

## INTRODUCTION

Although the transition within the American independent left from 1930s Marxism to Cold War liberalism has an extensive bibliography, comparatively little work has been done on the process of ideological realignment during the 1940s undertaken by the intellectuals involved. Also referred to as the New York intellectuals, these thinkers are justifiably treated in the literature as a cohesive group incorporating the writers, art critics, political commentators, philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists whose work appeared primarily in the New York “little magazines” *Commentary*, *Partisan Review*, *Politics*, and later, in the 1950s, *Dissent*. Yet, in spite of the interest in Marxism evident in these periodicals, the history of the independent left during the 1940s has generally been recounted as one of rapid acquiescence to postwar liberal ideology.<sup>1</sup> Politically, this meant a capitulation to representative democracy as opposed to any of the theories of either direct or socialist democracy afoot at the time and, economically, acceptance if not endorsement of international corporate capitalism.<sup>2</sup> As far as ideology is concerned, radical politics has largely been perceived as having been let down by disorganization, reticence, and a disproportionate concern with cultural issues.<sup>3</sup>

This preoccupation with culture in the late 1940s and 1950s, however, was central to what should be seen as a period of ideological transformation within the independent left. And it will be argued here that modern art – namely, Abstract Expressionism – became increasingly important as a form of political dissent within the independent left’s discussions on the future of socialism at this time. This has not been noted in the literature on the subject, yet the prospect of the visual arts having a significant role in the development of leftist ideology should not be surprising if one considers that, historically, avant-

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gardes have often been allied with the left through their challenging of cultural establishments and, by association, “the whole social order in which these enemies . . . gained and exercised and reproduced their power,” as Raymond Williams noted in *The Politics of Modernism* (1989).<sup>4</sup> Williams also pointed out that, although avant-gardes have appeared in diverse political cultures, their inevitable complicity with the cultural and fiscal economy has always ensured that their politics went one of two ways, either finding a place in a new social order or making a new place in the same one.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, since Abstract Expressionism, the United States’ first internationally acclaimed avant-garde, emerged not only alongside but in direct dialogue with the independent left during the period of its ideological realignment, the current view in much of the art-historical scholarship that Abstract Expressionism was simply the beneficiary of the larger military, economic, and political triumph of the United States in Europe during the Cold War also merits reconsideration. For this interpretation of the politics of Abstract Expressionism is based on a particular understanding of how liberal ideology works, and it is one that has gone unchallenged for nearly thirty years. The “revisionist” accounts of the 1970s, for example, which are now anthologized in Francis Francina’s *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate* (1985), first equated what was in fact the United States government’s sporadic sponsorship of Abstract Expressionism abroad via traveling exhibitions in the 1950s with its being the sole artistic front of “official,” or dominant liberal ideology during the Cold War.<sup>6</sup> And this conception of a dominant liberal ideology that, consciously or covertly, dictates all social behavior, including artistic, has been employed in the strongest and most extensive work on the politics of Abstract Expressionism ever since, for example, Serge Guilbaut’s *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (1983) and Michael Leja’s *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (1993).

This is not to say, however, that all of these accounts of the political history of Abstract Expressionism are uniform because of their shared definition of liberal ideology at mid-century. Leja, for example, clearly distinguishes his approach from Guilbaut’s with the argument that ideology is in fact transparent: “For Guilbaut *ideology* designates an explicit, consciously held set of beliefs and commitments organized around a political affiliation. . . .” Moreover, he identifies his own use of ideology as Althusserian, having “little to do with consciously held

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65154-7 - The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism 1940-1960

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beliefs or political affiliations. It is meant to designate rather an implicit structure of belief, assumption, and disposition – an array of basic propositions and attitudes about reality, self, and society embedded in representation and discourse and seemingly obviously true and natural.”<sup>7</sup> Guilbaut’s work, on the other hand, while it allows for conscious ideological diversity among differently politicized groups in the 1930s and early 1940s, also understands the liberal ideology of the postwar period as monolithic and pervasive. In his account, this is characterized alone by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.’s “‘new liberalism’ . . . an ideology that, unlike the ideologies of the conservative right and the Communist left, not only made room for avant-garde dissidence but accorded to such dissidence a position of paramount importance.”<sup>8</sup>

