Journal of the Arkansas Academy of Science

1966

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Recommended Citation

104

Arkansas Academy of Science Proceedings, Vol. 20, 1966

THE INTELLECTUALS: A CRITIQUE

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In recent years several self-conscious studies about intellectuals have been published. To name but a few:[1] Lewis Coser's **Men of ideas: a sociologist's view;** Christopher Lasch's **New radicalism in America: the intellectual as a social type;** Lewis Feuer's **The scientific intellectual;** Richard Hofstadter's **Anti-intellectualism in American life;** Jacque Barzun's **The house of intellect;** and George Huszar's **The intellectuals.**

In general these studies either avoid the knotty question, "what is an intellectual?" or they give us flabby answers. Coser, for example, said that "intellectuals are gatekeepers of ideas and fountainheads of ideologies."[2] Whatever is meant, the definition is broad and vague. Barzun, although more precise, had a similar failing. He said that intellectuals are men who carry brief cases.[3] Many writers have criticized Barzun's statement. Hofstadter, for example, wrote: "Few of us believe that a member of a profession, even a learned profession, is necessarily an intellectual in any discriminatory or demanding sense of the word."[4] He went on to say — and quite rightly — that "we know, for instance, that all academic men are not intellectuals."[5] However, he proposed a definition which, while narrower, was vaguer. An intellectual, he implied, is a creative person: "We do not think of him as being an intellectual if certain qualities are missing from his work — disinterested intelligence, generalizing power, free speculation, fresh observation, creative novelty, radical criticism."[6] (Most of us will admit that whatever a creative person is, he is rare.) Feuer focused on "men of science," those who insist on testing and on rejecting everything that does not correspond with the so-called "facts of experience."[7] In a curiously dialectic way, he dealt with a tradition which denies the validity of tradition as such. As for Huszar, he simply dodged the problem of definition. After saying that he was using the word in

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[1](New York, Free Press, 1965); (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965); (New York: Knopf, 1965); (New York: Knopf, 1963); (New York: Harper, 1958); (New York: Free Press, 1960).

[2]Coser, **Men of ideas,** p. x.

[3]Barzun, **House of intellect,** introduction.

[4]Hofstadter, **Anti-intellectualism in American life,** p. 26.

[5]**Ibid.**

[6]**Ibid.,** p. 27.

[7]Feuer, **The scientific intellectual,** introduction, and **passim.**

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"a relatively broad sense,"[8] he never quite explained in which "relatively broad sense."

Confusion? Worse confounded! Paul Valéry, a contemporary literary critic, expressed his confused reaction in this way:

> So, I was in my own abyss, unable to explain to a child, to a savage, to an archangel — to myself, this word **intellectual**, which gives nobody else any difficulty at all.

> It wasn't that images failed me. On the contrary, every time this terrible word consulted my mind, the oracle responded with a different image. All were naive. Not one of them precisely annulled the sensation of not understanding.

> Tatters of dream came to me.

> I formed figures which I called 'Intellectuals.' Men almost motionless, who caused great movement in the world. Or very animated men, by the lively action of whose hands and mouths, imperceptible objects were made manifest . . . Pardon me for telling you the truth. I saw what I saw.

> Men of **thought**, Men of **letters**, Men of **science**, Artists — Causes, living causes, . . . minimal causes, causes within causes and inexplicable to themselves — and causes whose effects were as vain, but at the same time as prodigiously important, **as I wished.** The universe of these causes and their effects existed and did not exist. This system of strange acts, productions, and prodigies had the all powerful and vacant reality of a game of cards. Inspirations, meditations, works, glory, talents, it took no more than a certain look to make these things nearly everything, and a certain other look to reduce them to nearly nothing. . .[9]

Despite their weakness, these studies are not without keen insight nor without considerable interest, especially Hofstadter's. For example, he suggested that we may identify intellectuals by their pious and playful attitudes toward ideas.[10] (Perhaps he meant that we can tell an intellectual by his split personality or, better still, by his tendency toward manic-depressive moods.) When, however, we consider piety and playfulness separately, they seem more meaningful. By stressing piety, Hofstadter meant that the intellectual lives for ideas, that he has a sense of dedication to the life of the mind, somewhat like a religious commitment; that he is **engage'** — he is pledged, committed, and enlisted. What most people are willing to admit, namely that ideas and

[8] Huszar (ed.), **The intellectuals,** p. 5.

