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Jeffrey C. Goldfarb

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

*Introduction: the intellectuals at century's end*

I believe that intellectuals have played crucial roles in the making of democracy and in the ongoing practices of democratic life. I further believe that the diminution of intellectual activity presents a major threat to democracy in our times. Intellectuals are central democratic actors, and when they leave the political stage, democratic performance ends in failure. I have such beliefs, and judge that they are especially pressing nowadays, because I perceive that intellectuals are particularly able to address one of the most pressing needs of democracies: the need to deliberate about common problems.

Intellectuals help societies talk about their problems. They contribute to a democratic life when they civilize political contestation and when they subvert complacent consensus; when they provide enemies with the discursive possibility to become opponents and when they facilitate public deliberations about problems buried by the norms of civility. This is the primary thesis of this inquiry. Intellectuals are key democratic agents as they stimulate informed discussion about pressing social problems, fulfilling this role by cultivating *civility* in public life and promoting the *subversion* of restrictive common sense.

In order to explore this primary thesis adequately, we will consider in this investigation the dilemmas and complexities of intellectual action in democratic society. I will attempt to depict the intellectual as a distinct type of social actor (chapter 2) and show how he or she establishes a field for social action in public (chapters 3 and 4). As our inquiry progresses, the figure of the intellectual in democratic society will be more fully described. The full account of the democratic intellectual in contemporary societies is presented in the conclusion.

This will not be a straightforward formal inquiry. I will present a sociological definition of intellectuals by considering how they have

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defined themselves in their actions in society. This will lead us to a consideration of Socrates as an archetype of the classical intellectual in a classical democracy (chapter 2), and to an examination of the intellectual in communist and post-communist Europe (chapters 5, 6, and 10). These cases will be explored as comparative counterpoints to the investigation of the situation of the intellectual in the United States.

Our understanding of the intellectual in democratic society will emerge as we view intellectuals in action: grappling with the eclipse of public life with the development of mass society, as John Dewey and Walter Lippmann did in the first part of this century (chapter 3); attempting to subvert the restrictions of power and hierarchy, as C. Wright Mills and Edward Said have in the second part of the century (chapter 4); constructing and reconstructing our political vocabularies, as intellectuals in a sort of liberal cosmopolitan conspiracy have done, as they reintroduced the ideal of civil society with the defeat of actually existing socialism (chapter 5). The autonomy of cultural life from political and economic power will be shown to be a requisite of a free intellectual life, a requisite worth cultivating, a primary concern of intellectuals in action in post-communist Europe (chapter 6), but the autonomy of cultural institutions, such as the American university, I will maintain, has its dangers when it is too complete, leading to the sublimation of political contestation, as can be observed in the controversies over political correctness (chapter 7). Yet, even with the problems of the American university, we will observe intellectuals working on major American social problems, such as the problems of race, both by subverting cultural conventions, as did Malcolm X (chapter 8), and by carefully working on establishing more reflective civilized discussion of media events, as did a group of academics in reaction to the confirmation hearings of Clarence Thomas (chapter 9). Developing the proper balance between civility and subversion, I will argue, is a crucial problem facing democratic intellectuals, and we will take a look at the situation of feminism in the new democracies of Central Europe as one in which this balance is being weighed (chapter 10).

#### THE DELIBERATION DEFICIT

This account of intellectuals in democratic society is a reaction to the problems of our day. Mine is not simply a description of what

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intellectuals have done. I will make no attempt to give a descriptive survey of the situation of intellectuals in contemporary societies.<sup>1</sup> Instead, I will attempt to demonstrate what intellectuals do when they are supportive of democratic life. The inquiry is self-consciously a combination of empirical and normative investigation into the situation of democracy and intellectuals. I believe that they (we) are especially able to address the problems of our political culture, but, in order to do so, we must take them (ourselves) more seriously, facing the unique problems of our day.

Of the problems we face, the poor quality of public discussion in contemporary democracies is a key to my concerns. We, of democratic societies, are experiencing a *deliberation deficit*. It is not that there is no exchange of information. Obviously the opposite is the case. Ours is a world of the electronic superhighway, with huge data banks on matters public and private. But information does not automatically yield informed discussions. We are flooded by discrete facts about everything and everybody, through new and old technologies. Information has become a primary basis of power and wealth, a central characteristic of post-industrial society. The thoughtful consideration of the problems facing democracies by their citizenries and their representatives, though, has become ever harder to sustain. We know very well how to process information, and we are getting better and better at it, but we have an exceedingly difficult time thinking about the information we process, especially with each other. Thus, my sense that intellectuals are important, that they matter. If intellectuals do not provoke serious talk about the problems we face, no one will.

