The literature of recanting radicals has been with us since 1917: from the recollections of Russian Mensheviks, who rued the day they joined with Lenin, to Irving Kristol’s “Memoirs of a Trotskist,” in which the neoconservative godfather fondly reminisces about his youthful dalliance with dissident activity. There is a Trotskyist, “in which the neoconservative atrocity and betrayal—Kronstadt, the Khrushchev’s admission of Stalin’s culpability—has been detailed in dozens of books, the most sensational revelations of ex-communists whose works have been the subject of much press coverage and, in some cases, have sold well. Witness. This overpraised and overhyped genre of literature of recanting radicals is now more than a staple of the anti-communist arsenal. With their lurid tales of a secret subworld of subversion, a hidden labyrinth of evil beneath the placid streets of postwar America, they thrilled their readers with a delicious blend of sensation, psychology, and political intrigue. The implosion of communism meant that the condition of their parental love was that they embrace their political faith. It would never have occurred to Gitlow to blame his father and mother for his political mistakes, but the Oprahization of American culture makes it possible for Horowitz to demonize his parents. While he prefaches each denunciation of their actions with a protestation of his undying love, he spares them nothing. These “permanent conspirators in a revolutionary drama” are described as virtual puppets, their true selves deeply embedded in an underground world of subversion. “Their real politics,” he writes, “were conducted far from view, in the neighborhood cell meetings of the Communist Party. It was to this subterranean activity that they owed their true allegiance. He likens them to “agents of a secret service” for whom “secrecy enveloped everything that was important to them.” His father made cryptic references to “the Organization” and “the Party,” but rarely said the C-word aloud.

Horowitz does not deny that people such as his parents were operating under the constant surveillance of government agencies, including the FBI and local police departments, and “the scent of inquisition was in the air. And yet,” he writes, “what else could they have expected?” After all, they “wanted to overthrow existing institutions.”

In other words, they deserved it. While this point may be arguable, it is unsettling and unseemly that their own son is the one to make it. While finger-pointing ex-comrades and “naming names” was a major motivation of Gitlow, Budenz, et al., none ever went so far as to single out his own parents—at least, not until Horowitz.

Since the era of Gitlow, the stature of these recanters has slowly but surely
degenerated, along with the level of the culture at large. Compared to Horowitz, Gitlow—the fanatic avenger and consummate opportunist—is a veritable giant. While Horowitz was always a peripheral figure on the left, with no status as an activist beyond the Berkeley scene, Gitlow was one of the founding leaders of the American Communist Party, whose defection was front-page news all across the world.

It was a startling turn for a man whose entire life had been spent in the service of the revolutionary socialist cause. In 1909, Gitlow joined the Socialist Party; in 1917, electrified by the Bolshevik coup in Russia, he became a leading figure in what was the nascent Communist Party of the United States. He was scooped up in the infamous Palmer Raids of 1919, and sent to Sing Sing prison. Upon his release, he went on to become a leader of the American (i.e., English-speaking) wing of the communists, which at that time was a definite minority. Along with Jack Reed—dashing author of Ten Days That Shook the World and subject of an adoring movie, Reds—Gitlow led the fight to "Americanize" what was essentially a party of immigrants. As a top leader and organizer of the CP, Gitlow eventually ran afloat of the Comintern when his patron, party leader Jay Lovestone, fell out of favor with the Kremlin. On a trip to Moscow to appeal to Stalin himself, Gitlow and his confreres stood up to the dictator on his own turf, at a famous meeting of the Comintern Praesidium. At considerable risk to his own life and liberty, he spoke in defiance of Stalin's order to turn the leadership of the American Communists over to a rival faction. In response, Uncle Joe himself stormed to the podium and denounced the American deviationist. "When you get back to the United States," he thundered, "only your wives and sweethearts will support you!"

Horowitz, on the other hand, is ambivalent about confronting the mini-Stalin of the Panther New Left milieu, Huey Newton, and he continually warned about the danger to his own safety. Typically, when he discovers that his Black Panther heroes are murderers and thugs, he blames other people: "Anger welled inside me. Why hadn't Noel said anything before? Why hadn't Charles? Or Troy? Why hadn't they warned me? The answer was clear: they did not want to be accused of betraying the Left." The Panthers had killed their accountant, Betty Van Patter, who had been recommended for the job by Horowitz himself, but he confesses that he "was now ruled by the principle of silence." Although Horowitz knew who had killed Van Patter, and why, it took him years to go public—and he never really does come clean. For nowhere does he directly acknowledge his own complicity in her death, even though it was he who recruited her for the position that was to prove her undoing. He claims that he and other New Left activists were "blind" to the fact that the Panthers were, as Dick Gregory put it, "a bunch of thugs." But this is not very credible: What else is one to think of a group that walked into a session of the California State Assembly armed with rifles and dressed in paramilitary uniforms? Huey Newton urged his followers to "pick up the gun." What else did Horowitz and his friends expect but that, one day, they would pick it up—and use it?

