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Insurgent Voices in Education

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Graduate Students at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

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## Education as Cultural Politics

Editorial

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## The Role of Intellectuals in Contemporary Society

Darin David Barney

There are some who still fondly  
imagine that knowledge, casting  
the clear light of awareness, inspires  
and contains goodness within itself.  
- Dora Russell.

The term "intelligentsia" originated in Russia in the middle of the 19th Century, and referred to those people who were concerned with matters of public interest. This intelligentsia felt a personal responsibility for solutions to these problems, tended to view political and social issues as morally based, and felt obligated to act as well as to think. As the importance of intellectuals in a technocratic society has increased, so too has the need for a continued re-examination of their nature, role and responsibilities in relation to society as a whole. This paper will survey some of the most prominent approaches to the question of the functions of intellectuals, with a view towards establishing the need for, and possible role of, a radical critique of their nature, role and responsibility in contemporary society.

Intellectuals have generally been defined as that group of individuals who are more or less concerned with knowledge or wisdom for its own sake, and who engage in the practices of creation and criticism of that knowledge. For the purposes of this essay, intellectuals will be defined, "...as people who specialize in symbols, the intellectuals produce, distribute and preserve distinct forms of consciousness" (Mills, 1951, p.142). That is, intellectuals are those individuals who are involved in the analysis of problems of politics, values, aesthetics and the human condition in general, and who disseminate their scholarly analyses through various media. Further, this discussion will be limited primarily to those intellectuals who ply their trade in western liberal bourgeois states.

I will begin by discussing the traditional conception of intellectuals as neutral observers engaged in the legitimate exercise of the dissemination of tradition and culture. The second dominant perspective which will be examined is the belief

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that intellectuals constitute a basically critical and often adversarial cadre of individuals, who are the primary stimulants of change in society. Following this, the beginnings of a critical approach to the role of intellectuals will be discussed. In order to further prepare the ground for a radical critique, the paper will then consider the relationship between intellectuals and the notion of class. Finally, the radical critique of the role and responsibility of intellectuals will be presented.

### Order and The Passive Intellectual

The idea of the intellectual as a passive observer of reality is largely founded on the belief that intellectuals have a unique ability to comprehend and communicate the ideal or abstract. Indeed, the major political function of the intellectual has often been defined precisely in relation to this ability (Shils, 1972, p.9). It is this perceived penchant for abstraction and idealism which is held to account for the propensity of intellectuals to characterize themselves as detached, dispassionate interpreters of the world around them.

Julien Benda (1969), has gone so far as to argue that the intellectual vocation precludes, by its very nature, active engagement in the practical political world. Benda believes that the true role of the intellectual is to stand in opposition to lay opinion and the material world, as a defender of the universal and the abstract. He depicts the intellectual as a dispassionate, disinterested observer, apolitical and socially detached, exercising a moderating influence over the passions of the masses. This is a view echoed by Edward Shils, who sees intellectuals as moderates in civil politics, maintaining, "...quiet apolitical concentration on their specialized intellectual pre-occupations, cynical and anti-political passivity, and faithful acceptance and service of the existing order" (Shils, 1972, p.9). It is significant to note that this characterization is not expressed disparagingly, but rather is upheld as an ideal against which all intellectuals can be assessed.

The intellectual community has also generally been presented as an effectively impartial conduit of tradition and culture. The role of intellectuals as purveyors of tradition has been examined by S.N. Eisenstadt, who discusses,

...the intellectuals as creators and carriers of traditions, as participating in the symbolic and institutional frameworks of such traditions or as performing their functions as the conscience of society within the framework of existing traditions (Eisenstadt, 1972, p.1).

This function tends to marry intellectuals to political elites, in that both groups maintain a vested interest in the symbolic aspects of the formation of tradition, and the institutionally situated ordering of cultural and social experience (Eisenstadt, 1972, p.8-9). This relationship is mutually beneficial because, as

will be discussed later, political elites require the legitimation provided by intellectuals, who in turn need the assistance of political institutions for the maintenance of their role and position.

Once again, it should be stressed that this aspect of the role of intellectuals, as presented by Shils and Eisenstadt, is not regarded as inappropriate. Shils agrees with Eisenstadt that intellectuals are responsible for "...infusing into the laity attachments to more general symbols and providing for the laity a means of participation in the central value system" (Shils, 1972, p.6). However, neither writer sees this role as being particularly disturbing, but rather they accept this proximity to authority as being quite natural. Shils proceeds to illustrate that even insofar as intellectuals have the potential to enter into conflict or dissensus with the dominant institutions of their society, this serves only to provide, "...an alternative pattern of integration for their own society" (Shils, 1972, p.7). Thus, even in criticism, the intellectual is acting to integrate, rather than educate. In this capacity,

Intellectuals are indispensable to any society...An effective collaboration between intellectuals and the authorities which govern society is a requirement for order and continuity in public life and for the integration of wider reaches of the laity into society (Shils, 1972, p.21).