[9] Paul Valéry, **Monsieur Teste,** trans by Jackson Mathew (New York: Knopf, 1948), pp. 61-62.

[10] Hofstadter, **Anti-intellectualism,** p. 27.

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abstractions are of major importance in human affairs, he conclusively feels.[11]

By piety Hofstadter probably meant to connote as well the idea that the role of an intellectual is, in good measure, inherited from the cleric. The clerical heritage is quite evident. Consider the tradition of personal discipline — the Germans call it **Sitzfleisch.** Consider, too, the traditional role of the cleric as caretaker of values, related to his own search for truth. Moreover, the professional thinker's involvement with symbols was said to have originated with the magical role of the priest. Ed Shils, a University of Chicago sociologist, summed up the tie between man of religion and man of ideas: "[Intellectuals exhibit] an unusual sensitivity to the sacred, an uncommon reflectiveness about the nature of their universe, and the rules which govern their society . . . [They] elicit, guide, and form the expressive dispositions within a society."[12]

By piety, finally, Hofstadter meant to recall that intellectuals not only are the upholders of the clerical tradition, they are also descendents of the biblical prophets — "inspired madmen,"[13] Coser calls them — who attacked men of power, who, in short, represent the millenial, the apocalyptic, the radical tradition. (More will be said about the intellectual and radicalism elsewhere in this paper. Suffice to say, meanwhile, that at best public opinion tends to think of him often as a radical, as an "inspired madman.")

Hofstadter used the idea of play as a counterpoise to piety. That is play checks the tendency of the committed intellectual to fanaticism. Moreover, the intellectual, more than any other person, is aware of the sheer delight in mental activity. We often speak of the play of the mind, do we not? Little doubt, then, but that an intellectual relished the play of the mind for its own sake. It very well might be, too, that this element of playfulness is an important factor in creative discovery, in the sense, at least, that an intellectual who enjoys playing with ideas is apt to turn answers into questions.

The element of play has held a significant role in the history of culture. Huizinga, a Dutch social historian, discussed this relationship in his celebrated study, **Homo ludens.**[14] Likewise the role of professional jokesters is historically tied to intellectuals. Take the medieval court jester, for instance. His chief social function was to play none of the expected roles but to say and do only the unexpected. Outside

[11]**Ibid.,** p. 28.

[12]Edward A. Shils, "The intellectuals and the powers: some perspectives for comparative analysis," in **Comparative studies in society and history,** I (Oct. 1958), p. 5.

[13]Coser, **Men of ideas,** p. viii.

[14](Boston, Beacon Press, 1955).

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of the social hierarchy, he could easily smile at, mimic, the usual social proprieties. Classified among the lowly and uprooted, he was nonetheless permitted to criticize, to ridicule the high and the mighty. Under the thin guise of laughter he satirized society's sacred cows. Surely the court jester has relevance for our understanding of intellectuals.[15] Their experience suggests that one is not free to prick the public's conscience unless one is outside of the social establishment, unless one is free, unless one is alienated. It suggests, too, the ambivalent relationship that jesters and intellectuals alike have often shared with society. Tolerated most of the time, occasionally even rewarded by society, they were, at the same time, scapegoats of society. It is a part of the intellectual's tragedy that the things he most values about himself and his work are quite unlike those society values in him. Society values him — and never more than today — because he can in fact be used for a variety of purposes, from popular entertainment to the design of weapons. But his playfulness is apt to seem a perverse luxury; his piety to seem nettlesome, if not actually dangerous. And neither quality is considered to contribute very much to the practical business of life.

