



Jamie Nace Cohen-Cole. *The Open Mind: Cold War Politics and the Sciences of Human Nature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. 397 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-09216-4.



Reviewed by Robert F. Barsky

Published on H-Socialisms (June, 2015)

Commissioned by Gary Roth (Rutgers University - Newark)

I feel obliged at the outset of this review of Jamie Cohen-Cole's *The Open Mind: Cold War Politics and the Sciences of Human Nature* to somehow dilute the enthusiasm that I feel about this book, so that those who are not engaged in the kinds of deliberations that have filled my personal and professional world of late will consider that my assessment of Cohen-Cole's work is appropriately balanced. To do so, let me just say that *The Open Mind* arrived on my desk at a moment when as a faculty head of house at Vanderbilt (equivalent to the house master at Harvard or the college master at Yale), I was obliged, both for myself and for the institution, to ask myself some hard questions about the role of an academic living in one of the houses of a residential college. What should be the relationship between the work we do in our specific field of study and the activities we promote within these houses? On what basis should we decide to participate in nonacademic activities that are programmed in the houses? There is no template for this work at Vanderbilt, and each of the heads of houses fosters different

types of activities, to different ends, accountable only to the dean of the Commons and the students themselves through end-of-the-year questionnaires. *The Open Mind* provides a historical lens to address these questions, not only for professors associated with the residential college project but also for any teacher contemplating appropriate work within a living-learning environment.

The Open Mind also arrived at a time when I was sorting through a rather vast archive of work on Avukah, a Zionist student organization active throughout the United States from 1925 to 1942 that came to be engaged in some key issues of the day, including Arab-Jewish relations, the future of Palestine, rising Fascism in Europe and America, and American involvement in World War II. Zellig Harris, a friend to the Chomsky family and Noam Chomsky's teacher at the University of Pennsylvania, exerted considerable influence in the national office of Avukah in New York City, leading many members into conducting intellectual work relating to structural linguistics, engaging in a decades-long inquiry into the "Frame of Refer-

ence" (FoR), embracing worker self-management, and bringing contemporary society along on a pathway to the "good society" (see my *Zellig Harris: From American Linguistics to Socialist Zionism* [2011]). Harris groomed a cadre of vanguard Avukah members that included Murray Eden, Nathan Glazer, Seymour Martin Lipset, Seymour Melman, Chester Rapkin, Judith Wallerstein, and Robert Wallerstein, who all went on to distinguished careers, bearing traces of ideas they had honed in Avukah. They and many others were drawn into FoR discussions about ways of understanding the attitudes of people, in part through his professional linguistics work in discourse analysis and then shifting these attitudes on the basis of new information. Harris's broad objectives included the promotion of Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOPs), the valorization of worker self-management, and the establishment in Palestine of socialist-inspired social organizations modeled after the Kibbutz Artzi. Harris's ambitious program is set forth to some degree in a manuscript published after his death in 1992 as *The Transformation of Capitalist Society*, and many of his ideas were integrated into Melman's work and to some degree are reflected in the kinds of questions that inform, often by counterexample, some of Chomsky's work.

Cohen-Cole's book discusses the "open-mind" attitude that was promoted to address the threat posed by Communism and, moreover, the rise of social conformity, homogeneity, and mass consumption in America. It is a valuable supplement to existing research into this period and adds components that I find eye-opening and provocative. The open mind project that is described in this book features many individuals associated with the milieu of Harris, Chomsky, and Avukah, and in its psychological dimensions it intersects with related efforts promoted by Harris and by the many Avukahites who had interest in psychoanalysis, the cognitive sciences, and Artificial Intelligence. Furthermore, it discusses a crucial period when Chomsky began to articulate an ap-

proach to the human mind that was opposed to Harris's structuralism and information theory since these were premised upon a behaviorist model for the human brain. And so with the disclaimer that Cohen-Cole's work feeds directly into questions and concerns that occupy me on a range of fronts, I will now provide an assessment that is reflected through those lenses, and a rather rambling work in progress that takes Cohen-Cole's book as a springboard toward a whole host of questions and issues I consider crucial at this time.

