men,” *Dissent* (Spring 1958)

¹¹ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1987), 90

“Looking at a college campus before,” Walzer observed in an unpublished essay on the significance of Greensboro on the emerging New Left, “the readiness for political activity would have been hard to imagine.”¹² Among the students, there was “a restlessness, a confusion, and a vague discontent.”¹³ But with Greensboro and the wave of sit ins it unleashed, many young people felt empowered to test out new forms of political activity that no longer fell under the purview of an older left and the formal political institutions to which it turned. Politics did not have to happen solely in the Beltway; it could be the province of all Americans. “This is why the response to the courage of the Southern Negro students was so great,” Walzer noted. “For these students had struck out on their own, outside the structure of group pressure, pitting their young, self-conscious dignity against a system blatantly evil.... They initiated... a direct politics of moral protest.... And it was for just this politics, and no other, that young people had been waiting.”¹⁴

Sitting in was not a new tactic. It had first appeared in the industrial sector as a tactic to seize shop floors and prevent scab work, and it gained national prominence in the United States first during the 1936–37 sit-down strikes, when over 2,000 autoworkers seized several General Motors plants in Flint, and then in the Little Steel strikes that took place in Johnstown and in much of the Upper Midwest. It also was method employed in the protests against the HUAC hearings and campus loyalty oaths and by small groups of pacifists during and after World War

¹² Walzer, “Untitled,” Walzer’s personal collection. This article, which offered a personal account of Walzer’s involvement in the civil rights movement in the early 1960s, was never published. It had been commissioned by Glenford Mitchell for an anthology examining the roots of the student-led phase of civil rights, but Mitchell decided to only include activists in the South. The book was published as *The Angry Black South* (New York: Corinth, 1962)

¹³ Walzer, “Untitled.”

¹⁴ Walzer, “Untitled”

II. Several civil rights activists also embraced the tactic early on in the struggle against segregation. In 1939, NAACP lawyer Samuel Tucker first used it in a segregated library in Alexandria, Virginia and soon those socialists and pacifists associated with the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Congress of Racial Equality, such as Bayard Rustin, George Houser, and James Farmer all began to use the sit in in a set of and well-publicized civil rights actions in Chicago, St. Louis, New York, and Wichita. Yet by the 1950s, as labor turned away from strikes and direct action after the Treaty of Detroit, and as pacifists preferred conscientious objection, the sit in seemed to all but disappear. The preferred method of attack for the NAACP and Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in the 1950s was not the sit in but boycotts, mass marches, publicity campaigns, and legal actions. Direct action was recognized as a useful means to help begin or galvanize a protest campaign, but civil disobedience was mostly frowned upon, seen as a single heroic acts not as collective action that might launch a sustained movement.¹⁵

With Greensboro this all changed. In January 1960 four students at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College entered a Woolworth, sat down at a whites-only lunch counter, and demanded a coffee. Returning the next day and the next day, the Greensboro Four set off a torrent of activism they likely had no idea had been brewing. After a bomb threat was called in and Woolworth closed its doors, the Greensboro Four put their sit ins on hold but at that point little could stop their style of protest from spreading across the state of North Carolina and into nearly all of the South, from Virginia to Kentucky and down to Mississippi and Alabama.

¹⁵ August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968* (Chicago: Illinois, 1975); also see James Laue, *Direct Action and Desegregation: Toward a Theory of the Rationalization of Protest* (New York: Carson, 1989)

While earlier sit-ins were organized by a highly disciplined cadre within a union or by close-knit pacifist, civil libertarian, or civil-rights groups, the new actions were more spontaneous. The initial group were not members of the older civil-rights organizations; they were just friends and fellow students, self-organized and learning as they went along. Even as the sit-ins gained considerable momentum into the spring and summer of 1960, their leaders, while coordinating with one another, still lacked a central political body to organize them. Only after the sit ins concluded did they found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and SNCC, unlike NAACP, CORE, and SCLC, remained highly local in organization.¹⁶

The sit ins also offered a unique vision of politics. Like the Petofi Circles and the New Left Clubs in Britain, they were largely run by young college-educated men and women, private citizens thrust into the public. They also did not seek to build formal institutions—parties, unions—nor to seize those within the state. They were not even all that interested in pressuring them. Instead, they wanted to dramatize the experience of racial discrimination and violence insinuated into everyday life and seize those rights that neither federal nor local bodies guaranteed. They were not revolutionary in the more traditional sense; they did not seek to overthrow, or for that matter to take control of the political system. Instead as Bob Moses, then a 26-year-old teacher in the Bronx and soon to be a SNCC leader, recalled, they wanted to go on the offensive, bring political activity into those spheres of life they still controlled: “Before, Negroes in the South had always looked on the defensive, cringing,” Moses noted. “This time they were taking the initiative. They were kids my age, and I knew this had something to do with

¹⁶ For histories of the sit ins, see Claybourne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1981); Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion* (Oxford: Mississippi, 1984); James Laue, *Direct Action and Desegregation: Toward a Theory of the Rationalization of Protest* (New York: Carson, 1989)

my own life. It made me realize that for a long time I had been troubled by the problem of being a Negro and at the same time being an American. This was an answer.”¹⁷

This answer captured the imagination of many young people on college campuses in the North, too, and especially those early New Leftists. “Galvanizing...little nodes of opposition that had been forming in New York City, in the Boston and San Francisco Bay areas, in Chicago’s Hyde Park, in Ann Arbor and Madison,” Gitlin, who soon became a leader in the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), recalled, “the sit-ins were the main dynamo that powered” the student left.¹⁸ They also excited the radical intellectuals gathered around *Liberation*, *Studies on the Left*, and *Dissent* who all covered the events in the South with anxious hope that this might, once and for all, mark a turning point in the South’s struggle to dismantle the Jim Crow system.

Dissent had been publishing a series of reports from Southern black activists like Robert Bone and Lawrence Reddick, as well as essays by Northern black intellectuals like Richard Wright, but these writers were all of the same generation of the older *Dissenters* and Howe and Coser wanted to send a younger person to report on the sit ins.¹⁹ With Reddick, then teaching at Alabama State College, reporting on Montgomery’s local sit-ins, Howe called Walzer to see if he might go to North Carolina.²⁰ Working on his dissertation at the time, Walzer happily agreed.

The Greensboro sit ins had come to an end by the time Walzer headed south from Cambridge and so he took a bus to Durham and Raleigh, where students from North Carolina College and Shaw University were organizing a new round of sit-ins (Shaw would also, later that

¹⁷ As quoted in Carson, *In the Struggle*, 17

¹⁸ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 83

¹⁹ Bob Bone, “The Changing Status of the Negro,” *Dissent* (Spring 1955), L.D. Reddick, “The Boycott in Montgomery,” *Dissent* (Spring 1956), L.D. Reddick, “The Anxious South,” *Dissent* (Summer 1957).

²⁰ L.D. Reddick, “The Negroes Act: The Students v The State,” *Dissent* (Summer 1960)

year, host the founding conference for SNCC).²¹ Interviewing the students, Walzer was taken by their disciplined confidence, which had resonances with the close-knit discipline of the Puritans, as well as to the New Leftists he had met in England and those struggling against Soviet expansionism in Eastern Europe. “Presidential politics seemed to them a universe apart,” he reported back to *Dissent* in the first of a series of reports. “Passive resistance and endless legal actions were the two political forms with which they were familiar,” but the activists hoped to offer “a new kind of political activity, at once unconventional and non-violent.... Everywhere the pattern was more or less the same. The Negro students, well-dressed and quiet, came into stores—always local branches of national chains—and sat down at the lunch counters. They were jeered at more frequently as news of the demonstrations spread, but did not reply. There were occasional fights. The counters were closed or roped off after a day,” but a movement had been born.²² The earlier civil rights movement had been “important, everyone agreed, but this, I was told over and over again, was more important... finally to act in the name of all the theories of equality.”²³

Returning to Cambridge in the spring, Walzer then went on a second, more expansive trip traveling to several southern states and meeting with organizers involved with the NAACP and SCLC as well. The tactical and strategic differences between the generations of civil-rights activists began to come across much more clearly as did the significance of the students’ activism. “What the students have done,” Walzer reported back to his *Dissent* colleagues, “is to

²¹ Walzer recalls the conversation in a reminiscence of the early years at *Dissent*. Michael Walzer, “*Dissent* at Thirty,” *Dissent* (Winter 1984). Also see Walzer, “The Political Theory License,” *Annual Review of Political Science* (2013). The three articles produced by his reporting are: Michael Walzer, “A Cup of Coffee and a Seat,” *Dissent* (Spring 1960); “The Politics of the New Negro” *Dissent* (Summer 1960), and an unpublished essay (personal collection).

²² Michael Walzer, “A Cup of Coffee and a Seat,” *Dissent* (Spring 1960);

²³ *Ibid.*

change the method of ideology from legalism to mass action, and this has brought other changes in its train.”²⁴ By marching “downtown to the five and dime stores,” the student activists “came into touch with the Negro masses, and challenged segregation precisely where it was most irritating to them”: the “counters and the streets” that “were outside the political arena in which the older leaders operated.”²⁵ Doing so, they also found an alternative path, not unlike the Petofi Circle rebels, for the postwar left that paired a rigorous egalitarianism with a commitment to action: The new student activists, Walzer insisted, had found a way to excite and mobilize a mass of black Americans. “Out of such organizations,” he argued, “perhaps, will come parents willing to force their children’s way into the white schools and eligible voters trained in the perversities of Southern law and determined to register.”²⁶

Walzer returned to Harvard at the end of the spring determined to bring the politics of direct action back to Cambridge. With Harvey Pressman, a friend from his Brandeis days who was also studying at Harvard, he organized a northern support group that drew from the ranks of young students throughout the Boston area. Originally named the Lunch Counter Integration Committee, it quickly expanded its scope to help orchestrate a citywide protest and publicity campaign. Calling itself the Emergency Public Integration Committee (EPIC), it picketed over forty Woolworths in Boston and served as a model for several other student-led campaigns that cropped up throughout the North.²⁷ “Strictly speaking,” Walzer explained, “organization was entirely local, even when groups with national connections were involved.”²⁸ But “in the course of the second and third month, there appeared a few metropolitan centers which began to play

²⁴ Michael Walzer, “The Politics of new Negro,” *Dissent* (Summer 1960)

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ “EPIC to Attack Problem of Discrimination in North,” *Harvard Crimson* (October 19, 1960). Walzer also discusses his involvement with EPIC in Williams, “Criticism and Connection: An Interview with Michael Walzer.”

²⁸ Walzer, “Untitled”

something of a (very limited) national role. Depending on the persistence of their letter-writers, on the success of local fund-raising, and also on the impact of their picket lines, a few groups began to be noticed, talked about and copied. . . . All this, it must be said again, was entirely new to the students who worked or walked or listened or contributed.”²⁹ (EPIC also attracted the attention of then-Harvard dean McGeorge Bundy, who interrogated Walzer and Pressman about their “Trotskyist” links.³⁰)

In the wake of Greensboro, Walzer also became involved in a variety of other left organizations in 1960, including the peace activists around TOCSIN, an undergraduate body led by Gitlin that he advised.³¹ Walzer’s hope was that these groups might mobilize a new popular front that, while offering the “bare beginnings” of a new liberalism, might eventually also transform into a new socialism.³² Whether marching on Washington against the Cold War or against segregation and racial inequality, the students might help initiate a new kind of politics—a politics in the intermediate zone between the state and household. The welfare state, Walzer complained a couple of years later, had led to “the virtual withering away of political energy and the disappearance, at least from public life, of any very significant popular creativity.”³³ The new student activism showed that politics could be something more than a provision of welfare; it could be, as the Puritans and the other early citizen politicians saw it, “a vital and exciting world

²⁹ Walzer, “Untitled”

³⁰ Stephanie Garlick, “Organizing Integration: Student Group Drew Local and National Attention,” *Harvard Crimson* (May 27, 2010).

³¹ Daniel Geary, “The New Left and Liberalism Reconsidered: The Committee of Correspondence and Port Huron Statement,” *The Port Huron Statement* edit by Richard Flacks and Nelson Lichtenstein (Philadelphia: Penn, 2015).

³² Michael Walzer, “The United States: After the Election,” *Dissent* (Winter 1961)

³³ Walzer, “Politics in the Welfare State,” *Dissent* (January-February 1968)

of work and struggle...of collective effort, mutual recognition, and *amour social*.”³⁴ “This was part of the ice breaking,” as one undergraduate involved in EPIC later recalled. “The ice broke in North Carolina and the ice broke in Nashville. There were a few little cracks at Harvard, too.”³⁵

Walzer and the EPIC and TOCSIN activists were only some of many inspired by the civil-rights actions of Greensboro in 1960. Dave Dellinger, A.J. Muste, Bayard Rustin, and the pacifist intellectuals around *Liberation* threw their energy into civil-rights actions, as did those around *Studies on the Left* and the *Monthly Review*.³⁶ Students at many research universities were beginning to throw themselves into a flurry of institution-building, founding a set of local and national student-based radical organizations dedicated to civil rights, civil liberties, and disarmament. Some were of a more local nature, such as the left-wing campus planks at Columbia (ACTION), Michigan (VOICE), and Berkeley (SLATE); others had more national ambitions, such as SNCC, the Student Peace Union, and the Students for a Democratic Society, which was launched out of the older left Student League for Industrial Democracy. “The so-called ‘silent generation,’ ” Coretta Scott King observed at one civil rights rally from this period, was proving to be “not so silent.”³⁷ Even the older generation of postwar radicals, bitterly disappointed by the setbacks of the 1950s, could not help but feel restored. In 1963, Howe wrote to *Dissent*’s readers: “How many readers can recall the atmosphere in this country at the time *Dissent* started publishing almost a decade ago? It was a moment of retreat, even rout.... Today

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Garlick, “Organizing Integration: Student Group Drew Local and National Attention”

³⁶ See Barker, “War of Position” for the *Studies on the Left* intellectuals at Madison as well as Kevin Mattson’s *Intellectuals in Action*, Matthew Levin’s *Cold War University: Madison and the New Left in the Sixties*, and Paul Buhle’s anthology *History and the New Left: Madison, Wisconsin, 1950-1970*.

³⁷ Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps, *Radical America: The US Left since World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2015), 86

things are very different, and largely for the better.... As a mood, if not a movement, radicalism is beginning to revive.”³⁸

The surge in political activism spawned by the sit-ins of the early winter of 1960 helped continue to recalibrate the early New Left’s political orientation, driving it even more toward the radical democratic politics defining the decade. The student activists signaled the ascent of a new type of political actor—not quite the historical subjects Marx and Engels imagined, but actors nonetheless. Their demands might not have been formulated in the language of socialism, but they offered their own images of egalitarianism. Rather than revolution or reform, they turned to direct action. Instead of seeking social change through parties and states, they targeted public spaces. Envisioning a politics for an age of prosperity, they aimed their efforts at not just the working class but also the middle class. Here was a radical politics, if not always socialist, for a new age.

Some of the older leftists around *Dissent* found the liberalism of this new generation frustrating; others were wary of its emphasis on direct actions and libertarianism, insisting on the importance of the party and state, and precisely because of their own growing liberalism. But for most around the early New Left the politics of the new decade seemed to be full of promise and hope and while spread across a variety of different spheres of interest—racial equality, decolonization, disarmament, civil liberties—it appeared to share in a common vision of an engaged citizenry carving out new spaces for political activity below the bureaucratic

For Walzer the new politics of the 1960s marked something of an epiphany. In a 1961 panel that he and Thernstrom organized to defend the youth politics, Walzer argued:

Every conscientious objector is practicing a form of resistance; his disobedience is not revolutionary precisely because it is civil—that is, it is orderly and public, it involves no conspiracy, it does not require the total renunciation of the established

³⁸ Irving Howe, “A Revival of Radicalism?” *Dissent* (Spring 1963)

social order. The 500 people who refused to take shelter when ordered to do so in New York's civil defense drill were practicing a form of resistance; so were the young people who "sat in" at the Un-American Activities Committee hearings in San Francisco. And so, finally, are the Negro students whose demonstrations continue.... All these activities can be called resistance because they oppose governmental activity or social convention with an appeal to a higher law and to the conscience of the community; because they are orderly and disciplined activities, with limited aims; and finally because they express sentiment from "below" rather than policy from "above." Reform is always a governmental function...resistance...is a politics for amateurs and citizens.³⁹

For Walzer, the 1960s may not have appeared to herald a renewed faith in socialism, but from the citizen politics, he hoped a new democratic and egalitarian spirit might take hold. Out from liberalism, might come a new participatory politics that might tilt in the right direction.

Even in these early years, however, the tensions between the different early New Lefts began to come to the surface. As has proven true throughout the history of the American left, this took place in the sphere of international relations not domestic politics. Many within the New Left were eager to draw lines between the citizen politics at home emerging around racial equality and disarmament and the citizen politics abroad opposing Soviet expansionism in Europe and Western neocolonialism in the Southern hemisphere and in particular, in North Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. What linked the Petofi Circle to the New Left clubs in England, and what linked civil-rights activism to protest actions in Poznan and Tbilisi, was that bodies of citizens were mobilizing against their states in order to develop new forms of power and resistance. Another critical analysis that began to take the fore in these years was that of empire. At first this largely did not appear to be an American phenomenon, more a European and Soviet

³⁹ Michael Walzer, "The Idea of Resistance," *Dissent* (Fall 1960). Stephan Thernstrom was also one the panel and defended the "new pacifism" of groups like TOCSIN. Thernstrom, "The New Pacifism," *Dissent* (Fall 1960)

one. But by the late 1950s and early 1960s, it was becoming increasingly clear how the United States was, too, a part of the imperial system that was preventing the new nations of the world from fully realizing political and economic interdependence. What tied Hungary to Suez was also what tied French repression in Algeria to the CIA-backed coups in Iran and Guatemala—a system of empire, orchestrated by northern superpowers from on high, that was preventing countries in the rest of the world from achieving their autonomy and place in the international society. “What has happened, I think,” Walzer explained in a debate with Arthur Schlesinger, Staughton Lynd, and Irving Kristol in the mid-1960s, “is that as a result of World War II and the collapse of the British and French empire, the United States has become probably the major imperial power in the world today. And we defend our empire, by and large, because that is what one does with empires.”⁴⁰ (Interestingly in later years Walzer would become very critical of those on the left who invoked empire as way of understanding American power abroad.)

The emergence of an imperialist framework within the long New Left was not entirely new. But when it came back in the early 1960s, the early New Left was now of a more divided mind. In the years after World War II, decolonization in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia appeared to augur a brave new world of national liberation and collective self-determination. As important: It marked the possible opening of a third camp that might escape the excesses of both Soviet expansionism and North Atlantic neocolonialism. But by the early 1960s, things had become more complicated. With American interference becoming more common, many of the developing and decolonized nations started to look toward the Soviet Union and China for aid and protection in order to insure or secure their independence. Meanwhile the countries that had been liberated from empire, and which had promised the prospects of a more democratic

⁴⁰ “A Talk-In on Vietnam,” *The New York Times* (February 6, 1966)

socialism that might be opposed against the authoritarian communism in Russia and Eastern Europe and the bureaucratic reformism of social democracy in the North Atlantic, also appeared to be moving in their own bureaucratic and authoritarian directions, and so the left could not invoke the postcolonial regimes as exemplars of either a democratic or nonalignment socialism.

For the older *Dissent* circle, the decolonized world's turning to the Soviet Union meant that it was no longer a viable site for left solidarity. Still harboring a deep antipathy toward any communist politics, the *Dissenters* refused to recognize the impossible position a country like Cuba found itself in after the revolution. But many other socialists and radicals within the long New Left took a radically different view of developments in the decolonized world. Having never fully broken with communist politics, Baran, Sweezy, and the *Monthly Review* were not troubled by the communist turn in the postcolonial world but heralded it, viewing it as an alternative to old Soviet communism. Many within the *Studies on the Left* circle denounced the excesses and brutality of Maoism, but, influenced by the neo-imperial critiques of American power espoused by William Appleman Williams and C. Wright Mills, they too found hope and possibility in the East and agreed with Staughton Lynd when he stated in *Dissent*, "I personally feel the strongest sort of kinship with the revolutionary upheavals of the non-Western world. How dare we as Americans sit in judgment on them?"⁴¹ The pacifists within the *Liberation* group and many of the younger leftists around SDS also began to tire of *Dissent's* stringent standard of anti-communism. *Dissent*, Philip Rahv observed in the *New York Review of Books*, had "fallen into the habit of holding an ideological pistol to the head of insurrectionary peasant movements led by Communists."⁴² Their argument that "democracy is immediately possible in

⁴¹ Staughton Lynd, "The Young Radicals: A Symposium," *Dissent* (Spring 1962)

⁴² Philip Rahv, "Left Face," *The New York Review of Books* (October 12, 1967)

underdeveloped countries strikes me as profoundly antihistorical, as well as contrary to the findings of nearly all analysts of the process of modernization.”⁴³

Vietnam became the site for many of these disagreements to play out in the mid and late 1960s, but in the early 1960s the proxy war was much closer to home. When Cuban guerrillas led by Fidel Castro overthrew the U.S.-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1959, the politics of national liberation moved even closer to the United States. So did the questions of nonalignment, communism, and democratic and authoritarian tracks of development. The revolution had begun as a coalition of anti-Batista liberals, communists, social democrats, and socialists, and Castro’s Cuba did not immediately align itself with the Communist bloc. But after the U.S. economic embargo on Cuba, and Eisenhower’s refusal to meet Castro or recognize his government, Castro began to look to the Soviet Union for economic and military aid. Fearing American intervention and struggling with a peasant uprising in the countryside, Castro announced in 1961, “I am a Marxist-Leninist, and I will be until the last days of my life.” To prove his point: he then began to persecute many of the socialist allies whom he had fought alongside, as well as to suppress Cuban trade unions, and he then put Communists in charge of most government bureaus.⁴⁴

As an increasingly authoritarian Cuba drifted closer to the communist bloc, it became a lightning rod for debate over how the left should engage with the developing and decolonized world—especially those countries, in which collective self-determination had led to less than desirable outcomes. Howe, Coser, Michael Harrington, and most of the older *Dissenters* denounced Kennedy’s Bay of Pigs invasion as delusional and poorly planned, but they also argued that it was incumbent on the left to support homegrown efforts by socialists and liberals to overthrow Castro. (Harrington, in a proposal put forth at a Socialist Party–Social Democratic

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ *Cuban Communism* edit. by Irving Louis Horowitz (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1995), 572

Federation conference in 1961, went even further, calling on the SP-SDF to do more than champion Cuban socialists' "open opposition" but to "work for change by other means."⁴⁵) The *Monthly Review* and *Studies on the Left* editors, on the other hand, insisted there was much to celebrate about the transformation of Cuba under Castro. Like Maoism in China and the Viet Minh movement in postcolonial Vietnam, Cuban socialism combined the imperatives of Marxist and anti-colonial programs into one, charting an alternative path toward industrialization that, while not democratic, might eventually evolve in that direction.

C. Wright Mills and his *Listen Yankee: Revolution in Cuba* became the totems for this faction's arguments.⁴⁶ But *Listen Yankee* was only one of many books by the pro-Cuban flank that made this case: Paul Sweezy and Leo Huberman's *Cuba: The Anatomy of a Revolution* made a similar, and perhaps more compelling, argument, relying not on anecdotal observation but closely studied economics, and both *Liberation* and *Studies on the Left* dedicated issues to the Cuban Revolution, with the *Studies on the Left* collective declaring in their issue that "the Cuban Revolution [was] the most important and least understood social development in the recent history of the Western Hemisphere."⁴⁷

As these two sides—an anticommunist left and a pro-Cuba and Third World left—began to harden into rivalrous camps, bitter arguments broke out. After *Liberation* editors and *Dissent* contributing editors A.J. Muste and Sidney Lens organized the American Forum conferences that sought to bring communist activists back into the fold of the democratic left, Howe argued that the left had to make a stark choice between left-wing forms of democracy and left-wing forms of

⁴⁵ Van Gosse, *Where the Boys Are: Cuba, Cold War America, and the Making of the New Left* (New York: Verso, 1993), 232-233

⁴⁶ C. Wright Mills, *Listen Yankee: Revolution in Cuba* (New York: Ballantine, 1960)

⁴⁷ Leo Huberman and Paul Sweezy, *Cuba: Anatomy of a Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review, 1960). Gosse, *Where the Boys Are: Cuba, Cold War America, and the Making of the New Left*, 159

authoritarianism: “We do not believe that the Communist Party forms part of the Left—no matter how generously or loosely the Left may be defined,” Howe asserted.⁴⁸ In response, Muste noted that Howe and the hardline anticommunist flank within *Dissent* were still fighting the battles of the 1930s and 40s: “I am quite certain that many, perhaps most of the contemporary American youth are quite as much bored by old type attacks on Stalinism as they are by attempts to foist some form of Stalinism on them.”⁴⁹ Shortly after, he and Lens resigned from *Dissent*’s masthead and made clear that they felt *Dissent* was no longer able to help play a role in consolidating a postwar left.

Arguments between Howe and Mills became even more heated. Howe had already launched a series of volleys at Mills by the late 1950s, having Mills’s earlier volume on the Cold War, *The Causes of World War III*, reviewed not once but twice in *Dissent* and criticizing it, in his own acerbic assessment, for being too naïve about the threats posed by Soviet and Chinese communism.⁵⁰ But after Cuba, it was open season. Complaining of Mills’s tendency to elide the excesses of communism in his effort to find some alternative to liberalism, Howe insisted, “the crucial fact remains, however, that the Communist states are still monolithic one-party dictatorships which deprive their people of the most elementary rights; and that anyone, especially an intellectual, who values freedom must continue to be a principled moral-political opponent of these regimes.”⁵¹ To which, Mills responded, in a furious letter published in *Dissent*: “Recently you have written of a collapse of ‘cold war moods’; in your review, however, you do

⁴⁸ Irving Howe, “The Choice of Comrades,” *Dissent* (Summer 1957)

⁴⁹ A.J. Muste, “The American Forum: In Defense,” *Dissent* (Summer 1957)

⁵⁰ Irving Howe, A. J. Muste, C. Wright Mills’ Program, *Dissent* (Spring 1959)

⁵¹ Irving Howe, Intellectuals and Russia, *Dissent* (Summer 1959)

not display much of this ‘collapse.’ You write like the cold warriors. To dissent is lovely. But Irving, as regards foreign policy, from what, tell me, do you dissent?”⁵²

Ever since he was an undergraduate at Brandeis, Walzer had found common cause with *Dissent*'s anticommunism. To him, it was an essential for the left to oppose its vision of democratic socialism against not only the bureaucratic tendencies of the liberal welfare state but also the excesses of the communist states.⁵³ For the decolonized world to truly be liberated it had to be free of both sides of the Cold War, but as important it also had to be free of the undemocratic features of both the strain of liberalism that emerged in the North Atlantic and the authoritarian communism that had emerged in the Soviet Union and much of Eastern Europe. Yet, Walzer's own developing view of international relations did have its unresolved tensions, ones that would haunt nearly all of his writing about international ethics and foreign policy during the Cold War: The principles of self-determination and democratic governance were not one and the same. A republican government, liberated from arbitrary or external rule, did not necessarily lead to a democratic government, let alone one that valued equality between citizens. The project of national liberation, collective self-determination, and decolonization, while of vital importance to the left, did not neatly align with either socialist or liberal emancipation. Liberation of a people did not mean necessarily the liberation of individuals within the postcolonial societies that emerged or socialist or liberal regimes emerging after decolonization; a “government of one's own” could still rule over its members absolutely and arbitrarily. An equality between nations did not inherently lead to an equality of persons within a nation.

⁵² C. Wright Mills, “Intellectuals and Russia,” *Dissent* (Summer 1959)

⁵³ Harry Kreisler, “Political Theory and Social Criticism: Interview with Michael Walzer”

Likewise, in those territories with multiple groups seeking their own self-determination, the liberation of one group often came at the costly and brutal expense of another group. National liberation not only reinforced many of the differentiations that both socialist and liberal regimes sought to transcend, they also led to nation-states that prevented the liberation of other nations.

Cuba captured many of these ambiguities and in particular the conflicting nature between republican anticolonialism and democracy and between pursuing an equality between nations and an equality between persons within a single nation. Liberated from but still under threat of American meddling, Castro and his government ruled over the island with a tight fist. He may have helped lay the foundations for a multiracial society, no longer tied to earlier differentiation. But the post-revolutionary regime in Cuba was also brutally repressing peasants in the countryside, rounding up trade unionists and socialists, and instead of a democratic society taking root the country was tilting toward a monolithic one-party system. One might argue that economic and political development did not come smoothly; making society a more egalitarian and more democratic place often required the bullet as well as the ballot—as both the American Revolution and Civil War demonstrated. But the Cuban government, to say the least, was no model for the democratic left in countries to its north and for Walzer and several others around the New Left Club, how the left should engage with it was not as obvious as Howe or Mills suggested. Cuba appeared to neither be a place of communist depravity nor postcolonial liberation; it was something in between, and Walzer, in some of his writings from the period, tried to mark out some space between the anticommunism of the *Dissent* circle and the rosy view of Cuba and Castro painted by Mills and those around *Studies on the Left* and *Monthly Review*.

As Walzer argued in a supplement sent to *Dissent* subscribers after Kennedy's disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion, American power abroad might not have looked like the empires of old, but

it nonetheless functioned like one, especially in Latin America, and the left therefore needed to not fall trap to a Cold War framework that situated all struggles abroad as ones between liberalism and communism and instead understood as ones in which nations were still struggling for independence. Even in the case of those insurgencies or postcolonial regimes that may have conflicted with the democratic left's commitments to multiparty systems and civil liberties, insuring these country's sovereignty was "a matter of grim necessity"—Cuba included.⁵⁴

This in-between position accorded with the ones taken by several others in the New Left Club. Stephan Thernstrom agreed with Walzer that, as he put it in an article in *Dissent*, "we must give our allegiance and support to any leftist nationalist revolutions in an underdeveloped country so long as there is any hope of the emergence of a non-totalitarian regime. America has no business at all in helping the French to murder in North Africa or the Portuguese in Angola. The first thing to do is to say to the native revolutionaries that we are *on their side* and to *prove* it."⁵⁵ He also agreed with Walzer that if a revolutionary state became authoritarian, the left should remain critical of it, insisting that "the basic values of the Western liberal and socialist traditions" were not just "plucked after the 'real' job of economic development has been accomplished."⁵⁶

Robert Paul Wolff also shared Walzer and Thernstrom's position. "As for authoritarian government," he explained, "I 'withhold my sympathy' from every government which commits a single act of oppression or injustice or cruelty, which is to say I have no sympathy for any present or past government. But if you mean to ask whether I would withhold my *support* from such governments, then I answer that my decision would depend entirely on the viable

⁵⁴ Michael Walzer, "Cuba: The Invasion and Its Consequences," *Dissent* (Spring Supplement, 1961)

⁵⁵ Stephan Thernstrom, "The Young Radicals: A Symposium," *Dissent* (Spring 1962)

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

alternatives.... I am revolted by the reports of injustice and repression in Cuba, but I supported Castro last year and the year before, I support him now, because the alternatives seem worse.”⁵⁷

Not all of the New Left Club members agreed with Walzer, Wolff, and Thernstrom’s arguments. Having studied at Madison as undergraduates and with ties to William Appleman Williams and the *Studies on the Left* circle, Joyce Kolko took a more adamantly pro-Cuba line, finding in the liberation struggles abroad the contours of a new kind of socialism that might take root at home. Supporting Cuba and other postcolonial states was not a matter of necessity. Instead, it offered the left an opportunity to affirm its commitments to a potent new form of radical politics. As Kolko noted in a heated exchange with Walzer over his Bay of Pigs pamphlet, “Why assume that supporting radical reformers is ‘a matter of grim necessity’ when they are anti-American? An American radical should welcome such a ‘grim necessity.’”⁵⁸

The tensions between the emerging left’s commitment to national liberation and socialism both at home and abroad were to become even more intractable in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In many hotly contested decolonized territories, a politics of nation-state building, as opposed to multinational state building, could lead to outcomes in which one group was liberated while another was dominated by new forms of arbitrary and external rule; it could also lead to second-class citizens within a particular nation-state. In Walzer’s case, his long submerged Zionist commitments became increasingly in tension with his socialist and internationalist ones, especially after the 1967 Israeli-Arab War led when it became increasingly impossible to miss the quandaries created by a program of national liberation that inevitably left one group unliberated. But it also posed a considerable challenge to Walzer’s early New Left anticolonialism and commitment to republican self-government. The *Dissenters* were right about

⁵⁷ Robert Paul Wolff, “The Young Radicals: A Symposium,” *Dissent* (Spring 1962)

⁵⁸ Joyce Kolko and Michael Walzer, “Communications: Cuba and Radicalism,” *Dissent* (Fall 1961)

one thing: The democratic prerogative to govern oneself did not necessarily lead to a democratic government and it was unclear how the left could reconcile its radical democratic and anticolonialist politics.

Despite the increasingly bitter arguments over Cuba, opposition to the Bay of Pigs invasion did help consolidate the ranks of the Cambridge left. Disturbed by the actions of Kennedy, many liberal disarmament groups, such as H. Stuart Hughes's SANE and David Reisman's Correspondence, joined in the flurry of action led by the socialists and radicals around the New Left Club.⁵⁹ Forming a "Cuba Protest Committee," the group set about organizing a series of protest rallies in Cambridge and Boston. As Wolff recalled, "Within days of the abortive invasion, we had mobilized ourselves and were organizing to protest the attempts by the United States to overthrow the Castro government."⁶⁰ In the wake of the Cuban missile crisis, Walzer and the New Left Club members also helped plan with TOCSIN a peace march in Washington.⁶¹ "Interminable Harvard-Brandeis meetings," as Gitlin recalled, "and the influential counsel of Michael Walzer (my 'section man' in a social science course), produced the official 'call' for a Washington March. Interestingly, questions of economic inequality also figured into their program, which focused on not only an "opposition to the resumption of nuclear tests and to the civil defense program" and "an appeal for 'unilateral initiatives,' tension-reducing moves, like

⁵⁹ Geary, "The New Left and Liberalism Reconsidered: The Committee of Correspondence and the Port Huron Statement"

⁶⁰ Wolff, "Coming of Age in Harvard Square," 259

⁶¹ "Tocsin Claims Snow Will Not Stop 'Project Washington' Peace March," *Harvard Crimson* (February 16, 1962); "Project Washington," *Harvard Crimson* (March 2, 1962); "Mass Protest Imperative," Says Walzer" *Harvard Crimson* (March 28, 1962). Walzer, "Students in Washington: A New Peace Movement," *Dissent* (Spring 1962). Also see Gitlin's *The Sixties* for a description of Tocsin's early organizing efforts.

the removal of the American missile bases in Turkey” but the North Atlantic offering “economic aid to the Third World.”⁶²

Yet, even in the midst of all of this activism and organizing, the fractures that lay at the foundations of the various left and liberal groupings could not be transcended. With Tito’s Yugoslavia, Nkrumah’s Ghana, Ben Bella’s Algeria, and Sukarno’s Indonesia all moving toward the Soviet Union and toward more repressive regimes at home, the choice between democratic socialism and national liberation grew even starker. “Are we still on their side when they seize newspapers, put critics in jail, vote with the Communist bloc in the UN?” Thornstrom asked in a piece for *Dissent*.⁶³ For the older *Dissent* contingent, the answer was clear: No nondemocratic country could be supported and certainly no communist one. For Walzer and the younger generation around the New Left Club, the answer was more opaque. Even after the rapid escalation of Vietnam in the mid-1960s, Walzer would try to carve out a position between the increasingly rigid anti-communism of the older circle of *Dissenters* and those within the younger New Left championing the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army. By the 1970s, Walzer’s socialist and radical democratic impulses would begin to give way to his commitments to self-determination and national liberation. The nation-state, instead of the transnational networks of citizens below it, became the main agents for change. Walzer’s movement toward the state was gradual and spawned by other domestic concerns as well—at home, a “left wing of the possible” was also actively defending the welfare state—and in the meantime there were many arguments and bitter controversies to traverse. Beginning in the early 1960s, Walzer also would discover a group of liberal philosophers whose approach to political theory would help him to navigate the left’s growing divides.

⁶² Gitlin’s *The Sixties*, 94

⁶³ Thornstrom, “The Young Radicals: A Symposium”

II. Obligations and Disassociations

4. Among the Philosophers

Having finished and defended his PhD, Walzer took a job as an assistant professor in Princeton's Department of Politics in the fall of 1962. This pulled him out of the activist circles he had become attached to at Harvard and Brandeis. But Princeton offered its own advantages. Walzer was introduced to a small group of philosophers then struggling to develop a form of political theory that might better address the paradoxes of democratic participation in a mass society and rethink the terms of the modern liberal tradition: Robert Nozick, Thomas Nagel, and Stuart Hampshire, who had been recruited from London to become the chair of Princeton's philosophy department. Through them, Walzer was introduced to a new set of tools that would help him understand and defend the citizen politics of the 1960s and later to work out syntheses between liberalism and socialism and between his egalitarianism and commitment to self-determination.

Nozick, Nagel, and Hampshire were not alone in their desire to see analytic philosophy address contemporary social and political problems; they were, in fact, part of a larger shift

taking place within English-language philosophy in the early 1960s. Most work within philosophy was in one of two traditional tracks: analytic philosophy and neo-Hegelian idealism. The former disavowed the historicism of the German philosophical tradition and focused on meta-philosophical questions relating to language and logic and had been inspired by the logical positivism of Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle. Insisting that philosophy was not a moral or political discipline but an analytical and scientific one, it sought to put philosophy on what Kant called the “sure path of a science.”¹ Questions of ethics and politics were extraneous to this project; they were also, in the view of analytic philosophy, unphilosophical, born of subjective preferences and thus not appropriate for a field of thinking aspiring to universal knowledge.

The neo-Hegelians had followed a different tack. A holdover from an earlier era, their project from the outset was political and moral: by recognizing the way history shaped ideas, they believed they might be able to build a philosophical system that might better undergird a politics and morality for the modern era. Originating on both sides of the Atlantic in the thought of T.H. Green, L.T. Hobhouse, Oliver Wendell Holmes, John Dewey, and A.D. Lindsay, this movement within English-language philosophy wanted to use the historicist components in German idealism to offer a better account of the “new liberalism” or liberal socialism emerging in much of the North Atlantic in the early twentieth century.² But under pressure from the rest of the human sciences to develop a more neutral and scientific methodology, its political ambitions began to become more submerged and several of their heirs, including the English-born Harvard

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics: That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science with Selections from the Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and edit. by Gary Hatfield (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1997), 141

² Morton White, *Social Thought in America: The Revolt of Formalism* (New York: Viking, 1952). R. Jeffrey Lustig, *Corporate Liberalism: The Origins of Modern Political Theory, 1890-1920* (Berkeley: California, 1983); James Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920* (Oxford: Oxford, 1988), Daniel Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Harvard 2000). Also see: Michael Freedman, *The New Liberalism: An Ideology of Social Reform* (Oxford: Oxford, 1978) and Peter Clarke’s *Liberalism and Social Democrats* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1978)

philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, eschewed the ideological components of their neo-Hegelianism while still relying on their philosophical foundations as an alternative to analysis. As Whitehead put it in the preface to *Process and Reality*, “I am greatly indebted to Bergson, William James, and John Dewey,” but “one of my preoccupations has been to rescue their type of thought from the charge of anti-intellectualism, which rightly or wrongly has been associated with it.”³

By the mid and late 1950s, a new generation of philosophers working within both of these schools began to call into question these antipolitical tendencies and try to bring politics and applied ethics back into philosophy. More and more of the analytic philosophers, including Wittgenstein, challenged the logical positivism of the 1930s and 40s in order to bring “words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use,” as Wittgenstein put it in *Philosophical Investigations*.⁴ Meanwhile, the neo-Hegelians, shocked and horrified by the Second World War, began to redirect Whitehead’s idealism back to the project of fortifying liberalism. Samuel Beer’s first book, *The City of Reason*, was one of several examples in this genre. The Holocaust, the deployment of atomic weaponry, the new distributive problems created by mass industrial societies, and the onset of the Cold War all made this project all the more urgent. The only dominant form of ethical thinking that had survived the apolitical turn in English-language philosophy had been the utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, which contended that the measure of political and moral choices was how they served an aggregate good. But for the postwar theorists, this understanding of political ethics was woefully inadequate as it could conceivably justify the deployment of atomic weaponry on the grounds

³ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology [The Gifford Lectures, 1926-1927]*, (New York: Free Press, 1978), xii

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (London: Blackwell, 1958), 47

that it might save more lives or it could not stop totalitarianism on the account of its evil but solely on the account of the fact that it was a less efficient system in generating general welfare.