Lasch came closest to defining with precision the term intellectual. An intellectual, he said simply, is a critic of society.[16] This definition has many advantages. First, it is quite consistent with the original use of the term, apparently first coined during the Dreyfus Affair. During the Affair the term acquired special meaning. It meant someone who was anti-clerical, anti-militaristic, anti-aristocratic, yet largely opposed to the values of a bourgeois society. He was identified with the revolutionary tradition. In short, a Dreyfusard — and hence an intellectual — was said to be a radical, an upholder of the Revolution, a critic of society.

This definition tends to incorporate most of the descriptive ideas about intellectuals. It incorporates the idea of the intellectual as cleric, as philosopher, as moralist, as skeptic, as satirist. It embraces, as well, the idea of alienation, which results often from a critic's clash with society. It includes the romantic tradition, with its emphasis upon individualism, and the populist tradition. (By populism I mean the belief in the creativity and the superior moral worth of the ordinary people.)

Lasch's definition would be considerably improved if he made two ideas more emphatic: first, the idea that the intellectual turns social critic largely because of the contradiction which he, in his role as custodian of morality, senses between what ought to be and what appears to be; second, that the intellectual, bent on making human existence appear rational and right, communicates his ideas to society which often finds them threatening. An intellectual, therefore, is a

[15]Ralf Dahrendorf, "Der Intellektuelle uno die Gesellschaft," **Zeit,** 13 (March 29, 1963).

[16]Lasch, **The new radicalism,** p. ix.

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social critic who persists on finding rational and empirical norms for what should be and who insists on communicating his critical thoughts.

Admittedly, this definition has at least two significant weaknesses: 1) It tends to exclude the thinker that shares all or some of the following values: authoritarianism, elitism, irrationalism, a tendency toward orthodoxy in religion, and, above all, fears change and prefers social stability. The suggested definition, in other words, eliminates those thinkers who are anti-intellectual. (They are anti-intellectual, it is emphasized, for many reasons, the most important being because they oppose the skeptical tradition, believing that excessive intellectual analysis or discussion can disrupt the foundation of order which they prize above all.) This deficiency can be handled easily enough — by calling such thinkers as Edmund Burke "anti-intellectual intellectuals," or, if one finds this combination of words objectionable, call them "anti-intellectualist intellectuals."[17] Whatever we call them, the history of intellectuals, sadly enough, has been dominated by the anti-intellectual intellectuals, by those who fear and oppose social critics, and not by intellectuals who see their historical role as being social critics.

2) Most academicians reject this definition. There very rejection, however, attests more to the decline of radicalism in America than to any essential shortcoming which the proposed definition may have. Several factors account for the decline of radicalism.

1) Social legislation and state intervention in economic life, the two central policies of the government from the New Deal to the Great Society, aroused the enthusiasm as it dulled the criticism of many intellectuals and near intellectuals. For their essential political and social expectations were being realized.

2) Liberalism, not radicalism, emerged with enhanced prestige after World War II. It went from one triumph to another, saved by the unexpected success of the capitalist order in sustaining a decent standard of living; saved, in the last analysis by the contemporary thirty years' war, hot and cold, which made that feat possible. Similarly, liberals point to their continued success at the polls which proves, they maintain, that unlike the radicals, they, at least, could be elected to power.

3) The ranks of liberals were increased and those of the radicals diminished by defectors from the revolutionary camp, and these recruits brought to liberalism the same polemical gifts, the same sense of commitment, and the same intolerance of opposition which they had learned as Bolsheviks.

[17]Morton White uses this definition. See his "Reflections as Anti-intellectualism," **Daedalus** (Summer, 1962), pp. 457-68. White makes a distinction between the anti-intellectual, who is hostile to intellectuals, and the anti-intellectualist, who is critical of the claims of Rational intellect in knowledge and in life.

