Manifesto of a Tenured Radical

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SOME YEARS AGO, WHEN I WAS BEGINNING TO TEACH FROM AN EXPANDED CANON AND WORKING ON THE BOOK ON NONCANONICAL MODERN AMERICAN POETRY DESCRIBED IN CHAPTERS 3 AND 5, I SENT A DRAFT OF THE MANUSCRIPT TO A SENIOR FACULTY MEMBER WHO WAS A SPECIALIST IN MODERN POETRY. THE BOOK WAS AN ATTEMPT TO RECOVER A LARGE NUMBER OF FORGOTTEN OR DEVALUED WOMEN, MINORITY, AND LEFT-WING WRITERS. MY READER, WEDDED TO THE TRADITIONAL CANON OF OFTEN POLITICALLY CONSERVATIVE WHITE MALES, HAD ONLY ONE COMMENT: “SO YOU WANT US TO READ A LOT OF WOMEN, BLACKS, AND JEWS. WHAT’S THE POINT?” AT THE TIME, I MUST ADMIT THE REMARK FIRST LEFT ME PRETTY MUCH SPEECHLESS, THOUGH I WAS INTERESTED TO NOTE THAT MY COLLEAGUE WAS AWARE OF THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE LEFT AND JEWISH CULTURE,
something I had not emphasized in the manuscript. In any case, my reader was not ready to hear the personal rejoinder the remark partly deserved; the problem, I might in other words have suggested, was not mine.

I offer this chapter, then, as a first gesture toward a belated response to that challenge of years ago. And I will begin by rephrasing the question in a more productive way: What happens when we put the Left at the center? At the center of our teaching. At the center of our research. At the center of the story or stories we tell about the American literary heritage. At the center of our notion of the culture’s ideals. Does the Left belong in the last two of these places? Was it ever really there before?

Of course posing the question this way forces us to ask what it entails to assert that there is a center. Is there a core narrative or group of narratives about American history and culture in which the Left might play a significant role? How continuous or discontinuous is that narrative? What is excluded from it? Is the center unitary or multiple? If there is a center and a periphery, how do they relate to one another? Does the decision to foreground the dichotomy between centrality and marginality blind us to other social and political relationships, to more complex and compromised discursive positions?

At least since Saussure, we have potentially known that the center is necessarily relational, that it can neither establish nor sustain its identity and status independently. A center has no meaning apart from its dialogue with cast out and marginalized elements of a culture. Since Marx, we have known that the center wins its dominance and visibility through struggle; that is a message feminism, minority studies, and postcolonialism have specified and reinforced. Cultural studies has taught us that the struggle is continual, that centrality can only be sustained through constant work and rearticulation, and that the center, indeed, is never quite the same; its nature changes even when it claims to stay the same, when it claims such continuity as one of its virtues. Maintaining the configuration of centrality requires constant reconfiguration and adaptation. When new constituencies, issues, and images are drawn into the center—or into a dynamic relationship with it—then the nature of the center itself changes. Both cultural studies and poststructuralism, meanwhile, have reinforced our growing suspicion that the meaning of the objects at the center is constructed, not inherent, and that it is always open to renegotiation. Finally, multiculturalism has demonstrated that there are always more stories than the dominant culture chooses to tell.

Some people, moreover, establish the center of their lives elsewhere. They may win this distance from the dominant culture with great difficulty or it may be imposed upon them. Not all will even be conscious of it. To a given subculture this distance may seem unproblematic, even a fact of nature. In terms
of their daily experience and their collective figuration of social space, the
dominant (and usually metropolitan) center may appear irrelevant.

Indeed, because the differential relations between center and periphery are
not only unequal and hierarchical but have historically also often been racist,
sexist, and colonialist, some have suggested we should stop using the metaphor
entirely. I would agree that the metaphor should be given no special priority in
our efforts to characterize social life, and I would also argue that it needs to be
flexible to have much interpretive purchase. Sometimes there are myriad centers;
sometimes there are two centers in mortal conflict. The relations between center
and periphery are also potentially reversible; sometimes they can be overthrown.
Foregrounding the metaphor, indeed, can serve not to perpetuate given relation-
ships but rather to provoke dissatisfaction with them and thus lead to change. It
would be invidious, moreover, to assume such relations have to exist in any
given social setting or historical moment. But the metaphor can help us under-
stand the distribution of power, authority, and wealth in given contexts.

