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Madison Daze

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REVIEW ESSAYS / NOTES CRITIQUES

Madison Daze

Michael Fellman

Paul Buhle, ed., *History and the New Left: Madison, Wisconsin, 1950-1970* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1990).

AS A MADISON OLD BOY I cannot approach this fascinating collection of essays as a pretended neutral. I was born in Madison, where my family moved permanently in 1947, when I was four, and I lived there until I went off on a European walkabout in 1961, a year prior to my entry into Oberlin College. My father, David Fellman, taught in the Political Science Department of the University of Wisconsin for 30 years, creating the first course on civil liberties in an American University. He was a classic Progressive: as well as being an active scholar and teacher, he was deeply involved in campus and national political and cultural activities, most especially in Wisconsin liberal Democratic politics during its post-McCarthy resurgence. As well as writing Gaylord Nelson's most eloquent speeches during his successful 1958 gubernatorial campaign, which marked, even more than William Proxmire's election to the Senate a year earlier, the comeback of the Wisconsin Democratic Party, he also invented the Wisconsin Civil Rights Commission.

By 1965 I was a graduate student at Northwestern, and my father and I had increasingly angry exchanges over the war in Vietnam, his support of which I believed to be a betrayal of the liberal values he had taught me and his students, and which he had helped enact in his very active public life. What I then believed to be my radicalism — and my thesis, written in 1968-69, was on American

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communitarianism — I now see more as enraged liberalism, to which was added a youthful thirst for action, which, on the whole, I sublimated in libraries and archives.

This book makes quite clear that Madison, 1950-1970, was about radicalism in a liberal matrix, and about how the baby was thrown out with the bath water. Some of the 30 authors are more self-reflectively generous than others, some more self-serving and mean-spirited; some past events, usually the celebratory ones, are fully aired, while some of the painful ones are downplayed or nearly omitted. Taken as a whole this book is a very human and appealing rendering of an epoch of extraordinary *sturm und drang* in the Midwest.

The locale of the drama is very precisely Madison; culture and politics are intertwined with work and life in the History Department. Although many of the authors writing here claim that they gained allegiance to European methods, theories, and culture while in Madison, and to a socialist perspective on national and international issues, it is the everyday, practical parochialism of their memories which is most vivid. Europe appears as books read and arguments asserted; even contemporary events at Berkeley, Michigan, and Columbia are mentioned one time each, although 1950s San Francisco bohemianism is an underlying presence in the book — viewed as Madison West. The over-riding retrospective concerns of these former students and their teachers are in fact local and concrete, protestations of cosmopolitanism notwithstanding. Indeed all three members of a long-ago love triangle write essays here, and you can piece together their tangled web if you have a mind to. The adage that history is just (higher) gossip is spelled out here, which is one of the reasons this is such an engaging collection.

At war during the 1950s with the conservative, Richard Hofstadter-led History Department at Columbia, Madison's was the other great department in the United States, the Progressive one. From the time of Fighting Bob LaFollette and his powerful academic allies, including Frederick Jackson Turner, the father of modern American history, whose salad days were spent in Madison, the university, which proclaimed proudly that its boundaries were the boundaries of the state, was unusually open to educational experimentation and unconventional ideas. Not only was American labour studied seriously almost uniquely in Madison from the turn of the century, the university also created a School for Workers (unmentioned in these pages) which nurtured CIO as well as AFL organizers during summer seminars. In the 1930s, Alexander Meikeljohn, fired from Smith College, founded an Experimental College, quite a wild innovation for its time.

