

INTELLECTUALS: PUBLIC AND PROLETARIAN

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Russell Jacoby, The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe, New York: Basic Books, 1987.

More than a generation ago, in the 1950s, modern Western culture reached one of its turning points and since then has never been the same. At that time, for a brief moment, the hopes of modern progressivism were expressed for the last time with sincerity, while simultaneously the rising technological corporatism, which would supplant progressive public morality, began to confidently absorb its ascendant power. In the United States the dissenting tradition of mature liberalism, radical pragmatism, would have one more attempt at creating a genuine public situation through the New Left. That effort would however demonstrate its irrelevance and its irrevocable failure when billy clubs were used in the streets of Chicago and the guns went off at Kent State and Jackson State. The generation whose myth was that it could "change the world, rearrange the world" proved to be an afterthought of a dead liberal fantasy. The real protagonist of the 1960s was state and corporate power, which proved to itself how easily it could subdue protest. The children of abundance voted for rock concerts over revolution, unable or unwilling to spill their blood for their ideals. The state progressed, forcing liberation movements into official channels and using administration to conceal a deadlocked and divided society.

Part of the great transformation that occurred from the 1950s through the 1960s was the migration of intellectuals into the bureaucratized universities, which became integral components of the power complexes of technological corporatism. That migration and its implications in cultural politics is the theme of Russell Jacoby's *The Last Intellectuals*, which documents the demise of the free-floating intellectual in North America and the rise of the corporatized mind that has leased itself to a specialized body

of professional learning. To say that Jacoby stands at the end of the radical pragmatist tradition would be inaccurate, because that tradition is extinct, as his own argument demonstrates. He stands beyond radical pragmatism, using its values to lament the absence of public intellectuals who might be sustained by those values. In effect, he does for democratic dissent what George Grant, in *Lament for a Nation*, did for Canadian conservatism: he sings a dirge, but Jacoby would deny this. He still nurses hope for the authentic public of radical pragmatism and somehow still adheres to the myth structure of the social democratic John Dewey and the populist C. Wright Mills. Unfortunately, his only audience is composed of the bureaucratized intellectuals in the academy, his own friends who have betrayed the progressive cause. He cannot offer them a refreshed definition of that cause but only a documentation of their failure to commit themselves to it. No wonder he is so tentative, guarded, and reserved in his moral judgments. He speaks from the height of an extinct ideal to those who are mired in the technical wash of the real.

The term "radical pragmatism" does not enter into Jacoby's text, which remains strangely clear of any explicit political or philosophical focus. The lack of any overt standpoint in the work is in great part a result of the standpoint that tacitly informs it. American radical democracy in the twentieth century has always harbored an uneasy equivocation between form and content. In one respect it is strongly committed to civil liberties and social pluralism, which means that it must welcome or at least allow conservative and even reactionary tendencies into its imagined public space. In another respect, however, it supports the popular forces against the vested interests and their apologists, tacking toward socialism in its moments of struggle.

The pluralist-libertarian side of radical pragmatism and its social-democratic camp were harmonized in John Dewey's generation by the *deus ex machina* of a spontaneous and automatic historical drift toward social democracy, only if the public space were kept open for inquiry, criticism, and social experimentation. By the time C. Wright Mills arrived on the scene, the optimism of the "common faith" had been overwhelmed by the "great celebration" of American imperial power: the radical pragmatist speaking to incipient publics, had become the marginal dissenter who could scarcely look to history for support. Now enter Jacoby, who understands that history is against him. He does not dare make a forthright commitment to the tradition of which he lies beyond but seeks to defend. He wants radical pragmatists but settles for lamenting the dearth of public intellectuals of whatever persuasion. John Dewey believed that a genuine public space could be created, C. Wright Mills was marginal to a vanishing public space, and Russell Jacoby speaks across a public void into the sanctum of academic bureaucracy.