Some of the issues that Cohen-Cole discusses bring the reader into crucial debates about politics and education in mid-twentieth-century America from a surprising perspective. Notably, he pursues the idea that efforts aimed at understanding and promoting the open mind were not just explored as a means of combating Communism or advancing knowledge in science and technology; they also specifically sought to make America more liberal by challenging frameworks of research based on conformity, homogeneity, and obedience to existing norms. The backlash to these efforts may be in part responsible for the current crises in education and politics. Cohen-Cole's many insights include a sense of how such an effort can reproduce elements it is trying to resist, and does so by offering "an analysis of Cold War culture and the maintenance of its apparent consensus by tracking the tools of psychological analysis through which intellectuals produced the very conformity that they feared" (p. 7). To do so, Cohen-Cole tracks how, in the period beginning with the close of World War II, key figures and institutions of American society shifted from "the structural, institutional, and economic ways of understanding American society that had dominated academic and public discourse" to "explanations framed in terms of the psyche" (p. 1). This helps the reader understand the shift from the way that Marxist thinkers of this time worked to assign economic motives and causes for social actions, but also (and in virtually the same period) how

structuralists (such as Leonard Bloomfield or Harris) sought to map out structural elements in language, and then subject them to systematic analysis that would allow for machine analysis of complex phenomenon, including human language and possibly even human behavior. The predilection that Cohen-Cole describes for reading and applying psychological explanations to everything that happens came in part as a reaction against both of these frames of reference, structural and Marxist (and their overlap), and the details of this paradigm shift are fascinating.

To challenge such rigorous but also mechanical methodologies, Cohen-Cole describes the importance of "open-mindedness" for key American intellectual and policy worlds both as a descriptor of how Americans think and as an antidote for conformist homogenous approaches to the world. Open-mindedness came to be of interest because it emphasized autonomy and creativity, and thus provided "solutions to the most pressing problems faced by the nation," notably, the allure of the Communist system. The overriding assumption was that "traditional or authoritarian societies could not be sustained in the presence of a citizen body that thought autonomously, but for a modern democracy like America, open-mindedness would have the opposite effect, offering social cohesion." The open mind from this perspective "meant a respect for individuality, tolerance of difference, appreciation of pluralism, and appreciation of freedom of thought. If citizens were sufficiently equipped with these virtues, thought policy makers and social critics, the nation would flourish" (p. 2). Although fascinating, I would have found it valuable for Cohen-Cole to describe how the American mind-set that fostered such thinking differs from other mind-sets, both within and, moreover, beyond the borders of the United States, in countries such as France.

A crucial contrasting example could have been the French model, which, at least since the Enlightenment period, has relied on the intellec-

tual for guidance in crucial matters, a tendency that accelerated through the twentieth century, beginning first with Emile Zola, and then in a much more pointed way with Jean-Paul Sartre (and arguably right up to Bernard-Henri Lévy). A large number of those associated with the French intellectual elite is particularly beguiled by the superstars of French intellectual life and the various "isms" with which they are associated. To follow the career of one such individual, Julia Kristeva, is to pursue her affiliations to structuralism, psychoanalysis, and then poststructuralism, but also the political movement from one form of Jacobin-Leninist authoritarianism to Maoism, with an array of stages along the way. As Richard Wolin has described, Kristeva and Philippe Sollers, the *Tel Quel* luminaries, were but two of the many French intellectuals "who perceived in Maoism a creative solution to France's excruciating political immobilism. After all, the Socialist Party was in total disarray. The Communists had become a 'party of order.' The Gaullists, with Pompidou now at the helm, pointedly refused to relinquish the reins of power. Yet, here was a left-wing groupuscule active in the Latin Quarter that in many respects had become the heir of May 1968's emancipatory quest. As a result of the May events and their contact with the Maoists, French intellectuals bade adieu to the Jacobin-Leninist authoritarian political model of which they had formerly been so enamored. They ceased behaving like mandarins and internalized the virtues of democratic humility. In May's aftermath, they attuned themselves to new forms and modes of social struggle. Their post-May awareness concerning the injustices of top-down politics alerted them to the virtues of 'society' and political struggle from below. In consequence, French intellectual life was wholly transformed. The Sartrean model of the engaged intellectual was upheld, but its content was totally reconfigured. Insight into the debilities of political vanguardism impelled French writers and thinkers to reevaluate the Dreyfusard legacy of the universal intellectual: the intellectu-

al who shames the holders of power by flaunting timeless moral truths." [1] To those familiar with Kristeva, this should have been damning, akin to Louis-Ferdinand Céline's sympathy for Nazism. On the contrary, her rise has been meteoric and consistent, similar in this regard to trajectories followed by a host of the twentieth-century French intellectuals who came to dominate such areas as cultural studies and literary theory in the United States.

