



Norman Podhoretz and Larry Birns: Two Journeys from the Outer Boroughs

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In 2010 I published a book called *Theory After Theory*, (Broadview Press) which was a history of literary theory from about 1950 to the beginnings of the twenty-first century. I dedicated the book to my father, Larry Birns, the founding and still incumbent director of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA). Some might wonder why I dedicated a book on literary theory to my father, a man best known for his practical political results rather than theory when it comes to U.S.- Latin American affairs. Part of the reason was I had dedicated my first book to my mother, who was so influential on my growth, so it seemed reasonable to dedicate my second book (excluding edited collections), to my father.

But there was also a deeper reason behind this dedication, one which I had occasion to reflect upon after my father telephoned me on Sunday, March 19, 2017, reacting to John Leland's article on the Jewish intellectual and neoconservative thinker Norman Podhoretz, in that day's *New York Times* magazine. My father maintained that he felt he had much in common with Podhoretz in a biographical and polemical sense: Both men were born in 1929. Podhoretz grew up in Brownsville, Brooklyn, while my father, spent his early years less than five miles to the east in the equally gritty neighborhood Ozone

Park, Queens, and both had made it from their humble origins to the more pretentious Manhattan neighborhoods and eventually to Washington as figures on the social scene and the world political stage. But, my father insisted, he still felt there was a world of difference between them. That conversation reminded me of why I ultimately had dedicated the book to my father: because, at least when it came to their more extreme drivel, I felt he had so vigorously dissented against much of the intellectual culture of the 1950s, a culture critiqued in the extended preface to my book, which focused on the Columbia University of the 1950s, presided over by the brilliant literary giant, Lionel Trilling—a teacher of Norman Podhoretz.

Though Trilling himself was not at all a part of this right-wing group what Podhoretz did inherit from Trilling was what I describe in my book the way the New York Intellectuals’ “disillusionment with Communism, which they rightly saw as totalitarian and brutal” made them “suspicious of any sort of disruption of the status quo”.¹ I had persistently stressed that the neoconservatives, including Podhoretz, shared a “common strand of being” with Trilling’s more conservative generation. It was his willingness to look for alternatives to the way things were being done that makes my father’s political trajectory different from contemporaries like Podhoretz and put him outside the more conventional consensus Podhoretz represented,

Very obviously, my father consistently swung to the Left, or at least stayed on the Left. As early as 1950, as a student at Bates College in Maine, my father had written an article in the college newspaper, the *Bates Student*, denouncing the “isolationistic interventionists” of the Republican right, who had been newly converted to the cause of

foreign intervention when the Chinese Communists were threatening Taiwan—or Formosa as it was called then--under the leadership of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek.ⁱⁱ In *Theory*, I called the New York Intellectuals “street wise, scrappy savants making their way in the big city” who presented “a very attractive image of an embodied intellectual life.ⁱⁱⁱ” This description certainly fit my father who, as a young Manhattan intellectual, like Norman Podhoretz, was a thinker who emerged out of this culture. For both men, postwar American life offered an exhilarating array of possibilities, which a smart youngster from the outer boroughs could explore in a way impossible before 1945. Leland’s profile on Podhoretz exhibits this gamut of social permutations; Podhoretz had a rent-controlled apartment on West 105th Street, then hardly a glamorous address to those who had leftist pretensions, yet Podhoretz's daughter Ruth recalls “There were parties that went on all night....We had a huge apartment with a concert grand piano in the living room, in a roach-infested building in a dangerous neighborhood^{iv}.” These paradoxes of affluence and precariousness, aesthetic style and political activism, were characteristic of the milieu Podhoretz and my father, despite the staggering differences in the values, nonetheless shared.

