

INTELLECTUALS AND THEIR DISCONTENTS

Russell Jacoby

Russell Jacoby is the author of seven books, including The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe (Basic); Dogmatic Wisdom: How the Culture Wars Divert Education and Distract America (Doubleday); and, most recently, The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy (Basic). He is currently Professor-in-Residence in the Department of History at University of California, Los Angeles.

MY TITLE, WHICH IS PINCHED FROM FREUD'S LITTLE book *Civilization and Its Discontents*, is misleading. I should have titled my essay, "Intellectuals and Their Contents." I don't worry that intellectuals are discontented, but rather the reverse: that they are too happy. Intellectuals have settled for too little; they have become too professorial and complacent. I am considering "academics" and "intellectuals" as almost equivalent terms; indeed, part of the story is how this came to be.

Some purchase on the topic of intellectuals (and intellectuals in an academic terrain) can be gained by considering the image of intellectuals and professors in films and novels. Not so long ago the professor was viewed as "absent-minded" and dysfunctional—perhaps as portrayed in the Marx Brothers film *Horse Feathers* or, more grimly, in Heinrich Mann's *Professor Unrat*, which was turned into the movie, *The Blue Angel*. This image, and the reality to which it corresponded, is obsolete. To satirize a professor nowadays one cannot pretend that he or she is sexually repressed or cannot find the classroom door or the keys to the car. Just the opposite—a professor is satirized for being oversexed or too connected. This is the image of the professor that emerges in a host of

recent novels, such as those by David Lodge. The fictional portrait resonates because it captures something of the current situation of academic intellectuals.

What might be called the classical image of the intellectual is in eclipse; it was a picture that surfaced in Europe and North America. Intellectuals were seen as subversive, effeminate, disreputable, and elitist.¹ In Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, when Mirek asked his girlfriend "why she was so withdrawn, she told him she hadn't been satisfied with their lovemaking." She said he made love like an intellectual.

In the political jargon of the day "intellectual" was an expletive. It designated a person who failed to understand life and was cut off from the people. All Communists hanged at the time by other Communists had that curse bestowed upon them. Unlike people with their feet planted firmly on the ground, they supposedly floated in air... But what did Zdena mean when she accused him of making love like an intellectual?²

In his book *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, Richard Hofstadter summarized the 1950s impression of an intellectual:

A person of spurious intellectual pretensions, often a professor or the protégé of a professor. Fundamentally superficial. Over-emotional and feminine in reactions to any problem...surfeited with conceit and contempt for the experience of more sound and able men. Essentially confused... A doctrinaire supporter of Middle-European socialism as opposed to Greco-French-American ideas of democracy and liberalism. Subject to the...morality of Nietzsche which

¹ Some of the following remarks are derived from my book, *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (New York: Basic, 1999).

² Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Knopf, 1981) 5.

frequently leads him into jail or disgrace.... An anemic bleeding heart.³

Even as he wrote the book in the late fifties, Hofstadter realized the times had changed. In 1956 *Time* ran a cover story announcing that a new spirit traversed the nation: America now embraced intellectuals. “What does it mean to be an intellectual in the U.S.?” asked *Time*. “Is he really in such an unhappy plight...the ridiculed double-dome, the egghead, the wild-eyed, absent-minded man who is made to feel an alien in his own country?” According to *Time*, Jacques Barzun, the Columbia University professor and writer, represented a new species, “a growing host of men of ideas who not only have the respect of the nation, but who return the compliment.”⁴

The shock of a Soviet satellite in 1957 and the onset of Kennedy’s presidency in 1961 redoubled the respect. By the early sixties intellectuals were welcomed, sometimes honored in the highest reaches of government. The title of David Halberstam’s book on the Kennedy years, *The Best and the Brightest*, partly refers to the intellectual cream that flowed towards Washington. A “new breed of thinkers-doers, half of academe, half of the nation’s think tanks” headed to the capital—people like McGeorge Bundy, who was educated at Groton and Yale and had taught at Harvard.⁵ The value of knowledge, training, and education rose dramatically. “Intellectuals have come to enjoy more acceptance and, in some ways, a more satisfactory position,” stated Hofstadter in his conclusion.⁶

Most intellectuals have embraced the change. Some affect disaffection, claiming a marginality they do not have. To put this sharply, once intellectuals were outsiders who wanted to be insiders. Now they are insid-

³ Louis Bromfield as quoted in Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1963) 9-10.

