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Left Behind

Sometimes indoctrination works, and sometimes it doesn't.

BY ABIGAIL THERNSTROM

After Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed in 1953, it was no surprise that the adoptive parents of their two sons chose to send the orphaned brothers to the Little Red School House, a New York private school. In the McCarthy era, Little Red and its high school, Elisabeth Irwin, were havens for teachers displaced from the public schools by their refusal to sign a loyalty oath to the United States government. The schools offered students a very distinctive—Stalinist—political education, and parents knew their children would not be corrupted by bourgeois capitalist values.

To this day, the schools' combined website describes both Little Red and Elisabeth Irwin as "progressive." They are "committed to social justice," which they define as "equity in race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic means and family structure." This commitment, in the 1950s and '60s, meant allegiance to the American Communist party (CPUSA).

Author Dina Hampton does not deny the schools' dedication to political indoctrination. The students, she writes, "grew up in a counter-culture hothouse steeped in progressive pedagogy and radical politics." At assemblies, everyone would stand to sing the "Negro National Anthem" ("Lift Every Voice and Sing") instead of the "Star-Spangled Banner." Social studies, taught by "a dyed-in-the-wool Marxist," formed the core of the curriculum, "with emphasis placed on the exploration of oppressed cultures." The school took students on field trips searching for the downtrodden proletariat (my description, not Hampton's). They stayed away from ordinary workers—most of whom would have been violently anti-Communist, of course—but met instead with those on strike or laboring as migrant workers; they toured Pennsylvania steel mills and coal mines.

I was an Elisabeth Irwin student in the early 1950s, and I remember clearly the curriculum and those politically heavy-handed trips. But neither made the intended impression on me, for reasons I don't entirely know—except that I was always terrible at listening to my elders.

Hampton provides little information about the school itself. But *Little Red's* subtitle, *Three Passionate Lives Through the Sixties and Beyond*, offers those lives as her subject. They are Tom Hurwitz, Angela Davis, and Elliott Abrams. Hurwitz and Davis were both

in the class of 1961; Abrams graduated in 1965. Hampton views all three as “radicals,” a term of endearment, but only when speaking of those on the left. Amazingly, she equates the radicalism of the Black Panthers, the Weathermen, and the CPUSA with the views of Jeane Kirkpatrick, Henry Jackson, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Nathan Glazer, and Irving Kristol—members of what she calls the “radical neoconservative movement that came to power with the Reagan administration.”

Elliott Abrams was clearly included to make the story ostensibly fair and balanced; but Davis and Hurwitz are heroes, while Abrams is conservative and, thus, a villain. Nevertheless, Hampton calls all three “remarkable” graduates who would “continue to impact the course of United States history.” Abrams, a prolific writer on foreign policy, served in the State Department under Reagan and in the White House under George W. Bush, and got into trouble during the Iran-Contra flap. He has, indeed, played an important role in our public life. But Angela Davis and Tom Hurwitz? They were both red diaper babies who made mischief of one sort or another.

Neither did anything admirable to warrant the attention Hampton lavishes on them; they just happen to have attended the same school from which the author herself graduated in the late 1970s. The high point of Hurwitz’s life, it seems, was his involvement in the 1968 Columbia student protest, when he and others occupied university buildings, took the acting dean and other administrators hostage, rifled through the president’s files, and taped a Che Guevara quotation above the dean’s office door: “In revolution one wins or dies.”

Apparently, the “revolution” was fun. In Hurwitz’s account, there was a lot of sex, and the revolutionary goal seems to have been having a lot of sex with strangers. In the fall of 1968 and spring of 1969, Hurwitz traveled the country for Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in the company of, among others, Obama pal Bill Ayers. “In every town there was a woman who wanted to sleep with you,” he reports.

Hampton’s own description of Hurwitz suggests he was basically a far-left playboy. In the summer of 1964, students risked their lives trying to register black voters in Mississippi, but Hurwitz never did anything remotely equivalent. Why put your life on the line when you could belong to what amounted to a college fraternity that gave nonstop political parties? Hurwitz was a perpetual adolescent, self-centered and self-righteous.