It also depreciated the value and role of individual choice. By emphasizing aggregate good, utilitarianism elevated those social scientists who could take a macrosocial view of society. If moral and political decisions were solely assessed on the measure of consequence, then it mattered less what an individual believed was right or wrong than on a choice's outcome and predicting these outcomes was primarily the terrain of an expert class not ordinary citizens. To recover a sense of agency, then, what was needed was a new philosophy that focused on the role individual reason and ordinary citizens could play in decisionmaking. This philosophy would not aspire to be a science so much as an account of our common sentiments. "For three hundred years of our history," Peter Laslett wrote in an anthology that he and a group of Cambridge political theorists published in the hope of launching this new philosophy, "there have been men writing [political and moral theory] in English, from the early seventeenth to twentieth centuries, from Hobbes to Bosanquet. Today, it would seem, we have them no longer."⁵

In the years to come, Walzer would grow close to John Rawls and the other philosophers working within the Harvard-MIT philosophical network that had begun to make their way back to politics and applied ethics. But in the early and mid-1960s the central influence on Walzer's thinking was the Princeton philosophers—and in particular, Stuart Hampshire. A prominent socialist with close ties to the Labour Party and an accomplished critic who wrote frequently for

⁵ Peter Laslett, "Introduction," *Philosophy, Politics, and Society* ed. by Peter Laslett (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956), vii

the *New Statesman*, Hampshire cut a rather worldly figure at the rather unworldly Princeton and he likely reminded Walzer of the older generation of *Dissent* editors.⁶ But perhaps of greater significance for Walzer was that Hampshire's vision of a more politically and morally engaged philosophy—and in particular a more liberal vision of socialism—offered Walzer a way to connect his academic work at Princeton with his political and intellectual preoccupations.

Trained in classics and analysis, Hampshire was initially enamored of the logical positivism of Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle. But after his military service during the Second World War, Hampshire fell in with a group of likeminded Oxford philosophers—Isaiah Berlin, J.L. Austin, Bernard Williams, Iris Murdoch, A.J. Ayers—who began to gravitate toward the fields of applied ethics, politics, and intellectual history. His early work was still in the more traditional fields of British philosophy, but by the late 1950s, Hampshire, like many of his peers at Oxford, began to take a more active interest in the field of political morality.⁷ Frustrated by the quick advances and then setbacks of the Labour government in the mid and late 1950s, and inspired by a wide-range of continental philosophy and social theory, in particular Kant, Marx, German phenomenology, and the French existentialists, he believed philosophy could offer a more robust account of the postwar social democracy—and do so by focusing on intentional action and the individual moral intuitions of each political actor. Agreeing with Marx that all

⁶ For a good biographical primer of Stuart Hampshire's life, see the *Times of London* obituary commissioned from Isaiah Berlin on Hampshire in 1965—a bit prematurely, it should be added, considering Hampshire died in 2004, outliving his obituary writer by nearly seven years: <http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/bibliography/joint-text.pdf>.

⁷ Stuart Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1991). The introduction contains a short biographical and intellectual sketch of Hampshire's life and there he discusses the influence of World War II on this thinking and how the failure of British politicians—including socialists—to formulate a principled stance against fascism led him to a closer reading of Marxism and to the more radical divisions of Anglophone socialism. He never embraced Marxism as doctrine but the notion of conflict remained throughout his writing and was at the center of his two most important expositions on morality and justice: *Morality and Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1983) and *Justice is Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton, 2000).

politics and morality were a matter of “taking sides”—something he felt the Atlee government had not fully reckoned with—and he wanted philosophy to clarify which side one should take.⁸

In 1959, after several years of reading, Hampshire published an innovative treatise, *Thought and Action*, that emphasized the important place of “intentionalism”—the idea, inherited from Kant, that we act with intentions—in philosophy.⁹ He also began to write more frequently for the *New Statesman* and other public venues on how philosophy related to politics and questions of ethics. Utilitarians and analytic philosophers, he argued, shared something in common, even if they departed in their interests: both insisted that modern philosophers come to “think of persons only as passive observers” and thus closed off from being able to make moral choices; *Thought and Action* and his popular philosophy in the *New Statesman*, he hoped, might develop the case for why philosophers should view people as “self-willed agents.”¹⁰ In fact, he hoped, even more ambitiously, it might convince ordinary citizens of their self-willed agency.

For Hampshire, *Thought and Action* was only the tip of the spear, however.: It was more polemic and critique than an affirmative vision of morality. It did not put a new applied ethics into practice, only highlighted, like the Laslett anthology what was presently missing in English-language philosophy. With his new appointment at Princeton, Hampshire hoped to chart the contours of this new political and moral theory that was anchored to individual moral choice. Reviewing the second volume of Laslett’s anthology, for the *New Statesman* the year he arrived at Princeton, Hampshire was pleased to discover he was not alone.¹¹ While the first volume had focused on what had gone sour in Anglophone philosophy, the new anthology, co-edited by W.C. Runciman, demonstrated a bold and confident new philosophical form. Disavowing the

⁸ Stuart Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1991)

⁹ Stuart Hampshire, *Thought and Action* (South Bend: Notre Dame, 1959)

¹⁰ Hampshire, *Thought and Action*

¹¹ Stuart Hampshire, “The Persistence of Theory,” *The New Statesman* (January 4, 1963)

notion “that philosophy, if it is to be an exact inquiry, must be neutral and non-committal and that any open or implied advocacy of a way of life is an impropriety within it,” these writers (which included, among others, Rawls and Berlin) had “escaped from the shadow of...academic gentility” and “the too exclusive reliance on analytical methods that was associated with it.”¹² Through a new hybrid of philosophy and political theory, the authors of these essays had “dare[d] to suggest why one kind of social policy is to be preferred to another, and even to suggest that political thought would be uninteresting if it did not reach [these] conclusions.”¹³

Following this essay with a series of “special supplements” in the *New York Review of Books*, Hampshire also homed in on the particular features of both analytic and utilitarian thought that troubled him. Both sought to create a science out of thinking and discard personal moral and political decisions because of their “emotive” and individualized nature.¹⁴ Hampshire, on the other hand, wanted to recover these features. What philosophy should focus on, he insisted, was “the reasons that lead a reflective man to prefer one code of manners, and one legal system, to another.”¹⁵ Taking sides was not a bad thing; it was the very duty of associated men and women; one had to choose between the right and wrong sides of history and social justice.

Hampshire’s own vision of applied ethics took years to develop.¹⁶ But at Princeton, he set up a popular seminar that took up politics and ethics and invited Walzer, as well as other philosophers

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Stuart Hampshire, “A Special Supplement: A Philosophy of the Just Society,” *New York Review of Books* (February, 24, 1972)

¹⁵ Stuart Hampshire, “A Special Supplement: Morality & Pessimism,” *New York Review of Book* (January 25, 1973)

¹⁶ Stuart Hampshire, *Freedom of the Individual* (Princeton: Princeton, 1965); *Freedom of the Mind and Other Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972); *Two Theories of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford, 1977); and *Morality and Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1983). Hampshire’s *Justice is Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton, 2000) is his magisterial opus that offers a comprehensive theory of justice.

and political scientists, to attend. Participation in the seminar proved to be a second education for Walzer. Encouraged by Hampshire and the other Princeton philosophers' vision of what was increasingly being called "normative theory," he began in the early and mid-1960s to work out some of the vexing moral and political ambiguities facing the left. Like Hampshire, he was drawn to these techniques for radical reasons: He wanted to use political theory to anchor the modern political tradition, in both its liberal and socialist varieties, to a more radical democratic foundation. Politics did not have to be framed to questions of aggregate good and therefore only the province of an expert class that could assess such a good and ruling class that could execute these assessments; for Walzer, they could also be, and should be, the domains of ordinary citizens, who through own moral and political reasoning, could determine the good from the bad.

While retaining some of his more historicist and contextualist impulses inherited from the neo-Hegelianism of the Harvard political theorists, and while also contending that these determinations were inherently collective in nature, Walzer found the work that Hampshire and the growing number of normative theorists inspired by Kant and philosophy's political turn a revelation. They too wanted to bring moral and political choice back into the hands of citizens. "What united us," Thomas Nagel later recalled, "was a belief in the reality of the moral domain, as an area in which there are real questions with right and wrong answers, and not just clashing subjective reactions."¹⁷ What united them also was that philosophy had some relevance in puzzling out these questions: It was a public enterprise—a forum for debating conflicting points of view—as much as an academic field. Philosophers, therefore, had license to moved back and forth between public debates and epistemological disagreements; they could even turn the tools of their analysis toward debating the rising tide of political activism in America. "Without that

¹⁷ Thomas Nagel, "foreword," Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic, 1974), xi

license to move back and forth, to write and talk inside and outside the academic world about the political questions that interested me,” Walzer later confessed in a short autobiographical reminiscence, “I don’t think that I could have survived either as a student or as a professor.”¹⁸

The hybrid of analytic philosophy and political theory being innovated by Hampshire, Nozick, Walzer, and Nagel at Princeton was also becoming popular in philosophy and political-science departments throughout the northeast corridor, perhaps most notably in Cambridge around Rawls and Judith Jarvis Thomson and in New York around Sidney Morgenbesser and Marshall Cohen. That popularity also led to a set of new institutions to house this new moral and political philosophy. Morgenbesser and a group of New York philosophers founded the Society for Philosophy and Public Policy in 1969 in the hope of promoting “the application of philosophical techniques to the consideration of public issues, and to give substantive political and social questions a central place in the professional concern of philosophers.”¹⁹ The stated aim was not “political philosophy and ethics in the abstract” but “concrete contemporary problems like conscription, police power, methods and occasions of warfare, treatment of individuals charged with crimes, population control, compensation, eugenics, and so forth,” and at their first session they invited Hampshire to speak.²⁰ The Princeton-and-Cambridge circle founded a rival group in 1967, the Society for Ethical and Legal Philosophy (SELF). SELF in its early phase included Nozick, Nagel, Walzer, Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, Charles Fried, Frank Michelman, Gilbert

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Founding statement for the Society of Philosophy and Public Policy group (which changed its name to Society for Philosophy and Public Affairs, as quoted in the introduction to an anthology that the group published in 1972.

²⁰ *Philosophy and Political Action: Essays for the New York Group of the Society of Philosophy and Public Affairs* edit by Virginia Held, Kai Nelson, Charles Parsons (Oxford: Oxford, 1972)

Harman, Owen Fiss, Marshall Cohen, and Judith Jarvis Thomson and met on a monthly basis in New York and Cambridge. The SELF philosophers also began to publish anthologies, covering everything from abortion rights to international ethics, and founded their own journal, *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, in 1972, which merited mention in the *New York Times*.²¹

SELF's mandate was very close to Hampshire's central philosophical program. It sought to bring the problems of applied ethics and political action back into analytic philosophy and to offer a neo-Kantian moral theory for the postwar administrative state that could replace utilitarian justifications of public policy composed of Hampshire's "self-willed agents." By rejecting utilitarianism and bringing back the intuitionism of Kant, the liberals in SELF hoped their theories might address the vulnerabilities of liberal democracy that radical democratic critics of the welfare state had revealed: If they could develop a moral procedure through which individuals could consent to a particular social arrangement through their own reasoning, then the SELF theorists could bring agency back into modern society. While we may not individually consent to a particular system—the social contract, after all, was a metaphor for an agreement that predates our membership—we could, at least in the abstract, recognize that we would have. By developing moral procedure, liberal democracies could be shown to have a democratic foundation, even if in practice this consent then paved the way to bureaucratic forms of power.

By offering a more morally and philosophically robust justification of the liberal administrative state, the SELF theorists hoped they might be able to help put liberalism on a stronger footing—and one that broke from these utilitarian justifications. To make liberalism more closely accord with democratic norms meant bringing moral decisionmaking back into the hands of citizens. Rather than emphasizing how the good of all justified the actions of some—

²¹ Isabel Shenker, "New Quarterly Is Seeking to Link Philosopher's Skills to Politics," *New York Times* (November 7, 1971)

especially given that the good of all required expert knowledge to understand—it was through philosophy that an individual’s moral reasoning—his or her intuitionism—could justify a regime.

“One of the legacies of logical positivism,” Thomas Nagel explained of the SELF’s motives,

was a general skepticism about value judgments, interpreted as essentially subjective expressions of feeling, unlike factual, scientific, or mathematical judgments, which could be verified or falsified, proved or disproved. Insofar as analytic philosophy aimed at discovering the truth, ethics was therefore thought not to be one of its legitimate subjects. In applying analytic methods of reasoning and argument to moral questions, we rejected this subjectivist outlook. The other assumption we rejected was that if there were a systematic moral theory it would have to be some form of utilitarianism. We distrusted not only the content of that theory but its form, which consisted of a single measure of the good—evaluated impartially for everyone.²²

As the SELF cohort’s particular brand of political philosophy started to take shape around moral intuitionism and consent theory, two intersecting research programs began to emerge. The first focused on the liberal state, in particular, in the spheres of domestic and international affairs, raising questions of distributive justice, international ethics, and the morality of state action, and attempting to work out a theory of a more interventionist state, premised on individual consent.²³ The second plank in the SELF theorists’ research program directed its attention away from the foundations of the state and policies its politicians and bureaucrats impose and to the moral choices citizens have to make on everyday basis that also form part of life in a liberal democracy: What kinds of duties should a citizen obey and which should he or she transgress?²⁴

²² Thomas Nagel, “foreword,” Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic, 1974), xii

²³ For books on distributive justice, see: John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1971); Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic, 1974); Bruce Ackerman, *Social Justice in the Liberal State* (New Haven: Yale, 1980); Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1982); Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic, 1983); and Dennis Thompson, *Political Ethics and Public Office* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1987). For books on the morality of war and international relations, see: *War and Moral Responsibility* edit by Marshall Cohen, Thomas Nagle, and Thomas Scanlon (Princeton: Philosophy and Public Affairs Readers, 1974); Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic, 1977); Charles Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton, 1979); *International Ethics* edit by Charles Beitz, Lawrence Alexander, and Thomas Scanlon (Princeton: Philosophy and Public Affairs Readers, 1984)

²⁴ Walzer, *Obligations* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1970); Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1978); Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Rights, Restitutions, and Risk: Essays in Moral Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1985)

Daniel Rodgers and other historians have argued that it was in the 1970s and 80s that normative theory “came into its own.”²⁵ But it was not so much the aftereffects of civil rights and Vietnam that created normative theory. It was the 1960s. “You have to remember,” Rawls later explained in an interview, segregation and war “dominated the politics of the day. And yet there was no recent book, no systematic treatise, you might say, on a conception of political justice.... For example, the issues...about conscientious objection and civil disobedience were much discussed topics then. Yet there was no systematic contemporary book that dealt with them.”²⁶

In Walzer’s case, his two major works that focused on the first plank of the SELF research program did not appear until 1970s and 80s, with *Just and Unjust Wars* and *Spheres of Justice*. This was in part because in the 1960s, Walzer was still rather skeptical of the role the liberal state should play in a radical politics. It was also because he was involved in the civil rights and then antiwar movements, which both sought to create pressure from outside an unmoving state. For this reason, Walzer focused on the questions of civil disobedience and contentious objection, working out a tentative version of consent in *Obligations* that he believed was more responsive to how the left understood politics in the decade and that might offer an account of how the acts of civil disobedience and conscientious objection fit within the broader liberal and socialist political traditions. As a radical, Walzer was first interested in the political and moral lives of citizens within a democracy—the duties they embraced and rights they claimed—and then later, as the left itself began to move back toward institutional politics, did he focus more on the state.

Informed by his socialism and activism, Walzer’s ventures into normative theory from the start departed considerably from the atomized and neo-Kantian models of moral and political

²⁵ Daniel Rodger, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2011), 182

²⁶ *Philosophers in Conversation: Interviews from the Harvard Review of Philosophy*, edit. by S. Phineas Ulpham, forward Thomas Scanlon (London: Routledge, 2002), 8

theory developed by many of his peers at Princeton and in the SELF grouping. While almost all of his writings hinged on consent theory, he never felt comfortable with the ways in which his SELF peers isolated moral agency and abstracted it from the particularities of collective life and rested on liberalism's individuated understanding of political and moral behavior, one unhinged from collective life and often only in pursuit of one's own economic self-interest. As the years would go on, he would, as he recalled, also become increasingly wary "of the endless hypotheticals...with which they illustrated or advanced their arguments" and even in these years he was working on a version of normative theory that was more grounded in history and sociology.

Yet, at the time, the style of political philosophy the SELF theorists practiced was far more sophisticated than anything being done in Princeton or Harvard's Political Science and Government Departments.²⁷ "Meeting Hampshire and Nagel and Nozick," Walzer recalled, "I just thought they were smarter than anyone else doing political theory" and working with them became a second education, offering him a way to think about the political activism of the 1950s and 60s and in general the crisis of postwar socialism and the democratic left in more philosophical terms.²⁸ "Monthly meetings with these people," Walzer later wrote in a short autobiographical reminiscence, "that was my philosophical education. I don't think that I ever actually became a philosopher. Abstract thinking and hypothetical examples were not, and are not, my strong point...but I was groping in those years for a style of my own, a way of arguing that would suit the readers of *Dissent* as well as the readers of *Philosophy and Public Affairs*."²⁹

²⁷ Oral history conducted by David Marcus with Michael Walzer, August 9, 2016 (Part II)

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Walzer, "The Political Theory License"

Walzer's education continued outside the seminar rooms as well as within them. The politics of war and decolonization was already a critical part of the left but had taken a back seat during the late 1950s and early 1960s as the struggle against segregation and for racial equality began to peak with Greensboro and as an older generation of early New Leftists debated questions of decolonization through the abstract terms of the Cold War and communism and anticommunism. But with the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, and with decolonization nearly complete, both of these areas of New Left activism began to fade and a new domain emerged: that of war and in particular the war the Americans were fighting in Southeast Asia.

Cuba and the Bay of Pigs had already brought some of the ambiguities of a left foreign policy to the fore, and it already raised questions about war, but with Vietnam the left became consumed with them. The rapid escalation in Vietnam transformed the American left. Civil-rights groups became much more radicalized, with many activists linking their analysis of American empire abroad with American racism at home. Pacifist collectives, which had once formed a loose grouping on the margins of the left, began to mobilize a national movement against the war. Peace organizing that had been launched by the Bay of Pigs invasion and Cuban missile crisis began to direct more and more of its energy toward mass protest. Immersed in poverty activism and community organizing, groups that had once focused on civil rights, like the SDS and SNCC, began to marshal their energy toward resisting Johnson's foreign policy.

Having spent the first half of the decade involved in civil-rights and occasional disarmament and anti-Cold War activism, Walzer followed the left abroad. Frustrated by how Cold War liberals and increasingly the Cold War socialists around *Dissent* described the war and American containment policy in the stark binaries of communism and democracy, he began to develop a fuller critique of American foreign policy. In a faculty forum in May 1965, featuring

Stuart Hampshire and Robert Nozick, among others, Walzer spoke about the United States' use of "counter-insurrection and foreign aid" as a means of containing self-determination as much as communism.³⁰ Cold War containment, while speaking the language of democracy, was actually a means for imposing American hegemony on much of the developing world and of crippling those governments seeking to rule over themselves.³¹ In December, on a panel sponsored by the newly formed Princeton SDS chapter, which he advised, he and Richard Falk discussed troop escalation and the challenges a draft system with exceptions posed in limiting American interventions.³² By isolating the effects of the war to a small population, the American government was unjustly and unequally distributing the duties of military service. It also was preventing national security decisions from being viewed by a larger public as a central concern for all American lives. If a universal draft existed, one in which college students were not exempted, then likely the "little wars" fought throughout the decolonized world by America would be constrained. Only wars of self-defense would be acceptable.³³ In the spring of 1966, after further troop deployments were made by Johnson, Walzer and several used a visit by Susan Sontag and German playwright Peter Weiss to stage what they called an "instant teach-in" in which they focused on the war.³⁴

Walzer also took his arguments outside the lecture halls of Princeton. In a public panel organized by Shirley Broughton's "Theater of Ideas" and hosted by Elizabeth Hardwick, he and Staughton Lynd debated Irving Kristol and Arthur Schlesinger.³⁵ Attracting the attention of the

³⁰ Michael Miles, "Faculty Members To Join Teach-In, Discuss Simultaneous Local Meeting" *The Daily Princetonian* (May 3, 1965)

³¹ Michael Walzer and John Schrecker, "American Intervention and the Cold War," *Dissent* (Fall 1965)

³² Michael Miles "SDS Panel," *The Daily Princetonian* (December 6, 1965); Lindsay Holland, "Walzer Denounces Student Deferments," *The Daily Princetonian* (December 7, 1965).

³³ Michael Walzer, "Democracy and the Conscript," *Dissent* (January–February, 1966)

³⁴ John Dippel, "Authors to Sponsor Panel On Viet Policy," *Daily Princetonian* (April 25, 1966).

³⁵ "A Talk-In on Vietnam," *The New York Times* (February 6, 1966)

New York Times, which featured an abridged transcription of the debate in its A section, Walzer upbraided Kristol and Schlesinger's Cold War liberalism for its flatfooted understanding of American power in the world and decolonization and insisted that the logic of American containment had functioned as a justification for American "hegemony in Southeast Asia, in Latin America, in the Mediterranean."³⁶ "I don't believe anyone seriously thought that the domino theory was accurate even in 1954 when international Communism could plausibly be described as a significant threat to the West," he explained. "Furthermore, I don't believe anyone in Washington has ever seriously believed...that there has been Chinese aggression in Vietnam or a Chinese effort to shake an equilibrium which had somehow been previously established."³⁷

In later years, Walzer would become openly hostile to those who viewed American power abroad as a merely an instrument of American empire, insisting, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, that it often could be a force of good in a world torn asunder.³⁸ But in the 1960s, Walzer believed that Vietnam suggested a larger pattern of American empire: As a result of the Cold War, America had moved into the decolonized world and hindered the development of newly liberated states. The Monroe Doctrine had helped it do this in the Western Hemisphere in the first half of the twentieth century; now the Cold War allowed it to do so in the rest of the world. "What has happened," he insisted, "is that as a result of World War II and of the collapse of the British and French empires, the United States had become probably the major imperial power in the world today. And we defend our empire, by and large, because that's what one does with empires. It is extraordinarily difficult to withdraw from an occupied position and it is perhaps especially difficult to withdraw from an occupied position because the loss of prestige

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Michael Walzer, "Can There Be a Decent Left?" *Dissent* (Spring 2002)

that entails seems to frighten most politicians, especially liberal politicians...It's just not the case that the United States merely gave economic assistance to a government in South Vietnam...We set about creating not a democratic but an anti-communist government.”³⁹

Walzer began to also attack the anticommunism that prevented the *Dissenters* from understanding the conflict in Vietnam as one between an imperial power and a nation struggling for national liberation and collective self-determination. In a series of articles published in *Dissent*, he targeted the older socialists around *Dissent* who were calling for a ceasefire and negotiations instead of America's immediate withdrawal: holding out for a potential liberal or “third force” to emerge in South Vietnam that might win over the country's population and prevent it from falling into the hands of the North. Howe, Coser, Harrington, Stanley Plastrik, and Henry Pachter all insisted that the left's demand for withdrawal was too extreme. While detesting the war itself—and criticizing its atrocities—they nonetheless insisted that America's presence in Southeast Asia was born out of a conflict between democracy and communism not a struggle between a superpower pursuing its interests and a nation seeking its own.

Caught in the “grips of the past,” the Cold War liberals and socialists had come to misread a struggle for political and economic independence as a proxy war between the United States and the Soviet Union. “It is always possible to find third world politicians willing to act out the cold war both at home and abroad,” Walzer argued in an article he co-wrote with the Princeton historian of East Asia, John Schrecker, but what was taking place in Vietnam was a struggle over newly liberated nations seeking to determine their own paths toward modernity outside the purview of the Cold War and an America refusing to let its hegemony go challenged. “Modernization is literally an open-ended, or, perhaps better, an unending development,” he and

³⁹ “A Talk-In on Vietnam,” *The New York Times* (February 6, 1966)

Schrecker insisted. “And it would be sheer folly to attempt to force all the upheavals, advances, and retreats which accompany modernization into just two categories, depending on whether they bring the country involved nearer to Communism or to some stable anti-Communism.”⁴⁰

Walzer did not deny that the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were communist, and he also worried about the excesses of force and brutality that were coming from their side too. But as with Cuba after the Bay of Pigs, which pushed Castro toward the Soviets, Walzer believed American interference in Vietnam since 1954 had pushed many to look toward Beijing and Moscow. “There once was a civil war in Vietnam,” he and Schrecker argued in another piece. “The U.S. escalated [it] into an international power struggle because we failed to grasp its *civil*, that is, local significance and believed mistakenly that it was an international power struggle from its very beginning. If China is today involved, it is because we have once again pursued a policy which tends to drive unwilling but weak states into the hands of rival super-powers.”⁴¹

In fall of 1966, in the midst of all these heated arguments and the flurry of activism against the war, Walzer moved to Harvard. In an interview with the *Daily Princetonian*, Walzer explained that “a comparison of the two towns was more important in our decision than comparing the two schools.”⁴² But one suspects that Walzer also found that Princeton did not offer the same advantages as Cambridge did for his growing involvement in the antiwar movement, and it was upon his arrival at Harvard that Walzer’s opposition to the war began to take up more and more of his time.

⁴⁰ Michael Walzer and John Schrecker, “American Intervention and the Cold War,” *Dissent* (Fall 1965)

⁴¹ Michael Walzer and John Schrecker, “A Reply,” *Dissent* (March 1966)

⁴² “Harvard Gives Walzer Tenure; Professor to Leave Princeton,” *The Daily Princetonian* (January 24, 1966)

At Harvard, Walzer's arguments also began to focus on the particular targets of the anti-war left's protests—in particular the selective-service system, which allowed students to defer from participating in the draft. Parallel to developing a critique of American force abroad, he argued that a central problem with the Vietnam War was that it captured the essentially undemocratic nature of American liberalism: The inequalities born of the selective-service draft, the secrecy and lack of legislative oversight, the reliance on executive action and military solutions—all showed how the war in Southeast Asia was a war also against American democracy. The politics of self-determination cut two ways: wars of imperial excess almost always undermined political participation at home as well as abroad. As only a small portion of the American population was affected by the war, Cold War strategists could fight these kinds of guerrilla or “little wars” indefinitely. “A genuinely universal draft,” however, “would almost certainly be a major restraint upon peacetime warmaking.”⁴³ Involving “the limits and restraints which an army of civilians, of peaceful men, impose upon professional soldiers,” it would also guarantee “a defense against military adventurism.”⁴⁴ In particular, it would limit those “little wars” between empires and insurgents, since while these are often “fought without regard to the procedures of democratic government,” a more evenly distributed set of hazards would provide “at least a minimum guarantee that little wars will not be accepted casually or passively at home.”⁴⁵

At Princeton, Walzer had already begun to speak on the undemocratic nature of the war and, in particular, of its selective-service system, giving a talk with Richard Falk that insisted that the selective service system, while preventing them from serving in an unjust war, was

⁴³ Michael Walzer, “Democracy and the Conscript,” *Dissent* (January–February, 1966)

⁴⁴ *Ibid*

⁴⁵ *Ibid*.

equally as unjust.⁴⁶ But at Harvard, Walzer found a larger audience for his arguments and some likeminded philosophers and faculty members who were also hoping to highlight the injustice born out not only the war but how Johnson and the American state prosecuted it. Led by Rawls, Stanley Hoffmann, David Riesman, H. Stuart Hughes, and Barrington Moore, Walzer joined a growing campaign against selective-service that wanted the faculty government to pass a resolution in opposition to the 2-S student deferment and other unfair distributions of military duty.⁴⁷

Walzer, Rawls, and the anti-deferment camp discovered a collateral benefit to their campaign. While the initial members were against the war, and hoped their campaign would help politicize the mostly apolitical faculty, they also discovered to their surprise that they drew support from Cold War liberals, realists, and conservatives who may have supported the war but opposed how it was being fought. By focusing their critique on the inequality of the draft system, they captured a more general injustice within American politics that these liberals and conservatives also felt uncomfortable with. “We conclude that in general,” the anti-deferment campaigners argued in a proposal put before the faculty that Henry Kissinger and Harvey Mansfield also signed, “there should be no student deferments except those tied to the necessities of national security, and that the 2-S deferment is unjust; that all forms of alternative service (leaving aside the question of conscientious objection) are to be opposed. That in our present situation, given that conscription is in effect, a lottery is the best available selective device.”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Lindsay Holland, “Walzer Denounces Student Deferments,” *The Daily Princetonian* (December 7, 1965)

⁴⁷ Explanatory Note on Item IV, Faculty of Arts and Sciences Meeting (December 6, 1966) (Walzer’s personal collection)

⁴⁸ Ibid.

The proposal was hotly debated at a meeting for the faculty of the arts and sciences in the fall of 1966, but, despite support from some Cold Warrior faculty members, it was tabled for further discussion the following semester and then “postponed indefinitely” in the spring of 1967, after a 90-minute argument over the subject, by a majority vote of 117 to 71.⁴⁹ The anti-deferment activists were frustrated. “A faculty that votes against the idea of discussing an idea,” Stanley Hoffmann bitterly complained to a *Harvard Crimson* reporter, “is a strange bird indeed.”⁵⁰

The conservatism of the Harvard faculty and the anti-war professors’ limited influence on campus proved dispiriting. But it also had a salutary effect on their activism, liberating those at Harvard from focusing on an issue—passing an anti-deferment resolution—that in many other ways was entirely academic in its effect: Having lost on campus, anti-deferment advocates now began to direct their energy toward organizing anti-war activism off campus as much as on it and the goal was no longer to win a campaign of principle but organize a much broader movement.

As with his civil-rights activism, for Walzer this work still began on a local level. Before spreading out toward more national efforts, left-wing politics always had to build a local base and its own self-organizing institutions. Founding and co-chairing the Cambridge Neighborhood Committee on Vietnam (CNCV), Walzer helped build the group into a wide-ranging organization, with SDS activists, faculty members, and local residents who set out “to do SDS-

⁴⁹ Robert J. Samuelson, “Faculty Shelves Draft Resolution After Debating for Hour and Half,” *The Harvard Crimson* (January 11, 1967)

⁵⁰ Robert J. Samuelson, “Ford Says Faculty Probably Won’t Discuss Draft Again This Month,” *The Harvard Crimson* (December 8, 1966)

like community organizing against the war.”⁵¹ “We raised money,” Walzer later recalled, “we rented an office on Mass Avenue, and we were running house-to-house [organizing]...knocking on doors to look for a living room where they’d be willing to hold a meeting and invite people from the neighborhood.”⁵² While Walzer’s ties to the younger generation of activists would later become strained, in 1967 he drew considerable support from the SDS and from other student groups in the Cambridge area. He also found that the coalition offered some insight into the left-liberal popular front that could be built in the postwar years: While no longer based primarily in the working class and through the institutions of organized labor as was the case with the Popular Front, this new popular front could subsidize these losses with students and professionals.⁵³

In the late spring of 1967, Walzer and the CNCV’s organizing took on an even more ambitious set of goals. Inspired by Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech against the war at New York’s Riverside Church, CNCV and a wider group of activists, including Gar Alperovitz who was then teaching at the Harvard Kennedy School, sought to develop a broader program and proposed they enlist King and other prominent figures to launch a summer-long campaign against the war.⁵⁴ The hope was to develop a organizing much like the Mississippi Freedom Summer and in homage they decided on calling it “Vietnam Summer.”⁵⁵

Walzer’s CNCV was only one part of this broader drive, which called for three phases: first, “the identification of people who are against the war”; second, educating and organizing these people, so that they in turn could become organizers; and then a third phase that would rely upon a diversity of oppositional tactics, to be deployed by the citizen groups that emerged from

⁵¹ Oral history conducted by David Marcus with Michael Walzer, August 9, 2016 (Part II)

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Michael Walzer, “The New Left and the Old,” *Radical Principles: Reflection of an Unreconstructed Democrats*. (New York: Basic, 1980)

⁵⁴ James Lardner, “Poll,” *New Yorker* (August 12, 1967)

⁵⁵ David Ellis, “‘Vietnam Summer’ Drive Launched in Cambridge,” *Boston Herald* (April 24, 1967) “Dr. King Starts Peace Crusade: National Grass-Roots Effort is backed by Dr. Spock,” *The New York Times* (April 24, 1967)

the first and second phases: everything from civil disobedience (anti-draft unions) to publicity (petitions and ballot referenda) to economic pressure (boycotts) to electoral campaigns (running primaries against pro-war Democrats) that the Vietnam Summer activists would create a large scale left-liberal front posed against American involvement in Vietnam.⁵⁶

To begin, the Vietnam Summer organizers hoped to establish 500 community organizations, with a headquarters in Cambridge and regional recruiting and training centers. To organize these organizations, they wanted to create a more pluralistic structure: They did not care what each community decided was the particular goal of the initial Vietnam Summer, so long as its activism was oriented around building and identifying an anti-war constituency.⁵⁷ As did its counterparts in several other university towns—Berkeley and Ann Arbor, for example—the Cambridge group decided that, to achieve this first goal, it would organize local support for an anti-war referendum by gathering the signatures necessary to have it added to the fall ballot. Like the anti-deferment resolution, it would have little to no national effect—what could a municipality do in terms of national security?—but the CNCV activists hoped that, by building support for the referendum and then campaigning for a vote in favor of passing the resolution, they would serve the larger purpose of organizing a cross-class antiwar coalition.

In terms of this larger goal, the CNCV was largely successful. As the *Crimson* reported, “Michael Walzer’s Cambridge Neighborhood Committee on Vietnam collected 8,000 signatures for a referendum on the swift return home of all American soldiers in Vietnam” and as a result got the referendum on the ballot for the November elections in 1967.⁵⁸ Berkeley and Ann Arbor likewise worked on referendum campaigns and got resolutions added to the 1967 ballots by the

⁵⁶ David Ellis, “‘Vietnam Summer’ Drive Launched in Cambridge”

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Seth Kupferberg, “A History of the Strike,” *Harvard Crimson* (April 15, 1974)

end of the summer. Others focused on other aspects of the organizational ambitions of Vietnam Summer and proved largely successful, opening dozens of regional offices and hundreds of chapters throughout the country.⁵⁹ But as in Ann Arbor and Berkeley, the referendum in Cambridge failed by a considerable margin. “About 39 per cent of Cambridge voted for the resolution,” the *Crimson* reported. This led “both doves and hawks” to claim victory, since from the view of the former it showed that a sizable minority in Cambridge opposed the war and offered the basis for organizing anti-war campaigns in 1968, while for the latter it revealed that there was still a majority within the city that opposed the anti-war activists.⁶⁰

Walzer, however, was frustrated by the outcomes. Having asked a pair of young sociologists to conduct a report on the referendum’s outcome, the CNCV discovered that it had made significant inroads with middle- and upper-middle-class voters who had not initially been opposed to the war or willing to play a role in opposing it. But among working-class voters, their campaign had found very few supporters—in fact, some of their organizing had put off those in the bottom income and rental brackets.⁶¹ “The Cambridge referendum,” Victoria Bonnell and Chester Hartman, the graduate students who conducted the survey, explained in an article in *Dissent*, “has undoubtedly established the CNCV as a potent political force in the city. It has built an extensive ward and precinct organization that is well suited to future electoral activities. Hundreds of people have become involved in active political work—some for the first time—and many citizens have been made aware that they do not stand alone in feeling uneasy about, if not absolutely opposed to, the war in Vietnam.”⁶² But the campaign had proven to demonstrate the

⁵⁹ “Referendum on War Gains, Dr. King Says,” *The New York Times* (August 12, 1967).

For the Vietnam Summer organizer’s manual see,

<https://www.afsc.org/sites/default/files/documents/1967%20Vietnam%20Summer%20Organizers%20Manual.pdf>

⁶⁰ William Galeota, “Peace Petition Defeated,” *Harvard Crimson* (November 29, 1967)

⁶¹ Victoria Bonnell and Chester Hartman, “Cambridge Votes on the Vietnam War,” *Dissent* (March 1968)

⁶² *Ibid.*

very argument some within the older left and liberal circles had been making: the young antiwar activists could not convince a working class to support their campaign and as a result their revealed an emerging wedge between middle class radicals and working Americans, many of whom in an earlier era would have helped serve as the base for a left-liberal popular front. Failing to “bridge the hostility between town and gown and to establish any solid organization among working class people,” Bonnell and Hartman noted, the referendum may have “received a substantial vote in some working-class neighborhoods” but it failed to build a cross-class coalition that might serve as the basis for a broader left-liberal social movement.⁶³ “The CNCV was clearly a middle-class, university-oriented outfit, and many working-class people voted against the referendum because of who they perceived was running or backing the effort.”⁶⁴

These tensions were not the CNCV’s alone. Ann Arbor’s and Berkeley’s referendums failed for many of the same reasons, and the gulf between blue-collar and middle-class Americans would only widen as many anti-war activists skipped over the educational phase of Vietnam Summer and began to direct more and more of their energy toward direct actions that alienated many American voters—especially those with children serving in the war.

Despite the preview of things to come, from the view of 1967, a new antiwar politics appeared to be consolidating on campuses. If the early New Left had sprung to life in the years 1960, the spring and fall of 1967 gave it renewed purpose and energy, throwing it into a new flurry of activity, from direct actions and civil disobedience to campaigns and mass marches. As Walzer later recalled, “1967 was a year that I pretty much took off from academic work.”⁶⁵

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Oral history conducted by David Marcus with Michael Walzer, August 9, 2016 (Part II)

Not everyone found the growing storm of disobedience as compelling as Walzer did in 1967. As the dust settled from the burst of activism, critics around *Dissent* and liberals on the Harvard faculty became increasingly outspoken critics of the anti-war movement. Michael Harrington told a *Newsday* reporter that fall that he had founded a group to rival the Vietnam Summer activists. “We’re trying to break out of telephone booths,” he remarked.⁶⁶ Lewis Coser found the anti-war movement’s demands for immediate withdrawal and its tactics of civil disobedience too “absolutist.” “I have admiration for those who advocate a politics of conscience and favor civil disobedience,” Coser noted in one censorious *Dissent* column, published just as the antiwar activism began to take off, “but I cannot agree with them. The absolutist ethics of these men seem to me to provide no hold when it comes to specifically political issues. In politics only a Weberian ethics of responsibility...seems applicable.”⁶⁷ Irving Howe went even further in his criticism, insisting that the anti-war activists had become part of the problem. “In their powerlessness,” he complained of the 1967 anti-war mobilizations, the activists sought “an escalation of vocabulary and gesture” that was alienating the working-class voters they hoped to win over. “We must recognize the authenticity of the moral outrage,” Howe concluded, but “I see no way, in the coming period, of avoiding recurrent friction with the people who represent [the student left’s] politics, at least for those of us who wish to build a peace movement that will gain wide support among the American people.”⁶⁸

In the years to come, Walzer would agree with some of these criticisms. But in 1967, Walzer found the critiques of the anti-war left by the *Dissenters* frustrating. Many of them

⁶⁶ Hamill, “Whatever became of Harrington?”

⁶⁷ Lewis Coser, “Vietnam and the Left,” *Dissent* (Fall 1965)

⁶⁸ Irving Howe, “Is the Country coming Apart?” *Dissent* (May-June 1967)

rehearsed a set of Cold War platitudes. They also missed, in his view, the important role this new citizen politics was playing and should play in the formation of a new left. For Walzer, both the civil rights and antiwar movements, while more liberal than socialist in orientation, offered a critical supplement to how participation had been evacuated from modern liberal societies. A politics of citizen participation at home was linked to a politics of self-government abroad. While in the years to come the tensions between these democratic and republican principles would come to the surface, as the principles of democratic participation often were undermined by those of collective self-rule, in the late 1960s it seemed they were all part of the same egalitarian project—an equality between people at home required an equality between nations abroad. For Walzer, the task before the left was to find a way to link these different egalitarianisms together.

Revolution of the Saints and his essays on the emerging student radicalism had begun to push Walzer toward rethinking the terrain of politics at home, capturing what he would later call “the intermediate zone” between the state and household in which radicals might build a more egalitarian society. So had his engagements with the civil rights and disarmament movements and his close observation of decolonization in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. But it would be with the escalation of Vietnam and the growth of the antiwar movement, that would give both a politics of citizen activism at home and a politics of self-determination abroad their urgency. As Walzer later observed, “The sheer ghastliness of the American war in Vietnam...has led some of us to plan or engage in kinds of civil disobedience far more serious than those in which we were enthusiastically involved during the early years of the civil rights struggle. Now it is not a question of challenging Southern sheriffs but local draft boards, not of sitting at lunch counters but at the Pentagon, not of breaking obnoxious laws but opposing a national policy—

and doing that in time of war.”⁶⁹ To justify such resistance required persuading more than just an older left but also the general public as a whole. Using radicalism’s history would no longer be an effective tool for those unfamiliar with the tradition of Western radicalism; what was now needed was a more general moral and political theory and one easily understood by all. While Walzer would never fully embrace the neo-Kantianism of Hampshire and the SELF circle, believed that all moral intuition was itself situated in thick social contexts, he would come to accept the burden of their standards that all moral activity must be easily reasoned by a broader public, that from the particular demands must come some set of loosely general principles and norms. The consequentialism and utilitarianism of an earlier era would no longer suffice, and neither would the moral logic limited to one particular community of radicals. “If we choose civil disobedience,” Walzer noted, then “we must justify our choice in moral and political, as well as emotional, terms” and “in terms of its consequences for others...as well as ourselves.”⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Walzer, “Civil Disobedience and ‘Resistance,’” *Dissent* (Spring 1968)

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

5. Unconventional Politics

Like the other figures involved in the early civil-rights and anti-war activism, Walzer initially offered a defense of civil disobedience and the direct actions of the postwar left from a political and historical perspective rather than a philosophical one. In a 1960 panel, he and other New Left Club members organized, he justified the “unconventional politics” of the civil-rights, civil-libertarian, and pacifist movements by attempting to parse out their deeper historical and intellectual roots.¹ Turning to the sixteenth-century history that was the subject of his dissertation, he contrasted the modern preference of liberal reformers and leftist revolutionaries to effect social change through the state to the medieval practices of self-defense and extra-institutional politics that organized in that intermediate zone between the state and household. In the modern tradition, Walzer noted, “the defense of pragmatic, democratic politics has moved

¹ Michael Walzer, “The Idea of Resistance,” *Dissent* (Fall 1960). The piece was initially composed for a public panel in Cambridge hosted by Walzer and other New Left Club members. The other participants included Stephan Thernstrom, who also attempted to offer a political justification of the “unconventional politics” of pacifism. His essay also appeared in the same issue of *Dissent* as “The New Pacifism,” *Dissent* (Fall 1960).

entirely between the poles of reform and revolution.”² But in the medieval period, radicals organized outside these poles. Some moved toward revolution, others toward reform and building power in newly formed legislatures and executive bodies. But many remained outside these political institutions: For them a “citizen politics,” a politics of radical civil society activity and the tactics of direct action, self-defense, and local organization were the keys to public life.