If you were a communist in the United States in 1952, you could, to say the
least, fairly be credited with having put the Left at the center of your life; you
also no doubt felt that you lived on the margins and you felt imperiled by the
beliefs and powers lodged at the very center of the culture as a whole. When
that center is after your head, you do not have the leisure to pretend it does not
exist. The history of the brutal relations between centrality and marginality
requires our continuing witness. Even in the American 1950s, however, even in
that moment of nearly unchecked, ruthless power, the metaphors of center and
periphery were more complicated than one might expect. Cast out of every
central institution, the political Left was nonetheless at the very center of the
political Right’s anxieties and its opportunism, integral to the Right’s self-
definitions and to its metaphors for public life. Something similar could be said
about many cultures’ rejected others, which are often at the center of the
dominant power’s efforts to sustain its hegemony. From English efforts to
promote their own cultural superiority by denigrating the Irish to Nazi Germa-
ny’s absolute othering of the Jews, a rejected other is lodged paradoxically at the
heart of the dominant culture’s identity.

Two straightforward points are among the preliminary conclusions that can
be drawn from this thumbnail sketch of how the metaphor of centrality has
been complicated for us: first, that the metaphor has a significant history and
considerable interpretive power; second, before discussing what we should or
should not do, we need to admit that we now have at least some power to do as
we choose. In other words, we can put the Left at the center of contemporary
teaching and research if we choose to do so. We have the power to make that
difference if we wish. We can choose to make our work answer to certain
personal and political needs and desires. In the process, we can certainly alter the way we remember the past and thus the way we live in the present. Just what effect we can have on the future, as always, remains unclear. But it is perfectly clear that we live in a time when the traditional center no longer holds and that for some of us suggests an opportunity, not a reason for fear.

From the stories that have long been told in our schools, our textbooks, and our scholarly discourses, we might well have concluded that we would have to invent an American Left in order to put it at the center of our cultural memory. It is certainly easy enough, for example, to find narratives that either omit or marginalize the fact that there were several hundred socialist periodicals in the United States in the second decade of the century and that their combined audience may well have reached several million. In 1912, the peak year for the Socialist party, Eugene Debs received nearly a million votes for President. Norman Thomas came close to that in 1932. Just how many Americans felt significantly attracted to the culture of American communism in the 1930s we will never know; once again, however, the numbers were not insignificant. The Left’s impact on the labor and civil rights movements and on poetry, fiction, drama, and the graphic arts has also been extensive. And many of its causes and arguments and public policy proposals have eventually found their way into mainstream law, though often only after being disarticulated from their origins.

The archive is thus not empty. We do not have to invent objects to study or people who contributed to or were influenced by Left culture. We do not have to invent people who put the Left at the center of their lives. We do have to decide that these people and products matter: that they matter to us, first, that they mattered to themselves, second, and then perhaps that they mattered to the times in which they lived. We do have to invent and reinvent the narratives that include these people and the work they did. We have to decide what prominence to give the Left and what meaning it had in the past and might have in the present and future. As I argued in chapter 3, the meaning of history is always under revision, always being reestablished. At stake is the effort to gain some influence over what facts will count in that retelling and over who writes the new stories we will habitually tell.