4) Liberalism thrived after the war and radicalism declined because the idea of ideology, itself, became increasingly suspect; pragmatism now dominates the intellectual scene, to the point where it itself has become somewhat of an ideology. A recent critic analyzed this rise of political pragmatism: "Pragmatism has been wrongly called the philosophy of the practical man. It represents the anti-intellectualism of the American intellectual, who is overawed by the practical sweep of American life."[18] He observed that "in no country of the world is there such a tremendous gap between the values recognized by intellectuals and the values that actually govern political and economic realities."[19] Despite the deplorable circumstance, he continued to say, "in no country is the intellectual so preoccupied with affecting the course of politics to the exclusion of his intellectual interests. The less power he has of determining conditions, the more passionate, it would seem, is his will-o'the wisp quest of political influence."[20] It is here that the philosophy of pragmatism is most revealing.

5) The current liberal theory of pluralism is passionately opposed to the radical tradition. Consider, for example, the attacks of liberals upon the Berkeley Free Speech Movement.[21] They denounced the FSM as a threat to law and order and upheld stability as a morality unto itself. In effect, the "pluralists" said that no matter what the circumstances were, the students committed some kind of crime in bypassing normal processes of change, i.e., in not operating through the so-called channels.

The "pluralists'" emphasis on stability should not be taken to mean that they are opposed to political conflict. But conflict, they argue, should take place between contending leaders and political elites, as Seymour Lipset calls them. Conflict is healthy when it is between groups with different interests, so long as they do not seek to transform the political structure. So long as the demands of these groups are limited, the more conflicting groups the better.

"Equilibrium" is the metaphor commonly used by the "pluralists" to describe their social ideal. Equilibrium means balancing: the pairing-off of opposing forces and attitudes that negate each other and thus preserve the existing institutional structure, with only marginal changes. This kind of balancing means limited popular participation in politics, limited commitment of individuals or groups to principles and a "polity" which gives the widest latitude in decision-making to

[18]Benjamin Ginzburg, "Science under Communism" **New republic**, LXIX (Jan. 6, 1932), pp. 208-09.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid.

[21]For a discussion of the "pluralists" and the Berkeley FSM, James F. Petras and Michael Shute, "Communications: Berkeley '65," **Partisan Review**, (Spring, 1965), pp. 314-23.

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those already in decision-making positions. The values which the "pluralists' called democratic in actuality are a threat to the vision of an open society, for they actually describe the means to preserve an elitist, a bureaucratic society. To this extent, they are anti-intellectual intellectuals.

6) The complex society which emerged after World Yar II has likewise contributed to the decline of radicalism in America. For one thing, it increased the demand for an educated class. Many new jobs at relatively high salaries suddenly became available in the academy, in government, and in industry. The prices which professional thinkers paid for their rise in status is high — by joining the establishment they have given up much of their freedom. Whereas, in the past, young scholars faced an unfriendly world alone, or together in their bohemias, they now sink into middle class suburbs, country homes, country clubs, and college towns. Far more insidious is that slow attrition which has removed the challenge, the whole idea of the intellectual vocation — the idea of a life dedicated to values that cannot be realized by a commercial, capitalistic civilization.

7) The rise of a so-called "mass culture" has reinforced the liberal community's fears of democratic movement. They prefer a cultural elitism.

8) Finally, old radicals and liberals alike view the cultural expressions of the new radicals with hostility, calling them beatniks, or hipsters, or dropouts. In at least one important cultural sense the new radicals are dropouts — dropouts from history. The withdrawal from school, so typical of their generation, and so inscrutable to ours, is best understood as an existential symbol of their rejection of the notion of cultural continuity and progress, which our graded education system represents in institutional form. Lester Fiedler has described the new radicals with understanding:

> It is not merely a matter of their rejecting what happens to have happened just before them, as the young do, after all, in every age; but of their attempting to disavow the very idea of the past, of their seeking to avoid recapitulating it step by step — up to the point of graduation into the present.

> Specifically, the tradition from which they strive to disengage is the tradition of the human, as the West has defined it, Humanism itself, and more especially, the cult of reason. . .[22]

The new radicals, in short, are manifesting, in an exaggerated but significant way, the same tendencies as the liberals. Yet liberals are equally firm in using the new radicals to justify their disillusionment, or plain opposition to radicalism.

[22]Leslie A. Fiedler, "The new mutants," **Partisan Review** (Fall, 1965), p. 509.