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# THE POWERLESS PEOPLE: THE SOCIAL RÔLE OF THE INTELLECTUAL<sup>1</sup>

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While the United Nations are winning the war, American intellectuals are suffering the tremors of men who face overwhelming defeat. They are worried and distraught, some only half aware of their condition, others so painfully aware of it that they must obscure it by busy work and self-deception.

Pragmatism was the nerve of progressive American thinking for the first several decades of this century. It took a rather severe beating from the fashionable left-wing of the thirties and since the latter years of that decade it has obviously been losing out in competition with more religious and tragic views of political and personal life. Many who not long ago read John Dewey with apparent satisfaction have become vitally interested in such analysts of personal tragedy as Soren Kierkegaard. Attempts to reinstate pragmatism's emphasis upon the power of man's intelligence to control his destiny have not been taken to heart by American intellectuals. They are obviously spurred by new worries and are after new gods.

Rather than give in to the self-pity and political lament which the collapse of hope invites, Arthur Koestler proposes, in the *New York Times*, a Fraternity of Pessimists who are to live together in "an oasis." Melvin Lasky, writing in the *New Leader*, responds to Koestler by urging intellectuals, in Spinoza's phrase, "neither to cry nor to laugh but to understand." The president of the American Sociological Society, George Lundberg, ascribes contemporary disasters and disasters apparently yet to come, to the fact that the social sciences have not developed as rapidly nor along the same lines as physical science. Malcolm Cowley, of the *New Republic*, wonders

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted through the courtesy of *Politics* (Vol. 1, No. 3, April, 1944).

why the war years have produced so little that may be considered great American literature. As for live political writing, intellectuals from right of center to revolutionary left seem to believe that there just isn't any. In a feeble attempt to fill the gap, Walter Lippmann's *The Good Society*, originally published in 1937, is reprinted and even acclaimed by at least one anxious reviewer. Many writers who are turning out postwar plans to suit every purse and taste busily divert the attentions of their readers from current political decisions and bolster their hopes by dreams of the future. Stuart Chase and other proponents of a brave new postwar economic world achieve a confident note at the expense of a political realism which worries even John Chamberlain.

Dwight Macdonald has correctly indicated that the failure of nerve is no simple retreat from reason. The ideas current are not merely fads sweeping over insecure intellectuals in a nation at war. Their invention and distribution must be understood as historical phenomena. Yet what is happening is not adequately explained by the political defeat of liberal, labor, and radical parties—from the decision in Spain to the present.

To understand what is happening in American intellectual life we have to consider the social position of its creators, the intellectuals. We have to realize the effect upon them of certain deeplying trends of modern social organization.

## II

We continue to know more and more about modern society, but we find the centers of political initiative less and less accessible. This generates a personal malady that is particularly acute in the intellectual who has labored under the illusion that his thinking makes a difference. In the world of today the more his knowledge of affairs grows, the less effective the impact of his thinking seems to become. Since he grows more frustrated as his knowledge increases, it seems that knowledge leads to powerlessness. He feels helpless in the fundamental sense that he cannot control what he is able to foresee. This is not only true of the consequences of his own attempts to act; it is true of the acts of powerful men whom he observes.

Such frustration arises, of course, only in the man who feels compelled to act. The "detached spectator" does not know his helplessness because he never tries to surmount it. But the political man is always aware that while events are not in his hands he must bear their consequences. He finds it increasingly difficult even to express himself. If he states public issues as he sees them, he cannot take seriously the slogans and confusions used by parties with a chance to win power. He therefore feels politically irrelevant. Yet if he approaches public issues "realistically," that is, in terms of the major parties, he has already so compromised their very statement that he is not able to sustain an enthusiasm for political action and thought.