What this study brings to Guilbaut’s observation, and how it differs from Leja’s is, first, its explanation of the way in which this new liberalism was related to leftist ideology, and with what effect on the meaning of socialism in the United States during the Cold War; and second, how artists and the intellectual circles in which they moved consciously produced this particular variant of postdialectical socialist thought. Finally, it will be argued that the new liberalism was not a dominant, here meaning government-sanctioned, ideology. For, while Guilbaut rightly identified 1947 to 1948 as the years in which the new liberalism emerged as a “third way” out of the ruins of the American anti-Stalinist left, he did not pursue the distinction that the term “third way” suggests between the new liberalism and liberalism as defined by official government policy, which we shall see were fundamentally different in the 1940s and 1950s. This oversight, however, enabled him to describe the ideology of Abstract Expressionist painting at this time as being “in tandem” with that of the government, as well as that of the independent left. Thus Guilbaut could assert that the “ideology of the avant-garde . . . coincided with what was becoming the dominant ideology, that embodied in Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s book *The Vital Center*,”<sup>9</sup> and from there conclude that: “Avant-garde art succeeded because the work and the ideology that supported it, articulated in the painters’ writings as well as conveyed in images, coincided fairly closely with the ideology that came to dominate American political life after the 1948 presidential elections.”<sup>10</sup> Far from being understood as a third way position with all of its leftist aspirations, the ideology of the avant-garde is here conflated with the dominant ideology of a conservative Cold War State Department:

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It was after 1951 – when the Communist threat loomed ever greater in the United States, when Truman, outflanked on the right and unable to slow the anti-Communist machine that he had set in motion, was forced to leave the political initiative to McCarthy – that the American avant-garde was most forcefully presented through independent organizations all over Europe.<sup>11</sup>

Recently, however, a number of analyses of American foreign-policy initiatives and aid plans in Western Europe during the 1950s have pointed to a State Department that was less conservative than has commonly been held, one marked by its frequent cooperation with Social as well as Christian Democratic governments in Western Europe in order to encourage democracy abroad.<sup>12</sup> What these studies have suggested is that to treat American “liberalism” of the late 1940s and 1950s as a monolithic and pervasive ideology is to oversimplify it; this is borne out by the fact that “liberalism” itself was a contested term in the late 1940s, and was applied by many independent leftists, usually derisively, to a variety of political thinkers and groups at the time. We shall see that these ranged from Communist sympathizers to neoconservatives who were sometimes within their own ranks. Furthermore, *The Vital Center* was only one example of the many revisions undergone by prewar liberalism throughout a protracted discussion, with the hope for some sort of democratic socialism not being wholly relinquished in the United States until 1952. Only then was it agreed, by American participants in what was an international debate, that a critical approach to the power politics now pervading the United States’ foreign policy was the best way to preserve the values of socialism. Thus it will be argued that postwar liberalism should more accurately be seen as part of the tangle of third-way political brainstorming to which both American independent leftist and, importantly, European Western Marxist thinkers contributed. In fact, this was understood by the new liberalism’s ideologically diverse theoreticians as not so much a capitulation to the values of capitalist democracy as a swapping of leftism’s political means of expression for the cultural act, which would ensure that the United States’ fundamentally sound democratic institutions would not be jeopardized by any actively political form of dissent, while holding open the possibility for the revival of a socialist politics at a later, unspecified date.

