An Interview with Norman Birnbaum

Photo by Charles Votaw

In this interview, Norman Birnbaum, one of the country's foremost public intellectuals, brings to life the history of the United States and the European New Left. He takes us through U.S. and British higher education and politics from the McCarthy era through today, with personal and historical detail that reminds us that the tumult of today has precedent and, perhaps, roots in the 1950s and 1960s. Birnbaum is a founding editor of the *New Left Review*, was on the editorial board of the *Partisan Review*, and is on the editorial board of the *Nation*. Birnbaum was born in 1926 in New York City and educated at its public schools, Williams College, and Harvard University. He has taught at the London School of Economics, Oxford University, the University of Strasbourg, and Amherst College and is University Professor Emeritus at Georgetown University Law Center. His most recent book is *After Progress: American Social Reform and European Socialism in the Twentieth Century*, and he is working on a memoir titled *From the Bronx to Oxford—and Not Quite Back*. AAUP general secretary Roger Bowen interviewed Birnbaum in May 2006 in Washington, D.C.

Bowen: You just turned eighty this year, and you have had a very distinguished career. You advised Ted Kennedy's presidential campaign. You consulted with the National Security Council during the Carter years.

Birnbaum: Yes, but I cannot claim that the foreign policy apparatus was very enthusiastic about it, and any advice I had to give was systematically not followed. And I was shuffled out in a remarkably rapid and smooth process.

Bowen: You've also advised the United Auto Workers, and you've served on the editorial board of the *Partisan Review* and the *Nation* for a great many years.

Birnbaum: Yes, the *Nation* for a very long period. I also think I may be one of the oldest living contributors to the *Nation* who is also *compos mentis*. But I've certainly been on the board since the 1970s—and remain today due to the generosity of editor and publisher Katrina vanden Heuvel's excellent regime. And, of course, I began to read the *Nation* when my father was a New York City school teacher. When it came into the house, I began to read it and the *New Republic* at the age of probably twelve. And now the *Nation* is in some danger, namely, of being in the black. We have got this awful experience and don't know what to do with it.

Bowen: You can thank George Bush. You were also on the editorial board of the *New Left Review*.

Birnbaum: Well, I was on the founding editorial board of the *New Left Review* when it was launched in 1959 as a fusion of the *New Reasoner* and *Universities and Left Review*, which was done by a younger and somewhat more independent group from Oxford, including the late Raphael Samuel, Stuart Hall, and Charles Taylor. I joined *Universities and Left Review* with a lot of other people, like Ralph Miliband and Iris Murdoch in 1957, one year after both journals were founded.

Bowen: Okay. Let me ask the most obvious question. You have been on the left your whole life, your entire career. Why?

Birnbaum: When I think of the characters and ideas of many of those on the right, the left seems to be the only place anybody with self-respect could be. But, that apart, I think probably there is some religious ethnic inheritance, although I don't go to synagogue. My grandfather was a member of the old Yiddish grouping. He was a house painter who came from Poland after having served his imperial majesty the tsar in the military service. My father was a New York City high school teacher who had studied at City College and liked the ideas of John Dewey. And, of course, Franklin Roosevelt was an iconic figure in the family. But I think we sensed that our fate depended upon the general installation of a regime of justice. And, of course, there was the atmosphere of American progressivism and then the New Deal. I think the first big books I read were things like the Beards on American civilization and Dos Passos's *U.S.A.,* which made a great impression on me. And I remember when I heard Thomas Mann speak—I think at age twelve—at the last rally for the Spanish Republic in New York. Andre Malraux was also among the speakers. But I remember my father's astonishment when I said that Thomas Mann wasn't Jewish. Gradually, there was the discovery that progressivism is at the center of a broad stream of American history. Being on the left was a way to join America, not to distance oneself from it.

Bowen: You identified somewhere three values of the left: emancipation, social solidarity, and democracy. I haven't seen it put quite that way before. Of those three values, do you favor one over another?