⁴ “America and the Intellectual,” *Time* (11 June 1956): 65.

⁵ David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Ballantine, 1993) 43.

⁶ Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, 393.

ers who pretend to be outsiders—a claim that can be sustained only by turning marginality into a pose. This is not the whole story, but it may be half of it. The other half is the admission, even celebration, of their new insider status as career professionals. These are two responses to the same process. Both signify the eclipse of an older image, which to be sure was always partly mythic, of the independent intellectual.

The old image of intellectuals as marginalized dissenters who attack injustice has not simply vanished. Many of those who bury this image turn about and coolly announce that they themselves are marginalized intellectuals. Edward Said, in his book *Representations of the Intellectual*, advances an idea of the intellectual as a vulnerable critic on the outside. The intellectual, he writes, is “someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma...to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations...”⁷ The intellectual “always has a choice either to side with the weaker, the less well represented, the forgotten or ignored, or to side with the more powerful.”⁸

And there is something fundamentally unsettling about intellectuals who have neither offices to protect nor territory to consolidate and guard; self-irony is therefore more frequent than pomposity, directness more than hemming and hawing. But there is no dodging the inescapable reality that such representations by intellectuals will neither make them friends in high places nor win them official honors. It is a lonely condition...⁹

This is an engaging portrait, but today what relationship does it bear to reality? No honors? No hemming and hawing? No offices or territory to defend? Lonely existence? Where? Maybe in Egypt or Afghanistan, but hardly in the United States or France. Can we say that Derrida or

⁷ Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Pantheon, 1994) 32.

⁸ Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 11.

⁹ Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, xviii.

Said or Henry Louis Gates, Jr., lead unrecognized or marginalized lives? It would be more accurate to state the opposite: they and other oppositional intellectuals hold distinguished positions at major institutions. They are regularly wined and dined, as well as handsomely compensated. Many leading intellectuals like Cornel West or Camille Paglia operate with agents, who arrange fees and schedules for their many speaking engagements. What does this reveal about intellectual life today?

A sign of the times is Stanley Fish's exultation that intellectual life increasingly mimics corporate practices in establishing conferences and travel as the coin of the realm:

The flourishing of the [conference] circuit has brought with it new sources of extra income, increased opportunities for domestic and foreign travel...an ever-growing list of stages on which to showcase one's talents, and geometric increase in the availability of the commodities for which academics yearn, attention, applause, fame...¹⁰

His only regret? The imitation of corporate largesse is only half-hearted and the compensation for professors remains small.

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My concern, however, is not with intellectuals in general, but a subset of them: public intellectuals. In *The Last Intellectuals*,¹¹ I identified Dwight Macdonald and others like Edmund Wilson, Lewis Mumford, and Lionel Trilling—those born around the turn of the century—as classic American intellectuals; and I labeled them *public* intellectuals inasmuch as they addressed the educated public. They wrote to be read. To be sure, the term “public intellectual” is not easy to define. I meant

¹⁰ Stanley Fish, “The Unbearable Ugliness of Volvos,” *English Inside and Out: The Places of Literary Criticism*, ed. Susan Gubar and Jonathan Kamholtz (New York: Routledge, 1993) 103.

¹¹ Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic, 1987).

roughly an intellectual who uses the vernacular and writes for more than specialists, an intellectual who remains committed to a public.

Some aspects of this topic go far beyond the history of intellectuals. The history of rhetoric illuminates the issue of public intellectuals. Classical thinkers studied and valued rhetoric, in large part, because public life depended on oratory. In Rome, public speaking was a pre-eminent civil occupation. “No pursuit,” wrote Cicero in “On the Orator,” “has ever flourished with greater vigour than public speaking....almost every ambitious young man felt he ought to bestir himself to the best of his ability to become eloquent.”¹² Cicero continued:

Think, moreover, of the *power* an orator possesses: power to rescue the suppliant, to raise up the afflicted, to bestow salvation, to dispel danger, to preserve citizens’ rights; what in the whole world could be more noble, more generous, more princely?¹³

Cicero argued against those who viewed oratory as a specialized field, separate from philosophy and history. In order to be eloquent and convincing, the speaker had to be drenched in knowledge; there was no special “art” of oration. Crassus, who represents Cicero in “On the Orator,” is asked at one point whether there is an “art” of oratory.

