

What Are Intellectuals Good For? - A Crooked Timber
Seminar on George Scialabba's Book

Edited and organized by Henry Farrell

© 2009.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons License.

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5/>

Contents

Contents	ii
Introduction	1
What Kinds of Intellectuals Should There Be? - John Holbo	2
George Scialabba and the Culture Wars ... - Michael Bérubé	6
Avoiding the Lasch of Modernity - Rich Yeselson	15
Toward a Larger Left - Aaron Swartz	23
No Live Readings - Russell Jacoby	27
Hommes de Lettres and Inorganic Intellectuals - Henry Farrell	30
Steady Work - Scott McLemee	36
Response - George Scialabba	40

Introduction

As promised, we will be having a seminar on George Scialabba's *What Are Intellectuals Good For?* over the next few days. We're really happy to have George with us - he is a frequent CT commenter, and, more importantly, one of the great public intellectuals of our time. A lot of the discussion will focus on the question of what role, if any, public intellectuals should play in modern culture.

The non-CT authors:

Russell Jacoby is professor of history at UCLA. He is the author of numerous books, most relevantly including *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*, and updated in his article, "Big Brains, Small Impact" for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Aaron Swartz was one of the founders of Reddit, helped write the simple markup language Markdown (which has been used to format this seminar) and is involved in sundry other causes and activities in the area where information technology and politics intersect.

Rich Yeselson is a research coordinator in the Strategic Organizing Center of the labor federation, Change to Win, and the Zelig of the American intellectual left.

What Kinds of Intellectuals Should There Be? - John Holbo

On the whole, a great book. A real pleasure to read. I've never read Scialabba's stuff before (or I haven't noticed his byline, to remember it). My loss. But better late than never.

What's so great about Scialabba? Temperamentally, there is his gratifyingly steady exhibition of generous severity to his subjects. (I can't imagine anyone could object to being drubbed so fairly. With the possible exception of Christopher Hitchens.) Stylistically, there is his facility for cramming breadth into small literary packets, without recourse to cheap space-saving devices. Intellectually, there is his forthright evenhandedness - his awareness of what other people think - that never forgets, or neglects to mention, what he thinks. (Everyone else is praising George as well, so I won't lay it on thick. But no kidding. Good stuff.)

Full disclosure: I left my copy of his book in Maryland - but only after reading it completely - then wrote this post in New York, from stuff on his website¹, with the TV blaring in the background. And now I'm in Singapore, polishing up a little.

What are intellectuals good for?

The cover seems to suggest the answer might be: nothing. Nothing *good*. 'We fool you,' announce the symbol-manipulating professionals, snug between those who rule and those who shoot. But no. The correct answer is: several things, surely. Two, for starters.

Scialabba's review of Michael Walzer's² *In The Company of Critics* makes the point that we probably need both 'internal' critics (the sort Walzer favors) but also 'external critics'. You can guess what the distinction comes to from the long passage I am about to quote; or you could just plain guess. But - in case you are unaccountably dull, hence incapable of guessing - 'internal critics' are those pragmatist meliorists, incrementalists, moderates, two-side-seers, tactical trimmers and prudent 'yes, but' foot-draggers who 'measure critical distance in inches', rather than in terms of all that hard, lonely ground you have to cover, crawling all the way out of the Cave. 'External' critics are the ones who leave the Cave.

¹<http://www.georgescialabba.net/mtgs/>

²<http://www.georgescialabba.net/mtgs/1989/12/the-company-of-critics-social.html>

Walzer's idea is that the former fare better (achieve more, and maybe live longer) because (to reverse a famous formula) prophets without honor in their hometowns tend not to do much better when they take their weird show on the road.

If you want to appeal to people, you have to appeal to what appeals to people. Those who have been outside the Cave too long tend to be lousy persuaders. They don't know how to draw on local troglodyte traditions in making their reform proposals. (Plato noticed this long ago, yes of course.)

Still, even granting (at least for the sake of argument) that internalist strategies are on the whole sounder and more secure, more steadily profitable, it hardly follows that all critics should be internal critics. This is Scialabba's point (or part of it). I'll quote at length, because it's lovely writing and - I'll stick my neck out an inch - expresses a Scialabban (Scialabbesque? Scialabbayan?) critical creed:

Concerned not to cut himself off from his fellow-citizens, the internal critic will be tempted to moderate, if not his indignation, then at least the expression of it: his rhetoric. And sometimes - usually - he will be right to do so, to set political effectiveness above literary effect. But indignation is not always manageable. And however conscientiously the critic tries to reiterate, to reconstruct the moral history of those in other communities, it will always be difficult for him to give their suffering due weight. We are properly skeptical of the habitually enraged critic; but we are also disappointed on occasion - and they may be the most important occasions - by the invariably judicious one. Perhaps this is why, though I largely share Walzer's political positions, I have seldom been profoundly moved by his own social criticism - enlightened, yes, but rarely inspired. The young Kafka wrote: "If the book we are reading does not wake us, as with a fist hammering on our skull, why then do we read it?" Walzer is, alas, far too polite ever to have hammered on anyone's skull. Other connected critics have done so, it is true, including some of those Walzer discusses. But if the connection is not to be endangered, the tact required is extraordinary and the critic's inhibitions will therefore be considerable. Kafka went on: "What we must have are books that come upon us like ill-fortune and distress us deeply. . . . A book must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us." I have often exclaimed with pleasure while reading Walzer's graceful prose, but never with distress. Inside every citizen of a state responsible for so much misery in the rest of the world there is, one must assume, a frozen sea. In normal times, for ordinary purposes, the temperate, scrupulously nuanced, moderately forceful criticism of the typical connected critic - of Walzer himself - is appropriate. But sometimes maximum intensity - an axe, a charge of verbal explosives, a burst of white heat - is required, whether for immediate effect or in helpless, furious witness. A sense of the simultaneous urgency and futility of much social criticism - i.e., the tragic sense - is a necessary part of the critical

temperament. To resist this sense is the critic's everyday responsibility. To give in to it, to risk excess, loss of dignity, disconnection, may also, on occasion, be his duty.

This negative point is made again in Scialabba's review of an Isaiah Berlin volume³. (Berlin, like Walzer, is a temperamental 'internalist' and, like Walzer, an advertiser of the virtues of that temperament.) Again I'll quote at length. The first bit of what follows refers to unspecified 'urgent and obvious questions'. Again, the reader can guess - urgency and obviousness are wonderful assistants. But, in case the reader truly is a dull person: the questions in question revolve around the degree to which we can make the world a better place. (Yes, of course we can't make it perfect. But it doesn't have to be *such* a mess, surely.)

Notwithstanding his famously varied interests and extraordinary range, Berlin has never found the occasion to raise, much less come to terms with, these urgent and obvious questions. He has instead devoted himself to addressing continual reminders about the unattainability of perfect harmony to a civilization that cannot rouse itself to legislate a decently progressive income tax or do more than gesture fitfully at homelessness, global hunger, and a score of other evils for which a doubtless imperfect posterity will doubtless curse and despise us. Berlin will not, I'm afraid, win the Scialabba Prize. He will survive that disappointment; for all his frequent and graceful self-deprecation, he evidently enjoys, along with everyone else's, his own good opinion. Near the end of his splendid essay on Turgenev is a passage of what is unmistakably self-description:

“... the small, hesitant, not always very brave band of men who occupy a position somewhere to the left of center, and are morally repelled both by the hard faces to their right and the hysteria and mindless violence and demagoguery on their left. Like the men of the [18]40s, for whom Turgenev spoke, they are at once horrified and fascinated. They are shocked by the violent irrationalism of the dervishes on the left, yet they are not prepared to reject wholesale the position of those who claim to represent the young and the disinherited, the indignant champions of the poor and the socially deprived or repressed. This is the notoriously unsatisfactory, at times agonizing, position of the modern heirs of the liberal tradition (*Russian Thinkers*, p. 301).

This is a perfectly honorable position, but it is not, as far as I can see, an agonizing one. It seems, in fact, quite a comfortable one. Turgenev, it is true,

³<http://www.georgescialabba.net/mtgs/2001/10/the-crooked-timber-of-humanity.html>

was not comfortable. But then, he tried long and hard to find common ground with the “indignant champions of the poor,” rather than merely informing them that not much, alas, can be done. Berlin is, of course, in favor of whatever can be done; but what in particular that might be, and why not more, never seems to be his immediate concern. “The concrete situation is almost everything,” he advises, concluding an essay entitled “The Pursuit of the Ideal.” The concrete situation is just what he has rarely had a word to say about. Forty years ago Irving Howe wrote: “But if the ideal of socialism is now to be seen as problematic, the problem of socialism remains an abiding ideal. I would say that it is the best problem to which a political intellectual can attach himself.” So it was, and still is. And Berlin still hasn’t.