Americans, according to the picture painted by Cohen-Cole, are less apt to being beguiled by the many isms, although they have arguably moved increasingly toward cultural conformity; for example, the Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush administrations tapped into the anti-isms (socialism, communitarianism), while benefiting from particular versions of pro-Christian values and the idea of the "free market." Be this as it may, and complex as a thoroughgoing discussion on such issues would be, it would have been helpful to delineate some of the central categories discussed in *The Open Mind*, such as "freedom of thought." Nevertheless, the pathway set forth in this regard is compelling: "it was only through concentrated attention to the pressing national problem that experts, educators, policy makers, and public intellectuals came to develop a common language through which they understood the cognitive virtues sibling to free thought." This attention is viewed through the lens of the open mind, which was "invented as a characterological umbrella that could unify the political and intellectual desiderata of the time" (p. 3).

From this description emerges a sense that such crucial categories as "free thought" were in fact products of deliberation, and Cohen-Cole studies this deliberation as a way of understanding the role of the open mind in regard to the intellectual, social, and political life of the Cold War. Cohen-Cole is able to demonstrate how the very idea of the open mind, and concomitant ideas about autonomous thinking and creativity, be-

came what he calls "invisible norms." This is perhaps a tad conspiratorial and tied to a very particular subsection of American intellectual life, but it is nonetheless fascinating, and reading about it is to discover a kind of cabal of leading social scientists; directors at granting agencies; founders of cognitive sciences; and leading representatives of elite American institutions, such as Harvard, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Columbia, the Ford Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation, as well Berkeley, Stanford, the University of Michigan, and the University of North Carolina that "received advice from scholarly visiting committees, often with the promise of funds, to revise existing programs along the lines favored by the core intellectuals" (p. 4). Another major player was the federal government, particularly in the wake of John F. Kennedy's decision to staff his administration with intellectuals from Harvard and MIT, such as McGeorge Bundy as head of the National Security Council.

The civic open mind that these figures observed and eventually promoted was characterized by certain features: "the open mind was tolerant, broad, flexible, realistic, unprejudiced," while its antithesis was "rigid, narrow, conformist, intolerant, ideological, and prejudiced. A closed-minded person rejected new ideas and people, and, because of compulsive adherence to ideology, lacked his or her own thoughts" (p. 4). Closed-minded people would open the door to bigotry and mass society, and so it was determined that to challenge them would help save America from Communism, but also racism and conformism. The key to this effort was to promote "active, discovery-based learning" that was designed to break narrow, "authoritarian" pedagogical techniques. These techniques were designed "to enhance the very mental attributes that could resist McCarthyism and military structures—flexibility, autonomy, and creativity. This was how the nation could be defended from the rising tide of

conformity, how American individualism could be preserved" (p. 5).

This story is interesting in itself and gains value when applied to the current climate on college campuses. The challenge facing administrators and professors (and faculty heads of houses), for example, is how to address anti-Semitism, racism, anti-Muslim sentiments, the quietude of certain populations in the face of sexual violence, or the hidden doors that are found on, and even more, off, college campuses. At a more fundamental level, faculty and administrators working in the framework of open-mindedness must find ways to challenge raw consumerism, the demise of avant-garde art in favor of Disneyesque spectacles, and the lure of social conformity. This lure permeates into the university with many Disney-themed parties, popular culture events, and massive corporate sponsorship woven through education and research work, and past efforts, such as the open mind, could be recalled as means of combating these emerging tendencies.