“Well, really!,” exclaimed Crassus, “Do you imagine I am just one of those idle and talkative Greeks, the sort of little man, no doubt scholarly and erudite enough, whom you can ask trivial questions.... On the contrary, I have always laughed at the impudent characters who sit on their chairs in the schools and call out to the assembled crowds...”¹⁴

¹² Cicero, “On the Orator,” *On the Good Life*, trans. Michael Grant (New York: Penguin, 1971) 240.

¹³ Cicero, “On the Orator,” 246.

¹⁴ Cicero, “On the Orator,” 272.

He goes on to say that oratory is more than a specialized “art”; the orator needs broad knowledge, as well as familiarity with the poets and historians.

Indeed he must peruse and scrutinize the writers and experts on every liberal art.... He must know all about our law and our statutes; he must have a thorough understanding of ancient history; he must master the usages of the Senate, the nature of the constitution, the rights of subject allies, our national treaties and agreements...¹⁵

The Ciceronian model of rhetoric, which inspired Renaissance thinkers, and its idea of “civic humanism” wore the stamp of the city and politics; eloquence was prized in order to convince an audience. And real eloquence depended on wide knowledge and understanding.

Let me jump to the present. Some years ago a professor of writing, Charles Bazerman, published an analysis of an unlikely subject, the *Publication Manual* of the American Psychological Association—that is, the association’s guidelines for authors who are preparing scholarly manuscripts for submissions. Bazerman made several telling observations. The guidelines or instructions for the psychologist had expanded tremendously. The first set of instructions, in 1929, was six pages, the most recent edition almost 200.

With this vast enlargement came an increase in the codification of the discipline; only certain kinds of research were possible, and they had to be presented in a single fashion. Articles were no longer meant to be read, but simply to be scanned or indexed; they were broken up into sections: abstract, introduction, method, results, discussion. Each section was to follow a prescribed form. Moreover, a new reference style had been adopted, putting author and date of cited works in parentheses in the text, which implied, according to Bazerman, “the incrementalism of the literature.” He continued, “As anyone who has worked

¹⁵ Cicero, “On the Orator,” 289.

with this reference system can attest, it is very convenient for listing and summarizing a series of related findings, but it is awkward for extensive quotation or discussion..."¹⁶ The author of the scholarly psychology piece, he concluded, "must display competence to the audience rather than persuade readers of the truth of an idea."¹⁷ In other words, here was a contemporary discipline that prescribed a narrow scientific approach, both in its research and presentation of research. Scholarly contributions were judged by form; no value was given to readability. The concerns of classical rhetoric had vaporized.

Between Cicero's writings on oratory and the 1983 publication manual of the American Psychological Association, intellectual life changed. For many disciplines, eloquence and wide knowledge were not dismissed for the simple reason that they were never considered. If someone studying to be a psychologist confessed that he or she wanted to study writing and literature or even wanted to write well, he or she would be confessing to a lack of direction, perhaps to instability. This was not always so. The only prize that Freud ever received was a literary prize, the Goethe prize for literature. Certainly much of Freud's impact was due to his greatness as a writer.

In recent years interest in rhetoric has exploded. Oddly this renewed attention has had no effect on how academics write. Indeed, as argued in Brian Vickers' *In Defense of Rhetoric*, the new enthusiasm has abandoned the heart of rhetoric: a commitment to public interventions. In studying the old texts of rhetoric,

we are not using them for the purposes for which they were designed.... They were "how-to-do-it" manuals, and reading them without the intention of putting their teachings

¹⁶ Charles Bazerman, "Codifying the Social Scientific Style: The APA *Publication Manual* as a Behaviorist Rhetoric," *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences: Language and Argument in Scholarship and Public Affairs*, ed. John S. Nelson, Allan Megill, and Donald M. McCloskey (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987) 140.

¹⁷ Bazerman, "Codifying the Social Scientific Style," 140.

into practice would be as perverse as studying a book on tennis, or bridge, if we never intended to play those games.¹⁸

He decries the “reductive” use of rhetoric found in Hayden White, who employs four tropes to categorize all literature.¹⁹ Rhetoric gets whittled down to a formalistic analysis of writing. Few, if any, of those who study rhetoric express any desire to participate in public life.

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In the course of the twentieth century, intellectuals have made a progressive retreat from commitment to a public and critical prose. The transition from Lionel Trilling to Fred Jameson, or from Jane Jacobs to younger urbanists like David Harvey, or from William James to younger philosophers, illustrates the cultural shift. The previous generations of intellectuals could be read, and were read, by educated readers; the most recent intellectuals cannot be—nor do they direct themselves to a public audience. They have settled into specialties and sub-specialties. Even as critics have become more sophisticated and daring, they have also become more private and complacent, which belies a critical discourse.