This collaboration is seen as a positive feature of modern society, and one which facilitates a balance of civility and creativity on the part of statesmen and intellectuals.

It would seem reasonable that the proximity of intellectuals and authority would have a profound effect on their independence. While, as will be discussed, other perspectives present a more critical analysis of this relationship, Shils downplays its significance. While he does well to show that intellectuals have transformed into more functional roles (i.e., public administrators, research and development, management, etc.) and, as such, are more vulnerable to state control, he maintains that this control is generally not operationalized. It is suggested that *direct* control is only exercised in totalitarian states, while the interest of pluralistic societies in their intellectuals is a great deal more benign. He implies that the control exerted in pluralistic societies, being indirect, is justifiable (Shils, 1972, p.75-80).

This implication, disconcerting as it is, requires elaboration because it constitutes one of the sustaining assumptions of the moderate view of intellectuals. While it is recognized that the relationship between intellectuals and the corporate-state complex has a qualitative impact on scholarship, the severity of this condition is summarily dismissed (Shils, 1972, p.306-332). Phenomena such as the silencing or exclusion of dissident voices and self-censorship are recognized, but not regarded as being particularly worrisome. Shils is content to

conclude that, "On the side of research, limitations on freedom do not seem to play any very significant role, since the great centers of research are on the whole quite free" (Shils, 1972, p.331). According to this view, the problem of marginalization must not be institutional in origin, but rather due to deficiencies in individual academic integrity and ability.

The logical extension of the moderate depiction of the intellectual community is a conception of a group of actors who operate as a decidedly conservative force within society as a whole. Further, the moderate position holds that this role is entirely natural, conscious and legitimate. The possible repercussions and implications of this conservatism and association with authority are considered more as an unfortunate by-product of a necessary function, than as a starting point for criticism.

### The Intellectual as Critic

Perhaps the most prevalent view of the role of intellectuals is that of the scholar as a critic of society. It is believed that in their capacity as articulators of the ideal, and because of their ability to measure the shortcomings of the status quo against that ideal, intellectuals naturally occupy a critical position in relation to society. Much of the literature surrounding the role of intellectuals postulates that certain features inherent in this role, and in the social organization of intellectual life, give rise to a critical intelligentsia, or "adversary culture" amongst intellectuals (Lipset & Dobson, 1972, p.138). In arguing that the majority of intellectuals are progressive, liberal, and leftist, Lipset and Dobson outline a number of factors which lead to a critical disposition amongst intellectuals. These include: a high degree of competition within disciplines, which, in turn, breeds originality; an occupational structure based on organized skepticism; a high degree of autonomy; comprehensive inter-disciplinary study; and a great deal of demographic concentration. Lipset and Dobson also attribute the critical nature of intellectuals to the fact that,

...the kind of mind or background which impels men to question the society of which they are a part also makes for success in intellectual activities....the attributes of mind which lead men to reject the established order are closely linked with those that foster scholarly or artistic activity (Lipset & Dobson, 1972, p.164; 166).

Thus, the propensity to be critical is something which is believed to exist as a result of phenomena both internal and external to the intellectual herself.

Ladd and Lipset (1975) argue that until the last quarter of the 19th Century, American intellectuals were *overtly* engaged in status quo socialization. Up to this point, the authors believe, colleges and universities were primarily centers of conservative, apolitical thought, concerned with instilling traditional

values and truths into the minds of each new generation (Ladd & Lipset, 1975, p.11). However, by the turn of the century, the intellectual community had transformed itself into a stratum that was inherently critical, socially disruptive and committed to anti-establishment values (Ladd & Lipset, 1975, p.13). These qualities were internalized to the point that they became definitive of the intellectual existence. Ladd and Lipset posit that, "... inherent in the obligation to create, to innovate, has been the tendency to reject the status quo, to oppose the existing order as old or philistine" (Ladd & Lipset, 1975, p.13).<sup>2</sup>

Much of this "critical" disposition can be accounted for by activity *within* the various social science disciplines. That is, intellectuals generally like to view their work as innovative and ground-breaking, and thus are pre-disposed towards employing methods and thought processes which deviate from established practices within their discipline. It is to this which Tom Bottomore (1975) refers when he argues for the need for a radical sociology. While he recognizes that sociology derives some part, at least, of its criteria for what is significant or valid from the framework of the society in which it is situated, he feels it is a mistake to characterize sociology as a mere reflection of a particular balance of social interests. According to Bottomore:

It is one of the positive, and radical features of sociology considered as a science that it involves a continuous criticism of all extant theories of society including those everyday conceptions of the social world which shape practical life (Bottomore, 1975, p.15).