One approach, explicit and implicit to the history that Cohen-Cole provides, is to favor questions and questioning, rather than to measure the value of preconceived solutions one relative to another. Here, too, we find precedent described in *The Open Mind* through the valorization of interdisciplinarity that was deemed by Cold War intellectuals as inherently virtuous. "Taking advantage of a cultural climate that celebrated pluralism, these intellectuals cast themselves as good citizens of the academy, for to be interdisciplinary was to welcome and thrive on difference of ideas and viewpoints." Interdisciplinary scholars were, by the definitions provided, broad, flexible, creative, autonomous, and rational. By contrast, disciplinary researchers were "bound to the precepts established by their own kind, were rigid, narrow, conformist, intolerant of difference, prejudiced against other fields, and ideological"; they had, in short, closed minds (p. 5). It is at this very early point in the book that many creative-minded in-

tellectuals might feel a tad uneasy, since values that they ascribe to—from Deweyite approaches to education right up to interdisciplinarity—turn out to have clear precedents that were articulated by, or perhaps even programmed by, a small group of individuals who were trying to promote flexibility, breadth, tolerance, and pluralism.

The link here between pluralism, tolerance, and interdisciplinarity is fascinating, and raises the question about what role the faculty member can play in fostering openness and interestedness in the face of a strong drive for careers in medicine, especially, but also business, law, or investment banking. We might anticipate that colleges would foster interdisciplinarity by enforcing the liberal arts major, which of course they do, but without necessarily a strong sense of what this implies in terms of curriculum. As we might expect, this curricular discussion was very much a part of the "open-mind" debate, and Cohen-Cole describes it in detail in regard to the debate between general education and liberal education. "General education advocates thought of culture in an ethnographic sense—the democratic values and ways of life that formed the bedrock of American society. In their view modernity, science, and technology were destroying the unity of that culture, separating citizens from one another and from decision makers. Their desire for common culture was instead oriented toward sustaining egalitarian democracy and community" (p. 11).

Rather than orienting students toward the kind of "classics" that are taught in, for example, the Columbia University core curriculum, many institutions opted for a general education that was thought to be more practical. This idea of general education hinged more on discovery than truth, and was undertaken in a modern, progressive, and student-centered fashion that challenged the liberal tradition's effort to build a common corpus of texts and debates that would serve as a core linking current students to earlier periods. Citing this debate between general and liberal ed-

ucation brings us to discussions that are still raging, because "the cures prescribed by one group ran counter to the problems diagnosed by the other. The kind of practical learning that the general education camp supported was precisely what was deplored in liberal education circles as materialistic and unintellectual" (pp. 12-13). The battle between general education advocates who found it antidemocratic and elitist imagined that the entire American population would be interested in and prepared to read the great books of the Western world. These same sentiments are expressed broadly today, often in the form of debates on such questions as: Should universities be teaching practical skills relating to computers and useful knowledge about living in this society? Or should they leave that "training" to the technical schools and aim to connect students to age-long inquiries? Is it valuable to teach students that the kinds of technical advances touted by Silicon Valley may in fact be rather illusory, giving those without a longer historical sense the impression that problems like automatic translation, content analysis, or even diagnoses of illnesses can be accomplished by robots guided by algorithms? What kinds of issues will the next generation of computers be able to address?

The Open Mind is also an interesting historical study of the challenges that were mounted during this period to the ambitious and dominant paradigm of behaviorism, largely through newly legitimized scientific study of the mind. One way in which cognitive scientists found success was by linking both behaviorist practitioners and methods, and behaviorist thought, with what has been described thus far as "close-mindedness": "For what was the authoritarian personality if not mindless and merely responsive to external stimuli? And what was behaviorist commitment to disciplinary research if not rigid and narrow? To the bleakness of this view the cognitive scientists offered a bright alternative. They envisioned humans and their internal psyches as independent of the environment, as autonomous and creative.

They presented themselves and their work as inclusive of diverse fields of thought. Cognitive scientists not only epitomized the democratic character, but their account of humanity was more attractive. To accept their scientific vision was to find that being quintessentially American was one and the same as being human" (p. 6).

For anyone who knows Chomsky's work, this is fascinating, since while he was demonstrating that Harris or Victor Yngve were asking the wrong questions, based on assumptions about the mind that were untrue, others were claiming that their ambitions and behaviorist framework were ideologically flawed, and that the picture of the human mind they were proposing instead was in accord with a cultural climate that favored pluralism, interdisciplinarity, flexibility, and, of course, creativity. The very methodology of behaviorism was problematic from this perspective, since "behaviorists who denied rodent insight and focused on learning through trial and accumulated experience were more likely to frame the empirical experience as the foundation of proper scientific method—of which they were practitioners" (p. 163). This method was rooted in a particular mind-set that Chomsky describes in *Language and the Mind* as a widespread and wrongheaded "general enthusiasm" for using mathematical formulations for basic processes: "For those who sought a more mathematical formulation for the basic processes, there was the newly developed mathematical theory of communication, which, it was widely believed in the early 1950s, had provided a fundamental concept—the concept of 'information'—that would unify the social and behavioral sciences and permit the development of a solid and satisfactory mathematical theory of human behavior on a probabilistic base. About the same time, the theory of automata developed as an independent study, making use of closely related mathematical notions. And it was linked at once, and quite properly, to earlier explorations of the theory of neural nets. There were those—John von Neumann, for example—who felt that the en-