A generational grid used in tracing this evolution—or decline—expresses the real dynamics of intellectual life in the last 50 years. In surveying current intellectual life, I find not a flat-out absence of public intellectuals, but an absence of younger ones—and I am using “younger” in its most expansive meaning: the few public intellectuals are almost all over the age of 50, usually 60. In other words, behind the erosion of public intellectuals, a generational flux is at work. An older generation of intellectuals is passing on, and a new one is not showing up. And this “missing” generation is more or less the sixties generation; they may have been a force for change and ferment, but today they are scarcely pre-

¹⁸ Brian Vickers, *In Defense of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) 14.

¹⁹ Vickers, *In Defense of Rhetoric*, 441-2.

sent as an intellectual generation. Who are the younger successors to Edmund Wilson or Dwight Macdonald or Lewis Mumford or even Lionel Trilling?

This absence can be explained by looking first at what might be called the cultural geography: the sharp increase in higher education in the post-World War II years and the corresponding increase in academic employment. What is decisive is not simply the growing academic environment but the decline of the alternative environments, and specifically, the decline of the urban bohemias. If the western frontier closed in the 1890s, the cultural frontier closed in the 1950s. For a young writer or artist, out of high school or college, to decide to move to New York City and live in Greenwich Village to begin his or her novel is no longer a possibility. The big cities, mainly New York, but also San Francisco and Chicago, get too difficult and too expensive. Café society gives rise to the essay and aphorism; colleges and colleagues spur the monograph and grant application. Socio-cultural environment gives a cast to intellectuals and ways of thinking and writing. The density and rhythms of thought itself register the environment. And if this environment is one of lectures, seminars, and conferences, it reveals itself in the prose, the approach, and perhaps the content of scholarship. The presupposition might be crudely characterized as materialistic: material circumstances do affect people, and insofar as intellectuals are people, they are affected by their surroundings.

While this presupposition is neither subtle nor original, it proves to be fairly controversial. Left intellectuals, who accent social and economic conditions in their politics, get touchy if it is suggested that their own work must also be situated within the social environment. Several left reviewers of my book *The Last Intellectuals* were scandalized by the notion that anything interesting or important could be said about intellectual work by looking at work conditions. This is apparently true for other kinds of workers—miners, needle workers, autoworkers—but not intellectuals; here we must only consider their ideas. The same people whose scholarship is devoted to documenting how workers live are angered if it is suggested that their ideas may also be related to how they live and work.

To be sure, approached from a different angle, the problem of the increasing professionalization of academic intellectuals has often been broached. For instance, Bruce Kuklick in *The Rise of American Philosophy* states in his last chapter, titled “The Triumph of Professionalism,” that while Royce and James assumed two roles—basic research and popular presentations—the next Harvard philosophers:

ignored the public work of Royce and James and centered their attention on logic and epistemology. The order of the day was technical specialized research published for technically competent audiences in technical journals, with popularizations...relegated to hacks, incompetents, and has-beens. The professionalization of philosophy within the American university radically intensified this shift, and philosophy lost its synthesizing, comprehensive function.²⁰

Richard Rorty has recalled his days as a graduate student in the early 1950s when analytic philosophers confidently seized the initiative. Prizing technical problems, they derided others who pursued “the history of philosophy, or more generally...the history of thought.” He cites from a classic account of scientific philosophy that identified “the philosopher of the old school” as someone “trained in literature and history, who has never learned the precision methods of the mathematical sciences.”²¹ Thirty years later analytic thinkers staff many departments, but according to Rorty, the philosophical situation is far from favorable. These departments have almost abandoned the humanities (and have not joined the sciences); they produce students who are argumentative logicians, little more. The discipline has no focus. Rorty writes, “the field these days is a jungle of competing research programs,

²⁰ Bruce Kuklick, *The Rise of American Philosophy: Cambridge, Massachusetts 1860-1930* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) 565.

