



'The Pleasures of Being Out of Step': Nat Hentoff's Free Speech

By Cynthia Fuchs

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The Accumulation of Stuff

“Nat loves conflict.” Margot Hentoff doesn’t always agree with her husband. “Why?” wonders her questioner the documentary *The Pleasures of Being Out of Step*. “Oh it’s fun,” she smiles. “I love it too, it’s great when everybody disagrees with you and everything’s coming down and you can stand there and say, “This is what I believe.””

But if it’s good to believe and to take a stand on it, it’s also good to think through beliefs. The film touches on such complications repeatedly. Most plainly, it’s a portrait of Nat Hentoff, jazz critic, historian novelist, columnist and, since 2011, a fellow at the Cato Institute, with opinions offered by a predictable set of talking heads, including colleagues and Margot, as well as Hentoff himself. As such, it’s appropriately fractured and vaguely jazzy in its rhythms, connections between ideas a little hazy, transitions between scenes a little jittery.

Even as the film lays out Hentoff’s associations with thinkers and artists (among others, Dylan, Malcolm X, Charlie Mingus) or commends his prose, his passion, and early appreciation of jazz (when not everyone was so keen), it also poses some questions, as to the definitions and effects of principle. Put another way, *The Pleasures of Being Out of Step* wonders, repeatedly, about those pleasures, and if confronting “everybody” is a function of a sometimes disconcerting certainty, finding fun in the conflict in and of itself.

Of course Hentoff defends his thinking rigorously, including a longtime devotion to free speech, a principle that may in itself trump all others. But the film’s celebration is more complicated than that. Its occasional openness to uncertainty, not incidentally voiced by women interviewed in the film, makes Hentoff at once fascinating and infuriating, a rather perfect focus of conflict.

This focus begins but hardly ends with his notorious proclamations on various public issues, condemning bigotry but fighting for the civil rights of Nazis to march in Skokie, Illinois during the mid-’70s, insisting on individual rights to privacy but asserting a pro-life position during the ’80s. His defense of the Nazis in Skokie is recalled here by former record executive Regina Joskow, who says that his response to her outraged letter to him at the time was so eloquent, so “patient, gentle, and well thought out” that she came to understand the First Amendment in a new way.

That new way, as Floyd Abrams notes under images of *The Innocence of Muslims* (2012) and protests against it, holds that “We should allow speech which offends people, speech which can do some harm, speech which leads to pain, is a uniquely American approach, and when you carry it as far as Nat does, it takes a lot of talking about it and explaining.” The film’s juxtaposition of a “them” and “us” as Abrams speaks sets the free speech argument in a stark and somewhat reductive context, confirming the fearfulness and lunacy of censorship.

But even as this argument is reconfirmed in Hentoff’s defenses of all sorts of art—and the film includes Amiri Baraka and Stanley Crouch as defenders of this defender (“Nat didn’t care about any of it,” says Crouch, “It wasn’t that he was indifferent to hostility and all of that, it’s just that I think he thought that in a society where free speech is possible, there is a cost that one has to endure to be free”)—other contexts make for other stakes, and speech that does harm might need more speech. Indeed, this might follow on Hentoff’s own argument, that more talking is always preferable than less.

There may be a way to fold the free speech argument into Hentoff’s campaigns against men with AIDS and abortion, in the sense that privacy is not the same as speech. His onetime *Village Voice* editor Karen Durbin says he was “developing certain lines of social conservatism and one of the first ones, I think, had to do with homosexuality: his first reaction to AIDS was not good. He was not at all interested in privacy rights for men with AIDS.”

Similarly, his adamant pro-life stand (which he calls a “consistent ethic of right,” on a continuum with his position against the death penalty) seems opposite of his more familiar alliances with the left. As Anna Quindlen puts it during a debate clip included here, under this thinking, “I can be private in my own home, not in my own skin.”

Recalling her decision not to help him with research on an anti-abortion column, Durbin says this of Hentoff’s stand on abortion: “I don’t think it has intellectual underpinnings, I think it’s a personal thing that is unexamined.” While Hentoff doesn’t address this question (and so it may remain unexamined), *The Pleasures of Being Out of Step* doesn’t ignore it. Still, the question hovers, quietly. And as you know, more speech is always better.