tire development was dubious and shaky at best, and probably quite misconceived, but such qualms did not go far to dispel the feeling that mathematics, technology and behavioristic linguistics and psychology were converging on a point of view that was very simple, very clear, and fully adequate to provide a basic understanding of what tradition had left shrouded in mystery." [2]

One of the ways in which an intellectual paradigm can become fixed is by ensuring that those who are outside of its frame of reference remain there, ensuring, to some degree, that fundamental assumptions will not be challenged. An antidote to this rigidity is to examine, often from the perspective of an outsider, some of the basic presuppositions that underwrite a research project or a powerful scientific paradigm. There is one such paradigm that is operative today, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and it is linked in some ways to some of the history that Cohen-Cole recalls. A detour into the present, with an eye to tension between behaviorism and its opponents, helps complement certain elements of the story told by Cohen-Cole.

For a group of Silicon Valley luminaries, led by Tesla's Elon Musk, and scientists including Stephen Hawking, the answer to the question of how far we can go with AI is obvious: AI is tackling age-old questions with remarkable results, and the question is not how far we can go with this technology, but rather who will benefit from it. In a review of Nicholas Carr's *The Glass Cage: Automation and Us* (2014), Sue Halpern notes that for Hawking, "AI could spell the end of the human race as machines evolve faster than people and overtake us." She then cites a letter from these luminaries that warns that "the progress in AI research makes it timely to focus on research not only by making AI more capable, but also on maximizing the societal benefit... [Until now, the field of AI] has focused largely on techniques that are neutral with respect to purpose. We recommend

expanded research aimed at ensuring that increasingly capable AI systems are robust and beneficial: our AI systems must do what we want them to do." [3] Halpern does not question the truth of this picture, which depicts a kind of "sky is the limit" version of automation and AI, but is rather more concerned about who will act as the watchdog described in the letter from the luminaries, that is, what role is to be played by the government, the corporations developing the technology, and "the people" who stand to be annihilated, pace Hawking. I think it is worth deviating from the *Open Mind* for a moment to examine the general picture of the world described by these luminaries, to see if it is in accord with what is happening, because it turns out that for Chomsky, the claims made for AI and, moreover, computational cognitive science, are eerily similar to those that were being made in the period described in *The Open Mind*. This has been a constant complaint that Chomsky has made about some AI and big data research; he argues that its claims far exceed the program being pursued, in evidence, for example, in the realm of language studies.

In a fascinating article, "On Chomsky and the Two Cultures of Statistical Learning," Peter Norvig attends to an issue raised at the Brains, Minds, and Machines symposium held during MIT's 150th birthday. Chomsky was one of the speakers at this symposium, and Norvig recalls that in the course of his remarks Chomsky "derided researchers in machine learning who use purely statistical methods to produce behavior that mimics something in the world, but who don't try to understand the meaning of that behavior." The [uncorrected] transcript of Chomsky provides examples of this: "There is a notion of success which has developed in computational cognitive science in recent years which I think is novel in the history of science. It interprets success as approximating unanalyzed data. So for example if you were ... to study bee communication this way, instead of doing the complex experiments that bee scientists

do,... like having to fly to an island to see if they leave an odor trail and this sort of thing, if you simply did extensive videotaping of bees swarming,... and you did ... a lot of statistical analysis of it, you would get a pretty good prediction for what bees are likely to do next time they swarm; actually you'd get a better prediction than bee scientists do, and they wouldn't care because they're not trying to do that.... You can make it a better and better approximation by more video tapes and more statistics and so on.... You could do physics this way, instead of studying things like balls rolling down frictionless planes, which can't happen in nature, if you took a ton of video tapes of what's happening outside my office window, let's say,... leaves flying and various things, and you did an extensive analysis of them, you would get some kind of prediction of what's likely to happen next, certainly way better than anybody in the physics department could do.... That's a notion of success which is I think novel. I don't know of anything like it in the history of science. And in those terms you get some kind of successes, and if you look at the literature in the field, a lot of these papers are listed as successes. And when you look at them carefully, they're successes in this particular sense, and not the sense that science has ever been interested in. But it does give you ways of approximating unanalyzed data." [4]