This third form of politics was the initial tactic of the Puritans, who organized across national boundaries and outside the purview of monarchies. It was also the original tactic of Jacobins and Bolsheviks establishing new bodies of committed activists first in a set of political clubs and then through a disciplined, revolutionary cadre and the form of politics that defined the Hungarian Revolution and Poznan protest and the early anti-colonial struggles in India, Algeria, and Indochina. It was also now the tradition from which the civil-rights and early anti-war movements drew. It was not perfect, he acknowledged, but in its original expression it offered a path beyond the state. “We have been warned that any step outside the realm of conventional politics—outside the parties, the parliament, the system of pressures—is a step toward revolution and totalitarianism,” he noted. And yet there was an alternative, “radical and far-reaching, but entirely compatible with the moral repudiation of revolutionary terror”—that of “resistance.”³

For Walzer, the 1960s politics of resistance marked an important break from an older left’s reliance on either revolution or reform for both practical and ideological reasons. In an age of administrative centralization and large bureaucratic states, resistance—not revolution or reform—was one of the few weapons a citizen could wield in self-defense, and this was true both within the North Atlantic and Soviet spheres, where large administrative states lorded over

² Walzer, “The Idea of Resistance”

³ Ibid.

ordinary citizens, and in the decolonized spheres where American and Soviet superpower was deployed.

The politics of resistance also marked an important moral innovation in the socialist and liberal traditions. Instead of abstracting political agency by viewing it as the domain of states and political parties, the politics of resistance helped recover the more libertarian origins of these traditions. In the case of socialism, in particular, Walzer insisted this recovery of the more radical democratic roots of the egalitarian tradition was important as it provided a contrast to the statism of “actually existing socialism” and helped the left return to a politics of mutual aid, shared risk, and democratic self-organization. After a half-century of carnage produced by the modern state, the left, Walzer believed, needed to place more of its faith in the work of ordinary citizens.

This politics of resistance was recognized, at first, by many liberals and an older left as having a salutary effect on American politics. For Howe and the *Dissent* circle, “the young civil rights movement brought a fresh idea to American society: nonviolent resistance, sometimes shading off into civil disobedience,” which they believed might help the left recover its sense of agency and its commitments to radical democracy and the dignity of individuals.⁴ For Michael Harrington and Lewis Coser, the new generation of activists marching on Washington and sitting in in Greensboro marked an ascendant new politics that would help push socialism to the fore.

Liberals, too, began to view the new resisters as potential agents of change, a rising interest group within the field of postwar pluralism that might help keep America more oriented toward its core values of liberty, equality before the law, and democratic accountability. For some it also marked a break outside interest groups altogether and a path toward a more radical democratic liberalism that might place more of its faith in ordinary citizens participation.

⁴ Irving Howe, *Margin of Hope*, 284

Michigan philosopher and self-professed “liberal radical” Arnold Kaufman insisted that the direct actions and self-organization of the New Left marked the fulfillment of liberalism, helping recover a “participatory democracy” in the face of the “powerlessness” created by the liberal welfare state, an argument that ended up inspiring the early SDS activists and the Port Huron Statement. The vision of participation imbued in resistance was, he insisted, “potentially the most radical doctrine in the modern world. Because rightly interpreted, it cannot respect any arrangement—however firmly entrenched—which denies to every human being his full allotment of personal freedom.”⁵ Politicized by his exposure to the direct actions he witnessed in South Africa in 1959, Democratic organizer Allard Lowenstein agreed with Kaufman: the model of citizen action and self-organization, he believed, could help reawaken the Democratic Party as well as the left. It could serve as the basis for a newly emboldened and egalitarian liberalism.⁶

Yet by the mid- and late 1960s, many within the older generation of socialists and liberals had grown cold to the politics of resistance as Vietnam continued to escalate and anti-war activists, frustrated by Johnson’s intransigence, began to take aim at liberalism itself instead of the segregationist regimes in the South or Cold War armament in the North. The collective resistance of the early 1960s had never directly challenged the legitimacy of the nation-state, even when it opposed its policies; it challenged the excesses of local state administrations that refused to buckle in the face of federal law and the popular will. But now many radicals were calling for Americans to “resist” the laws of the American state—and they held liberals accountable for having created the crisis of legitimation as well as geopolitics by escalating the Vietnam War.

⁵ As quoted by Kevin Mattson, in *Intellectuals in Action*, 187

⁶ William H. Chafe, *Never Stop Running: Allard Lowenstein and the Struggle to Save American Liberalism* (New York: Basic, 1994)

Smarting from their own confrontations with the younger antiwar left over their demand for America's immediate withdrawal, Howe, Harrington, and the Cold War socialists around *Dissent* agreed that the direct actions of the antiwar movement were different from those of the early civil rights movement. They insisted that the stakes of civil disobedience, when directed toward national security institutions and toward the liberal state itself, appeared to be a step too far. Writing in 1967, Howe insisted that while he found many of the anti-war activists' criticisms of the war to be legitimate, "what was not legitimate was to use tactics that looked like civil disobedience yet really constituted 'uncivil' and prerevolutionary acts. 'Stopping' troop trains...is a basic challenge to the authority of the state, and it makes sense only if undertaken as part of a revolutionary sequence."⁷

Walzer found this older generation's arguments—and in particular Howe's arguments—hyperbolic. No direct action was, after all, going to overthrow America's well-fortified state or begin a "revolutionary sequence." He also found such arguments were misleading, understating the uncivil implications of civil disobedience going back to the late 1950s and early 1960s, if not also to the sit-down strikes of the 1930s. "I don't want to quarrel about names," he wrote in a *Dissent* essay he published in response to Howe and other socialist critics of the anti-war actions. But "narrow definitions of civil disobedience" are "a little disingenuous, since it disregards, first, the coercive impact disobedience often has on innocent bystanders and, second, the actual violence it provokes and sometimes is intended to provoke, especially from the police."⁸

⁷ Irving Howe, "Is the Country coming Apart?" *Dissent* (May-June 1967)

⁸ Michael Walzer, "Civil Disobedience and Corporate Authority," *Power and Community: Dissenting Essays in Political Science*, edit. by Philip Green and Sanford Levinson (New York: Random House, 1969). Also published in *Dissent* (September–October, 1969) and then in *Obligations: Essays on Disobedience, War, and Citizenship* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1970)

While Walzer was largely sympathetic to the direct actions in the late 1960s, he also worried that those justifying them were also missing a significant aspect of what these actions represented. Resistance could, in Walzer's view, expand the very meaning and nature of citizenship in a modern social democracy or liberal welfare state: It could remind citizens of what they owed one another, as well as what they owed their state. It had very little to do with the rights vested to citizens when the state was in breach of its social contract with them; instead it was primarily about those informal contracts that citizens form with one another, the exchange of obligations that emerge out of local moral and political communities formed outside the state.

The main line of defense, at the time, was a primarily liberal source: as groups like the one that issued the 1967 "Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority" argued, direct actions and civil disobedience were justified, in their view, because of one's rights to rebel in the face of illegitimate governments and the rampant abuses of power. Drawing from the modern liberal tradition, the rights-based justifications frequently cited Locke's famous passage in the *Second Treatise*, "whenever the Legislators endeavor...to reduce [citizens] to Slavery under Arbitrary Power, they put themselves into a state of War...[and] *forfeit* the Power the People had put into their hands.... It [then] devolves to the People, who have a Right to resume their original Liberty."⁹ They also often invoked the "right to rebel" found in the Declaration of Independence, where Jefferson justified the colonies' "dissolution" of their duties to the British Empire by arguing that "when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government." Both of these lines of reasoning could be found in the early antiwar arguments about stopping trains and sitting in at sensitive national security establishments; it was

⁹ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government and the Letter Concerning Toleration* edit. Mark Goldie (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2016), 109

also at the center of the 1967 “Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority,” published in the *New York Review of Books* and signed by a leading group of intellectuals from the long New Left—Dwight Macdonald, Noam Chomsky, Paul Goodman—that asserted that the critical argument for resistance was that it was a citizen’s *right* to resist the Vietnam War because the Johnson government had embarked on it through undemocratic means and therefore ruled arbitrarily.¹⁰

By emphasizing one’s right to rebel, the RESIST intellectuals and others employing similar arguments were doing two things that Walzer believed were misrepresentative, the first being to suggest the Johnson administration was any more or less legitimate than earlier administrations. It was not as if Johnson invented the extension of executive power over military affairs. But what really bothered Walzer about the RESIST arguments was its philosophical underpinnings: A rights-justification missed how most people resisting the war were doing so out of a sense of duty. By emphasizing one’s right to rebel, the RESIST intellectuals, in Walzer’s view, focused on the individual nature of resistance when political action was at root collective.

“According to liberal political theory, as formulated by John Locke,” Walzer argued in his first efforts to critique the rights-based justification of disobedience, “any individual citizens, oppressed by the rulers of the state, has a right to disobey their commands, break their laws, even rebel and seek to replace the rulers and change the laws.” But for Walzer, this disobedience did not derive its legitimacy from rights but from those duties derived from our associations and communities outside the state. One had a duty to his or her fellow citizens that justified breaching a duty to the state. “Throughout history, when men have disobeyed or rebelled,” Walzer insisted, “they have done so, by and large, as members or representatives of groups and they have claimed, not merely that they are free to disobey, but that they are *obligated* to do

¹⁰ “The Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority,” *The New York Review of Books* (1967)

so.”¹¹ A defense of disobedience on rights grounds missed this act of solidarity, framing the act of resistance as purely a liberal act of individual rights and conscience not of collective action. As he argued in what became *Obligations*, “no political theory which does not move beyond rights to duties, beyond monologue to fraternal discussion, debate, and resolution, can ever explain what men actually do when they disobey or rebel, or why they do so.”¹²

For the liberal theorists and for the RESIST intellectuals what was at stake was individual rights and conscience, linked either to Lockean and Jeffersonian doctrines of the right to rebel or in some other cases to Thoreavian principles of freedom of conscience. But for Walzer what was at stake was our very collectivity, the right to live and act as associated men and women. Acts of disobedience were always also acts of duty. “Here I stand—Martin Luther’s bold defiance—is hardly an assertion of freedom or a claim to rights,” Walzer noted. “It is the acknowledgement of a new but undeniable obligation,” one that is almost always voiced in the first-person plural.¹³

The tradition of duties and political obligation in liberal thought goes back to its origins. To receive certain protections from the state, a citizen had to forgo certain liberties and obey laws. This exchange is what inaugurated the social contract and formed the foundations of collective life and the basis for the liberal consent theory that was central to the normative theorists work on justice. One consented to obedience to a law (not to kill, not to steal, to perform a set of undesirable duties like military service) for the sake of other liberties. Liberty, at least in this modern form, was never just about doing as one pleased. It was also choosing *not* to do as one

¹¹ Walzer, *Obligations*, 3

¹² Walzer, *Obligations*, 23

¹³ Walzer, *Obligations*, 3-4

pleased. “For to be driven by appetite alone is slavery,” as Rousseau noted in *On the Social Contract*, “and obedience to the law one has prescribed for oneself is liberty.”¹⁴

Yet while the exchange of rights and obligations were bound up in all early contract and consent theories, many of the first theorists to formulate their accounts of this exchange were writing in contexts of absolutism and so focused on rights provided by the state to the citizens instead of the duties citizens owed the state. Worried about the residue of an premodern state that might arbitrarily impose itself on its subjects, Locke, Paine, and Jefferson all emphasized the role rights played in legitimizing government and protecting citizens. Obligations remained a central part of this tradition: Duties—the duty not to kill, not to steal—helped protect numerous natural rights, and as noted above Jefferson himself also spoke in the language of duties as well as rights. It also was central to the Kantian and neo-Kantian ethics formed around the categorical imperative. But these duties were often a more subdued feature of Anglo-American liberalism.

This began to change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Western democracies became complex industrial systems riven by economic crisis, class conflict, global depression, and world war, liberal philosophers began to focus on how duties helped bind societies together and justified the state interventions needed in order to ensure a stable social and economic order. Troubled by the upheavals caused by laissez-faire capitalism, they hoped that by recovering a theory of duty they could show that constraining the economic forces unleashed by the market might coincide with a vision of liberty central to the liberal tradition.

In an age of interdependence, rights alone were not enough, since so many of the freedoms granted to citizens come from duties to one another. To ensure welfare and security, and to create stable economic regimes, states needed therefore to impose more laws, regulate

¹⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Rousseau: Basic Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Classics, 2011), 167

more sectors of life, and intervene more directly in the organization and management of the economy. Likewise, citizens now owed more to the state: They had to pay taxes, they had to cede certain liberties in times of war, and they had to obey an ever-growing number of laws that placed some constraints on their economic activity. Writing in what became one of the classic texts of this “new liberalism,” the English philosopher T.H. Green insisted that if liberal politics were to survive into the twentieth century, it would need a better “justification for obedience to law.”¹⁵

Green was not alone in coming to this conclusion—and not all the theorists were liberals; many were also socialists and social democrats inspired by egalitarian visions of collective life. L.T. Hobhouse, R.H. Tawney, Harold Laski, Richard Ely, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Herbert Croly, Walter Lippmann, and John Dewey all offered new accounts of duties that developed out of the turn of the century’s increasingly interdependent society.¹⁶ Moving beyond a Kantian emphasis on human autonomy and a Millsian stress on general utility, many of these thinkers looked toward Hegel’s organicism and state-centered view of politics in order to anchor their theories. Laski, Dewey, Ely, and Tawney also drew more directly from the socialist tradition. But no matter the source of their revised liberalism, they believed it was imperative to formulate a new vision of duties to help salvage a liberalism that had become too dependent on rights. A laissez-faire version of liberalism would no longer suffice in an age of interdependent social life.

¹⁵ T.H. Green, *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation and Other Writings* edit. by Paul Harris and John Morrow (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1986), 13. For an excellent summary of Green’s thought, see: John Dewey, “The Philosophy of Thomas Hill Green,” *The Early Works of John Dewey, 1882–1898; Volume Three: 1889–1892* edit. by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois, 1969).

¹⁶ For the history of what is sometimes called “corporate liberalism” as well as new liberalism or liberal socialism, see: Morton White, *Social Thought in America: The Revolt of Formalism* (New York: Viking, 1952). R. Jeffrey Lustig, *Corporate Liberalism: The Origins of Modern Political Theory, 1890–1920* (Berkeley: California, 1983); James Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870–1920* (Oxford: Oxford, 1988), Daniel Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Harvard 2000). Also see: Michael Freedman, *The New Liberalism: An Ideology of Social Reform* (Oxford: Oxford, 1978) and Peter Clarke’s *Liberalism and Social Democrats* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1978)

After World War II, political and legal theories became even more enamored of the duty track within the liberal tradition. As more and more of the North Atlantic embraced the social-democratic and welfarist policies of this new breed of liberalism, it became all the more imperative to justify a liberalism that no longer rested all of its understanding of politics on rights and the liberties states granted citizens. From H.L.A. Hart's *The Concept of the Law* (1959) and Joseph Tussman's *Obligations and the Body Politic* (1960) to Sidney Hook's *The Paradoxes of Freedom* (1964) and Rawls's "Legal Obligations and the Duty of Fair Play" (1964) to David Spitz's *The Liberal Idea of Freedom* (1965) and Hanna Pitkin's "Obligation and Consent" (1965), the 1950s and 60s saw a renaissance of obligations theories.¹⁷ As Rousseau anticipated, twentieth-century liberty had now become the freedom to consent to what one could not do.

Even as inquiries into what citizens owe one another began to focus solely on rights, a significant amount of the new obligation theory lost the social theories that had anchored the worldviews of their turn-of-the-century socialist and liberal predecessors. Hobhouse, Dewey, Laski, Tawney, Holmes, and Green, whether self-identifying as socialists or liberals, had come to believe that liberalism was a progressive and egalitarian tradition that faced the challenge of an ever-changing and increasingly ever-more interdependent world and to retain its program of progress and equality required it embracing a historicism and organicism it had once resisted. But by the 1950s and 60s, many political philosophers—especially, but not only, those around the SELF circle—that now avowed theories of duties wanted to extract a notion of obligations

¹⁷ Katrina Forrester in "Citizenship, War, and the Origins of International Ethics in American Political Philosophy 1960-1975," offers an excellent account of the rise of obligations theory in the postwar years. H.L.A. Hart, *The concept of the Law* (Oxford: Oxford, 1959), Joseph Tussman, *Obligations and the Body Politic* (Oxford: Oxford: 1960); Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Princeton: Princeton, 1960); Sidney Hook's *Paradoxes of Freedom* (Berkeley: California, 1963); John Rawls, "Legal Obligations and the Duty of Fair Play," *Law and Philosophy* edit by Sidney Hook (New York: NYU, 1964); David Spitz, *The Liberal Idea of Freedom* (Tucson: Arizona, 1964); Hanna Pitkin, "Obligation & Consent I," *American Political Science Review* (1965); "Obligation & Consent II" *American Political Science Review* (1966)

from the loosely Hegelian and Marxist social and historical theories that they felt undermined individual freedom and in their view the central tenets of a liberal democratic system. Instead of making their case based on the ways in which modern life had been interdependent, this new generation of obligation theorists turned back to earlier, more individualist theories of the social contract and consent theory and relied on innovations in psychology, economics, and behavioralist political science instead of sociology and history. Even though they focused on duties as well as rights, Locke became a central key to their social contract theories; so, too, did Kant come to replace the utilitarianism of Mill. For them, liberty took precedence over the imperatives of equality, and economic self-interest over those of solidarity and citizenship.

Responding to what they felt was an overemphasis on macro-social forces—whether in the utilitarian writings of Bentham, Mill, and Henry Sidgwick or the neo-Hegelian works of Dewey and Green—Hart, Rawls, and many of theorists around the Society for Ethical and Legal Philosophy wanted to find a way to reassert the importance of individual moral reasoning and they wanted to do so by reaffirming a set of norms that might govern action as opposed to basing any theories of political and moral action on aggregate good (in the case of the utilitarians) or equality and solidarity (in the case of the neo-Hegelians and of socialists like Laski and Tawney).

Resting their moral theories on neo-Kantian theories of intuitionism and intentionalism and what would later become called deontological ethics by critics of normative theory, they argued that what justified a social contract was that each individual *could* have consented to its particular exchange of rights and duties. From the original position, an abstracted moral agent, stripped of class, race, gender, and standing, could judge the fairest allocation of obligations, liberties, wealth, and power. Not everyone would have the opportunity to make such a choice. In fact, the argument was that no one would; this was just an exercise in moral imagination. But the

point was that, based on this experiment, one could determine what contract one might consent to and therefore which duties one's activity was bound by and which activities one had a right to. Moral and political reasoning therefore had very little to do with one's collectivity and what one owed one another. It was premised on individual reasoning and the capacity to think asocially. One committed an act of disobedience out of a sense of personal conscience not solidarity.

Walzer agreed with the first impulse of this argument. Like the SELF theorists and other postwar obligation and contract theorists, he agreed with Rawls, Nagel, Nozick, and the other SELF theorists that a new moral theory needed to be devised to put agency back in the hands of citizens. He also agreed that to give an accurate account of the politics emerging in the postwar years and in particular out of the civil rights and antiwar movements one had to focus on duties instead of rights. But he worried that the SELF theorists' turn back to Kant removed moral actors from their social contexts and led to a different set of problems. Displacing the collective nature of moral calculations, their neo-Kantianism also reaffirmed a set of troubling suppositions found within the liberal tradition that individuated not just moral life but all facets of life: health, economic transactions, work, war, political representation, distributive inequalities. Premised "on radically individualist principles," as Walzer later wrote, this neo-Kantian framework "seems to ignore or bypass the morality of mutual involvement."¹⁸ It also was premised on a bad sense of sociology, eliding the social and historical nature of all political life, and missing how all moral and political activity, no matter whether acted alone or in a group, was born out of one's relationship to others and one's duties to a larger political or moral community. "According to liberal political theory as formulated by John Locke," Walzer argued in a paper he presented at one of Stuart Hampshire's seminar and that became a centerpiece of his first work of normative

¹⁸ Michael Walzer, "From Contract to Community," *The New Republic* (December 13, 1982)

theory, *Obligations*, “any individual citizen, oppressed by the rulers of the state, has a right to disobey their commands, break their laws, even rebel and seek to replace the rulers and change the laws.”¹⁹ But for Walzer what justified acts of civil disobedience was not that they were “a right often claimed or acted upon by individuals, but that they were born out of those obligations incurred by individuals in their various political communities, many of which operate below the formal institutions of the state and within civil society. “When men have disobeyed or rebelled, they have done so, by and large, as members or representatives of groups and they have claimed, not merely that they are free to disobey, but that they are *obligated* to do so.”²⁰

Walzer first worked out this argument in “The Obligation to Disobey,” which he presented in Hampshire’s seminar while still at Princeton and which he published in the political theory journal *Ethics* in 1967 during the height of his activism in the antiwar movement.²¹ In it, Walzer pointed out the social roots of all moral and political activity. Acts of duty and acts of disobedience were both born out of a sense of collectivity. When one disobeyed a law it was the result of one’s sense of duty to those moral and political communities formed outside the formal institutions of the state and political party. Leaning on Hume and Smith’s moral theories more than Kant’s, he noted that moral duty was born out of one’s sense of solidarity with others, an act of empathy as well as an act of collective self-interest. Moral duty never stemmed solely from the reasoning of one individual on his or her own and isolated from collective life.

¹⁹ Walzer, *Obligations*, 3

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Michael Walzer, “The Obligation to Disobey,” *Ethics* (1967)

As the antiwar movement's direct actions began to escalate in the late 1960s, Walzer continued to work on this argument, eventually trying to develop a new theory of consent altogether. *Obligations*, which he published in 1970, sought to do this. Because each duty is spawned by a different set of social relationships and contexts, the book was a set of essays instead of one long argument. Opening with "The Obligation to Disobey," he then sought to examine the applications of his "restated" consent theory in a variety of other contexts. In "Civil Disobedience and Corporate Authority," he took up the question of what citizens owe to non-state institutions—corporations, churches, places of production and consumption—when these institutions use the protections afforded to them by a liberal state to hinder individual citizens' rights and liberties. Using the 1936–1937 UAW sit-down strikes in Flint as his example, Walzer argued that General Motors had broken two contracts at once: It broke its contract with the state by hindering its members' rights to freedom of expression and association, and it broke its contracts with employees by refusing to grant them a fair hearing and allow them to negotiate collectively. The strikers, according to Walzer, therefore were not in breach of their contracts with the state and General Motors but acting out those informal contracts they had with one another since both the state, which refused to protect their rights, and General Motors which was in dereliction to both its duties to the state and its workers, had ceased to hold up theirs.

The strikers, Walzer explained, "were members, as all of us are, of overlapping social circles," and in "the spheres specific to them—General Motors, the auto industry, the capitalist industrial system generally—they did not enjoy the benefits usually associated with the words law and order"; because of this, they owed one another a duty to help fix these contracts that had been transgressed by the state and corporations.²² Had the state intervened to repair these broken

²² Walzer, *Obligations*, 41

contracts, the strikers would not have had to do so themselves. “If democratic states choose to shelter corporate autocrats,” Walzer noted, “then they must learn to shelter corporate rebels as well.”²³

The same logic, Walzer argued in his third essay, “The Obligations of Oppressed Minorities,” held in the case of the early 1960s sit-ins: The acts of disobedience, while again in transgression of state laws, targeted non-state entities in breach of federal state laws that were not being enforced. The federal state should have intervened, but since it did not, citizens were required to act on their own behalf—and this case as a specific group of oppressed people. Again, this was not a matter of rights but of duties. If the state does not act against the tyranny of civil-society institutions, then citizens must. Locke may have argued that “where the body of the people, or any single man, is deprived of their right...they have liberty” to rebel. But for Walzer, “when oppressed men exercise their ‘liberty’ and act out their rage,” they do so “first with or on behalf of the group that they constitute” and then as members “within the larger community.”²⁴

Tensions, however, often emerge between these duties that are not as easily resolved as in these cases. In the case of black Southerners, refusing to leave a Woolworth counter reaffirmed the interests of the oppressed group and the democratic principles, then unrealized, of the society as a whole. Demonstrators were acting in the interests of both the small and large communities of which they were members. But what about an oppressed minority (or at least a minority that believes it is oppressed) that acts in the interests of its own members and in so doing against the interests of a majority? To take one obvious example, how would Walzer respond to those white Southerners who assert that they are the “oppressed” minority, menaced by a liberal, multiracial majority? One might argue that since an oppressed community’s duties are first to its own

²³ Walzer, *Obligations*, 45

²⁴ Walzer, *Obligations*, 50

members and then to society as a whole, a supremacist group that believes it is oppressed by a majority could transgress a society's laws. But within the broader context of American politics, this outcome would lead to this minority subjugating a minority within its own community. The logic of duties to the communities below the state put at risk some of the very principles of equality and liberty that Walzer hoped his revised theory of duties and consent might further. Resolving these tensions would become central to much of Walzer's later political theory.

Walzer does not address this particular challenge to the theory he outlines in his first three essays in *Obligations*, but in the following essays he does begin to work out what it means to choose between obligations. Observing how in a modern liberal democratic society the relationships between citizens within the larger formal political community of the state have become so attenuated that they only operate as a set of abstractions, Walzer insists it is this very choice between one's competing duties that individual citizens can reclaim a certain amount of agency. "The extraordinary transformation of scale which has occurred in the past century and a half," Walzer asserts in one of his final essays, "has created a radically different kind of political community—one in which relations between the individual and the state are so weakened (at least their moral quality is so attenuated) as to call into question all the classical and early democratic theories of obligation and war."²⁵ In place of these theories, Walzer argues that a new one could be formulated based on the kinds of choices citizens make in deciding which duties to commit to: For Walzer, morality and citizenship are "realized through a variety of political duties, some formal, others informal" that force a society's members into public deliberation.²⁶

²⁵ Walzer, *Obligations*, 99

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Citing Hegel's writing on the plural forms of membership found in civil society as well as to a formal state, he contends that "this is surely the great strength of a pluralist citizenship, that it not only implicates the citizens in state policy, but generates real obligations and an authentic patriotism by recognizing a sphere within which they actually have a scope of meaningful action."²⁷

Here one finds Walzer attempting to correct what he believes is an oversight in the socialist as well as the liberal tradition. Socialists have often been skeptical of the pluralism found in civil society, worried that it can serve as a counterweight to their hope to universalize the egalitarianism of the state within all spheres of social life. Likewise, the plural communities and forms of membership in civil society can work against a more practical aim of socialists—to help unite a working class in the service of its collective interests. But for Walzer it is precisely this type of pluralism that can help save socialism from any totalizing tendencies. Instead of placing one's faith in a uniform working class that has yet to arrive, socialists can direct their attention to the social bonds that already exist. If young people are channeling their energy toward particularist or liberal campaigns, the left can begin here instead of imposing a set of alien norms on a group that has yet to develop them on its own. "After all," as Walzer concludes his arguments in one *Obligation* essay, "class conflict requires class organization, even multiple organization, and...there is no reason to accept the old Wobbly notion that class struggle can only be fought by 'one big union.' On the contrary, periods of intense struggle have been marked by an enormous proliferation of groups (many of which clearly had overlapping membership)."²⁸

For Walzer, this was the critical test of the 1960s: If socialism and egalitarianism were to survive in a period of socialist retreat, they had to recognize those sites of agency born in liberal

²⁷ Walzer, *Obligations*, 219

²⁸ Walzer, *Obligations*, 223

democracy. One had to act as a socialist but also as someone committed to racial equality, to self-rule and national liberation in the international sphere, to disarmament and civil liberties at home. Different forms of citizenship, and different political traditions that make up the left, were never going to fully intersect. Liberal and socialist impulses were never fully commensurable. There was always going to be a messy set of tensions at the core of one's sense of what was right. This was the promise and the limit of democratic politics. "After all," Walzer notes in his final *Obligations* essay, "what would democratic politics be like without its kibitzers?"²⁹

Upon publication, *Obligations* was heralded by many within the SELF circle as a major contribution to normative theory. Departing from how many understood contract theory, it asserted the central role consent plays in helping bring politics back into the hands of citizens in an age of administrative action. Working through questions relating to civil disobedience in a time of war and racial inequality, it demonstrated the utility of moral philosophy in thinking about contemporary political problems and while allowing for these norms to be open-ended and pluralistic, it reasserted a moral reality within the world of public decision-making. As Rawls later recalled, it was "the first large work coming after the period of political conflict."³⁰

Not everyone agreed with Rawls's praise, however. Sympathetic to the reasons why postwar radicals and the New Left might be "handicapped by an accident of history: their revolt has come at a time in the United States when the revolutionary tradition lies wounded," Tom Kahn, a civil-rights activist who had become critical of the anti-war movement, argued that

²⁹ Walzer, *Obligations*, 238

³⁰ "John Rawls interview," *Philosophers in Conversation: Interviews from the Harvard Review of Philosophy*, edited by S. Phineas Ulpham, forward Thomas Scanlon (London: Routledge, 2002), 8

Walzer's preference for citizen-based activism demonstrated a "disinclination to confront the question of social power."³¹ The modern state was "a gigantic, inescapable octopus" and a radical politics could not work outside it.³² For change to occur, radicals had to confront it and remake it in their image. Fetishizing the bonds formed outside it seemed counterproductive.

Other liberal and left critics of *Obligations* agreed. Writing in the *Nation*, the liberal University of Michigan philosopher Carl Cohen argued that the framework of Walzer's obligation theory placed too much faith in the informal bonds of civil society and extra-state politics.³³ Insisting that an essential part of democratic society is the "tacit consent" that structures liberal contract theory and liberal democracies, he contended that it was "a grave theoretical fault," on the part of Walzer, "to ascribe all moral and political obligations to one kind of source, any one kind."³⁴ Of even greater concern to Cohen was what troubled Kahn about Walzer's arguments about resistance: By centering obligations on the "deliberate consent" of citizen activism, he ignored the pivotal role the state played in social change. Civil disobedience, in his view, was an effort not to create a new space for power but to pressure the existing institutions of power. "To recognize that there may be obligations overriding those owed to the state," he concluded, "is not to affirm that every set of obligations in conflict with civil law is more worthy than it. Far from that. States do awful things, especially when they seek to govern in spheres not appropriately theirs. Sometimes, also, they concretize in law the noblest expressions of human civility."³⁵

³¹ Tom Kahn, Michael Walzer, "Communication: The Idea of Revolution"

³² Ibid.

³³ Carl Cohen, "Citizenship and Obedience: Tangled Obligations," *The Nation* (September 28, 1970)

³⁴ Cohen, "Citizenship and Obedience"

³⁵ Cohen, "Citizenship and Obedience"

One might argue that Cohen was overstating Walzer's disinterest in the state and in the critical role tacit forms of consent play, since in *Obligations* Walzer never entirely disavows either, and in fact is careful to note that what he is trying to do is extend the theory of consent and political duties into civil society. But Cohen nonetheless touched upon a critical weakness in Walzer's arguments, one that would crop up time and again in his later normative theory. By prioritizing a community's role in determining what arrangements are just, Walzer's international ethics and distributive justice often ended up reaffirming already existing forms of domination. Duties to a particular group can create impediments to fulfilling duties to the state; they can also create ones impeding our duties to other citizens who fall outside one's own group. The same could be said of the right to self-determination that undergirds his international ethics: It may allow each community to determine its fate, but it also puts those minority communities within these states at risk and can lead to social arrangements that are just based on the standard of self-rule but unjust based on the standards of equality, fairness, and democratic accountability. Rather than serve as a guide for how one ought to act, the pluralist and communitarian notion of morality at the center of Walzer's work can potentially reiterate those forms of injustice already in existence.

In the estimation of Cohen, this was why the liberal state was so essential to the politics of justice and why a rights model, instead of a duty model, should be the backbone of a social contract: A liberal state could act as a neutral force in a pluralist society, preventing one group—say, white supremacists in the South—from dominating another; the rights central to its contract could also protect those minority groups and dissenting views. A politics that emphasizes duties can diminish the role the state can play in helping protect the diversity of modern society from one group ruling arbitrarily over another.

In an irony that was almost certainly not lost on Walzer, some members of the younger flanks of the New Left found *Obligations* wanting for precisely the opposite reason—for attempting to develop some kind of synthesis between socialism and liberalism and radical democracy and social democracy. In a review in SELF’s newly founded journal, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, J. Peter Euben, a student of Sheldon Wolin and veteran of the Berkeley uprisings, argued that the main weakness of Walzer’s vision of citizenship was not that it neglects the role of the liberal state and the value of social-contract theory, but that it tried to anchor a more radical vision of politics to them, attempting to use the pluralism inherent in liberalism as some kind of limit on egalitarianism and the democratic impulses of a community.³⁶ “In many ways this is a noble task,” Euben observed. “And yet it may be that the present quality of our political lives is far too desperate for reflecting on disobedience, war, and citizenship within terms of liberal consent theory. If we are to provide alternative understandings of the political life aimed at a more human reconstitution of that life, then we need to go outside consent theory, liberalism, and pluralism, not ignoring their import (for that is to ignore what we are), but assessing their relevance more critically. We do need a sense of moral complexity, but we also need political courage, lest that complexity overwhelm our political creativity.”³⁷ Citing Lenin in what must have been one of the first times (and, one suspects, one of the only times) a Marxist revolutionary was quoted in the staid liberal pages of *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Euben ended his review of Walzer’s book arguing that “we need not only to ask with the prophet Amos, ‘Can two walk together except they be agreed?’ but to ask with Lenin, ‘What is to be done?’”³⁸

³⁶ J. Peter Euben, “Walzer’s *Obligations*,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (Summer 1972)

³⁷ Euben, “Walzer’s *Obligations*”

³⁸ Walzer, *Obligations*, 238

Many of the tensions Walzer's critics highlighted—his prioritization of communal duty over state or personal obligations, his desire to combine liberalism and socialism into one synthetic politics, the ambiguities of his pluralism—would remain at the center of nearly all of his normative theory. But one can begin to see a sophisticated theory of political action and consent emerging from Walzer's work that broke from earlier individuated understandings found within the liberal tradition. Likewise, one can begin to see his contextualist theory of morality also in formation: rather than one universal set of norms operating upon all of humanity, morality was the product of a competing set of duties born out of one's bonds to different communities. Politics and moral activity were formed in the smithy of social interaction, when individuals chose between these competing duties and communities. One was not only beholden to the laws and obligations of the state but to a variety of other political and moral groups as well. To act in favor of those laws and obligations, therefore, was not an act of individual autonomy but a confirmation of other forms of citizenship developed outside the realm of formal institutions.

Walzer also did work out a compelling argument about how these actions might relate to the state—how they radical citizen activity could also influence and remake the state. In a long essay that he published a year later as a small book titled *Political Action: A Practical Guide to Movement Politics*, he began to outline how a vision of unconventional politics might help shape, if not transform, liberal democracy from within.³⁹ Working chapter by chapter through many of the practical problems faced by citizen activists—issues of money, organization, tactics, ideology, sexual inequality—Walzer wove his book's argument together around a critical insight: While the left, at least in America, had very little chance in the immediate future of getting a foothold within formal centers of power, the structure of liberal democracy nonetheless

³⁹ Michael Walzer, *Political Action: A Practical Guide to Movement Politics* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1971)

created a space in civil society in which citizen activists could build their own centers of power. Below the state was the realm in which socialists could thrive. This was not solely about creating models of the kinds of participatory and egalitarian societies these activists preferred to live in. By recovering the ways in which institutions below the state came with their own set of rights and duties, the left, Walzer argued, could begin to carve out a more democratic, and even socialist, system under the umbrella of social protections afforded citizens by the state. Instead of embracing the common radical view that it is “no longer possible to work within the system,” the amateur politicians of the 1960s could work alongside it, building a socialism from below.⁴⁰ By focusing on a set of single issues, the left could slowly begin to reshape their everyday lives in accordance with the more maximalist ambitions of a socialist left. For this reason, in Walzer’s view, social democracy and liberalism were not incongruent with the demands of socialism; nor were the civil-rights and anti-war campaigns. They helped create the *conditions* for a more radical democratic socialism to take root.

This kind of hybrid politics might not resemble the socialism that he and his *Dissent* comrades had once aspired to or that liberal reformers or Marxist revolutionaries approved of, but, through education, time, and work, it might lead to a different kind of socialism. “A citizens’ movement,” Walzer argued, “carefully organized, intelligently led, can win important victories on both the local and national levels.”⁴¹ In fact, in Walzer’s view it already had. “Both the civil rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s, and the peace movement too, had significant effects on American politics. They reached new constituencies, forced professional politicians to pay attention, built up local power bases, won changes in executive policies and bureaucratic

⁴⁰ Walzer, *Political Action*, 9

⁴¹ Walzer, *Political Action*, 123

procedures.”⁴² In recognizing the harbinger of the new social movements on the horizon, he also noted that this would be possible for the women’s liberation movement and the feminist radicalism emerging on the horizon. Even when the explicit ends of a campaign were not achieved, the work of democratic self-organization left its own important changes on the everyday lives of citizens. “New political movements generally take shape around a single issue—a wrong being done to the people who join or to some other group with whom they have political connections or moral sympathies. The activists are likely to disagree about much else, but this sense of injury or indignation they must share” and from it a new politics might come.⁴³

Yet, while a forceful argument about the role citizens can play in taking back democracy from the state, for some of Walzer’s readers this vision of an engaged citizenry felt too little and too late. Walzer, after all, had made his argument in 1971, not 1965. The ground beneath American politics had shifted. Racism and a politics of fear had taken root in the Republican Party. Eugene McCarthy and the activists who had sought to take over the Democratic Party had been defeated. Both liberals and libertarians were challenging many of the policies of the welfare state and the social-democratic assumptions that had helped anchor them. A new generation of feminists, black radicals, environmentalists, and gay rights activists all offered compelling critiques of the socialist and liberal framework of the older groupings of the New Left, highlighting how the older generation’s visions of an equality between persons often reinforced a set of racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies, and yet the older generation of radicals not only struggled to adapt their politics but in the case of figures like Howe were openly hostile to it.⁴⁴ A popular front formed out of single-issue campaigns and a nonsocialist civil society radicalism

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Irving Howe, “The Middle Class Mind of Kate Millet,” *Harpers* (December 1970)

seemed unlikely; both because the older generation of the long New Left was unwelcoming of it and because a new generation no longer was all that interested in drawing their predecessors in. Likewise, on the broader front of American life, it was unclear if any of these lefts were poised to make any substantial gains in an era in which a resurgent libertarian right appeared ascendant and in which many in the Democratic Party were also beginning their march toward the right.

In a review of *Political Action* in the *New York Review of Books*, Christopher Lasch noted his sympathies with Walzer's political vision but that the book read as if the past five years had not happened.⁴⁵ Walzer, he noted, does not ask "himself the question that will surely be asked by historians of the period: if this kind of politics held out any promise, why was it supplanted by [a] more militant radicalism?" The newfound militancy "was a response, after all, to a genuine historical need, the demonstrated failure of polite reformism: the failure of the peace movement to end the cold war or to prevent Vietnam, the failure of the civil rights movement to achieve racial justice, the failure of reform Democrats to reform the Democratic party.... To be sure we must not belittle the real though minor achievements of these movements; we should not expect change to be sudden and total; above all we should not leap from their failures to the conclusion that it is 'no longer possible to work within the system.' But an awareness of these dangers does not justify an attempt to return to the politics of the early Sixties as if nothing had happened in the meantime."⁴⁶

Walzer did not respond to Lasch's review, but while *Political Action* showed a considerable openness to the black power and radical feminist movements on the horizon, especially in contrast to an older generation of socialists, Lasch was right that Walzer was still writing in a language from an earlier era that was no longer the vocabulary of an emerging 1970s

⁴⁵ Christopher Lasch, "Can the Left Rise Again?" *The New York Review of Books*, October 21, 1971

⁴⁶ Lasch, "Can the Left Rise Again?"

left. Perhaps even more pressing was that just as he published *Political Action*, Walzer was himself beginning to move away from the radical politics of the 1950s and 60s to which he was committed and over the next decade, he would have to confront many of the ambiguities and competing impulses just under the surface of his political commitments and normative theory.