Birnbaum: No, I think that a good society would provide for each of these. But, obviously, there are times when pursuing them involves situations where the context is unfavorable. After all, we have a long tradition of social Catholicism, not only in Europe, but even in this country, which is not necessarily conducive to emancipation but is conducive to a considerable amount of dis-

tributive justice that would be inconceivable without the social Catholics. And that's also true of the European or postwar welfare states. Emancipation may be the most difficult to achieve of all these since we're not quite agreed on what it means. That depends on one's theory of human nature and human potential, or how much emancipation a society can stand.

Bowen: Are there moments in American history where the value of freedom and the value of equality are in direct conflict?

Birnbaum: Suppose there were a national referendum on civil unions or something like that. The value of democracy would conceivably dictate obedience to the majority rule, which I doubt would come out strongly in favor of civil unions. In that case, democracy needs to be strengthened by certain guarantees or certain institutional immunizations from majority rule. Anybody who lived through the McCarthy period, with its long institutionalized Cold War sequel, and who now has to endure tirades about how one is not loyal to the West because one doesn't support the great struggle against Islamo-fascism, understands this. The impoverished defense of the West by persons who know little about fascism and nothing about Islam is grotesque. They may constitute a majority even though democracy is violated. There must be something else, namely, the dimensions of emancipation and solidarity. The other day, I was in Germany to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of a man long gone, Wolfgang Abendroth, who was the great leader of the academic left in the early years of the Federal Republic. One of the ceremonies was held at the rather nice, new headquarters of the metal workers' union. It still has 2.5 million members. Abendroth was also a lawyer, a jurist, as well as a professor of politics, an adversary of the disciples of Carl Schmitt, who dominated the courts and law faculties after the war. In effect, I think the Europeans, with their notions of social democracy, which are widely shared although under attack, have an understanding of a democracy that is not reduced to formal voting. Their notion of civic society clearly entails the social provision of decent minima of the things necessary for the good life: education and health.

Bowen: You mentioned you were somewhat insulated from McCarthyism, because during the years when it was at its worst, you were at your best, teaching in Britain.

Birnbaum: I was insulated also because I never belonged to the American Communist Party. I was briefly a member of a Communist front group, the American Student Union, from 1939, when I entered high school, until 1940, when I felt that the party line on the Soviet Union's alliance with Germany was intolerable and left. But I simply felt uncomfortable in the early McCarthy years and didn't like what I saw. I had no difficulty when I got to Europe. When I began to teach in England in 1953, it was widely assumed I must be a political refugee, as there were some, like my late friend Moses Finley, the great classicist. I remember that a student who later became a distinguished anthropologist asked me how I stayed out of jail in America. In fact, one of my great early memories in England was having lunch with Mo in his rooms at his college at Cambridge University. At about 12:30, there was a knock on the door, and three servants marched in with silver platters, put them down, poured the wine, and discreetly withdrew. And he said, "I sure owe the House Un-American Activities Committee a lot."

Bowen: You were first at the London School of Economics. From that vantage point, what did you think about McCarthyism?

Birnbaum: I think that the whole European experience was "deprovincializing." It made me see there were other approaches to the Cold War, which in Europe were closer to what was then the mainstream of politics. I got to know people in the British Labor Party. I got to meet people in France, ex-communists like Edgar Morin and others, who had a different view of the Cold War. And I got to know the people in Germany from the Confessional Church who had resisted Hitler. They felt that the country could not continue divided, and that, therefore, efforts to talk with the other side were not treason but necessary. This gave me a view of the crabbed, narrow, anxious anticommunism, which persisted when McCarthy himself had fallen into disgrace. Also, when I was in England, the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Central Intelligence Agency dispatched Irving Kristol to London to start *Encounter*. And I knew him and some of his group.

Bowen: But did you know that the CIA was sponsoring *Encounter* magazine?

Birnbaum: It got to be an open secret. As an eminent American social scientist whom I don't feel like naming pointed out to me, "Given the money they're throwing around, it must be from the CIA." And later, there was a famous episode in which Dwight MacDonald came over to edit *Encounter* for a bit with some proposal that he should eventually replace Kristol. But the New York gang led by Sidney Hook fought tooth and nail against it, since Dwight was unreliable—that is, an independent thinker who rowed nobody's party line. Dwight submitted a piece to *Encounter* that was later published in *Dissent*. *Encounter* didn't print it, because it was thought to be too critical, and Dwight protested about this. I took up the protest by writing an open letter to the Congress, which

was printed in *Universities and Left Review,* saying, "Come on, tell us where you get the money."