The mix of socialism, populism, social welfare, pragmatic experimentation, and civil libertarianism that fueled radical democratic protest and dis-

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sent through the first half of the twentieth century, and that allowed independent thinkers the possibility of synthesizing unique positions and of remaking those positions as circumstances changed, has decomposed. All of these elements are present in Jacoby's text at one point or another, but they are never synthesized into a vision, which is not Jacoby's fault, since it is not possible to be a public intellectual in a public void. If Jacoby can be called to account it is only for failing to take seriously the consequences of his central thesis: that the intellectuals of the "war baby" and "baby boom" generations migrated into the university. The public space imploded and was replaced by the externalized mind of the mass electronic media, manipulated by state and capitalist conglomerates. The freelance intellectual wholesalers of ideas to "opinion leaders" gave way to the direct marketing of images by such mind factories as think tanks, advertising agencies, and public relations complexes. The swamping of public opinion by organizational opinion was not caused by the migration of the intellectuals but was one of the causes of that migration. Where else could those who wanted to think for themselves and to express their thought to others go, except to the university, even if they would encounter there a constraining disciplinary system that might bid fair to turn them into timorous intellectual proletarians?

Russell Jacoby introduces a deliberate equivocation into the title of his work. The idea of "last intellectuals" might refer to the extinction of a social type, but it might also denote the most recent group of specimens in a continuing line. It is surely impossible to predict what the future might hold in the way of renewed progressivism, but Jacoby's own rhetorical strategy shows how far he is from considering the second possibility seriously. When, in the later sections of his work, he discusses the contemporary academic mind in the humanities, he delivers some of his choicest polemics against the Marxist critics who have adopted poststructuralism and deconstruction. Noting that the "new Marxism converges with, indeed partly promotes, a 'poststructuralism' that concentrates on texts, signs, and signifiers as the stuff of interpretation" (172), he then declares that "(t)he theory of fetishism, which Marx set forth, turns into its opposite, the fetishism of theory" (173). One can agree wholeheartedly with those remarks and with the observation that "literary theory expands as literature dwindles" (173), and then acknowledge that Jacoby is just as trapped as his adversaries are in the meta-theory of discourses. What is he doing but showing how one sort of discourse, which was promoted by small groups of relatively independent intellectuals during the first half of the twentieth century, has been replaced by another sort of discourse, which is furthered by bands of turf-conscious academic bureaucrats? The point is not that Jacoby's intentions are the same as those whom he criticizes — he is not, as they are, engaged in a corrupt form of thought, academic thinking, which invents theoretical movements as a means to the institutional promotion of academic cliques; the best that he has done is to present a discourse

on discourses, albeit a refreshing and heterodox one. Language, rhetoric, communication, text, discourse, semiology, and narratology have become such central terms in the humanities because the possibility of shared culture has become so problematic. If the imagined public space of progressivism has been effaced by the externalization of the organized mind in the mass media, it is intelligible that the progressives should retreat into the hyper-space of texts where they still may exercise the right of free interpretation. Jacoby joins them in their hyper-space, an intruder reminding them that there once might have been a public space or at least the hope for one, in which discourses were about great issues and events, and not about canonical texts.

In his "Preface" Jacoby remarks that he "will employ, but not exhaustively define, various categories — bohemia, intellectuals, generations, cultural life," because "(t)oo many definitions, too much caution, kill thought" (xii). The lack of definitions in his text makes it open for interpretation, sending the reader on a hunt for some conceptual clarification that would make an internal reading and analysis possible. Fortunately, late in the work, he provides a fragment of a definition that reveals the structure of his argument: "Yet the decisive category here is not intellectuals, those who cherish thinking and ideas, but public intellectuals, who contribute to open discussions" (221). The binary opposition of open and closed discussion is the hermeneutical key to unlocking Jacoby's text. More than anything else, he is concerned with the character of discourse, just as the other leaders of his cultural generation are, and his text tells the story, through a series of strategic and striking vignettes, of how the open discussion of public affairs by intellectuals courting an enlightened public opinion gave way to the closed discussion of academic bureaucrats deploying jargons to gain peer acceptance and preferment. It is a sorry tale, as Jacoby knows, and he relates it engagingly by devoting the first half of the work to the demise of the public intellectual, and its second half to the rise of the academic bureaucrat or, if one likes, professional. The following comments will trace the two moments of Jacoby's tale, retelling some aspects and also amplifying and amending others.