The political failure of nerve has a personal counterpart in the development of a tragic sense of life. This sense of tragedy may be experienced as a personal discovery and a personal burden, but it is also a reflex of objective circumstances. It arises from the fact that at the centers of public decision there are powerful men who do not themselves suffer the violent results of their own decisions. In a world of big organizations the lines between powerful decisions and grass-root democratic controls become blurred and tenuous, and seemingly irresponsible actions by individuals at the top are encouraged. The need for action prompts them to take decisions into their own hands, while the fact that they act as parts of large corporations or other organizations blurs the identification of personal responsibility. Their public views and political actions are, in this objective meaning of the word, irresponsible: the social corollary of their irresponsibility is the fact that others are dependent upon them and must suffer the consequences of their ignorance and mistakes, their self-deceptions, and their biased motives. The sense of tragedy in the intellectual who watches this scene is a personal reaction to the politics and economics of irresponsibility.

Never before have so few men made such fateful decisions for so many people who themselves are so helpless. Dictatorships are but one manifestation of this fact. Mass armies all over the world are its living embodiment, and the Cairo and Teheran and Yalta conferences are its most impressive symbols. The soldier may face death, yet have no voice in the network of decisions which leads him to recapture Burma or garrison India. Power is an impersonal

monster; those who do the taking understand only its technique and not its end.

The networks of military decision may be traced further up the line to the centers of political power. There, plans are made by the older men who do not face the chance of violent death. This contrast between the elder statesman and the young soldier is not a popular topic to stress during war, but it is nevertheless one foundation for the modern man's urgently tragic sense of life. When the man who fights and dies can also make the decision to fight in the light of his own ideals, wars can be heroic. When this is not the case, they are only tragic.

Contemporary irresponsibility may be collective; no one circle of men may make the most fateful decision; there may, indeed, be no single fateful decision, only a series of steps in a seemingly inevitable chain, but these considerations do not relieve the resulting tragedy. On the contrary, they deepen it.

The centralization of decision and the related growth of dependence are not, however, confined to armies; although that is where they may be seen in their most immediate form. Organized irresponsibility is a leading feature of modern industrial societies everywhere. On every hand, the individual is confronted with seemingly remote organizations and he feels dwarfed and helpless. If the small business man escapes being turned into an employee of a chain or a corporation, one has only to listen to his pleas for help before small business committees to realize his dependence. More and more people are becoming dependent salaried workers who spend the most alert hours of their lives being told what to do. In climactic times like the present, dominated by the need for swift action, the individual feels dangerously lost. As the *London Economist* recently remarked, "The British citizen *should be* an ardent participant in his public affairs; he *is* little more than a consenting spectator who draws a distinction between 'we' who sit and watch and 'they' who run the state."

Such are the general frustrations of contemporary life. For the intellectual who seeks a public for this thinking—and he must support himself somehow—these general frustrations are made acute by the fact that in a world of organized irresponsibility the diffi-

culty of speaking one's mind has increased for those who do not speak popular pieces.

If the writer is the hired man of an "information industry," his general aims are, of course, set by the decisions of others and not by his own integrity. But the freedom of the so-called free-lance is also minimized when he goes to the market; if he does not go, his freedom is without public value. Between the intellectual and his potential public stand technical, economic, and social structures which are owned and operated by others. The world of pamphletting offered to a Tom Paine a direct channel to readers that the world of mass circulations supported by advertising cannot usually afford to provide one who does not say already popular things. The craftsmanship which is central to all intellectual and artistic gratification is thwarted for an increasing number of intellectual workers. They find themselves in the predicament of the Hollywood writer: the sense of independent craftsmanship they would put into their work is bent to the ends of a mass appeal to a mass market.

Even the editor of the mass circulation magazine has not escaped the depersonalization of publishing, for he becomes an employee of a business enterprise rather than a personality in his own right. Mass magazines are not so much edited by a personality as regulated by an adroit formula.

Writers have always been more or less hampered by the pleasure and mentality of their readers, but the variations and the level to which the publishing industry has been geared made possible a large amount of freedom. The recent tendency towards mass distribution of books—the 25 cent "pocket books"—may very well require, as do the production and distribution of films, a more cautious and standardized product. It is likely that fewer and fewer publishers will pass on more and more of those manuscripts which reach mass publics through drug stores and other large-scale channels of distribution.