Bowen: So you were attacked?

Birnbaum: I was. I think the year was 1958. I moved to Oxford in 1959.

Bowen: Did the term "New Left" originate around that time?

Birnbaum: Yes. The New Left had many sources in Europe and in the states. I taught in the summer of 1962 at Harvard and toured the states. I spoke at different universities. I went to Ann Arbor and met Tom Hayden, when he was writing the Port Huron Statement, the manifesto of Students for a Democratic Society. And I was treated as if I were an emissary from a brotherly cosmos in Europe. Among the many Europeans studying in the United States at the time was an anti-Franco physicist, Javier Solana, who brought the ideas back to Spain, to the anti-fascist turbulence of its sixties. I later met him when he was foreign minister, and he is now the senior foreign policy official of the European Union.

Bowen: You wrote that, for a time, the New Left provided you with a spiritual home. How so?

Birnbaum: Well, it was "home" partly in the sense that I had membership in a group; our house in London was one of the meeting points. But it was my spiritual home in the sense that those in the New Left shared the conviction that although the Soviet Union had failed, liberal capitalism was not the only alternative. This was a period in which the great French social political scientist Maurice Duverger coined the phrase *"fascisme á l'exterior,"* meaning external fascism was a continuation of imperialism. The New Left included German Protestants and French left Catholics, as well as important segments of the British labor movement. I think I was particularly aware of the religious traditions, not just dissident Marxism.

Bowen: So this is a secular religion?

Birnbaum: Well, the older I get, the more bewildered and cautious I get about that term, which is still worth investigating. But let's say that we subscribed to a secular set of beliefs that rest on metahistorical assumptions about human capacity.

Bowen: And who was part of that group at the time? And who among them are still close friends?

Birnbaum: Well, there are some people who are close friends whom I rarely see. Some I see more than others. In England, the late Raphael Samuel. Eric Hobsbawm sympathized with it. He stayed in the British Communist Party, but he probably belonged more to us than he did to mainline communism. Even though he stayed, Eric didn't like the Soviet Union. But, I would say in England, there were Raphael Samuel and certainly Stuart Hall.

Bowen: Was Hobsbawm involved with *Past and Present*? You were on the editorial board there.

Birnbaum: Yes, he was very much involved with *Past and Present*.

Bowen: And Victor Kiernan was also on that board, was he not?

Birnbaum: Yes, Victor Kiernan was on the board. *Past and Present* opened up to people who weren't quite Marxists but were certainly excellent social historians, like Lawrence Stone, who later went to Princeton.

Bowen: Kiernan, I know, left the party, I think in 1957.

Birnbaum: A lot of them did. Christopher Hill, who was also on the board, did. I knew him well at Oxford. Christopher is another person in England from that era who remained a friend. And of course, I knew and greatly respected and liked Charles Taylor. Charles moved in and out of England. He later came back from Canada and was a professor at Oxford. Charles had a very decided Catholic component in his beliefs and had good contacts with continental Catholicism.

Bowen: What about Americans?

Birnbaum: Certainly, I would say Christopher Lasch, although he later criticized it. Christopher and I were very close. We once collaborated, and we joined *Partisan Review* at the same time. Susan Sontag, too.

Bowen: Was Norman Podhoretz part of that movement?

Birnbaum: Podhoretz helped start the American New Left. He took over *Commentary* in 1961. I remember visiting the states in 1961 or 1962 and being received by the Kristols on the west side of Manhattan in their apartment, where I bumped into Bernard Malamud, who was going out. I remember being told by the Kristols in one voice, "You've come back at the right time. The whole country is pointing left. The Podhoretzes have just had the most ferocious argument with the Trillings." The comment suggests that they had a rather village-like view of the country. Norman Podhoretz was very much at that time a part of the New Left. He published David Reisman and Michael Maccoby's article on the American crisis, he published the first version of Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd*, and he published Staughton Lynd's arguments against the war. He published critiques of the Kennedy administration, which displeased it very much. Norman's turn to the right was precipitated, I think, by the New York City school strike and by the conflict with the blacks—between the Jewish community and the blacks. When large segments of

the American non-Jewish left sympathized with the Palestinians after the 1967 war, his New Left period ended.

