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Norman Podhoretz & the nature of things

by [William McGurn](#)

A review of *The Norman Podhoretz Reader: A Selection of His Writings from the 1950's Through the 1990's*, by Norman Podhoretz, edited by Thomas L. Jeffers.

“We had an intellectually coherent thing. The American people knew what the rules were and then we did whatever.” The year was 1993, and a newly installed William Jefferson Clinton was unburdening himself to *The Washington Post* about the difficulties of fashioning a coherent foreign policy in a post-Berlin Wall world. Clinton joked that he “missed the Cold War” because of the easy distinction between good and evil that had made things easier for his predecessors.

The Norman Podhoretz Reader, [\[1\]](#) a generous selection of writings from the distinguished critic and editor of *Commentary* from 1960 to 1995, reminds us that the distinctions so wistfully longed for by Mr. Clinton were in their own day not made as easily as he remembers. Nor did it start with Vietnam. Podhoretz recounts the happiness Mary McCarthy said she felt when “she suddenly realized one day that she cared about the outcome of the war, that she wanted the United States to win”—the point surely being that there were those who never did come around to that realization. Picking up on this note, Podhoretz cites a symposium in *Partisan Review* a few years later called “Our Country and Our Culture,” whose most radical aspect was the reference to America as “our” country.

In some senses this is the undercurrent that runs through the entire *Reader*: That the fundamental distinctions that ought to have been easy (and which *were* easy to ordinary Americans) nonetheless eluded many members of the class whose lives were spent thinking about them. Though Podhoretz does not address Bill Clinton’s self-serving nostalgia for the Cold War, as one who served on the front lines he would surely see in Mr. Clinton confirmation of all his misgivings: How a leader who took such self-conscious inspiration from having been asked to bear any burden would ultimately end up persuading himself that no burden in history had ever been quite so large as his.

“One of the longest journeys in the world is the journey from Brooklyn to Manhattan.” With this line Podhoretz begins *Making It* (1967), the first of a trilogy of works chronicling his ascent to, dissent with, and life apart from the New York intellectual community. The piece is included here, along with segments from *Breaking Ranks* (1979) and *Ex-Friends* (1999). Yet though these works are all filtered through an overtly first-person prism, none are, at least in the ordinary sense, memoirs or autobiographies. Something similar can be said of all of Podhoretz’s essays, which tend to feature their author without shading into autobiography.

Which makes definition something of a challenge. In a brief introduction to the *Reader*, the British historian Paul Johnson sets Podhoretz against the backdrop of the postwar New York intellectual, hailing him as “both the archetype and sui generis.” The archetype: Brooklyn-born, Jewish, educated

in New York public schools in their heyday, following on to Columbia College, with aspirations to literary criticism and a career that was spent writing for small but influential magazines.

But Podhoretz was original for reasons both intellectual and personal. In terms of profession, as Johnson notes, unlike contemporaries who were more easily pigeon-holed by profession—Lionel Trilling (professor); Mary McCarthy or Norman Mailer (novelist); Allen Ginsberg (poet); Daniel Patrick Moynihan (professor turned politician); Jacques Barzun (historian), etc.—Podhoretz is a polymath, a writing editor whose pen has engaged everything from the fate of the novel to the Old Testament Prophets. Yet with regard to his work, what set Podhoretz apart relatively early on was not just his catholic interests but also a style that he has elsewhere described as “auto case-history.” It is not a felicitous wording, and he has yet to find anything better, but it gets to his insistence on measuring abstract ideas against the yardstick of personal experience.

This dichotomy between comfortable liberal abstractions and lived realities appears early on. In “My Negro Problem—And Ours,” an early essay that gained him some notoriety, he gets right into it by noting the dichotomy between the world presented to him in print and film and the world he knew from Brownsville:

[F]or a long time I was puzzled to think that Jews were supposed to be rich when the only Jews I knew were poor, and that Negroes were supposed to be persecuted when it was the Negroes who were doing the only persecuting I knew about—and doing it, moreover, to *me*.