Demonstrably, the two men then took very different paths. Even before he had formally broken with the Left, Podhoretz, in his 1967 autobiography *Making It* openly exhibited himself as possessing ruthlessly personal ambitions and delighted in his ascent to the core of American intellectual power, which he felt suited him. My father, on the other hand, had at that point already chosen the then rather marginal and, in academic terms, shabby area of Latin America as his specialty. At this time Latin

America rarely surveyed outside of official State Department quarters, and whose academic stanchions, such as Princeton's Paul Sigmund, congenially reflected orthodox Washington perspectives. Over repeated radio television transmission, my father was one of the early commentators on the region to broadly define and put human rights concepts and political justice issues at the forefront of his personal agenda where it belonged which he further institutionalized with the founding of COHA in 1975. By the mid-1970s, on the other hand, Podhoretz had moved openly to the Right, presiding over the anti-Soviet Committee on the Present Danger in 1976, about the time the term "neoconservative" began to be applied to Jewish intellectuals like Podhoretz, Irving Kristol, and Nathan Glazer. who in midlife had shifted from Left to Right.

Some critics have seen Podhoretz's ideological journey as fulfilling a Jewish American odyssey. Susanne Klingenstein, a respected MIT academic who generally was found on the Right, saw *Making It* as embodying "the conversion of the Jews" and casts the distinctive neoconservative trajectory of Podhoretz and his peers as a form of maturation like a chrysalis becoming a butterfly, or perhaps more appositely, a tadpole becoming a frog, rather than simply a form of Americanization^v. Any opposition to the neoconservative agenda can thus be cast as anti-Semitism or some other species of sour grapes.

My father's career shows a very different manifestation of Jewishness in the American political sphere, one that retained the compassion and ethical stakes central to traditional Jewish idealism, and insisted on an absolute ethical responsibility to all others, particularly the oppressed and marginalized. Symptomatic here is that

Podhoretz never really displayed much interest in Latin America. As a leftist, he was hardly excited by the less attractive facets of the Cuban Revolution, which, whatever one's stance on it, was one of the defining events of the twentieth century in the Western Hemisphere. By the time he had begun to migrate from the Left, Podhoretz still did not speak much on Cuba: whereas other ex-leftists, such as the Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, criticized the Cuban government over its jailing of the dissident Heberto Padilla, Podhoretz was silent. The earliest mention of Latin America in the Marquette academic Tom Jeffers's laudatory biography of Podhoretz occurs on page 229, when the action has already advanced to 1979 and the Sandinista takeover of Nicaragua, which Podhoretz, necessarily if reflexively, opposed.^{vi}

Here we have not so much an individual peculiarity, uniquely limited to Podhoretz, but a general tendency of the New York Intellectuals: Latin America did not loom large enough in their world, and it was questionable whether they cared about it at all. Admittedly, there had been a constellation of maverick New York-based thinkers such as Waldo Frank and Selden Rodman who had taken an interest in the arts and culture of Latin America in the mid-twentieth century, supplemented by émigrés such as the Ecuadorian artist Camilo Egas, who taught at the New School, and the Colombian philosopher Germán Arciniegas—with whom my father studied at Columbia University. But the New York Intellectuals as a whole were not interested in speaking of Latin American culture or literature, at least until Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez began to make literary names for themselves. This lack of direct contact deprived the New York Intellectuals, for whom the vast majority of intellectual currents

derived from either Marx or Freud, from engaging with thinkers in Latin America who, as Bruno Bosteels has shown, were similarly intrigued with Marxist and Freudian thought at that time^{vii}.

Larry Birns' interest in Latin America has been very different from the selective neoconservative tendency to use human rights as a form of political opportunism. We saw this in the case of El Salvador in the 1980s, where the same people who discerned human rights abuses in Nicaragua did not say a word when the right wing death squads ran rampant in its neighbor. COHA has always stood against human rights abuses, even more when they are directly supported by Washington under cover of exceptionalism. Indeed, this suspicion of American exceptionalism (without entirely rejecting it) also characterizes Larry Birns's departure from the neoconservatives as well as from much of mainstream liberalism.

It is for these reasons that my father and Podhoretz, despite their experiential consanguinity, never explicitly engaged with each other. This lack of contact was more than made up for, though, by the entry of Podhoretz' son-in-law, Elliott Abrams, who came on the scene in the early 1980s. The Reagan administration had appointed Abrams as Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs. In this capacity, Abrams was thus able to cover up the El Mozote massacre in El Salvador and turned a blind eye to the illegal smuggling of money and arms to the Contras in Nicaragua. Although, throughout the 1980s, COHA consistently and vehemently criticized Reagan administration policy across the board, there was no more opportune target for its polemic fury than Abrams, whose misdeeds COHA delighted in upbraiding

and exposing.