This reflects the belief that insofar as social scientists exhibit a tendency to search out and transcend the boundaries of conventional or "normal" science, and in so doing establish new paradigms of thought, they are acting in accordance with a radical orientation.

For many, this critical disposition within the social sciences on a methodological level is equated with a radical positioning of intellectuals within the social sphere as a whole. It is widely held that "... academics have stood further left politically than any other major occupational group for a long time" (Ladd & Lipset, 1975, p.55). The ideological disposition of intellectuals in the 20th Century has consistently been portrayed as disproportionately progressive, liberal or leftist. Further, the prevailing revolutionary history of the 20th Century places radicalized intellectuals in key leadership roles in major upheavals (Gouldner, 1979, p.6-7). The significant question is whether this handful of revolutionaries is truly representative of the character of intellectuals in general.

The argument that intellectuals are naturally and predominantly "radical" relies on a discourse that mistakenly reduces radicalism to the expression of any sentiment that is not vehemently conservative. While it is true that *some* intellectuals were involved in opposition to tides such as McCarthyism<sup>4</sup> and the war in Vietnam<sup>5</sup>, this does nothing to substantiate claims regarding a compre-

hensive radical disposition on the part of the scholarly community. In the post-Communist, free market- frenzied world, even the word "progressive" has been debased to include basically anyone tolerant of trade unions or affirmative action. In a political environment as predominantly conservative as the one which now prevails in the developed countries, moderate opposition, though celebrated as proof of pluralism, disappears into the status quo. Consequently, those scholars who are labelled radical, or even progressive, in the contemporary climate fail to meet any meaningful criteria of those designations — they are conservative by most other standards of political judgement (Kadushin, 1974, p.27).

### Towards a Radical Critique of the Role of Intellectuals

In a direct reply to Lipset and Dobson (1972), Jill Conway (1972) challenges their presentation of intellectuals as critical of, and divorced from the essential values of American popular culture, alienated from the structures of power in America (Conway, 1972, p.199). By employing an historical, as opposed to sociological perspective, Conway reaches the conclusion that scholars, as a group, do not hold views farther to the left than their fellow Americans. Instead, she finds,

Those who live and work with ideas ... the academics, the intellectuals, whether expert or romantic democrat, have experienced no rebellion against American political and social institutions, but have accepted their promise as the only blueprint for an ideal world order (Conway 1972, p.200).

Conway holds that the belief in the alienated, revolutionary intellectual is pure romanticism, and that any opposition to the prevailing order comes in the form of disputes over styles and approaches to study, rather than questions regarding the fundamental elements of the dominant culture (Conway, 1972, p.200-201). The basic legitimacy of American cultural and political institutions is not subject to intensely critical scrutiny.

Eisenstadt (1972) also discusses what can be called the "myth" of the revolutionary intellectual. He admits that modern society has given rise to conditions which seemingly promote the growth of independence among intellectuals. However, Eisenstadt posits that this perception of the unique and critical social position of intellectuals is somewhat of an illusion (Eisenstadt, 1972, p.17). While he recognizes that intellectuals have played leading roles in many modern reform movements, Eisenstadt maintains that they have not necessarily been the only or even the most important elements in the *generation of change* or innovation. Instead, the intellectual community has largely acted as an *ex post facto legitimator* of change initiated in other sectors of society,

which is an entirely different exercise.

There are many reasons why intellectuals in contemporary western society have not exhibited the high degree of alienation, and consequent revolutionary character that one might expect. One reason is, undoubtedly, that intellectuals have allowed themselves to be used as instruments of domination, where previously only the tools of coercion were available. It has generally become recognized that,

... the spiritual domination of any ruling class over the people ... depends on its bonds with the intelligentsia ... for the less one is capable of ruling by intellectual means, the more one must resort to the instruments of force (Kolakowski, 1968, p.179).

In response to this reality, contemporary society has evolved a vast variety of control mechanisms which replace coercive power as guarantors of super and subordination, including the use of intellectuals to perpetuate ideological control (Mannheim, 1956, p.98).