In the History Department, by the early 1950s a remarkable group of Progressive historians had gathered. In American history, these included Merrill Jensen, Howard K. Beale, Fred Harvey Harrington and, most notably, Merle Curti, who, among other activities, created American intellectual history, and who nurtured a wide range of young scholars, whose appreciation for him rings through many of these essays. Indeed some of these writers over-emphasize Curti's undoubted saintliness, underestimating the aggressive, left-wing political and cultural

criticism which animates his best work. In this volume, James B. Gilbert best summarizes the "Wisconsin historical tradition, upheld and nourished by [this] remarkable group of scholars." These historians, Gilbert writes, "had been educated in a tradition that had deep roots in American Progressivism, and they exhibited its serious but attractive secular religiosity, its anti-establishment anger, its faith in the power and responsibility of government, and its firm belief that intellectuals ought to serve the state and the nation." (120)

Most of the authors writing here were attracted by the Wisconsin American historians, but they were also deeply influenced by Hans Gerth, a brilliant, complicated and difficult sociologist, who was a survivor of the Frankfurt School of Weimar Germany, and by the writing of his great student, C. Wright Mills, by 1950 gone from Madison, but at the height of his tragically brief career; by George Mosse an erudite, witty and engaging European intellectual historian; by Harvey Goldberg, the very personification of French *gauchist* activism; and, absolutely central to this book, by William Appleman Williams, who studied in Madison after World War II and returned to teach in 1958, gathering around him many of the young scholars who originated the Madison New Left.

The students attracted to the Madison milieu of the 1950s were a mixture of Midwestern WASPs and New York Jewish red diaper babies, Eugene Dennis, Jr., and Michael Meeropol, son of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, included. Unlike the Ivy League, and prior to the creation of the State University of New York, Madison welcomed the children of the Old Left — indeed the last Labor Youth League of the Communist Party survived in Madison until the end of the 1950s. This group is well-represented in this collection. Most of them tell of discovering America in Madison, and of developing beyond sectarianism and dogmatism. Several stayed long enough to join the blossoming of the New Left.

Even during the trough of the Cold War, Communists joined Progressives in political and cultural activities which are joyfully recounted in these pages. Cultural activities included endless arguments at the Rathskeller in the Student Union, at the Green Lantern eating co-operative, at the 602 Club on University Avenue, listening to jazz, dressing in basic bohemian black. Political activities began with the Joe Must Go recall campaign, and at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, the creation of the "Anti-Military Ball," a satirical political counter-cultural response to the annual ROTC dance, the creation of a non-sectarian Socialist Club, sympathetic civil rights boycotts in Madison as well as in the South, and the Fair Play for Cuba Committee.

From within the History Department, graduate students, mainly those studying with Williams, founded *Studies on the Left* in 1959. Although they were unevenly sophisticated in their abilities to execute essays, the ambitions of this young group were lofty and serious, as they attempted to wed socialist theory to Progressive empiricism and political engagement. *Studies on the Left* decamped for New York City in 1963, an event not fully analyzed here.

And then the war came. The *Studies*-Williams group, opposed to the war, consciously on the anti-Imperialist left, nevertheless remained, as James Gilbert writes, "cautious, intellectual, a bit cynical" about direct action. (120) This was the cool jazz generation which would be displaced by a younger student left of rock 'n roll. Although discussion of this transition is rather elliptical in this volume, there are many clues here.

Elizabeth Ewan points out that to younger students like her, by 1964, Williams and the remaining *Studies* people seemed "rather remote" to younger radicals, while the spellbinder Harvey Goldberg "personified the spirit of activism." (150) Paul Buhle and others of the younger New Left founded *Radical America*, far more populist than had been *Studies*, and in campus politics tended more to spontaneity than to calm reflection. The climax of this second, direct action generation of the Madison New Left came in the sit-in against Dow Chemical on-campus interviews in October, 1967, which ended in violence.

In comparison to the 1950s Old Left/Midwest Progressive radicals, and to the *Studies* group, this generation is under-represented in these pages. From a glancing and ironic retrospective stance, Evan Stark, *the* boy orator of the 1966-67 sit-ins, describes how the media "reified [him] like a campus [beauty] queen." Looking back at his Madison persona, he now sees "one of a rare breed of post-adolescent gunfighters whose artillery consisted of rhetorical flamboyance mixed with Jewish humour and an almost inhuman capacity to attend meetings and walk the picket line after debating through the night." (174) Immediately after helping escalate the anti-Dow events into violence, Stark resigned from the university rather than awaiting the suspension that would have come, and disappeared from Madison. In general, this violent episode marked the final division of radicals from liberals and the passing of the central role of the Goldberg-activist New Left second generation. Sectarian fragmentation and nihilism ensued.