The Closure of Discussion

Russell Jacoby dwells on that borderland between philosophy, sociology, and politics that Georg Simmel called cultural history, a field that has today become the meeting ground for all of those intellectuals who want to speak to the general and significant aspects of the human condition without becoming caught in the toils of over-specialization. Since the 1960s that cultural history has gained such an importance as the last redoubt for embattled humanists and symbolizes the problem of public vacancy that Jacoby addresses. As human affairs have been distributed for study among an ever proliferating array of technical specialties, and as comprehensive

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interpretation of human affairs has been submitted to the mass media, generalists have encountered an inability to find a language adequate to characterize their circumstances and to communicate their insights to a wider audience. They have been thrust back into the past, particularly to the era of high modernism, to discover a proper vocabulary and idiom. It is still possible to specialize in the generalities of past thinkers and to use their words as battering rams against the fortresses of jargon erected by the coterie of academic bureaucrats. Interpretation of aging texts has become the key weapon in the emerging battle of the books, and is the shadow play in which combative intellectuals engage it as their substitute for direct involvement with issues. Old texts display a coherence that is no longer possible to achieve through a direct reflection on the public situation. It is comforting and expedient to immerse oneself in discourses that were intended to give a sense of completion, even if their deconstruction is the only goal.

As a cultural historian, Jacoby belongs to the line of thought that was initiated after World War I by Karl Mannheim and Jose Ortega y Gasset, each of whom independently discovered the generation as a central concept in sociological inquiry. For Mannheim and Ortega, the generation was a specially privileged concept because, unlike the more static and structural ideas of classical sociology, it incorporated the notion of change, that is, what Mannheim called "the dynamic insight," into itself. Jacoby's theorization of the transformation from open to closed discussion in North American intellectual life depends upon the distinction between three generations. The intellectuals who were born at the turn of the century were nurtured in urban bohemia, wrote in independent magazines for an educated public, and were marked by a critical independence from established concentrations of institutional power, especially the universities. Such thinkers as Lewis Mumford and Edmund Wilson are, for Jacoby, the paradigmatic public intellectuals, free from dogmatism, fresh in their critical approach, and unencumbered by the constraints of academic professionalism. He recurs to them as his standard-bearers in the battle of the books. The generation of 1900, the high watermark of the public intellectual, was succeeded by the generation of 1920, which carried through the transition from the public to the academic intellectual. Its members, for example, Daniel Bell and Alfred Kazin, often began their careers outside the university but became attached to it in the crucial decade of the 1950s when the social conditions for public intellectual life disappeared. The shift was completed by the generation born in the 1940s, nearly none of whose members failed to heed the academic siren song, thereby abandoning the public space for the seminar room and the conference hall.

The basic outline of Jacoby's thesis is unexceptionable and is recounted with verve and precision. Indeed, he has identified a phenomenon that cannot fail to absorb the interest of any thoughtful person who is perplexed by an inability to think adequate thoughts about the contemporary cir-