There are a number of other complementary explanations for the absence of a truly radical disposition amongst the intellectual community. In 1956, Karl Mannheim discussed them when he foresaw the potential for the demise of the free intelligentsia, and the concomitant demise of critical thought in general (Mannheim, 1956, p.166-170). The first is that the rise of the absolute, secular state, and the parallel emergence of mass democratic culture have produced a society which, through the use of the talents of intellectuals, has become better equipped to control thought than the Church or monarchy ever was. A second reason for the lack of autonomy on the part of intellectuals is that the emergence of the liberal state has brought with it the rapid and comprehensive bureaucratization of society as a whole. In turn this bureaucratization has encouraged the standardization of socialization through mass education. According to Mannheim, "The retailing of knowledge in standard packages paralyzes the impulse to question and to inquire" (Mannheim, 1956, p.167). This view was articulated previously by C. Wright Mills, who maintained that the consolidation of the distribution of knowledge had the effect of standardizing the product, and that this standardization extended into the realm of the university, where it acted as a constraint on critical thought (Mills, 1951, p.151).

The massive bureaucratization of business and the state necessitated a demand for a compliant technical and ideological intelligentsia (Mills, 1951, p.149). The expression of dissent was contained by the fact that the state, through expanding professions and private bureaucracies, was able to absorb intellectuals financially, as well as ideologically. The growth of the liberal state, and private communications bureaucracies have furnished multiple (and, in some cases, the only) employment opportunities for intellectuals, provided they are willing to defer to the dominant ideology (Mills 1951, p.168). Clearly, such

institutionalized association, runs counter to the idea of a "detached" intellectual. This subservience of ideas to the bureaucratic "market" has produced what Mills has described as "the managerial demiurge" (Mills, 1951, p.157). Even among those intellectuals who are not directly embedded in such organizations, conscious and unconscious steps are taken to ensure that published opinions conform to the limits set by those who are (Mills, 1951, p.155).

There are also certain factors within the academic community itself which have contributed to the lack of a formation of an adversary ethic, and the homogenization of intellectual products. For instance, the certification process which establishes exactly who can be defined as an intellectual is, to a large extent, controlled by intellectuals who have already secured their positions through submission to the interests of the dominant culture. Succinctly put, "...an elite intellectual is simply a person whom other elite intellectuals believe to be an elite intellectual" (Kadushin, 1974, p.8).

The pre-eminence of academic journals as paragons of intellectual integrity has also been a vital agent in the conditioning of scholarly activity. Academic journals have become very powerful mechanisms for ensuring a disposition among their contributors which is far from critical in a fundamental sense. Once a journal has attained a position of significance, it brandishes a great deal of independent power to establish or destroy the prestige of individual scholars (Kadushin, 1974, p.51). This power manifests itself in the journal's ability to decide on exactly which material will or will not be published, and which ideas will or will not be offered for mass consideration. This power is pervasive, in that, "...even if an intellectual has the right political line, the proper expertise, and the right connections he must adopt an appropriate intellectual journal style or he cannot get published" (Kadushin, 1974, p.59). Under these circumstances, prior restraint in relation to not only content, but also form, is unavoidable.

It is this scenario which leads Kadushin to conclude that the exercise of intellectual discourse constitutes a social circle in and of itself (Kadushin, 1974, p.8-9). The life of the American intellectual elite is characterized by a "...loosely allied and interpenetrating trinity", which is comprised of prestigious intellectuals and leading journals, which act in concert to form the leading circles in academia (Kadushin, 1974, p.63). Each point in this trinity acts to bolster the other, by sustaining intellectual conditions which do not infringe on the borders of what has been ordained as appropriate and therefore significant.

The inert viability of this academic complex has served to frustrate the genuinely radical or actively critical intellectual. For while the intellectual who remains truly "free" of this trinity may continue to discover increasingly more about contemporary society, he nonetheless is denied access to the centers of academic and political power and expression (Mills, 1951, p.157). The harsh realities of professional survival have created a situation wherein, "The political intellectual is, increasingly, an employee living off the communication

machineries which are based on the very opposite of what he would like to stand for" (Mills, 1951, p.159) This raises the question of whether it is possible, in a rationalized bureaucratic state, to discover a truly "adversary culture" within the intellectual sphere.

### Intellectuals and Class

Before discussing the radical critique of the role of intellectuals, it is necessary to examine the ideas surrounding the relationship between intellectuals and class. This should serve as a useful bridge between the positions already considered, and the radical argument yet to be advanced.

