

Introduction: Intellectuals, Politics, and Theory

A recurrent theme within virtually all currents of social and political theory has been the effort to conceptualize the role of intellectuals in both the reproduction of order and the struggle for change. Since the time of the Greeks, intellectuals have taken on a decisive, even Promethean, status as political actors who could formulate ideologies and discourses, inspire the formation of large communities, and legitimate belief systems for mass publics. From Plato to Hobbes to Lenin, intellectuals assumed powerful functions in establishing and codifying the rules and norms of political life. Occupying dominant positions within the social division of labor, intellectuals have stood at the summit of great political formations and events, as the prime movers of local struggles, parties, revolutions, and states—in practice as well as in theory. Especially in moments of great turbulence and change, history reflects an intimate dialectic between political ideas and social transformation within which intellectuals play a crucial, though always mediated and shifting, political role. As a critical repository of worldviews, from traditional religions to Enlightenment rationality to liberalism and Marxism, intellectual groupings have commonly provided a linkage between power and knowledge, governance and legitimacy, movements and ideology; in other words, they have been indispensable historical actors.

Classical debates around the political role of intellectuals never seem to have been resolved, as a survey of recent literature on the topic suggests.¹ Theorists have, at various points, defined intellectuals as detached vanguards, as a “new” class or stratum for themselves, as organic to broad social forces, and as outsiders or rebels alienated from the dominant culture. Most approaches seek to identify universalistic tendencies and ambitions while overlooking the dynamic, fluid, and sometimes contradictory relationship of intellectuals to politics, social movements, and class structures. As bearers of (imputed or actual) collective consciousness, intellectuals can be a significant catalyst of local

struggles against multiple forms of power; within that same process they can also bring into being new structures designed to preserve and embellish their own privilege as owners of intellectual capital. From this standpoint, the complex role of intellectuals within the ebb and flow of contending social forces—especially in the modern period with its abundant crises—needs to be thoroughly investigated.

Such inquiries, with few exceptions, have been conducted by theorists whose work is situated largely outside the mainstream currents of higher education: Marcuse, Habermas, Gouldner, Debray, Konrad and Szelenyi, and more recently Jacoby.² The most insightful critical work has been directed against the very idea of academic specialization. One problem with academic culture in the United States is that it has typically avoided coming to grips with the larger *political* dimensions of intellectual life in advanced industrial society. Despite vast resources poured into the humanities and social sciences annually—despite the largesse received from government agencies, universities, foundations, and commissions—academics have done very little to theorize the nature of intellectual work, including their own, within both the academy and society as a whole. Scholarly work tends to be narrowly conceived, technocratic, and self-consumed, obsessed as it is with “manageable” problems that are not likely to threaten conservative professional norms or social priorities. While the modern university congratulates itself on its commitment to liberal humanism, open pursuit of truth, and respect for pluralism of views, the reality is that bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, and politicians tend to dominate the academic landscape. This is a milieu in which a critical social theory of intellectuals cannot be expected to win much interest.

As agents of legitimation (and delegitimation), intellectuals have asserted a variety of claims to truth and knowledge grounded in religion, private property, science and technology, and of course the state—each with its peculiar blend of traditions, ideologies, and social relations. The political involvement of intellectuals can be traced from preindustrial society through the early phases of industrialization to the era of modernity and then to current stage of “postindustrialism,” or “post-Fordism,” with its celebrated crisis of modernity. As corporate capitalism matured, the rationalization of all spheres of life eroded classical hegemonic ideologies—for example, religion, nationalism, and liberalism—while giving rise to a new normative structure grounded in Enlightenment rationality. But the absence, on a society-wide scale, of any compelling purposive framework that could give meaning to social existence created in time an ideological and cultural void exacerbated by the predatory growth of corporate and state power. The struggle

for renewed meaning and discourse in an increasingly rationalized world generated a diffuse but nonetheless overpowering postmodern response, characterized by a restless intellectual probing that challenges the modernist emphasis on progress, reason, and emancipation.