Scialabba’s got Walzer and Berlin dead to rights. But his point isn’t that Walzer and Berlin are good for nothing. Rather, in a healthier intellectual ecology, you would have *relatively more* Kafkaesque ice-axe-style skull smashing. Not just that, of course. And, of course, not literally. Berlin is not, pace the cover of Scialabba’s book, fooling us. But it isn’t exactly an accident that his undeniably attractive persona has expanded to fill a particular niche in the intellectual ecology; nor that the niche turns out to be so comfortable.

The fervent gratitude he inspires is, in a way, the most remarkable thing about Berlin’s career. He has written comparatively little; it obviously strikes exactly the right chord. “People are pleased,” observes Russell Jacoby (“Isaiah Berlin: With the Current,” *Salmagundi*, Winter 1982), “to find a man of learning who does not accuse them or their society of unspeakable crimes. . . . Berlin reassures his readers in a prose studded with the great names of Western culture that complexity is inevitable, solutions, impossible; the threat is from the utopians and artists who imagine a better world.”

Ouch. The more so for taking such mild note of the symptomatic absence of agony. It isn’t that Berlin is wrong. What Scialabba is saying, in effect, is that Berlin lacks a sense of proportion. He can’t strike a balance between the ideal and the possible. Which, of course, ironically undercuts Berlin’s self-presentation as, precisely, the down-to-earth balancer of competing claims and values. Scialabba’s point is that any true sense of proportion would be a tragic sense an agonized sense. It is Berlin’s equilibrium that shows he’s off-balance.

Now: how much have I just said? Not so much, really. Still, a lot follows from it, potentially. I’d like to develop this thought to the tune of about 8,000 words in one direction, at least 5,000 in another. But what I’ve said will do for starters. Let me conclude by remarking that a more accurate title for the collection might be:

What Sorts of Intellectuals Should There Be? In What Social Mixes and Ecological Proportions? When? And How Can You Tell?

Except that’s not a very good title.

George Scialabba and the Culture Wars; or, Critique of Judgment - Michael Bérubé

In his brief but delightful introduction to *What Are Intellectuals Good For?*, Scott McLemee offers a précis of the Scialabbian moral/political universe: “Reconciling the skeptical pragmatism of Richard Rorty and the geopolitical worldview of Noam Chomsky is not a simple project. Rarely do you find them treated as two sides of one ideological coin. But that seems like a reasonably accurate description of Scialabba’s sense of the possible. If he were to write a manifesto, it would probably call for more economic equality, the dismantling of the American military industrial complex, and the end of metaphysics.” This does indeed sound reasonably accurate, and it serves as a reminder that McLemee is one of the few contemporary writers and reviewers who belongs in Scialabba’s league. For regardless of whether one agrees with Scialabba’s judgments on matters moral and political (and, often enough, I don’t, even though I’d endorse that hypothetical manifesto in a heartbeat), one has to be impressed with Scialabba’s uncanny ability to *inhabit* the books and writers he reviews. Scialabba’s work in *What Are Intellectuals Good For?* is remarkable for its range, yes, and his prose is notable for its precision and clarity. But what’s most impressive, I think, is the scrupulous fairness that Scialabba brings to the task of reviewing. Almost every essay in this collection allows the reader some degree of imaginative sympathy with the books and writers under review, even when Scialabba himself turns out to be largely unsympathetic to the material he’s writing about. That’s because Scialabba, like McLemee, always offers a reasonably accurate précis of the material he’s writing about before he gets around to taking issue with it. It’s easy enough to do, of course, when you’re writing about someone who sees the world as you do; but George Scialabba does it as a matter of course. I wish I could say the same of all reviewers; and though it’s a standard to which I hold my own review essays, I know very well that I’ve sometimes honored it in the breach.

And yet, in a fascinating passage at the outset of his essay on Christopher Hitchens, Scialabba acknowledges the temptations of the partisan review:

All the someone in question has to do is begin thinking differently from me about a few important matters. In no time, I begin to find that his qualities

have subtly metamorphosed. His abundance of colorful anecdotes now looks like incessant and ingenious self-promotion. His marvelous copiousness and fluency strike me as mere mellifluous facility and mechanical prolixity. A prose style I thought deliciously suave and sinuous I now find preening and overelaborate. His fearless cheekiness has become truculent bravado; his namedropping has gone from endearing foible to excruciating tic; his extraordinary dialectical agility seems like resourceful and unscrupulous sophistry; his entertaining literary asides like garrulousness and vulgar display; his bracing contrariness, tiresome perversity. Strange, this alteration of perspective; and even stranger, it sometimes occurs to me that if he changed his opinions again and agreed with me, all his qualities would once more reverse polarity and appear in their original splendor. A very instructive experience, epistemologically speaking.

“Farewell, Hitch” is the most recent of Scialabba’s essays reprinted in *What Are Intellectuals Good For?*, dating from 2005; but unlike so many other farewells to Hitchens written after 9/11, Scialabba’s essay manages to be measured and circumspect— and all the more devastating as a result. Surely Scialabba’s rigorous honesty, his willingness to predicate his review on that very instructive experience (epistemologically speaking), accounts both for the circumspection and the devastation.

The other admirable thing about Scialabba is his unpredictability. How do you know when you’re dealing with the work of a hack? When you can anticipate its every move, mentally writing the review talking point by stock phrase before you actually read it. Scialabba’s reviews are basically the opposite of that. As if it’s not hard enough to reconcile the skeptical pragmatism of Richard Rorty and the geopolitical worldview of Noam Chomsky, Scialabba also finds ways to reconcile the polemics of Alexander Cockburn and the jeremiads of Victor Davis Hanson. You wouldn’t think that someone like Scialabba, who admires Chomsky and Cockburn as well as antifoundationalist stalwarts Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish, would file friendly reviews of Hanson’s and Heath’s *Who Killed Homer?*, Richard Bernstein’s *Dictatorship of Virtue*, and Roger Kimball and Hilton Kramer’s *Against the Grain: The New Criterion on Art and Intellect at the End of the Twentieth Century*. But you’d be wrong. Reading George Scialabba is always illuminating and often surprising, and I mean that as high praise. Late in the collection, Scialabba cites Leonardo Sciascia’s response to the work of Pier Paolo Pasolini: “Pasolini ‘may be wrong,’ Sciascia replied, he ‘may contradict himself,’ but he knows ‘how to think with a freedom which very few people today even aspire to.’” That’s precisely my response to *What Are Intellectuals Good For?*, and may even offer an answer to the collection’s titular question: to think with a freedom which very few people even aspire to.

The case of Bernstein’s *Dictatorship of Virtue* is instructive, epistemologically speaking. Scialabba largely— indeed, almost entirely— agrees with Bernstein’s fierce critique of multiculturalism in academe and out, even to the matter of the title, which suggests an ominous parallel between multiculturalism and the Reign of Terror. Actually, Scialabba

offers a parallel to another, more recent reign of terror: “Emasculated text books, the frantic pursuit of an artificial inclusiveness, neglect or even suspicion of intellectual mastery, subtle or unsubtle disparagement of classical ideals and achievements, reflexive accusations of racism, sexism, and elitism— it sounds a little like an earlier Cultural Revolution; though this time, fortunately, the promised hundred flowers have turned out to be not poisonous but only plastic.” I imagine that those plastic flowers are Scialabba’s way of admitting that the death toll attributable to multiculturalism and political correctness is rather lower than that of the French or Cultural Revolutions. Be that as it may, Scialabba also agrees with Bernstein’s antidote to multiculturalist terror: “Real educational equality consists in everyone’s being held— and, if necessary, helped— to the same high standards. Which standards? Bernstein makes a modest and pragmatic case— which is therefore much more persuasive than the neoconservatives’ strident and dogmatic case— for Americanism and Eurocentrism.” If it’s hard to imagine a Chomsky/Cockburn fan endorsing a modest, pragmatic version of the neocons’ espousal of Americanism and Eurocentrism, well, see “illuminating and surprising,” one paragraph above.