While Karl Mannheim (1956) recognized the potential for the demise of the critical, independent scholar, and illustrated phenomena which would contribute to that potential demise, he nevertheless remained faithful to the ideal of the detached, innovative intellectual. This hope can be attributed to a certain quality which Mannheim saw in intellectuals, and labelled the "sociological point of view" (Mannheim, 1956, p.100). This sociological point of view was inextricably linked with the class position, or lack thereof, enjoyed by intellectuals as a group. Mannheim maintained that while intellectuals often acted as satellites of other existing socioeconomic strata, for the most part they were able to transcend this functional role, and operate notwithstanding any enduring or compelling class attachments (Mannheim, 1956, p.105). It is in this state of relative classlessness that, according to Mannheim, intellectuals are able to activate the faculties with which they have been equipped, and reveal their inherently critical timbre (Mannheim, 1956, p.118). The critical impulse within the individual intellectual is believed to supersede any class affiliations.

There is another viewpoint which agrees Mannheim's premise that intellectuals, as a general rule, are not inextricably linked with a specific, pre-existing socioeconomic class. It does not, however, agree that as a result, intellectuals are necessarily "classless". Instead this view, which has its epistemological roots in the elite theory of the Italian political sociologists, Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca, holds that intellectuals and the intelligentsia constitute a "New Class" which competes with groups already in control of the world socioeconomic order. This is the view advanced by Alvin Gouldner (1979), when he calls the new intellectual class a flawed universal class, suggesting, "The new class is elitist and self-seeking, and uses its special knowledge to advance its own interests and power, and to control its own work situation" (Gouldner, 1979, p.7). Gouldner believes that the new intellectual class is both powerful and independent, insofar as it possesses the cultural and human capital from which income and status are derived.

Yet another orientation towards the relationship of intellectuals and class maintains that intellectuals are linked to particular class interests, and articulate

themselves in accordance with those interests. Some analysts feel that intellectuals are predominantly attached to the upper or middle classes (Gella, 1976, p.20). Others find that the intellectual community is more intimately linked with the lower classes, and thus has a vested interest in the development of a revolutionary proletariat (Gouldner, 1975-76, p.12-13). Both views offer conclusions which are based more on sentiment than hard evidence, as they do not systematically analyze the nature of the intellectual role, but rather reflect the a priori expectations of the analyst.

Perhaps the most insightful and sophisticated treatment of intellectuals and class is offered by Antonio Gramsci (1929). Gramsci argues that intellectuals are not a distinct social category, independent of class attachments. Instead, he posits that while all people are not intellectuals by social function, they are all potentially intellectuals in the sense that they all have an intellect and all have the ability to use it (Gramsci, 1929, p.9). However, Gramsci makes a distinction between "organic" and "traditional" intellectuals. Organic intellectuals may not be intellectuals by profession, but rather are so by virtue of the organizing function they carry out. That is, organic intellectuals arise out of a given class, and proceed to articulate and defend the fundamental social, economic, and political interests of that class and, in so doing, provide that class with cohesion and an awareness of its position (Gramsci, 1929, p.5). Traditional intellectuals are professional scholars, who are inter-class to a certain extent, yet in maintaining relatively concealed attachments to past and present class structures, represent a certain degree of continuity in class relations (Gramsci, 1929, p.6-7).

It is the "traditional" type of intellectuals which is of concern here. As recognized by Gramsci, one of the most important qualities of any group which is seeking to establish its dominance, is its struggle to ideologically conquer and assimilate the traditional intellectuals (Gramsci 1929: 10). Gramsci puts forth two major superstructural levels, the civil society and the political society, which correspond respectively to the functions of "social hegemony" and "direct domination". Gramsci describes social hegemony as,

The spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production (Gramsci, 1929, p.12).

Within this process, traditional intellectuals serve to secure "spontaneous consent" by acting as the deputies of the dominant class, and legitimating its activity. Gramsci's notion of social hegemony, and his account of the part which intellectuals play in producing it, serves as a basis for a radical critique of the role of intellectuals. Gramsci lays the groundwork for a conceptualization of intel-

lectuals as a group of actors which, by and large, align themselves in the service of power and the powerful class. Once this position is established, a radical critique of the role and responsibilities of intellectuals is not only possible, but necessary.

### The Radical Critique - Intellectuals and Responsibility

The differences between the *steps toward* a radical position, previously outlined, and the radical position itself, are subtle, yet fundamental. While the former position merely *identifies* the association of intellectuals with various authority structures, the genuinely radical critique points out the unacceptability of this association, and goes so far as to declare that the relationship between intellectuals and power is incompatible with legitimate scholarly endeavour. To the extent that individual scholars are ignorant or tolerant of the implications of this relationship, they perpetrate a profound abdication of their responsibility as intellectuals.