Without such talk, democratic polities function undeliberately. Everyday political practices become strategic campaigns of mass manipulation – a situation all too well known in contemporary democracies. Political programs are formulated to appeal to popular prejudices, both in their form and in their content. They promise something for nothing, and they are presented in easily digestible packages, following made-for-television formulas. The general populus makes political decisions as it chooses brands of soap. Cynicism and confusion seem to be the general rule of the political game from Moscow to Lima, from Milan to Tokyo to Dallas. The intellectual confrontation with cynicism today presents distinctive dilemmas and opportunities, as we will observe in the conclusion of our inquiry.

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I will attempt to show in the chapters that follow how intellectuals support democratic society by making it possible to deliberate about specific problems, how they make it possible to go beyond the prevailing political confusions and cynicism. I will resist the theoretical temptation to assign a singular role for intellectuals, good for all places and for all times. What intellectuals do to support democracy, I will maintain, is situationally specific. None the less, I do believe that reasonable sustained consequential discussion about complicated social, political, and cultural problems is a key component of the intellectual's role, particularly as he or she contributes to the constitution of democratic life, and that this discussion is pressingly needed in contemporary democratic societies.

Serious discussion is being marginalized at best, silenced at worst. When repressive regimes reign, the silencing of discussion is commonplace. But often in liberal democratic polities, such as the United States, the free market works toward the same effect, especially as it functions through the electronic media. Commercial television and radio broadcast news sensation and shouting heads.<sup>2</sup> The distinctions between tabloid journalism and serious journalism are becoming ever more difficult to make. Scandal and gossip which arguably are the appropriate fare for the former are becoming staples of purportedly more serious programs. This does not only mean that journalism standards have lowered. It means, as well, that the very notion of such standards is being cast into doubt. The fundamental distinction between news and entertainment is becoming difficult to maintain. And when it comes to broadcast discussions, talk radio has perfected the form of the discursive boxing match. The aims are not to reason and illuminate, but to ridicule and entertain. There are tame talk shows on commercial and public television and radio, and there are distinguished journals of opinion in the so-called print media, not to mention the ancient medium of books. Yet these are becoming marginalized, reaching elite "opinion makers" but apparently not the broad general public.

Such a situation, perhaps, is not all that unusual. It not only is present in the United States, but can be observed world-wide. Indeed, in some sense, it is not even anything particularly new. After all, at the same time that *The New York Times* was developed as a newspaper of record (at the close of the nineteenth century), yellow journalism was perfected as a popular form, and the great French treatises of the enlightenment appeared at the same time that the

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low literature of Grub Street developed (in the second half of the eighteenth century). Popular entertainments are always more prevalent, refined arguments always more restricted in their appeal. Yet, the problem lies with the present uncertain relationship between the entertaining and the serious, and how this uncertainty distorts public deliberations and decisions. One end result is the prevailing mediocrity of political decisions observable world-wide.<sup>3</sup>

Intellectuals can, I believe, provide, as they have provided in the past, a corrective for this kind of situation, contributing an informed critical intelligence in public life. This has been the distinctive role of intellectuals since the times of Socrates, as I will show below. The pressing question is: will they do so in the future? Addressing this question is no simple task. It requires a much clearer understanding of who the intellectual is and what her or his roles are in complex societies: a task I will turn to in the next chapter. It further requires an understanding of the consequences of specific intellectual interventions in different places and on different issues. There was a time when social thinkers could imagine a leadership role and function of intellectuals in society, from Lenin's vanguard of the proletariat to Mannheim's free-floating adjudicator of competing class interests, to Benda's disinterested guardians of truth.<sup>4</sup> Now such accounts are unconvincing, even for those who have adhered to one of these positions until quite recently. With the fall of communism, vanguards have lost their appeal, even to radical revolutionaries such as the Zapatistas of Mexico.<sup>5</sup> With the intellectuals' products, knowledge and cultural imagination becoming the bases of power in post-industrial societies, the notion that the intellectuals do not have interests of their own as do other groups in society is ever more difficult to sustain. And, as for truth as an autonomous force in society, independent from competing narrow interests, in the world of multiculturalism and postmodernism, this seems little more than a quaint claim for privilege. With such rather common generalized starting positions in doubt, an account of the intellectual in democratic society requires careful examination of intellectuals at work in specific contexts, with an understanding that their work and its effects are quite likely to be different in different contexts.

Yet, there are a number of general issues which I think we ought to examine. These issues comprise a common set of sociological problems which intellectuals face at century's end. The most basic

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among these emanate from the fundamental tensions faced by the intellectual in democratic society.