Part of Scialabba’s disdain for the multiculturalist wing of the academic left stems from his aversion to what one might call the diversity-management bureaucracy. That much is understandable. But reviewing these 1990s culture-wars reviews today, I get the sense that Scialabba, like Russell Jacoby and Paul Berman, was a little too eager to believe the worst of the academic left (with a few salient exceptions, like Rorty and Fish). In a 1992 issue of *Dissent*, Richard Rorty had written, “One of the contributions of the newer [the radical-academic] left has been to enable professors, whose mild guilt about the comfort and security of their own lives once led them into extra-academic political activity, to say, ‘Sorry, I gave at the office.’” Scialabba is fond of this line, and cites it twice— once in his review of *Dictatorship of Virtue* and once in his review of *Against the Grain*. There’s good reason to be fond of it, I suppose. It gently deflates all those self-satisfied claims about the political urgency of intellectual work, and Moloch knows, some of those claims needed deflating. But in retrospect, I think there’s reason to wonder whether Scialabba’s healthy skepticism about the self-satisfied claims of the academic left didn’t lead him to be rather too generous to some writers and not altogether fair to others.

For Scialabba’s take on Bernstein’s take on multiculturalism didn’t rest wholly on his aversion to the diversity-management bureaucracy; it rested also on his conviction that the conservative critics of the academic left had chosen their targets well. Here’s how Scialabba puts it in his review of *Against the Grain*:

In its crusade against the politicization of contemporary culture, *The New Criterion* is— on the whole, in the main, and not to put too fine a point on it— right. Notwithstanding the importance of legal and social equality for women, homosexuals, and members of racial minorities, most of the cultural strategies employed in the service of these ends have been— again, on the whole; and with many exceptions, not always duly acknowledged by conservative critics—

misguided and counterproductive. Multiculturalist pedagogy; the promotion of “cultural diversity” through arts administration, philanthropy, and public policy; academic departments of Women’s Studies and Afro-American Studies; the project of “critical theory”; and in general, the greatly increased weight—in teaching and research, hiring and funding, programming and grant-making—given to explicitly political considerations: altogether these things have done more harm than good. They have undoubtedly made possible some valuable work and attracted some people to culture who would otherwise have been lost to it. But they have also generated a really staggering amount of mediocre and tendentious work. And not only do these ideological priorities make for less accomplished artists and scholars; they also make for less effective citizens. Attempting to turn one’s professional enthusiasms and expertise to political account can distract from—can even serve to rationalize the avoidance of—everyday democratic activity, with all its tedium and frustration.

The following sentence cites Rorty’s line about academic leftists giving at the office.

This is a pretty overwhelming bill of particulars, and even at this late date it’s hard for me to resist the temptation to argue with it line by line. (How, for instance, has the promotion of “cultural diversity” through arts administration, philanthropy, and public policy done more harm than good?) But I will resist, and confine myself simply to noting an important feature of Scialabba’s account: it is one thing to argue that the politicization of culture is bad for culture, leading to the overvaluation of mediocrity and agitprop; it is quite another to argue that the politicization of culture is bad for politics, making for *less effective citizens*. Somehow, Scialabba manages to imply that our fellow citizens would be more deeply engaged in and by politics if more people heeded Hilton Kramer’s formalist call for “a return to connoisseurship i.e., ‘the close, comparative study of art objects [and literary texts] with a view to determining their relative levels of aesthetic quality.’” Scialabba likes Kramer’s conception of connoisseurship, and that’s fine by me. But however impatient I might become when inundated with mediocrity and agitprop, I have a hard time believing that there is any strong connection between connoisseurship and citizenship. (I will, however, return to aesthetics and politics at the end of the essay.)

Because he believes that cultural politics are bad for culture and bad for politics, Scialabba also agrees with Russell Jacoby’s complaint that the culture wars are a distraction from real and important business. Again, in retrospect, it’s clear that there was some merit to the complaint: of all the forms of AIDS activism in the period, surely the protests against the Paul Verhoeven flick *Basic Instinct* were among the least important. And yet

almost everyone on the American left who complained about the “distraction” of the culture wars spent a good deal of time writing books about them. Ah, they were a powerful distraction indeed.

At this point, though, it might be instructive to do a side-by-side comparison between Scialabba’s assessment of *Dictatorship of Virtue* and that of Louis Menand, who reviewed it for the *New York Review of Books* in October 1994. Like Scialabba, Menand agrees that Bernstein has a case: “I think it was inevitable,” Menand writes, “that new groups entering the professional culture would ask, about the standards and the mores and the ‘great books’ they found already in place there, ‘Why are these things good for us?’ And I think that a culture that cannot answer this question reasonably and persuasively, or see that there are indeed other ways of doing things and other books to talk about, is not a culture entirely worth defending. But I agree with Bernstein that this questioning has been the excuse for the promulgation of a shallow, reflexive, self-righteous political orthodoxy.” But Menand offers a few reasons for skepticism about Bernstein’s book that seem not to have occurred to Scialabba at the time. I quote at length, because Menand lays out a principle that subtends this entire discussion:

Was it legitimate for Clarence Thomas to “play the race card” after listening to Anita Hill’s testimony against him? Was Hill justified in feeling “sexually harassed” by the behavior she alleged? Is it inappropriate to raise the subject of race in a discussion of the O.J. Simpson case? Would the first Rodney King jury have let the officers off if King had been a white man? If Robert Mapplethorpe’s “X Portfolio” photographs are objectionable, is it because they depict sexual acts, or because they depict homosexual acts, or because they depict sado-masochistic homosexual acts? Exactly how solicitous are we supposed to be about the self-esteem of sado-masochists?

These are possibly questions a society with a lot of other problems shouldn’t be quite so obsessed with. But we’re obsessed with them anyway, and the consequence is a nearly complete lack of consensus about what’s tolerant and fair and what’s fanatical and “politically correct”; about what’s legitimate criticism or distaste and what’s racist, sexist, or homophobic; about what’s an excellent pickup line and what’s grounds for a lawsuit. It’s not just that people don’t want to get hauled up before some disciplinary tribunal for what they thought was a perfectly innocent remark; it’s also that people honestly don’t want to give offense when none is intended (and also, I suppose, want to be sure that they have given offense when it is intended), and they would like to know just where reasonable people think the line ought to be drawn.

The credibility of a book about multiculturalism depends to a considerable extent, therefore, on the author’s instinct for distinguishing the innocuous from the objectionable— or, perhaps more often, the objectionable from the more objectionable. Readers not already confident of their own instincts in these matters need to feel that the writer sees the merits

in the cases he discusses in roughly the way they would see them, and that he won't excuse offensive behavior just because the response to that behavior is also offensive. I think my attitude toward multiculturalism's claims to represent a cogent and useful educational and social philosophy is fairly skeptical, but I had a very hard time entering into Bernstein's sense of some of the situations he describes.

Bernstein is generally interested in cases in which people seem to have overreacted to inadvertent, misunderstood, or trivial affronts to their self-esteem. But his idea of what constitutes overreaction is sometimes hard to credit because his idea of what constitutes an affront seems rather limited. He tells us, in his opening pages, about an editorial run by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* proposing to decrease the number of poor, specifically black children by offering welfare mothers added benefits if they agree to use a contraceptive called Norplant, which makes women infertile for five years. Bernstein regards this rather eugenicist and racially targeted proposition as "the normal expression of opinion," and he cannot understand why both black and white reporters became extremely upset about it, and why the paper decided to run an apology. . . .

The reaction to the *Inquirer* editorial does not seem to me, even on Bernstein's account, to have been inappropriate. Among other things, the paper decided to require that editorials on controversial topics be approved in the future by the entire thirteen-member editorial board. Bernstein complains that this gives "veto power to the board's three black members." True enough. It also gives veto power to any one of the board's ten non-black members.

I admire the distinctly Menandian deadpan quality of that final sentence. But I admire even more Menand's sense of how to gauge a writer's credibility when it comes to matters about which there is no social consensus. And on that count, I think it's diagnostic that Bernstein directed his criticism not at an editorial calling for the temporary sterilization of black women but at the possibility that three black members of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* editorial board be granted veto power over editorials on controversial topics. It's a handy index to Bernstein's sense of political priorities. And it's regrettable that Scialabba didn't pick up on it, or, perhaps, didn't have a harder time entering into Bernstein's sense of some of the situations he describes.