As he goes on to explain, in the world in which he grew up it “was the whites, the Italians and Jews, who feared the Negroes, not the other way around.” Never mind that the proscription he offered at the end—intermarriage—was, as he soon admitted, no solution at all. The defining characteristic of this essay was an unwillingness to look the other way at uncomfortable facts, even about himself. It also helps explain why, when his ideas changed, so did his friends.

Johnson tweaks him gently here, attributing the tumult created by these splits an American (and continental) intellectual environment that “plays for keeps.” He contrasts this with the arrangement that prevails in his native Britain, where, he says, his own noisy departure from the Labor Party in the 1970s “did not sever a single old friendship.” Sir Isaiah Berlin makes a related point when Podhoretz asks how he squared his Zionism with his continued appearance in a publication (*The New York Review of Books*) that regularly published enemies of Israel such as Noam Chomsky and I. F. Stone. Berlin’s responded with a witticism. “I see,” he responded. “You are accusing me of being a fellow-traveler of a fellow-traveler.”

No doubt some of this has to do with Cardinal Newman’s definition of Toryism as loyalty to persons over ideology, a disposition that surely has its pluses for civilized discourse. Yet it invites the question whether even a virtue may at some point become a vice. In Sir Isaiah’s case, it is to suggest that this point may have been reached when, after Guy Burgess had revealed himself to be a Soviet agent, Berlin nonetheless pressed a journalist who would be visiting Moscow to convey “his warmest love” to Burgess and assure him that his former acquaintances back in England were shunning another intellectual whose crime really did put him behind the pale: a tabloid exposé of Burgess’s libertinism.

It may be intellectual conceit itself to profess to detect in this *Reader* any kind of consistency in essays that span a half century and range on topics from Saul Bellow and Simone de Beauvoir to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the resurrection of faith in an age of science. That many were written at times when Podhoretz’s social, political, and cultural sympathies were strongly at odds with what they are today adds a further complication. And yet I find three strong threads. The first is a concern for what we mean by America. The second is what we mean (or, equally often, what

others mean) by being a Jew. And the third is what human nature has to tell us about both these things.

The first has its origins in the alienation with American life in that defined literary orthodoxy in Podhoretz's formative years, from Ezra Pound on the right to Edmund Wilson on the left. A half-century later the interest culminated in a book celebrating his "love affair" with America. Likewise the concern for all things Jewish accounts not only for his spirited defense of the state of Israel but also a study of the Prophets.

Overall, though, it is the obsession with the nature of things that runs through this *Reader* like a golden thread. While acknowledging, for example, the brilliance of Hannah Arendt's argument for Nazi ordinariness in *Eichman in Jerusalem*, he writes that it "violates the Nature of Man, and therefore the Nature of Totalitarianism must go hang." On the very next page he again locates the seeds of ideological confusions in competing views of "human nature," with totalitarianism substituting "for the naïve liberal idea of the infinite perfectibility of man the equally naïve idea of the infinite malleability of man." In the selection from *Breaking Ranks*, he advises his son that "there can be no more radical refusal of self-acceptance than the repudiation of one's own biological nature," and declares that it is "this identification of sterility with vitality [that] links the new narcissism of the Me Decade to Women's Lib and the gay-rights movement, and it was links of them to the radicalism of the sixties."

In the very last essay, on the failure of science to abolish religion, he suggests again that there exists a nature whose fullness cannot be captured by the microscope. He even quotes F. R. Leavis—his great mentor at Cambridge—as saying this held true for art as well, citing "loyalty to the dictates of [the work's] own nature" as the precondition for a great work of art. Professor Thomas J. Jeffers, who has helped assemble the *Reader*, includes an introduction to each section, which is marked by decades. In the lead-in to the 1970s, Jeffers cites Podhoretz's overriding belief that "there exists an unchanging nature of things to which we are best off submitting" and that most of the misery of the last fifty years has been the rebellion of our thinking classes from it.

