

Holding the Center: Memoirs of a Life in Higher Education

by Howard Wesley Johnson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999) 331 pp.

Reviewed by George Katsiaficas

At their best, autobiographies portray the flowering of an individual personality. They dramatize and embody the unique events of the author's life, bringing the reader into the very essence of history. For MIT—its present and future—Howard Johnson's memoirs are a valuable resource, one that serves to provide an "accounting" of Johnson's twenty-four years as dean, president and chairman of the corporation. By remembering publicly the inner dynamics of MIT's top decision-makers, Johnson seeks to outline the trajectory of the past in order to inform the future.

As an organizational history of MIT, HJ's construction of his tenure at the Institute contains a litany of praise for his many co-workers with whom he was "in harness" (a phrase he uses repeatedly). From the point of view of the control center, his memoirs recall events in the boardrooms and top decision-making bodies of some of the world's most powerful institutions. As an autobiography, however, the book is flat and one-dimensional—a mere "accounting" (his father's occupation) rather than an insightful examination of life. As he looks in the mirror of his past, HJ reflects the organizational man so well dramatized in *Death of a Salesman* and so often decried in sociological studies. When all is said and done, we have the narrative history of a yes man, the bland recitation of his memory of specific times and places and people. Rather than a rich tapestry of life woven with care and aesthetic sensibility, we have a Price Club synthetic rug.

Even as an "accounting," the book is inaccurate and distorts the past to fit it into the particular self-image HJ seeks to project. The most significant events in his tenure at MIT were anti-Vietnam war protests--the "social and political storms that engulfed us all in the late sixties." During the war in Vietnam, MIT laboratories (today's Draper and Lincoln Labs) performed hundreds of millions of dollars worth of research and development for the Pentagon—not an inconsiderable sum of money today, but then a veritable fountain of prosperity for the MIT corporation, which annually was able to debit millions of dollars in "overhead" costs ascribed to the R&D projects—only one level of the benefits accruing to MIT from its war-related research.

Student activists like myself took a critical view of this research. We saw these military contracts as impoverishing the Institute by prostituting science and knowledge to those who would make war, not love. We called MIT the "Pentagon on the Charles," risked our careers and sometimes our personal safety for our principles, and our movement dramatically changed the Institute—and the country--for the better. Among the MIT movement's many accomplishments can be counted the founding of the Union of Concerned Scientists. The changes at MIT brought about by student activism were enormous. The takeover of the student center--an event that HJ utterly falsifies—dramatically impacted MIT, and very much for the better. One outcome was March 4, 1969, when the whole Institute closed down for a day to devote itself--for the first time, which is astonishing in itself--to serious consideration of problems of science, technology and society. Similar events were organized

at about 100 other colleges and universities. Shortly afterwards, the undergraduate social inquiry program, the alternative humanities path that was developed then mainly by students and younger faculty, was first choice for over half the student body.

Yet in HJ's accounting of these turbulent times, he is the guy in the white hat battling radical and conservative villains. He "holds the center" while others take "extreme" positions. For his title, he borrowed a phrase from Yeats: "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold... The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." HJ shifts the meaning from Yeats' intransitive use of "hold"—a shift indicative of his transformation of other facets of his life—in order to paint the movement as the "worst," and himself as the "best," even accepting that he might "lack all conviction."

In his rendition of the times, MIT only did research related to the Cold War—projects like missile guidance systems. No mention is made of the helicopter stabilization project or the MTI ground radar (both of which were central to the US war against the people of Vietnam). The helicopter project used gyroscopes to solve the problem of crashes caused by the enormous firepower unleashed from "state of the art" assemblages of machine guns and cannons simultaneously fired from cumbersome helicopters. The radar project detected minute movements on the ground, an essential ingredient of the "electronic battlefield" devised to continue the war while minimizing risks to American troops.