When, after the inauguration of Donald Trump in 2017, it was rumored that Abrams was a likely pick for Deputy Secretary of State, COHA once again entered the fray when it leaped against their old antagonist, urging Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson to pick virtually anyone else^{viii}. Here something quite revealing happened. Trump refused to let Tillerson pick Abrams because Trump was still vexed at some of the critical remarks Abrams had made about Trump during the presidential campaign. One would think that Podhoretz, described by Leland's article as still suffering "physically and emotionally" from the death of his daughter Rachel, who was Abrams's wife, would have been infuriated enough by the President's spiteful gesture towards his son-in-law to join the anti-Trump resistance. Yet Podhoretz told Leland:

"I was anti-anti-Trump.... I said it was a choice of evils, and he was the lesser evil. And I still think that's true, although it might turn out that he wasn't evil at all. He has the most conservative cabinet since Reagan, more than Reagan. So I watch what he does more than what he says."

This statement by Podhoretz is especially striking when one considers Trump's arcane alliance with Russia; after all, whereas other neoconservatives such as Kristol or Glazer moved to the Right because of issues such as crime, drugs, money launder, or welfare issues. Podhoretz overwhelmingly attributed the Soviet threat to his ideological shift. Yet Leland described Podhoretz as "not put off..." by Trump's "conciliatory approach to

Russia.” This is shocking in that Podhoretz was a full-fledged supporter of Reagan and both Bushes, and Podhoretz's wife, Midge Decter, wrote a book about former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld so panegyric that it became the subject of almost instant ridicule^{ix}.

It is fascinating that Podhoretz's stance towards Trump, whose foreign policies in many ways reverse those of Reagan, the Bushes, and Rumsfeld, reveals the same weakness my father, as a Bates student, noted in the Republican right of 1950: they would shift principles out of unqualified opportunism. There is, though, a virtuous prudence that can stand as counterpoint to this opportunism. As Frederick Mills, perhaps the leading Latin Americanist of the current generation and a longtime admirer and interlocutor of COHA, said of my father: “I believe that Larry has never gone to the dark side as Podhoretz and others in part because Larry is suspicious that much of political liberalism might harbor a false humanism and being troubled by this is a good thing; it shows his own openness to critique and his willingness to do battle for the human personality^x.”

The readers may, according to their own beliefs, judge whether they prefer the politics of Norman Podhoretz or Larry Birns, according to their own predilections. What is beyond dispute, though, is which one of this duo stuck to his convictions.

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ⁱ . Nicholas Birns, *Theory After Theory: An Intellectual History of literary Theory from the 1950s to the early twenty-first century* (Peterborough: Broadview, 2010), p. 19,

ⁱⁱ . *The Bates Student*, January 18, 1950, p. 2,

http://scarab.bates.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2024&context=bates_student, accessed 19 March 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ . *Theory*, op. cit., p. 21.

^{iv} . John Leland, "Norman Podhoretz Still Picks Fights and Names Names, *New York Times Magazine*, March 19, 2017.

^v . Susanne Klingenstein, *Enlarging America: The Cultural Work of Jewish Literary Scholars, 1930-1990* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998), p. 231.

^{vi} , Tom Jeffers, *Norman Podhoretz: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). , P. 229.

^{vii} . Bruno Bosteels, *Marx and Freud in Latin America, Politics, Psychoanalysis, and Religion in Times of Terror* (London: Verso, 2012).

^{viii} . Kate Teran and Taylor Lewis, The Consideration of Elliott Abrams for Deputy Secretary of State would Represent a Rude Shock for Latin America, Council on Hemispheric Affairs, February 9 2017,

<http://www.coha.org/the-consideration-of-elliott-abrams-for-deputy-secretary-of-state-would-represent-a-rude-shock-for-latin-america/> , accessed 5 April 2017.

^{ix} . Midge Decter, *Rumsfeld: A Personal Portrait* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).

^x . Email from Frederick Mills to the author, 2 April 2017