It is at this point that the radical decentering of our myths of centrality comes helpfully into play. It helps us understand not only what opportunities are available to us but also the uncanny epistemology of our recovery projects. For although the archive is not without Left artifacts, there is another sense in which we have reason to doubt that they exist. To the extent that Left culture exists only so long as we continue to tell stories about it, to the extent that Left poetry and politics have meaning only when we speak of them, that otherwise Left culture falls silent, unable to be spoken of and unable to speak to us, to that
extent, indeed, it will seem as though the left did not exist. There is a quite practical sense in which a forgotten culture seems never to have existed and in which the effort to recover it thus feels like phantasmatic invention. In failing to tell appropriate stories—both in academia and in our public culture—we have in a very real sense driven the Left out of existence. Reaching out to it from the vantage point of the dominant culture’s coercive silence requires breaking through that aura of the improbable and the impossible. If the gods meant the Left to be at the center, the Right seems implicitly to argue, it would already be there. Once the barrier to speech is broken, however, everything changes; the objects and their meanings and the stories we can tell about them multiply. Suddenly what was not there goes on forever.

These generalizing abstractions, I should point out, grow out of the practical research and teaching my graduate students and I, along with many other people across the country, have done over the past decade. Sometimes that has meant doing resistance teaching amongst conservative students. Interested in the history of American anarchism and its impact on American poetry, Lee Furey began to seek out books, journals, and newspapers from the early part of the century. Expecting a small but notable body of work, she found that one recovered subculture led to another and another. Now, between anarchist and socialist poetry, a lifetime of rediscovery awaits her and her students, and our notions of what was radical about modernism need to be revised. Mark Van Wienen noticed that a small body of antiwar poetry flourished in America before we entered the First World War and before some of the heaviest censorship in our history was installed and stifled most free expression. Journals led to archives, archives led to letters, and the small body of poetry became much larger; now the history of modernism and its engagement with public life looks very different to his students than it did before his work began.

In my own research on and teaching of the 1920s and 1930s I concentrated on books, journals, and newspapers. That alone so multiplied the varieties of Left poetry that no single story could any longer account for it. Then I decided to follow up one poet, Edwin Rolfe (1909–1954), in detail. My collaborator Jefferson Hendricks and I contacted Rolfe’s widow, still alive at eighty years of age in San Francisco, and arranged to see her husband’s papers. A day into twenty-some boxes and it was clear there was a body of witty and anguished poetry about McCarthyism that had never been published. By the second giddy day, we had an unpublished poem by Langston Hughes, letters from Ernest Hemingway, and still more, all of it unpublished. Combined with the work Rolfe had published in books and journals, the unpublished poetry made it possible to say that he was the American poet who did the most sustained work about both the Spanish Civil War and McCarthyism. His *Collected Poems*,
published in November of 1993, now makes that work available to everyone.4 Here are some representative passages about American culture Rolfe wrote during the McCarthy period:

The poisoned air befouled the whole decade,
corrupting even those whose childhood vision
contained no hint of bomb or nuclear fission . . . (253)

Knaves masqued like sovereigns decree
what we shall say, listen to, see,
The habit of slavery, long discarded,
becomes our normal, comfortable suit. (216)

What are we having for dinner tonight
Whom are we having for dinner tonight?
  Raw nerve ends on toast
  Pickled cops’ feet
  Suckling pig with a gag in its mouth
  And no talk—its ears are wired for sound. (259)

Who used to lie with his love
  In the glade, far from the battle-sector,
  Now lies embraced with a lie-detector
And can not, dare not, move. (259)

This court, supreme in blindness and in hate,
supremely flaunts its lickspittle estate;
kills Jews today, as twenty-five years ago,
it killed Italians. (259)

Considering that most scholars believe American poets retreated from political themes during the American inquisition in the early 1950s, Rolfe’s work alone makes it necessary to begin rethinking the role poetry played in that period. Some of his work, of course, was unpublished, so it existed only in the most invisible and private way. When those trees fell in the forest, there was definitely no one there to hear them. Even Rolfe’s unpublished work, however, requires us to reexamine our assumptions about what poets wrote (and found it possible to write) during the American inquisition.