If Scialabba is a bit too generous with Bernstein, he is not altogether fair to Edward Said. *Culture and Imperialism*, Scialabba writes, is "an inexhaustibly tiresome book." "The writing is clumsy, stilted, verbose, imprecise, and marinated–pickled–in academic jargon"; worse still, "Said's polemical manners, here as elsewhere, are atrocious: sneering, overweening, *ad hominem*. Too often, he innocently misinterprets or not-so-innocently misrepresents other people's arguments." I suppose this is plausible enough–I've heard similar complaints about Said before. But Scialabba's distaste for atrocious polemical manners did not prevent him from writing an admiring review of Alexander Cockburn, so

perhaps this is one of those cases to which Scialabba refers in his essay on Hitchens. Still, Scialabba is probably right to find Said's reading of Austen's *Mansfield Park* reductive and tendentious. In response to Said's claim that "the extraordinary formal and ideological dependence of the great French and English realistic novels on the facts of empire has never been studied from a general theoretical standpoint" (a claim which is buttressed in part by making much of Sir Thomas Bertram's departure from Mansfield Park for his estate in Antigua), Scialabba is withering:

[Said's] interpretive strategy is bold and ingenious. "How are we to assess Austen's few references to Antigua, and what are we to make of them interpretively? . . . My contention is that by that very odd combination of casualness and stress, Austen reveals herself to be assuming . . . the importance of an empire to the situation at home." This is the hermeneutics of suspicion *a la folie*.

In fact, not much more can usefully be said about the relation of *Mansfield Park* to the British Empire than that the former was written in the latter. "Extraordinary formal and ideological dependence," my eye. It is just this sort of grandiloquent assertion that excited so many people about *Orientalism* and that makes Said's celebrity so depressing.

It was a heady time— I remember it well, that particular postcolonialist moment in which the most urgent task at hand involved finding some way of linking Jane Austen to imperialism, slavery, and genocide. I'm not surprised that Scialabba finds it all a bit overheated. But I am surprised by the final paragraphs of the review, which basically charge Said with giving at the office:

For many people with aesthetic tastes and talents, real politics— anything likely to produce new legislation, not just new curriculum— is bound to seem like fearful drudgery. Since neither accepting irrelevance nor plunging into the pedestrian is an attractive option to most literary people, some have looked for reasons to consider the aesthetic as political. It's too difficult getting up to speed to debate economics or foreign policy with smart right-wingers. And organizing the unfortunate is appallingly dull. So, since finding evidence (however far-fetched) of the "formal and ideological dependence" of art on social structure appears to provide work both congenial and useful, it is denominated "political."

This is not such a contemptible evasion. The dilemma it is meant to resolve is a subtle one; to feel it at all is honorable. And Said has, to his credit, plunged into the pedestrian— into the details of contemporary political debate— more than most. But few of his epigoni have the energy to follow him there.

Here the strain is evident. For whatever one's opinion of Said's politics— and he had legions of admirers and detractors on that score— it would seem incontrovertible that he

had a politics, that he was intimately involved in one of the most explosive geopolitical conflicts on the left for most of his intellectual career, that he was a champion of the Palestinian cause in a United States deeply hostile to such champions (see also Chomsky, Noam). It is simply implausible to accuse Edward Said of evading real politics by finding far-fetched evidence of the formal and ideological dependence of art on social structure. And so Scialabba does not throw that pitch; instead, he sets, winds up, delivers . . . and stops himself at the last moment, admitting that Said plunged into political debate more than most and leveling the accusation instead at Said's "epigoni." *They're* the ones who are giving at the office, yet for their lapses Said is apparently to blame. This, I think, is not quite cricket.

I'll close, however, on another note. Because insofar as Scialabba's culture-wars dispatches argue that the politicization of culture leads to a trivial or attenuated form of politics, Scialabba clearly has a point, regardless of whether I agree with his reviews of Bernstein and Said. So let's take up matters of aesthetics. In his review of *Against the Grain*, Scialabba takes issue with the *New Criterion's* faith in "intrinsic merit." Kimball and Kramer write: "We proceed on the conviction that there is such a thing as intrinsic merit, that it can be discerned and rationally argued for, and that its rejection is a prescription for moral and cultural catastrophe." Scialabba's response is smart and eloquent—and, in the end, questionable:

Well, then, what is intrinsic merit? "Intrinsic" can't mean "universally agreed upon," since no aesthetic criteria are. It can't mean "independent of inherited, unconscious, or other local determination," since no beliefs are. It can't, in short, mean supra-historical and non-contingent, since nothing whatever is. What Fish, Rorty, and other pragmatists contend is that all criteria start out equal and must be justified to those who would be affected by their adoption—that democracy, in other words, is prior to philosophy. Beyond this, as Fish never tires of pointing out, antifoundationalism has no consequences. In any case, if Kramer and Kimball believe there are objective, irrefragable, rationally demonstrable aesthetic and moral criteria, they ought by now to have offered the rest of us a fairly precise idea of what they are, or in whose writings they can be found.

They haven't, and they can't. But then, they needn't. They need only muddle along, employing and occasionally articulating the criteria that have emerged from our culture's conversation since the Greeks initiated it, and showing that what used to and still usually does underwrite our judgments about beauty and truth is inconsistent with giving Robert Mapplethorpe a one-man show, or Karen Finley an NEA grant, or Toni Morrison a Nobel Prize. More than that, no one can do.

OK, I'll take Finley off the table—she's not exactly my cup of chocolate. But Map-

plethorpe and Morrison? Really?

It's hard to tell whether Scialabba is seriously saying that what used to and still usually does underwrite our judgments about beauty and truth is inconsistent with critically acclaiming Mapplethorpe and Morrison, or whether he is simply inhabiting and ventriloquizing the *New Criterion* worldview as a good reviewer should do. But in either case, I think there are two possible responses.

The first is to take the low road, and deal simply with the political aspect of this judgment, be it Scialabba's or Kimball and Kramer's. Mapplethorpe, Finley, and Andres Serrano (for *Piss Christ*) were, infamously, the basis for Patrick Buchanan's *kulturkampf* campaign for the Presidency in 1992, and many leftists might reflexively think that any artist on the wrong side of Buchanan must be on the right side of history— and that anyone who criticizes such artists is therefore objectively pro-Buchanan. But to make that argument is precisely to take cultural artifacts and cultural debates on narrow political terms, and to confirm Scialabba's sense of why this is a bad thing to do. So I'm going to go with the second response, and demur from this judgment on aesthetic grounds.

Regardless of whether one thinks Mapplethorpe's X Portfolio is "objectionable," as Menand put it, I honestly don't believe there can be any serious question as to the aesthetic quality of Mapplethorpe's work in formalist terms; his photography is exquisite, and I'm willing to bet that quite a number of the people who have employed and articulated aesthetic criteria since the Greeks might agree. Likewise, I see no problem whatsoever with awarding the Nobel Prize to Toni Morrison; I think her narrative talent is on a par with Coetzee, Lessing, and Garcia Marquez, and surely neither the Nobel Prize nor the history of aesthetics was traduced when they received the award.

But to make this argument is to suggest that the faculty of judgment we bring to art and literature is inseparable from the faculty of judgment we bring to the rest of the world. It is also to suggest that some aspects of the culture wars weren't distractions at all— on the contrary, they were about nothing other than the employment and articulation of public standards of judgment. And George Scialabba knows all this very well, which is why his many contributions to that conversation, then and now, remain so valuable— even, or especially, when his judgments don't concur with mine.

Avoiding the Lasch of Modernity - Rich Yeselson

George Scialabba wishes he could be as calmly appalled about our historical moment as Richard Rorty, but Christopher Lasch keeps haranguing him, shouting from an artisan commune on the Other Side that it is worse—much worse—than Bin Laden, Bush, and Jon and Kate plus Eight all rolled into one. Scialabba has been writing wittily and vexingly about modernity and its discontents for decades. And in *What Are Intellectuals Good For?*, a collection of his review essays, he demonstrates his astonishing erudition in considering and citing many thinkers besides Lasch and Rorty.

Yet although there are writers he praises more than Lasch (he calls Randolph Bourne, Noam Chomsky, and Dwight Macdonald the three greatest American political writers of the 20th century), there are none that disturb and move him the way the late historian does. And there are none he more unconditionally admires than Rorty whom he calls “an (perhaps the) exemplary contemporary intellectual” (WAIGF, p.28).