cumstance. Russell Jacoby is deeply correct when he documents and laments the loss of public intellectuals. His point is amply demonstrated by the fact that anyone who seeks ideas that might nourish life, sharpen perception, and enrich thought must be driven back to the generation of 1900 and to those preceding it. Has there been any philosopher, for example since John Dewey, who has been able to crystallize debate on public affairs and to contextualize that debate in the terms of a provocative metaphysics, the categories of which refer to direct experience? Asking such a question reveals the poverty of the contemporary North American intellect. Ambitious and confident thought about human existence, expressed in a clear and intelligible vocabulary, has been replaced, at best, by the bricolage of postmodernism, poking among the detritus of high modernism; normally, by hermeneutical studies of canonized thinkers; and, at worst, by the abstract empiricism of exegesis and the preparation of "critical editions." The generation of 1940 can do nothing better than to recur to the writings of the generations of 1900 and before, forming endless study circles devoted to the memories of the intellectual heroes of the past, those who comprised what Nikos Kazantzakis called "the international of the spirit," the republic of letters. The generation of 1920, which prepared the way for the present, gains little respect or attention for good reason. That group of intellectuals, with such notable exceptions as C. Wright Mills and Marshall McLuhan, was characterized by an unseemly lust for wealth, status, and power, and an ugly preoccupation with the Cold War.

There is, however, another perspective. While much of Jacoby's argument rests upon the temptations of security, if nothing else, that an expanding academia availed to the intellectuals of the 1950s and 1960s, he also provides the beginnings of a sociological analysis of the erosion of public space. Public intellectuals had, prior to World War II, the common meeting and training grounds of the bohemian sections of major cities, ecological niches of low rents and cheap restaurants where aspiring writers and critics, and the politically concerned could exchange ideas, mount publishing projects, and find markets for their productions. The bohemian seedbed for public intellectuals vanished in the 1950s under the impact of suburbanization, "redevelopment," gentrification, and the encroachment of the slum. There was no longer any material basis for the sustenance of the independent spirit. The public intellectual was simultaneously driven out of nurturant urban haunts by consumer capitalism and drawn into the universities by the carrots of tenure, a modicum of academic freedom, and the possibility, for the best, brightest, and most compliant of a dazzling array of "perks" such as grants, fellowships, institutes, international travel, and status honor.

One cannot, indeed should not, quarrel with Jacoby's account. How else is it possible to understand sympathetically why the ardent members of the generation born in the 1940s rebelled so strenuously against the corrupt professionalism that they saw as undergraduates and even more as

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graduate students? It was corrupt, the guilty corruption of elders who either knew or should have known that they had betrayed the public function of the intellect to disclose society to itself, not to apologize for its major concentrations of power. The generation born in the 1920s failed to anticipate the protest movements of the 1960s because it did not want to: it had found a new niche. Nevertheless, the reasons for which the generation of 1940 followed its forebears, with far more willingness and docility than they had evinced, into the academic padded cell calls for a deeper analysis than Jacoby provides.

The disappearance of bohemia, which is the major social occurrence upon which Jacoby grounds his sociological account of the demise of the public intellectual, is far too flimsy a base on which to build the cultural history of our times. The conditions for an open public discourse, in which free spirits adopt positions on public affairs from independent analysis and personal commitment, what Robert Michels called "scientific conviction," and then alter them in response to changing events and the play of debate, include the existence of public intellectuals but are not exhausted by their presence. Indeed, public intellectuals are not primarily the consequence of low rents and cheap restaurants, but of a culture which is both diverse enough to permit a variety of opinions about the possibilities for social betterment, and coherent enough to allow those possibilities to refer to a general situation which those who promote opinions acknowledge that they share. That is, public intellectuals can only appear and function in a public situation, a general human context which is not so rigidly defined that it prohibits the serious entertainment of fresh possibilities for its transformation and reorganization.

Open public discourse requires that society be made a shared object by the parties to discussion and that it is amenable to change by what John Dewey called "publics," groups which respond to the effects of organized activities in ever novel ways. Public intellectuals speak for publics in a common situation, but the big story of recent generations has been the relentless bureaucratization of life, which has limited the genuine possibilities for change, and the disappearance of a common situation, which has led to the fragmentation of society into hermetic masses unable to communicate with one another in a common idiom. Bureaucracy eliminates adaptability as it simultaneously fragments publics and reduces them to organized interest groups. There is a public void. Even if low rents and cheap restaurants in relatively safe neighborhoods were somehow to reappear miraculously, there would be nowhere else to go than the university for intellectuals who wanted to retain any vestige of independence. Technological corporatism is bureaucratized feudalism — feudalism on a functional rather than a territorial basis. That is our circumstance.