MIT was also doing research on anti-missile systems, whose legacy survives today in Bush's Ballistic Missile Defense program. Student activists discovered that MIT had contracts to research "multiple independently targeted reentry vehicles"--MIRVs. We figured out the dangerously destabilizing nature of MIRV technology. Such analysis finally led to the Nuclear Freeze Movement of the early 1980's, opposition to MX missile deployment (the ultimate MIRV), and the wide spread understanding that nuclear hegemony covered interventionist aggression--the "deadly connection." Far from being immature extremists ("the worst/filled with passionate intensity"), we were acting with the utmost responsibility. MIT should be proud to have spawned such a movement.

HJ's chronology is also flawed. In his remembrance, Hanoi was being bombed in 1968 when Lyndon Johnson was President, not (as actually occurred) in 1972 when Nixon used B-52's during Christmas vacation. In HJ's view, the North Vietnamese Army mounted the Tet offensive in 1968, when it was South Vietnamese guerrillas—the National Liberation Front or Viet Cong. (According to the US State Department, there were more South Korean troops in South Vietnam in 1968 than North Vietnamese troops.)

We may forgive Johnson for his poor research on the war, but not for his inaccurate version of what transpired at MIT. In describing a meeting of several hundred people at which Doc Draper (founder of the Draper Labs) was called upon to justify his lab's research programs, Johnson sets the incident some 14 months earlier than actually occurred. He makes no mention of MIT's vindictive actions against protesters, three of whom (myself included) received prison terms for our anti-war activities. In his memory, he had the support of his faculty—even radical critic Noam Chomsky whom HJ places with Ithiel de Sola Pool and others cheering HJ for his leadership.

At the same time as he portrays himself as a moderate “holding the center,” HJ recounts how, during the meeting described above (which he placed 14 months earlier than actually occurred): “I had the fantasy that if I had my old squad from Camp Robinson there, I could clean out the whole group in a hurry...” In a similar vein, his crazed macho tone is bolstered by notes he received from one of his sycophants, Al Hill, who used to slip him pep-talk notes during times of crisis. “They usually said things like, ‘Atta boy.’ But once he wrote, ‘Howard, show them you’ve got the balls to do it.’ These notes always lifted my spirits and he knew it.” HJ’s strange schizophrenia, his mild-mannered exterior and macho interior, are one indication of how boundless egoism and complete self-deception go hand-in-hand.

Distortion and falsification of the sixties has become a veritable industry today, useful to marketing moguls and music promoters, but HJ carries this tendency to new extremes, using his public anti-war stance to bend history to his personal aggrandizement. Here is the crux of the matter. How could a docile and peaceful institution like MIT, led by peace-loving men like HJ, be part of a war machine whose destructive capacity helped kill at least 2 million Vietnamese? HJ’s megalomania and weak-kneed nastiness, so visible in his memoirs, are a powerful example of the “banality of evil,” a phrase used by Hannah Arendt to sum up the experience of modern genocide. HJ’s life is a case in point.

His self-effacing modest front and sadistic interior have roots in his childhood. His grandmother, he tells us, “never seemed to know which of Albert’s sons I was.” As a boy of ten or eleven, he shot his sister in the behind with his BB gun. Apparently feeling no remorse, he informs us that, “It was a great shot, but it cost me my BB gun and nearly put an end to my career as a marksman.” Could that incident explain why HJ still holds in his wallet a permit from the City of Cambridge to carry a concealed weapon?

Always a dark-horse candidate for the positions he came to occupy, he nonetheless managed to place himself in the very best of jobs, a skill he first developed during World War 2. Trained in the use of rifles and mortars at Camp Robinson in Arkansas, HJ never saw combat. Instead he got himself assigned to a “Civil Affairs Regiment” and became one of the Americans blessed with the good fortune to be on the receiving end of French gratitude and celebration for their liberation from the Nazis. His military service during World War 2 had none of the guts and glory to which we are accustomed from Hollywood portrayals. There is plenty of travelogue and continual reference to his personal use of government resources for his own pleasure. Using a jeep to take a junket to Paris, one of his colleagues is nearly killed in a one-vehicle accident, a tragic occurrence subsequently reported as “sabotage.”