Unlike Gitlow, Chambers, et al., Horowitz was not an activist but a self-styled theoretician, a literary type who held a key post as an editor of Ramparts but who deliberately avoided any organizational loyalties except in running the "Learning Center" for the Oakland branch of the Black Panthers. In spite of his best effort to inflate his own importance to the growth of the New Left movement, Horowitz never exercised any appreciable influence over its activities or direction. When Gitlow was expelled from the Communist Party in the 1930's, along with Jay Lovestone, they took several hundred members with them; when Horowitz, the great New Left guru, announced his support for Ronald Reagan, he took exactly one of his ex-comrades with him: his long-time friend and literary collaborator Pe Collier.

One striking difference between ex-commie confessions of yesteryear and Horowitz's tome is stylistic; while Gitlow is concerned with exposing the inner workings of the communist movement, its front groups, strategies, subterfuges, Horowitz is mainly interested in self-revelation. We learn everything we never needed to know about the messy little ups and downs of his personal life: an affair with a "psychic healer" who "heals" him out of his marriage; his relationship with a crack-addict drifter who left him suddenly after draining him of considerable sums of money; an affair with Abbie Rockefeller. Particularly maddening is the fact that the author, in detailing this Bacchanalia, keeps asserting his growing disenchantment with the countercultural values and lifestyle of his generation.

This genre has never been bereft of sex; the focus of previous memoirs, however, was not on the sexuality of the author but on the licentiousness of his ex-comrades. In The Whole of Their Lives (1948), Gitlow charged that "in New York and in other communist centers, the youth had built up a communist Sodom and Gomorrah." Describing a commune orgy with some degree of realism, Gitlow argued that promiscuity aided in "the deadening of the mind with communist ideology." Whatever the merits of the argument that young communes would be too tired from these gymnastics to resist indoctrination, at least Gitlow bothered to make a political argument. Horowitz, on the other hand, in detailing his own homosexual peccadilloes at such length—while all the time proclaiming his growing devotion to conservative family values—succeeds only in proving his own hypocrisy.

Reflecting the self-absorption so typical of his generation, Radical Son chronicles Horowitz's every mood swing in excruciating detail. To relieve the tedium, the author recalls his brushes with the glitterati: how he hung out with some Kennedy kids as they snorted coke and mingled with the Hollywood crowd, dropping plenty of names along the way. But the star of this show is the author. In a prologue that reads like a marketing strategy, the tirelessly self-promoting Horowitz declares, "I was like Whitaker Chambers in their generation—a young man, inspired by the high-minded pas-

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LIBERAL ARTS

THE LEOPARD AND HIS SPOTS

"Two prison inmates driving in a state-owned van were arrested for allegedly soliciting a prostitute, police said. Both inmates had work-release privileges, which allowed them to be in public... The men, ages 37 and 41, are inmates at the St. John's Correctional Center on Milwaukee's east side. They were on their way to a job-placement interview with a temporary-help agency."

—from the Beloit Daily News, March 28
sions of the Left who had broken through to the dark underside of the radical cause. Like Chambers, I had encoun-
tered with totalitarian forces that in-
volved betrayal and death. Like him, I
had been demonized for my second
thoughts.... Like Chambers, I had be-
come the most hated ex-radical of my
generation.

Here is a narcissism so inflated that it
explodes in a burst of pure absurdity: Pic-
ture Chambers, defying the establish-
ment, taking on a man like Hiss, and
standing up to the power of the Soviet
Empire. Now look at Horowitz: he
swims with the tide, not against it, and
breathlessly announces, at this late date,
that socialism is evil and the Black Pan-
thurs were of a decidedly lower order,
and the genre inevitably degenerated:
Reform and the genre inevitably degenerated:
Radical Son is not only likely to be the
last, but also the low point of the lot.

Yet, among the Washington-New York
conservative cognoscenti, this book was
touted so loudly and insistently that the
din was deafening. Bill Bennett sang its
praises. George Gilder effused that Ho-
rowitz had written "the first great Amer-
ican autobiography of his generation."
P.J. O'Rourke, that master of uninten-
tional humor, declared: "I think the last
political book that affected me this
strongly was Hayek's Road to Serfdom!"

Horowitz and Collier have managed to
stay on the cutting edge of political
fashion since the early 60's; when it was
clic to shout "Free Bobby—Off the
pig!" they shouted the loudest. When
the political winds shifted, this fearless
duo was one step ahead of the crowd.
When the pendulum swings leftward
again, and "extremism" on the right
comes under fire, what is to prevent
these Second Thoughters from having
Third Thoughts? You can almost count
on it.