In fact, Tom Hurwitz and his friends were on a mission to nowhere. SDS hoped to force the United States to withdraw troops from Vietnam—and American troops did come home in 1975, but no thanks to student protests. In October 1969, the Weathermen organized a demonstration in Chicago that became known as the “days of rage.” Homes and shops were vandalized, police officers assaulted. Similar violent demonstrations were staged across the country over the next few years. Yet the result was simply to deepen working-class disdain of privileged college kids who didn’t have to go to Vietnam.

This band—of which Hurwitz was a member—enraged ordinary Americans, but intimidated Columbia and other institutions of higher learning, including Harvard, where similar protests occurred. In the face of appalling student behavior, the schools were paralyzed. Well, not quite: Columbia did eventually take bold action, appointing a study group to consider student discipline. All this might seem funny in retrospect, but it was not at the time. Universities never recovered; they caved to the student demands of the era, and kept caving and caving. The protests accelerated a process of cultural change for the worse, and from which there was no going back.

Tom Hurwitz was not a serious person, but Angela Davis was; and while he quickly faded from public sight, she has not been altogether forgotten. Some American universities continue to give her a platform. Pitzer College, for instance, invited her to be the 2012 commencement speaker, and the school's president, Laura Skandera Trombley, introduced Davis as a “beautiful African-American woman . . . unafraid to practice her convictions.” In 1969, Trombley explained, Davis had been fired from her teaching post at UCLA for “publicly voicing her opposition to the Vietnam war, racism, sexism, the prison industrial complex, and her support for gay rights and other social justice movements.” Of course, if opposition to racism and support for gay rights were firing offenses, almost no one would be left teaching. And President Trombley somehow left out Davis's long membership in the CPUSA, her close ties to the Black Panthers, her devotion to the murderer/prison radical George Jackson, and other such biographical details.

Angela Davis joined the CPUSA in 1968, an “exciting year to be in the party,” Hampton writes. If Davis was looking for excitement, she soon found it: Two years after she signed up, she was involved in a courtroom shootout for which she had purchased the guns, and she was charged with responsibility for the deaths of four people, including a judge. She fled, ending up on the FBI's Most Wanted list, and was eventually captured. The Communist party supplied her with an attorney who argued that Davis and her colleagues in the courtroom shootout were, in fact, political prisoners—as all black inmates were said to be. Julian Bond, Marlon Brando, Jane Fonda, and other celebrities rallied to her defense. She was acquitted.

Throughout *Little Red*, Hampton is in a swoon over Angela Davis. She provides a detailed and starry-eyed account of Davis's long service to the moribund CPUSA, which reads like a press release: Angela joins the party; Angela is on the central committee; Angela is running for vice president of the United States on the Communist ticket! Nowhere is there any recognition that the CPUSA was a wholly owned subsidiary of the Soviet Union, which secretly provided most of its funding. Hampton suggests that the Communists were idealistic—all things “idealistic” being good by definition—but by the time Davis had joined, its membership was microscopic and its influence nil. Indeed, Hampton doesn't seem to understand that there had to be something seriously wrong with anyone who could remain a Communist after the Moscow show trials of 1936-38, Stalin's purges, and the Hitler-Stalin Pact.

Elizabeth Irwin had said that she hoped her school would always be a place where “heresy will be looked upon as possible truth,” and the school did celebrate heresy from mainstream American culture—but not from Stalinism. Indeed, Little Red was an appalling school, and from its current website, I think it’s fair to say that it still is. Nevertheless, it continues to have a clientele of old and new New York lefties who have the means to buy a private education with a curriculum that will keep their offspring politically close to home.

Little Red is appalling, too. But readers with some anthropological curiosity may find its picture illuminating; it offers an introduction to a bizarre political tribe that most ordinary Americans have never encountered, but that has never entirely disappeared.

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