But of course I began to wonder what other work might be out there. In the 1930s I was dealing with Left poetry that had been published but largely
forgotten. After going through Rolfe’s papers, I began asking what other poetry might have been written but proven unpublishable in a climate of intense repression. A year later I was on my way to visit the widow of one of the Hollywood Ten. Alvah Bessie had published a few poems in journals, but there was no evidence of them in his University of Wisconsin archive. Bessie’s wife was convinced his remaining files contained only photocopies of the materials he had already donated, but I finally persuaded her to let me have a look. An hour’s search seemed to prove her right. But then, a thick envelope emerged from the back of a file cabinet. In it was an unpublished book of political poems written while Bessie was in federal prison in 1951. As I left the house in the California hills, poems in hand, I drove past one building site after another. Everywhere the earth was being torn up, the past covered over with new construction. I asked a question we will no doubt never be able to answer: How many other repressed manuscripts of the Left have ended up in landfills? And one question we will have to answer if we are to put Left culture of the 1950s at the center: What does it mean to recover a past that might have had a public life but never did?

If left-wing work like Rolfe’s or Bessie’s is published and reaches an audience, if other scholars take it up and talk about it, then the landscape of the past will begin to look very different to us. Our understanding of politically conservative canonical work will have to make adjustments to account relationally for what other poets found it possible and necessary to write. History’s dynamic will have new elements in play, new forces in contention, new options to offer to the present. Putting the Left at the center of our work, then, even by a deliberate act of will, an act provoked by a political commitment, can eventually force seismic shifts everywhere else in the cultural landscape. That has already happened dramatically with feminist and minority recovery projects and it will continue as a general recovery of Left history and culture makes it possible to see past filiations and alliances among constituencies that sometimes compete for exclusive priority in the contemporary scene.

For the effort to put the Left at the center is necessarily a project of rearticulation. The Left cannot exist at the center without a network of relationships—comparisons, similarities, differences, contrasts, allegiances, affiliations, disputations, contentions, representations, and misrepresentations—that enable it and keep it in place. To put the Left at the center, as I did in the course I describe in the opening chapter of this section of Manifesto, is to ask how everything else in the culture bears on the Left’s values and actions. Putting the Left at the center thus means reevaluating the meaning of the alternative claims other political visions make on our past and future. It also means drawing different elements of other discourses into the foreground to mark their points
of similarity and difference with the already varied and mutually contentious discourses of the Left. In the process a general realignment of our traditions and our understanding of them can begin to take place. In the end, if the project of putting the Left at the center succeeds, our past comes to speak differently to us; the inertial force of our central traditions makes different claims on our present aims.

Of course, while we are working to put the Left at the center, other people with very different conceptions of the American past and present will be carrying out their own raids on the same territory. That is the nature of cultural struggle. But if we leave the task of defining our national traditions and identities to the Right, then the Left will be visible as it would see itself neither at the center nor on the horizon. We do not have to know whether we can win this battle to benefit from the fight. This is a project that can begin in your research, your teaching, your daily life.

Indeed, the changes it first makes are local ones. Putting the Left at the center of your life changes your needs and desires, your work and its rewards, your relations and your conversations, your impact on your students and colleagues; it changes your understanding of the past and the processes that brought the present into being. And it multiplies possible futures that might otherwise seem culturally constrained.

Often, however, putting the Left at the center requires a certain bloody-mindedness, a willfulness about proceeding despite the incredulity of conservative colleagues. Putting the Left at the center means putting it where some people believe it does not belong. Indeed, my title is intended, whimsically, to suggest just that sort of unwarranted transposition, a violation of the logic of directionality. Putting the Left at the center often entails accepting that existing systems of meaning in academia will offer no context for semanticizing your work. It may, indeed, be easier to reward you for it than to comprehend it.

Putting the Left at the center also requires us to refuse to cash in all that project’s relational consequences in advance. The scholar I mentioned at the outset, in effect, wanted all the implications spelled out before acceding to an expanded canon. But it is in the very nature of the recombinatory effects of a new relational landscape to be unpredictable. Putting the Left at the center sets off chain reactions here and elsewhere. Its broader cultural risks and benefits, the fruits of its foregrounding, the semiotic effects of its dissemination, all wait upon a future we cannot yet name. That is the nature of a revolution.