In the more immediate future, as the war in Vietnam continued to rage on, and as a new set of Israeli-Arab wars broke out in the Middle East, Walzer would have to reckon with the growing tension between his anti-war commitments, his socialist commitments, and his Zionism. All of a sudden, it seemed, Walzer was in fierce conflict with numerous sides of the long New Left, arguing with the *Dissent* circle about the Vietnam War and with the anti-war left over the Israeli-Arab wars of 1967 and 1973 and more generally over his commitment to Israel, and finding the civil society movements of the early 1970s—those involving women’s liberation, environmentalism, and black nationalism—to challenge his more slowly evolving egalitarian framework that focused primarily on economic equality instead of sexual and racial hierarchies. But while Walzer would eventually begin to amend his egalitarianism in order to respond to these latter challenges, he would first have to confront the questions of Vietnam and Israel. The politics of war, instead of a politics about peaceful citizen action, ended up becoming first and foremost on his mind in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s as he now found himself at the center of a set of bitter arguments over the wars in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. The wars in these regions eventually would also mark the beginning of his movement toward the state. Later, when the last institutions of American social democracy were under attack, he too would attempt to offer a defense of the liberal welfare state but in the late 1960s and early 1970s, first Walzer needed to reckon with the implications of his national liberationist politics and what that meant for his radicalism and how it stood increasingly at odds with his radical democratic and

internationalist politics. As with his writings on the 1960s unconventional politics, Walzer would find that political theory would once again be a vital tool in helping reckon with these tensions.

6. Socialists Go to War

The collapse of the Popular Front and the left-liberal coalition of the 1930s and 40s had put Walzer on notice that the radical tradition of the first half of the twentieth century needed revision. In the 1950s, the founding of *Dissent* and Walzer's time in England with the British New Left alerted him to the fact that he was not alone in realizing this: There was a set of intersecting generations of radicals on both sides of the English-speaking Atlantic seeking "a new politics," as Stuart Hall put it, "somewhere between the old forms of social democracy and Stalinism."¹ Greensboro and the student-led direct actions of the civil-rights and disarmament movements in the early 1960s awoke Walzer to the possibility that the renovation of the left might not happen in the field of the state or come from the left's traditional working-class base, and his training in intellectual history and then in philosophy helped him think about past and present examples of the kind of civil-society organizing that would define this new left, and as

¹ Stuart Hall, "The 'First' New Left: Life and Times," *Out of Apathy: Voices of the Left Thirty Years On* (New York: Verso, 1989).

these early movements came undone he also began to recognize these possibilities in women's liberation movement, the black radicalism, and the other "new social movements" of the 1970s.² But it would be in the late 1960s and early 1970s that many of the underlying tensions and competing ideals of the first several generations of the long New Left would boil to the surface, forcing Walzer and his contemporaries to reckon with which ideals they held highest and which they were willing to sacrifice. The choice between these different duties remade the left's politics in the 1970s and 80s and has left us with many of the ambiguities that still confounds the left.

Finding himself in support of the younger New Left's demand for immediate withdrawal in Vietnam and in frequent argument with the *Dissent* circle over the Cold War, Walzer also found himself subsumed in conflict with his peers in the antiwar movement who denounced Israel's preemptive strike against Egypt in 1967. Once, socialism, radical democracy, and a politics of national liberation had neatly intersected in the nonalignment egalitarianism of early decolonization. With Vietnam's continued escalation and the heightened Israeli-Arab conflict, Walzer found that many of these competing tendencies were now at odds with one another.

Walzer had once lauded the intermediate zone between the household and the state in which the left might be able to build a radical democratic and egalitarian politics from below the welfare state, but now he was caught in a very different kind of intermediate zone—one that was between older and newer lefts, between draft resistance and electoral politics, and between the internationalism of his socialism and the politics of national liberation of his Zionism.

² Michael Walzer, *Political Action: A Practical Guide to Movement Politics* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1971)

The collision between Walzer's Zionist and socialist commitments seemed more inevitable, but it was his arguments with the *Dissent* left over Vietnam that came first. As early as the late 1950s, *Dissent* had taken an interest in Vietnam, tracking America's growing involvement in the country. Many of the pieces it published warned against heightened involvement by the United States and cautioned that Vietnam would become America's Algeria.³ But viewing the struggle between the Viet Cong and the South Vietnamese army primarily as a proxy war in the international conflict between communism and democracy, *Dissent's* editors also insisted American support of the south was necessary to prevent the country from becoming communist. At first this position marked an idiosyncratic break from the increasingly antiwar left. But by holding it as late as the Tet Offensive and Nixon's Cambodia campaign, the *Dissent* circle found itself aligned with a number of strange bedfellows that they had once dedicated numerous articles to chastising, including Cold War hawks like Arthur Schlesinger, who joined the Negotiations Now group Michael Harrington and the older *Dissenters* set up in the fall of 1967.⁴

Walzer was sympathetic to the desire for an alternative to a unified communist Vietnam. But he was also shocked by the contortions his *Dissent* comrades were going through to justify their position and their growing allegiance with Cold War liberals. "The Communists had won the hearts and minds battle" in much of the Vietnamese countryside by the late 1960s, Walzer later recalled, meaning the U.S. was at "war with rural Vietnam...a war that would have to be brutal and [that the left] could not support."⁵ This was clear to Walzer from the outset of Johnson's escalation in 1965 and '66. But the older *Dissenters* held on well into the late 1960s.

³ Lewis Coser, "Indochina: America's Algeria," *Dissent* (Summer 1963)

⁴ Pete Hamill, "Whatever happened to Harrington?" *Newsday* (October 10, 1967)

⁵ Oral history conducted by David Marcus with Michael Walzer, August 9, 2016 (Part II)

Responding to an editorial written by Howe defending their stance, Walzer argued that Howe and the older increasingly hawkish *Dissenters* failed “to grasp the significance of the most important point [Howe] makes: that in Vietnam the national liberation movement was from the beginning led by the Communists. There, in a sense, is the whole story. The U.S. failed to establish a democratic regime in the South not because of reactionary stupidity...but because the Communists were the only political group capable of winning an election.”⁶ In another article, co-written with John Schrecker, he insisted that to think “that a local anti-Communist vanguard, working in the shadow of American military power, can rally popular support and modernize its countries is one of the most unfortunate of cold war myths.”⁷ The war in Vietnam, in Walzer and Schrecker’s view, was not about a struggle between communism or liberal democracy but competing visions for political and economic independence. As in Cuba, the Americans had made Vietnam a Cold War war. “The U.S.,” Walzer and Schrecker explained in another essay written in response to one published in *Dissent* by Henry Pachter, “escalated [Vietnam] into an international power struggle because we failed to grasp its *civil*, that is, local significance and believed mistakenly that it was an international power struggle from its very beginning.”⁸

In a prelude to *Just and Unjust Wars* and his later international ethics, Walzer also argued that what the anticommunist socialists and liberals missed was how American involvement in Vietnam, as was the case with much of its neocolonial adventurism, undermined an international system built on the principles of collective self-determination and national sovereignty. A peaceful global order was produced by an international system in which the doctrine of nonintervention took priority and in which nation’s allowed each other to choose their own paths

⁶ Michael Walzer, “A Comment,” *Dissent* (Spring 1965)

⁷ Michael Walzer and John Schrecker, “American Intervention and the Cold War,” *Dissent* (Fall 1965)

⁸ Walzer and Schrecker, “A Reply to ‘Ideology and Power in Foreign Affairs,’” *Dissent* (March 1966)

toward modernity without being menaced by superpowers seeking to dominate a particular region or sphere of influence. When this doctrine broke down, so did a pacific world. The only legitimate goal for any kind of foreign military action was either self-defense or those counter-interventions that would “create or restore the necessary condition for local self-government.”⁹ All others are acts of aggression were in breach of the contract between nations: Just as citizens have a certain set of inalienable rights—to life and liberty—so, too, do nations have the right to a collective life and territorial integrity. “It is time to bring our policemen home,” Walzer and Schrecker insisted. “Our country and the rest of the world will be no less safe when we do.”¹⁰

As casualty rates steadily increased and as a series of atrocities began to be reported in American newspapers, such as the Binh Hoa and My Lai massacres, Walzer also began to make his case along a different track, focusing less on the injustice of America having gone to war and more on the injustice of how it was fighting it. In “Moral Judgment in Time of War,” Walzer sought to counter what he believed was the realism undergirding the anticommunist socialists and liberals’ stance on Vietnam. For Walzer, the left needed to oppose the war on both the grounds that the war was in breach of the doctrines of nonintervention and collective self-determination and on the grounds that the war was being fought in breach of human rights.

Here Walzer introduced what became two central categories in *Just and Unjust Wars* and his later international ethics: *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. There is justice before a war when one decides whether to enter into it and when the aim is to sustain peace, and there is justice during a war when one decides what means to use to prosecute it. In the first, the primary criteria were the principles of nonintervention and self-determination: no country is justified to intervene in the affairs of another country unless it is an action of self-defense. In the second, the operating

⁹ Walzer and Schrecker, “American Intervention and the Cold War”

¹⁰ Ibid.

principles are different but they are just as critical to arguing about war: Has a state breached the war conventions and human rights law in its attempt to persecute a just or unjust war?

Walzer separated out the moral criteria for assessing these two fields of judgment not to keep them permanently separate but, in fact, to show how they were tied together in Vietnam and in nearly all colonial and postcolonial contexts: No unjustly fought war, such as the asymmetric war fought in Vietnam, he argues, can be fought for just reasons since what makes the war unjustly fought is what also makes it an unjust war: Colonial and imperial wars that trespass the sovereignty of another country and are fought against the will of a local population will almost always lead to brutal war tactics that break human rights law.

Walzer had already begun to develop some of these arguments in his essays on military conscription and the draft, highlighting the differences between those “big wars” fought between sovereign nations that could be justified along the lines of self-defense and those “little wars” (taken from the Spanish of guerrilla) that are not as easily justified by popular common sense since there is no clear emergency provoking them and therefore no justification for conscription.

Yet in this essay, which became the basis for much of his later work on just war theory, Walzer pushed this argument further. Vietnam represented more than a troubling escalation in the Cold War; the war was unjust on both the reasons for its existence and the means in which it was being persecuted. On the terms of *jus ad bellum*, the war represented the United States trespassing on the sovereignty of several other countries, and on the terms of *jus in bello*, the numerous atrocities that the United States and its surrogates were involved in also made it unjust.

While Walzer continued to assert that Howe, Harrington, Coser, and the other *Dissenters* were wrong to insist that a continued presence in Vietnam was justified it was on both of these accounts that he sought to refute them: The war in Vietnam was not merely undermining the

basis for peace in the sphere of international relations but was in clear transgression of morality in a time of war. “War is indeed ugly,” Walzer explained, “but there are degrees of ugliness. As we watch the continued escalation of the war in Vietnam, this truth is driven home with especial force. Surely there is a point at which the means employed for the sake of this or that political goal come into conflict with a more general human purpose: the maintenance of moral standards and the survival of some sort of international society.... At that point, war is not merely ugly, but criminal.”¹¹

The questions of collective self-determination, human rights, just wars, and state sovereignty became all the more vexing shortly after he published “Moral Judgment in Time of War.” In the beginning of June, 1967, Israeli warplanes, in the first major conflagration since the Suez crisis, struck a set of Egyptian air bases in a preemptive strike and ignited a multinational war between Israel and its neighbors. Its outcome, as much as its beginning, would be hotly debated: What was at stake was not only whether Israel was justified to strike first, but whether its right to self-determination justified its hindering of others’ in the war’s aftermath. No matter how one viewed the origins of the state of Israel, either as an extension of Western colonialism into the postcolonial era or as state liberated from British imperial rule and granting an embattled people the capacity to rule over themselves, in the years after the 1967 war, the situation in the Middle East came to prove the high costs of self-determination and ambiguities of national liberation.

¹¹ Walzer, “Moral Judgment in Time of War,”

Walzer had been raised in a Labor Zionist household.¹² But his political identity as a Zionist had long remained dormant. An important reason was that Zionism and the state of Israel were not contested subjects for much of the left in the postwar years; for many liberals and radicals, granted Jews, after years of persecution, the right to self-determination and was therefore not unlike many of the smaller European nations granted this right after World War I and many countries in the southern and eastern hemispheres after World War II. There were some notable outliers: Hannah Arendt; the Ihud intellectuals around Henrietta Szold, Martin Buber, Hugo Bergman, and Gershom Scholem who all called for the founding of a binational postcolonial state in Israel-Palestine; Albert Camus and the French postwar left after the Suez crisis, and Erich Fromm, Henry Pachter, and several of the ex-Trotskyists around *Dissent* who viewed all programs of national liberation suspiciously and were especially skeptical of Zionism and the state of Israel. (Walzer, in fact, later recalled that until 1967, it was with the *Dissent* left that he had most of his arguments over Zionism and Jewish self-determination in Israel.¹³) But Israel's strike in 1967 and its occupation of the West Bank, Golan, Gaza, and Sinai, parallel with a growing solidarity within the West with the Palestinian struggle against the occupation, broke the consensus among left and liberal intellectuals. It also, conversely, caused many of the older former non-Zionist Trotskyists around *Dissent*—Howe, Coser, Harrington, Plastrik—to become outspoken defenders of Israel, especially as they feuded with the younger flanks of the left.¹⁴

For Walzer, who was spending the summer caught up in the work of Vietnam Summer, the breakdown on this consensus erupted suddenly and posed a particularly difficult challenge to his activism that summer. As he later recalled, by middle of the summer of 1967, “I [was]

¹² In an interview with Jeffrey Williams, Walzer notes, “My family were Zionists—not Zionists ready to leave the United States, but in favor of the enterprise, as I was.” (Williams, “Criticism and Connection”)

¹³ Maurice Isserman interview with Michael Walzer March 20, 1986 (Tamiment)

¹⁴ Abdullah Schleifer, “Decline of *Dissent*,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* (Fall 1972).

running around the country because we were trying [to spread] the Cambridge model of community organizing against Vietnam...and so I was traveling with some SDS people and giving speeches against the war and then suddenly, there is Israel's preemptive strike against Egypt and I'm giving speeches defending one war and criticizing another."¹⁵ But the breakdown of the left's consensus went deeper than just the antiwar movement and it posed deeper ideological problems for Walzer as well. Older left figures, many of whom Walzer had looked to as models of intellectual radicalism such as I.F. Stone and Isaac Deutscher, also insisted that exclusionary nationalism of Zionism and internationalism of socialism were incommensurate.¹⁶

One suspects Stone's criticisms were particularly distressing for Walzer. Stone, who had been an early advocate of Jewish self-determination (though insisting, with the *Ihud* intellectuals, it could only happen sustainably and equitably within a binational Jewish-Arab state), denounced Israel's growing militarism after 1967 in a well-circulated *New York Review of Books* essay titled "Holy War."¹⁷ Stone also directed a considerable amount of his animus toward Zionism, noting that it ran contrary to both his socialist commitments and the pluralism that has sustained diasporic Judaism since the Israelites' expulsion from Judea nearly 2,000 years before. The 1967 war and the occupations that followed had opened up, Stone insisted, questions about the "'moral myopia' of a people who framed so much of their identity around a 1,900-year exile" and it called for a "reexamination of Zionist ideology."¹⁸ "It must be recognized, despite Zionist ideology, that the periods of greatest Jewish creative accomplishment have been associated with pluralistic civilizations in their time of expansion and tolerance: in the Hellenistic period, in the

¹⁵ Oral history conducted by David Marcus with Michael Walzer, August 9, 2016 (Part II)

¹⁶ I.F. F. Stone, "Holy War," *The New York Review of Books* (August 3, 1967); Isaac Deutscher, "The Israeli-Arab War: June 1967," *The Non-Jewish Jew* (Oxford: Oxford, 1968)

¹⁷ I.F. Stone, "Holy War," *The New York Review of Books* (August 3, 1967)

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Arab civilization of North Africa and Spain, and in Western Europe and America. Universal values can only be the fruit of a universal vision; the greatness of the Prophets lay in their overcoming of ethnocentricity. A Lilliputian nationalism cannot distill truths for all mankind.”¹⁹

For Walzer, these criticisms proved to pose a considerable challenge to his own self-understanding as a socialist Zionist. It also highlighted a set of growing tensions within much of the longer New Left, if not always focused on Israel-Palestine, then on other regions in the decolonized world where the project of national self-determination often ran in conflict with a multinational pluralism and liberal democracy and in which the early long New Left’s commitments to radical democracy ran up against the statism of national liberation.

To defend Israel’s military actions in 1967 and then his Zionist politics, and eventually to begin to address many of the other conflicts between his socialist, radical democratic, and liberationist politics, Walzer followed several tracks simultaneously. He employed the arguments he had made in “Moral Judgment in Time of War” in *Just and Unjust Wars*, asserting that by blockading the Straits of Tiran, Egypt had posed an existential threat to Israel (a point later critics of Walzer would dispute).²⁰ He also took up challenges from the left that sought to place Zionism within the context of Western imperialism, that contended that Israel represented a new phase of settler-colonialism, and that challenged the nationalist and exclusionary underpinnings of Jewish self-determination.²¹ He also began to develop a fuller theory of international ethics that would simultaneously defend an equality between nations and the project of national liberation and an equality between persons and the internationalism and socialism of an older left. The 1967 war was not the only reason that Walzer had to confront these tensions, but it and

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ For Walzer’s discussion of the 1967 war in the context of international ethics and just war theory, see: Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, Chapter 5: Anticipations.

²¹ Michael Walzer and Martin Peretz, “Israel is not Vietnam,” *Ramparts* (July 1967)

the arguments around Israel, self-determination, and nationalism that followed served as goads, leading him to use political theory as a way to better make sense of his conflicting commitments.

In “On Arabs and Jews: The Chimera of a Binational State,” which Walzer published in *Dissent* in 1972, he attempted to offer an answer to the criticisms of Israel and Zionism’s one-nation state nationalism and to also work out some of the underlying tensions within his own thought between the internationalism and egalitarianism of his socialist commitments and his fidelity to a politics of national liberation and nation-statism.²² He also tried to do so on the universalist, egalitarian, and internationalist terms of his left critics. If the primary unit for modern life was the nation-state, Walzer argued, then all people and political communities should have one. “The left has always underestimated both the intensity and value of national feelings,” he insisted, “even when its parties and movement were systematically exploiting them.”²³ This had led the left to often think politics could transcend national identities. Instead of building an international society of nations; it aspired to building a post-national society of internationals. In Walzer’s view, this greatly overlooked “human beings respond to oppression, and survive it, by nourishing and cultivating their particular ethnic, racial, and religious identities.”²⁴ It also missed the consequential effects of decolonization and rise of the nation-state, first in Europe after World War I and then in much of the rest of the world after World War II. The program of national liberation and self-determination had, for better or worse, always centered on this cultivation of specific, often exclusively defined identities; decolonization was, in Walzer’s view, the project of liberating a distinct group of people from the arbitrary rule of empire. “The freedom of a community rather than an individual,” he explained, “may begin with

²² Michael Walzer, “On Arabs and Jews: The Chimera of a Binational State” *Dissent* (July 1972)

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

the removal of imperial bureaucrats, but its full development involves the sharing and shaping of...a political culture radically different from the cosmopolitanism of the old elites.”²⁵

Since, in Walzer’s view, this form of nationalism was inevitable, all should have the right to the instrument—the nation-state—that ensured this nationalism realization and a political community’s freedom. While “the universal principle that all men have a right to govern themselves points toward the proliferation of what, from the standpoint of the old empires (or of the world socialist republic), must look like parochial and archaic communities,” for Walzer there was no alternative. “Each act of liberation makes the next more necessary, if crime and cruelty are to be avoided.... The freedom of Iraq...requires the freedom of Kurdistan...the freedom of Pakistan, Bengal,” and “the freedom of Israel requires that of Palestine; and conversely, for those leftists already committed to Palestinian liberation, Palestine requires Israel. There is no way of avoiding the logic of the process—at least no honest way—unless one decides that one national or protonational group deserves to be subjected to another.”²⁶

Walzer recognized that this vision of universalizing nationhood posed problems for the egalitarianism of liberalism and the left, but he believed that in the wake of decolonization, egalitarians could not pick and choose which forms of nationalism and national liberation they backed and which they disavowed. “It is a dilemma that universalism should lead so inexorably to parochialism on a universal scale. And since leftists did not expect the dilemma, it should not be surprising that so many of them have coped with it so badly, choosing to support or not support this or that national group on the basis of the most arbitrary distinctions (progressive / reactionary).”²⁷ But if one supports the right of one group of people not to be ruled by an

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Walzer, “On Arabs and Jews: The Chimera of a Binational State”

²⁷ Ibid.

arbitrary form of power, Walzer insisted, then this principle must be applied equally to all nation. There just was “no secure or justified general position,” he insisted, “short of support for every popularly based movement...that aimed at national liberation.”²⁸ “No doubt,” he noted, “this is a defeat for socialist internationalism, as it is for ordinary liberalism,” but “how can one measure the value of one people’s self-discovery and national self-assertion against another’s?”²⁹

One might ask whether Walzer’s argument here was observing a defeat for liberalism and socialism that had already occurred or if his vision of an international system, defined by a confederation of nation-states that respected these states’ sovereignties even when they were repressive or undemocratic, was itself one more movement in the defeat of liberalism’s and socialism’s aspirations. But Walzer also never compellingly answers why he believes the program of liberating a people or group of peoples oppressed by the arbitrary and external rule of empire had to point to a narrowly defined national identity organized around religion, race, language, or ethnicity. A uniform body of people and ethnic solidarity may have been conducive to building movements against empire, but it was not a prerequisite for collective freedom and self-determination in the wake of empire. Numerous countries—India, the United States, Canada—offered examples of the possibility of postcolonial formations that may have been devised in opposition to an old imperial elite but that also built (albeit after, in most cases, considerable internal struggle) multicultural, multiethnic, and multiracial societies, and a country like France also pointed to the prospects of a politics of republican self-determination that universalized the nation and therefore defined it along inclusive, instead of exclusive, principles.

Walzer in his essay also did not answer perhaps what might be the most serious challenge to the exclusionary nationalism of Zionism—that perhaps the international system could not

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

really sustain a program of national liberation for all nations. When a narrowly defined group of people liberated themselves in a decolonized territory with more than one group, the project of national liberation and nation-state building could often prove to be more of a zero-sum game. Israel was not the only example of this: liberation of one group in Ceylon, Iraq, and many other parts of the world often led to the hindrance of another group's.³⁰ The project of emancipated nations ruling over themselves through a state of their own and in a territory in which they already lived was not one that could necessarily be universalized in a world in which different groups of people lived within overlapping territories. It could also lead to inhumane outcomes in which oppressive regimes stripped the humanity of one group for the sake of another and in which a politics of an equality between nations squashed one of an equality between persons.

Whether Walzer's argument was convincing or not, his "chimera" essay did mark an important turn in Walzer's thinking. For Walzer a key layer to the long New Left's politics was that of republican self-government and the doctrine of nonintervention and a key layer to his own thinking about international relations revolved around the notion that all groups should have a state of their own; these ideas all ran incongruously with the long New Left's commitments to radical democracy, its skepticism of the state, and its championing of those actors just below it.

Walzer's early writings about the politics of decolonization had always emphasized the emergence of popular movements, built out of citizens' self-organizing, but by the late 1960s a defense of national liberation led Walzer to the centrality of nation-state, which was now the institution that protected he believed protected the collective life these movements pursued. It almost certainly did not hurt that Walzer was also growing increasingly frustrated by the limited gains of the radical democratic activism that he had championed in the 1950s and 60s and that

³⁰ Walzer, "On Arabs and Jews: The Chimera of a Binational State"

the state at home was also under duress from a resurgent libertarian right. But by the early 1970s Walzer was already beginning to come to the conclusion that it was incumbent on the left to defend the sovereignty and primacy of the state, whether at home or abroad. This also meant finding a way to come to terms with the coercions and inequalities that the state naturally produced: the bureaucratic agencies, the regulation of social life from on high, the borders that defined its territory. One could not escape these in the twentieth century; in fact, in Walzer's view, they were integral to a more realistic understanding of the egalitarianism and internationalist politics of the left. "Here is the maxim of a chastened humanism," he insisted in his chimera essay. "Good borders make good neighbors."³¹ For him, a chastened humanism was all that was left.

Walzer never fully resolved the tensions between his Zionism and commitment to collective self-determination and his socialist and internationalist commitments. Nor would he ever fully resolve those between his national liberationist and nation-state politics and his democratic egalitarianism, and as the years went on, one might note that he began to cede more and more of his more radical commitments—to socialism, to radical democracy, to internationalism—to a more chastened egalitarianism that began to troublingly resemble the nationalist and statist politics he and so many of his contemporaries on the left had once been skeptical of. This would be particularly true in *Just and Unjust Wars* and *Exodus and Revolution*, texts that both sought to further develop his defense of nationalism—premised on an equality between people—even when they came into conflict with liberal and socialist ideals of an equality between people.

³¹ Walzer, "On Arabs and Jews: The Chimera of a Binational State"

Walzer's arguments on Israel also helped recalibrate his political affiliations as well as mark the beginning of his movement away from the radical democratic, libertarian, and post-Marxist socialism that had helped define much of his political commitments in the 1950s and 60s. Having spent much of the second half of the 1960s in heated debate with the *Dissent* circle over Vietnam, he now found that he was once again aligned with it and in opposition to much of the antiwar left not criticizing Israel. Henry Pachter remained an outlier among this group, defending America's presence in Vietnam and yet staunchly opposing the group's uncritical outlook on Israel. But almost all the other *Dissenters*—Howe, Coser, Plastrik, Harrington—rallied behind Israel after the 1967 war, and while most never called themselves Zionists, their politics began more and more to resemble Walzer's as they came to call for America's immediate withdrawal from Vietnam yet defend Jewish self-determination and the ideological framework undergirding Israel's one nation-state. For some, this change was born out of a newfound ethnic solidarity. But it was also likely the product of growing frustration with the left. "Had American socialism not reached an impasse in the postwar years," Howe later recalled, "I might have continued to think of myself as a cosmopolitan activist of Jewish origin."³²

Either way, the arguments over Israel and Zionism proved to be the last straws for Walzer and his relationship to the younger and more radical flanks of the New Left, and the bitterness and distrust it produced on both sides would take decades to pass. Only in the 1980s did the various left groupings, organized around the socialist and feminist activists in New American Movement and the older democratic socialists in Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, find a way to come together with the formation of the Democratic Socialists of America. By that point, both sides of the arguments over Israel and Vietnam had moved toward a more social-

³² Sorin, *Irving Howe*, 275-277

democratic politics that that had abandoned many earlier enmities toward the state. In an age of resurgent libertarianism, many of the socialists within the long New Left believed that they needed to form a “left wing of the possible” with liberals if they were to salvage what remained of the American welfare state. “We must go where the people are,” Harrington noted around the time of DSA’s founding, and by the 1980s, that was “the liberal wing of the Democratic Party.”³³

In a memoir written about these years, Harrington recalled how the first half of the 1960s had shown socialists that they could walk a “perilous tightrope” between being “true to the socialist vision of a new society” and “the actual movements fighting not to transform the system, but to gain some little increment of dignity or even just a piece of bread.”³⁴ This proved tenable for the first several generations of the long New Left during the 1950s and the 1960s, when it came to the direct actions around disarmament, civil rights, and decolonization. But the arguments over Vietnam and Israel, coupled with the disappointments of the McCarthy and McGovern campaigns, and the splintering of the left into a variety of more acutely defined movements around women’s, black, and gay liberation, made walking this tightrope even more difficult and by the early 1970s it sometimes seemed impossible for the left to remain balanced.

When in 1971 Walzer and several other faculty members organized a teach-in at Harvard with Eugene McCarthy, Bella Abzug, Noam Chomsky, and other anti-war activists in the hope of helping reenergize the peace movement for the 1972 election, 2,500 students attended, filling three halls. But they came not to show solidarity as much as to taunt the panel.³⁵ As one student wrote in the *Harvard Crimson*, “The whole pretense of ‘teaching’ was a sham. That phase of the

³³ Jack Ross, *The Socialist Party: A Complete History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2015), 545

³⁴ Michael Harrington, *Fragments of a Century* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1975), 225

³⁵ Bill Kovach, “McCarthy Scores ‘A Different War’: Cites Changes as Boston Teach-In Opens,” *New York Times* (February 22, 1971)

peace movement had pretty much ended back in '66, back before many of us had worked out our need to fight against the war.”³⁶ Chairing the meeting, Walzer tried to calm the room. “‘Well, here we are again,’ Michael Walzer began,” the student recalled in his article. “But it didn’t work. His ‘we’ was too highly suspect, for the only common denominator in the hall was a common distrust.”³⁷ The bitter scene was covered by the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. Both reported how Walzer, McCarthy, and others were forced to stand onstage as they were heckled and booed. At one point, reported the *Washington Post*, Walzer observed, with what one can only assume was ironic self-deprecation, that “to be serious in politics is to endure.”³⁸

The teach-in was an embarrassing debacle. The effort to salvage the intergenerational coalitions of the New Left proved to be even more of a letdown. The hope had been that the McCarthy event might give renewed life to the antiwar movement. But, as a reporter observed, the room was full of “cynicism and frustration.”³⁹ New movements were on the horizon. Socialist feminism, black radicalism, gay liberation, and environmentalism all suggested creative and promising paths forward for the left, bringing its visions of egalitarianism and emancipation into a new decade and to new groups. But with these movements only in gestation, and with the war in Southeast Asia “widening down” into Cambodia, Walzer and many peers within the long New Left felt they had arrived at a terrible and uncertain impasse, unclear about how to move forward or backward, stuck midway on a tightrope between past mistakes and an indeterminate future. Writing in a 1972 essay titled “Notes for Whoever’s Left,” Walzer bleakly observed: “When the revolution doesn’t happen it’s not easy to find one’s way back to everyday politics.”⁴⁰

³⁶ Greg Killday, “Teach In II—Of Sin and Sanders,” *The Harvard Crimson* (February 25, 1971)

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Trudy Rubin, “Teach-ins to fire up peace drive?” *Christian Science Monitor* (Feb 24, 1971); Bill Kovach, “McCarthy Scores ‘A Different War’: Cites Changes as Boston Teach-In Opens,” *The New York Times* (February 22, 1971); Lawrence Stein, “Kidology—A Revival,” *The Washington Post* (Feb 24, 1971)

³⁹ Stein, “Kidology—A Revival”

⁴⁰ Michael Walzer, “Notes for Whoever’s Left,” *Dissent* (Spring 1972)

III. Liberalism and the Art of Separation

7. Whoever's Left

Throughout the 1960s, Walzer held out hope that the new wave of citizen-based insurgencies might offer the left an alternative to revolution and reform. In his essays and political journalism for *Dissent*, Walzer tracked how this new strain of egalitarianism emerged out of the civil-rights, decolonization, and anti-war movements. In *Obligations* and his early work in normative political theory, he attempted to offer a theoretical framework upon which to justify its tactics, especially its direct actions and civil disobedience, and he sought to give its overarching strategy and goals greater clarity. For Walzer, the activism of the civil-rights and anti-war movements had given spontaneous expression to a new kind of left politics, one that mined the tradition of Anglo-American socialism and liberalism while redirecting its aims toward an engaged citizenry.

The protest movements never fully made the move to the democratic socialism that Walzer and his *Dissent* and *ULR* comrades had hoped for. But he nonetheless believed the new movement politics could be harnessed, and from its radical democracy might come a socialism from below. This was the program of *Dissent* in the 1950s and 60s; it was also the program of

the English New Left and Walzer's New Left Club peers during his Harvard years. Through civil society, a new form of social power could be consolidated that might force liberalism leftward.

Things started to change, however, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as tensions began to dissolve the bonds between the left's older and younger generations. New movements on the horizon—women's liberation, black liberation, gay liberation—challenged many of the static categories of an older left, and yet an older left was slow to respond to them or in some cases hostile to them.¹ In *Political Action*, Walzer was more receptive to feminist and black radicalism, but he too struggled to respond to and integrate their critiques of liberalism and the left into his work and only years later, after several critical responses from feminists to *Spheres of Justice*, including Susan Moller Okin, would Walzer come to wonder “how would my work have been different if I had engaged with and learned from the feminists of the late 1960s and 1970s?”²

Likewise, the fragile left-liberal coalition that had been built in the first half of the 1960s, between students, working- and middle-class activists, and liberals, had started to come undone by the second half of the decade. After the failed referendum campaign in Cambridge, the multigenerational group of leftists and liberals around the CNCV split into two opposed camps. One half went into draft resistance, the other into electoral politics. Neither track fared well in the late 1960s and early 1970s, among working-class Americans. Unlike the protest campaigns against segregation, peace did not have the same base among the working class and did not have the same natural left-liberal coalition, and both the direct action and electoral activists found their efforts frustrated by the very liberals they had collaborated with during the early 1960s.

The political and social conditions of the 1970s also shifted the ground beneath these radicals' feet. The umbrella of prosperity and social protections that helped sustain a new

¹ Irving Howe, “The Middle Class Mind of Kate Millet,” *Harpers* (December 1970)

² Walzer, “Feminism and Me,” *Dissent* (Winter 2013)

generation of working- and middle-class Americans as they became politically active no longer offered much cover in the wake of the economic crises of the early and mid-1970s. The welfare state that Walzer and many of his peers had taken for granted was under attack from more than the right but also by a spate of oil shocks and fiscal crises that racked the U.S. economy.

In a period of affluence and increasing equality, socialists could make the case that they could gradually transform social democracy from outside its formal institutions, using prosperity itself as a tool: In an age of affluence, more and more citizens could be enrolled in organizations within civil society to push politics toward the left. But with recession, and with a Republican government in power and a conservative movement on the rise, many on the left felt forced to abandon a more offensive position and redirect their energy to more defensive efforts.³ The liberal welfare state had long been taken for granted by the postwar left as a basic minimum upon which to build a fairer and more equal America, but not as an aspiration itself so much as a means to a more socialist end. But now, in an age of ascendant libertarianism, the left found itself in the position of having to defend the welfare state—and not only from critics on the right.

As these new political realities set in, Walzer's political orientation began to shift to the center. He had been torn between the democratic socialism of the *Dissent* left, which had all but abandoned movement politics by the late 1960s, and the civil-rights and anti-war activism of the student left to which he had dedicated so much of his life. The growing tensions between his commitments to Zionism and national liberation and his commitments to the egalitarian internationalism of the socialist left also became increasingly difficult to ignore or reconcile.

³ On the shifting political and economic ground in the 1970s, see, among others, Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010) and Judith Stein, *The Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven: Yale, 2010).

The place of socialists in liberal democracy, he believed, had also changed. Having already thrown in his lot with electoral politics in 1968 and 1972, Walzer now believed that as the postwar consensus around the liberal welfare state started to fall apart, the left had to direct its energies toward fortifying what remained of social democracy and the liberal welfare state in America before turning to the project of socialism and building a more participatory democracy.⁴

Walzer was not alone in making this argument in the 1970s; it was a conclusion arrived at by many of his socialist peers on the long New Left, whether of the Howe and Harrington generation or the *Studies on the Left* and New Left Club persuasion or even, by the mid-1970s, those among Tom Hayden and Todd Gitlin's generation. As Stanley Aronowitz, a contemporary of Walzer, observed: "When confronted with the tyranny of 'really existing' communism and the national liberation movements it supported, democratic socialists were constrained to support the limited goals of modern liberalism.... Renouncing the search for a political 'truth,' most erstwhile radicals [of this latter grouping] contented themselves with a politics that sought the achievement of 'more' equality and a greater measure of economic justice for the minorities excluded from postwar prosperity. Justice entailed preserving the gains of the welfare state, which albeit imperfect, remained a relatively adequate mechanism for securing social justice for the individual and for enacting laws that protected individual freedom and associational rights."⁵ As a result, the socialist left had come to the conclusion that it had to hold a "sharply attenuated conception of positive freedom" if it was to sustain a program of egalitarianism in America.⁶

"Our practical work will focus differently," Walzer noted in his 1972 essay, "Notes for Whoever's Left," "for we are in no position to choose our causes with reference only to our

⁴ Michael Walzer, "The Pastoral Retreat of the New Left," *Dissent* (Fall, 1979)

⁵ Stanley Aronowitz, *The Death and Rebirth of American Radicalism* (London: Routledge, 1996), 152

⁶ *Ibid.*

ideology.”⁷ Having once held out hope of expanding the reach of the welfare state, socialists would now have to fight to protect the achievements it already made. “We shall be involved in difficult battles over civil liberties, unionization, civil rights, social welfare, ethnic pluralism, crime, housing, education—and, endlessly, foreign policy,” Walzer observed. “In all these battles, we can bring socialist perspectives to bear; we have an ethic, a literature, a history to draw upon. But we...still have to look forward to the time when our vision actually integrates our day-to-day activity. Right now, it only draws us together to talk about and plan for that time.”⁸

In light of the implosion of the fragile coalition of left-liberal activists, Walzer had come to take an even starker view of the possibilities of citizen activism. Once he had held out hope for a civil society radicalism to create a new space for politics in a world of increasing bureaucratization. But now he worried that “local organizing does not lead in any clear way toward socialism—no more than union organizing did in the thirties.”⁹ The mobilization of various local campaigns did not break through the group politics system; they were eventually absorbed into it. The base the various New Lefts helped organize became “clients—first of all for the organizers and the advocates, and then for the state—not self-determining men and women”; likewise, the activists who were now enrolled in electoral politics were party apparatchiks and politicians.¹⁰ Walzer might have noted that many socialist feminists, environmentalists, and black radicals offered counter-examples of how a socialism from below and a civil-society based radicalism could continue into the 1970s and in fact helped expand the ambitions of the left. But cut off from these movements, and no longer active even among earlier New Left groupings, for

⁷ Walzer, “Notes for Whoever’s Left,” *Dissent* (Spring 1972)

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Walzer, “Notes for Whoever’s Left”

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Walzer the 1970s appeared to be a moment of disappointment. Having directed their energy toward organizing instead of building institutions, the early 1960s left no longer could sustain its earlier radicalism and now had to work with the institutions that existed—and for him that meant coming to terms with the limited gains of the liberal welfare state. Since “the peace movement has left behind no institutional residue,” he wrote in 1973, “what has now been demonstrated is that it cannot win by itself and that it cannot grow by simple expansion.” It could now survive only “within the Democratic Party and as a part of one or another future coalition.”¹¹

The turn away from the movement politics and citizen activism of the 1950s and '60s can be heard in the many essays Walzer wrote in the early and mid-1970s and that he collected in his next book, *Radical Principles: Reflections of an Unreconstructed Democrat*. So, too, can Walzer's search for a way back to everyday politics, which would eventually lead him toward liberalism and social democracy. What might have been a follow-up to *Political Action*, collecting many of his essays from the early and mid-1960s on the new movement politics, instead documented Walzer's disillusionment and frustration with the 1960s left. Leaving out many of his early essays that celebrated the activism and protest movements of the early New Left, the book tracked Walzer's movement toward the politics of the older *Dissent* cohort.¹²

Opening with a series of essays that examined liberalism's retreat in the wake of its failures in the 1960s, Walzer explored how the gains of the welfare state on economic and social terms were undermined by the limitations of the system on political terms. The welfare state

¹¹ Walzer, “The Peace Movement: What Was Won by Protest?” *The New Republic*, (February 10, 1973)

¹² Michael Walzer, “The Idea of Resistance,” *Dissent* (Fall 1960); “The Politics of the New Negro,” *Dissent* (Summer 1960); “Students in Washington: A New Peace Movement,” *Dissent* (Spring 1962); “The Young Radicals: A Symposium,” *Dissent* (Spring 1962); “Options for Resistance Today,” *Dissent* (May-June 1966)

provided the basic provisions needed for a greater equality but it also undermined the democratic conditions for political participation. The protest movements of the 1960s had offered a way to bring politics back into the hands of citizens, but after the large-scale movements around civil rights and Vietnam dissolved there was no longer the same basis for large-scale movements and now politics revolved around either community organizing that had often turned to local poverty advocacy or electoral activism that was absorbed into the Democratic Party.¹³ While Walzer was sympathetic to both the community activism and electoral politics, he worried that the community organizers, while helping enroll more people within the welfare state, and the electoral activists, while helping reform the Democratic Party from within, practiced a politics more of defense than of offense. “Because there is no other place to work,” Walzer noted, the left could now only “work within the system,” a system that was “constraining” and that would only offer “small victories” that didn’t “add up” and that demanded “difficult, frustrating” work.¹⁴ While had he engaged with the feminist activism at the time, he would have likely taken a different view of things, for Walzer, it appeared all the left could presently do was dig in. “New patterns of social cooperation, deeper equality—these lay, I thought, beyond the welfare state, and waited upon its completion,” Walzer noted in his book’s last essay. “But this vision assumed an infinitely expandable economy, and that looks today like an implausible assumption.”¹⁵

Walzer was not alone in beginning to recognize the changing task and increasing limitations faced by socialists in the United States. A group of long New Left veterans—James Weinstein,

¹³ Michael Walzer, “Violence: The Police, the Militants, and the Rest of Us,” *Dissent* (April, 1971); “Notes for Whoever’s Left,” *Dissent* (Spring, 1972); “The Pastoral Retreat of the New Left,” *Dissent* (Fall, 1979)

¹⁴ Michael Walzer, “The Pastoral Retreat of the New Left,” *Dissent* (Fall, 1979)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Michael Lerner, Barbara Ehrenreich, Richard Healey, Barbara Epstein, and Staughton Lynd among them—set out to found a new organization that might help salvage what remained of the left in the 1970s. Founded in Davenport, Iowa, in 1971 as the New American Movement, it hoped to enroll tens of thousands of anti-war and civil-rights activists, socialists, and feminists who might then link up with the more liberal flanks of organized labor and liberal Democrats and form a new left-liberal coalition in America.¹⁶ The emphasis remained socialist; the founders came mostly from Walzer’s “middle generation” of long New Leftists, as opposed to the later New Leftists that had been more ambivalent about socialism. But they had also had softened their politics by the 1970s, accepting the tactics and principles of democratic reform, disavowing the revolutionary turn among their peers—in both its Maoist and its terrorist expressions—and hoping that a democratic-socialist politics not unlike the increasingly reformist Eurocommunism might emerge in the United States.¹⁷ As Maurice Isserman notes, if “SDSers had favored T-shirts bearing a likeness of slain Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara as a fashion/political statement,” then “NAM’s T-shirts featured the likeness of Italian Communist theorist Antonio Gramsci and his dug-in-for-the-long-haul slogan, ‘Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will.’”¹⁸

A similar tendency took root among Walzer’s colleagues at *Dissent*. Hoping they might be able to join up with the new generation of post-1960s leftists around groups like NAM and within the Democratic Party, Howe, Harrington, and Coser hoped to build a new socialist

¹⁶ Agis Salupkas, “400 on Radical Left Gather to Build a National Movement Backed by Workers,” *New York Times* (November 30, 1971)

¹⁷ For the history of NAM, see Stanley Aronowitz, *The Death and Rebirth of American Radicalism* (especially the chapter “The Situation of the Left in the United States”) and Victor Cohen’s interviews with Richard Healey, Barbara Epstein, and many other NAM veterans in “The New American Movement: Oral History,” *Work & Days* (Spring/Fall 2010). Of note are: Stanley Aronowitz, “The New American Movement and Why It Failed?”; Michael Lerner, “Reflections on NAM”; Judith Kegan Gardner, “Ambitious Moderation: Socialist Feminism and NAM”; and Carl Boggs, “Gramsci and the New American Movement.” The introduction to *Unfinished Business: Twenty Years of Socialist Review* edit by Socialist Review Collective (New York: Verso, 1991) also gives us an overview.