The tendency of scholars to become servants of power *vis-a-vis* the state and its patronage of intellectual products is a tangible danger (Eliot, 1945, p.260). As the modern state becomes more sophisticated, the intellectual's privileged position is increasingly exploited as an ideological instrument. In a society which offers academics prestige and affluence, it is reasonable to expect that they will exhibit what has been cleverly and deceptively labelled a "pragmatic" attitude. In operational terms, this attitude manifests itself as a tacit acceptance, as opposed to a critical analysis of, or desire to change, the existing domestic or international distribution of power, and the political realities which arise from it (Chomsky, 1967, p.317).

Radical critics of the sycophantic character of intellectuals are aware that in totalitarian states, the coercive pressure on the dissemination of knowledge is more overt and readily identifiable than it is in so-called democratic polities. They are also aware of the fact that in western democracies, the pressure of power exerted on society's consciousness through intellectuals, though relatively covert, nevertheless exists (O'Brien 1969a, p.1). As Chomsky suggests, the difference between the control of consciousness in totalitarian and democratic societies is largely semantic:

The process of creating and entrenching highly selective, reshaped, or completely fabricated memories of the past is what we call 'indoctrination' or 'propaganda' when it is conducted by official enemies, and 'education', 'moral instruction', or 'character building' when we do it ourselves. It is a valuable mechanism of control, since it effectively blocks any understanding of what is happening in the world (Chomsky, 1984, p.124).

By diverting attention away from, distorting the reality of, or wholly ignoring,

the systematic functioning of their society's institutions, intellectuals facilitate a climate wherein elite groups, under the banner of "national interest", can act without popular constraint in the pursuit of their desires (Chomsky, 1984, p.124). As academics legitimate even irrational and barbaric acts of the state as virtuous and tolerable, seemingly no obstacle exists to a given government's indiscriminate application of power (Kolko, 1969, p.139).

This process becomes even more sophisticated as it is realized that even those who are *popularly* deemed to be critical scholars actually act to reinforce the system of indoctrination. Even the harshest mainstream critics contribute to the reinforcement of the system of indoctrination, of which they themselves are both victims and purveyors, by leaving unchallenged the fundamental tacit assumptions that undergird state and class power (Chomsky 1984, p.126). The sophisticated western bourgeois state recognizes the doctrinal utility of a stratum of critical analysts, who may denounce the shortcomings of a particular episode of leadership, but nevertheless adopt the crucial premises of the state religion.

This is accomplished via the establishment and elaboration of a framework of possible thought, constrained by the pretenses of state dogma, within which intellectuals will express their criticisms. In so doing, they reinforce the system they purport to be attacking (Chomsky, 1984, p.132).

Debate cannot be stilled, and indeed, in a properly functioning system of propaganda it should not be, because it has a system reinforcing character if constrained within proper bounds. What is essential is to set the bounds firmly. Controversy may rage as long as it adheres to the pre-suppositions that define the consensus of elites, and it should be furthermore encouraged within these bounds, thus helping to establish these doctrines as the very condition of thinkable thought, while reinforcing the belief that freedom reigns. (Chomsky, 1989, p.48).

The practical achievement of these internalized parameters of debate is a type of scholarship which attributes contemporary and past maladies to the personal failings of specific individual leaders. This as opposed to a truthful exposition of the reality that the chauvinist politics of liberal bourgeois democracies are the logical and systematic expression of the way in which our institutions are designed to function (Chomsky, 1984, p.126).

The final cog which keeps the wheels of the manufacture of consent, and social hegemony turning is the ability of the intellectual/state complex to successfully marginalize intellectuals who pursue the truth devoid of any consideration of the repressive boundaries of acceptable thought. Those who do not appreciate the proclaimed self-evident truths of the state ideology, but rather feel that these "truths" should be supported by some evidence, are generally labelled as hysterically emotional, or irresponsible ideologues, usually linked with Communism (Chomsky, 1984, p.131). Today, with the fall of Stalinist

regimes being equated with the demise of Marxist ideas, this effectively renders such scholars obsolete in the public and academic perception, wallowing aimlessly in a history that has "ended". What is significant is that the views of such thinkers are condemned to exist outside the hallowed realm of thinkable thought; their views cannot be heard on a mass scale, much less considered seriously. As O'Brien admits:

This does not mean that radical scholars always tell the truth: it does mean that, in a society where the distorting pressures thrust toward the right, scholars who are telling the truth are likely to be generally regarded as radical (O'Brien, 1969a, p.3).

The marginalization of fundamental dissent allows liberal bourgeois democracies to present, through their intellectuals, a continued image of themselves as committed to freedom and human rights, when in fact these ideals are often irrelevant to their decisions and subsequent behaviour.