Although, in general, the larger universities are still the freest of places in which to work, the trends which limit the independence of the scholar are not absent there. The professor, after all, is legally an employee, subject to all that this fact involves. Institutional factors naturally select men for these universities and in-

fluence how, when, and upon what they will work and write. Yet the deepest problem of freedom for teachers is not the occasional ousting of a professor, but a vague general fear—sometimes politely known as “discretion,” “good taste,” or “balanced judgment.” It is a fear which leads to self-intimidation and finally becomes so habitual that the scholar is unaware of it. The real restraints are not so much external prohibitions as control of the insurgent by the agreements of academic gentlemen. Such control is naturally furthered by Hatch Acts, by political and business attacks upon “professors,” by the restraints necessarily involved in the Army’s program for the colleges, and by the setting up of committees by trade associations of subjects, like history, which attempt to standardize the content and effects of teaching. Research in social science is increasingly dependent upon funds from foundations, and foundations are notably averse to scholars who develop unpopular theses, that is, those placed in the category of “unconstructive.”

The United States’ growing international entanglements have subtle effects upon some American intellectuals: to the young man who teaches and writes on Latin America, Asia, or Europe and who refrains from deviating from acceptable facts and policies, these entanglements lead to a voluntary censorship. He hopes for opportunities of research, travel, and foundation subsidies.

*The means of effective communication are being expropriated from the intellectual worker. The material basis of his initiative and intellectual freedom is no longer in his hands. Some intellectuals feel these processes in their work. They know more than they say and they are powerless and afraid.*

In modern society both freedom and security depend upon organized responsibility. By “freedom” and “security,” I do not mean independence for each individual; I mean merely that men have effective control over what they are dependent upon. The ethics and politics of democracy center on decisions which vitally affect people who have no voice in them. Today, everywhere, such decisions are central to the lives of more and more people. A politics of organized irresponsibility prevails, and because of it, men in high places must hide the facts of life in order to retain their power.

When irresponsible decisions prevail and values are not proportionately distributed, you will find universal deception practiced by and for those who make the decisions and who have the most of what values there are to have. An increasing number of intellectually equipped men and women work *within* powerful bureaucracies and *for* the relatively few who do the deciding. And if the intellectual is not directly hired by such organizations, then by little steps and in many self-deceptive ways he seeks to have his published opinions conform to the limits set by them and by those whom they do directly hire.

### III

Any philosophy which is sensitive to the meaning of various societies for personal ways of life will give the idea of responsibility a central place. That is why it is central in the ethics and politics of John Dewey and of the late German sociologist, Max Weber. The intellectual's response to the tragic fact of irresponsibility has a wide range but we can understand it in terms of where the problem is faced. The tragedy of irresponsibility may be confronted introspectively, as a moral or intellectual problem. It may be confronted publicly, as a problem of the political economy.

Along this scale there are (1) simple evaluations of our selves; (2) objective considerations of events; (3) estimates of our personal position in relation to the objective distribution of power and decision. An adequate philosophy uses each of these three styles of reflection in thinking through any position that is taken.

1. If ethical and political problems are defined solely in terms of the way they affect the individual, he may enrich his experience, expand his sensitivities, and perhaps adjust to his own suffering. But he will not solve the problems he is up against. He is not confronting them at their deeper sources.

2. If only the objective trends of society are considered, personal biases and passions, inevitably involved in observation and thought of any consequence, are overlooked. Objectivity need not be an academic cult of the narrowed attention; it may be more ample and include meaning as well as "fact." What many consider to be "objective" is only an unimaginative use of already

plotted routines of research. This may satisfy those who are not interested in politics; it is inadequate as a full orientation. It is more like a specialized form of retreat than the intellectual orientation of a man.

3. The shaping of the society we shall live in and the manner in which we shall live in it are increasingly political. And this society includes the realms of intellect and of personal morals. If we demand that these realms be geared to our activities which make a public difference, then personal morals and political interests become closely related; any philosophy that is not a personal escape involves taking a political stand. If this is true, it places great responsibility upon our political thinking. Because of the expanded reach of politics, it is our own personal style of life and reflection we are thinking about when we think about politics.