Brought on by what we shall see was a unique set of historical circumstances, this new liberalism was not a dominant ideology. Rather, it was the former independent left’s piecemeal accommodation to the power politics often, but not always, wielded by the State

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65154-7 - The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism 1940-1960

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Department, its acquiescence resulting from an exchange between a particular group of artists and a discreet yet diverse group of political thinkers, through which the very definition of socialism was revised. These historical circumstances can be broadly described as the discrediting of Marx's class theory of agency among the independent left, and the outbreak of the Cold War, both of which discouraged organized political agitation within the left, as fear of Soviet ideological imperialism began to mount across most sectors of American society. As a sustained part of the independent left's consideration of these issues, the role Abstract Expressionism would increasingly play both as a safe form of leftist dissent and as a repository of socialist values during this period of ideological disarray and international political tension suggests that its stock treatment as a pawn of American liberal ideology lacks political subtlety and merits further investigation.

Given what we shall see was the direct discussion between the independent left and the members of this avant-garde, the political history of Abstract Expressionism can and arguably should be seen as one that can elucidate how and why the independent left came to relinquish radical political activity in favor of cultural critique. Thus, one of the aims of this book is to demonstrate that when the independent left did ultimately come to support, albeit critically, the policies of the United States government, it was not due to either the renunciation or the dormancy of socialism as has been claimed. Rather, what took place at this time was a reconceptualization of Marxism as an aesthetic, utopian ideal as opposed to a theory of class struggle and, concomitantly, the reassigning of radical agency to the artist instead of the working class. This transformation has been overlooked because of the emphasis in the secondary literature upon ideological and artistic change within a strictly American context. Yet it was through prolonged discussion between the American independent left and its European counterparts that the argument for artists and intellectuals to be the postdialectical socialist agent originated, and the implications of the American investiture of this particular revisionist Marxism in the Abstract Expressionist movement would be far-reaching. For we shall see that the "leftist" ideals of Abstract Expressionism presented in Europe in the late 1950s would be avidly received there by liberals and third-way leftists alike, its European, Western Marxist philosophical premises being a large part of its appeal.

Thus, in order to understand Abstract Expressionism's role in this redefinition of socialism, which would both mark it as an American

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avant-garde of international stature and perform an explicit political function, the reception of European leftist thought in the United States needs to be reckoned. The failure to do so has obscured a fuller understanding of these intertwined art and political histories. For example, Alan Wald's exhaustive *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (1987), while truly indispensable for its discussion of the groups and institutions that comprised the left in the 1930s, argues for the "failure of nerve" of American leftists in the 1940s as social and cultural rather than ideological in motivation.<sup>13</sup> This assertion is facilitated by Wald's concentration on the activities of American intellectual movements and, while he notes their awareness of European thinkers and debates, an analysis of the influence which the latter may have had on them is not within the scope of his project. On this latter point, the same can also be said of Christopher Lasch's *The Agony of the American Left* (1969), Richard H. Pells's *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age* (1989), and also Neil Jumonville's *Critical Crossings: The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America* (1991), in which Jumonville maintains that the "Europeanization" of American culture occurred in the 1920s and 1930s, with the American intellectuals' return to pragmatism in the 1940s being part of an effort to "fight off the 'ideological Europeanization' of America."<sup>14</sup>

Some preliminary efforts to assess the impact of European on American postdialectical thought, however, have been made. For example, Paul Buhle's *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Left* (1987) acknowledges the "creative intensity" of the early 1940s and the survival of different leftist groups into that decade. Buhle also distinguishes among them by the degree to which their various publications relinquished political in favor of cultural theory. Justifiably identifying the *Partisan Review* as emblematic of this renunciation, it was *Politics*, in his assessment, which provided continuity between the old left and the new.<sup>15</sup> And he cites *Politics*'s introduction of the work of European intellectuals Albert Camus and Victor Serge to American leftists as one of the primary reasons for this, as it gave to the discourse of the latter an existential "element . . . that became a solace for the new isolation of the radical intelligentsia."<sup>16</sup> Buhle's book, however, is intended as a general history of the American left; consequently, the space in his text devoted to this period and its ideological particularities is necessarily constricted. Therefore, not only are the implications of the presence of European thought in the American leftist press not pursued, what is also largely unexamined is the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65154-7 - The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism 1940-1960