Norvig notes that Chomsky has five main points. First, "statistical language models have had engineering success, but that is irrelevant to science." Second, he notes that Chomsky argues that "accurately modeling linguistic facts is just butterfly collecting; what matters in science (and specifically linguistics) is the underlying principles." The third point is that "statistical models are incomprehensible; they provide no insight." Fourth, "statistical models may provide an accurate simulation of some phenomena, but the simulation is done completely the wrong way; people don't decide what the third word of a sentence should be by consulting a probability table keyed on the previous two words, rather they map from

an internal semantic form to a syntactic tree-structure, which is then linearized into words. This is done without any probability or statistics." Finally, Chomsky's fifth point, according to Norvig, is that "statistical models have been proven incapable of learning language; therefore language must be innate, so why are these statistical modelers wasting their time on the wrong enterprise?" [5] Norvig challenges many of these assumptions, but I bring up this argument here in regard to *The Open Mind* because some of the details recall the tension between behaviorism and its open-mind-oriented opponents. Furthermore, one of the ways in which behaviorism could be called into question is through the idea of "creativity," an element apparently lacking in a world in which people learn by practice reinforced by reward and error identified through punishment.

Creativity is a many-headed beast, and it signifies something quite different in Chomskian linguistics than in ordinary parlance, but it is a crucial keyword that also harkens back to *The Open Mind* discussions because it was considered by Cold War intellectuals as a defining feature of a positive personality type. John Gardner, president of the Carnegie Corporation and patron of much Cold War social science, including creativity research, noted that creativity "'is a word of dizzying popularity.... It is more than a word today; it is an incantation. People think of it as a kind of wonder drug, powerful and presumably painless; and everybody wants a prescription. It is part of a growing resistance to the tyranny of formula, a new respect for individuality, a dawning recognition of the potentialities of the liberated mind'" (pp. 35-36). Gardner and others thought that creative people would bring coherence to America's increasingly complex and diverse culture, and "'at the same time, these creative people would mitigate the conformity that many social critics feared was a key characteristic of both traditional society and modern mass society. Their creativity would be the critical ingredient in making possible the 'unity in diversity' that Cold War social critics be-

lieved to be the defining feature of the liberal pluralism they desired for America" (p. 36).

Creativity in this sense can describe a certain audacity, a willingness to do things differently, defying prevailing assumptions. This can lead to a charge, leveled frequently against thinkers who range over a broad array of issues and questions, that they are exceeding the discipline within which they trained, and providing critique without due respect for the positions held by central figures. Those who favor open-mindedness, on the contrary, find considerable value in exploration, questioning, risk taking, and discovery as central components of an education. This perspective accords with much of what was discussed in the framework of the open mind, and the very methods by which these discussions unfolded and the settings within which they occurred reveal something about their objective. Those involved in articulating the vision of the open mind favored common rooms in undergraduate dormitories or faculty clubs that would bring students and faculty together to bridge disciplines around a table well stocked with food and drink. Cohen-Cole writes that "these interdisciplinary settings emphasized the ability of members to speak across the boundaries of disciplinary expertise either by eschewing narrow disciplinary jargon and adopting a language and manner of speech appropriate to a varied audience or by developing a set of theoretical tools that could be applied in several disciplinary contexts. Beyond what they required of speakers, these interdisciplinary environments demanded that other participants, the listeners, be able to evaluate the quality of the speaker's ideas and intellect. Notably, that evaluation would need to be accomplished by individuals who lacked the particular form of disciplinary expertise possessed by the speaker" (pp. 27-28). This led to the formation of interdisciplinary committees tasked with evaluating tenure files and the promotion of research centers such as Institutes for Advanced Studies or Societies of Fellows rather than what was perceived to be the anachronistic

and staid departmental organization that tended to rely on a set of discipline-specific norms and beliefs, as we saw in behaviorist psychologists.