#### THE PARADOX OF THE DEMOCRATIC INTELLECTUAL

Intellectuals have a paradoxical status in democratic societies. On the one (enlightened) hand, democracy requires the cultural excellence intellectuals do contribute, their special knowledge, their creative capacities and their communicative skills. On the other hand, the egalitarian one, in democracies intellectuals and their “cultural excellence” are viewed with suspicion. Intellectual position is established through hierarchies of judgment. There is such a thing as a good and a bad argument, a fine and a mediocre piece of work, and intellectual power depends upon such judgment. Yet, democracy inculcates an inherent suspicion of hierarchy as a matter of fundamental principle. This conflict, it seems to me, is an ongoing part of the democratic experience, a central problematic of democratic life, making the intellectual’s position in democratic society a perpetually uncertain one. Intellectuals have a love-hate relationship with democracy, and democracy has a love-hate relationship with intellectuals.<sup>6</sup>

On the side of love, or at least mutual dependence: democracy is the rule of the people, and to be a viable form of governance it requires an informed and critical citizenry. Democrats need both the expertise and the normative insights provided by the cultural activities of intellectuals in order to pursue the ideal of wise governance. Further and more importantly, they need the opportunity for public deliberations that intellectual contestation opens. In a democracy, an informed public must be capable of making critical judgments, sometimes about complicated matters. Thus intellectuals should take part in public life, and their fellow citizens, or at least their representatives, ought to be informed about the fruits of intellectual activities. Otherwise, some form of tyranny or oligarchy is likely to be more powerful and pervasive. For, if a democratic polity does not draw upon all the sources of available information and good judgment, it will be weakened. The makers of the American Revolution and Constitution – the founding political elite – clearly adhered to such a republican vision, as Gordon Wood has brilliantly underscored.<sup>7</sup>

But Wood has just as clearly demonstrated the instability of the elite’s vision. Democracies may not hate intellectuals, but they are

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often deeply suspicious of them. The American founders expected a natural aristocracy, an intellectual elite (themselves), to lead in public affairs, replacing the corruption and incompetency of the old hierarchy with a new, i.e. definitely late eighteenth century, sort of meritocracy. Instead, an egalitarian dynamic, described by Tocqueville as a “providential force,” overturned both the old hierarchy and the republican dreams of a new, democratically sanctioned one. When push came to shove, the yeoman farmers, mechanics, and craftsmen chose from among themselves, or from among others, people like Andrew Jackson or Martin Van Buren, who most clearly represented their interests, judgments, and prejudices. The democratic tension between enlightened intellectual ideals and egalitarian ideals, then, dates back to at least the early years of the world’s oldest democracy, and it has been with us ever since.

For many observers of the American scene, including de Tocqueville, this situation leads to cultural gloom. They fear that since democracy is egalitarian, and culture, as the arts and sciences, is hierarchical, cultural excellence will necessarily be undermined by a democratic ethos. For the more populist minded, the problem is viewed in a mirrored fashion. They worry that an intellectual elite will dominate popular opinion and customs. The sociologist Herbert Gans holds such an opinion,<sup>8</sup> as do (more famously) such conservative political figures as former Vice-President Dan Quayle, William Bennett, and Pat Buchanan. Both left-wing and right-wing populism share a suspicion of intellectual elitism. On the left, where Gans is a very moderate player, such elitism is seen as a force which privileges the privileged, who have a clear interest in the status quo. On the right, the intellectual elite is viewed as a cosmopolitan force which denigrates the common beliefs and folkways of ordinary people.

Intellectuals have tried to face this problem from almost every angle. Some, such as Gans, have adopted the populist position. Others, such as Hilton Kramer on the right<sup>9</sup> but also Irving Howe on the left,<sup>10</sup> have opted for a more elitist position, defending cultural refinement in the face of populist mediocrity. Yet, the intellectual contribution does not end simply with taking sides, and clearly and forcefully articulating one position or the other. Intellectuals contribute to public debate by adding depth to the consideration of the problem. Thus, the American historian Richard Hofstadter confronted the problems of populist anti-intellectualism in two of his major books, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* and *The*

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*Paranoid Style in Politics*, and the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has explored how cultural elitism subverts democracy in his *magnum opus*, *Distinctions*.<sup>11</sup>

Such scholarly interventions do, though, present problems of their own. Their form restricts their audience. They are, for the most part, accessible only to a highly trained public, those with a high level of literacy and a high degree of training. The clear writings of Hofstadter, ironically the anti-populist who has the literary capacity to reach a general audience, as opposed to such technical writings as those of Bourdieu, do have more potential public impact. But this is qualified by national variations. Thus, roughly speaking, the French have a much greater tolerance for theoretical abstraction than do the British or the Americans, epitomized in the post-war period by the intellectual celebrity of Jean-Paul Sartre, while the British value clarity, typified by the work of Orwell, and the Americans go for a more prophetic tone, exemplified by the writings of Walter Lippmann. Clearly, the way intellectuals write and the way the general public reads affect the way intellectuals struggle with populist skepticism and with elitism.