Podhoretz is disinclined to indulge in the cheap despair of those who see globalization as "a metastasizing plague." When his grandson in Israel proudly informs him of the arrival of a (non-kosher) McDonald's in the Promised Land, Podhoretz suggests that what McDonald's really symbolizes is the "universality of human nature." And it is not just human nature that absorbs him. It is impossible to appreciate Podhoretz's treatment of either the Mideast conflict or the Cold War without comprehending, as he insists in his essay on Kissinger, that the fatal flaw of ignoring ideology is that "in any negotiation between a party with limited aims and a party with unlimited aims, the party with limited aims is bound to lose in the very nature of things." Which is why the détente that was sold on the basis of restraining the Soviet Union ended up restraining only Washington instead of Moscow.

No doubt it was this Brownsville rootedness that accounts for the lack of attraction Communism held for him even at his most green and idealistic. In his own description, having started out a Cold War liberal along the lines of Lionel Trilling, he soon moved sharply to Trilling's left and ultimately ended up on Trilling's right. That flirtation with the New Left is alluded to here and there with profound regret, and there is nothing that leads me not to believe him. But from the earliest there is a whiff of the apostate in Podhoretz's early liberalism, whether it be his suspicion of the dangerous primitivism celebrated by the Beats, his concerns with black criminality, or his insistence that the novel had to deal with reality as it was and not as novelists would have it.

From this remove, Podhoretz's embrace of the New Left at the stage in his life when he assumed the editorship of *Commentary* strikes me more as the holding of the conventional wisdom of the crowd in which he ran, rather like someone who has grown up in a church and learned his catechism

without ever really subjecting it to hard questioning. No doubt there are things that he wrote that would mortify him today, but his real regrets appear to have more to do with his role in publishing and promoting writers such as Paul Goodman, Norman O. Brown, and James Baldwin. In terms of his thinking, however, even in his most leftist phases he does not come across as a true believer. And the disgust he feels for the debilitating effects of the counterculture seem more pronounced when the subject is literature than politics.

Many of the same complications hold true for neoconservatism, a movement in which he enjoys Founding Father status but which has never been sufficiently defined in positive terms. Negative definitions abound, from those on the right who see it as a Trojan Horse for liberalism to those on the left who see it as a conservatism with a friendlier face (not to mention those who use it as a crude euphemism for “Jewish”). Positive definitions have been more difficult to supply, and not only because neoconservatism is probably most frequently deployed as a pejorative. In its actual manifestations, it has not really been a creed along the lines of the cultural conservatism of the Russell Kirks, the libertarian consistency of a Hayek, or even the fusionism of a William F. Buckley, Jr. To my mind, the *Reader* confirms that neoconservatism is more a disposition that divided those on the left who adjusted their theories to reality from those who did vice versa.

Ultimately it proved a critical disposition for the future of America, because it manifested itself at a critical juncture in international relations. Probably neoconservatism didn’t have much to do with Reagan’s own beliefs—this was a man, after all, who read *National Review*, could quote Milton Friedman, and had given a speech for Goldwater back when Podhoretz was still shucking off his New Left credentials—but in its arguments neoconservatism did help Reagan soften the harder edges of Goldwaterism. To call it narrow because its interests and passions were so peculiarly New York is to miss the point. What the Podhoretz-led movement did was to open the war Reagan was fighting on a much broader front and in so doing lay claim to territory that had more or less been permanently conceded to the Left.

Those coming to Podhoretz for the first time—and even those more familiar with his later years—might be surprised to see how much of the *Reader* is devoted to literature. They are in for a pleasant surprise. But this is not such a discontinuity as might first appear. Early on Podhoretz had impressed on him that “radicals who seek as earnestly to transform themselves as to transform society have generally been hostile to literature.” Which may be the key to understanding how the Columbia-educated son of a Brownsville milkman started out his career worried about the integrity of the modern novel and ended up realizing this was but one front in a much wider war.

Notes

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1. *The Norman Podhoretz Reader: A Selection of His Writings from the 1950s Through the 1990s*, by Norman Podhoretz, edited by Thomas L. Jeffers; The Free Press, 478 pages, \$35. [Go back to the text.](#)

William McGurn is the chief editorial writer for *The Wall Street Journal*.

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