¹⁸ Isserman, *The Other American* 347

organization that would not operate as a party but as a kind of socialist and social-democratic pressure group, operating in a field of more right-wing interest groups. The 1972 election solidified this turn for Walzer as it did for Harrington, Howe, and a growing number of *Dissent* and Socialist Party members. George McGovern's campaign had, from the start, been a disaster. But for Walzer and the *Dissent* circle, his loss signaled the possibility for a realignment in the party: There was an emerging generation of left-leaning activists, many of whom were veterans of the McGovern campaigns and who were ready to enroll in the Democratic Party in order to push it to the left. What they needed was a stronger base both outside the party to help publicize their politics. As Harrington noted, he and the older *Dissenters* had "enormously underestimate[d] the potential of the new strata of the McGovern campaign."¹⁹ McGovern's loss also marked an opening, for a socialist and social democratic left to once again emerge but not through its own candidates but by forming a left-wing flank within the Democratic Party.

Walzer had never been a member of the Socialist Party, but after Harrington resigned in the fall of 1972 from a chairmanship he shared with Bayard Rustin and Sasha Zimmerman, Walzer joined Harrington, Howe, Bogdan Denitch, Debbie Meier, Victor Reuther, Christopher Lasch, Norman Birnbaum, Jules Bernstein, Patricia Sexton, and a group of Socialist Party activists, *Dissenters*, and organizers for the AFSCME, the International Association of Machinists, the American Federation of Teachers, and the United Auto Workers in calling for a conference to found a new socialist organization. "We felt it was time for a regrouping of the Left after the debacle of the last few years," Walzer told a *Harvard Crimson* reporter in the run-up to the fall conference. "My sense is that the people who were at odds with Mike Harrington or me or *Dissent* over the last few years are much less hostile now.... Christopher Lasch, for

¹⁹ Isserman, *The Other American*, 297

instance, was always to our left and never involved in social-democratic politics before” and had signed on.²⁰

The conference that fall, titled “The Future of the Democratic Left,” gathered several hundred participants at a New York hotel, where they founded the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC).²¹ Its mandate was a far cry from the more radical democratic and militant politics that *Dissent* and the early New Left had once espoused. Rather than seeking to radicalize the welfare state by empowering citizens within civil society, the DSOC sought to secure the welfare state and social democracy in an age in which they were under attack. Rather than insist on putting socialism at the forefront of their politics, and turning to citizen movements to help create a more democratic and self-organized citizenry, they turned to conventional politicians and politics, viewing themselves as a socialist grouping in a broader left-liberal coalition.

Given Harrington and several other DSOC members’ affiliation with the Americans for Democratic Action at this time, it was also clear that any skirmishes between socialism and liberalism had been called off, or at least postponed, to build a new left-liberal coalition. In the 1970s, the task of socialists was to play a subsidiary role to the remaining liberals in the Democratic Party. The goal was to defend the welfare state and to perhaps press, as much as the left could, for a more robust social democracy. “Today we begin the work of building the seventies left,” Harrington announced at the conference.²² This was no longer the left of the

²⁰ Seth Kupferberg, “Walzer Joins a New Socialist Group,” *The Harvard Crimson*, September 17, 1973

²¹ For a discussion of the founding of DSOC, see: Isserman’s *The Other American* and Jack Ross, “Democratic Socialists of America and the Roots of Post-Cold War Liberalism,” *The Socialist Party: A Complete History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2015)

²² Clark, *The Socialist Party*, 545

1950s and '60s, but a politics of the possible—and the possible for the left in the early 1970s was rather limited.

Even those among the *Dissent* circle who had been ardent critics of the original left-liberal coalitions of the Popular Front had come around to Harrington's arguments. Writing in *Socialism and America*, Howe observed that "if we are to see a resurgent democratic left in America, it will have more to learn tactically from the Popular Front initiated by the Stalinists than from those political ancestors whose integrity we admire."²³ Lasch, who ended up joining the conference despite his criticism of the *Dissent* left's liberal turn, noted that while the "radicalized liberalism as represented by...Harrington is no substitute for a radical party," it "may be the only political force strong enough to save the country from a general reaction."²⁴

In an essay Walzer wrote for the *New Republic* several months before the DSOC's founding, he observed that there were three different phases the left had undergone since the end of World War II: the educational phase, mostly organized by students and embodied in the teach-ins and publicity campaigns of the anti-war and civil-rights movements; a mobilization phase that developed a series of extra-parliamentary civil-rights and anti-war movements and staged a series of direct actions that sought to express their discontent, but that nonetheless left "it to conventional politicians to respond to these expressions"; and an electoral phase that aspired to bring the new radicalism, as modest and constrained as it was by the early and mid-1970s, into the sphere of conventional and institutional politics.²⁵ The left in this last stage could no longer truly be the left of the first two; it had to use the liberal institutions that already existed; it also had to accept the limited prospects for socialism in the immediate future. But, Walzer insisted,

²³ Irving Howe, *Socialism and America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 88

²⁴ Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Knopf, 1969), 203

²⁵ Michael Walzer, "The Peace Movement: What Was Won by Protest?" *The New Republic*, (February 10, 1973)

“it was the third part of the peace movement—the presidential campaigns of McCarthy and McGovern—that brought it closest to success. For the American left, conventional politics is itself an achievement.” Walzer felt that by the 1970s and ’80s, it was all the left still had.²⁶

This turn to conventional politics may have failed in the short term, but, in Walzer’s view, it would go on to demonstrate incremental levels of success. Losing in 1968, the emerging post-60s left alignment seized the party and presidential nomination in 1972. Losing the 1972 presidential election, it infiltrated the rank and file of the Democratic Party and reformed its institutions and bylaws, creating midterm national party conventions, relaxing the rules on primaries to allow for more challengers, and organizing state planks and candidates that began to seize local party apparatuses. Groups like the DSOC and NAM appeared to offer a new approach to politics, and they marked a new realignment of left and liberal forces around a “left wing of the possible.” As Walzer explained to the *Crimson* that fall, the activists in DSOC wanted not to remake the Democrats in their own image but to form “a socialist caucus within the...party” and “try to collect the remnants of the Left and organize around common problems.”²⁷ “The welfare state is not the name of our desire,” he added in another essay from this time, but it “remains the most important politics today, and no serious activism can avoid the patterns it imposes.”²⁸

This turn to institutions also led many on the left toward thinking about other venues through which to sustain and expand the base for progressive politics. One site outside of community organizing and Democratic Party politics was journalism. NAM founders James Weinstein and

²⁶ Walzer, “The Peace Movement: What Was Won by Protest?”

²⁷ Kupferberg, “Walzer Joins a New Socialist Group”

²⁸ Walzer, “The Pastoral Retreat of the New Left,” *Radical Principles*, 185

Michael Learner, frustrated by some of the infighting within the organization, founded *In These Times* and *Tikkun*, which they hoped might offer a more radical and socialist alternative to the liberal opinion journalism in the *New Republic* and the *Nation*.²⁹ Likewise, another group of New Left veterans founded *Mother Jones*, and in 1978, Victor Navasky, an antiwar Democratic Party activist, took over the editorship of the *Nation*.³⁰ Many radicals, after the frustrations of the late 1960s and early 1970s, had fled the confrontations of the streets for the academy, forming what people like John Patrick Diggins, Russell Jacoby, and Richard Rorty later pejoratively referred to as “the academic left.”³¹ But not all; in fact, parallel to the social democratic coalitions seeking to build a left wing of the possible within the Democratic Party, many of the long New Left members threw themselves into more public forms of intellectual production ignored by many later historians and social critics and that left a considerable impact on American life. Through national magazines, and through Democratic activism, they insisted, a left constituency that had been born and radicalized by the 1960s could be sustained in a new era.

Walzer, Howe, and Harrington also began to write more frequently for national magazines, even as all three continued their work at *Dissent* and with groups like DSOC. They occasionally contributed to these other long New Left venues, but as they had grown increasingly disenchanted with movement politics, they also turned to another post-1960s journal of opinion experiencing its own revival and that was more in line with their own disillusionment: the *New Republic*. Founded in 1914 by a group of intellectuals who were momentarily under the sway of socialism, the magazine had, with the exception of a radical period during the

²⁹ For a brief discussion of *In These Times*, see Aronowitz, *The Death and Rebirth of American Radicalism*.

³⁰ For Navasky’s takeover of *The Nation*, see: Navasky, *A Matter of Opinion*.

³¹ Diggins, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left*

Depression, mostly represented a progressive, if still reserved, vision of liberalism.³² In the late 1960s, however, this vision had gone into crisis as the establishment liberalism the magazine had long championed had itself gone into a state of shock and uncertainty during the Vietnam years and the longstanding owner and editor of the magazine, Gilbert Harrison, began to look for someone from the 1960s generation to take over the magazine and help give it new life. Meeting Marty Peretz at the home of McCarthy, Harrison believed he found the right person.³³

“Rich by marriage,” as one *Washington Post* reporter snidely observed, Peretz was a lecturer in Harvard’s Social Studies department and at the time moving from the left to the center. Active in the 1960s protest campaigns, on the margins of the Harvard New Left Club, and occasionally a contributor to the New York intellectual magazines, Peretz’s primary involvement with the long New Left was through his money—or, rather, through his wife’s money: Peretz had supported *Ramparts*, the New Left monthly; he was one of McCarthy’s main donors and also was a considerable backer of McGovern’s campaign; and he supported the wave of “new politics” conferences in the late 1960s that sought to enroll the left in the Democratic Party.³⁴

Like so many people who spend their money more than their time on radical politics, Peretz also had unreasonable expectations when it came to his fellow radicals. Hoping to help fund the long New Left’s march back into the institutions in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he expected this march should follow his own political path—in particular, when it came to Israel.

³² For *TNR*’s history, see: Charles Forcey, *The Crossroads of Liberalism: Croly, Weyl, Lippmann and the Progressive Era* (Oxford: Oxford, 1961); Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism: The Intellectual as a Social Type, 1889-1963* (New York: Knopf, 1965); John Patrick Diggins, “*The New Republic* and Its Times,” *The New Republic* (December 10, 1984); David Seideman, *The New Republic: A Voice of Modern Liberalism* (New York: Praeger, 1986).

³³ Richard L. Madden, “Harvard Lecturer Buys New Republic,” *New York Times* (March 13, 1975)

³⁴ James Ridgeway, “The *Ramparts* Story,” *The New York Times* (April 20, 1969). For his role in the McGovern campaign, see: Warren Weaver Jr., “A Statesman Who...” *The New York Times* (December 4, 1967); “Two Young Rich Activists,” *Washington Post* (February 2, 1969)

When a public fight broke out over Zionism at one of the first “new politics” conferences, followed by *Ramparts* critical coverage of the 1967 and 1973 Israeli-Arab wars, Peretz began to look for less radical and more centrist venues to direct his money.³⁵ With his “radicalism outdistanced,” as one reporter put it, Peretz found that the *New Republic* offered the perfect liberal venue in which he might build a more robust and more practical liberalism for the 1970s and he acquired it, and the townhouse the magazine long resided in, for \$380,000 in 1974.³⁶

Always known for its cozy relationship with the Beltway establishment, under Peretz’s control, the magazine began its creep toward those within the establishment who had also come to the conclusion that that the lesson of the 1960s was that liberalism had to embrace a more chastened view of politics. “On foreign issues, there’s a great dependence on the Georgetown Center for Strategic Studies, which is closely tied to the Henry Kissinger axis,” a *Nation* editor complained in 1979. But “even on domestic issues, any definition of liberalism can’t include *The New Republic*.”³⁷

Why Howe, Walzer, Coser, and Harrington chose Peretz’s *New Republic* among the many post-1960s institutions that they could have published in is not entirely clear. It may have been that, after the bitter infighting between the various lefts, it was the only one inviting them to contribute. It may have been social: Walzer, Howe, Coser, and Peretz had known each other since the 1950s, when all three were at Brandeis. It may also have been political. The *New Republic* was not entirely unsympathetic to the coalitional politics espoused by the DSOC, even if it might have advocated a more liberal breed of a “left wing of the possible.” (In fact, shortly

³⁵ Kathleen, Teltesch, “S.N.C.C. Criticized for Israel Stand,” *The New York Times* (August 16, 1967); Walter Goodman, “The Liberal Establishment faces the Blacks, the Young, the New Left,” *The New York Times* (December 29, 1968)

³⁶ Madden, “Harvard Lecturer Buys New Republic,” *New York Times* (March 13, 1975)

³⁷ Steven Ratner, “New Republic Is Seen Shifting Liberal Outlook,” *New York Times* (January 29, 1979)

after Peretz purchased the magazine, the *New Republic*'s long-standing Beltway reporter and in-house curmudgeon, Henry Fairlie, ran a long, flattering profile of an early DSOC convention.³⁸) One also suspects that Howe, Harrington, and Walzer, after years of being on the right-wing side of the New Left's arguments, found it appealing to be on the left of Peretz's growing centrism.

There was also the matter of Israel. "The security of Israel is for me," Peretz explained to the *New York Times* in an article noting the *New Republic*'s rightward drift shortly after his acquisition of it, "as much a moral issue as Indochina was a decade ago. The Palestinians have a right to decide their own life, but not Israel's life."³⁹ And on this, if not much else, Howe, Walzer, and most *Dissenters* agreed. In Peretz and the *New Republic*, they had found an ally.

When Peretz took over, he fired Harrison, whom he had promised to keep on for several years, and then pushed out much of the older staff in a series of well-reported and acrimonious layoffs. ("A tale of five egos," observed one reporter, "a Rashoman of the publishing world where one man's truth is another's fiction, one man's politics an affront to another's professionalism."⁴⁰) He also added, among others, Walzer to the magazine's masthead as a contributing editor, and the articles and editorials that Walzer contributed to the magazine in these years followed the three tracks that connected the *Dissent* circle to the *New Republic*: He wrote about the limits and excesses of the late 1960s protest movements.⁴¹ He defended social democracy and coalitional left-wing politics from the left as well as the right and he attempted to revise his definition of socialism so that it better accorded with the politics of the American

³⁸ Henry Fairlie, "The Passionate Socialist," *The New Republic* (March 26, 1977)

³⁹ Rattner, "New Republic Is Seen Shifting Liberal Outlook"

⁴⁰ Jean M. White, "A New Flap at The New Republic," *Washington Post* (May 23, 1975); William Gildea, "A Firing at the New Republic," *Washington Post* (June 5, 1975); Stephen Klaidman, "Conflict Rages Over Policies of The New Republic," *Washington Post* (September 2, 1975)

⁴¹ Michael Walzer, "The Peace Movement: What Was Won by Protest?" *The New Republic* (February 10, 1973); "The Pastoral Retreat of the New Left," *Dissent* (Fall, 1979).

liberal welfare state.⁴² Finally, he wrote about the politics of Israel and the Middle East and about his own Zionism.⁴³

Walzer's break from the politics of the 1960s could be heard in all three approaches, as could his movement closer to the liberal and social-democratic politics that later undergirded much of his political theory, from *Just and Unjust Wars* and *Spheres of Justice* to *The Company of Critics*. His critiques of the New Left often focused on the limits of citizen activism to effect long-term change and build long-lasting institutions. "The 'new politics' will survive," Walzer noted, "but only within the Democratic Party and as part of one or another future coalition."⁴⁴

Walzer's defense of the welfare state and social democracy from radical, libertarian, and neoconservative criticism also centered on his growing belief that state played a central role in creating a more equal society and a more pacific world order and that the left had to defend its institutions and begin to think a bit more critically about its reliance on extra-state politics. And he also began to work out a more liberalized view of socialism, one that helped pluralize many of the notions of equality that the left had for much of its existence understood in primarily universal terms. "What egalitarianism requires is that many bells should ring," he argued in one essay from 1973. "Different goods should be distributed to different people for different reasons. Equality is not a simple notion, and it cannot be satisfied by a single distributive scheme."⁴⁵

⁴² Michael Walzer, "In Defense of Equality," *Dissent* (Fall, 1973); "Disadvantaged Groups, Individual Rights" (unsigned editorial), *The New Republic* (October 15, 1977).

⁴³ Michael Walzer, "Israeli Arabs: The Rabin Government's Dilemma," *The New Republic* (April 17, 1976); "Hope in the Middle East" (unsigned editorial), *The New Republic* (December 3, 1977); "How to Welcome President Sadat" (unsigned editorial), *The New Republic* (April 9, 1977); "Chosen for Attention" (unsigned editorial), *The New Republic* (August 16, 1980). "Arafat's Unexpected Ally" (unsigned editorial), *The New Republic* (June 23, 1979). For a full list of his unsigned editorials, see <https://www.sss.ias.edu/files/Walzer-Publications-complete.pdf>

⁴⁴ Michael Walzer, "The Peace Movement: What Was Won by Protest?" *The New Republic*

⁴⁵ Michael Walzer, "In Defense of Equality," *Dissent* (Fall 1973)

Yet, it was on Middle Eastern politics, and in particular on the subject of Israel, that Walzer's realignment became clearest. Some articles examined internal Israeli policies as the occupation deepened and the country moved to the right, first with the Labor Party launching the settler movement in the 1970s and then under the right-wing revanchism of Menachem Begin.⁴⁶ Others contemplated the geopolitical aspects of the Israeli-Arab conflict, especially after Begin and Egypt's Anwar Sadat began to make overtures in the late 1970s and the conflict became more and more a clash between Jews and Palestinians within the decolonized territory of Palestine than between Israel and Arab states.⁴⁷ But in nearly all of his essays he took a defensive stance toward those critics of Israel that he felt challenged Israel's underlying right to exist.

In an unsigned editorial "Arafat's Unexpected Ally," for example, Walzer framed his criticisms of Begin and the Israeli right not in the context of what had led to or arguably brought to the surface a revanchist bent in Israeli political culture but how Begin's expansionism dampened Israel's right to self-rule.⁴⁸ "What Israel needs," he argued, "in the West Bank for its own security is fairly simple and straightforward: first, relatively modest permanent changes in Israel's borders, largely in the unpopulated areas; second, reliable security arrangements including Israeli troops stationed beyond the new borders; third, effective limits on the military strength of any successor authority, Palestinian or Jordanian; and fourth (though this is a subject best left to another time), an arrangement that guarantees the unity of Jerusalem."⁴⁹ The Begin government's main fallacy was not expansionism alone, but that this expansionism hindered the

⁴⁶ Michael Walzer, "Israeli Arabs: The Rabin Government's Dilemma," *The New Republic* (April 17, 1976); "Hope in the Middle East" (unsigned editorial), *The New Republic* (December 3, 1977)

⁴⁷ "How to Welcome President Sadat" (unsigned editorial), *The New Republic* (April 9, 1977); "Chosen for Attention" (unsigned editorial), *The New Republic* (August 16, 1980). "Arafat's Unexpected Ally" (unsigned editorial), *The New Republic* (June 23, 1979).

⁴⁸ Unsigned editorial (Walzer), "Arafat's Unexpected Ally" *The New Republic* (June 23, 1979)

⁴⁹ Ibid.

formalization of borders for Israel and a Palestinian state. “No doubt,” Walzer argued, “Arafat is grateful: with this Begin and he can walk hand in hand toward confrontation and disaster.”⁵⁰

In another article, “Chosen for Attention,” Walzer chastised the international community, in particular the UN, for focusing on Israel while neglecting a wide array of infractions by other developed and developing countries; his critique, however, centered on the tensions between the UN and other multilateral international bodies and an international society of self-determining nation-states that enforce their own internal laws. The UN and other international bodies should govern relations between nations, not within them (though there are exceptions to this rule—basic minimums of human rights that compel the society of nations to take collective action). Again he asserted that Palestinians deserved a state but that this could only be cultivated by Palestinians alone and in agreement with other Middle Eastern states, including Israel. “That is the single point that America’s leaders must reiterate,” he insisted. “Defeats for Israel in the UN will not translate into concessions on the ground, because we won’t help make the translation.”⁵¹

Walzer wrote did address the question of Palestinian self-determination in several of these essays, and reiterate his argument from his chimera essay: Palestinian statehood was, in his view, a matter of principle. “The freedom of Israel,” as he argued, “requires that of Palestine.”⁵² But on this subject, his justifications for creating a separate Palestinian state rested on the “logic of national liberation” that he believed justified Jewish self-rule in Israel and that did not address underlying questions about the project of an exclusionary nationalism. “What most people need is a state of their own,” he explained in a later interview he gave, and “there is a sense in which

⁵⁰ Unsigned editorial (Walzer), “Arafat’s Unexpected Ally”

⁵¹ Unsigned editorial (Walzer) “Chosen for Attention,” *The New Republic* (August 16, 1980)

⁵² Walzer, “On Arabs and Jews: The Chimera of a Binational State”

Israel needs a Palestinian state right now more than the Palestinians do, because Israel won't be a Jewish state unless it is a smaller state.”⁵³

The arguments over collective self-determination had already featured prominently in Walzer's writings on decolonization politics, Cuba, the Vietnam War, and the Israeli-Arab wars of 1967 and 1973. They also became the backbone that held together *Just and Unjust Wars*. Not all of this was because of his Zionist commitments to Jewish self-determination. As discussed in earlier chapters, there were many other sources for Walzer's commitment to a politics of national liberation and to the nation-statism that would become central to his international ethics. But the arguments over Israel in the mid- and late 1970s informed his later thinking on the subject, forcing him to try to reconcile the tensions between the internationalism and egalitarianism of his socialism and the particularism and nationalism of his Zionism and national liberationist politics. It was not so much that he saw a text like *Just and Unjust Wars* as vindicating his commitment to Jewish self-rule (it never directly addresses Zionism), but that the book builds an international ethics on the premise that underlies both Zionist and national liberationist politics: that all peoples deserve the right to their own state un-menaced by arbitrary and external power.

In Walzer's essay on binationalism, one can already find him ceding considerable ground to the politics of national liberation and an increasingly statist view of politics. In a world of already formed nation-states, he argued, the only path toward self-determination was to adhere to the logic of self-government for all political groups, even if this came into conflict with one's liberal or socialist commitments. In his view, this was a different kind of egalitarianism—an

⁵³ Williams, "Criticism and Connection"

equality between nations and peoples instead of an equality between individual persons. But in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Walzer attempted to situate his argument for national liberation within the radical tradition. As well as an argument about the way things were, he wanted to make an argument about the project of republican self-government and nation-states as being linked to the way things *ought* to be: Just as socialism's central aspiration was an equality between persons, he contended, a parallel form of equality between nations could be found in the program of national liberation begun in the middle of the nineteenth century with the 1848 revolutions and completed in the years after World War II with decolonization. In Walzer's view, one could then make the case for Zionism by invoking the very egalitarian terms that underwrote his socialism: Since some nations had a state, all nations deserved one. "There is no way," as Walzer argued, "of avoiding the logic of the process—at least no honest way—unless one decides that one national or protonational group deserves to be subjected to another."⁵⁴

Walzer developed some of these themes in several of his shorter editorials and articles on Middle Eastern politics, but they attained their fullest expression in an essay-review of a book by Shlomo Avineri. In this essay, titled "The Challenge of Liberation," he defended Zionism along the lines that it accords with a principle of egalitarianism scaled up to the international sphere. "Zionism," he insists in the essay's opening, "is the national liberation movement of the Jewish people. This simple affirmation makes an important point, and it isn't a new point. In the name of what principle of liberty or socialism, asked Moses Hess in the 1860s, can the Jews be asked to forgo their collective identity and political rights when every other people insists upon its own identity and claims its own rights? Zionism is a demand for equal treatment, for minimal justice in the world of nations."⁵⁵ This minimal justice clearly conflicted with socialism's

⁵⁴ Walzer, "On Arabs and Jews: The Chimera of a Binational State"

⁵⁵ Walzer, "The Challenge of Liberation"

internationalism and liberalism's pluralism. It also highlighted the growing tensions between Walzer's radical democratic commitments, which looked to develop a politics below the state, and his increasingly statist ones. But, in Walzer's view, it was egalitarian in its own fashion: Each nation, like each person, had an equal claim to the right determine their own social system.

Walzer pursued this line of reasoning even further in *Exodus and Revolution*.⁵⁶ In it, he attempted "to trace a continuous history from Exodus to radical politics of our own time" by showing how the narrative arc of the Exodus story can be found in nearly all emancipatory politics since the Puritan Revolution.⁵⁷ From the Jacobin and American revolutionaries in the late eighteenth century to the liberal nationalists in the mid-nineteenth century, and from Marxists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the civil-rights and anti-colonial movements of the 1950s and '60s, the auto-emancipation of liberation had been essential to the left's politics. The central pattern in all of these different liberation struggles, Walzer insisted, evinced the same "linear movement" found in the Exodus narrative, from collective consciousness to social conflict to a political covenant that establishes a self-determining political community: First, Walzer noted, a group of people, no matter where they are, recognize their alienation from a society as it exists; then they build a broader base or a social movement around a more affirmative vision of a more liberated world; then they gain support for this vision through conflict; and then they consolidate these gains within a covenant or constitution and a formal state. This was what the Calvinists did in England; it was what the American Revolutionaries and then Latin American nationalists did in the New World and what the Jacobins and 1848-ers did in the Old World; it was movement toward national liberation that begun in Europe in the wake of World War I and that was completed in much of the rest of the world after World War II.

⁵⁶ Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic, 1985)

⁵⁷ Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 25

These stages of development Walzer insisted even hold true for those seeking to liberate a group within a society from a particular form of oppression but not found a state of their own.

By making this argument, Walzer wanted to show that his commitment to collective self-determination and national liberation, and in particular his commitment to Zionism and the state of Israel, was not incongruent with his affinity for radical politics: liberation, rather than egalitarianism, was the core of the radical tradition in Walzer's view, and that from the outset it followed a similar pattern: "first, that wherever you live, it is probably Egypt," as Walzer argued at the end of his book. "Second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land...and, third, that 'the way to the land is through the wilderness.'"⁵⁸ But while Walzer's argument was crisply narrated and impressive for its wide-ranging interpretive scheme, his argument also left a considerable number of unresolved tensions and ambiguities at its center. The differences between those liberation movements that seek to liberate a particular people and those that seek to liberate all peoples (in a territory or around the world) is a considerable one and one that often marks the difference between reactionary and conservative movements pursuing self-government and egalitarian and pluralist ones pursuing self-government. They separate not just, say, liberal nationalists and Marxists in the mid- and late nineteenth century, or anti-colonial nationalists and anti-colonial socialists; they also, more broadly, separate egalitarians of both the leftist and liberal variety who offer an inclusive vision of a people from reactionaries and conservatives who offer exclusionary understandings of who the people are. Southern segregationists spoke in the language of self-rule as did abolitionists, but the former hoped to allow a regional majority to control and menace the lives of a minority while the latter

⁵⁸ Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 149

sought to extend the ideals of self-government to all members within a bounded territory.

Liberation alone is not a radical program; it requires other constraining ideals and principles too.

There were also other problems in drawing parallels between all of the liberationist movements. The civil-rights movement, for example, sought to hold a society to its pluralist commitments, extending the program of liberation to all people living within the bounded territory of the United States, and it was not invested in a state of its own whereas anti-colonial national liberation movements, of the socialist or nationalist variety, were often not interested in pluralism within a society so much as self-rule and building a state for a specific group. Likewise, while some of liberationists, especially the liberal nationalists from the nineteenth century, saw their project as having international implications and could be applied universally, the lessons of the twentieth-century national liberation pointed in the opposite direction. Scaling up socialism's vision of an equality between persons to nationalism's equality between peoples did not lead to or ensure the prospects of the former, in fact often the latter's success undermined it. It was also unclear if the international system could sustain such a program of national liberation. In hotly contested decolonized territories where there was more than one group or people, often collective self-determination was understood in starkly zero-sum terms: The self-government of one people not only did not require the self-government of other peoples within a territory but often led to postcolonial regimes that actively resisted allowing others' to rule over themselves. And Walzer also never compellingly made the case for why postcolonial rule had to lead inevitably to national liberation and to one nation states. One can agree with Walzer that community, parallel to self-determination, is central to human existence but one can do so without accepting, as he asserted in a review of one of Noam Chomsky's books, that these

“human needs [were] embodied in contemporary nationalism.”⁵⁹ There are many forms of community, not all cut up along national, religious, ethnic, racial, or cultural lines and numerous postcolonial states, defining the nation by all peoples living in a territory, offered counter-examples to Walzer’s teleology. Anticolonial liberation did not have to be dedicated to a particular group’s self-government: multinational and binational republics, as well as post-national ones, could emerge out of empire too.

Walzer recognized that the project of national liberation could veer off track, bringing what he called the “politics of exile” into newly liberated republics, and in Walzer’s later work, especially in *The Paradox of Liberation*, he would take up the question of what went wrong with the struggles for national liberation in Israel, India, and Algeria.⁶⁰ In *Exodus and Revolution*, too, Walzer took up the question of how the emancipatory tendencies of national liberation went off the rails and in particular in Israel. But his critique of was also, in its own way, a defense. While many critics in the 1970s and 80s of Israeli policies pointed out that the Israeli right’s unwillingness to work with Palestinians was consistent with Labor governments that had launched the settlement program in the occupied territories in the West Bank and Gaza and that had often resisted helping promote the prospect of a Palestinian state, for Walzer, Israeli politics had only taken a troubling turn after Begin and the revisionist right’s rise in the 1970s.⁶¹ In Walzer’s view, Israel’s revanchism was not the outcome of the exclusionary nationalism central to political Zionism nor representative of Israel’s prioritization of Jewish self-rule, but of a much later counterrevolution that was “by and large the creation of the right, of the so-called

⁵⁹ Walzer, “Noam Chomsky argues, an Israeli and Arab talk”

⁶⁰ Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 14-15. Michael Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation: Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions* (New Haven: Yale, 2015)

⁶¹ Chomsky, *The Fateful Triangle*, 436

Revisionists.”⁶² It was a “paradox” of national liberation that it could not sustain its emancipatory impulses, not the consequences of a politics that from the start had defined liberation on the exclusive terms of insuring the self-rule of a specific group of people or nation.

When *Exodus and Revolution* was published, the book was met by a mixed reception. In the *Nation*, Bernard Avishai lauded the book’s drew out patterns of liberation within the modern political tradition but worried that secularizing a religious story did not produce a guide for modern politics but opened a pathway through which the totalizing tendencies of the sacred might creep into a modern secularism, a point that was inverted by theologian Robert Brown who observed in the *New York Times*: “If I were to enter a caveat at any point...it would be that Mr. Walzer concedes more than he needs to in separating the Exodus story as a record of God’s actions from the Exodus story as an account of what human beings did on their own behalf.”⁶³

Yet the central bone of contention focused on the elision that sat at the center of Walzer’s argument. In order to claim that the Exodus narrative was a fable about universal liberation, Walzer had to elide how it was a story about a specific people, triumphing over other peoples. As the *New York Times*’ daily critic John Gross noted of the book, *Exodus and Revolution* carried with it an “elegantly written” argument “full of stimulating suggestions,” but “Mr. Walzer only makes good his case by conjuring away the harsher elements in the Exodus story, and while he does not ignore the purely ethnic aspects of its appeal, he certainly tends to play them down.”⁶⁴

⁶² Walzer, “The Challenge of Liberation”

⁶³ Bernard Avishai, “Sacred and Secular,” *The Nation* (April 13, 1985); Robert McAfee Brown, “Bible for the Oppressed,” *The New York Time* (January 20, 1985)

⁶⁴ John Gross, “Book of the Times: Michael Walzer’s Exodus and Revolution,” *New York Times* (January 25, 1985)

This criticism was only a side note to Gross's otherwise positive review. But it was the central critique of Edward Said, who argued that Walzer's defense of national liberation illustrated a critical omission that troubled much of Walzer's thinking at the time: By selecting a narrative of not just a people coming into their own but a chosen people compelled by God to seize land from others, Walzer, Said insisted, had "regressed to an odd position on the concept of equality," elevating the liberation of one group of people over others.⁶⁵ Pointing to Walzer's other work, Said noted that "the key terms" in *Exodus and Revolution* "once again are 'members' in and 'strangers' to a community, and although Walzer does not refer to Jews and non-Jews, it is difficult not to arrive at the conclusion that his reflections as a Jew on Israel have 'shaped and controlled' his other thought."⁶⁶ Walzer's aim may have been to show the universal appeal of liberation and to demonstrate its centrality to modern radicals and ancients alike, but to make his argument Walzer also had to omit the starker features of Israelite auto-emancipation, in particular the domination and expulsion of the Canaanites who were already living in the region.

Said granted that Walzer wanted to speak the language of socialism in his book, linking a politics of liberation with those struggles for equality throughout history. But "the more he shores up his Exodus politics" to the radical tradition, Said noted, "the more likely it is that Canaanites" and the Palestinians are left outside its emancipatory and egalitarian program.⁶⁷ "I have read Walzer for many years and have always admired his intellect," but "I have always wanted to say to him that...peoplehood based on exclusion and displacement of others who are deemed to be lesser is not what intellectuals ought to be about."⁶⁸ Walzer's liberation politics

⁶⁵ Edward Said, "Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution: A Canaanite Reading*," *Grand Street* (Winter 1986)

⁶⁶ Said, "Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution: A Canaanite Reading*"

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

may have been “at bottom a position retaining the vocabulary of the Left,” but it had also “scuttled the theory and critical astringency that historically gave the Left its moral and intellectual power.”⁶⁹ For Said, the problem with *Exodus and Revolution* raised the question of not only whether a national liberation program could be left-wing but whether it should be championed by any kind of intellectual, who in Said’s view, had to aim define his or her community more broadly, along the universal terms of humanity not just of a specific group.

The challenge Said posed to Walzer’s thinking on the politics of national liberation and in particular his Zionism would cast a significant shadow on much of Walzer’s later writing. So too would the question how an intellectual should relate to the various communities and principles to which he or she asserted loyalty. Working out the tensions raised by Said and by his other critics would lead Walzer to begin to formulate his theory of the “connected critic,” of an intellectual who argued from within the gates of his or her community not from outside it. Addressing the questions of human rights versus national liberation, and the tensions between his egalitarianism and internationalism and his politics of self-determination and Zionism would also lead Walzer to formulating a broader theory of international relations. Among the numerous and ambitious research programs he would take on in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Walzer would seek to offer a fuller account of the nation-state and of the politics of national liberation that had become so critical to his thinking. This politics had been there from the beginning; decolonization had been a central node of politics for the long New Left, and on this subject Walzer had shown considerable consistency between the arguments he made in the 1960 and in the 1970s and 80s. But the tensions between his self-determination politics and his other long New Left commitments had become harder to ignore or to transcend. The state and nation had

⁶⁹ Ibid.

become important features in Walzer's thought, and in ways that stood in conflict with his socialism and with the visions of radical democracy that had been central to his early politics.

8. The Moral Standing of States

Arguments over the politics of war and decolonization, and in particular, the politics around the wars and decolonization in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, left a lasting mark on Walzer's thought and politics. At the center of these arguments was Walzer's notion of national liberation. A central ambition in radical politics, in his opinion, was to liberate groups of people from arbitrary and external forms of power and establish an international system of self-governing states. This politics of self-determination and liberation may have marked a break from the international politics that had long been the purview of socialism. But it represented, Walzer claimed, a different type of egalitarianism, a "reiterative egalitarianism" in which an equality between nation-states emerged, if not an equality between all people within these nation-states.

This line of reasoning, as noted in previous chapters, raised a considerable number of questions. Scaling up the left's vision of equality between persons to nationalism's equality between peoples may have drawn a nice line from socialism to national liberation. But as Israel demonstrated the self-determination of one people did not necessarily insure the self-

determination of other people. Likewise, an equality between different nation-states could, in fact, be at odds with socialism's more traditional demand of an equality between persons and liberal democracy's demands for a set of formal rights and equal forms of representation. It was also unclear if an international system could truly sustain a program of national liberation for all groups of people that wanted to be self-determining. In hotly contested decolonized territories with two or more groups of people, national self-determination could often prove to be a zero-sum game, in which the realization of one people's collective life led to the hindrance of another.

Perhaps most troubling for Walzer's argument were the counter-examples. Walzer claimed that all people wanted to define their collective lives around national terms, of some combination of shared religious, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic traditions. But as so much of the decolonized world proved, collective life could take multiple expressions; not all self-governing republics had to be national in nature and not all forms of commonality cut along what might be called national lines. There were an abundant number of examples of postcolonial states that had developed multinational regimes not dominated by one nation or people but representative of many at once. Others, such as France, had defined their nationalism along inclusive terms of republicanism. The logic of self-rule may have been indefatigable, starting in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, with the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions. It may have been partially won in continental Europe after World War I and in much of the rest of the world after World War II. But that did not mean a postcolonial republic necessarily required building a nation. There were many other terms on which to define collective self-rule and political identity.

The arguments Walzer had over Zionism and the politics of collective self-determination and nationalism in the 1970s also brought to the surface another set of tensions found within the broader left. As the left wing of the possible began to march back toward the state and the formal

institutions of liberalism and social democracy, socialists needed to formulate a clearer understanding of how they should relate to them, not just nation-states but *all* states bodies and formations. In his earlier work, Walzer had never fully reckoned with the state or developed a theory of how the left should relate to the coercions and inequalities it produced; the truth was neither had much of the left. Now that the left was drifting back toward conventional legislative and electoral politics, however, it had to develop a more sophisticated understanding of them.

The need for a new theory of the state became all the more pressing because some of the new left-wings of the possible in Europe had taken charge. Having formed an alliance between his own Socialist Party and France's Communist Party, François Mitterrand was elected president in 1981, the first socialist to have done so since the founding of the Fifth Republic in 1958. After six years out of power, the Social Democrats' Olaf Palme returned to helm the Swedish government in 1982 with a more reformist vision of socialism and Bettino Craxi, the leader of Italy's Socialist Party won the country's premiership in 1983. European socialists may not have retained the confidence and discipline of mind of their turn-of-the-century predecessors; they may have had to share power or rule through compromise but they were now faced with the moral and political ambiguities of power and yet the left had little theory of how to rule.

In the United States, these developments helped ignite the imagination of the left, especially those trying to revive socialism. Harrington, Howe, and others around the DSOC and NAM began to set their eyes on political power as well, drawing much inspiration from the "Eurosociologists" who were offering a new vision of a liberal socialist politics—a flexible socialism of the possible that was, as Harrington enthused in the *New Republic*, "decentralist, youthful, innovative, reaching out to the third world, articulating the disarmament concerns of

most people.”¹ But it was not in fact just how far away from being able to realize this vision of a decentralized socialism that led many of the democratic socialists of the long New Left to take up the question of how the left should engage with the state. With Reagan’s election and both parties advocating for the rollback of the last standing institutions of American social democracy, American socialists needed to develop a more coherent theory of the state in order to defend what remained of it. Having spent much of the 1950s and 60s offering critiques of it, now intellectuals around NAM, DSOC, and the newly founded merger, Democratic Socialists of America, were some of the last defenders of the welfare state’s imperfect egalitarianism.

Despite recognizing their shifting position, and calling for a left wing of the possible to defend it, the socialists around DSA had few resources to draw from. Early socialists such as Robert Owen and Charles Fourier had avoided the politics of the state altogether, centering their egalitarian politics on the model of small-scale utopian communities set off from capitalism’s institutions. Marx and Engels had likewise offered their heirs very little on what might happen if socialists might one day seize the state. Writing in his treatise against the utopian socialist Eugen Dühring, Engels argued that under communism the state would slowly wither away and a “government of persons” would replace an “administration of things.”² But when it came to answering how this withering of centralized power might be realized, and how this government of persons might be preserved, Marx and Engels had few answers.