Bowen: I want to go back to Oxford for a second. You taught class with Iris Murdoch.

Birnbaum: Yes.

Bowen: You were friendly with Isaiah Berlin.

Birnbaum: Well, it was Isaiah who encouraged me to come to Oxford.

Bowen: Yet you two were not very close ideologically?

Birnbaum: That was increasingly and painfully apparent.

Bowen: But you got along quite well, generally?

Birnbaum: Well, for a while. Let's just say that the left is frequently accused of combining high-flying, broad, generous, inclusive notions of humanity with fallible human behavior. Let us say that in my relations with Isaiah, I discovered that this could also apply to liberals. Briefly, Isaiah encouraged me to come to Oxford to start sociology as an undergraduate discipline, which I did. But when the time came to back me in certain academic quarrels, he wasn't there. Part of this was my fault. It's a very complicated story.

Bowen: If we set aside personality differences, what in your judgment differentiates a liberal from a leftist, or a liberal from a progressive?

Birnbaum: I think it is clear that many liberals emphasize the formal properties of democracy. Some of the ideological groups around the White House have an exclusive focus on things like voting. One hopes they are not just thinking of the electronic machines used and abused in Ohio in 2004. But I think liberalism is certainly contained in the kind of social democracy I would identify myself with. But I think we must go a step further and ask what institutions could, in fact, sustain individual freedom, particularly in the face of the pressures of the market. Liberals concentrate on free space against the state, splendid when we think of practices like wiretapping, but true individualism requires free space against any number of coercive institutions. There were plenty of liberals I met in England who were in the old Tory Party. McMillan was a liberal. Some of them, by the way, the so-called one-nation Tories, are quite attentive to social issues. The Tory Party had that tradition rather like some of the Gaullists and certainly the European Christian democratic parties, German and Italian, which I knew quite well.

Bowen: Let me move you from Britain to the United States. You left Oxford, and you took a teaching position at Amherst College?

Birnbaum: No. When I first left Oxford, I consoled myself for eleven years of British Sundays by teaching for two years at Strasbourg with Henri Lefebvre. I then came back and taught for two years in New York on the graduate faculty in the New School. And so I didn't move to Amherst until 1968.

Bowen: Which is very similar to your undergraduate college, Williams?

Birnbaum: Yes, it was for me. I was very glad to do it, because it was a good return to my roots; I had a marvelous experience at Williams. At bottom, I like very much the notion of broadly liberal undergraduate education, and I was the first sociologist at Amherst. Well, once Oxford and Cambridge decided to teach it, Swarthmore, Williams, Wesleyan, and Amherst decided it was safe to do so—even though it had been taught at Harvard and Yale for a very, very long time.

Bowen: So you were at Amherst maybe one year before getting involved in a fascinating legal case that, in some ways, resembles recent events? And that was *Mandel v. Mitchell* in 1969. You, Robert Heilbroner, Noam Chomsky, Richard Falk, Robert Paul Wolfe, and other major intellectual heavyweights sued the U.S. government over the issue of ideological exclusion?

Birnbaum: Yes. The U.S. government excluded Mandel, the leader of world Trotskyism, especially because the attorney general, John Mitchell, said he was responsible for the student riots in France. We sued on the very liberal grounds that we were teaching about these social movements and about Marxist ideas to our students. And whether or not we agreed with them, or the government agreed with them, the students should hear these ideas first hand. We wanted Mandel to come talk to our students.

Bowen: You make my point here. Your argument was a classic AAUP academic freedom issue.

Birnbaum: It was an academic freedom issue.

Bowen: And you lost.

Birnbaum: Yes, we lost first. But Mandel later came. I remember him coming to Amherst and giving a very good talk in which he quaintly referred to the students as "comrades," which I hadn't heard for a long time. But that was much later. We lost, yes.

