

THE SIDNEY HOOK MEMORIAL AWARD PRESENTATION

From time to time, the National Association of Scholars bestows the Sidney Hook Memorial Award on a distinguished scholar, honoring a notable contribution to the freedom and integrity of academic life. On Saturday, 13 January 2001, at a banquet luncheon held in New York City during its ninth national convention, the NAS so honored Eugene Genovese, past president of The Historical Society, a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a fellow of the Society of American Historians. *Academic Questions* is pleased to print Stanley Rothman's remarks in presenting the award and Professor Genovese's acceptance speech.

Introduction: Akin to Sidney Hook

Stanley Rothman

The Sidney Hook Memorial Award was established in 1989. It is, in many ways, the NAS's most prestigious award and is granted to individuals for the "defense of academic freedom and the integrity of academic life." Since its establishment the award has honored six people, among whom have been Thomas Sowell, James Coleman, the great University of Chicago sociologist, and two first rank historians, C. Vann Woodward and Gertrude Himmelfarb.

We are pleased to award the Memorial to Eugene Genovese. Professor Genovese, who is officially retired, reminds me very much of Sidney Hook. For one thing, and of great importance, they were both born in New York, a sure sign of eminence in itself. To Genovese's credit, however, he was, like me, born in Brooklyn, New York. Little more need be said. Hook was merely born in Manhattan.

Unfortunately unlike Professor Hook and myself, who attended City College, Genovese decided to go to Brooklyn College where, in his day, he was among the few token Italians.

More importantly (and more seriously) Eugene Genovese and Sidney Hook both began their adult intellectual careers as Marxists. Indeed, Hook, in a tour de force, attempted to integrate Marx and John Dewey, just as Genovese, finding traditional Marxism less than useful in explaining what he wished to

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explain, brought in cultural values through the work of Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist. Both, in the end, became dissatisfied with their efforts to re-suscitate Marx, and, while not denying his significance, moved in other directions. Genovese has returned to the Catholic Church, and, though I may be in error, I believe that he has become more sympathetic to a Weberian approach to the study of history. I don't wish to stress this because Genovese's work is driven by his encounter with the material he studies as this encounter raises problems that must be resolved. Even in his ideological phase he never allowed theory to trump empathetic understanding of empirical data.

It is his diligence, creativity, and intellectual honesty that have led even those scholars who disagree with him to praise his work in glowing terms. Orlando Patterson, for example, describes his masterwork *Roll Jordan Roll* as a book

without modern peer, [one that] will certainly become an indispensable source for all those scholars interested in these problems. And it is a tribute to Genovese's intellectual honesty and masterly scholarship that we are able to draw conclusions from his rich and vivid portrayal that differ radically from his own. (*New Republic*, 9 November 1974)

Patterson's view was expressed by a number of other distinguished reviewers.

Genovese's passion remains slavery in the South, and he and his wife, Elizabeth, a noted historian in her own right, are now busily at work on a multi-volume history of the "mind" of Southern slave masters. However, while Genovese has edited and written many books on that subject, he has also published more broadly on American history. He has written a history of the United States for example and coedited (along with) Forrest McDonald a reader on basic debates in American history. All of his volumes are the result of an imaginative, scholarly academic mind at work but, like Sidney Hook, Eugene Genovese is a public intellectual as well as an academic. Thus Gene has written for such publications as the *Times Literary Supplement*, *The New Republic*, *Dissent*, the *New York Times Book Review* and *National Review*, to mention just a few that appeal to a somewhat broader public.

In his career Genovese has made both enemies and friends drawn from all sides of the political spectrum. In 1950 he was expelled from the Communist Party for failing to toe the line. At a "teach in" at Rutgers University in the late 1960s, he allowed, since he was asked, that as a Marxist Leninist, he hoped the Vietcong would emerge victorious. He was pressured to leave Rutgers and was denounced by Richard Nixon. After a short stay in Canada, Gene accepted a position at the University of Rochester where he remained until his retirement. However, he did not remain silent. Disillusioned with the Vietcong, he accused some of his fellow academics of colluding with mass murderers in Vietnam and elsewhere. Later he clashed with the establishment in the American Historical Association.

Even in his Marxist days, Genovese had insisted that one should not use one's classes as a sounding board for one's social and political perspectives. In his teaching he never tried to press his views upon his students even in his (as he thought) Marxist phase. Indeed he leaned over backwards to insure that students who disagreed with him were not afraid to express their beliefs. He also believed that professional associations should avoid taking collective public political stands as associations, whatever the proclivities of individual scholars. He was astonished and dismayed, then, when the major professional associations started pronouncing on public issues and becoming frankly partisan on cultural as well as social and economic questions. The increasing attention being paid those who spent their time emphasizing race, sex, and class without thinking the issues through, and hiding their ignorance behind a barrage of empty neologisms also dismayed him. He battled the history establishment from the floor, and, for the most part, he lost. Finally, he decided to quit both the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians. It was but a short trip to accepting the first presidency of the Historical Society.

Like Sidney Hook, Eugene Genovese is a tough but fair opponent and, like him, he is willing to step out on a limb. Both he and Hook always have told it like they see it in no uncertain terms, even when they were a minority of one. Gene Genovese is the perfect choice to receive the Sidney Hook Memorial Award. Sidney Hook would most certainly have approved, though I doubt they would have seen eye to eye on all issues. For example, while Gene has reconnected with his Catholic heritage, Hook remained an articulate secular skeptic. He really had very little use for religion. Those of us who have had the privilege of knowing them both know that they would have had gloriously exciting arguments, to the benefit of all who heard them.

The Fall 2000 *Harvard Law Bulletin* tells of the appointment of Janet Halley as professor of law at HLS. She is described as an authority on legal issues surrounding gender, identity, and sexual orientation, who is “a bridge between the worlds of law and literary criticism.”

“My literary critical background has shaped the way that I study legal questions,” she said. “I tend more than some of my colleagues to see a legal event as a social text that can be read.”