In the following chapters, I will explore this struggle, as it is shaped by public expectations in different places and in different times, and around different issues. But we must realize that beyond the variations are a set of formal similarities, emanating from inherent problems of large-scale complex societies, as their members attempt to communicate with each other. Beyond the tensions intellectuals face in democratic societies which are a result of their paradoxical position, there are the immense problems of mass media and mass culture.

#### INTELLECTUAL ACTION IN MASS SOCIETY

Whether one is British, French, or American, or of any other post-industrial society, it is striking that the role of the written word has receded as radio, the telephone, and television have become major media for societal communication. There are some indications that literacy may be making a momentary comeback with the increased importance and popularity of the personal computer, but it would seem that any increased importance of writing and reading for the general public will be soon a thing of the past once a new generation of computers with enhanced audio and video capacities are in place.



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Whether or not writing and reading make a modest rebound, it is clear that the centrality of the writer as a popular communicator is a thing of the past. No pamphleteers of our day will have the impact of those during the American Revolution. The great twentieth-century novelists have not been the mass entertainers that Dickens and Twain were, and it even seems doubtful that the novelists of the next century will be as central to the popular culture as were Hemingway and Fitzgerald in their day. This presents serious problems for modern intellectuals, who have been best known as writers of a critical temperament.

It can be argued, of course, that this does not automatically spell the end to the intellectual in democracy. Many intellectuals of the past were not primarily writers. Perhaps the greatest of them all, Socrates, did not even leave any written legacy. In nineteenth-century America, public lectures and debate were major forms of intellectual exchange. Therefore, it should not necessarily be alarming that television, radio, and film have become major media of societal communication. It should even be expected that some of our major intellectuals use or appear on these media. The rise of the electronic media does not necessarily spell the end to intellectual life as we have known it.

Yet, there are serious problems which must be addressed. Those, such as Andrew Ross and Stanley Aronowitz, who believe critical intellectual life is sustained by the popular media must face the fact that the way the mass media are organized and the way they function present very significant constraints on public discussion and on the possible activities of critical intellectuals.<sup>12</sup> Public deliberations and intellectual activities have been defined by the powers of the mass media, with sound bites replacing reasoned argument, with successful media manipulation overwhelming principled politics, and with media celebrity confused with famed accomplishment. This has often overpowered critical intellectuals.

Critics of mass culture and mass politics have been concerned with these problems for a long time. The critique of the masses clearly involved at first a conservative response to democratic developments. Ortega y Gasset opens his classic, *The Revolt of the Masses*, with the image of the unwashed suddenly encroaching upon the institutions of civilization.<sup>13</sup> The mere fact that crude "others" were sitting next to the more refined in theaters and other cultural institutions was the source of alarm. Later criticisms of mass society

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and culture, though, were directed toward something quite different, what I am trying to highlight here as a fundamental problem of the intellectual in contemporary democratic societies. The criticisms of the mass media and of mass culture by thinkers such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Jurgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt, focus not so much on those untutored who took part in public life, but on the constrained organization and the control of publicity operating through the institutions of the mass culture industry.<sup>14</sup>

From the point of view of this inquiry, the mass media present a special problem. Although they do provide the intellectuals with the possibility to reach a broad audience, they make it difficult for intellectuals to speak their own truths clearly and criticize the wrongs they see or advance the rights they can imagine. Given democratic desires to address their works to a general public, intellectuals must use mass media. But these often frustrate their efforts because the media change the meaning of intellectual works in one way or the other, or make it impossible for certain ideas to reach an audience or even be imagined. The logic of media communication often dominates the logic of intellectual criticism.

Before the advent of the mass electronic media, the intellectual, as writer, controlled his or her mode of production to a much greater extent than the intellectual of the media age does. Now, whether in print or on film or on the airwaves, the imperatives of the media constrain what and how things can be addressed to a general public. Consider this as it relates to the pressing problem of the politics of cultural identity, an issue I will explore throughout this investigation.

The relationship between the politics of identity and democracy is extremely complicated. Confronting these complications through the institutions of the mass media is extraordinarily difficult. This is not always the result of bad intentions, although such intentions are sometimes evident, for example in Serbian and Croatian television accounts of inter-ethnic relations when Yugoslavia broke up. In such situations, coarse repressive control rules the air, and identity politics is a cultural war. Short of such war, the identity politics of the mass media ranges from highly constrained speech situations to circuses, this even with the good intentions.

Critical intellectuals, with limited degrees of success, do attempt to resist these constraints and to avoid such circuses, but this is far from easy. It often seems the case that identity politics plus the mass