The independent artist and intellectual are among the few remaining personalities equipped to resist and to fight the stereotyping and consequent death of genuinely lively things. Fresh perception now involves the capacity continually to unmask and to smash the stereotypes of vision and intellect with which modern communications swamp us. These worlds of mass-art and mass-thought are increasingly geared to the demands of politics. That is why it is in politics that intellectual solidarity and effort must be centered. If the thinker does not relate himself to the value of truth in political struggle, he cannot responsibly cope with the whole of live experience.

#### IV

If he is to think politically in a realistic way, the intellectual must constantly know his own social position. This is necessary in order that he may be aware of the sphere of strategy that is really open to his influence. If he forgets this, his thinking may exceed his sphere of strategy so far as to make impossible any translation of his thought into action, his own or that of others. His thought may thus become fantastic. If he remembers his powerlessness too well, assumes that his sphere of strategy is restricted to the point of impotence, then his thought may easily become politically trivial. In either case, fantasy and powerlessness

may well be the lot of his mind. One apparent way to escape both of these fates is to make one's goal simply that of understanding.

Simply to understand is an inadequate alternative to giving in to a personal sense of tragedy. It is not even a true alternative; increased understanding may only deepen the sense of tragedy. Simply to understand is perhaps an ideal of those who are alienated but by no means disinherited—*i.e.*, those who have jobs but don't believe in the work they are doing. Since "the job" is a pervasive political sanction and censorship of most middle class intellectuals, the political psychology of the scared employee becomes relevant. Simply understanding is an ideal of the man who has a capacity to know truth but not the chance, the skill, or the guts, as the case may be, to communicate them with political effectiveness.

Knowledge that is not communicated has a way of turning the mind sour, of being obscured, and finally of being forgotten. For the sake of the integrity of the discoverer, his discovery must be effectively communicated. Such communication is also a necessary element in the very search for clear understanding, including the understanding of one's self. For only through the social confirmation of others whom we believe adequately equipped do we earn the right of feeling secure in our knowledge. The basis of our integrity can be gained or renewed only by activity, including communication, in which we may give ourselves with a minimum of repression. It cannot be gained nor retained by selling what we believe to be our selves. When you sell the lies of others you are also selling your self. To sell your self is to turn your self into a commodity. A commodity does not control the market; its nominal worth is determined by what the market will offer. And it isn't enough.

We insist upon clarity and understanding in order to govern our decisions by their consequences. Clear understanding of the political world and of our place within it is also indispensable if we are to keep an appropriate distance from ourselves. Without this distance men collapse into self-pity and political lament. We must constantly shuttle between the understanding which is made possible by detachment and the longing and working for a politics of truth in a society that is responsible. The problems which make a difference, both personally and politically, arise in the active

search for these goals. The solutions which may be truthful and adequate require episodes of detachment from political morality and from considerations of self.

The phase of detachment may be isolated from its political context and in the division of labor become an end in itself. Those who restrict themselves to work only such segments of intellectual endeavor may attempt to generalize them, making them the basis for political and personal orientation. Then the key problem is held to rise from the fact that social science lags behind physical science and technology, and political and social problems are a result of this deficiency and lag. Such a position is inadequate.

Alienation must be used in the pursuit of truths, but there is no reason to make a political fetish out of it. Much less may it serve as a personal excuse. Certainly more secure knowledge is needed, but we already have a great deal of knowledge that is politically and economically relevant. Big businessmen prove this by their readiness to pay out cash to social scientists who will use their knowledge for the ends of business. Many top economic brains are now hired by big business committees; and a good social scientist is often fired from government, under business pressure, only to be hired by business or by one of its front organizations.

The political man does not need to wait upon more knowledge in order to act responsibly now. To blame his inaction upon insufficient knowledge serves as a cheap escape from the taking of a political stand and acting upon it as best he can. If one-half of the relevant knowledge which we now possess were really put into the service of the ideals which leaders mouth, these ideals could be realized in short order. The view that all that is needed is knowledge ignores the nub of the problem as the social scientist confronts it: he has little or no power to act politically and his chance to communicate in a politically effective manner is very limited.