Rorty and Lasch are the large thinkers who shadow Scialabba’s considerations of modernity. The contrast between the two couldn’t be starker. You can find a few affinities: for example, interest in the work of Dewey and James (although they take different things from them). But on the big questions, Lasch and Rorty stand miles apart. Rorty thinks the last 250 years or so in the North America and much of Europe have been a period of evolving progress, a vast mitigation against cruelty and sadism, even allowing for every war and other form of inhumanity; Lasch thinks that we’re going in the wrong direction: destroying communities; creating hollowed out individuals, lacking autonomy, vulnerable to consumer blandishments, oscillating between rage and fear; abdicating familial authority to faceless professional “experts”, and eviscerating any vestiges of local autonomy and worker skills in favor of giant state and corporate bureaucracies; Rorty thinks that the continued capacity for people to individuate themselves is one of the great benefits of modernity and that a fetishizing of identity politics endangers what he called in one of his final essays (a misguided disagreement with Nancy Fraser), a “diversity of self-creating individuals.” Lasch worries about identity politics because it threatens older, white ethnic forms of homogeneous community he traces back to the 19th century. Rorty sees very little value in religion,

and potentially great danger in politically reactionary expressions of it like the Christian Right. He would reluctantly sideline Dr. King from the game of historical agency if he could bench Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, too. Lasch believes that to describe religious fundamentalism as a “reactionary movement bent on reversing all of the progressive measures of the past three decades” (roughly Rorty’s view) is to “caricature” it (*The Revolt of the Elites*, p. 215). The final sentence of Lasch’s final book, *The Revolt of the Elites* assures us, that despite the contempt of secular elites, religion will be with us for a long time to come (246). Rorty viewed his own class position as a great boon, and felt it was the obligation of left leaning intellectuals like himself to do their best to defend the rights of the less fortunate. Lasch—somehow exempting himself—took Robert Reich’s famous designation of the new class as “symbol analysts” as an excuse to excoriate the same as secular, cosmopolitan, hyper-individuated, unpatriotic, and not all that talented when you come right down to it. Until his death, Rorty was a great supporter of the actually existing American labor movement. He spoke and wrote on its behalf, and taught its evolution in the 20th century because—to use that pervasive Rortyeen word—he found it the most useful avenue through which non-elite Americans might actually raise their standard of living, ensure that their workplaces were safer and healthier, and enjoy a modest bit more of leisure. Lasch, the self-appointed champion of the non-elites, judged modern unions, the institutional expression of working class political and economic power, as “conservative” (*The True and Only Heaven*, p. 209) and thus disappointing. But although Scialabba argues that Lasch “is less interested in historiographical virtuosity than in civic virtue,” he stops his analysis of the labor movement in the mid 19th century.

If that isn’t enough, these guys didn’t think much of each others work either. Not surprisingly, Lasch pretty much thought Rorty was a glib pseudo-cosmopolitan, happy to lounge around in private clubs chatting with his egghead friends while a fatuous, multi-ethnic bazaar goes on all about them destroying any possibility of common culture or values (*The Revolt of the Elites*, p. 127-28). For his part, Rorty thought Lasch to be enormously overrated, and couldn’t understand why his work had attracted an ardent following. He wrote a scathing review essay about Lasch, for the *New Yorker* in 1995, which after labeling Lasch, who had died a year earlier, nostalgic, inchoate, and, essentially in search of moral regeneration rather than practical political reform, was at its most generous in seeing Lasch in twilight as a gloom and doomster cross between Jonathan Edwards and Martin Heidegger.

In 1996, I spent a day and an evening with Rorty at the University of Virginia, speaking to one of his graduate classes, among other things. Most interestingly, we had about three hours alone. In a conversation that ranged widely, and included discussions of many of his intellectual peers—Jameson, Habermas, Eagleton (who happened to be giving a talk at the University that night)—Lasch’s was the only name that ruffled Rorty’s otherwise unflinching bemused tone. Rorty spoke of him in the way that you tell friends in a bar about the meeting you finally have with the new girl/boy friend your best pal had been bending your ear about for weeks—s/he’s *so* hot, *so* smart, *so* funny, I just can’t wait to

introduce her/him to you. Then you meet this divine creature and...huh??? Not hot, not smart, not funny. "His supporters talk about him [Lasch] as if he's got the Answer or something," Rorty said to me. "I just don't understand what the big deal is about this guy."

What does Scialabba see in Lasch that Rorty doesn't? And what might a reader find attractive about Scialabba's Lasch? For one thing, Scialabba does Lasch, at least "late Lasch," better than Lasch (The early Lasch, writing essays about Mabel Dodge's literary salons and other episodes in the history of the American Left, remains quite rich and—key word—circumscribed.) You really don't have to read Lasch's long, anti-modernist tract, *The True and Only Heaven* (1991) after you've read Scialabba's masterfully compressed summation and analysis of it in this book. Pages 167-168 in Scialabba's book, in which he channels Lasch channeling Adam Smith and other great thinkers of the Enlightenment, distills Lasch's long argument and digressions to its essence. In short, secularization, the division of labor, the championing of individuation leads to mobility, intellectual freedom, scientific invention, material progress (good), but also destruction of community, worker alienation, contempt for natural world, and economic instability (bad). Alas, Scialabba does Lasch just a little too well, and isn't sufficiently critical of the book, or of its successor, *The Revolt of the Elites*. I think Scialabba enters deeply, brilliantly into Lasch's world, but that this is a world he should extricate himself from as soon as possible. In order to demonstrate that, I will have to return to that world—one we have very surely lost—and also to the more congenial world of Richard Rorty.

One of Lasch's original contributions to the discussion of modernity is to augment what we might call the School of Delusional Historical Agency. *The True and Only Heaven* reads like a companion volume to Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces*, written by Marcus's older brother who is suffering from Seasonal Affective Disorder: the secret strain of liberation is there—zigging and zagging thru the centuries—if you just have the right guide to help you find it. There's been a lot of searching for the "real" progressive agent going on since the sixties, in both world historical and mundane versions—everything from Marcuse first hoping that students might overcome one dimensionality and then his upholding the utopian power of bourgeois art in *Counterrevolution and Revolt* to Mark Penn's soccer moms, with everything from Shulamith Firestone's feminist utopian seizing of the "means of reproduction" and the Progressive Labor Party's simulacrum of the white working class in between.

Lasch thinks he's found transformative agents, too. Not the decadent post sixties types, of course. No, more creatively, he finds his agents among "Artisans against Innovation" as he titled one of the sections in *The True and Only Heaven* (p.212). We're talking the Lynn, MA shoemakers of the 1830s, for example, although Lasch gets us all the way up to the Knights of Labor, (who actually aren't really artisans, but pretty much everybody but bankers and lawyers) who rose and fell in a dizzying two year period in the mid 1880s. Think pride in one's craft, owning one's own small shop, manly virtues of independence and self-sufficiency. Then, as the artisans get rolled over by changes in the structure

of capitalism—the capitalists deskill them, as Harry Braverman told us all—Lasch sees inspiration in the Populists of the 1890s. All of this is accompanied by an accomplished review of the relevant historical literature. The stuff about “artisan republicanism” was a big deal in American historiography in the 1970s, but if you don’t know it, several pages of Lasch or just one paragraph of Scialabba will serve you well.

There is a substantive and conceptual problem here, however. The substantive problem is that all of these people are dead. Thus they are inadequate agents to carry forward a critique against modernity. The substantive problem is linked to the conceptual one. Scialabba allows that those readers who aren’t professional historians may wonder whether Lasch gets the history right. Well, he gets the historiography right, which is as close as we can get to getting the history right. The problem is that the historiography is as dead as the Lynn shoemakers. The historians of these movements give them an encomium, and then whisk them into the dustbin of history—Lawrence Goodwyn, the great historian of Populism upon which Lasch relies, says our chance for real democracy pretty much ended in 1896. D’oh! To invert the old joke about asking directions from the taciturn New Englander: “You can’t get from there to here.” It’s not merely Lasch’s agents, but the historical link between them and today’s non-elites that has disappeared.

Because all of his hardy “Artisans against Innovation,” (which would be an SNL joke title if people still knew what artisans were) plus the populists, plus the virtuous small “producers” have been wiped out by the early part of the 20th century, and because these folks were all proud of their skills *and* because they were ethnically homogeneous, Lasch can’t explain how the hell millions of *unskilled, ethnically heterogeneous* workers formed the CIO in the 1930s—and with it the backbone of the American middle class for the next two generations.