Bowen: Well, fast forward to a year ago, with Muslim scholar Tariq Ramadan likewise being excluded, this time by the Department of Homeland Security and the State Department, which invoked article 411 of the Patriot Act, the ideological exclusion clause. And of course, the AAUP is suing, with the American Civil Liberties Union and other groups, on behalf of Ramadan. What explains this? Have we come full circle, or are we continuing on a crooked line? (On September 21, 2006, Ramadan received a letter from the U.S. government informing him that his visa had been denied. See the story on page 6 of this issue of *Academe*.)

Birnbaum: Let's go back to something really interesting. Years ago, the *New York Times* did a series on "Middletown," which was actually

Muncie, Indiana. Ball State College, which later became Ball State University, was there. The *Times* went and looked at it, and some parent from the vicinity told the newspaper, "There's nothing I fear so much as the college professor," in all seriousness. Think about the kids at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who didn't want, in the first-year introductory program, to read about Islam. There is a certain tendency among Americans to resist ideas, different ideas, whether in the form of opposition to Marxists, opposition to alleged Islamists, or opposition to other things. Ban Mandel, ban readings about Islam. David Horowitz, for instance, believes college professors are "remote from American values," and higher education, presumably, is safe only in his hands. So this tendency is there, and shrewd ideological marketers like Horowitz and Daniel Pipes exploit it to boost their careers and affirm their own political preferences. I am reminded that the giant John Kenneth Galbraith, who has just died, was fired from Harvard in the thirties for being a Keynesian and a New Dealer.

Bowen: Back to the issue of what makes ideas so threatening to the American public. What are they frightened of?

Birnbaum: Well, I think this is a good question. And I think it's a question we ought to ask ourselves, because of the campaigns against the universities. The paradox is, and this was pointed out by Todd Gitlin in a review in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the only people who take the academic left's political potential seriously are state legislatures, which are fighting this phantom. I think really one probably has to go back to two things: first, that sketched by Richard Hofstadter in the famous book *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, that is, the premium on character, the suspicion of abstraction. Second is the notion of the United States as the achieved revolution, a religiously founded one. But is the American Revolution achieved, or is it still an open-ended project? But Hofstadter went back to the sources of the notion of America as a redemptive nation in the ideas of the people who fled Cromwell's England because they thought that even Cromwell was betraying God's cause. And I think the notion of the nation as a church means that dissent has very little or no place in it.

Bowen: You wrote, "Democratic socialism has suffered from the failure of modern liberalism to achieve its promise." Let me ask, specifically, if modern liberalism had achieved its promise, what would the United States look like today?

Birnbaum: Well, if modern liberalism had achieved its promise, the United States certainly would be a society in which the differential in investment of resources between the elite sector of higher education and the kinds of colleges most people go to would certainly be far less. And there would also, I think, be a much greater diversity of opinion and cultural resources available on television and in the mass media rather than the anxious servility of those awful Washington journalists when they speak about political issues. I think more value would also be placed on cosmopolitan, international, innovative experimentation and culture.

Bowen: Conservatives today do not like the term "social justice." The term gets them quite upset. Why is that term so upsetting to conservatives?

Birnbaum: I wish I knew, since, after all, people identify a certain type of old conservative who thought that the order conservatives proposed was the only one that would work and that it had its quantity of justice. These people were the patrician New Dealers led by Franklin Roosevelt. But it seems to me the kinds of conservatism now institutionalized in the Republican Party and its fellow-traveling institutes, research centers, and the like is based on anxiety and fear. Fear of change. These conservatives have profited pretty well from the present order. If you think of the recent tensions between, let's say, the Jewish community and the black community, certainly, there's a note of inappropriate triumphalism in the Jewish response, "We made it, why don't they?" Of course, if we're talking of Jews, we came from two thousand years of written culture, and when we came to this country, we weren't brought here as slaves from primitive societies without a written tradition. And we weren't confined to the South as agricultural laborers. It makes a difference, even though Norman Podhoretz and others won't admit it. It does seem that an anxious conservatism may reflect on some people's sense of the fragility of their acquisitions. What is going to happen in America? I'm reminded of a professor of economics at Wesleyan who two or three years ago wrote a letter to the *Times* severely criticizing those who didn't understand that outsourcing was an economic good, that it brought cheaper goods, and asking why people shouldn't have cheaper goods. And I replied, "Well, you know, you can outsource lots of things. With video, why couldn't the very expensive price of education at Wesleyan be reduced by using people from India who have very good educations, and who, because of the time difference, would also be available to their students at all hours of the day and night?" Of course, the economists favor free trade: there are no $65-a-week Mexican economists to take their jobs. A lot of the anxiety is directly related to the sense of fragility. I think this probably has been true through much of American history. There were always challenges, there were always dangers, there were always political polarizations.