The Opening Of Externalized Mind

The classical sociology and political science of the turn of the century traced the transition from traditional to modern society across the main dimensions of human activity. Now, as the end of the twentieth century approaches, the effort to think comprehensively about human affairs is once again challenged to describe, account for, and foresee the consequences of another decisive change. The great theme of present times is the problematicity of modernity, the question about whether modern life is the terminus of the human process, now revealed for just what it must be in all of its significant aspects, or whether it has already been supplanted by another era, which for lack of any apparent essential structure, has to be denominated as postmodern. One thing within the confusion of the current culture wars does seem to be clear: the various myths that provided modern social life with hope for the future, with a final cause, have been exhausted. The question is whether a new myth structure is emerging to inform and inspire life, or whether human beings must at last confront all their frailty, unredeemed by saving thoughts.

The Last Intellectuals occupies an important position in the debate and discussion about the meaning of modernity. Despite his reluctance to make a forthright philosophical and political commitment Russell Jacoby sides with the modernists. His essential contribution to contemporary thought is to have demonstrated the exhaustion of one of the powerful modern myths, the progressive democratic myth of open discussion in a genuine public situation. The public intellectual is the ideal citizen in the democratic polity — Thomas Jefferson's natural aristocrat who takes upon himself, with a fully self-conscious responsibility, the office of leavening and leading an enlightened public opinion. In this sense Jacoby should be placed among thinkers like Jurgen Habermas and Richard Rorty, who in different ways continue the line of liberal and radical democratic ideas proceeding from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. The ongoing "conversation," which is promoted by Rorty as the essence of bourgeois democracy, and the "ideal speech situation" that is defended by Habermas as the telos of emancipation, find their counterpart in Jacoby's ideal of "open discussions." Jacoby, however, is not confident that the modern democratic idea is still viable. Just a small shift in attitude would allow him to declare the exhaustion of democracy, but he clings to that terribly delusive liberal hope that the end of fundamental human transformation has not arrived, that there still might be some happy surprises for us beyond the horizon. His self-imposed task is to push the academic intellectuals out of the closet and into the public void, but one cannot expect them to budge: The "age of discussion" has ended, although democracy remains the only verbal formula available for political rhetoric, not only in the West but throughout the world. The great change in the process of political communication

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that must now be described and understood is the replacement of personal opinion and group ideology by organizational opinion.

The strength of Jacoby's account of the academic intellectual resides in his ability to show how the discussion of human affairs in the university has been captured in inaccessible technical jargons which, for the most part, take cultural artifacts such as texts for their objects and avoid any direct encounter with common or personal life. Jacoby seems to believe, although as always he is elusive about such matters, that open discussions might be renewed if intellectuals once again adopted a lucid and accessible idiom. The bare facts of the matter, however, show that he is searching for regeneration in the wrong place. There is no doubt that the preponderance of academic output today in the humanities and the social sciences is worth reading only by those who hope to use it for their professional profit, that is, to insert themselves into some micro-discourse promoted by one of the dizzying array of cliques fighting to entrench themselves in the academic hierarchy. That, nevertheless, is not the whole picture. There are probably more intellectuals practicing today than there have been in the history of the world and many of them, academic and otherwise, are writing in the vernacular. The opinion magazines still exist along with an outpouring of position papers and monographs from the vigorous industry of think tanks and institutes. The prestige papers have opened their columns to op-ed pieces, every interest group and circle has a newsletter, and every organization has a public information department. Indeed, it is not possible even to comprehend, much less absorb, the products of contemporary discussion, which do not merely form the midden heap of an information explosion, rather an opinion explosion. There is a plentitude of open discussions, but there has been a closure or implosion of a coherent public space and an opening out of the externalized organizational mind, a collective mind, divided within itself into thousands of fragments.