Nor is he even interested in the question. His analysis of working class history stops in the 1890s. The auto workers of River Rouge didn’t own their own tools and command their own shops nor did the longshoremen in San Francisco, the department stores clerks and hotel maids in New York City, the tireworkers of Akron or the truck drivers in Minneapolis. They were a jumble of ethnicities, including, sometimes, African Americans and represented both genders. Indeed, Lasch’s skilled heroes often had contempt for their co-workers and insisted that these unskilled brethren of “inferior” races could not do what these workers, in fact, ultimately did—organize themselves into the most powerful labor movement the country has ever seen, before or since.

And if Lasch had known or cared about this historiography, he would also understand that the newly emergent popular culture of the 1930s—radio, movies, promises of the “American dream” in advertising—actually helped bond workers from previously antagonistic ethnic communities together. The great depression savaged these communities economically; popular culture, with its promise of abundance for all, brought them together in a searing demand for just that. Perhaps Lasch missed Lizabeth Cohen’s, *Making a New Deal* (1990) at the time he was finishing *The True and Only Heaven*, published a mere six months later. But her seminal work, on the relationship between class consciousness and

popular culture among Chicago's industrial workers, as well of that of other 20th century labor historians, had broken through by the time he published his final collection of essays three years later.

So Lasch ignores a 20th century activist working class who helped create what economists call the "great compression", the greatest sustained, middle class growth in human history, one that sharply mitigated the inequality of wealth and income that prevailed before the Great Depression. Perhaps the UAW, back in the day, however, helped too many members' kids go to college—where they'd only end up as vapid "symbol analysts" anyway. Lasch opposes this kind of class mobility—it drains the working class of leadership (this belies the desires of every worker I've ever met for their children). So, skipping to the 1970s, he is left with the unedifying and absurd task of defending the anti-busing whites in Boston as an example of an organic community besieged by a combination of elite, liberal imperialists and their black stooges. Lasch is so caught up in his fantasy of a white, non-elite, ideal type that his earnest sentences can make you laugh out loud. "Liberals were predisposed to see nothing but racial prejudice in the antibusing movement, but the movement did very little to correct this *misunderstanding*." (emphasis added, TTAOH, p.501). Hmm, hard to see why given that, as Lasch concedes a few sentences later, the favorite slogan of the movement was, "Bus the niggers back to Africa!" (ibid).

I confess this section of *The True and Only Heaven* has always shocked me. It reads to me as almost a parody of the out of touch academic huddled in his archive relying on the sturdy accounts of the period recorded by participants and other writers. I read *Common Ground* too, but I also lived in the "white" part of Dorchester, one of the sections of Boston affected by busing, during part of this period. A black church, which unfortunately found itself on the wrong side of Dorchester Avenue, was spray painted with "KKK", swastikas, and "NIGGER!" Teenage boys routinely shouted "nigger" at blacks they saw come into the white areas. A black man was beaten to death at the Shawmut subway stop which I regularly took to work. Busing was a bad deal for everybody—these were all poor people, and all of their schools were terrible. But Lasch often wrote as if he never actually met anybody who wasn't from a middle class background, had never seen first hand or even had explained to him genuine, ugly racist or misogynist rage. It's as if his understanding of homogeneous community life derived solely from his hyper articulate freshman roommate at Harvard, Reading, PA's John Updike. This is the most pernicious section of the book, and Scialabba should have pounded Lasch hard over it and similar remarks which essentially "priced in" racism in Boston and elsewhere in "middle America" as a reasonable cost to be paid to retain the neo-populist strains of resistance purportedly represented by these ethnic non-elites.

So why does Scialabba let Lasch off the hook? Perhaps because he seems drawn most to writers and thinkers whom Sartre might have called the "unsalvageable", after Hugo, the disillusioned leftist who goes down in a hail of Stalinist bullets at the end of *Dirty Hands* while shouting that he is "unsalvageable" (as opposed to those The Party cynically deems "salvageable" for its own instrumental purposes). Time and again, he praises those whom

their contemporaries often showered with contempt and who carried on without the encomiums and honorifics of the establishment: the deformed polymath, Randolph Bourne, who challenged the greatest liberal intellectuals of his day, Lippmann and Dewey, over the greatest issue of the day, American entry into World War I; the endlessly idiosyncratic Dwight Macdonald; Chomsky, moonlighting as anti-imperialist scourge, erased, Trotsky like, from the NYRB, after already changing 20th century thought in another life; the brilliantly alienated Vivian Gornick; the cranky right wing farmer classicist Victor David Hanson; The screwball, promiscuous anti-modernist (Foucault with charm), Pier Paolo Pasolini; The sui generis Norman Mailer, in a cameo throughout the book, that “banker going ape” running thru the National Guard during the Pentagon demonstration in October, 1967; the untenurable Russell Jacoby. Lasch would have been appalled by rent boy crazy Pasolini. But, in Scialabba’s eyes, they both raised hell and pissed the right people off, so welcome aboard.

The writers he has the most scorn for are those who are most “respected” at the time he reviewed their work. He sees Edward Said as a pet of the liberal ruling class—the poster child for repressive tolerance. He can barely stand his persona and can stand his work even less (but look at the early essays on Conrad, George!); He savages Martha Nussbaum’s defense of the liberal arts and tellingly accuses her of sounding like the Chairman of the NEH. Scialabba’s essay about Nussbaum and Victor David Hanson is extraordinarily revealing. As pompous as he finds the academic superstar Nussbaum, he couldn’t be more delighted with the self-taught sixth generation small farmer, Hanson. Scialabba compares some of Hanson’s work to the best of Lasch and Wendell Berry as a keen diagnosis of “contemporary cultural weightlessness.” But Hanson does more than evoke Lasch. He is the last Laschian—the late 20th century embodiment of Lasch’s small ‘d’ democratic, anti-modernist “producers.” And thus, to Scialabba, his work calls forth “the highwater mark of Democratic Republicanism in modern history. . . .” Unfortunately, like almost all the contemporary non-elites that Lasch writes about with sympathy, Hanson’s politics are grotesquely anti-liberal. Positing a choice between the cosmopolitanism represented by Nussbaum and the “agrarian populism” of Hanson, Scialabba remarkably chooses the reactionary eloquence of Hanson. (Agrarian Populism—in 1999, the time the review was written? Scialabba insists that Hanson’s writing is “unromantic” and without “nostalgia.” But how could that be? There *is* no agrarian populism in 1999!) When Scialabba concludes this review thusly, “The “heroic ideal” and the “tragic sense”: these phrases already sound archaic. But our civilization has not outgrown what they signify; it has merely forgotten. Cultural amnesia is not the same thing as progress. Or is it, as the critics of “progress” allege?”, he comes closer to merging his view of modernity with that of Lasch than he does in his two close readings of Lasch’s work in this volume.

So Lasch, shouting out the Great Refusal to all of modernity, is another in this long line of gutsy truth tellers who push against the grain of the conventional wisdom. And Scialabba gives him bonus points for his unsalvageability. Way too many. Lasch builds a vast transportation device that does not move. His fantasy of a producerist ideology

somehow redistributing wealth and power in a multi-polar world dominated by large pools of capital is just goofy. Lasch fears the very State that is the only entity capacious enough to circumscribe the power of private interests. He's all dreams, he's got no plans, and we want the plans, as Scialabba gently reminds Jacoby in another context. (As Scialabba presciently notes in his opening essay published in 1988, leftist intellectuals increasingly write "not for the ages, but for present efficacy." (WAIGF, p. 18). I wonder for example if the brilliant, precocious Ezra Klein, one of the country's leading experts on health care, has ever publicly written the word "modernity"—the lodestone that Scialabba has wrestled with for these many years—and whether that is a bad thing.) Lasch romanticizes working class people who need support, not bug eyed suitors who project their own visions of unyielding strength and homespun wisdom onto them. And he vilifies college educated professionals—people like himself—some of whom, not surprisingly, are just as dedicated to humane purposes and good works as he was.