There are many illusions which uphold authority and which are known to be illusions by many social scientists. Tacitly by their affiliations and silence, or explicitly in their work, the social scientist often sanctions these, rather than speak out the truth against them. They censor themselves either by carefully selecting safe problems in the name of pure science, or by selling such prestige as their scholarship may have for ends other than their own.

## V

The above acceptances of the *status quo* proceed directly. The present may also be accepted—and made spuriously palatable—by unanchored expectations of the future. This method is now being used in the production and publicity of hundreds of “postwar plans.”

The big businessman sets the technological trap by dangling his baubles before the public without telling precisely how they may be widely distributed. In a similar manner, the political writer may focus attention away from the present and into the several models of the future. The more the antagonisms of the actual present must be suffered, the more the future is drawn upon as a source of pseudo-unity and synthetic morale. Intellectuals and publicists have produced such a range of “plans” that there is now one to satisfy every one. Most of these commodities are not plans with any real chance to be realized. They are baits for various strata, and sometimes for quite vested groups, to support contemporary irresponsibilities. Postwar “planning” is the “new propaganda.”

Discussions of the future which accept the present basis for it serve either as diversions from immediate realities or as tacit intellectual sanctions of future disasters. The postwar world is already rather clearly scheduled by authoritative decisions. Apparently, it is to be a balance of power within the collective domination of three great powers. We move from individual to collective domination, as the nations which have shown themselves mightiest in organizing world violence take on the leadership of the peaceful world. Such collective dominance may lead either to counter-alliances and bigger wars, or to decisions not effectively responsible to the man who is born in India or on an island of the Caribbean.

There is very little serious public discussion of these facts and prospects, or of the causes of the current war. Yet the way to avoid war is to recognize its causes within each nation and then remove them. Writers simply accept war as given, refer to December 7 when it all began, and then talk of the warless future. Nobody goes further in the scholarly directions of the inter-war investigations of the causes of modern wars. All that is forgotten, hidden

beneath the rather meaningless shield, "Isolationist." It is easier to discuss an anchorless future, where there are as yet no facts, than to face up to the troublesome questions of the present and recent past.

In the covenants of power the future is being planned, even if later it must be laid down in blood with a sword. The powerless intellectual as planner may set up contrary expectations; he will later see the actual function of his "planning." He is leading a prayer and such prayer is a mass indirection.

Discussion of world affairs that does not proceed in terms of the struggle for power within each nation is interesting only in the political uses now made of it by those in power. Internal power struggles are the only determinants of international affairs which we may influence. The effective way to plan the world's future is to criticize the decisions of the present. Unless it is at every point so anchored, "planning" disguises the world that is actually in the works; it is therefore a dangerous disguise which permits a spurious escape from the anxieties surrounding the decisions and happenings of the present.

## VI

The writer tends to believe that problems are *really* going to be solved in *his* medium, that of the word. Thus he often underplays the threat of violence, the coercive power always present in decisive political questions. This keeps the writer's mind and energies in general channels, where he can talk safely of justice and freedom. Since the model of his type of controversy is rational argumentation, rather than skilled violence or stupid rhetoric, it keeps him from seeing these other and historically more decisive types of controversy. These results of the writer's position, his work and its effects, are quite convenient for the working politician, for they generally serve to cover the nature of his struggles and decisions with ethically elaborated disguises. As the channels of communication become more and more monopolized and party machines and economic pressures, based on vested shams, continue to monopolize the chances of effective political organization, his opportunities to act and to communicate politically are minimized. The po-

litical intellectual is, increasingly, an employee living off the communicational machineries which are based on the very opposite of what he would like to stand for. He would like to stand for a politics of truth in a democratically responsible society. But such efforts as he has made in behalf of freedom for his function have been defeated.

The defeat is not at the hands of an enemy that is clearly defined. Even given the power, no one could easily work his will with our situation, nor succeed in destroying its effects with one blow. It is always easier to locate an external enemy than grapple with an internal condition. Our impersonal defeat has spun a tragic plot and many are betrayed by what is false within them.