²¹ Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) 215.

programs which seem to have a shorter and shorter half-life as the years go by.”²²

Many academics and professionals are defensive on the issues of professionalization and surrendering a general audience. I have been accused of being a Luddite, a populist, a romantic, an outsider, and a reactionary. Yet it should be possible to raise the issue of insular specialization without pledging fealty to progress and industrial society. The incarceration of specialists and a return to bloodletting or phrenology is hardly the goal; nor is the point to foster anti-intellectual populism or half-educated generalists. Specialization inheres in industrial society. We need specialists. No one wants to hear a cheery announcement that today your airline pilot will be a family therapist. Nevertheless this truth does not justify every micro-field or subdiscipline or new jargon. Specialization can also be obscurantism, turf building, careerism, and regression, as well as a simple waste of talent and resources.

My concern that humanist studies have evolved into insular activities which have lost contact with the vernacular might be seen as a repressive call for populist intellectuals. I am presumed to wish that intellectuals speak in a uniform language to the great unwashed. Geoffrey Hartman in *Criticism in the Wilderness* complains again and again that some critics allow the creative artist to be involuted or opaque but hold the critics to a single standard of lucidity: “It is as if the literary field were being crassly divided into permissive creativity (fiction) on the one hand, and school masterly criticism on the other.”²³ While there is something to this, Hartman’s language reveals his real beef: he chafes at being subordinated to literature, at being a servant to it. The critic does not simply want to read texts, he or she wants to be a text or, really, be the center of attention. Yet the objection has some truth. No single standard of lucidity exists; literary criticism must be guided by the sub-

²² Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 216.

²³ Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) 233.

ject at hand. And, yes, the interpretation may at times overshadow or surpass that which is interpreted.

Nevertheless, in recent years, we have seen an insistent argument that simplicity in language indicates superficiality, and that complexity denotes subversion. Increasingly in books and articles, “to complicate” is showing up as a virtue. We are told that so-and-so “complicates” our notion of gender or intellectuals. Once upon a time to clarify was considered a goal; now it is assumed to be dangerous, as if there is too much clarity.

In his essay “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” Leo Strauss argued that the existence or threat of persecution—past and present—prompted philosophers to develop a peculiar writing technique. Fearful of stating exactly what they thought, they masked their thought, writing as it were “between the lines.” This meant that their truths were in fact restricted to a few circles of trustworthy and intelligent readers, for the others would read the lines, not between them. Moreover, it was not simply political fear that encouraged this involuted and dense style; they feared the masses: “They were convinced that philosophy as such was suspect to, and hated by, the majority of men.... They must conceal their opinions from all but philosophers...”²⁴

I want to situate Strauss’s analysis within the contemporary context. At least in North America, few humanists or critics fear persecution for their thoughts; this is hardly a motive to mask one’s writings. But I can less easily dismiss the second reason that Strauss offers: fear of or suspicion of the masses. To be sure, it would not be formulated in these terms; in the contemporary context, it is the fear of being read by a wider public, rather than by the masses. Countless graduate students and younger faculty in numerous fields have recounted that they have been given the friendly and very serious advice by their elders to publish in scholarly and technical journals—not general periodicals of opin-

²⁴ Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1952) 34.

ion. One of the most damning judgments about a scholar's work is that it is "journalistic." What does this mean? It implies the book is readable, which infers that it is not rigorous and scholarly. We have largely accepted the notion that readability means superficiality, and opacity means profundity.

Often quoted is Fred Jameson's defense of critical theory as requiring complex language rather than the repressive nature of common sense and lucidity. Jameson defended the writing of the German critical Marxists from the charges of obscurity: "It can be admitted that it does not conform to the canons of clear and fluid journalistic writing taught in schools. But what if those ideas of clarity and simplicity have come to serve a very different ideological purpose...?"²⁵ What if transparency facilitates clichés, but avoids "real thought" requiring effort and time? For Jameson the density of T. W. Adorno's writing exemplified a break with repressive clarity. His "bristling mass of abstractions and cross-references is precisely intended to be read in situation, against the cheap facility of what surrounds it, as a warning to the reader of the price he has to pay for genuine thinking."²⁶ The point is well taken; but it is also misleading, and not only because the characterization of Adorno's writings as a "bristling mass of abstractions and cross-references" misses the mark—this describes academic writing, not Adorno's. The issue is not the difficulty of writing, but the fetish of difficulty, the belief that fractured English, name dropping, and abstractions guarantee profundity, professionalization, and subversion. With this belief comes the counter-belief: lucidity implies banality, amateurism, and conservatism.

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Loyal to an old-fashioned intellectual style, some conservatives have mounted an effective criticism of professionalization and academization. Distrusting the cost of bureaucratic success, they prize the lucid

²⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) xiii.