We want the plans. Rorty pretty much thought his work as a philosopher didn't have much to do with social change. It was interesting to him and to people like him, of which in relative terms, there aren't many. It became, for him, another form of "wild orchids", a personal expression of pleasure, the kind that liberal society permits people to indulge. So he grew more and more drawn to writing about and around issues of public policy, advocating on behalf of a politics that might allow people to have enough money in their pocket to discover their own analogues for philosophy or wild orchids. He didn't much think they understood the details of politics, but he was hopeful they'd stand up for themselves. In fact, when I met with him in 1996, he told me that, contra Lasch who mistook political enthusiasm for wisdom and knowledge, he took Lippmann's side—the anti-populist side—in the famous Lippmann/Dewey debates of the 1920s about the public's knowledge of policy issues, and its ability to rationally adjudicate politics in a democracy (he told me this somewhat abashedly, given his well known admiration for Dewey's work). Like Lippmann, Rorty figured ordinary people had enough on their mind regarding their family, jobs, and whatever simple pleasures engaged them without trying to understand, oh, say, the public option for health care, or the virtues of cap and trade vs. a carbon tax. Rorty had some time on his hand and he could help the non-elites out by pointing to those elites who were trying to exploit them. Of course, this made him an elite too, not exactly the disinterested elite that Lippmann had in mind, but at least an alternative elite. I reminded him about the "best and brightest" getting us into Vietnam, and he just laughed, and said he hoped the elites would do a better job than that next time.

I think Rorty—who was matter of fact about it—and Lippmann—who was pompous about it—are right. Even Dewey agreed with Lippmann, but lamely sort of wished it weren't so. The people are busy—I've spent a lot of time around them. I've got a pretty good feel for this. Their jobs suck and they're exhausted. When they get it together to do something amazing like build the CIO or create the Civil Rights movement, it's a mitzvah composed of all kinds of things, especially incredibly tenacious, labor intensive organizing. Some of them are wonderful, and some of them are awful, and most of them are

in between—kind of like everybody else. People who actually spent time around working class people—in New Hampton, Iowa, Ravenswood, West Virginia, LaPlace, Louisiana, Traverse City, Michigan—do not think of them or write about them in the way Lasch did. Organic intellectuals exist, but they are not a commonplace. It's a hard life. As Clarence Darrow famously remarked: "I am a friend of the working man, and I would rather be his friend than be one."

Lasch spent too much time trying to demonstrate that some stratum of the downtrodden were right or noble or resistant to the encroachments on their way of life. Rorty spent his time just trying to argue against those with power who were trying to screw them, regardless of whether the downtrodden themselves were so wonderful or their way of life was so great. Because frequently they aren't and it isn't. A lot of local knowledge isn't so humane. And there are other people, too—those suffering from the pains of "social subordination", as Nancy Fraser has put it, a kind of bigotry—who need our help. And they are in the very same communities that Lasch tended to view monolithically.

By the time he gets to the last essay of his book, Scialabba is a pretty worried guy. Lasch's mood, if not his solutions, seems to have gotten to him (at least if the way he ordered these previously published essays mean anything). He thinks that all the great gifts of modernity—stuff that Lasch pushed against, but which Scialabba finally allows are pretty remarkable—may be lost to the great mass of human beings who haven't been so blessed with cultural capital as he and the readers of his book. He quotes Sven Birkerts—a bloviator of Hindenburg like proportions—that we may be depleting language, which is our cultural "ozone layer." So the language that has allowed a relative few to individuate in Rorty's Whitmanian fashion may have already passed billions by. Who reads anything anymore? It's depressing and scary stuff — Scialabba thinks the "electronic millennium" is a "threat."

But if you always assumed that Lippmann was basically right, if you never thought that people mechanically listening to Sean Hannity—or for that matter, Rachel Maddow—had bitten off a huge piece of modernity in the first place, you don't have to feel so bad. There will always be a Bourne, an Irving Howe, a Gene Debs, a Dr. King, an Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a Harvey Milk, a Walter Reuther—and a Richard Rorty and George Scialabba—at the ramparts, doing their best to stem the tide of greed, cruelty, and bigotry. Same as it ever was. It wasn't so great during the bygone days of Artisan Republicanism either—a black person or a woman would have noted that this was no golden age. The world has always been a scary place, and it's always been the fit though few who have undertaken to make stuff better. And, over time, they pick up some fellow travelers, and, oddly enough, things do get better.

Toward a Larger Left - Aaron Swartz

Stanford, like many universities, maintains full employment for humanities professors by requiring new students to take their seminars. My heart burning with the pain of societal injustice, I chose the one on “Freedom, Equality, Difference.”

Most of the other students had no particular interest in the topic — they were just meeting the requirement. But a significant minority did: like me, they cared passionately about it. They were the conservatives, armed with endless citations on how affirmative action was undermining American meritocracy. The only other political attitude I noticed was a moderate centrism, the view espoused by the teacher, whose day job was studying Just War Theory.

It quickly became clear that I was the only person even remotely on the left. And it wasn't simply that the others disagreed with me; they couldn't even *understand* me. I remember us discussing a scene in *Invisible Man* where a factory worker brags he's so indispensable that when he was out sick the boss drove to his house and begged him to come back, agreeing to put him in charge. When I suggested Ellison might be implying that labor, not management, ought to run workplaces, the other students (and the teacher) didn't just disagree — they found the idea incomprehensible. How could you run a factory without managers?

This is the reproduction of American intellectual culture: a large number of vocal and articulate conservatives, a handful of mushy moderately-liberal centrists, and an audience that doesn't much care. (Completing the picture, the teacher later shouted me down for bringing up inconvenient facts during a discussion of Vietnam.)

It's a future that worries George Scialabba. He cares passionately about the humane left-wing tradition, but he's forced to watch it shrivel. As he observes, the conservatives receive prominent places in industry (including industry-funded think tanks), the centrists are quarantined in hyperspecialized programs at universities, and the real leftists can barely get a toehold. (*The Soviet Union fell*, seems to be the dominant position. *Why are you still here?*)

The question is what to do about it. George hails the few exceptions (Noam Chomsky, Alexander Cockburn — names presumably picked to provoke) who have managed to eke out a niche exposing the falsehoods and bucking the consensus, getting pushed to the

cultural margins for their trouble. Henry proposes⁴ a more technical version, where left-wing critics don't argue to the public (which in practice seems to mean the 20,000 readers of *Z Magazine*) but instead to elites, especially disciplinary experts, using a field's flaws against itself (ala Doug Henwood). And Michael seems to make⁵ the usual retort that such extremism never gets an audience, let alone an accomplishment — only incrementalism and realist accommodation to power will make a difference in people's lives (perhaps Ezra Klein could be the poster boy⁶ here).

This debate is not dispassionate. It's a muddy mix of trying to work out what to do with our lives and how to justify what we've already done. Personally, I adore Chomsky, Henwood, and Klein — I find both their writing and their personalities incredibly inspirational. And while I could quibble with their strategies, it's difficult for me to imagine, let alone desire, a world in which they did anything particularly different. But my own plans — forged in that Stanford classroom and (to my surprise) unshakable ever since — take a different tack.

A new media world is emerging. The mainstream media outlets that won't even bother to print Chomsky's response when they libel him are fading, while alternative media explodes. Alexander Cockburn publishes not one, but a dozen articles each day at CounterPunch.org. Amy Goodman has a daily television news show carried on over 700 stations. There's a whole Chomsky Industry, which gets at least a shelf even at suburban chain bookstores. Socialist-feminists like Barbara Ehrenreich write *New York Times* bestsellers. Hell, we even have a socialist US Senator now!

Then there's the whole new generation of political bloggers. DailyKos, Atrios, and so on have a combined readership in the millions and are all consistently venomous toward the bulk of the Democratic Party and the media. Their work is broadcast nightly on major networks by Jon Stewart and Rachel Maddow. (*The West Wing* even made Atrios a character.) Even Scialabba admits (although not in his book) that if he wants to spend time with like-minded friends, he heads to Crooked Timber.

But while this clearly has a salutary effect on mainstream political culture (witness Stephen Kinzer's transformation from [Noam Chomsky's *bête noire*][pm] to Amy Goodman's guest⁷), it hasn't exactly created an alternative culture of its own. Conservatives, centrists, liberals — they all repeat *their* fundamental premise: *We've got a pretty good system going here. Sure, there may be some trouble around the edges (liberals think more, conservatives think less), but, as McCain said, the fundamentals are still strong.* The lines are so well-publicized that even college freshmen can repeat them down to the soundbite.