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ideological paradox presented by the fact that many of these Europeans published in all of the independent leftist magazines, and that by the early 1950s Camus, the most salient of them, could also be grouped with “such future conservative savants as Daniel Bell, Oscar Handlin, Nathan Glazer, and Irving Kristol,” who also contributed to that press at the time.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, a reckoning of the influence of European leftist thought on the formation of the American new liberal ideology that emerged within the independent leftist and avant-garde presses is needed; for histories that have pursued the careers of leftist European intellectuals in the United States during the Cold War are hard to come by, and those which are available, such as Martin Jay’s excellent *The Dialectical Imagination* (1973) and *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America* (1985), and Peter M. Rutkoff and William B. Scott’s *New School: A History of the New School for Social Research* (1986) are more concerned with the impact of being in the United States on the work of the Frankfurt School, rather than with the reception or assimilation of their ideas by their American peers; Claus-Dieter Krohn’s *Intellectuals in Exile: Refugee Scholars and the New School for Social Research* (1987) is more of an institutional history. This study will fill the lacuna, taking as its starting point the influence of the two variants of Western Marxism popular in the United States in the 1940s – the Frankfurt School’s critical theory and French existentialism – on both the American independent left’s migration from a class theory of political agency to one centered upon individual subjectivity; and the Abstract Expressionists’ questioning of collectivist aesthetics during the early 1940s, while they were still in their Surrealist phase. Not to be seen as an instance of parallel development between the independent left and the avant-garde, it will be shown that at the core of their joint revision of Marx’s theory of agency was Western Marxist aesthetic theory, and that the sympathetic relationship between them which would be crucial in redefining political agency as cultural work, bringing the independent left and the avant-garde into tacit acceptance of the United States government’s power politics through their deliberate abstention from politics per se. More important, however, this revisionist Marxism was to introduce what would become an enduring division between leftist theory and agency in the United States.

That there was a formidable gap between theory and agency within Western Marxism as a whole at mid-twentieth century is not a unique observation. Perry Anderson, for example, in his *Considerations on*

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*Western Marxism* (1976), noted long ago the irony in the distancing of Western Marxism's chief theoreticians from the labor movements of their own countries. This was both in terms of their discipline, philosophy being far removed from a working-class audience, and their geographical location – many were in exile, voluntary or otherwise between the 1930s and the 1950s.<sup>18</sup> Although Anderson's work explained such weaknesses of postdialectical thought regarding political practice, it did not address the centrality of aesthetics to Western Marxist discourse. Yet this concern with the act of creative imagination as the precondition for the radical act, it will be argued, added even more distance between Western Marxist theory and the possibility of agency, and it was this aesthetic orientation in contemporary critical theory and existentialism which appealed most to American leftist ideologists during the 1940s. This was not the result of a simple lapse among the latter in a radical sensibility that would be revived by the New Left in the 1960s, but a consequence of their revision of Marx's theory of agency as a cultural rather than a political endeavor, one guided by European Western Marxist theory. Therefore, to omit the influence of European postdialectical thought on the American independent left and the avant-garde is to overlook the very impetus behind the former's preoccupation with cultural issues and the political reasons behind the latter's stunning reception in Western Europe, most notably among European third-way thinkers.

In short, this study will demonstrate how what had initially been a movement by particular European leftist groups toward a revisionist Marxism that located the source of socialist agency in the imaginative act of individuals as opposed to actions of the working class was actually transformed into the creative act alone by its American interpreters. Specifically associated with the practices of the American avant-garde, it was then handed back to a European audience by politically shrewd institutions as a means of quelling leftist criticism of American-style democracy, and thus encouraging European political and economic integration based on an American precedent. In recounting how this ideological transformation occurred, and its subsequent career in the arena of foreign diplomacy, the first chapter of this book examines the motivations behind the reconsideration of Marx's theory of agency among the New York intellectuals and the Abstract Expressionists in the early to mid-1940s. First, the ideological crisis facing the artists and their critical champions within the independent left and the growth of their shared doubt in collective theories of agency and their visual



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65154-7 - The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism 1940-1960

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representation are recounted. It is shown how a lapse of faith in collectivism was advanced by the spokespersons for the nascent Abstract Expressionist movement as justification for their discarding a Surrealist style, which was grounded in a collectivist theory of psychology and, relatedly, of political agency, in favor of an individualist but as yet stylistically and ideologically indeterminate approach.