Early in the twentieth century, French, German, and Italian Marxists of the revisionist mold began to resolve some of these quandaries by offering theories of change that made their peace with the liberal state. Yet, their theories of change only developed instrumental views of

¹ Michael Harrington, “Eurosocijalism Takes Off,” *The New Republic* (May 20, 1981)

² Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring: Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution Science*, trans. by Emile Burns (New York: Progress, 1945)

the state: The institutions of the liberal state were weapons in socialism's and the working class' war against entrenched economic and political elites. A socialist government of persons would come through representative democracy and the social protections of the welfare state. But, just as the Popular Front struggled to meld its liberal and socialist impulses together, so too with the revisionists, there was no moral or political theory running parallel to more instrumental views of the state and the institutions of liberal democracy. Likewise, most of the theories that were formulated were less concerned with the liberal state than with the development of parties.

For the socialists around *Dissent* and DSA this proved particularly vexing because they had distinguished their politics from an old left by incorporating a suspicion of state politics in to their struggle for social equality. What separated their socialism from that of the early twentieth century had been that it sought to build socialism from below first, instead of imposing one from above. This had been the mistake of earlier socialist lefts: The French socialists and British Fabians, in particular, had become dangerously absorbed into the state and now were a force to sometimes be resisted as they evacuated public life of its more participatory features. A new left would be formed by redirecting the egalitarianism of this earlier generation away from the state and to everyday life. Ordinary citizens, not policymakers, would be the agents of change.

Among Walzer's peers, questions of the state had already begun to be broached during the arguments over the competing paths—democratic and authoritarian—of socialist and postcolonial states in the decolonized world. On principle, the left should be skeptical of all states since all were, in some form, perpetrators of violence, inequality, empire, and undemocratic social relations. But out of practical necessity the left should lend its “support,” while withholding its “sympathy,” to those states that, in an immediate context, proved to be improvements on preceding regimes.

This was Robert Paul Wolff's line of argument during the Cuban Revolution and the one Walzer and Thernstrom also embraced. It did not mean supporting any state whole cloth; it meant a more complicated act of interpretation. Each regime needed to be judged within the context of its predecessors and assessed not along a stringent binary of liberal democratic or authoritarian, but more egalitarian and libertarian or less egalitarian and libertarian. As Wolff noted, Khrushchev's Soviet Union deserved support in the wake of Stalin's and Castro's Cuba in the wake of Battista's. The left punted the ball when it refused to recognize the gradations of bad and only recognized the clarity of good, especially given that the regimes in the North Atlantic, the communist bloc, and the decolonized regions all had disreputable elements.

This position had its own clear weaknesses, being primarily relativist in nature, and lacking a clear moral or political standard to assess how the left should relate to the state if it were to be in power. Which goods took precedent in foreign and domestic politics, how did they take precedent, and at what cost? "Are we still on [a state's] side," as Thernstrom asked in the early 1960s, "when they seize newspapers, put critics in jail, vote with the Communist bloc in the UN?"³ What kinds of state actions had to be universally denounced and what kind could be accepted as the unfortunate but necessary consequences of "doing business"? With the European socialists in power, how could one draw the lines between compromise and principle, especially given that the Italian Socialists were in a coalition with a party that had proven so deeply repressive? Likewise, even out of power, socialists needed a better theory of international relations that might be able to justify the existence of some state actions and not others.

³ Thernstrom, "The Young Radicals: A Symposium"

Walzer's growing interest in developing a theory of the state also had another source of inspiration in the 1970s and 80s. The normative theorists around SELF were also now turning their attention to theories of the state. Published in 1971, Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* helped canonize many of the arguments the SELF circle were having over duties and rights in the 1960s. But *A Theory of Justice* also left an important set of questions relating to state action unanswered. While Rawls outlined a set of axioms that loosely accorded with liberalism—his “equality of liberty” and “difference” principles—he did not make the case for a particular distributive arrangement. Whether Rawls's procedural justice led to a socialist or liberal state, he insisted, was an empirical question not a normative one. Likewise, while Rawls discussed the ethics of war in his book and made some glancing references to international ethics, he was interested in these subjects for domestic reasons: What rights and duties did the state and citizens have in the case of illegitimate wars? What role did questions of distribution play in the context of military conflicts that were believed to be by many citizens to be unjust? Just war theory, for Rawls, offered a way to make sense of when it was justified for citizens to resist war and when it was justified for states to impose the obligations created by war on citizens. But on the on questions of global poverty, human rights, and national liberation, *A Theory of Justice* was silent.

These holes in Rawls's magnum opus meant that in the 1970s and early 1980s normative theorists had a considerable amount of terrain to cover to formulate a much wider theory of the justice. Walzer's Princeton and Harvard colleague, Robert Nozick sought to make the case for a more libertarian theory of the state in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*.⁴ Bruce Ackerman, a legal theorist at Yale, tried to make the case for a more robust social democratic one in *Social Justice in the Liberal State* and G.A. Cohen, a Canadian Marxist teaching at Oxford at the time, tried to

⁴ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic, 1974)

make the case for a more socialist one in *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality*.⁵ Critical of Rawls's Kantianism, Michael Sandel in *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* tried to anchor his theories of the state to thick moral and political communities instead of abstracted individual moral agents, and Ronald Dworkin and Judith Jarvis Thomson sought to link their theories of justice and distribution to the *a priori* of rights, looking to individual personhood as foundation for social interactions instead of the duties a state owed citizens and duties citizens owed a state.⁶ Charles Mills, Iris Marion Young, and Susan Moller Okin also pointed to the considerable limits of Rawls's epistemological position: By abstracting moral thought from society, *A Theory of Justice* helped fortify the racialized and gendered hierarchies already native to a society.⁷

Parallel to these extensions and critiques of Rawls's domestic distributive justice, a group of normative theorists also sought to work out moral and political theories of the state abroad. One of the first volumes of collected writings from *Philosophy & Public Affairs* focused on the morality of war, and subsequent editions attempted to develop international ethics in the context of distributive justice.⁸ Some of these extensions rested on a view of an international society of nation-states that might collectively be able to address the ills of global inequality and interstate conflict, as Walzer had argued and continued to argue and as Rawls would also later argue; others, such as Charles Beitz's *Political Theory and International Relations* and Henry Shue's *Basic Rights*, attempted to formulate an international ethics that transcended the emphasis on

⁵ Bruce Ackerman, *Social Justice in the Liberal State* (New Haven: Yale, 1980); G.A. Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1995)

⁶ Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1982); Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1978); Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Rights, Restitutions, and Risk: Essays in Moral Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1985)

⁷ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton, 1990); Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic, 1991); Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1999);

⁸ *War and Moral Responsibility* edit. by Marshall Cohen, Thomas Nagel, Thomas Scanlon (Princeton: *Philosophy & Public Affairs* Readers, 1974) and *International Ethics* edit. by Charles Beitz, Lawrence Alexander, Thomas Scanlon (Princeton: *Philosophy & Public Affairs* Readers, 1984).

bounded nation-states and, like earlier socialists, focused on cosmopolitan, rather than national, forms of economic justice.⁹ As Samuel Moyn notes in his new history of human rights, “Rawls’s thought registered the assumptions of national welfare on the brink of crisis” and some continued to work in this framework when they turned to global justice, but “at the beginning of the 1970s, the rise of international ethics in the face of scandalous famine inaugurated a novel emphasis on the ethics of global destitution, which would redefine ‘human rights’ in the era since.”¹⁰

Inspired by the growing problems faced by the left and by liberal normative theories, Walzer’s work in the 1970s and 80s worked on both of these tracks within political philosophy, hoping to develop a more egalitarian and radical democratic theory of the distributive state at home and of a liberal foreign policy that was more sensitive to a politics of collective self-determination abroad. With Nozick, he taught a course that debated whether a theory of justice would lead toward a socialist or capitalist society and he began to teach a series of courses in political theory that took up the subjects of morality in a time of war.¹¹ In essays like “World War II: Why Was This War Different?” “Political Action,” and “The Moral Standing of States,” he also began to work out a political theory of the nation-state and international ethics that accorded with his commitments to collective self-determination and in articles like “In Defense of Equality” and “Liberalism and the Art of Separation,” he began to work out an account of the welfare state at home that addressed his concerns with the SELF theorists’ underlying political and epistemological assumptions: Walzer targeted both the Kantian universalism and individualism undergirding Rawls and the SELF theorists view of justice as well as how their

⁹ Charles Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton, 1979); Henry Shue, *Basic Rights: Subsistence, Affluence, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton, 1980).

¹⁰ Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2018), 147

¹¹ Walzer, “The Political Theory License”

liberal and procedural views of equality did not go far enough in realizing a fairer and more just society.¹²

Following what was then the bifurcated way in which theorists approached questions of domestic and global justice, Walzer worked on these tracks parallel to each other, publishing *Just and Unjust Wars* 1977 and *Spheres of Justice* in 1983 as separate texts and only synthesizing their arguments in later works like *Thick and Thin*.¹³ But despite some noticeable differences between the two—the former emphasized a set of minimalist rights accorded to both states and individuals; the latter sought to examine those maximalist ones such as health and education—his arguments held a set of common through-lines that offered the contours of a general theory of the state. Sharing the SELF circle’s skepticism of older ethical models such as utilitarianism in the domestic sphere and realism in the international one, Walzer sought in *Just and Unjust Wars* and *Spheres of Justice* to reassert a “moral reality” of state action that might place moral and political decision-making back into the hands of citizens instead of an expert class of utilitarian policymakers; there was no such thing as a realm in which interests alone dictated how we choose between outcomes: even when politics was motivated by interest, and Walzer was more than willing to recognize this was a majority of the time, some moral preferences existed below it.

Like his peers within SELF, Walzer also believed that in order to recover moral agency, one had to also formulate a set of norms guiding action from the start; to prevent a state from

¹² Michael Walzer, “World War II: Why Was This War Different?” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (1971); “The Moral Standing of States: A Response to Four Critics,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (Spring 1980); “The Distribution of Membership,” *Boundaries* edit. by Peter G. Brown and Henry Shue (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1981); “Two Kinds of Military Responsibility,” *Parameters* (March 1981); “In Defense of Equality” *Dissent* (Fall 1973); “Philosophy and Democracy,” *Political Theory* (1981); “Liberalism and the Art of Separation,” *Political Theory* (1984); “Justice Here and Now,” *Justice and Equality Here and Now* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1986).

¹³ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic, 1977) and *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic, 1983).

justifying deploying weapons of mass destruction because on a cost-benefit scheme they saved more lives than they took, Walzer believed that socialists and liberals needed a normative theory of the state that required all agents to adhere to a set of rules and particular doctrines.

Yet, Walzer's theories of the state, informed by his socialist, radical democratic, and historicist impulses, also broke from the SELF theorists in considerable ways. Wary of how the normative theorists' reliance on intuitionism individuated moral reasoning, he argued that ethics should rely on the "shared meanings" found in the world, through history, sociology, and native moral and political traditions instead of a single moral procedure to adjudicate laws.¹⁴ Instead of developing a universal moral procedure that abstracted all moral choices, Walzer instead wanted to interpret how ordinary citizens already made many of these choices. "One way to begin the philosophical enterprise," he insisted in *Spheres of Justice*, "...is to walk out of the cave, leave the city, climb the mountain" to "fashion for oneself (what can never be fashioned for ordinary men and women) an objective and universal standpoint....But I mean to stand in the cave, in the city, on the ground...to interpret to one's fellow citizens the world of meanings that we share."¹⁵

This "connected" view of moral and political theory offered an important set of correctives. His argumentation was casuistic instead of speculative, and it rested on specific historical examples instead of abstract hypotheticals. It emphasized the collective nature of moral reasoning and examined moral choice in particular institutional settings. In both his international and distributive ethics, it also sought to offer a synthesis of many of his long New Left commitments: In his international ethics, he tried to link socialism's commitment to an equality of persons with a national liberationist commitment to an equality between nations. In his distributive justice, he sought to offer an account of egalitarianism that was more sensitive to

¹⁴ Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, 7

¹⁵ Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, xiv

pluralism, and still finding a rich political life in the intermediate zones between the household and state, he also tried to carry some of his radical democratic politics into his work on the state, insisting that it was ordinary citizens not a philosophical or policymaking elite that was responsible for formulating the moral principles that undergird a society's vision of justice.

Yet despite the creativity and ingenuity of many of these syntheses, his theories of justice at home and abroad also were also wrought with the ambiguities born out the long New Left's competing impulses. His pluralism introduced a much needed amount of history, sociology, and difference into political theory, but it also appeared to "scuttle" the universalism, as Said put it, that "historically gave the Left its moral and intellectual power."¹⁶ His reliance on the "shared meanings" and moral vernacular of a community helped reassert the important role a community should play in determining its governing values as well as institutions, but it often led to fortifying those social hierarchies already native to a community and its native moral traditions. Likewise, by prioritizing the state's role in determining its own forms of justice and self-government, Walzer imagined an international system that undermined the rights and agency of the citizens that he had long championed in in works like *Obligations* and *Political Action*. Just as in the case of *Exodus and Revolution*, in which the reiterative egalitarianism between states took precedent over an egalitarianism between persons, in his broader theory of international ethics, state rights took primacy over personal ones. By placing the burden of determining a vision of justice not on individuals but a community as a whole, Walzer's vision of the state tended to reaffirm the status quo. Rather than a moral compass, his pluralist theory of distributive justice had the potential of reiterating an inegalitarian society's already bad sense of direction.

¹⁶ Said, "Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution: A Canaanite Reading*"

Many of these ambiguities and tensions would become clearer in *Spheres of Justice* but nearly all of them were already detectable in *Just and Unjust Wars*, which he published first in 1977. There were likely several reasons why he wrote and published *Just and Unjust Wars* first: In the late 1970s, there still appeared to be room for a left wing of the possible to make some gains on the home front. While Carter was no social democrat, for many on the socialist left it was not yet clear how threatened the gains of the midcentury welfare state were and a theory of socialist and liberal distribution could be postponed. On the international front, however, many new vexing problems had arisen. Vietnam had already caused the left to foreground questions of morality as a hawkish foreign-policy establishment continued to justify its policies along either realpolitik or anticommunist arguments. Yet, after Vietnam devastating famines and killing fields throughout the Southern hemisphere inspired liberals and radicals alike to take up questions of human rights and view foreign policy through a humanitarian lens.¹⁷ As Katrina Forrester noted in an invaluable article on this humanitarian turn: “Once philosophers began to explore [the international] realm, it was not long before discussions moved away from the obligations of citizens as parts of co-operative schemes towards new internationalisms where rights-bearing, conscientious individuals became the cosmopolitan citizens of a new global era.”¹⁸

This humanitarian turn in international ethics marked a transition away from the politics of decolonization and national liberation, in which the highest aim was collective self-determination, to a cosmopolitan politics that might transcend and constrain the newly liberated nation-states. After all, some of the world’s greatest catastrophes were now taking place within

¹⁷ Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2018).

¹⁸ Forrester, “Citizenship, War, and the Origins of International Ethics in American Political Philosophy 1960-1975”

self-governing decolonized nations and there were clear limits to a politics that only assessed these regimes on the principles of self-government and republican anti-colonialism. For a younger generation, the dangers of an unconstrained state raised questions about an earlier left's fidelity to nonintervention and to a project of decolonization that allowed each nation total sovereignty over its territory and citizens. As these nation-states experienced stalled economic development and in some cases teetered on the brink of economic collapse, the geopolitical crises also raised another set of intersecting questions about the global distribution of wealth and power. Rawls and the early SELF theorists had focused primarily on how to distribute resources within a particular state; now a new generation wanted to globalize this project. "They wanted," as Moyn notes in *Not Enough*, "to make the international system a topic of inquiry into just social relations—as if it were possible to view the globe itself as just the sort of 'basic structure' that Rawls had seen as the setting of just social relations in the national welfare state."¹⁹

Walzer still operated on an earlier model: His view of international ethics still primarily understood foreign affairs through the context of decolonization, national liberation, 1956, Cuba, Vietnam, and Israel, and viewed questions of maldistribution as primarily ones relating to the domestic sphere. Self-determination and the doctrine of nonintervention that he and his peers had rallied around throughout the 1950s and 60s, especially, but not only in the context of Vietnam War remained the central principles upon which to build a pacific global order, and more socialist and liberal questions of building a society around a consensual contract in which the resources and duties of a society were fairly and equally distributed remained central to building a stable twentieth century domestic regime. But the influence of the Young Turks who were beginning to press normative theory in new directions on the international front, led Walzer to

¹⁹ Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World*, 152

rethink some of his own assumptions and his own emphasis on duties and power instead of rights. Walzer, too, felt a pressing need to work out a theory of interstate relations that might also draw from the new rights discourse dominating both domestic and global ethics and that might also better address questions in which self-determination was not the only criteria for assessing the legitimacy of postcolonial regime. Like the younger generation of normative theorists, he wanted to develop a theory of international relations that was moral rather than realist—and one that took into account the uncertain developments of decolonization that led to humanitarian crises in places like Cambodia and East Pakistan as well as regimes like India.

Politicized in an earlier moment, however, Walzer was not entirely willing to let go of his earlier commitments to national liberation, collective self-determination, and the nation-state. He wanted to develop a theory that could address the questions of atrocity and famine that were urgently raised in the late 1970s but to do so without reneging on his earlier commitments to decolonization, nationalism, self-rule, and Zionism. Ironically, this would mean he found himself defending more conservative arguments about the nation-state while his younger liberal interlocutors called for a post-nationalist politics that sounded a lot more like an earlier left's commitments to internationalism. Human rights would become a central foundation upon which both of these flanks developed their arguments—in part, because rights also had become central to domestic theories as well, but it would also mean that the normative theory he would develop would try to simultaneously assert the right of a nation to determine its own social arrangements and to defend the institution, the nation-state, that embodied this right while finding a way to demarcate those zones of interstate violence in which human rights reigned supreme. “Here is the maxim of a chastened humanism,” Walzer insisted. “Good borders make good neighbors.”²⁰

²⁰ Walzer, “On Arabs and Jews: The Chimera of a Binational State”

Just and Unjust Wars was the culmination of this project.²¹ To build an international ethics that aligned with his egalitarianism and yet satisfied the needs and demands of a program for self-determination was not an easy feat but it felt pressing both in the face of earlier arguments in the late 1960s and early 1970s and his later ones over binationalism. Walzer believed the self-determination was central to pacific world order and he felt liberals and the left needed to offer an account of what justified the state taking priority in the international sphere.

To do so, Walzer returned to a central distinction that he made during the Vietnam War. To simultaneously make the case for a new humanitarianism and one that reasserted an equality between nations, he developed his own chimera: two parallel theories of morality in international relations in *Just and Unjust Wars*. Both would try to reclaim the moral reality of international affairs. But one would formulate a theory of human rights during a time of war—*jus in bello*—and that would be primarily concerned with the protection of individuals from state actions and another theory of interstate interactions during times of peace—*jus ad bellum*—that would determine when it was acceptable for wars and interventions to take place, including moments of humanitarian crises and that would make the case for the sovereignty and the rights of states.

In the first sphere, questions of justice would be, as Walzer noted, adverbial: Are interstate interactions, in particular in the field of war and military conflict, *justly* acted out. Is it, for example, a war being justly fought or unjustly fought? Are atrocities and human rights violations occurring? In the second sphere, questions of justice would be primarily adjectival: Was the war just to begin with? Which actions are legitimate and which are not and what are the consequences? The first was a moral theory between persons, which sought to preserve an equality between individuals and protect them from the indignities and violence of the state in

²¹ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic, 1977)

the international realm, and in this way it carried on the internationalist and egalitarian impulses of Walzer's socialist commitments; the latter was a moral theory between states, which sought to achieve an equality between nations and a stable "international society of nation-states" that might also help preserve the peace in the sphere of geopolitics.

Walzer was not entirely unconcerned with the outcomes of global economic and material inequality. At points, he recognizes these as sources for extreme humanitarian crisis, but unlike the younger generation of global justice theorists, he did not envision a massive redistribution of the world's wealth and resources in order to realize an economic as well as political equality between nations. So long as states did not breach human rights and humanitarian law in a time of war, Walzer was not concerned with how the maldistribution of global wealth also undermined a nation's political independence. In this way, while Walzer completed *Just and Unjust Wars* in the late 1970s, it was very much a book that was composed with an eye toward Vietnam and an earlier era of decolonization. Self-determination, instead of humanitarian intervention, was at its core, something that markedly changed in Walzer's writings by the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Before examining these two different temporal fields in *Just and Unjust Wars*, Walzer also concerned himself with a question raised by the very enterprise of thinking about morality in the sphere of international relations. In the 1970s, in the wake of the Vietnam War, both liberal and conservative foreign policymakers had abandoned an earlier era's hawkish anticommunism in favor of a "realism" that viewed world politics as being driven by national interest. The Cold War, from this view, was a contest between superpowers seeking to preserve their domination over their respective spheres of influence; this was neither a good nor a bad thing—it was just

the “reality” of international relations. In this way, there was much less difference between Nixon and Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski, Jimmy Carter’s National Security Adviser: all three believed world affairs was primarily a matter of power and domination not of ideology.

For Walzer, this thinking led to a dangerous instrumentalism. If no norms governed interstate interactions, then all was fair in war so long as the ends justified the means. In *Just and Unjust Wars*, Walzer wanted to reestablish the moral reality that these realists overlooked. To do so, he first wanted to show how realism itself had a moral code operating below it, before turning to his arguments about the particular codes that should govern his different spheres.

Opening *Just and Unjust War* with a close reading of Thucydides’s “Melian Dialogue,” he argued that this text, often held up as a paragon of foreign policy realism, actually tells a story about political morality as much as it tells a story about the power and domination of one nation over another. Appearing midway through *The Peloponnesian War*, the Melian Dialogue tells the story of a summit held between Athenian army officers and magistrates representing the island-state of Melos. Surrounding the island with ships of infantry, the Athenians present Melos with two options: surrender the island to the Athenian empire and pay tribute or face a battle that both know Melos will likely lose. The Athenians had made similar ultimatums throughout the eastern half of the Mediterranean and with much success; few of the city-states in the region could fend off Athens’ army and so often acquiesced. The stronger, the Athenians reasons, have a right to dominate. The Athenians frame their demand to the Melians along similar lines: “The strong do what they can and the weak they must suffer what they must.”²² To accept Athenian domination is to accept “reality.” The Melian magistrates retort: whether this is or is not the reality, they are

²² Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 5

bound to a higher good, that of the dignity that comes from their island's ability to rule itself.

The Athenians press, but the Melians refuse and are eventually devastated by the Athenian army.

For most, the story is a demonstration of the power of realism over idealism. Had Melos been more instrumental in their decision-making, they would have chosen Athenian domination over total destruction. But for Walzer, there is a morality found underlying the narrative and that both the Athenians and Melians share. Neither the Athenians nor the Melians really accept the notion that the powerful ought to dominate and the weak ought to suffer. Instead, they both seek to create the most ideal conditions in which their community's self-government can persist. They are governed by a moral code relating to the principles of self-determination and nonintervention. This code appears more obvious in the case of the Melians, who voice it explicitly, but for Walzer this is true of the Athenians as well. For, as Walzer explains, "they must expand their empire...or lose what they already have." An intransigent island-country like Melos, Walzer quotes the Athenians as stating, "'will be an argument of our weakness, and your hatred of our power, among those we have rule over.'"²³ There is a politics about power, and one that does indeed fit within the framework of *realpolitik*, but it is also one that can be understood through a moral lens. Athenian imperialism is an example of power in pursuit of a specific set of imperatives—above all else, the right of *their* community to determine its fate.

By isolating this underlying norm governing the actions of the Athenians and Melians, Walzer does two things at once: He makes the case that there is a moral reality to international relations that realists often neglect or miss. He also wants to make the case that, contra the 1950s and 60s anticommunist hawks, this moral space is not about competing ideologies but about the competing struggles for collective freedom. "We can 'unmask' strategic discourse," Walzer

²³ Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 5

explains, “just as Thucydides did with moral discourse.”²⁴ Even the realists pursue a set of higher ends. “A war called unjust is not, to paraphrase Hobbes, a war disliked,” Walzer notes. “It is a war disliked for particular reasons” and these reasons have their “own entailments, leading [one] deeper and deeper into a world of” ethics and moral choice. “We don’t have to translate moral talk into interest talk in order to understand it; morality refers in its own way to the real world.”²⁵

That morality and interests are related, not opposed, leads Walzer to the larger argument at the center of his book: *Just and Unjust Wars* contends that there is a different track for international relations and the politics of war than those followed by both the Cold War realists and anticommunist hawks. In the realm of international relations—in the justice before and after wars—there is the basic principle of collective self-determination, the rights of a community to build and preserve common life. In the realm of justice during a time of war, there are other considerations, those not relating to states but humanity, that take precedence above all else. There is also a third temporal sphere as well, which often goes neglected because it does not fit into the classical categories of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, but that is also central to Walzer’s thinking: that of justice after a period of war. For sometimes the doctrines of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* come into conflict and for Walzer, there must be a third realm that litigates these conflicts and seeks to reinstate any laws that are transgressed, even for the sake of another. “The assignment of responsibility,” as Walzer notes, “is the critical test of the argument for justice.”²⁶

²⁴ Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 11

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 287

For Walzer, what keeps the peace between nations and states in a time before war is simple—the principle of nonintervention. Nonintervention is a practical principle. “Good borders make good neighbors,” Walzer notes. But it is also a moral one: All groups of people have a right to collective life; in fact, all individuals have this right to collective life. And these rights translate into rights held by a state, in particular the rights to sovereignty and territorial integrity. Here Walzer brings in the metaphor of the contract and sets up what he calls “the domestic analogy”: Just as in civil society an exchange of rights and duties takes place to create the stable conditions for individual life, so too in “an international society of nation-states” there is an exchange of rights and duties that enables states to be vehicles for creating stable collective life. These rights are not natural to the states themselves; they are inherited from groups and persons. But once they are held by a state, they nonetheless become *a priori* since they alone help keep the peace.

Thus the major crime of international relations and *jus ad bellum* is a war of aggression, which transgresses these states’ abilities to allow their members to rule over themselves. By undermining self-government, aggression also is not only a crime against one particular group; it marks the very breakdown of the international civil society; it is a transgression against all states’ right. What is at risk is more than a particular nation’s sovereignty but all nations’ sovereignty.

As a result, Walzer draws two principles about geopolitics. With a few exceptions—what he later in the book calls “rules of disregard”—all nation-states must respect the foundational doctrine of nonintervention. States cannot apply dominion over other states, through armed force or for that matter through economic or diplomatic measures. The second principle Walzer derives from his international society of states is that the only justifiable wars are those of self-defense. This includes wars of immediate self-defense but also includes “counter-interventions”

when a third nation enters into a conflict after a second nation has trespassed over a first nation's rights in order to defend the broader principles of an international society of nations and states.

In Walzer's view this is what distinguishes the Korean War from the Vietnam War. In the former case the United States intervened to protect the right to collective rule and the sovereignty of South Korea after North Korea and China invaded. In the latter case, the United States was the intervening power in a civil war. When the Soviets and Chinese entered into the conflict, they were doing so only after the United States undermined the self-rule of the South Vietnamese.

Because the central crime of international relations is the crime of aggression, Walzer argues that moral judgments that take place in times just before wars are often empirical in nature. "*Jus ad bellum* requires us," he notes, "to make judgments about aggression and self-defense," what is being interpreted is who transgressed the norm of self-rule and who is acting in its defense.²⁷ For Walzer, this leads also to the general architecture of his moral arguments: One cannot draw hard and fast rules about international relations and the choice to enter into war. Each incident must be assessed case by case, as no country is always the aggressor and no country is always on the defensive. Likewise, moral theory should be argued casuistically since no moral action or principle will mean the same thing in all scenarios; judgment is eternal.

For Walzer, the case of the Athenians and Melians is a good example of the dangers of abstraction. Both sides spoke in the abstract terms of self-defense and self-determination and yet when the case was examined in its concrete expression, one was acting within these rule and the other in opposition to them. While the notions of right conduct are remarkably consistent over time and space—with some variation—when it comes to how states relate to one another, one side almost always is in the wrong. Some choose war; others, like the Melians, are "put to it."²⁸

²⁷ Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 21

²⁸ Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 12

If in the first section of *Just and Unjust Wars* Walzer considers the norms that should restrain states from engaging in war, he then turns to the norms that should restrain states once they are involved in war. Moving from the *jus ad bellum* and the laws of going to war to *jus in bello* and the laws of fighting a war, Walzer takes up the rights and wrongs of persecuting interstate conflicts. Here the rights of men and women, instead of the rights of nations and states, come back to the fore. If in the former temporal sphere, the doctrines are all relative in nature. In the latter, they are all absolute and are inherited from human rights law, Catholic just war theory, and war conventions. They transcend space and time: All states must observe these laws equally, no matter whether fighting in just wars of self-defense or fighting in unjust wars of aggression.

Here the major crime is no longer the act of aggression that leads to war; it can be committed also by those acting in self-defense. Even in wars struggling to assert the principle of self-rule, these laws apply universally. When the Irish, Algerian, and Zionists in their struggles for national independence resorted to terrorism, they broke, in Walzer's view, the war conventions that require combatants to differentiate between soldiers and civilians and therefore were fighting unjustly, even if, in Walzer's view, he may have argued that they were just struggles. Likewise, the British and French who resorted to torture and indiscriminately targeting noncombatant populations in Ireland and Algeria were acting unjustly. Their imperial motives undermined their right to be fighting these wars; their means also undermined the justness of how they were fighting these wars and, in Walzer's view, also led to atrocities on the other side.

Most of the contours of these two categories of moral judgment were already set up in "Moral Judgement in Time of War," and in that essay Walzer finds Vietnam wanting on both

accounts: It was an unjust war for the Americans to have initiated and it was an unjust war in its fighting. In *Just and Unjust Wars*, Walzer also examines those cases that are more ambiguous. Surely certain humanitarian crises merit some kind of trespass of the doctrine of nonintervention and some emergency conditions allow leniency when it comes to war conventions and laws.

Working through a set of historical examples, Walzer attempts to answer some of these questions. In moments of “supreme emergency,” Walzer argues that some discriminate crimes can be justified in the face of indiscriminate destruction. Britain Bomber Command’s bombing of German civilian centers, in his view, met this standard since in the early years of World War II, Britain faced total extinction and this was its only means of defense. The bombing of Dresden, in his view, did not meet this standard because it was not an act of self-defense, but an effort to create the conditions of total defeat. Likewise, Walzer argues that there are moments when extreme cases of atrocities call upon a country to transgress the norm of nonintervention. India’s invasion of Pakistan, for example, was in Walzer’s view a necessary action to prevent Pakistan from continuing to massacre Bangladeshis. Some crimes against humanity suspect the norms that keep the peace. The extremity of the humanitarian crises demand that other states act.

By allowing for some exceptions to the rule, however, Walzer faces another problem, which he takes up in the last part of his book and in which a new temporal frame is introduced—justice after war. When there are breaches of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, even when they fit the standards he outlines, there still needs to be some kind of restorative justice in their wake.

In the case of the British indiscriminate bombing of German civilian centers, for example, Walzer argues that while this act was justified by the extremity of the circumstances, its severity nonetheless requires that international bodies hold those who sanctioned it accountable after the fact. Likewise, when the only just thing is to breach the doctrine of

nonintervention, there must be some kind of reparative action afterward that reaffirms the absolute nature of these doctrines. As “there are always going to be soldiers on the battlefields of Blenheim...who are prepared to risk some awful crime for the sake of victory,” Walzer explains, it is requisite to make the costs of flouting a norm, even for the sake of another, high enough that they are only hazarded in moments of extremity and even then these transgressions must be righted afterward through some kind of international tribunal.²⁹ In Walzer’s view, it is for this reason that while one might argue that the “supreme emergency” of World War II justified the British “wager of a determinate crime” against Nazi Germany’s “immeasurable evil,” without holding British Bomber Command responsible than the norm that was previously held unimpeachable will no longer remain a line that cannot be crossed.³⁰ “Do you think you can govern innocently?” Walzer quotes one of Sartre’s militants in *Dirty Hands*. “My answer is no,” Walzer insists, “I don’t think I could govern innocently; nor do most of us believe that those who govern us are innocent...even the best of them. But this does not mean that it isn’t possible to do the right thing while governing. It means that a particular act of government (in a political party or in the state) may be exactly the right thing to do in utilitarian terms and yet leave the man who does it guilty of a moral wrong...The notion of dirty hands derives from an effort to refuse ‘absolutism’ without denying the reality of the moral dilemma. Though this may appear to utilitarian philosophers to pile confusion upon confusion, I propose to take it very seriously.”³¹

One might argue that this flexibility creates problems of its own. A utilitarianism in the immediate moment and a Kantianism after the fact is a nice idea, but in practice will politicians truly be held responsible for their actions in the wake of a supreme emergence? After all, at the

²⁹ Walzer, “World War II: Why Was This War Different?”

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Walzer, “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands”

end of World War II, only the Germans were prosecuted for war crimes not the Americans in Dresden or British Bomber Command? And won't the utilitarianism of an extreme circumstance begin to dictate all interstate interactions as each side will claim they face an existential threat?

There is also the question of Walzer's emphasis on the nation-state as the main instrument for realizing popular self-government. While he outlines a set of rights held by citizens during a time of war, he argued that the state's rights reigned supreme in times before and after a war. Besides those moments of disregard that call for the doctrine of nonintervention to be suspended, this means what states do inside their borders is their own business, even if they abandon the principles of self-government and self-determination that justify their right to exist. Throughout *Just and Unjust Wars*, Walzer was careful to insist, with legal theorist John Westlake, that "the duties and rights of states are nothing more than the duties and rights of the men who compose them."³² Yet even if the rights of states begin with the individual and are transferred to the state, once the state possesses them Walzer insisted they exist *a priori* in the terrain of international affairs and so cannot be taken back by a citizenry unless it chooses to rebel internally. In Walzer's view, there is not much another state can do about a Pinochet or a Castro so long as these states do not create extreme crises that justify third-party interventions. "No doubt this is a defeat for socialist internationalism, as it is for ordinary liberalism," Walzer noted. But this was the maxim of a chastened humanism: "good borders make good neighbors."³³

Just and Unjust War was well-received by many on its publication. Working out his own theory of international ethics in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Rawls turned to Walzer's international

³² Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 53

³³ Walzer, "On Arabs and Jews: The Chimera of a Binational State"

society of nation-states to formulate his own vision for inter-state relations. “I follow here Michael Walzer’s *Just and Unjust War*,” he noted “...an impressive work, and what I say does not, I think, depart from it in any significant respect.”³⁴ Reviewing it in the *Washington Post*, Stanley Hoffmann praised Walzer’s vision of a moral theory of international relations, which he argued offered a reminder that ethics and questions of national interest “not only are not...in conflict; they are not separable.”³⁵ In the *New York Review of Books*, Canadian philosopher J.M. Cameron observed that by recovering the moral tradition of just war theory from Christianity, Walzer offered “a powerful remedy for the malign forgetfulness from which we suffer.”³⁶

Yet, many of the tensions that Walzer had tried to grapple with in his earlier political theory and commentary came to the surface in even the most positive of reviews. Hoffmann noted that for all of the stringency of his war conventions, his exceptions around supreme emergencies appeared too permissive. Even while holding human rights up as an absolute, there was no clear line to prevent the logic of extremity from becoming a sliding scale. “Critics might point out that what Walzer calls the ‘utilitarianism of extremity’—the possibility of overriding human rights when, at last, ‘after holding out for a long time,’ one has no alternative left if one wants to save one’s political community—could turn out less stringent than he wants.”³⁷

A critic of the secularization of political theory, Cameron in the *New York Review* argued that Walzer’s employment of utilitarianism in the context of supreme emergencies left his emphasis on normative thinking open to challenges from utilitarians who might argue if their theory is applicable in one case why not all? “Walzer thinks we ought to keep the rules in any

³⁴ John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1993), fn95

³⁵ Stanley Hoffmann, “The War Game: Playing by the Rules,” *The Washington Post* (January 8, 1978)

³⁶ J.M. Cameron, “Morality and War,” *The New York Review of Books* (December 8, 1977)

³⁷ Hoffmann, “The War Game: Playing by the Rules”

situation that is not extreme,” he noted. “This is why he is on the whole so hard on utilitarianism. But if utilitarianism is what gets us out of our moral difficulty in the hardest case we can conceive, then it may perhaps be a serviceable doctrine in cases that are not so extreme.”³⁸

Other reviewers felt that Walzer’s international ethics was too accommodating to wartime actions, and not just in moments of supreme emergency, but in relation to all wars. Reviewing the book for the *Nation*, Richard Falk, Walzer’s former Princeton colleague, argued that by trying to make a moral argument about war, Walzer humanized what could not, in Falk’s view, be humanized.³⁹ “Without a doubt, Walzer has produced a brilliantly reasoned book about the relevance of moral argument to modern war,” Falk conceded, and “it should be studied by anyone interested in stemming the Machiavellian/Kissingerian tide of the time,” but “it is also troubling on precisely these grounds...Walzer makes the claim that despite all we now know about statecraft and the technology of warfare, it remains generally possible for political leaders to reconcile the pursuit of national interests with the claims of international law and morality.”⁴⁰

Falk was not taking an absolutist stand about the immorality of war or making his argument from the point of view of a pacifist. Instead, Falk contended that it was impossible to think about just wars or fighting justly in an age defined by atomic weaponry and mutually assured destruction, since any war or international crisis flirted with total destruction of both sides. “The full truth about military planning,” Falk concluded his review, “includes a mindless arms race, the diversion of precious resources, a permanent condition of prewar readiness, an enormous militarized bureaucracy, and willingness to develop and deploy weapons such as the neutron bomb that accentuate the fiendish moral status of nuclear weapons in general.”⁴¹

³⁸ Cameron, “Morality and War”

³⁹ Richard Falk, “The Moral Argument as Apologia,” *The Nation* (March 25, 1978)

⁴⁰ Falk, “The Moral Argument as Apologia”

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

The question of Walzer's growing statism also became central to the critiques of *Just and Unjust Wars*. By emphasizing the role states played in securing individual and collective liberty, Walzer placed a premium on the rights of the states at the expense of the rights of men and women, those associated men and women that he had long viewed as an important antidote to the outsized states born in the twentieth century. The doctrines of nonintervention with the exception of defensive wars, in this way, proved to not be permissive enough. The "rules of disregard" excluded many instances that others felt called for collective action from outside the state.

Walzer's statism was particularly troubling to the group of younger normative theorists who were attempting to globalize Rawls's theory of justice along cosmopolitan and post-national lines.⁴² While Walzer, Rawls, and their generation of theorists had cut their teeth in the heyday of welfare state and therefore began to develop their theories in the face of its numerous crises in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this new cohort no longer looked to the state. "Instead of colonial liberation and the creation of emancipated nations," as Moyn observed in his first history of human rights, this new internationalism "most often meant individual protections from states."⁴³

From this point of view, a politics of nonintervention was not enough; in fact, it was part of the problem. Inspired by the emerging human rights movement, figures like Charles Beitz and Henry Shue held out hope for groups and individuals working below the state. What philosophy needed was not to retrench behind national borders, as Walzer did in *Just and Unjust Wars* and *Exodus and Revolution*, but to imagine those forms of humanity and morality that transcended

⁴² On the morality of war and international relations, see, among others, *War and Moral Responsibility* edit by Marshall Cohen, Thomas Nagel, Thomas Scanlon (Princeton: *Philosophy & Public Affairs Readers*, 1974); Charles Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton, 1979); Henry Shue, *Basic Rights: Subsistence, Affluence, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton, 1980) *International Ethics* edit by Charles Beitz, Lawrence Alexander, Thomas Scanlon (Princeton: *Philosophy & Public Affairs Readers*, 1984). Also for two essential primers on this subject see Katrina Forrester, "Citizenship, War, and the Origins of International Ethics in American Political Philosophy 1960-1975," *Historical Journal* (September 2014) and Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2018), 146-173

⁴³ Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2012), 4

the state's bounded space. Good borders may have made good neighbors but not good states and even worse international ethics. States intervening in one another's affairs, as well as citizen mobilizing against a state from outside it, were necessary in a world dominated by state power.

Charles Beitz offered perhaps the most striking criticism of Walzer's work. In an article for *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, he pointed out the dangers of Walzer's emphasis on collective self-determination, noting that it ironically led to an international regime in which "people have rights to be governed by 'a state of their own, even if 'their own' state excludes them absolutely."⁴⁴ In another essay that took up *Just and Unjust Wars* and an essay Walzer contributed to a book on international ethics edited by Peter G. Brown and Henry Shue, he expanded his critique.⁴⁵ If Walzer's claim was that a state gained its moral and political value because it was an instrument through which personal rights to associated life and self-rule were realized, then how could specific states also have an *a priori* claim to territory and sovereignty? Either the state's right or the individuals' rights reigned supreme; the one being the representation of the other. As Beitz put it, "The fundamental question raised by his version of *jus ad bellum*—a question that goes to the heart of the morality of states—is why we should accord such great moral importance to the maintenance of a state's territorial integrity and political sovereignty. Walzer thinks that these derive their moral value from the human rights they protect, in particular, 'the right of men and women to build a common life and to risk their individual lives only when they freely choose to do so.' The obvious criticism is that there are many states that conspicuously do not permit their citizens to organize a 'common life' or to choose freely 'to risk their individual lives' for the common defense."⁴⁶ In Beitz's view, the

⁴⁴ Charles Beitz, "Nonintervention and Community Integrity," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (Summer 1980)

⁴⁵ Charles Beitz, "Bounded Morality: Justice and the State in World Politics," *International Organization* (Summer 1979)

⁴⁶ Beitz, "Bounded Morality: Justice and the State in World Politics"

centrality of collective self-determination in Walzer's international ethics was not only politically and morally troubling; it also was inconsistent. It had no clear line of reasoning.