Bowen: Please give me your assessment of the state of higher education today and of the primary threats that we face.

Birnbaum: I think that what we have now is a very, very serious threat because of the organized nature of what were previously scattered vigilante responses. The David Horowitz phenomenon and the campaigns and activities of the people around Lynne Cheney and the American Council of Trustees and Alumni—these represent an organized danger. At the same time, however, they are very explicit in their ends and therefore, in some sense, easy to identify and fight. That's one thing. Second, there's another kind of danger to academic freedom. Everybody talks about the predominance of liberals in certain fields. Well, what about the predominance of market analysts in economics? A British thinker said that as long as the world profession of economics looks to Harvard and MIT for leadership, we'll never get a social democratic revival in economics. The same might apply to fields like international relations. When Kissinger left the State Department with such obvious reluctance in 1976, he was asked in a notable interview whether he thought there would be new thought on foreign affairs in the universities. And Kissinger laughed and said derisively, "Don't be silly. When every assistant professor in international relations thinks he can be a deputy assistant secretary of state or defense, why should he think any differently than the bureaucrats?" And he was right. Absolutely right on that. So that you have to ask yourself why this allegedly left-wing American university has produced Kissinger, George Shultz, Condoleezza Rice, Samuel Huntington, and James Schlesinger. How come this university produces the technocrats who run American capitalism and our empire? Wasn't it William Buckley who coined the phrase, "We'd rather be governed by the first two thousand pages of the names in the phone book than by people who came from Harvard"? Well, his objection to being governed by fellow Yale alumni (Ford and two Bushes) is less. But there is a much more subtle danger to the university, and it comes from the inner stratification of American higher education. That is to say, the stratification and the allocation of resources, the fact that 46 percent of the people teaching are part time and without benefits.

Bowen: You referenced the American Counsel of Trustees and Alumni a moment ago. It would like to have a top-down management structure that prevents faculty from participating in the governance of institutions. And ACTA does not lament the fact that two out of three appointments today in the academy go to contingent labor.

Birnbaum: No, because contingent faculty have to struggle for existence; they haven't got much time to develop broad, socially critical views. They tend to be people with great integrity, despite being under the most obvious kinds of pressures.

Bowen: Do you think faculty need collective bargaining today, at both public and private institutions?

Birnbaum: I would think so, yes. Given the tendency of trustees, state legislatures, and so on to try to decide how and when resources should be allocated. Second, given the ideological pressures, I think collective bargaining can secure tenure and thus academic freedom. It is interesting that those who would not dream of telling their physician what medicines to prescribe do not hesitate to tell professors of history, politics, economics, and literature what they should teach. It does seem to me that there is a direct connection between the preservation of academic freedom and faculty autonomy.

Bowen: Do you think, then, that collective bargaining by faculty is the best way to achieve academic freedom and protect faculty autonomy?

Birnbaum: That is a fair conclusion. It strikes me that probably in the long run, it is.

Bowen: Why do you, as a sociologist, think so many faculty are averse to collective bargaining?

Birnbaum: Well, let me speak about my own experiences at Amherst. When I arrived, we were quite well paid and had terrific resources, but there was tension with the board of trustees, some of whom were philistines who believed that the communists had a foothold at Amherst. The "communists" were me and my eminent colleague in American studies, Leo Marx. John J. McCloy of Wall Street fame was for a while the chair of the board of trustees. McCloy publicly declared that tenure was very bad, because it made for deadwood. And I said, "Well, the American ruling class is characterized by three things: one, its murderous hypocrisy; two, its total incompetence—this was the time of the last agonies of Vietnam; and three, its total absence of style." McCloy had insulted the very people he wished to behave as servants. He

shortly thereafter protested to the late Bill Ward, who was then college president, and told him to make me apologize. Bill said that's the one thing he was sure he couldn't do. Shortly thereafter, McCloy left the board of trustees.