The type of intellectual predominant in preindustrial society was the detached, genteel, cleric or scholar who monopolized the traditional forms of discourse. While appearing in some respects to stand “above” class divisions, this stratum was the bearer of hegemonic ideologies that justified aristocratic power, the monarchy, and the church. With the revolutionary turbulence of late eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe, the traditional intellectual gave way, at crucial junctures, to the Jacobin mode of intellectual whose historical debut arrived with the French Revolution and whose political role in countries like the United States, Italy, and Russia was also decisive.

Jacobinism entered into both the liberal and Marxist traditions despite a profound hostility toward elitist and statist solutions common to both theories, and of course it shaped the fascist and Stalinist experiences of the twentieth century. The revolt against Jacobinism moved in a broad range of theoretical and political directions, both within and outside of Marxism—from Sorel and the anarcho-syndicalists to the council Communists and the Western Marxism of Lukacs and Luxemburg, each stressing the primacy of mass self-activity against a state-centered politics. Perhaps the most sophisticated reaction against Jacobinism was Gramsci’s theory of “organic” intellectuals, which was congruent with Marx’s own (but less developed) view of intellectuals. Gramsci sought a transcendence of Jacobin and popular or “spontaneist” extremes, premised on the view that intellectual functions are indispensable to revolutionary change—but only as an expression of class forces and the political struggles that grew out of them. An organic model of this sort has surfaced from time to time since Gramsci wrote in the 1930s, although rarely along the lines originally theorized by him.

The predominant intellectual type in the modern period, however, has been the technocratic variant whose ascendancy comes with advanced levels of industrial development and the rationalization of social life that accompanies it. Technocratic intellectuals serve to legitimate, in various ways, the smooth functioning of bureaucratic state capitalism and other forms of industrial society. They are located primarily in the state bureaucracy, universities, corporations, the military, the media, and the culture industry. Evolving out of and against this stratum is a critical intelligentsia situated in higher education, the media, and the arts but typically confined to local spheres of influence and therefore lacking the cohesion of the technocrats. The epochal con-

flict between technocratic and critical intellectuals, between hegemonic and potentially counterhegemonic worldviews, shapes the political and cultural terrain of advanced industrial society.³ It is no longer possible to argue, in the fashion of some Frankfurt School theorists, that rationalization means a system of total domination in which oppositional ideologies and practices are fully negated. The crisis of modernity, perhaps more acute than its theorists first anticipated, opens up new ideological fissures in the power structure that technocratic intellectuals have been unable to seal.⁴ If the enormous complexity of modernity undercuts the viability of an old-style Jacobin model, the likelihood that new subversive forms will appear on a large scale within postindustrial society may increase even if such forms turn out to be less explosive.

The multiple assaults on modernity have disrupted the prospects for a fully rationalized universe of discourse; the linkage between global belief systems and political action—once the lynchpin of social change—has become increasingly mediated and refracted since the 1960s. If power remains concentrated within the state, corporate, and military structures, knowledge itself seems to have become more and more dispersed, localized, and fragmented. It follows that the opposition to forms of domination, where such opposition is set in motion, is likewise dispersed and pluralistic. In this context the universities and media become a major arena of social and ideological conflict even as they become more vulnerable to the pressures of rationalization. The idea that higher education constitutes an autonomous sphere where truth and knowledge can be dispassionately sought is now, more than ever, a myth owing in part to grandiose technocratic efforts to manage and restrict the flow of communication. With every technological and bureaucratic advance have come new forms of local resistance, mirrored first in the spread of popular movements and then in the diffusion of academic alternatives such as Critical Theory, radical political economy, poststructuralism, feminism, social ecology, and neo-Marxism. Efforts to construct a fortress multiversity over the past three decades have thus failed, at least in part, when one considers the growth of a significant radical intelligentsia precisely since those efforts were launched. If this subculture assimilates many problematic features of the surrounding academic milieu (e.g., positivism, fetishism of technology, professionalism), its galvanizing potential for future social movements cannot be discounted.