Writing in *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Gerald Doppelt observed a corollary problem: "Walzer's theory... identifies the state with the people, nation, or political community."⁴⁷ By doing so, his "international relations... places the rights of de facto states above those of individuals," even if states' rights had originated from those held by its members since it elides their differences.⁴⁸

Walzer replied to these critics in his essay, "The Moral Standing of States."⁴⁹ In it, Walzer's defended his theory of international relations by emphasizing a chimerical understanding of moral judgment that he would further develop in *Spheres of Justice*: How we judge the legitimacy of a state from the outside, he contended, is different from how we might judge its legitimacy from within it. "The doctrine of legitimacy has a dual reference," he noted, that "do not coincide because they are addressed to different audiences."⁵⁰ A state is legitimate to its people because it represents their interests but it is legitimate to other states because it abides by the doctrine of nonintervention and serves as the instrument through which a particular group of people can achieve collective self-determination. The first form of legitimacy is determined by "the 'fit' of government and community, that is, the degree to which the government actually represents the political life of its people."⁵¹ The "second set of arguments concerns the presumptive legitimacy of states in international society" and here it is regulated by the question of whether the state is a law-abiding member of the international society of nation-states: Does it adhere by the contract that Walzer outlined as helping keep the peace between different states?⁵²

⁴⁷ Gerald Doppelt, "Walzer's Theory of Morality in International Relation," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (Fall 1978)

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Michael Walzer, "The Moral Standing of States: A Response to Four Critics" *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (1980)

⁵⁰ Walzer, "The Moral Standing of States: A Response to Four Critics"

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

The rules for disregard, in Walzer's view, do not sanction intervention in the case that a state is illegitimate before its first audience, so long as there is not an extreme crisis at hand. This is not only because it would undermine the foundations of a pacific global order but also because, for Walzer, intervention in internal legitimacy crises meant trespassing over the rights of citizens to choose what form of government they want to represent them. "The people have a right to rebel," he noted, and "if they are free to rebel, then they are also free not to rebel."⁵³

While this vision of democratic legitimation offered some useful corrections to the flattened way in which legitimacy was often thought about, it also did not address many of the questions raised by critiques of Walzer's writing. Leaving aside whether a people, under dire conditions, have the capacity to rebel and so regime change can only come from without, the central problem was that Walzer's stringent principle of nonintervention appeared to concede too much to the status quo: A state could be simultaneously legitimate and illegitimate; it could represent an equality between nations and peoples and fortify inequalities between persons. Likewise, as a norm that helped keep empires in check and enabled republican forms of self-government, Walzer's emphasis on national self-determination offered a powerful vision of an international order in which each nation respected the rights of other nation-states. But the program of national liberation in hotly contested decolonized territories every possible: Israel and Sri Lanka were, perhaps, the most glaring examples of the often winner take all nature of national self-determination. No Kurdistan had emerged out of Kurdish-dominated parts of Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. South Africa still ruled through apartheid. Tibet remained under the brutal thumb of China, and Bangladesh achieved independence from Pakistan, but only after

⁵³ Ibid.

bloody struggle for independence. What had become clear since the 1960s was one people's liberation often did not lead to the next. Sometimes, it in fact prevented another group's self-rule. By prioritizing the right of nations and states in a period in which these rights often proved regressive, an international ethics tied to national self-determination could also prove to work against both a more egalitarian and more pacific world order. It may have established an important antidote to an earlier age of imperial domination, and it may also have recognized the more plural forms in which political development emerged. But it also posed the danger of reaffirming those inequalities that were already established by a state and self-rule. Its "relativism," as Ronald Dworkin wrote of Walzer's later work, was at risk of being "faithless to the single most important social practice we have...that justice is our critic not our mirror."⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Ronald Dworkin, "To Each His Own," *New York Review of Books* (April 14, 1983)

9. Justice Here and Now

After fourteen years at Harvard, Walzer moved back to Princeton in 1980 to join the Institute for Advanced Study. Political life in the 1960s had been exhilarating and then exhausting. Political life in the 1970s had been disappointing and then entirely dispiriting. While at Harvard, Walzer sustained as much of his activist life as he could. He threw his support behind making Harvard College co-ed, he spoke at one of the last Radcliffe commencement speeches calling on the generation of women graduates to enlist themselves in the growing ranks of citizen politicians, and he brought figures like Eugene McCarthy and Bella Abzug to the Harvard campus.¹ He helped set up a DSOC chapter in Cambridge, and he debated younger activists on the politics of Israel and his Zionist commitments.² Like both the older generation of socialists around *Dissent* and the younger one around Michael Lerner and *Tikkun*, Walzer and fellow radical and former

¹ Bill Kovach, "McCarthy Scores 'A Different War': Cites Changes as Boston Teach-In Opens," *New York Times* (February 22, 1971) and Carol Sternhell, "Faculty Readily Approves All Proposals on Women," *Harvard Crimson* (May 26, 1971)

² Edward Josephson, "Walzer Speaks on Socialism and Democracy," *Harvard Crimson* (September 29, 1977); "Walzer Speaks on Israel," *Harvard Crimson* (November 18, 1978)

radical colleagues, like Robert Nozick and Hilary Putnam, began to rediscover their Jewishness and speak on Jewish themes on campus, ranging from the Talmud to secular Jewish culture.³

Walzer also continued to contribute political commentary, social criticism, and book reviews to the *New Republic*, the *New York Review of Books*, and in 1976 he became co-editor of *Dissent* with Irving Howe. Like many of his socialist peers, he accepted the necessity of turning back to conventional electoral politics, a long and slow march through the institutions that, as he noted in a short-lived journal edited by Christopher Lasch and Eugene Genovese, “will take the form of a succession of accommodations in each of which the new class will find larger scope for its political activity and an increasing cultural influence” but only “gradual movement.”⁴

Yet, after the flurry of political activity in the early and mid 1960s and the bitter controversies of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Walzer’s turn back to conventional politics also marked something of a withdrawal from radical politics and a turn toward a more “chastened humanism.” The scale for solidarity, political activity, and community had shrunken; so had Walzer’s role in an activist left that directed more and more of its energy toward various local struggles that were new to him or that he no longer felt drawn to. Reviewing *Radical Principles* in the *Crimson* shortly after Walzer moved to the Institute, one frustrated undergraduate noted that in Walzer’s “paradoxical intellectual history,” one hears “the triumph and despair of the Left

³ Steven J. Sampson, “Nozick, Walzer Predict Jews Will Focus on Jewish Issues,” *Havard Crimson* (March 12, 1979). For the rediscovery of Jewish identity in the 1970s by many of the veterans of the long New Left, see Irving Howe, “Jewish Quandaries,” *A Margin of Hope* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Javanoch, 1984). Putnam speaks about his turn back to Judaism in the wake of the frustrations and defeats of the 1960s in a wonderful interview given to the Italian scholar, Giovanna Borradori: “Between the New Left and Judaism,” *The American Philosopher: Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, MacIntyre, and Kuhn* (Chicago: Chicago, 1994). Walzer would in the years to come embark on a large-scale recovery of the Jewish political tradition that he and his co-editors have collected in a series of volumes under the heading, *The Jewish Political Tradition (The Jewish Political Tradition: Volume I-III)*, edit. by Michael Walzer, Menachem Lorberbaum, Noam Zohar, and Yair Loberbaum [New Haven: Yale, 2000, 2003, 2018].

⁴ Michael Walzer, “A Theory of Revolution,” *Marxist Perspectives* (Spring 1979)

in this country over the past two decades.”⁵ His “ideas as a young radical intellectual evinced a sense of political urgency...they sparkled with the anticipation of a radically different and much better world.”⁶ Yet, “his maturation...has involved a more staid and withdrawn perception of political realities, reverting to more abstract and idealistic conceptualization.”⁷

Part of Walzer’s evolution was defensive and tactical. It was less a retreat from radicalism than an effort to fortify the gains the left and social democracy had made in the first two thirds of the twentieth century. In a libertarian age, Walzer had come to the conclusion that socialists needed to first direct their energy toward defending the welfare state before seeking to extend liberalism’s liberties and equalities, and he was not alone in coming to this conclusion: a “defensive” social democracy, Tony Judt later noted, was all that was available to the left after the defeats of the 1960s.⁸ Under attack from both conservatives in the Republican Party and self-described “neoliberals” emerging in the Democratic Party, the left now had to be one of the liberal welfare state’s last lines of defense. But Walzer’s migration to the left wing of the possible was also ideological. Walzer had long felt that socialism needed to be supplemented with a politics of collective self-determination and the agency of radical democracy. He had, like the *Dissent* circle and figures like Stuart Hampshire, also come to believe the civil and political rights of liberalism were central to this project of renovating the radical tradition and had since the 1960s avowed what might be called a “liberal socialism.” But by the 1980s, he also believed the left needed a more formal rapprochement with the institutions, policies, and parties of liberalism. Socialism had to develop a greater sensitivity for difference and, in his view, it could only do so through the political bodies of the liberal welfare state and social democracy. A more

⁵ Siddhartha Mazumdar, “Retreat of the Left,” *Harvard Crimson* (November 24, 1980)

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land* (New York: Penguin, 2011)

maximalist socialism from below, which twinned radical democracy with egalitarianism, was perhaps a too utopian aspiration in a society that was barely able to meet its citizens' basic needs.

Walzer was not alone in coming to this conclusion. The desire to update socialism with the terms and constraints of liberalism was central to the project of nearly all North Atlantic socialist groupings in the 1970s and 80s. Under the guidance of Michael Foot, Olaf Palme, Willy Brandt, and Francois Mitterrand, socialist and social democratic parties in the Western half of Europe were moving toward liberalism, and turning to many of the market mechanisms and economic policies they once criticized, and so were the Communist Parties in Italy, Spain, and France that adopted a "New Way," opening up the path for these parties to work with social democratic and liberal political parties and embrace a politics of liberal conciliation and reform.

In the United States, many of Walzer's contemporaries also began to search for a reconciliation with liberal politics and economics. *Dissent* had run several speculative essays on the notion of "market socialism" in the 1960s and 1970s, examining ways in which socialists might embrace the mixed economies that had formed in the postwar years.⁹ Now in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the effort to give the market system a socialist underpinning became a recurring theme in its pages and in other long New Left magazines such as *In These Times*.¹⁰

⁹ Henry Pachter, "Three Economic Models: Capitalism, the Welfare State, and Socialism," *Dissent* (Spring 1964) and Luther Carpenter, "On Socialist Planning," *Dissent* (Summer 1973)

¹⁰ For articles in *Dissent*, see: Henry Pachter, "Freedom, Authority, Participation," *Dissent* (Summer 1978); Robert Heilbroner, "What is Socialism?" *Dissent* (Fall 1978); Kenneth Arrow, "A Cautious Case for Socialism," *Dissent* (Fall 1978); Irving Weinstein, "Market Socialism: A Program for American Socialists," *Dissent* (Winter 1981), Robert Lekachman, "Reconsidering Socialism: A View from Yugoslavia," *Dissent* (Fall 1982); Robert Heilbroner, "A Feasible Vision of Socialism," *Dissent* (Fall 1983); David Miller and Saul Estrin, "The Case for Market Socialism," *Dissent* (Fall 1987). For articles in *In These Times*, see: Kenneth Zapp, "Market Socialism," *In These Times* (May 25, 1977) Leland Stauber, "For a Socialism that Works: Part I, II, III" *In These Times* (May 3, 10, 1978); John H. Brown, "Does Socialism Fit with the Market?" (May 31, 1978); Leland Stauber, "A Workable Socialism: Part I and II," *In These Times* (May 16, 23, 1979); John Judis, "Socialism: Who Knows What It Is?" *In These Times* (January 25, 1985). For the *New Republic*, see: Michael Harrington, "Socialism Reborn in Europe: Europe's Social Democrats are Rediscovering Ideology," *The New Republic* (March 11, 1978)

Arguing that “a transitional socialist society would make full use of the virtues of the market mechanism,” Michael Harrington dedicated a series of essays in *Dissent* to defending the liberal turn in socialist politics, insisting that if the left were to sustain the libertarian and humanist spirit of postwar socialism, it needed to embrace the constraints on state action imposed on it by liberal economics.¹¹ The decentralist spirit of liberalism and libertarianism were important features of any future socialist society. So, too, he argued, must the creativity and energy of the market be marshalled toward egalitarian ends. Inspired by the experiments in socialist economic planning found in France and Yugoslavia, a growing number of left-liberal economists from Robert Heilbroner, John Roemer, and Robert Lekachman to Kenneth Arrow also began to make similar calls for “market socialism,” insisting that neither Keynesian liberalism nor command-economy socialism offered a path out of the recessions and economic crises of the 1970s and early 1980s. What was needed to revive the West’s flagging economies was a market socialism that looked to the state but not to run an economy but to regulate it.¹²

In These Times ran a five-part series in 1978-79 by the political economist Leland Stauber on the various models of market socialism in use in East and West Europe as well as examinations of the left-liberal coalitions emerging in Europe that he insisted might serve as a new framework for the American socialism of the possible formed around NAM and DSOC.¹³ The article provoked considerable frustration from the younger flanks of the *In These Times* writers, but the magazine’s editors followed up the series with a second one in which Stauber

¹¹ Michael Harrington, “Full Employment and Social Investment,” *Dissent* (Winter 1978); “What is Socialism?” *Dissent* (Fall 1978), “What Socialists Would Do in America—If They Could,” (Fall 1978); “A Path for America: Proposals for the Democratic Left,” *Dissent* (Fall 1982); “Is the Market Necessarily Capitalist?” (Winter 1989).

¹² See: Heilbroner, “What is Socialism?”; Arrow, “A Cautious Case for Socialism”; Lekachman, “Reconsidering Socialism: A View from Yugoslavia”; Heilbroner, “A Feasible Vision of Socialism”; Roemer, “Market Socialism”

¹³ Stauber, “For a Socialism that Works: Part I, II, III”

made the case in even sharper terms: market socialism was the only path to a “workable socialism.”¹⁴

Other socialists, less interested in the economics of a liberal-socialist rapprochement, began to consider the moral and political implications of pairing the two traditions. Drawing from the rediscovered “Western Marxism” of Gramsci, Karl Korsch, Georg Lukacs, and the Frankfurt School, Marxists around the *Socialist Review*, *New Left Review*, and *Telos* began to develop a pluralist understanding of the Marxist tradition that incorporated many of the liberal constraints on civil society and that sought to find ways to better incorporate feminist and black radicalism into the socialist tradition. Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau’s 1985 *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* typified this turn, insisting that competing subjectivities had to be integrated into any politics seeking equality.¹⁵ The universalism and internationalism of the Second International was no longer feasible. Perhaps it never was. A politics sensitive to difference, locality, and the more organic ways in which solidarity was formed was essential if the left were to regain its earlier strength. Mouffe and Laclau’s book provoked considerable consternation from some of the older socialists but as the 1980s tilted evermore toward liberal and pluralist thought, the pair found that they were not alone. Many socialists who had been inspired by Marxism now sought to reinvent the tradition so it aligned more closely with liberal democracy and with the need for a plural civil society that would not erode difference.¹⁶

¹⁴ Stauber, “A Workable Socialism: Part I and II”

¹⁵ Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 1985)

¹⁶ For a selection of articles in *Socialist Review*, see: Socialist Review Collective, *Unfinished Business: Twenty Years of Socialist Review* (Chicago: Haymarket, 1991). Among other pieces and books from *New Left Review* circles, see: Perry Anderson, *Considerations of Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1976); Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford, 1978); *Western Marxism: A Reader* edit. by New Left Review (Verso, 1983); Stuart Hall, “The Problem of Ideology: Marxism Without Guarantees,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* (Summer 1986). For the *Telos* circle, see: *The Unknown Dimension: European Marxism Since Lenin* edit. by Dick Howard and Karl Klare (New York: Basic, 1972); *Towards a New Marxism* edit. by Bart Grahl and Paul Piccone

In a series of essays published in *Dissent* eventually collected in *Socialism and America*, Irving Howe did his part to working out a “conciliation” between liberalism and socialism.¹⁷ *Dissent*’s democratic socialism had long absorbed the pluralist and civil libertarian norms of liberalism. Now he wanted to formalize the ceasefire. “Functioning for a good many decades as an opposition movement, and one, moreover, that could not quite decide whether it wished to be brought into society or preferred to seek a ‘total’ revolutionary transformation, the socialist movement,” Howe noted, “systematically attacked liberalism for timidity, evasiveness, vacillation, ‘rotten compromise,’ etc.”¹⁸ But the story was more complex: From the view of the late twentieth century, socialism and liberalism had more often been allies than antagonists. When one went into decline, the other did. In a moment when both liberals and leftists found themselves in a state of retreat, a new reconciliation was needed. Howe and his comrades at *Dissent* had viewed the social democratic politics of the first two thirds of the twentieth century with considerable skepticism. The Fabians had focused too much on the centrality of the state. The Popular Fronts had reduced the claims of socialism into slogans and had been too soft on both communism and liberalism. But in the 1970s and 80s, it was “the Fabian course” to which Howe believed the left should be committed. This course may not “stir the passions,” he admitted, but it was “politically good and perhaps even realistic.”¹⁹ “Here, finally,” he

(St. Louis: Telos, 1973); Paul Bienes and Andrew Arato, *The Young Lukacs and the Origins of Western Marxism* (New York: Continuum, 1979). Danny Postel has an excellent essay on the *Telos* circle, a subject that often ignored by many intellectual historians of the U.S. left: “The Metamorphosis of *Telos*,” *In These Times* (April 24-30, 1991).

¹⁷ Irving Howe, “Socialists and Communists in European Politics,” *Dissent* (Fall 1975); “Socialism and Liberalism: Articles of Conciliation?” *Dissent* (Winter 1977); “On the Moral Basis of Socialism,” *Dissent* (Fall 1981); “Thinking of Socialism,” *Dissent* (Fall 1985); “Of Socialists, Liberals, and Others,” *Dissent* (Winter 1988); see also the essays, not all previously published, in *Socialism and American* (New York: Harcourt, 1985)

¹⁸ Irving Howe, “Socialism and Liberalism: Articles of Conciliation?” *Dissent* (Winter 1977)

¹⁹ Howe, “Socialism and Liberalism: Articles of Conciliation?”

concluded, “liberals and democratic socialists find themselves in the same boat, even if at opposite ends of it.”²⁰

Walzer, too, directed much of his energy in the late 1970s and early 1980s to a liberal-socialist conciliation in a series of articles published in *Dissent* and the *New Republic*. As with Howe, he believed better threading liberalism and socialism together was not merely a matter of strategic necessity, but offered considerable moral and political dividends and the work that the postwar and post-Marxist left had done in an earlier period was not enough; democratic socialists needed to embrace more of liberalism’s economics and pluralism as well as its civil libertarianism. There were many arguments, Walzer noted in one *Dissent* essay, that have “do with distributive justice, equality, the need for planning, self-respect, fraternity, and so on” that justify a movement toward a liberal socialism or a socialist liberalism.²¹ But “the one that seems to me the easiest and best is a political argument” is that one needs both liberalism and socialism in order to achieve a democratic society.²² Socialism helped fulfill liberalism’s democratic ambitions in those spheres of life left untouched by a liberal state and the formal equalities and liberties it provided; liberalism helped protect the autonomy of individuals and groups within a society that had absorbed many of socialism and social democracy’s egalitarian imperatives.

Expanding on this argument in “A Day in the Life of a Socialist Citizen,” Walzer argued that certain liberal political institutions, in fact, are necessary to realize the egalitarian ambitions of socialism. If an entire society was involved with the process of political decision-making at all times, its members could not pursue the other forms of individual and collective life. Citizens could not find meaning in their work; they would not have time for their families or hobbies or

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Michael Walzer, “Town Meetings and Workers’ Control: A Story for Socialists,” *Dissent* (Summer 1978)

²² Walzer, “Town Meetings and Workers’ Control: A Story for Socialists”

local activism. Walzer agreed with Oscar Wilde, when he quipped that one critical problems with socialism was that it took far too many evenings.²³ What was needed therefore was a set of representative institutions, ones that took a considerable amount of the burden of political decision-making away from ordinary citizens and delegated this work to a ruling political class.

In “Town Meetings and Workers’ Control: A Story for Socialists,” Walzer made a similar case.²⁴ One could draw parallels between socialism’s model of worker control and democracy’s town meetings; each was an effort to assert a certain amount of collective control over public life. But ultimately these kinds of participatory forms of democracy only work on local and small scales. To organize a political and economic system for a large body of people, spread out across a territory, required liberalism’s more representational distribution of power. Parties and elected officials had to supplement, if not replace, amateur ones. “What is important is that [they] be known to be common and that our participation in [them] be recognized as a matter of right.”²⁵

The political advantages of pairing socialism and liberalism were also explored in an exchange with Robert Heilbroner in *Dissent*.²⁶ The author of the bestselling economic history, *The Worldly Philosopher*, Heilbroner had moved closer to *Dissent*’s version of democratic socialism as the *Dissenters*—especially Howe, Coser, and Harrington—moved closer to his version of social democratic politics. For Heilbroner the new socialist-liberal rapprochement was encouraging, and he hailed the efforts by Harrington and others to bridge the differences between their economics. But on moral terms, he was skeptical of how socialism and liberalism might be conjoined as one. Socialism sought to elide difference, while liberalism tried to preserve it.

²³ Walzer, “A Day in the Life of a Socialist Citizen”

²⁴ Walzer, “Town Meetings and Workers’ Control: A Story for Socialists”

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Robert Heilbroner, Michael Walzer, “What is Socialism?” *Dissent* (Summer 1978)

While industrial planning and worker cooperatives could be paired with the market, socialism's prioritization of equality could not co-exist with liberalism's prioritization of liberty.²⁷

For many of the *Dissenters*, this was a frustrating argument as their central understanding of socialism rested on the notion that it was ultimately in pursuit of liberty and individual personhood and that a system of democratic control in the economic sphere did not necessarily undermine or run in conflict to a system of democratic control in the political sphere and Walzer responded to Heilbroner's argument, insisting that Heilbroner missed how liberalism and socialism had long operated parallel to each other in a complimentary and not necessarily antagonistic fashion: both were in pursuit of liberty and equality just in different spheres: Liberals looked to formalize these norms within the state, leaving civil society to the market. Socialists sought to protect these norms in the realms of civil society and the market. The hope was that the same spirit of equality found in liberalism's due process and political representation could be extended in everyday life and create the same forms of individual liberty.²⁸ Equality and liberty could have many different registers; the point was to sustain the program of both in all realms of life, not just place a monopoly of one value in one sphere and monopoly of another in the other sphere. In each realm, liberty and equality meant something different and required a different set of policies and application of these norms; one could not just abandon liberty in the realm of the state just as one could not abandon the principle of equality in realm of civil society.

While defending socialism's moral and political culture from liberal critics, Walzer also began in a series of essays that he started to publish in the 1970s and 80s to make the case for how liberalism could help make up for the deficiencies found in socialism to liberalism's left-wing critics. Liberalism, he argued, offered a vision of a society cut up into different spheres, in

²⁷ Heilbroner, "What is Socialism?"

²⁸ Walzer, "What is Socialism?"

which the goods produced in one terrain did not invade another. The piety produced by the church, in a liberal polity, was not supposed to invade the realm of politics. Political power was not supposed to determine one's fortunes in the market. The market had no place in the realm of healthcare or security and the state had no place in the church. Before a court, all citizens—the wealthiest and poorest, the most politically empowered and the most disenfranchised—had the same rights and were bound by the same laws and duties. In Walzer's view, these acts of enclosure helped protect the plurality of human expression, in particular in civil society, and created new regimes of toleration, which served as a basis for modern liberal democracy. They also offered a novel way of thinking about key norms of the long New Left, in particular its often conflicting commitments to equality, liberty, radical democracy, self-determination, and pluralism. By understanding that equality had different meanings in different spheres, socialists could find themselves committed to a set of political traditions that sometimes ran up against one another while asserting that they still retained the central libertarian and egalitarian ideals of socialism since in each sphere of life a different expression and application of these ideals was relevant.

In the international sphere, for example, an equality between nations should take precedence in Walzer's view. In the domestic sphere, an equality between persons should take priority but even here there were different ways to understand and iterate this equality between persons. When it came to questions of military duty, all citizens should be delegated these burdens equally. When it came to questions of healthcare and housing, need should dictate. So long as the wealth obtained within the realm of the market did not invade other spheres, then certain inequalities within the sphere of money and commodity exchange were acceptable. And for Walzer all of this fit into a program of self-determination and collective liberty: when this

program of complex equality was better realized than the domination that comes from the justifiable inequality of one sphere invading in an unjustifiable way the equalities of another sphere would be staunch. Socialism, in Walzer's view, no longer should aim "at eliminating all difference but a particular set of differences"—"aristocratic privilege, capitalist wealth, bureaucratic power, racial or sexual supremacy."²⁹ At its core was less a doctrine of flattened social status so much as the principles of self-government and the ability to collectively decide on which forms of inequality are acceptable in particular spheres of social exchange. a politics Rather than remake the system altogether, Walzer wanted to model the left's egalitarianism around native principles of self-determination that he believed could be found throughout human history. Instead of maximalist visions of a society dictated by no inequality, the left should aspired toward building societies with "no more bowing and scraping, fawning and toadying; no more fearful trembling; no more high-and-mightiness; no more master, no more slaves."³⁰

Like the market socialists, Walzer was not opposed to a view of equality that ultimately produced some forms of inequality, inequalities of property and possession, differences in outcomes and wealth, so long as these inequalities did not invade those spheres of life where there should be total equality—those realms, like health, housing, representation, law, and duties. The problem with social life in the 1970s and 80s was that the principle of equality within the market—of rational self-interest and of each individual being able to enter into a contract on their own—invaded other realms where equality meant radically different things. Health, housing, education, and other goods necessary for basic subsistence and collective life were often not distributed according to the principles of market equality but according to those principles of fairness and equality native to their own spheres. For Walzer, liberalism's "art of

²⁹ Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, xiii

³⁰ *Ibid.*

separation,” as he put it, could here help offer a way for socialists to correct for this, insisting that the market needs to be better enclosed in order to create greater freedom and equality in other realms of social life and exchange. Just as liberalism had enclosed various domains—property, commerce, the church, the press—from the state, a socialist art of separation, Walzer argued, could adapt liberalism’s tendency to enclose different spheres for its own purposes, turning the work of separation back onto liberal institutions, in particular the market, that had since the 1970s and 80s begun to run roughshod on the rest of civil society. Just “as the institutions of civil society were protected from state power,” he argued in a 1984 essay outlining this argument, “so now they must be protected, and the state too, from the new power that arises within civil society itself, the power of wealth. The point is not to reject separation as Marx did but to endorse and extend it, to enlist liberal artfulness in the service of socialism.”³¹

By enlisting this “art of separation,” Walzer believed a more complex egalitarianism could in fact provide the best of both liberal and socialist traditions, offering an equality—one in which many differences still survived—that was sensitive to institutional context and that kept the market out of other spheres of social life while also not abandoning the need to restrain the state. To each sphere should come its own version of egalitarian justice. Marx’s slogan “‘from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs’ is a fine slogan with regard to medical care,” Walzer explained in another essay on this theme. “But...what egalitarianism requires is that many bells should ring. Different goods should be distributed in to different people for different reasons.”³² Likewise the flattened universalism imagined by Rawls and the neo-Kantians around SELF also offered a fine method of approaching some distributive justice questions—such as civil liberties, military duty, and basic social provisions—but by generalizing

³¹ Michael Walzer, “Liberalism and the Art of Separation,” *Political Theory* (1984)

³² Michael Walzer, “In Defense of Equality” *Dissent* (Fall 1973)

their principles of liberty and equality across all spheres of social exchange, they, too, imagined political and economic systems that reaffirmed inequalities in some spheres—family life, social relations, culture—that a liberal socialism, enlisting the art of separation, might be able to resist.

Here Walzer's understanding of a liberal socialism shows signs of the influence of his time at the Institute for Advanced Study, where an emphasis on context and history played a central role in the institute's "interpretivist" approach to social science. One can also hear what might be called the "moral-economy socialism" of R.H. Tawney and Karl Polanyi echoing throughout Walzer's arguments about socialism in this period.³³ Certain goods should not be commodities, traded on the market and subject to its distributive principles. Yet, for Walzer, what was particularly important when it came to his arguments about the separation of spheres was what this meant in terms of power. What most troubled Walzer about how the goods produced in one sphere migrated to another—say how money could dictate the quality of medical treatment or influence an election—was that by doing so the inequalities of one sphere would be able to tyrannize all other spheres of collective life. Self-determination was at risk when the power accrued in, say, the sphere of the market or church applied to political life. Likewise, it was at risk when a powerful politician could exercise unfair advantage in a court.

Just as the principle of collective self-determination created a world of collective freedom in the sphere of international relations, so, too, Walzer argued did a separation of the different realms of social interaction protect self-determination and democratic self-government within a domestic setting. "Just as a free church" is determined by being in "the hands of believers," and

³³ Polanyi is rarely, if at all, cited in Walzer's work from this time; Tawney, on the other hand, played an important role in much of Walzer's thinking, from *The Revolution of the Saints* to *Spheres of Justice*. In this period, Walzer also sought to revive interest in Tawney's writing and *Dissent* ran an excerpt of his *Commonplace Book* selected and introduced by Walzer. See: Michael Walzer, "From R. H. Tawney's *Commonplace Book*: Introduction" *Dissent* (Fall, 1981)

“a free university in the hands of scholars,” and “a free firm in the hands workers and managers,” so too is a free society determined by limiting the power of any one sphere of social exchange.³⁴ When a good from another realm invades these autonomous spheres, liberty, as well as an equality of relations, begins to break down. In Walzer’s view, so does democracy. This principle of separation would get Walzer into considerable trouble in the years to come, as it rehearsed many of the contradictions found in his work on international ethics, but it would also serve as the backbone for the vision of egalitarianism and pluralism outlined in *Spheres of Justice*. A complex and intricate society, he would argue, also requires a complex view of egalitarianism.

Like *Just and Unjust Wars*, Walzer divides *Spheres of Justice* into a set of distinct realms of moral and political judgment, emphasizing how different institutional settings lead to different understandings of justice, liberty, equality, self-determination, and even humanity. But Walzer also defines these spheres differently in *Spheres of Justice* from the temporal and geographical framework used in *Just and Unjust Wars*. In *Just and Unjust Wars*, there are two different moralities—one for a time of war and one for a time of peace—and two different scales for morality—that within the sphere of inter-state relations and that between individual people. Turning from the international sphere to the domestic one in *Spheres of Justice*, Walzer argues that morality is not bounded by two different codes that regulated social action but instead many. In the terrain of distributive justice, the rules all may look to the same principles of equality, pluralism, liberty, and self-determination, but they took on distinct expressions in each sphere. Since “there has never been a universal medium of exchange,” Walzer notes, there is no “single

³⁴ Walzer, “Liberalism and the Art of Separation”

decision point from which all distributions are controlled or a single set of agents making decisions.”³⁵

In the market, for example, the goods it produces—money and commodities, in particular—should be transferred based on the principles of merit and productivity; in the sphere of security and welfare, it should be distributed equally to all members regardless of differences in talent or productivity and in the spheres of religion, politics, family life, and intellectual production other standards of distribution should exist. This may lead to inequalities in a particular sphere but so long as these inequalities and distributive principles of one sphere does not transfer to another, Walzer argues that this can nonetheless form the basis for a theory of justice. “There is no such thing,” in Walzer’s view, “as a maldistribution of consumer goods. It just doesn’t matter, from the standpoint of complex equality, that you have a yacht and I don’t, or that the sound system of her hi-fi set is greatly superior to his,” whereas inequalities produced by the movement of a good or distributive scheme from one sphere to another, was unjust.³⁶ When money buys health and security, when piety leads to greater political representation, when political power allows one to abstain from collective duties such as military service, then the good produced in one sphere of social exchange is tyrannizing the equalities and liberties found in other sphere. This is why for Walzer “relative autonomy” between spheres “is a critical principle.”³⁷ There is no one standard or set of standards for distribution, whether Marxist or Rawlsian, but many standards, each responsive to the characteristics of that sphere’s norms.

For Walzer this was why a distributive justice theory requires liberalism’s art of separation, what he calls “blocked exchanges” in *Spheres of Justice*. “It’s not only a matter of

³⁵ Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, 4

³⁶ Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, 108

³⁷ Ibid.

implementing some singular principle or set of principles in different historical settings,” Walzer notes early on in *Spheres of Justice*. “I want to argue for more than this: that the principles of justice are themselves pluralistic in form; that different social goods ought to be distributed for different reasons, in accordance with different procedures, by difference agents” and as a result of this pluralism within each sphere there needed to be a system that regulated the movement of norms and goods from sphere to another.³⁸ Walzer did not want eliminate “all difference but a particular set of differences”—“aristocratic privilege, capitalist wealth, bureaucratic power, racial or sexual supremacy”—that cannot be justified by any particular sphere of exchange.³⁹ “Money is inappropriate in the sphere of ecclesiastical office,” as should spiritual piety “make for no advantage in the marketplace,” and “the same can be said about political power in the sphere of the courts; social prestige or education in the sphere of spiritual or private life.”⁴⁰

This division of spheres was not a new idea. By redistributing some goods but not others, and by creating laws that regulate the movement of goods from one sphere to another, the welfare state already did much of this and the notion that some goods should not be commodified and exchanged on the market was central to the moral-economy socialism of Polanyi and Tawney. But the reasons behind it for Walzer went deeper than merely satisfying the basic necessities of collective life and preventing the market from colonizing other spheres of life. For Walzer, this principle of spherical pluralism evinced both the informal egalitarianism of socialism and formal egalitarianism of liberalism. It also helped hinder a form of internal tyranny. When the state allows some duties and inequalities to go up for sale, it is putting the very principles of self-government at risk since it transforms what should be governed or

³⁸ Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, 6

³⁹ Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, xiii

⁴⁰ Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, 10

determined by all into something determined by the few. When Lincoln signed the Enrollment and Conscription Act into law in 1863, for example, thereby allowing some Americans to buy their way out of military service, he not only acted unjustly by allowing the wealth generated in the market to interfere with the equality found in the sphere of distributing dangerous work, he also put a public good in the realm of private exchange. Selling the right to evade conscription was not only unjust but also, Walzer notes, “a bad business in a republic, for it seemed to abolish the *public things* and turn military service...into a private transaction.”⁴¹ For Walzer, then, distributive justice is also about self-rule. The market’s colonization of the sphere of health or security is not imperialism as history has known it, but it is, in Walzer’s view, a different form of imperialism in which a community’s collective liberty is undermined by an external power and those goods that should be distributed according to public interest are traded for private gain.

When a charismatic politician or a skillful investor or a particularly adept basketball player receive an unequal amount of recognition within the sphere of his or her skill this was an unfortunate but necessary outcome of the differences created by luck and skill. But when he or she then received preferential treatment in other domains, using the good they acquired in either of these spheres to, say, get out of military service, or to break the law, or receive better medical treatments, they are tyrannizing those forms of life that should be defined by other moral norms.

Walzer’s spherical justice and complex egalitarianism also aligns nicely with the visions of market socialism being explored in the pages of *Dissent* and *In These Times*. Walzer does not call for the abolition of the market when writing about questions of commerce; for him the issue is not how much money or property one has but how one uses it (though he does highlight the problem of monopoly being distinct from the one of maldistributions). “There is nothing

⁴¹ Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, 99

degraded about buying and selling,” Walzer argues, and “nothing degraded in wanting to own that shirt (to wear it, to be seen in it) or in wanting to own this book (to read it, to mark it up) and nothing degraded in making such things available for a price.”⁴² But this is the case “so long as [the market] isn’t selling people or votes or political influence” and the market does not allow a merchant to have a monopoly over a particular commodity so that he or she can extort an unfair price from consumers.⁴³ Democracy is not “well served,” Walzer insists, “if such matters as the choice of washing machines and television sets [has] to be debated in the assembly,” but it is equally not well-served if its citizens cannot participate in decision-making of a society because they are too busy making ends meet, are unhealthy because medical care is too expensive, or uneducated because a university, wielding a monopoly on college degrees, makes higher education prohibitive. An open market can play a role in a democratic society, but it can only do so if its openness is regulated in a manner to prevent it from distributing other sphere’s goods.

For Walzer, this society, defined by a complex equality and spherical pluralism, would look something like the kind of society he and his long New Leftists have long been in pursuit of. As he argues near the end of *Spheres of Justice*, a just America would have “a decentralized democratic socialism; a strong welfare state run, in part at least, by local and amateur officials; a constrained market; an open and demystified civil service; independent public schools; the sharing of hard work and free time; the protection of religious and familial life; a system of public honoring and dishonoring free from all considerations of rank and class; workers’ control of companies and factories; a politics of parties, movements, meetings, and public debate.”⁴⁴

⁴² Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, 109-110

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, 318

For Walzer, the importance of developing a spherical notion of distribution led him to another important turn in his argument: All liberal and socialist distributive schemes need to be more pluralist in nature. In following the more historicist and contextualist nature of the Institute for Advanced Study, especially the work of Clifford Geertz, Walzer insists that no principle of justice can stand on its own: there is always a context in which this principle is being applied and in which it is judged. This does not only mean a context in terms of institutional setting but also the historical, social, religious, and linguistic contexts that separate out different moral cultures. Just as each distributive sphere has its own principles, so too does each political community and moral tradition have its own “collective values,” its “shared understandings of membership, health, food and shelter, work and leisure.”⁴⁵ Even the very notion of justice, equality, and liberty, which define almost all political theories of distributions are defined by the unique cultural settings, as well as institutional contexts, in which these abstract norms are applied. Parallel to what Jason Reiner calls the “internal pluralism” of Walzer’s spherical justice, is his “external pluralism” that seeks to empower and respect each community’s particularism.⁴⁶

On the surface this external or communitarian pluralism appears to run concurrent with Walzer’s spherical distributive scheme that is internally applied within each community. Both rest on a particularism that respects the relative autonomy of a specific social space. But these two regimes of pluralism, in fact, often can run at odds with one another. By prioritizing a community’s ability to determine its understanding and meanings of justice, one also forfeits the ability to judge some “shared understandings” and “collective values” as more just and some as less just (or as unjust). One even forfeits the ability to argue that justice should be spherical since

⁴⁵ Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, 82

⁴⁶ Reiner, “Political Thought and Political Action: Michael Walzer’s Engagement with American Radicalism,” (University California-Berkeley, 2011)

for some communities it is the uniformity of principles that creates a just society not a spherical one. In this way, his external pluralism can run up against the claims of his internal pluralism.

Walzer recognizes this tensions between his different pluralisms in *Spheres of Justice*, and notes that while each community has its own understandings of justice there are still, in fact, many overlapping distributive principles that are interpreted differently by different communities but that orbit around a similar line of reasoning that is accessible beyond a particular space and time. As with his war conventions, there are some basic minimums that transcend any bounded space or historical context and that allow for a distributive justice theory to still be extrapolated. In fifth-century Athens, medieval Jewish communities, and the welfare states of twentieth-century Europe and the United States, for example, many basic provisions needed for life are, or at least should be, distributed according to the principles of need. Yet, despite this being an overlapping principle among these various communities, in each of these societies, the community attends “to the needs of its members as they collectively understand those needs” and so since basic provisions are up for interpretation so too are the distributive outcomes of each of these communities.⁴⁷ Because Athenian drama and Jewish academies are viewed in their respective communities “not merely as enhancements of the common life but vital aspects of communal welfare,” these often take precedent over other provisions that twentieth-century welfare states have come to view as essential to common life, and twentieth-century welfare states often do not view either the academy or drama as a basic social provision.⁴⁸ Likewise, while the principle of membership is central to each community, because each of these communities has different definitions of who is and who is not a part of a community, there is also a variation in how the basic provisions are distributive, even if the principle of need remains

⁴⁷ Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, 84

⁴⁸ Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, 83

constant. In Athens, for example, only free men were considered full members and in medieval Jewish communities, only the faithful and pious, and so only those individuals who meet this standard receive an equal distribution of what is deemed necessary for life. In caste-riven India, villages distributed according to need but only to those within specific castes. An equality of principles remained even if this very principle was inegalitarian while in a liberal democracy, where the doctrine of birthright citizenship often applies, all born within a land receive, or at least should receive, the same amount of communal provisions needed to sustain material life.

Here we begin to see some of the same tensions that riddled Walzer's international ethics and his writings on national liberation: the vocabulary of egalitarianism is still being employed but often in conflict with its traditional universalist and internationalist ambitions. Without a transhistorical set of standards to define the principles of equality, allowing a community to determine its own "shared understandings" and "collective values" can cause a form of complex egalitarianism that ultimately justifies a highly hierarchical and repressive society. By granting a particular moral tradition primacy in determining its own meanings of justice, many reactionary moral and political cultures can remain in place—and not just related to membership but within many other spheres of social exchange and public and private life. Patriarchal family arrangements, illiberal legal regimes, undemocratic forms of representation, unequal distributions of dangerous or undesirable work are justified by certain moral and political traditions, contemporary as well as ancient, but according to the principle of external pluralism so long as they are representative of community's "shared understandings," they accord with Walzer's complex egalitarianism and spherical justice. Likewise, the internal pluralism of spheres are themselves vulnerable to the external pluralism of communities that might want the church to invade the realm of politics or the educational status to dictate the distribution of health

care. What about a society like contemporary America where there appears to be a plurality that supports the notion that the distributive principles of the market can invade other spheres of life? If one accepts Walzer's argument that different forms of distribution must emerge from within a community's unique history, traditions, and patterns of life, then how can one judge a community in which a dominant part of its moral culture is inegalitarian? As the consensus historians argued, maybe America's market colonialism is its native moral culture.

