

Marvin Mandell, Who Fought for Equality, for Life, and for Art

July 2, 2017



In 1996, at the height of the culture wars, Marvin Mandell joined the battle, writing a long essay, “Canon on the Left,” in which he argued that the left should not allow conservatives to claim the literary canon. While he of course supported the expansion of the canon to include all of the writers of color, as well as the women and all of the others who had been neglected and excluded, he refused to allow the right to claim the great tradition of European literature. He concluded the essay with these words:

The Great Tradition is a treasure. For the left to abandon that treasure either because the expeditions to find it were often financed and supported by a ruling class or because many were unjustly prevented from joining the expeditions would be a deprivation not only of ourselves but of posterity. Let the right read Homer, Euripides, Dante, Shakespeare, and the Bible with open eyes and heart and weep. And let the left not forsake them, but read them and take heart.

What is remarkable here is that Marvin believed in the power of literature to reach even the hardest hearts on the right, if only they will read “with open eyes and hearts,” and if they do, they will “weep.” The fight for socialism was a struggle to liberate all of humanity, even if it must be carried out against the will of part of it.

While Marvin Mandell, the editor of *New Politics* from 2006 to 2013, was a socialist, it was a socialism rooted in a profound humanism. He and his late wife Betty Reid Mandell—she died in 2014 at the age of 89, and he, this year at the age of 90—spent their lives together in a common search and struggle for socialism. Their search led them not only to contemplate literature and art, to teach and practice social work, but also to experiment in radical psychology and to join the socialist movement.



Marvin Mandell was born on January 26, 1927, in Rochester, New York, the son of Harold and Frieda Sarachan Mandell. During World War II, he served in the United States Army from 1944 to 1946. After the war he became a member of the Workers Party, adopting its "Third Camp" position of opposition to both war camps, later encapsulated in the slogan "Neither Washington nor Moscow." His friend Mathis Szykowski, in his *Betrayal and Survival and Beyond: A Memoir*, describes Marvin as he knew him in the late 1940s at the University of Rochester, shortly after Mandell had divorced his first wife:

Marvin was an honor student in English literature at the University of Rochester. He had embraced Marx and Freud. He was attending school on the GI Bill. ... He had served in Italy and had been, he told us, the heavyweight-boxing champion of his regiment. He was a bulky man, full of energy. When you met Marvin you were assaulted by a myriad of ideas and suggestions. In the coming years I got used to hearing Marvin presenting some fabulous idea or tale as he was crossing the threshold of my door. Some people found him to be offensive and even obnoxious. I was often baffled by his outlandishness, but I was never bored. You could depend on Marvin to keep the conversation going. He had and still has, beyond his bounding energy, a generosity of spirit. ... Marvin's saving grace, if he needed one, was that he laughed easily at the absurdity of the world and even more easily at himself.

Marvin became involved not only in the Workers Party, which had its roots in the Trotskyist movement, but also in the psychoanalytic movement of Wilhelm Reich, who had begun his career as a disciple of Sigmund Freud. Reich had been a Socialist, then a Communist, and eventually sympathetic to Trotsky. Marvin appreciated Reich's interests in liberating human beings not only from the state and class society, but also from the sexual repression that distorted so many human lives.

From the University of Rochester, where he graduated with honors in 1950, Marvin went on to Columbia University in New York. After earning his master's degree there in 1951, he taught English literature in the New York City schools from 1951 to 1959. In the mid-1950s Marvin met and fell in love with Betty Reid, who was studying social work, and the two were married and became lifelong

partners. Marvin introduced Betty to Marxist theory and both were involved in the successor to the Workers Party, which in 1949 had changed its name to the Independent Socialist League (ISL).

As Max Shachtman, the leader of the Workers Party and then of the ISL, moved to the right on a variety of questions, Marvin and Betty continued to uphold their left-wing views. Marvin joined with Julius Jacobson and Phyllis Jacobson to found *New Politics* in 1961. Later, after the death of the Jacobsons, Marvin and Betty became the journal's editors.

While continuing with their political activities, Marvin and Betty also began a family. They had two daughters, Christine and Charlotte. They encouraged their children to call their parents by their first names. As Charlotte Mandell Kelly said, "They wanted everybody to be equal. They didn't want us to think of them as authoritarian."

When the U.S. military decommissioned Cuttyhunk Island, off New Bedford, Massachusetts, Marvin and Betty bought a lot, ordered a Sears Roebuck house, and had it assembled there. Cuttyhunk became the family's summer refuge, though they also enjoyed vacations in France. Marvin loved the out-of-doors, particularly skiing, sailing, swimming, and hiking.

Marvin continued to pursue the study of literature and his teaching career. From 1959 to 1961 he was a professor of English at Colorado State College in Greeley (now Northern Colorado University); then at the State University of New York at Potsdam from 1964 to 1967; then at the University of Connecticut in Hartford from 1967 to 1969. From 1969 to 1993, he taught at Curry College in Milton, Massachusetts, where he became the chair of the Humanities Department.

In Boston, Betty and Marvin Mandell formed part of a community of committed social activists who became involved in all of the issues of the day, but, under Betty's influence, with a particular emphasis on questions of economic equality and poverty. Taking over the editorship of *New Politics* in 2006, they continued also to carry out a struggle for socialism from below.

Footnotes