New strains of critical social theory and local movements that accompany the postmodern shift (uneven as it may be) signifies an evolving new role for oppositional intellectuals. As a previously sta-

ble, orderly system of modernity gives way to dispersed and fragmented centers of discourse, critical intellectual work itself takes on a relatively localized, parochial definition even in the midst of globalizing economic and political forces. In part this is a response to the unraveling of Fordist-Keynesian strategies of growth and control in the postwar period.⁵ It is simultaneously a reaction against the global penetration of commodity production, of bureaucratic expansion, of mass society and the culture industry, into the deepest recesses of everyday life.

This crisis of modernity is probably nowhere more visible than in the ecological breakdown of urban industrial society, with its emphasis on endless and uncontrolled economic growth, technological manipulation of nature, and the excesses of consumerism and resource depletion. Given its facile connection between human progress and production for profit, the ethos of modernity that stems from Enlightenment rationality will eventually, if it is not countered, lead to planetary disaster—whether by means of war or environmental catastrophe. Not surprisingly, this ideology of progress (contained within both liberalism and Marxism) embraces manifestly technocratic and masculine forms of discourse enshrined in the impulse to dominate nature. In opposition to a growth-centered, predatory approach to development, an ecologically sensitized postmodernism upholds the ideal of balance, openness, and diversity, which suggests an organic equilibrium between society and nature. Quite clearly, the production, consumption, and stepped-up exploitation of natural resources has already outpaced the capacity of the ecosystem to sustain the old models of accumulation. In this way too modernity leads to a fundamental degrading of social existence.⁶

Postmodernism turns away from the idea of developmental logic—of a rational accounting of history—that informs the whole spectrum of modernist theories: Marxism, social democracy, Leninism, liberalism. To the degree that *any* politics can be identified with this new phase, it is dispersed and tied more closely to the “micropolitics” of new social movements (feminist, ecology, antiwar, urban protest, etc.) than to the familiar realm of large-scale organizations (parties, unions, interest groups, the state), though of course the distinctions are often blurred.⁷ Transcendence of modernity calls forth a questioning of technocratic order and the rationalist pretensions of state, corporate, and military power. Global identities and loyalties—class, national, religious, ideological—are generally viewed with suspicion. At the same time, postmodernism does not necessarily invoke outright rejection of modernity nor the easy embrace of a nostalgic romanticism, but rather a radical vision of the future that “would be simultaneously post-Marx-

ist and post-liberal."⁸ Thus postmodernism, insofar as such a political and cultural tendency can be identified, serves to bring out and attack the one-sided character of modernity, calling into question various classical modes of intellectual activity—traditional, Jacobin, and technocratic—while posing new ways of conceptualizing the critical and organic modes.

Just as modernity long ago brought with it a crisis in traditional ways of thinking, the resulting ideological void makes imperative a fundamental reconceptualization of the role of intellectuals in politics. With the explosion of new social movements in North America and Europe since the 1960s, with the later emergence of Green politics in West Germany and elsewhere, and with the spread of grassroots dissidence in other parts of the world, struggles for democratic empowerment (while still inchoate) remain a durable part of the political landscape. This reality, coinciding with the growing salience of ideological and cultural factors in both modern and postmodern conditions, enlarges the strategic role of intellectuals while at the same time denying them Jacobin aspirations that were so often the hallmark of leftist politics. While intellectuals in the United States, for example, have been mostly assimilated into the technostucture, their potential as democratizing agents has taken new directions in the past two decades. In both cases—incorporation and refusal—the vision of an all-powerful and unified radical intelligentsia that could make history is today obsolete, since the very conditions underlying intellectual life have so profoundly changed.

In the West, the penetration of centralized forms of power into civil society have rarely been accompanied by monolithic ideologies. The logic of instrumental rationality, while debilitating to intellectual life, has been resisted by disparate and localized but nonetheless widespread groupings of academics, journalists, community activists, and media and cultural workers whose activity takes place at the margins of the power structure. Modes of critical thinking appear in opposition to the narrow, depoliticizing pressures of technocratic ideology, sometimes creating an expanded public sphere in which a recovery of politics, of collective subjectivity, can be revived. In most cases this possibility requires a convergence of intellectual groupings (within and beyond the universities) and social movements located on the periphery of mainstream institutions and culture.