Post-1967 Madison appears only indirectly in these pages, as nearly all the authors were gone from Madison by this time, and as none joined the barbarian third generation New Left of 1967-71. As Buhle points out, by 1969 at the latest, the Madison left had disintegrated, and he, in common with every other contributor here, looks back in horror at the so-called Maoist "post-New Left gangs" whose form of radicalism ran to "hurling rocks through the State Street windows" of small businessmen. (230) This cult of violent action led on directly to the horror of the 1971 bombing of the Army math research centre on campus in which an innocent foreign graduate student was killed, and with him, the Madison left, except in pamphlet rhetoric.

Only William Appleman Williams (discussed below) in any way assumes responsibility for the final 1967-71 period of the Madison New Left. As for the others, did they or did they not help create, however unconsciously, the political culture which nourished the final nihilist phase? Did the first and second New Left generations provide the cultural matrix for the post-1967 crazies, in a sort of bizarre and speeded-up recapitulation of the manner in which, for two decades, Madison

Progressives had nourished them? Lack of discussion of this issue is the most serious omission from this collection. Perhaps it was left out because of the pain such analysis would have recalled. Pushing into violence themselves in 1967, opening the door for subsequent mindless action factions, in retrospect, was pushing beyond reconstruction into destruction visited on radicals and liberals alike.

If not a guilty one, the underlying moral tone of the more human of these writers is one of profound regret about what was lost, and about all who were hurt in the process. In a brilliant essay, written in 1981, the late Eleanor Hakim, a 1950s existentialist-independent left Madisonian, recounts the tragedy of Hans Gerth, who ended his Madison days in the late 1960s, mocked and scorned by the younger New Left. For Hakim, this persecution personified the manner in which the New Left came to destroy an adult intellectual and cultural politique for the "easy allurements of political expediency." (258) Several other writers, including George Mosse and James Gilbert, also emphasize that an angry and destructive direct action moralism displaced historical analysis. Indeed analysis of any but the crudest anarchist sort virtually disappeared on the Madison New Left.

With considerable bitterness as well as regret, the late William Appleman Williams escaped Madison in 1968 for Oregon State University. In his retrospective view here, the 1947-50 period, when he had done his graduate work, had been a golden age when well-motivated veterans, like himself, as students, had studied in a wonderful arts faculty which was full of first-rate conservatives and feisty liberals as well as of radicals like himself and Hans Gerth. Of a religious and Annapolis background, Williams approached community and intellectual excellence as moral imperatives which demanded not only self-denial but the emotional and moral capacity to engage in dialogue with people of other minds, which called for, in Williams phrase, the "necessity of walking the mile in the other person's shoes." This was precisely the place, he argues, where the Madison New Left failed, and this failure led on to the replacement of thoughtful criticism by increasingly "random and nonsocial violence," and of plausible political action by "moral determinism" and phoney vanguardism. The New Left alienated their liberal protectors and allies, Williams argues, and he does not shift all the blame on to the post-1967 monsters, but accepts the possibility that the New Left had a continuous as well as a discontinuous moral history. "In later years," Williams writes of the lost liberal allies, "the Left has either forgotten them or castigated them as sunshine radicals. I want to salute them as people who demonstrated the capacity and courage for intellectual change and moral and emotional commitment. I think it was we who lost them instead of them betraying us." (270-1)

This profound and moving example of Williams' sense of moral and social responsibility surely is one of the reasons which led James Gilbert in his essay to deal with Williams as the last representative of the Madison Progressive school rather than as the first New Leftist. I believe that Williams would have rejected Gilbert's act of kindness, an act which makes a certain amount of historical sense,

and that he would not have disowned his role in fostering the New Left even though the events which followed turned out to be repellant to him. His was not a convenient morality.