I find this approach interesting in terms of the residential college goal of promoting interactions between faculty and students within a living-learning community, usually accompanied by a meal. Raphael Demos, who was party to such discussions at Harvard, is cited as stating: "Since it is so concrete itself, conversation thrives when aided by concrete physical things: good food, drink, and smoke, pleasant rooms and comfortable chairs. Surely the opportunity of the Harvard houses, in providing the setting for education conversation, needs no stressing; I have in mind especially the dining rooms (and the common rooms)." Cohen-Cole adds that these common rooms played an important role in developing the committee's general education proposal. And so even though the original vision emerged through Harvard University culture, it led to a perspective that favored "pleasant rooms" and "comfortable chairs" that appeared in, for instance, the Educational Policies Commission's *Education for All American Youth* (1944). "This book pictured communities all across the country centered not just on schools, but on schools equipped with rooms designed to increase education through specific creature comforts" (p. 127). And so even if the original impulses came from such think tanks as the RAND Corporation, Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Institute for Advanced Study, discussion groups, the so-called Cambridge set, or the "Georgetown Set" in Washington, DC, there was the idea to spread such work to the population at large. And the legacy of this work is deeply ensconced, as Cohen-Cole makes clear, in the Harvard Center for Cognitive Studies, one of the outgrowths of these discussions.

Born of elitist vanguard institutions, the "open-mind" ideology, described in the *Education for All American Youth*, "pictured communities all across the country centered not just on schools,

but on schools equipped with rooms designed to increase education through specific creature comforts" such as paneled walls, built-in bookshelves, indirect lighting, pleasant colors, large tables, comfortable library chairs, attractive draperies, rugs, floor lamps, paintings, and plants. "Such spaces would promote learning of humanistic subjects, and the schools with such spaces would serve as a civic hub for the larger community. Thus, where the Harvard vision was that its own common rooms would be the model for American society, for the EPC [Educational Policies Commission] the basis of American society would be a well-appointed room in a rural high school" (p. 29). Convivial conversation was "the basis for a smoothly functioning society," because it helped to promote autonomous selfhood, which from this perspective can be seen as improving the nation by reforming the self "while also respecting individuality and America's pluralist character" (p. 36). These models of the self were, therefore, political, and employed to political ends. Cohen-Cole states: "Liberal social scientists sought to mold America into a nation that fit their vision of the good society. They did so by managing the definitions of creativity and autonomy in such a way that those traits, once redefined, would describe their political allies. Conversely, the opposite traits—conformity, rigidity, and narrow-mindedness—were defined so as to apply to the liberals' McCarthyite opponents on the right and their Communist foes on the left. By marking as irrational the social and political views they disagreed with, liberal social scientists played an important role in marginalizing non-centrist political ideas as irrational and thereby helped generate the apparent consensus of the Cold War era" (p. 36).

At this point, it is fair to say that we move from the realm of the history of ideas into current debates about how to address the growing fanaticism in certain sectors of the religious right, the attack on unions and what they stand for, the antitax (and anti-IRS [Internal Revenue Service]) movements, and so forth. Even more worrisome

is the more pernicious homogeneity and conformity, in evidence in the so-called debates between "liberals" and "conservatives," "Democrats" and "Republicans," or "red" and "blue" state policy-makers that all have the distinct flavor of Coke versus Pepsi, Verizon versus AT&T, or Apple versus Android. Not surprisingly, these non-distinctions were already present in the Cold War era, although not to the degree we experience today, which makes reading about the fears expressed then still topical. In the period described by Cohen-Cole, people were subjected to the "pressures" of homogenization and conformity: "From the works of such popular social critics as William Whyte and David Riesman to mass market magazines like *Reader's Digest*, *Woman's Day*, *Life*, and novels like *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, Americans expressed anxiety about the growing conformity in the nation. They believed that the conditions of modern American life, including the corporatization of work and suburban homogeneity, produced conformity and therefore weakness in American culture and society" (p. 39). As Daniel Bell put it, "Everyone is against conformity, and probably everyone always was. Thirty-five years ago, you could easily rattle any middle class American by charging him with being a 'Babbitt.' Today you can do so by accusing him of conformity" (p. 39).