There are, largely, three major forms of opinion about political affairs in contemporary society. Jacoby has admirably documented one of them, the opinion generated by academic coteries for their own internal consumption, but he has neglected the other two, both of which help to explain why the public intellectual has been pushed out of the scene. Mass opinion, merchandised through the electronic media, by-passes any conceptual content in favor of images that, as Murray Edelman has long pointed out, function mainly to provide a sense of symbolic security to anxious populations, but which, under special circumstances of institutional need or crisis, may also be contrived to panic or mobilize. Mass opinion exists in a twilight zone between cognition and emotion, fostering favorable or unfavorable attitudes and dispositions toward political and cultural objects. It is not unitary, except in its overriding tendency to induce complacency and a brittle substitute for confidence — the mass must feel secure but not so secure that it cannot be readily panicked or mobilized — but or-

dinarily reflects the confusion bred by the conflicts of adjustments among major organizations and leading institutions. Mass opinion itself has little theoretical or political interest because it is derived from another form of opinion that stands behind and generates it.

What might be called "responsible opinion" is the floating mediation between the interests of the great competing organizations of contemporary technological corporatism, each of which is directed to secure its short-term survival and advantage, and all of which have a general concern for maintaining the institutional environment in which they operate. Responsible opinion is coordinated by the powerful concentrations of national print media, such as the prestige papers and major news magazines, that perform the perpetual function of achieving a transient coalescence of judgments about the methods by which to manage the political, social, and economic tensions that continually recur as organizations clash and, in the process, disturb less mobilized social groups. Public opinion has vanished, having been split into the manipulativenness of mass opinion and the struggle by intellectuals in the hire of bureaucratic complexes to form responsible opinion.

Perhaps the most important characteristic of responsible opinion in the light of Jacoby's analysis is the fact that it is a tangled web of open discussions, the simulacrum of a genuine public discourse. Indeed, it can be nothing other than nakedly exposed because the world of technological corporatism has no coordinating center that might harbor secret designs, but is composed of massive disarticulated and specialized bureaucratic complexes that must bid against one another for resources and somehow control heterogeneous masses, some of which nurse chronic resentment because of structural disadvantage. The bureaucratic complexes do their bargaining and fight their battles in the light of day through the offices of the media, which provide them with an externalized social mind. Open discussions, indeed, are ubiquitous, but they entirely lack guidance from the principles of public good which are the substance of democratic myth. Appeals to principle are the staple of responsible opinion, but they are merely rhetorical devices that are adopted and rejected in accordance with the requirements of short-term adjustment. Responsible opinion is determined by a strict prohibition on ever problematizing the public as a coherent object upon which to project totalizing possibility, and by an easy permission to deploy past convictions as rhetoric. This deprived spiritual environment forecloses the appearance of public intellectuals and encourages, indeed necessitates, the advocate intellectual, the policy analyst, the bureaucratic ethicist, the arts advisor, and the artist of public relations, all of whom represent the worldly counterparts of the closeted academician.

The public intellectual has vanished permanently, elbowed out by the overgrowth of complex organization that has found its own way of thinking through political life, poorly, even disastrously, to be sure, but still its

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own indispensable way. Can one expect the bureaucracies to surrender the control that they have gained over the opinion phase of political activity? Who might wrest it from them, an aroused citizenry led by people of scientific conviction? The intellectuals of the generation born in the 1940s are the first intellectual cohorts to completely become an intellectual proletariat. Nothing prohibits a young or middle-aged intellectual from doing everything that public intellectuals once did. Indeed, many still do, if only part-time. Nevertheless, one who enters the combat of open discussions armed only with the vernacular must, if he could ward off madness, entertain a sense of the ridiculous. At best his words will find their place in the mix of responsible opinion, appropriated by one or another vested interest or interest aspiring to be vested. He will know himself as proletarian, not as the inspiration of the proletariat.

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