Next, the ideological impetuses that would shape their expectations of postdialectical socialism through their contact with the independent left are examined. Starting with the Western Marxist intellectuals associated with the Frankfurt School, in exile at Columbia University, New York City, between 1933 and 1949, and who published in the American independent leftist press during the mid-1940s, I argue that these German intellectuals directed the initial discussion around the crisis of Marxism dominating the American independent leftist press at this time. The powerful influence of the more ideologically fluid German existentialist Hannah Arendt is also considered, and it is shown how the German analyses of the rise of totalitarianism and its implications for dialectical Marxism centered the debated future of American independent leftism on two crucial issues. These were: the viability of a class theory of agency in light of the advent of mass mentality, perceived as the basis of German fascism and Soviet totalitarianism; and the credibility of scientific socialism as a theory of social progress. For, while scientific socialism promised the achievement of a communist utopia, in practice it was seen to tolerate and even justify human exploitation and suffering as a necessary means to an ideal end. The veracity of eyewitness accounts from these German leftists in exile can be seen to have initiated the dismantling of system-based ideology as well as galvanizing American support for the preservation of individual agency against the threat of massification and genocide.

The chapter concludes with an assessment of how American leftists applied these Continental insights to their situation at home. Quick to draw parallels between totalitarian and capitalist means of production, which they saw as equally technocratic, the German commentators inculcated a fear among American independent leftists of long-term, scientifically based social planning. Their observations also formed the basis within the American independent left for a broader critique of rationality and scientism – in contemporary parlance, “Enlightenment values,” increasingly perceived as the amoral foundation of both totalitarian and capitalist societies. The German critique would guide the efforts of the American independent left in defining postdialectical, or

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65154-7 - The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism 1940-1960

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ethical Marxism as grounded in subjective will, formed by the creative act of individual perception as opposed to objective and rational knowledge. Referred to by its American theorists as the “Counter-Enlightenment,” and its values directly applied by them to Abstract Expressionism in its mature phase, it will subsequently be shown that this relocation of the sources of political agency in the creative act would presage the identification of Abstract Expressionism as the repository of socialist values.

The second chapter addresses the surge of popularity of, first, German then, more enduringly, French existentialism within the American independent leftist and avant-garde presses in the late 1940s. French existentialism, like critical theory, rejected the optimism of progressivist ideology and faith in collective political agency. Yet if Germany, under the domination of Allied power until 1949, did not hold any prospect for a socialist movement in the immediate postwar years, there was a lively and engaged third-way intellectual movement in France, of which the existentialists were a vital component, presenting a real possibility for a socialist government. Dealing exclusively with texts they produced that were available to an American audience, French arguments for the phenomenological and aesthetic bases of subjectivity, which in turn were considered to be the guides for individual political action, are examined and the contradictions between existentialism’s diverse spokespersons considered. Then, the Abstract Expressionists’ contact with existentialism, with its welter of different political shadings – from Sartre’s radicalism to Camus’s nascent liberalism, and from Kierkegaard’s and Nietzsche’s transcendence of, to Jaspers’s and Heidegger’s abstention from, political theory – is explored. It is shown that the artists in question were in direct contact with the existentialist texts available in both the independent leftist and avant-garde presses in the mid- to late 1940s; these enabled Abstract Expressionism consciously to ground itself in existentialism’s privileging of subjective perception as the basis of thought and action. Thus, Abstract Expressionism’s own origins in existentialist phenomenology are argued to have facilitated its assimilation into the independent left’s aesthetic theory of agency. For of these artists the most vociferous spokespersons for the movement, namely Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko, were university educated in pragmatist and existentialist philosophy, and they were also conversant with and sympathetic toward the independent left’s efforts to establish a third-way movement in the late 1940s.<sup>19</sup> Examining their stylistic transfor-