Spheres of Justice offered a series of important amendments to the modern liberal and socialist traditions. Drawing from the socialist tradition, Walzer insisted that egalitarianism needed to concern itself with more than just the formal spheres of political life and help create a greater equality within those spheres of civil society and informal social exchange outside the state. Answering the growing critique of "neoliberals" (yes, that is what they called themselves) within the Democratic Party that contended that more social goods should be distributed according to the logic of the market, Walzer also showed how his spherical version of justice was central to self-government and to the principles not only of liberalism and socialism but also republicanism, as it prevents those goods that are public things from becoming private. *Spheres of Justice* also offered a valuable response to the abstraction and universalism of his SELF peers and fellow socialists who resisted the radical feminists, black nationalists, and other radicals' politics of difference in the 1970s and 80s. Tyranny, Walzer reminds his readers, is not only the imposition of arbitrary power but can also be a form of cultural and moral totalization, a "*Gleichschaltung*," as Walzer puts it, of all "social goods and spheres of life."⁴⁹ For Walzer, if one way of thinking about justice—one preferred by both Rawls and Marx—was to walk out of the cave and leave the city, insisting that a universal standard foreign to their occupants must be

⁴⁹ Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, 316

imposed from on high, for Walzer the more democratic way to do so was to stand in the cave and within the city and to “interpret to one’s fellow citizens the world of meanings that we share.”⁵⁰

Yet, Walzer’s spherical vision of justice also brought to the surface many of the underlying tensions that long been brewing under the surface of his thought. While Walzer concludes *Spheres* by arguing that in an advanced industrial society like the United States, justice points toward the development of a social democracy above and a decentralized democratic socialism below, it is unclear how one could universalize this argument. Respecting the plural ways in which communities define their social goods means embracing, in the case of Athens or a caste-riven India, an underlying inequality native to these communities. His internal pluralism insisted that each sphere of social life—the market, welfare, medical care, family and intimate life, political representation—should have its own distributive principles. But it also meant that those structural hierarchies produced by a sphere—say, patriarchy within the family, social inequality in the market—remained unchallenged. In a lecture Walzer gave two years after publishing *Spheres of Justice*, he tried to reckon with some of these ambiguities by further developing his theory of the foundations (or lack of foundations) for moral and political thought, arguing that there are three types of “moral knowledge.”⁵¹ There is “discovery,” or the theological and platonic idea that there is a principle or image of the good that is out there to be divined. There is “invention,” the romantic idea that all norms are to be willed onto the world by individuals. And there is “interpretation,” the idea that it is through one’s encounter with others—through one’s arguments and everyday complaints—morality organically emerges. For Walzer, it was this last form of moral knowledge that defined his work in the 1970s and 80s. Many of the SELF philosophers looked to their philosophical predecessors for models of

⁵⁰ Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, xiv

⁵¹ Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1987).

deliberation: Plato and Hobbes's speculative architectonics, Locke and Rousseau's radical anthropologies, Kant's magnificent system-building. But Walzer looked to the citizen-activist—the saints, the revolutionaries, the movement organizers—struggling to administer a meeting and negotiate contesting voices. But the citizen-activist could only see as far the city or the cave. He could not look beyond the world in which he or she lived and the immediate needs imposed on it.

Walzer's vision of a moral and political philosophy anchored to the world, and drawn from the moral and political vernaculars native to a particular community and cultural context offers a compellingly democratic and modest understanding of the task of moral and political theory. As Walzer noted, citing a famous Talmudic line in which a rabbi tells his peers to stop looking to God to understand justice, "It is not in heaven. The law is to be decided here."⁵² But the kind of justice decided on earth in the 1970s and 80s, especially in the North Atlantic, was not only far from heavenly; it also was far from the visions of equality, solidarity, and liberation avowed by socialists and social democrats for much of the first half of the twentieth century. While *Spheres of Justice* offered the left an important document of pluralist egalitarianism that corrected for many of the left's oversights in earlier epochs, it also marked a considerable diminution for the radical tradition, perhaps speaking too much in the moral and political vernacular of its times and confirming, rather than extending, the realm of the possible.

Upon publication, *Spheres of Justice* received both rave and critical reviews. Writing in *In These Times*, shortly after its release, George Scialabba noted that it has helped the 1980s left and, in particular, the 1980s socialist left "find their voice," offering a bridge between an Old Left

⁵² *ibid.*

egalitarianism and a New Left pluralism, liberationism, and liberalism.⁵³ In *Ethics*, then the leading journal of American political theory, William Galston noted the book was “at once critical of the imperfections of the liberal welfare state and sobered by the crimes of contemporary totalitarianism.”⁵⁴ By synthesizing his liberal and socialist commitments, Walzer suggested a different path for not just the left but also contemporary philosophy, one that did not turn to rationality alone but was “sensitive to social experience and historical particularity.”⁵⁵ Writing about the book in a cover story for the *New York Times Book Review*, Michael Sandel argued it provided “an imaginative alternative to the current debate over distributive justice...carried on between libertarians on the one hand and egalitarians on the other,” rescuing “the case for equality from its critics and defenders alike, by shifting the ground of” this divide and emphasizing that the real focus of justice was a system of separation between different spheres that could help realize the programs of both libertarians and egalitarians alike.⁵⁶ “The key to his solution is worry less about the distribution of money and more about limiting the things that money can buy,” Sandel explained. “This is the point of talking about *spheres of justice*.”⁵⁷

The book also provoked significant criticism from both liberal and radical theorists. Writing in the *New York Review of Books*, Ronald Dworkin noted that Walzer offered “a relaxed and agreeable vision of social justice” that “promises a society at peace with its own traditions, without the constant tensions, comparisons, jealousies, and regimentation of ‘simple’ equality. Citizens live together in harmony, though no one has exactly the wealth or education or

⁵³ George Scialabba, “Michael Walzer’s *Spheres of Justice*,” *In These Times* (October 19, 1983)

⁵⁴ William Galston, “Michael Walzer’s *Spheres of Justice*,” *Ethics* (Winter 1984)

⁵⁵ Galston, “Michael Walzer’s *Spheres of Justice*”

⁵⁶ Michael Sandel, “Spheres of Justice,” *The New York Times* (April 24, 1983)

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

opportunities of anyone else, because each understands that he has received what justice requires within each sphere.”⁵⁸ Yet in trying to “break the grip that the formal style has lately had on Anglo-American political philosophy,” he also ceded, in Dworkin’s view, the central value in philosophy’s neo-Kantian method when it came to justice: “Walzer’s relativism,” he concluded, “is faithless to the single most important social practice we have. It ignores the ‘social meaning’ of a tradition much more fundamental than the discrete traditions it asks us to respect. For it is part of our common political life, if anything is, that justice is our critic not our mirror.”⁵⁹

Even many of *Spheres of Justice*’s champions made a similar criticism. While its turn away from the Kantian intuitionism dominating moral and political philosophy at the time, Sandel agreed with Dworkin noting that, “societies faithful to the shared understanding of their members do not make for just societies...only consistent ones.”⁶⁰ Likewise T.M. Scanlon in a *London Review of Books* essay that otherwise praised Walzer’s book’s considerable innovations noted that while Walzer is right in situating moral and political thought within a community and from a view from somewhere, he neglected how a universalism can also emerge out of local moralities. “The drive towards abstract principles of justice,” Scanlon argued, “does not arise only from meddling outsiders looking for an excuse to interfere but also, and often, from disputes within a society, particularly from the claims of those who are disadvantaged and oppressed by its established practices.”⁶¹ Universalism can be a weapon wielded by communities striving for particular forms of justice, a point Walzer had made in *Exodus and Revolution*.

A new generation of feminists also were critical of Walzer’s communitarian pluralism. While they found his critique of the universalism found in both Marxism and neo-Kantian

⁵⁸ Ronald Dworkin, “To Each His Own,” *The New York Review of Books* (April 14, 1983)

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Sandel, “Spheres of Justice”

⁶¹ Scanlon, “Local Justice”

Rawlsianism a useful cudgel against the ways in which so many left-wing and liberal theories of liberty and equality generalize from the perspective of abstracted white men, thereby reinforcing many of the ways in which women and other minority groups remained subjugated, Walzer's second form of pluralism posed considerable problems to a feminist egalitarianism.⁶² Like his arguments with David Luban, Charles Beitz, Gerald Doppelt, and Richard Wasserstrom over the tensions between human rights and collective self-determination mirrored, the insistence that each community had a right to determine its own moral and political traditions also could undermine transhistorical and universal set of constraints on a reactionary state.⁶³ By prioritizing a community's role in determining its social arrangements, his theory of justice, like his international ethics, could have an inadvertent effect of fortifying already existing hierarchies.

Susan Moller Okin posed this argument in *Justice, Gender, and Family*.⁶⁴ On the one hand, Okin lauded Walzer's pluralism of spheres and his sensitivity to how the goods accumulated in one realm of social life can dangerously tyrannize another and therefore help fortify already existing forms of patriarchy, and she employed a similar critique of the Rawlsians and neo-Kantians that Walzer makes throughout *Spheres*. But on the other hand, Okin notes that Walzer's second understanding of pluralism—the notion that each community has its own native moral and political traditions that help define its understandings of justice—also reaffirmed various forms of domination and hierarchy based on gender, race, class, and other social distinctions. Premising the justice of any moral or political system on a community's own

⁶² Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Palo Alto: Stanford, 1988); Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic, 1989), Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton, 1990), Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1999)

⁶³ Charles Beitz, "Bounded Morality: Justice and the State in World Politics," *International Organization*; David Luban, "Just War and Human Rights," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*

⁶⁴ Susan Moller Okin, "Justice and Gender," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (Winter 1987); *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic, 1989)

determinations, the “reliance on ‘shared meanings,’” Okin argued, proves to be “incapable of dealing with the problem of the effects of *social domination* on beliefs and understandings.”⁶⁵

The “difficult issue is whether and how such a relativist criterion for the justice of social arrangements and distributions can have the critical potential Walzer claims of it. *Can* it apply, except where the basic equality of human beings is already assumed?”⁶⁶

Okin also raised another quandary for Walzer’s theory. What about those societies in which there are no “shared understandings” or “shared meanings,” where some, such as the middle-class liberals in the United States, support gender and racial equality, and other groups do not? It would appear that anchoring any distributive system, or any moral system for that matter, to a common consensus also means making moral and political decisions impossible in those cultures that are riven by differences of opinion. Okin noted this was particularly true in 1980s America when it comes to issues of gender where there is “*no shared understandings*...As studies of feminism and antifeminism have shown, women are deeply divided on the subject of gender and sex roles, with antifeminist women not rejecting them as unjust but rather regarding the continued economic dependence of women and the dominance of the world outside the home by men as natural and inevitable given women’s special reproductive functions.”⁶⁷

One could also extend Okin’s critique even further. Contra Walzer’s claim that the natural progression for an advanced industrial society like the United States was toward social democracy and a decentralized democratic socialism, the political history of the 1980s proved the opposite: The gains of the midcentury welfare state were effectively rolled back by both Democratic and Republican administrations. If Walzer’s principle is that a vision of justice can

⁶⁵ Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, 41-42.

⁶⁶ Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, 63

⁶⁷ Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, 67-68

only speak the language native to its own community, then what place in an increasingly neoliberal America did the left's more egalitarian demands have? The Democrats, as well as the Republicans, had embraced a politics that defended the supremacy of the market over other spheres of life and by the 1990s were also dismantling many of the welfare state's universal programs. Given the popularity of these measures, at least among a plurality of voters, on what shared understandings could a social democratic or socialist left be built in the United States? Sometimes, it seems, the left needed to not merely speak the language of a contemporary culture, but speak against it and in universal terms. Otherwise, upon what moral grounds could the left criticize an increasingly inegalitarian America if it can only speak the society's common tongue?

In the years to come, Walzer would try to answer many of these challenges. In a response to Dworkin, he insisted that there was no easy way out of the quandary of moral and political thinking that an earlier age of universalism might have once afforded. "The hard task," he explained, "is to find principles latent in the lives of the people Dworkin and I live with, principles that they can recognize and adopt."⁶⁸ Answering Okin's criticisms many years later, he insisted "a critic connected to and loyal to this society, but hostile to its inequalities, could find in the consciousness of excluded women material for a critique of exclusion."⁶⁹ Walzer also tried to better map out the foundations of this "connected criticism" which might draw from the underground moral and political vernaculars of equality already present in a culture and therefore find some moral reserve in the face of immorality in two books published in the late 1980s.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Michael Walzer, "'Spheres of a Justice: An Exchange,'" *New York Review of Books* (July 21, 1983)

⁶⁹ Michael Walzer, "Feminism and Me," *Dissent* (Winter 2013)

⁷⁰ Walzer gave the Tanner Lecture on Human Values on November 13 and 14, 1985. The lecture was subsequently published as *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1987) and Walzer, *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment* (New York: Basic, 1988)

Instead of the universalism born out of “discovery”—and that resembled the neo-Kantianism of the SELF circle—or the relativism of “invention,” the critic, Walzer argued, must choose the path of “interpretation.” He or she must formulate a vision of justice drawn from the world around him or her; moral and political knowledge could have no other source of meaning.

“I want to suggest an alternative model,” Walzer explained, that ran contrary to the view the intellectuals and radicals could only stand outside their societies; instead what one must do is become something of a “connected critic, who earns his authority, or fails to do so, by arguing with his fellows...Perhaps he has traveled and studied abroad, but his appeal is to local or localized principles; if he has picked up new ideas on his travels, he tries to connect them to the local culture, building on his own intimate knowledge; he is not intellectually detached. Nor is he emotionally detached; he doesn’t wish the natives well, he seeks the success of their common enterprise. This is the style of Alexander Herzen among nineteenth-century Russians...of Ahad Ha-am among East European Jews, of Gandhi in India, of Tawney and Orwell in Britain. Social criticism, for such people, is an internal argument.”⁷¹ It is through a critic’s encounters—through his or her arguments and negotiations and often thwarted hopes—that, Walzer asserted, meanings about morality, social goods, and duties begin to take shape and one can formulate a dissent. “There isn’t,” he concluded, “anything else,” certainly “no discovery or invention.”⁷²

There is much that is appealing to this vision, a certain democratic modesty and a recognition that all people, not just intellectuals and philosophers, have a right to formulate a vision of justice and collective life. “Justice here and now,” as Walzer put it, is all that we can and will be able to win. Yet, the communitarian pluralism and the minimalist understandings of justice and equality did mark a retreat from the more universal and egalitarian visions of an

⁷¹ Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*

⁷² *Ibid.*

earlier socialism. Unmoored from any trans-historical principles of equality, the left could only look to the world as it is in order to be able to make its case for a more equal society and in the 1980s and 90s, that world as it was proved radically inconsistent with the long-term aims of the left. Likewise, without what Henry Sidgwick called an “ideal of the future” to push up against the inadequacies of the present, a left wing of the possible could unwittingly play a role in the narrowing of a society’s sense of possibility. Without a robust defense of socialist principles, those features of socialism that had long distinguished it from the liberal and social democratic tradition would begin to fade, until soon the three began to resemble one another. A connected left, speaking in the vernacular of its times, will be, as was the case in the 1970s and 80s, forced to speak in a language that runs contrary to many of its own ambitions and ideals. Walzer noted this diminution of himself. When asked in an interview, shortly after he retired as editor of *Dissent*, what differences there were between socialism and social democracy in contemporary America, Walzer explained to the reporter, “those terms once had different meanings, not anymore.”⁷³

⁷³ Marc Tracy, The Dean of “Dissent,” *The New Republic* (April 10, 2013)

Conclusion: Banners in Prague

1989 came as surprise to many. Perhaps most of all for those democratic leftists, such as the socialists around *Dissent*, who had been anticipating it for almost a half century. Howe, Harrington, Walzer, and the rest of the *Dissenters* had all closely followed the developments in Europe since the early 1980s, cheering on the labor activists and intellectuals as they began to mount a considerable challenge to the single-party communist systems in their home countries. But the *Dissent* circle also assumed that the Soviet Union would eventually intervene and in a replay of 1956 and 1968 suppress the calls for reform and independence from the Warsaw Pact.

So strongly held was this presumption that even in the summer of 1989, as events began to take a dramatic turn, Michael Harrington observed in his last book, *Socialism: Past and Future*, that while the summer 1889 had been one of promise for the left, with socialist parties coming into their own throughout Europe, the summer of 1989 was one marked by disappointment and frustration as a resurgent right dominated the North Atlantic and an

authoritarian left controlled Eastern and Central Europe and Russia.¹ “Can socialism,” he asked in the last lines of the book, “learn from the defeats and betrayals that resulted from its flawed understanding of its own profound truths?”² The book concluded grimly: Harrington did not offer any answer to his question.

Yet, despite the pessimism of even their Western champions, the insurgent intellectuals and activists of Eastern and Central Europe proved everyone wrong. In part, this was their own doing. The members of the Polish Solidarity movement were highly disciplined and unlike in the 1956 and 1968 debacles they had bided their time, organizing, striking, but waiting for the right moment to stage a large-scale challenge to their country’s communist regime. The same was true of the Charter 77 activists in Czechoslovakia and the reformists organizing in Hungary. In part, it was also for extrinsic reasons. Many within Russia were also demanding change and the Soviet empire, weakened by a decade-long war in Afghanistan, proved no longer able to leverage the same energy and determination to enforce its rule over the eastern half of the European continent. As Polish, Czechoslovakian, Hungarian, and German intellectuals and unions began to rebel openly against their native Communist Parties, the Soviets also were in the process of reform themselves: With a young apparatchik by the name of Mikhail Gorbachev appointed the head the Soviet Communist Party, there was even hope that this vision of reform from within might take place in Russia. Introducing a set of bold initiatives under the headings of *glasnost* (opening up civil society), *perestroika* and *demokratizatsiya* (reorganizing and democratizing the political system), and *uskoreniye* (jumpstarting the economy), Gorbachev hoped not to put an end to the Soviet Union, but to bring the communist experiment back in line with Lenin and the Bolsheviks’ original spirit of egalitarianism.

¹ Michael Harrington, *Socialism: Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1989)

² Ibid.

There was as a result no will within the Soviet Union nor within many of these Eastern and Central European countries to resist the calls for reform and under pressure from internal dissidents, Communists in the Soviet bloc began to question their fidelity to an earlier Marxist orthodoxy. Hungary opened its border to Austria, allowing hundreds of thousands of East Germans to cross into the West, and many began to talk about the heroic rebellion of 1956. Polish Communists began to stage a set of talks with the Solidarity strikers in Gdansk rather than use the same kind of brute force that they had resorted to in Poznan in 1956. Czech and Slovakian intellectuals, gathered around the Charter 77 group, became emboldened and staged a set of nationwide protests. East and West Germany started to speak of a possible confederation or even unification. Gorbachev's economic programs faltered but *glasnost* and *perestroika* were a success: After some encouragement from the government, newspapers began to write with a new sense of independence; reformers in the party, even as the old guard elites challenged them, became more vocal.

By the fall of 1989, it was beginning to become clear that what was taking place was not merely a slow evolution out of authoritarianism but a series of mostly nonviolent revolutions that would lead to an entirely different political outcome. In Poland, editor and Solidarity supporter Tadeusz Mazowiecki became the first non-communist prime minister since the end of World War II and in Hungary, a multi-party system emerged. In Czechoslovakia, a "velvet revolution" followed after student protestors took to the streets and Vaclav Havel was appointed president. In a dramatic demonstration of the changes afoot, Berliners gathered at the Berlin Wall in November and began to disassemble it; soldiers refused to shoot the protesters or to police the border and the East German regime, without the backing of Moscow, folded. By the beginning of 1990, nearly all of Central and Eastern Europe appeared transformed, from Poland, Hungary, and

Czechoslovakia to Bulgaria, Romania, and Yugoslavia, and mostly without a fired gun (Romania was the one exception where a bloody struggle took root in the fall of 1989 culminating in the trial and filmed execution of Ceaușescu). The Soviet empire itself appeared on the edge of breaking apart, as the Baltic states in the northwest declared their independence and Boris Yeltsin, the new chair of the Russian Soviet, began to talk about a break from the Soviet Union, a dissolution of the Soviet empire from within the metropole.

For the *Dissenters*, the rapidity of change and the finality of these changes were hard to fathom. “The changes now occurring in the Soviet Union,” Irving Howe wrote breathlessly in January of 1990, “are of a magnitude such as no one predicted. There is still, thank heaven, surprise in history.”³ Walzer too was surprised. He had followed the developments with guarded hope. But by the new year, he also realized just how dramatic and lasting the revolutions of the fall and winter were. Writing in *Dissent* in the early spring of 1990, he observed: “In the old days we confronted historic events with theories of history in hand, and so we placed the events in their appropriate sequences and evaluated their likely outcomes. But I have no theory of history with which to address the extraordinary events now taking place.”⁴ With a newly united Europe and with a Soviet Union on the precipice of collapse, a brave new democratic world appeared on the horizon. Nothing could be taken for granted; a more pluralist socialism and social democracy of the kind outlined in *Spheres of Justice* and a more pacific international system of the kind outlined in *Just and Unjust Wars* were not necessarily in the making. “After forty years of Stalinist rule,” Walzer noted, the changes taking place are “entirely wonderful,” but “what comes next no one knows.”⁵ Yet, Walzer, Howe, and the *Dissenters* now felt there was some room to

³ Irving Howe, “The New Political Situation,” *Dissent* (Winter 1990)

⁴ Michael Walzer, “On the Soviet Union,” *Dissent* (Spring 1990)

⁵ *Ibid.*

hope the world might tilt in their direction. “We no longer have this albatross on our backs,” Cornel West, then a DSA co-chair with Howe, explained to one *New York Times* reporter in 1990. “Our values can now be played out. We can begin to translate them into programs of action.”⁶

To his surprise, Walzer also did find that some of his political theory could be put to use to understand what had happened. Oriented around reasserting national sovereignty and self-rule, the 1989 revolutions, Walzer argued, represented a final culmination to the program of national liberation that had begun in 1848 and had slowly progressed after World War I and World War II. “It is easy to talk about ‘the democratic revolution,’” he noted, but what was really happening, in his view, was “a *national* democratic revolution, the fulfillment at last—in 1990!—of 1848.”⁷ With the impending collapse of the Soviet Union, he even allowed himself to hope that a new international system of liberal, if not socialist, democracies might form. “Not every morning, of course, is the start of a good day,” he observed in 1990. “It is, however, suddenly and happily, morning again. Deprived of any sure knowledge of the dialectic, our fingers are crossed.”⁸

Walzer began to return to many of the themes of his early writings in the 1960s on the role citizens played in democratic life. Having started through disciplined political activity in those intermediate zones between the household and state, the 1989 revolutionaries vindicated his faith in a “citizen politics” and the centrality of civil society as a site for radical and emancipatory political action. In a lecture he gave in Stockholm in the fall of 1990, he insisted that the image and politics of civil society would be key to any post-Cold War egalitarian politics, helping sustain the programs of pluralism and a civic culture of democratic participation

⁶ Frank J. Priol, “Socialists Ponder a Changed World,” *The New York Times* (October 10, 1990)

⁷ Walzer, “On the Soviet Union”

⁸ *Ibid.*

and keeping the left's focus on those spheres of life that did not fall within either the realm of the state or of labor.⁹ "Once incorporated into civil society, neither citizenship nor production can ever again be all-absorbing," he asserted in his lecture. "They will have their votaries, but these people will not be models for the rest of us—or, they will be partial models only, for some people at some time of their lives, not for other people, not at other times," helping establish pluralist societies in which citizenship and duties were defined by a variety of communities and group imperatives.¹⁰

The nonviolent regime-changes in 1989 also reminded the left, in Walzer's view, of a different kind of politics between reform and revolution, a politics of democratic self-organization. Returning to some of his earlier criticism of the bureaucratic forms of power in a social democracy and liberal welfare state, Walzer noted that a danger in these newly liberated societies was that citizenship could once again become "a passive role: citizens are spectators who vote."¹¹ By sustaining the civil society activism that emerged in 1989 into the next century, he argued these liberal democracies might allow for a more active role for citizens. "Civil society—so we have been taught since Hegel—is a realm of fragmentation. But it also provides, or can provide with political assistance, the necessary conditions of liberty [and] equality."¹²

Even in the Soviet Union, where many of the reforms were coming from the Politburo, Walzer argued that there was a possibility that a new democratic civil society could be cultivated below the state and led by those newly released citizen groups. "The new freedom" in the Soviet Union, he insisted, "if it hasn't yet produced a coherent politics, has opened up space for

⁹ Michael Walzer, "Gunnar Myrdal Lecture," University of Stockholm, Sweden (October 1990). He then subsequently published it as "The Idea of Civil Society: A Path to Social Reconstruction," *Dissent* (Spring 1991).

¹⁰ Walzer, "The Idea of Civil Society: A Path to Social Reconstruction"

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Michael Walzer, "Pluralism and Social Democracy," *Dissent* (Winter 1998)

opposition newspapers and journals, civic and religious associations, trade union organizing, sharp and exhilarating public debate—the re-creation of civil society. Though this is still very much a revolution from above, it is driven by and at least partially responsive to discontent below.”¹³

Despite finding promising intersections with 1989 and his own long-held commitments, much of this promise would prove to come to naught in the years to come. So much of Walzer’s democratic socialist identity had been shaped by his dual opposition to the Cold War liberals to his center and to the authoritarian communists to his left. The collapse of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact communism scrambled these points of differentiation, softening the differences between the left and liberalism even more. With a Democratic Party that was, by the mid-1990s aggressively attacking the last standing institutions of midcentury liberalism, Walzer and many of the long New Leftists found themselves no longer aspiring for anything more than social democracy. Socialism may have remained a name of their desire, but it increasingly was no longer named. Writing of a 1994 conference of European and American left groups organized by *Dissent* in Switzerland, Walzer observed “social democracy is the only practical leftism that survives in European politics today, just as some kind of left liberalism is the only practical leftism in contemporary America.”¹⁴ In his 1994 synthesis of his distributive justice and international ethics work, *Thick and Thin*, socialism does not appear even once.¹⁵ The “banners of Prague,” as he put it, carried the politics of liberal democracy, not a liberal socialism; the

¹³ Walzer, “On the Soviet Union”

¹⁴ Michael Walzer, “The Locarno *Dissent* Conference,” *Dissent* (Fall 1994)

¹⁵ Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Arguments at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame, 1994)

debate after 1989 was now between competing visions of liberalism, one that was more social democratic, the other that was more libertarian.¹⁶ In his follow-up effort, his 2006 *Politics and Passion*, which also no longer spoke of a socialist left, he marked his movement toward liberalism even more starkly: The left's ambition was no longer a liberal socialism but a "more egalitarian liberalism," not as a step toward decentralized socialism—his goal in *Spheres of Justice*—but as an end in itself.¹⁷

On the international front, Walzer's vision also began to evolve considerably. He and many of the *Dissenters* had hoped that the end of the Cold War might mark the revival of not only a more liberal strain of egalitarianism but a more egalitarian strain of internationalism. The North Atlantic and Eastern blocs had brutally and relentlessly dominated the southern hemisphere, preventing much of the decolonized world from truly becoming independent. The hope was that in the wake of the Cold War the nations of the global south might finally achieve economic as well as political independence. Likewise, with activists building transnational networks pursuing economic and social justice, they might be able to build a new "global civil society" that could subsidize the limitations of the more institutional politics, creating an engaged and now globalized citizenry.¹⁸

Yet, within a few years, it became clear that nearly all of these early ambitions of the post-Cold War left proved to be mirages. Globalization did help link one end of the world to the other, but it proved to be a program of forced liberalization and austerity that benefited the North Atlantic economies, in particular the United States, at the expense of the rest of the world. While anti-globalization activists did organize something of a "global civil society," their numbers were

¹⁶ Walzer, *Thick and Thin*, 16

¹⁷ Michael Walzer, *Politics and Passion: Toward a More Egalitarian Liberalism* (New Haven: Yale, 2006)

¹⁸ Michael Walzer, Introduction, *Toward a Global Civil Society* edit. by Michael Walzer (Oxford: Berghahn, 1991)

far from large enough to pose any significant counterweight to the heft of international economic institutions imposing austerity and unforgiving trade deals on much of the global south. The end of the Cold War also did not prove to be an era of pacific geopolitics, in which an equality between nations and respect for collective self-determination had provided the necessary ballast to stabilize a post-Cold War era. Instead the disintegration of Eastern-bloc multinational states unleashed a fury of ethnic violence, civil war, tribalism, and new ravages of terrorism. The world appeared to be becoming more nationalist, more riven by war and global inequality than before.

For Walzer, the disappointments of the early post-Cold War years were to leave a lasting mark on his politics. He had never bought into the idea, much in circulation at the time, that the collapse of the Soviet Union marked the end of history and the rise of a new liberal *pax Americana*. But he had thought the transition from authoritarian socialism to liberal democracies might be smoother, perhaps laying the groundwork for an eventual turn to social democracy. Yet the even his vision of a more “chastened humanism” in which nation-states respected one another’s sovereignty and self-determination appeared to be woefully inadequate. “In countries like Serbia and Croatia,” Walzer wrote in 1994, “nationalist politicians with maximal programs easily win elections and fight wars. And in much of the world, civil war and anarchy, desperate poverty and famine, masses of people in flight make any kind of democratic politics impossible. Democracy remains, should remain, the central goal of the left, but insofar as we think about state policy, we need to lower our sights. What is necessary today is minimal decency: peace on the ground if not in the heart, subsistence and shelter, security for minority populations.”¹⁹ Coupled with the frustrations at home as Clinton and the Democrats whittled away at the last remaining institutions of the welfare state, it seemed all the left could really do was work toward

¹⁹ Michael Walzer, “Editor’s Page,” *Dissent* (Spring 1994)

a minimal decency. A “theater of displacement” began to take place, as one of Walzer’s interlocutors at the time, the liberal interventionist Michael Ignatieff, called it. Places like “Bosnia became the latest *bel espoir* of a generation that had tried ecology, socialism, and civil rights only to watch all these lose their romantic momentum.”²⁰ “It isn’t enough,” Walzer observed in one essay examining the politics of humanitarian intervention, “to wait until the tyrants, the zealots, and the bigots have done their filthy work and then rush food and medicine to the ragged survivors. Whenever the filthy work can be stopped, it should be stopped.”²¹

Perhaps because of Howe’s own singed relationship with the left in the 1960s over the politics of war, *Dissent* in the 1970s and 80s had been less vocal on international politics and had taken an increasingly dovish view of intervention, especially as Reagan and a group of neoconservative intellectuals seized the language of human rights for their own Cold War purposes. But with Howe’s death in 1993 and the wave of humanitarian crises in the Balkans, East Timor, Rwanda, Somalia, Haiti, and elsewhere, the magazine began to focus more and more on what Walzer called “the politics of rescue.” “What sort of military organization and budget should leftists defend?” he asked in one of his first editor’s pages after Howe died. “The question assumes that the answer is: some sort. Eighty-four years ago, Jean Jaures, who had no trouble with the assumption, answered this question in his *L’armee nouvelle*. But in the cold war years, serious arguments about military matters were virtually forbidden. The field of strategic studies was foreign territory. Today, the readiness of people on the left (I had better be careful: some people) to call for military intervention in places like Bosnia or Haiti makes it a necessary topic again.”²²

²⁰ Michael Ignatieff, *Warrior’s Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 95.

²¹ Michael Walzer, “The Politics of Rescue,” *Dissent* (Winter 1995)

²² Michael Walzer, “Editor’s Page,” *Dissent* (Spring 1994)

For Walzer, this did not mean all humanitarian interventions were acceptable but many more than he had allowed for in the past. The sovereignty of states and the right to self-determination no longer appeared as unimpeachable, in his view, as they once had in his international ethics from the 1970s. His skepticism of American force, in particular, seemed to soften. “Morally and politically,” he wrote in his 1995 essay “The Politics of Rescue,” “a division of labor is better, and the best use of American power will often be to press other countries to do their share of the work. Still, we will, and we should be, more widely involved than other countries with fewer resources... Old and well-earned suspicions of American power must give way now to a wary recognition of its necessity.”²³ Updating Hillel’s age-worn aphorism for an era of civil war and humanitarian crisis, Walzer wrote: “If not by us, the supposedly decent people of this world, then by whom?”²⁴

Noticeably in these years Walzer also began to conflate the questions of war and intervention with other questions of international politics and ethics that he had once addressed. He still wrote about unequal distributions of wealth and resources in the world and *Dissent* ran a series of articles critical of how in the post-Cold War era wealthy nations undermined developing nations. But for Walzer, the primary litmus test for the left when it came to international politics was, as he put it in his “Politics of Rescue” essay, “to intervene or not?” For Walzer, this was the “hard question” at the center of geopolitical moral and political quandaries.²⁵

The terror attacks in 2001 only made matters worse. Having backed the NATO bombings of Belgrade during the Kosovo crisis and Australia’s intervention in East Timor, Walzer and others around *Dissent* supported the Afghanistan War, argued it was “a legitimate act of self-

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Walzer, “The Politics of Rescue”

²⁵ Ibid.

defense,” as *Dissent* board member Ellen Willis explained, and an opportunity to liberate the country’s people, especially its oppressed women, from “an illegitimate, barbaric regime.”²⁶ In one essay lambasting those on the left skeptical of America’s involvement in Afghanistan after the Twin Tower attacks, he outlined the case for a new “popular front” that was not opposed to American use of force but instead would support its use in cases of both self-defense and humanitarian crisis. “The days after September 11,” he wrote, “would not have been a bad time for a popular front. What had happened that made something like that unthinkable?” When a smaller number of *Dissent* editors and editorial board members, including Walzer’s co-editor, supported the Iraq War, he dissented, but he directed as much of his energy toward criticizing the antiwar left as he did toward its pro-war elements.²⁷ Recognizing the sources for a younger generation’s distrust of America’s involvement, he insisted that if “we value democracy, we have to be prepared to defend it, at home, of course, but not only there.”²⁸

Walzer in his later work tried to remain a connected critic to the left but in a moment of so much uncertainty he ultimately lost his connection to many of the traditions that had made the long New Left and the democratic socialism it produced so long lasting. In fairness, Walzer was not alone. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, much of the long New Left, which had once defined itself against not only an older left but also against the cold war liberalism and communism of the twentieth century, was in the wilderness. “The ideology of the cold war once provided a set of terms,” Walzer noted in one of his essays marking his turn toward humanitarianism. “In the aftermath of the cold war, no comparable ideology has that capacity.”²⁹

²⁶ Ellen Willis, “The Realities of War,” *Boston Review* (October-November 2002)

²⁷ Mitchell Cohen, “Symposium: War and Iraq,” *Dissent* (Winter 2003).

²⁸ Michael Walzer, “Can There Be a Decent Left?” *Dissent* (Spring 2002)

²⁹ Walzer, “The Politics of Rescue”

The socialists of the long New Left had found a way to, as *Jacobin*'s Peter Frase put it, "survive a period of reaction without either being driven out of politics or becoming reactionaries themselves."³⁰ But in the process some of their grand visions, and some of what they had offered the left, when it came to radical democracy and egalitarianism, got lost. Howe once described his brand of socialism as suffering from the malady of tardiness. "One shorthand way of describing [our] situation," he wrote in the essay, "The New York Intellectuals," "is to say that [we] came late."³¹ And this was true not just of Howe but also for most socialists in the second half of the twentieth century. Born in the 1920s and 30s, they had arrived too late for radicalism and the movement politics of the Old Left, but were too old for the "new social movements" of the 1960s and 70s. Having started out at the midcentury, when so many left intellectuals and activists were shedding their last traces of radicalism, the long New Left found itself in socialism's twilight.

Walzer was not unaware of these shortcomings himself. Writing shortly after the so-called "Republican Revolution" of 1994 when the GOP took control of the House for the first time since 1952, he recognized that a considerable amount of the blame lay not just with Clinton and the New Democrats but also with those leftists of the possible. "We can't say that we foresaw the full dimensions of the turn," he noted, "though we have been worrying about the weakening position of the liberal left for some time" and it was clear that the "left's failure" to counter this weakening position was devastating on "intellectual as well as political" terms.³²

With the left no longer emphasizing the language of radical democracy and democratic egalitarianism that had once been central to its vision of society, "a fierce populist rhetoric" has been seized by the right and that now "co-exists easily with an extraordinary deference to the

³⁰ Peter Frase, "The Survivors," *Jacobin* (July 5, 2016)

³¹ Irving Howe, "The New York Intellectuals," *Commentary* (October, 1968)

³² Michael Walzer, "Editor's Page," *Dissent* (Spring 1995)

wealthy and powerful few.”³³ As Clinton and Gingrich worked on welfare reform, he lamented those working and middle class voters who once might have been open to the left’s visions of radical democracy and egalitarianism now found themselves adrift. “For the moment,” Walzer wrote in another editorial composed during the Clinton-Gingrich years, “large numbers of Americans identify with those solitary swimmers...not yet ready for the left’s lifeboat.”³⁴

Despite the diminished state it found itself in the late 1990s and early 2000s, socialism has been rediscovered by a new generation of intellectuals and activists. Awakened by the 2008 financial crisis, angered by the limitations of the Obama’s years, and inspired by the visions of radical democracy of Occupy Wall Street, a new left appears to be on the horizon and one that is more and more identifying with socialism and, in particular, the “democratic socialism” that was first developed by the early generation of the long New Left. In 2016, Bernie Sanders, another member of the long New Left, received over 40 percent of Democratic primary votes. A handful of socialist candidates from New York to Hawaii ran in the 2018 midterms elections both for Congress and for local office, and not just in coastal areas but also rural ones in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Texas, and Minnesota.³⁵ Membership in older groups like DSA has risen to 50,000 in a year, and the circulations of new socialist magazines like *Jacobin* have skyrocketed.³⁶ In a

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Michael Walzer, “What’s Going On?” *Dissent* (Winter 1996)

³⁵ Farah Stockman, “Yes, I’m Running as a Socialist,” *New York Times* (April 20, 2018)

³⁶ For DSA’s revival see, among others: Kate Aronoff, “Are the Democratic Socialists of America for Real?” *The New Republic* (August 7, 2017) and Anna Heyward, “Since Trump’s Victory, Democratic Socialists of America Has Become a Budding Political Force,” *The Nation* (January 15-22, 2018). For the rise of *Jacobin*, see: “No Shortcuts: Interview with Jacobin,” *Idiom Magazine* (March 16, 2011); “Project Jacobin: Interview with Bhaskar Sunkara,” *New Left Review* (November-December, 2014); and Dylan Matthews, “Inside Jacobin,” *Vox* (March 21, 2016).

2018 poll conducted by University of Chicago pollsters, 60 percent of young Democrats held a favorable view of socialism.³⁷ By 2020, they will be the largest voting bloc in the party.³⁸

On many subjects this new left holds starkly different views from its forerunners. Having come of age after the Cold War, this new generation takes a different outlook on the history of American radicalism, on the value and applicability of Marxist thought, on the rise of populist left-wing parties in Western Europe and Latin America, and on the conflict in Israel-Palestine. Born in the twilight of the welfare state and in an age of austerity, this new generation can no longer take for granted the social provisions that Walzer and his peers in the long New Left saw as a protective umbrella under which a new radical politics could gestate. Yet despite these differences, these two socialist lefts have more in common than what separates them. Organizing under the same banner of “democratic socialism,” they define themselves against an authoritarian communism on one end and liberalism on the other end and are really different ends of the same socialist tradition that emerged out of the “new radicalism” of the postwar years. For both, the path toward socialism runs along two distinct tracks: the often nonsocialist protest movements that seek to enhance the rights of women, people of color, LGBTQ, immigrants, and other disenfranchised members of society and the social democratic programs of the left-liberal flank of the Democratic Party. For both, their strengths lie in their domestic politics, and it is in this field that both have made gains over the years, whether in helping spawn the social security and poverty programs of the Great Society (Michael Harrington is largely credited in being the catalyst for Johnson’s “War on Poverty”), or more recently having forced the Democratic Party to the left on issues of universal healthcare, a living wage, and housing as a

³⁷ Cathy J. Cohen, Matthew Fowler, Vladimir E. Medencia, and Jon C. Rogowski, “Political Polarization and Trust Among Millennials,” Genforward Survey, University of Chicago (May 2018)

³⁸ William A. Galston, “Millennials Will Soon Be the Largest Voting Bloc in America,” Brookings Institution (July 31, 2017)

right, and on the very “moral-economy” terms outlined in *Spheres of Justice*. Likewise, for both their weaknesses lie in their international politics, where these lefts—while committed to many of the same norms—remain fiercely divided. Some of the tensions and contradictions found in this socialist tradition remain, sometimes leading to creative new syntheses—such as the emergence of a new generation of socialist feminists—and sometimes not. The socialist left may still be walking Harrington’s perilous tightrope but perhaps that has always been its fate.

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