Justin Raimondo is a senior fellow at the
Center for Libertarian Studies and the
author of Reclaiming the American
Right: The Lost Legacy of the Conser-
vative Movement.
On David Horowitz

It's a pity that Chronicles chose a shallow and vindictive reviewer like Justin Raimondo ("David Horowitz and the Ex-Communist Confessional," June) to vet Radical Son for the Chronicles audience. Justin's animus toward me (based on a public clash we had some years ago) is transparent enough, but his reading of my text is so bizarre that the Chronicles audience is offered little clue as to the contents of my book, let alone insight into its place in the literature of anticomunist memoirs, which is the pretense under which his review is written.

To set me up for invidious comparison, Raimondo praises the ex-communist Benjamin Gitlow for writing "nary a word of criticism" of his parents, nor attributing any aspect of his career to "parental influence." (Raimondo makes no attempt to justify why this should be praiseworthy in any writer of autobiography.) Then Raimondo turns to my text: "Contrast this with the victimological whining of Horowitz."

What was my own choice? In the beginning I hardly had one. I understood early that my parents' political religion was really the center of their moral life. This meant that the condition of their parental love was that I embrace their political faith.

The passage in which this offending comment occurs actually forms the prelude to my entrance into a communist-run nursery school at age 18 months. But this does not phase Raimondo: "It would never have occurred to Gitlow to blame his father and mother for his political mistakes, but the Oprahization of American culture makes it possible for Horowitz to demonize his parents."

Readers of Radical Son will know that I do nothing of the kind. Other reviewers have described my account of my relationship with my father, for example, as "poignant" and "poetic." Raimondo is so determined to demonize me that he winds up defending the communist community I grew up in. Thus, at another point in the text I observe that the people in this community were "permanent conspirators in a revolutionary drama" who posed as "progressives" to disarm the unsuspecting public while "their real politics were conducted far from view." Raimondo offers this as a further example of unfair attacks on my parents. Defending them, he writes: "Horowitz does not deny that people such as his parents were operating under the constant surveillance of government agencies, including the FBI and local police departments, and..." And he writes, "What else could they have expected?" After all, they wanted to overthrow existing institutions. In other words, they deserved it." Well, yes.

Raimondo's defense, of course, is the Communist Party's own explanation of its deceptions and Fifth Amendment denouncements—the FBI and the government red-baiters made us do it.: In other words, if we (communists) refuse to answer honestly as to what our real politics are, it is because we will be persecuted for our ideas. "Au contraire, Justin. It was the conspiratorial activities of the communist movement that made them dishonest and made it necessary for the FBI to surveil them. Because Raimondo's agenda is to attack me personally rather than to review my book, he manages to get everything wrong, even its central drama, which is my involvement with the Black Panthers. "Typically, when he discovers that his Black Panther heroes are murderers and thugs, he blames other people".
Mr. Raimondo Replies:

It is truly odd to be called vindictive by a man who celebrates the persecution of his own parents. This unattractive theme is further illustrated when Horowitz defends the firing of his father from his job as a teacher because he refused to deny that he was a member of the Communist Party: after all, "what actually happened to my father" wasn't all that bad. American Communists "were neither executed nor tortured, and spent hardly any time in jail." In Horowitz's book, his father should have been grateful to his persecutors instead of defiant: Radical Son is a case study in the distortion of personality by ideology—in this case, neconservative ideology.

In spite of his strenuous attempt to wriggle out of it, Horowitz never explains just why he didn't simply hand that money-filled envelope back to the KGB agent right there on the street. Horowitz reports an incident that raises questions he is not prepared to answer because, in works of this kind, vanity trumps common sense: after all, the KGB had deemed him important enough to recruit as an agent. The thought enraged me.

Now I ask the reader of this passage 1) Why would I report this incident if I was actually tempted by the offer and only haggling over the price, especially if I wanted to conceal that fact? 2) Why would I recount another incident in which I actually did commit treason, if I was intent (as Raimondo implies) on covering up a mere flirtation with treason earlier? In fact, my account is exactly the way it happened, and Raimondo's attempt to prosecute me for allegedly failing to admit what I freely admit a few pages later only shows how relentless is his determination to put me in a bad light, and how pathetic his execution of that task.

There is really no point in going further, but I cannot resist one additional comment. With typical reckless disregard for the facts, Raimondo accuses me of being an opportunist. "Horowitz ... swims with the tide, not against it, and breathlessly announces, at this late date that ... the Black Panthers were not Boy Scouts." Readers of Radical Son will know that I risked life and limb, lost family and friends, to bring the story of the Panther murders to light—over a 20-year period—and have been punished professionally by the liberal literary culture for doing so. If it were not for my efforts, no one—not even Justin Raimondo—would know about the Panther murders described in Radical Son.  

—David Horowitz  
Center for the Study of Popular Culture  
Los Angeles, CA

As for any personal "animus" on my part, I should state for the record that its genesis had nothing to do with his enraged response to my attack on Martin Luther King, Jr., at a 1993 National Review conference, for at the time I hardly knew the man. But Horowitz should know that one of the risks of autobiography is that the author will inadvertently reveal himself to be a thoroughly disagreeable and even contemptible person.