²⁶ Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, xiii.

prose that career professionals often surrender. Partly for this reason they have loomed large in the “cultural wars” that have ebbed and flowed over the last fifteen years. It is easy to list the conservative tracts decrying educational misdeeds (*Illiberal Education*, *Tenured Radicals*, *The Closing of the American Mind*),²⁷ but where are the rejoinders? The liberal professors growl and scowl, but have difficulty answering in limpid English; instead they collect conference papers. When their books finally appear, they lack bite. In the liberal view, education has proceeded swimmingly; it has become more diverse, multicultural, and exciting, which only crabby conservatives fail to fathom. Lawrence Levine’s *The Opening of the American Mind* reads like a public relations handout for the contemporary university.²⁸ A strange inversion has taken place; liberals and leftists, once critics of the establishment, have become its defenders.

But the debate has not stood still; important challenges and contributions have been made to this question of public and university intellectuals. One example: many have suggested that teaching itself is a form of intellectual and political activity. Inasmuch as intellectuals are now professors, and millions go to college, teaching constitutes a public engagement.

Likewise, there are three areas where I see possible change. Driven by academic discontent and boredom, professors might want to reinvent themselves as public writers. To a limited extent in the last ten years, I think this has happened. In the domain of philosophy, for example, Richard Rorty represents an effort to invigorate a public philosophy, and he has been followed by a number of others. Historians and literary critics increasingly try to break out of closed discussions into a larger public. Yet these professionals are not heeding but bucking

²⁷ See Dinesh D’Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: Free, 1991); Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990); and Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

²⁸ See my review of Levine’s book: “Pollyanna Goes to College,” *Dissent* (Winter 1997): 115-19.

institutional imperatives that reward technical rather than public contributions. Will they be successful? It is not clear.

In the last decade, the emergence of what has been called the new black public intellectuals has generated much attention. For the first time in many years, a group of African American intellectuals has burst upon the scene—figures like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Gerald Early, Adolph Reed, Jr., Randall Kennedy, and Cornel West. These are smart, hard-hitting, and (often) graceful writers, who weigh in on public problems of race, sports, politics, law, and culture. They have been both acclaimed as successors to the New York intellectuals and criticized as publicity hounds who ignore earlier black intellectuals such as W. E. B. Dubois and C. R. L. James. The emergence of the new black intellectuals demonstrates that a literate, indeed hungry, public still exists and refutes the claim that there has been an irrevocable demise of a literate public.

Another promising recent development is the increasing importance of what are sometimes called the new science writers, many of whom have been writing for decades. Their growing impact seems to confirm that a public has not disappeared. While scientists are often belittled as technicians and positivists—usually by conformist postmodern theorists—a group of science writers has more or less filled the space vacated by humanists. I am thinking of people such as Stephen Jay Gould, Oliver Sacks, the late Carl Sagan, Jared Diamond, Jonathan Weiner, and Jeremy Bernstein among others. These professionals do not disdain to write with clarity on matters of wide intellectual interest. Their success with a literate public raises numerous questions, among them: What does it mean if humanists lose the ability to think and write lucidly, while scientists become penetrating, engaged, and accessible? “I deeply deplore the equation of popular writing with pap and distortion,” says Stephen Jay Gould.²⁹ Few contemporary humanists or social scientists would agree. Why is that?

²⁹ Stephen Jay Gould, *Bully for Brontosaurus: Reflections in Natural History* (New York: Norton, 1991) 11.

What is the situation today? I'm not certain. I would like to see intellectuals reclaim the vernacular and reassert themselves in public life. Some see this as an injunction to sell out to—or just plain sell—an anti-intellectual demand to exchange dense and unpopular work for media coverage. No one can do everything, but intellectual work need not be pitched in a single register. For thinkers and writers it should be possible both to be serious and accessible—not always at the same time, but over time. After all, those thinkers touted as the most original and complex have often sought a broad public. Even the famously difficult Adorno sweated over his radio lectures to ensure they would be clear and understandable. Ultimately, it is not only the larger public that loses when intellectuals turn inward to fetishize their profundity and remain within their university corridors and offices, but also the intellectuals themselves. Not to be overly dramatic, but I sometimes think that the historical break with Latin and the rise of the national vernaculars will be reversed—obviously not everywhere, but within institutional settings. In this sense, we face the rise of a new intellectual class using a new scholasticism accessible only to the mandarins, who have turned their back on public life and letters.