In 1967, after my freshman year at MIT, my parents' separation meant that I had no money with which to continue my studies. My father had been a career soldier, and I planned to join the Marines. My mother's letter to Howard Johnson apparently convinced him to cover all my expenses by granting me a President’s Scholarship for the next three years. During that time, besides being my benefactor, he was also a casual friend, once even giving me a ride in his limousine from one side of campus to the other. In 1969, he asked me to be the sole undergraduate on his blue-ribbon Pounds Commission, created in response to student

protests against the research being conducted by MIT at the Instrumentation (now Draper) and Lincoln Labs. As HJ recalls: "I thought Katsiaficas had seemed like a middle-of-the-road or a slightly conservative student the previous term. As it turned out, he became an all-out radical who disappeared into the underground."

The Pounds Commission experience totally changed my life. As I recall, participants included Nobel Prize winners, laboratory chiefs, scientific experts, and radical critics like Noam Chomsky. There was at least one graduate student, Jon Kabat (today Kabat-Zinn). With daily transcripts of our hearings, we dove into the issues of the day. I took seriously the position in which I found myself: to make a moral and political evaluation of MIT's role in society. As a result of what I learned during the commission's meetings at MIT and our investigative trips to the Labs, the Pentagon and the Senate Office building (where we met with Senator Fulbright), I determined that many lab projects, especially the helicopter stabilization system that permitted the construction of flying death machines of an unparalleled sort, were criminal and should be stopped by all available means. I joined SDS and became part of the movement against the war. At one of our protests, we entered the MIT corporation meeting to demand an end to all war research. A moratorium on war research earlier had been approved by a special student referendum. In the midst of debate with us, Hojo (as we affectionately called him) whispered to me, "Et tu, Brutus." He clearly felt betrayed. In HJ's reconstruction of that day, he recalls: "Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Paul Gray jamming Katsiaficas's head against the wall and telling him to quit yelling." Here we see the qualifications for a future president of MIT.

As events in 1970 intensified, students at Kent State University in Ohio and Jackson State University in Mississippi were shot and killed during anti-war protests. In the same month, Hojo and MIT prosecuted two leaders of the movement, and we were sentenced to 2 months prison time on May 20, 1970 for "disturbing a school," the specific charges of which we were innocent. The judge was so prejudiced and MIT (specifically HJ--as I was told by several insiders) so obstinate in sending me upriver, that even my mother received jail time for "contempt of court" when she rose to tell that the judge, "My son is not a criminal." Hojo has never apologized (although the judge did). Hojo's assistant, Constantine Simonidis, did manage to get my mother released from the Charles Street jail after one week (her original sentence was 10 days).

As HJ tells it, I "disappeared into the underground." HJ did succeed in sending me to prison, and to insure I would not return to the Institute, I was graduated while in solitary confinement. After my release from jail and a summer trip to California, I returned to Cambridge and together with another MIT alum and others, opened a non-profit, collective radical bookstore, The Red Book, within sight of MIT in Central Square. (The store continues to exist as the Lucy Parsons Center.) Given MIT's neglect and /or abysmal treatment of the neighborhoods adjoining it, it is no wonder that Hojo thought I disappeared into the underground. In actuality, I have continued my activism in California, Berlin, and Kwangju (Korea), earned a PhD in 1983, and am currently Professor of Humanities at Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston. I have authored or edited 9 books, am editor of *New Political Science*, and I even came back to my 25th MIT reunion and served for a time on the reunion committee.

Reading Howard Johnson's book crystallized for me how apparently good-hearted people can lead lives that facilitate atrocities related to killing millions of people in Vietnam. By writing a book that falsifies the events of 1969-1970, Hojo has attempted to cover up his own hostility and aggression—and his institutional complicity in the construction of weapons of mass destruction. His book is a vivid example of how seemingly mild-mannered and polite people can contribute to the functioning of a criminal system.

By distorting MIT's political history, Johnson does the Institute a disservice, one that mitigates the assimilation of valuable lessons to be learned from the rich history of MIT's internal debates, protests and discussions. Even if we overlook his not paying close attention to the facts of the matter, his failure to comprehend the value of protest in the construction of a better MIT is a serious problem that merits full and wide discussion.