The revitalization of critical intellectual life in a setting where modernity encounters mounting crises and challenges poses the radical thematic of cultural politics.⁹ Oppositional discourse is nourished by the theoretical force of ideas and symbols drawn from radical tradi-

tions such as anarchism, social ecology, and feminism, as well as established paradigms such as liberalism and Marxism that carry forward elements of a democratic vision. The articulation of critical discourse demands a broadening of the public sphere within which the intellectual foundations of social change can be strengthened, where the multiple forms of domination can be identified so that, in Freire's language, the "cultural action for freedom" can be given life.¹⁰ A counterhegemonic politics implies that critical (and organic) intellectuals forge a "voice" of popular movements as these movements struggle for collective empowerment. This runs against the familiar elite model of politics insofar as discourse is not restricted to *haute politique*, to large-scale institutions, or to self-contained ideological critiques of an insular intelligentsia. Empowerment suggests not only the elaboration of new discourses but also a transformation of lived social relations. It follows that the cultural terrain cannot be viewed apart from the larger social totality, for it is rooted in a vast complex of processes and conditions that shape every form of intellectual activity.

This shifting historical reality means that development of critical social theory and counterhegemonic politics is intimately linked in new ways.¹¹ From a Gramscian standpoint, ideological hegemony refers to the capacity of dominant classes and elites to get the general population to accept and internalize ideals and values that help to reproduce the system—or that at least get people to disavow the possibility of any alternative to the existing order of things, however angry and disaffected they might be. Ruling elites employ a vast array of institutions and processes—the state, laws, education, mass media, culture—to engineer consent, with the goal of molding consciousness toward particular ends. The fact that hegemony is never absolute or complete does not negate the effectiveness of such efforts, especially in the industrialized West. Hegemonic messages include crossclass references to the ideals of freedom, democracy, the common good, prosperity, and national security. To the extent that people experience material deprivation, atomization, and disempowerment—and therefore might be expected to organize for change—ideological manipulation functions to block translation of this energy into collective political action. Alternative theories and visions must be made to look absurd, utopian, and hopeless.

The capacity of counterhegemonic theories and movements to make inroads into the dominant political culture depends upon their success in offering both a critique of the present and a vision of the future. Since the 1890s this agenda has been largely monopolized by Marxism, although in the industrialized societies no actual break-

throughs have occurred. Today, dominant ideologies appear to be more or less intact, reflected in the rush to “free market” doctrines in the wake of the Communist collapse after the late 1980s. In this context, the task of building what Gramsci called a “moral-intellectual” alternative is as compelling as ever, although the search no longer revolves around the “myth prince” of political party lore. The demise of the Soviet bloc, the end of the cold war, and the renewed crisis of Marxism pose this question in ever sharper relief.

As for the role of intellectuals, counterhegemonic politics calls forth the idea of an engaged, critical, public intelligentsia whose activity is grounded in social projects, constituencies, and movements—a model that invokes Gramsci’s concept of organic intellectuals but also goes beyond it.¹² A key function of this intelligentsia, presumably, would be the articulation of a critical social theory or, more accurately, diverse *theories* appropriate to the plural world of an evolving post-Fordist situation. In the 1990s it is reasonable to expect that such theories will grow out of disparate currents: Marxism, neo-Marxism, feminism, radical political economy, ecological radicalism, elements of postmodernism. The prospects of a single, unifying global framework can probably be ruled out. At the same time, critical social theory will have little relevance if it cannot establish the interconnectedness of multiple realms of thought and practice—for example, between philosophy, culture, and politics, between economics and everyday life—and thus demolish boundaries separating fields of intellectual work.¹³ Critical theories take shape not only in reaction to the familiar crisis of Marxism but also to the successive failures of social democracy, Leninism, the New Left, and of course liberalism.