Bowen: Is that when you first joined the AAUP?

Birnbaum: Yes, because I think it was the first time I had a full-time tenured job at an American university. There was a little group of us at Amherst. One of my dear friends at Amherst was Tom Yost, who later became AAUP president. He was a great guy, and we had marvelous times together at Amherst. But I think that some of my colleagues felt socially elevated by being allowed to teach the sons of the American upper-middle class, and they felt that we were at the apex of the American academic system. It was no problem flying somebody in to talk to our students, and I remember the large parade of great European left thinkers who visited.

Bowen: Amherst had incredible resources. The faculty were paid well, the students were very bright and highly motivated, and the faculty had a voice in governance. Why, then, would faculty at Amherst even consider collective bargaining?

Birnbaum: Well, that, I think, was what certain people thought. On the other hand, there were episodes. The trustees insisted they would name the president, and there was a conflict with faculty when Bill Ward resigned. The trustees advertised that they wanted, other things being equal, a graduate of Amherst College to be the next president, which excluded women, since no woman graduate of Amherst was old enough at that point. It excluded also any number of colleagues who had served the college for twenty or twenty-five years who would have been plausible candidates. I remember writing to the *Chronicle of Higher Education,* saying, "A liberal arts institution is an institution of learning, not a country club. This distinction, however, appears to have escaped our trustees." Julian Gibb, chair of chemistry at Brown, got the job. Julian's distinction was that he had been chair of chemistry and he was an Amherst graduate of 1946. Neil Rudenstine, who was then provost of Princeton, was turned down. Neil was later made president of Harvard, but he wasn't thought to be quite qualified at Amherst. He wasn't an Amherst man. It was preposterous. The faculty would have certainly taken Neil, and we'd have had a very, very good president. He might have even done better at Amherst than at the gigantic factory in Cambridge.

Bowen: Let me conclude by asking one last question. You left Amherst to go to Georgetown Law. You were a tenured full professor at Amherst and a prolific author. You were highly regarded throughout the academy. Why leave and go to Georgetown?

Birnbaum: There were several reasons. I had already made contact with mainline America, but as I had mentioned, I was working with the United Auto Workers, which was great for me. With the presidential bid by Ted Kennedy, I felt that if I went to Washington, I could do things of consequence for the Democratic Party. Too, I had tired of a certain localism at Amherst, which grew after the exciting days of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Let's put it that way. And second, I greatly treasured my contacts among the Jesuits and American Catholicism. I went to Georgetown as a visitor for a couple of years. My colleagues at the law school felt that I should do what I had always done, general social commentary. I, at this point, was beginning to detach myself from American sociology, with its disciplinary emphasis. Somebody asked me why I didn't write in sociological journals anymore, to which the answer was, "How many times can you write papers proving that (a) America has a class system, and (b) people are alienated? I have done that." And I was quite interested in things like the Cold War, the critique of the Cold War. I was interested in doing a different kind of intellectual work that I learned from my Amherst colleague, Leo Marx. This discovery of America and American culture is somewhat reflected in my 1988 book, *The Radical Renewal*. So there were all kinds of reasons at that point, including personal ones, to make a change.

Bowen: How did a critical social scientist fit in at a law school?

Birnbaum: In the most famous line of German literature, Faust bemoans the two souls dwelling in his breast. Law professors are rigorous and dispassionate parsers of statutes and decisions, meticulous in dark suits, shirts, and restrained ties. They are also, however, in jeans and sports shirts, social thinkers and metahistorians, Platonic philosopher kings. I greatly enjoyed the company of my hospitable Georgetown Law colleagues and learned a lot from their inner union of opposites.

Bowen: Has writing your memoirs been a kind of self-discovery or rediscovery?

Birnbaum: Yes, it's been very much a voyage of self-discovery, of reconsideration. For instance, the other night, I talked at the Oxford-Cambridge dinner and actually found benign words about my period at Oxford, which used to rankle to a certain degree. So it's a work of not only self-discovery, but also of reconsideration and acceptance of one's self.

Bowen: But you're not softening politically, I sense.

Birnbaum: In brief, no, I am *not* softening politically. How could I? After all, I am only eighty years young.