To return to the germination time of the Madison left, Richard Schickel, the brilliant *Time* magazine movie reviewer and writer of books of film criticism, who wrote energetic and clever radical editorials in the student newspaper in the early 1950s, recalls the impact of the University of Wisconsin on him. His experience, radicalism included, taught him to seek no "grand visions but simple ... a sense of meaning, not The Meaning.... These are not, of course, values of the radical university. They are the values of the liberal one, that university that claimed my first, and now my last allegiance." Schickel reads the collected essays of the late Warren Sussman in this light, and George Mosse reads the post-Madison history writing produced by many of the contributors to these pages in a similar manner — intellectual productivity occurred on ground more modest than the dreamscapes of earlier days.

Until the late 1960s, this liberal university protected and nurtured generations of radical students. To take one salty example from the early 1950s of this liberal/radical paradigm, the Marxist George Rawick just hated what he found to be a reactionary hick Madison, Merle Curti excepted, when he arrived to do graduate work in 1951. He found most of the vaunted Progressive historians to be "weird old men," most particularly Howard K. Beale, who made sure that Rawick would receive no fellowship for a second year, declaring to Rawick that "no unwashed bohemian, no matter how brilliant," would get a Madison PhD. The next year, Merle Curti, who had been away from Madison while Beale was playing the right bastard, rescued Rawick from Western Reserve with a teaching Assistantship and a prestigious research fellowship. In 1957, when Rawick was defending his doctoral thesis and found himself being viciously red-baited by Paul Sharp, none other than Howard K. Beale rose to Rawick's defense, demanding that the red-baiting questions be withdrawn or else that he, Beale, would take the issue to Committee A, the Committee on Academic Freedom of the American Association of University Professors. Beale and Rawick won the argument, and this demonstrated to Rawick that after all, Beale's "civil libertarianism was real and strong." (55-7)

A nice story, one on which the recently deceased Rawick doubtless dined out on for 40 years. But I suspect that the story was a good deal more ironic than Rawick's version. As Beale was declaiming during this defence, the office of the Chairman of Committee A of AAUP, David Fellman, was not more than a stone's throw away; Paul Sharp, who was quite junior in the History Department, knew that Fellman would give him holy hell if he pursued his red-baiting into actions against Rawick, and Beale knew all this. Thus at very little risk to himself, Beale could play the courageous liberal in order to impress a radical graduate student he had previously attacked in a vicious and underhanded manner. In addition, Beale was hazing Sharp, and at the same time apologizing to his colleagues, Merle Curti

in particular, for earlier having abused his own authority by savaging Rawick's career in the most illiberal manner, by judging him on the cut of his clothes rather than on the quality of his mind. Years earlier, in supporting Rawick, Curti had shamed Beale for his persecution of Rawick, a prime example of the sort of behaviour which made the curmudgeon Beale so unpopular with his colleagues. At this examination, Beale was publicly reaffirming his shaky subscription to a liberal Madison consensus, one which was far sturdier, even in 1957, than Rawick realized. Rawick was far less embattled and heroic than he thought, and Madison politics were rather more complex than many radicals realized, even radicals who were defended for reasons other than the ones they fancied.

All this is Madison past. The special liberal/radical stew is quite gone; Wisconsin is now just another good Big Ten university, not especially strong in the Arts; and no one would argue that the History Department is the best in the United States, or can be characterized as special in any political or cultural sense, some fine professors and students notwithstanding. In the 1970s, the radical community did foster a teaching assistants trade union and the mayoralty of Paul Soglin, who proved rather astute and progressive. Recently, after several years out of office, Soglin has been re-elected as a self-proclaimed moderate, and David Fellman says he finally voted for Soglin for the first time. So did many real estate developers.

The current consensus is an extremely pale version of the Madison of 1950-67. I do not believe that it is just the rosy-tinted glasses of nostalgia which have caused so many who were involved to express a deep sense of loss in these retrospective essays. In microcosm — and that is what this book, true at last to its Progressive-empiricist roots, proves to be — what was tried and lost in Madison was a salient example of the best as well as the silliest political experimentation of the American left during the Cold War-Vietnam era. It was a tragedy.