These debates are topical, perhaps even more urgent in an era of social media and the National Security Agency (NSA), and the complexity of the issues raised hearken back to questions raised by the crowd of people centered on the *Partisan Review*, those working in the framework of the Frankfurt school, or from a different standpoint, writers associated with the Beat Generation who spoke from places of bohemia, resistance, attacks on conformity, the (sometimes) promotion of dissent, and the value of counterculture as pathways to creativity. Cohen-Cole does make reference to the Beats appropriately enough, although there could have been more investigation into the details of their work. What we do learn, though, is

the general derision of the bohemian approach and lifestyle, deemed rather unthinking rather than insightful or creative: "The liberal sociologist David Riesman, for instance, wrote that 'today, whole groups are matter-of-factly Bohemian; but the individuals who compose them are not necessarily free. On the contrary, they are often zealously tuned in to the signals of a group that finds the meaning of life, quite unproblematically, in an illusion of attacking an allegedly dominant and punishing majority of Babbitts.' Riesman was joined in this diagnosis by many others, ranging from Paul Goodman, a left-wing poet and social critic, to Richard Crutchfield, a psychologist who specialized in the study of creativity, to Betty Friedan, who, before publishing *The Feminine Mystique*, had spent the late 1950s combating conformity among high school students. They all held that, in being unconventional, Beats and bohemians were merely slavishly following their unconventional peers" (p. 57).

The ultimate effect of all this research, and the efforts thus described, was not only to foster this open mind but also to create important divisions in American society that may now be rearing their anti-science, anti-intellectual, anti-liberal, and often distinctly authoritarian pro-corporation heads. For this reason and all the others named thus far, this is a debate with which I believe that we need to engage, and it is these portions of Cohen-Cole's book that I would identify as being of particular importance in this regard. Watching the current actions of Scott Walker in Wisconsin, of all places, is to be in the very midst of what this book is about; it is as though he read this playbook, and is now looking for ways to unravel the open mind and everything it represents: "The values, sensibilities, preferences, and forms of thinking that were prevalent within the community of psychologists helped to form the definition of rationality, creativity, and right thinking in mid-twentieth century America. The creative self they saw as the solution to the problems of American life was ultimately based on a form of self-

hood desired in leading research universities. The lines of influence ran in more than one direction, however. Where intellectual values and ideals encoded in ideals of autonomy functioned to police the boundaries of acceptable politics and social thought in America, it was also the case that the values of liberal pluralism helped to structure the daily lives of intellectuals" (p. 62).

The academy as a model of America raises the question of the relationship between the ivory tower and the community around it, but an examination of different institutions of higher education also demonstrate that schisms exist as well within the universities themselves, and they are increasingly played out between the underfunded (often public) institutions and the elite private ones. And so while Vanderbilt or Harvard or Yale continue to validate and in many ways uphold the "open-mind" scenario described by Cohen-Cole, state schools are being scrutinized and controlled by administrators, with whole departments eliminated and the important face-to-face experiences substituted with online courses. These divisions, played out on so many levels, mean that the graduates of elite schools will continue to have their wonderful meals, their fine wines, and (now) their Cuban cigars, as their waiters, cleaners, and parking lot attendants suffer the indignity of having been trained for obedience, to not question assumptions about those in power, and to believe that things could never really change in any significant way to provide them with the power of decision making and opportunity. Whether or not the debates about the elite continue to revolve around the promotion of the open mind depends on the direction that they choose to take; for those less fortunate, many of the decisions are made for them by parties uninterested in, and fearful of, the approaches they represent.

Notes

[1]. Richard Wolin, *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and*

the Legacy of the 1960s (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 4.

[2]. Noam Chomsky, *Language and Mind* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1972), 3-4.

[3]. Sue Halpern, “How Robots and Algorithms Are Taking Over,” review of *The Glass Cage: Automation and Us* by Nicholas Carr, *New York Review of Books* 62, no. 6 (April 2, 2015), 24-28.

[4]. Peter Norvig, “On Chomsky and the Two Cultures of Statistical Learning,” <http://norvig.com/chomsky.html>.

[5]. Ibid.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-socialisms>

Citation: Robert F. Barsky. Review of Cohen-Cole, Jamie Nace. *The Open Mind: Cold War Politics and the Sciences of Human Nature*. H-Socialisms, H-Net Reviews. June, 2015.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42405>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.