We live in a period when intellectuals, broadly defined to include all types of mental workers, produce and disseminate knowledge, expertise, skills, and ideas that can, in myriad ways, serve to legitimate (or subvert) specific structures of domination. The power of intellectuals goes far beyond their occupational niche or even their capacity to forge broad cultural identities; they are important actors in the social and political arena, within the university and outside of it, even where they do not represent a cohesive stratum. Conventional definitions of intellectual activity must be revised, whether this activity is understood as an expression of class forces (Marxism), as an elite vanguard (Leninism), as detached from class forces and social interests (liberalism), or as the simple appendage of mass struggles (anarchism, the New Left). If the enormous complexity of a modern world in crisis means that intellectuals cannot be located above the field of contending social forces, it also means they cannot be reduced to the simple movement of such forces either.

The new type of intellectual, whether technocratic, critical, or organic, can be located in a variety of spheres—the mass media, education, interest groups such as trade unions, the university, popular movements, artistic communities, even the state. Quite clearly their universe looks vastly different from what it was in traditional and earlier industrial societies even if for no other reason than the rapid expansion of their occupational roles and strategic potential.

In post-Fordist society the very nature of intellectual work becomes more diffuse and global even as its vanguardist role diminishes. Technology reshapes the framework, social composition, and ideological contours of intellectual life, which is less a function of “informationalism” than of the broad impact of modernity upon virtually every sphere of life. Modernity has given rise to rationalized forms of discourse centered in the educational system, mass media, the state, corporations, and so forth. More recently, the high-tech revolution has deepened the trend toward more dispersed locales of learning, cultural life, and opinion making associated with computer networking, cable TV, self-publishing, mini-magazines, electronic books, and similar forms where technological innovation converges with intellectual work. Such a diffusion of centers of “local knowledge,” to use Geertz’s term, has relevance not only for democratic politics but for expansion of critical intellectual work, especially in a context of vigorous social movements.¹⁴ The postmodern shift means that radical-democratic politics will ultimately have to confront power not only in the realm of state governance but in the fragmented arenas of social, economic, and cultural life.

Newly emergent forms of hegemony in the 1990s and beyond will surely be less confined than before by the dead weight of outmoded ideological paradigms, including liberalism and Marxism—both of which have legitimated privilege, bureaucratic rule, and class exploitation in the name of democracy and progress.¹⁵ Neither provides a theory of social change sensitive to contradictions around gender relations, ethnicity, ecology, bureaucracy, and culture of the sort taken up in the literature and practical activity of social movements.¹⁶ The outdated intellectual heritage of earlier theoretical debates—reform vs. revolution, party vs. movements, class location vs. class consciousness, democracy vs. totalitarianism—is reflected in their acute failure to grasp the historical meaning of these movements.

In modern society elite-centered technocratic discourse rests upon a shrunken public sphere with its narrow view of politics, participation, and citizenship. The postmodern shift opens up new space for a recovery of politics—for reclaiming a sense of collective subjectivity

and open discourse through the medium of grassroots struggles. Such empowerment requires, finally, the knowledge, skills, and vision of public intellectuals no longer confined to insular fields of expertise or contemptuous of local experience.

From this viewpoint, intellectuals can no longer function as rationalizing elites, social engineers, and state planners without compromising their oppositional identity. The simple alliance of intellectuals and powerful organizations was the hallmark of traditional, Jacobin, and technocratic types, but these models have either broken down or were blocked by strong countertrends. The crisis of modernity brings intellectuals closer to the local sphere where mobilization from above loses its rationale. It is more true now than ever that the realm of party, state, and corporate bureaucracy signifies the logic of domination and organizational adaptation—an extremely uncomfortable and deradicalizing situation for intellectuals committed to any alternative vision. Indeed, those institutions are typically administered without the guidance of even modest belief systems; instrumental rationality usually holds sway.¹⁷ Moreover, since opposition can no longer be sustained through intervention of a cohesive universal subject but increasingly revolves around multiple centers of resistance and sites of popular struggle, it becomes commonplace for critical intellectuals to perform more distinctly *local* and *organic* functions tied in some way to social movements. It is here that theory, culture, and politics finally merge.¹⁸