One of the most subtle mechanisms by which this process is secured is the somewhat dubious commitment to an ill-defined ideal of objectivity and scientism on the part of social scientists. Some have justified this commitment as one which necessarily and appropriately removes intellectuals from, "... responsibility for the material which is the object of their work" (Ascoli, 1936, p.298). However, it is far more appropriate to discredit the drive for objectivity on these very same grounds. Objectivity and impartiality are ideals to which scholars labouriously condition themselves to adhere, and in so doing, they have,

... freed themselves of the subjective passions, the emotional pre-conceptions which colour conviction and judgement... scholars freed themselves of the personal responsibility associated with personal choice. They emerged free, pure, and single into the antiseptic air of objectivity, and by that sublimation of the mind they prepared the mind's disaster (MacLeish, 1940, p.246).

It is in this manner that the intellectual community has divorced itself from responsibility for the political, economic and social misfortunes of its epoch. The self-important scientism of the social disciplines, and the concomitant increase in emphasis on specialization, has served to prevent scholars from examining general or basic questions regarding the nature and exercise of power in society (Chomsky, 1988, p.159-160). Furthermore, the presently dominant conservative ideology has become so pervasive, it is assumed that the mere parroting of its fundamental precepts is somehow equatable with objectivity. This seriously calls into question the possibility of *true* objectivity at all (O'Brien, 1969a, p.3). To this extent, the commitment to objectivity and scientism has prevented the intellectual community from functioning responsibly.

The basic responsibility of intellectuals is one of honesty, and they bear this responsibility as a result of the conspicuous and peculiar position they hold

within society:

Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and often hidden intentions...For a privileged minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest through which the elements of current history are presented to us...It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth, and to expose lies (Chomsky, 1966, p.60).

Therefore, by extension of the above rationale, intellectuals bear a unique social and moral responsibility for the whole sphere of activity of the society to which they belong (O'Brien, 1969b, p.37). So long as they refuse to accept this burden of responsibility, intellectuals will continue to be little more than sycophants in the service of power.

### Conclusion

Recent events such as the continuing slaughter in Iraq, the war on the poor in America (also known as the War on Drugs), and the current hysterical urge to label any activist criticism of the canon as illiberal "political correctness", illustrates the need for a radical critique of the role and responsibility of intellectuals. For it is intellectuals who will largely determine the terms in which events like these — events with real, human consequences — will be discussed and judged. Such a critique is undoubtedly necessary if the intellectual community is going to reach the standards to which the other, "more moderate" perspectives discussed here only pay lip-service — standards of autonomy, criticism, truth, and humanity.

To argue that it is the responsibility of intellectuals to tell the truth assumes, of course, that there is a truth to be told. This is no small assumption, in a postmodern intellectual climate that looks upon truth claims with suspicion, and in which readers bear as much responsibility for texts as their (apparently dead) authors. In this line of thought, to base the standard for intellectual morality on a requirement for truth-telling is to succumb to the same illusion which allowed for the privileging of conservative discourse in the first place — the illusion that there even are such things as universal truths which exist outside their articulation as localized "moments".

This challenge serves to strengthen, rather than weaken the cause of those of us who argue that every act of scholarship involves a simultaneous act of moral judgment. To say that there is a subjective choice involved in committing an account of the human condition to words does nothing to detract from the argument which insists that the choice remain as faithful to what is actually happening as possible. People, like authors, either die, or they do not. Scholarly

analyses of the war in the Persian Gulf which fail to mention the *fact* that countless thousands of innocent civilians perished under American fire are inappropriately subjective in a way that accounts which recognize this fact are not. The latter may be making contestable truth claims, but at least, unlike the former, they are not lying. The postmodern challenge alerts us to the dangers of truth removed from fact — it does not, however, provide intellectuals with a license to lie.

The paradox is that while it is desired that intellectuals be detached enough so as not to fall prey to potentially treacherous state interests, it is also desirable that they be actively engaged enough to chastise the state's inhumanity when necessary. It has been shown that the proximity of intellectuals to power is incompatible with responsible scholarly endeavour. But is a steadfast commitment to a critical posture any more likely to facilitate an escape from this paradox? George Orwell has argued that, "... the acceptance of any political discipline seems to be incompatible with literary integrity ... Indeed, the mere sound of words ending in *-ism* seems to bring with it the smell of propaganda" (Orwell, 1945, p.270). Indeed, whenever intellectuals internalize *any* orthodoxy, they inherit a fantastic array of contradictions which impair their ability to function responsibly. But an intellectual's commitment to tell the truth is neither a political orthodoxy, nor a mere *"-ism"* — it becomes so only by virtue of the description imposed upon it by the regime it seeks to expose. Indeed, the truth is the ground upon which intellectuals of all ideological dispositions can gather to celebrate their common purpose. It is this ground which defines the role of the intellectual, and it is the flight from this ground which constitutes an abdication of the responsibility inherent in that role.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For instance, Shils begins to discuss the situation wherein the needs of the modern state for intellectual functionaries has given rise to an increased interest on the part of the state in the production of such intellectuals (Shils, 1972, p.76-78). However he does not extend his argument to include a critique of the process whereby the state, in recognition of its need for intellectuals, has developed sophisticated means to produce and control them.

<sup>2</sup> However, in the same breath, Ladd and Lipset recognize that: "Universities remain primarily educational institutions, which implies that they are part of the social apparatus designed to transmit the existing culture, including the beliefs that help legitimate the authority system of society" (p.13). This contradiction is not subsequently solved, as a year later, Lipset and Basu (1976) conclude, somewhat oxymoronically, "...the very nature of the intellectual role, even when perceived in conservative 'preserver' terms, presses those who fulfill it to undermine social stability" (Lipset & Basu, 1976, p.144).

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Tom Hamilton

## Heavy Handed

teacher crept along the aisle  
 starch collar, dark ribbon tie  
 a frail brutality, his respectable  
 inheritance of pain fled through  
 the crawlspace of his eyes

a tightening in that face  
 turned elastic lips whiter than his teeth  
 enlisting gravity, one straight arm in torsion  
 pressed a springsteel spider, his hand  
 on the desktop of the boy in front

a sidelong talker whose tousled hair  
 encroached upon earlobes and conventions  
 the man, more carefully posed than his remark  
 "get it cut, you look like a girl", every  
 head was hung, no feminine pupil moved

<sup>3</sup> Here Gouldner refers to "paradigms" as conceptualized by Thomas Kuhn (1962). It is significant to note here that while Kuhnian analysis makes reference to revolutions in science, this can hardly be equated with a revolution in society as a whole. Thus, while intellectuals may actively seek epistemological upheaval within their disciplines, this may have little or nothing to do with comprehensive social upheaval on a broader scale.

<sup>4</sup> Ladd and Lipset feel that intellectuals came down resolutely against the McCarthy witch-hunts. However, an alternative view holds that the intellectual community actually contributed to the generation of anti-Communist hysteria in the McCarthy era (see Lora, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> As with McCarthyism, while it is popularly perceived that the vast majority of academics were opposed to American activity in Vietnam, scholars such as Noam Chomsky (1967) have argued that the intellectual treatment of the Vietnam invasion actually represented a sophisticated conservative viewpoint (see also Kadushin, 1974, p. 124-189).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, the high level of differentiation and specialization of intellectual roles, secularization, increased intellectualization of trades and professions, and the increasing use of abstract and symbolic constructs in the manipulation of social reality (Eisenstadt, 1972, p. 16-17). It is interesting to note that, as will be discussed, these very conditions are presented in other analyses as reasons for the lack of independence of intellectuals.

<sup>7</sup> The actual weakness of this latter position is well illustrated by Gouldner's portrayal of this, the most prevalent misconception surrounding the role of intellectuals. The association between intellectuals and the proletariat (and, thereby, revolution) is somewhat spurious. The major flaw in this argument centers around the mistreatment of the distinction between the objective and the subjective position of intellectuals. While the subjective viewpoints of mainstream intellectuals may display a romantic sympathy for the downtrodden, the material or objective interests of intellectuals are bound up in the interests of the moneyed class, as evidenced by previous discussion regarding scholars and prestige. Thus the perceived academic affinity for revolution could not be further from the truth.

<sup>8</sup> Chomsky argues that, in this sense, the educated classes are the most profoundly indoctrinated and ignorant group, because it is at this point that they surrender themselves totally to the "doctrines of the faith" (Chomsky, 1984, p. 126).

<sup>9</sup> The examples Chomsky offers are myriad. For instance, in numerous discussions of the Vietnam war, Chomsky outlines that the rhetoric of the critics actually served to uphold the "doctrines of the faith". He cites phraseology which variously characterized the war as: "a defense action"; "a mistake"; "a blundering effort to do good"; "disinterested benevolence"; "lofty intentions"; "a failed but noble crusade"; and highlights the absence of indictments of the war as an invasion, immoral, genocide, or otherwise fundamentally wrong (Chomsky, 1984, p. 128-129).

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