The left has succeeded in making it sound hollow and unconvincing. Your average liberal

⁴<http://crookedtimber.org/2009/04/14/the-answer-to-the-rhetorical-question-is-perhaps-yes-but-only-if-you-dont-invite-michael-walzer/#comment-272777>

⁵<http://crookedtimber.org/2009/04/14/the-answer-to-the-rhetorical-question-is-perhaps-yes-but-only-if-you-dont-invite-michael-walzer/#comment-272762>

⁶<http://www.dailyhowler.com/dh062609.html>

⁷<http://democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=06/04/21/132247>

blogger is happy to admit all the papers are full of lies, all the politicians are bland sellouts, and the government is run by lobbyists and corporate hacks. And (nothing new here) your average citizen is happy to agree (it takes a lot of education to be dumb enough to think otherwise). But where do you go from there? Elect Howard Dean?

The Popular Front is long dead, the labor unions have all but fizzled out, the New Left never had much of a plan (“We must name that system,” SDS cried. “We must name it, describe it, analyze it, understand it and change it.” Apparently they never got past naming) and barely even exists anymore. The term socialism has become so watered-down that it polls roughly equal with capitalism among the under-30 set — apparently it now means anything to the left of austere neoliberalism (except file-sharing⁸, of course).

If there was ever a time for a new program, this would seem to be it. The economic crisis has shattered the Washington Consensus more than a thousand Chomsky op-eds could, while the Internet has made it possible to organize people by the million. But the left can’t seem to move beyond its reactive stance. If you want books that criticize the policies of the Bush administration, you can fill up a whole library. But if you want books on what to do instead, where do you go? The only left-of-center group seriously putting out policy proposals is Third Way⁹. (Sample recommendation¹⁰: “Moderniz[e] our intelligence force... [hold a p]ress conference highlighting the 20th anniversary of the creation of al Qaeda.”)

There *is* a coherent, alternative ideology on the left. Scialabba, summarizing Chomsky, even takes a stab at laying it out: “the fundamental purpose of American foreign policy has all along been to maintain a favorable investment climate ... the American intelligentsia, though less harshly and clumsily regulated than its Soviet counterpart, has been no less effectively subordinated to the goals of the state.” (I would add only that the domestic economy is structured to make the majority of the population expendable servants of the rich.) Scialabba lays it out, but Chomsky (as far as I can find) never does.

I’ll even go further and take a stab at describing Chomsky’s solution: democracy. Media democracy, to prevent the population from being misled by deluded elites with big megaphones. Economic democracy, to promote a better mix and fairer distribution of societal goods and necessary evils. And political democracy, so that our military isn’t led by murderous thugs into endless immoral engagements.

This philosophy is so different from the dominant consensus that it takes far more than two paragraphs to explain, let alone argue for. But who’s even trying? Instead, the audience is forced to read a shelf of Chomsky and reverse-engineer the principles behind it.

This is better than nothing — it worked for me — but it obviously puts a hard limit on who can be persuaded. People without the time or the ability end up as the folks you see in liberal blog comments: people who know something is badly wrong, but aren’t quite

⁸<http://crookedtimber.org/2009/07/07/the-left-that-dare-not-speak-its-name/>

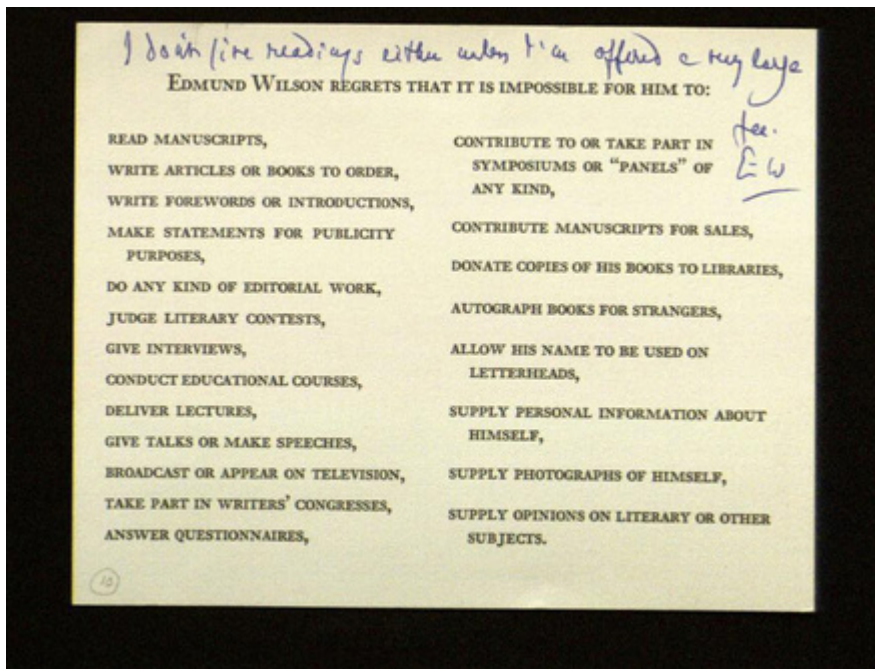
⁹<http://thirdway.org/>

¹⁰<http://thirdway.org/products/219>

sure what it is or what to do about it.

In short, leftist intellectuals need to move from simply poking holes in the dominant consensus to clearly articulating their alternative and proposing a concrete method for promoting it (Chomsky, for all his brilliance, seems to espouse a theory of change that doesn't go much beyond getting people at his book readings to join the local ISM chapter). I hope that more people will, because I sometimes fear that if they don't, there may not be many leftist intellectuals anymore.

No Live Readings - Russell Jacoby



Edmund Wilson's printed note, a response to a student group asking him to do a reading, breathes of another world. He added in a handwritten scrawl that he doesn't do "live readings either when I'm offered a very large fee." And the printed card itself lists a bevy of activities that he declines. Unlike participants here and now – myself and the others – he doesn't "contribute to or take part in symposiums or 'panels' of any kind," "give interviews" or speeches. He is an ornery writer, devoted to his craft.

The note, probably fifty years old, could be the occasion for tearful nostalgia—or for the charge of nostalgia. Where are the Edmund Wilsons today? Or even, since Scialabba discusses him, who are the successors to Noam Chomsky? The question is an old one; it both predates and postdates my own "The Last Intellectuals." Just look at Norman

Mailer's "Advertisements for Myself" (1959), where he takes stock of his fellow novelists—and finds them wanting. Where are the successors to Wolfe, Hemingway and Faulkner, he asks? To inquire as to what—and who—constitutes an intellectual generation remains valid. Yet many take it as a personal insult. They respond, "Look at me! The water is great! Come on in!" Daniel W. Drezner, who has written a robust defense¹¹ of new and younger intellectuals, cites a media studies professor, "There has never been a better time to be a public intellectual, and the Web is the big reason why."

George Scialabba does not blog, although he has a web site. Like Wilson, he is a non-academic intellectual. That road or that life has become tougher, if not impossible. The world of little magazines and newspapers that print essays contracts each year. The Web pays zilch. Wilson could live from his writings (although he skipped paying income taxes), but how many can do this nowadays? The essays from Scialabba's collection originally appeared in places such as "Agni," "Boston Phoenix," "Boston Review," and "Dissent." The earnings from these pieces would pay for a month of Starbuck lattes, not a month of rent or mortgage. The anthology that Robert Boynton published some years ago, "The New New Journalism" subtitled "Conversations with America's Best Nonfiction Writers on Their Craft" tip-toed around a issue that still remains too hot: money. How do intellectuals earn enough money to write and think?

The possibilities are worse than ever. Yes, a few souls manage to hustle and do quite nicely, for instance, Christopher Hitchens. Yes, a few magazines like the "New Yorker" pay a living wage, but for most to survive, if not flourish, requires a working (and willing) spouse, family money or an academic position (or its equivalent such as a slot in a think tank or policy outfit). Yes, Scialabba has a chair at Harvard, but he sits behind a desk on the ground floor of the building which he superintends. Only the most resolute can juggle for years a day job and night time of writing. For almost everyone else, the choice is to join an institution or die on the vine.

In the wake of government harassment of professors in the 1950s, Albert Einstein was asked about the situation of scientists and famously replied, "If I would be a young man again and had to decide how to make my living, I would not try to become a scientist or scholar or teacher. I would rather choose to be a plumber or a peddler in the hope to find that modest degree of independence still available under present circumstances." Even for the 1950s the reference to a peddler is dated, yet the point remains salient. What are the costs of the institutionalization of intelligence?

In a discussion that drew on Wilson, the forgotten—or perhaps never noticed—Josef Weber cited these sentences of Einstein. Weber, to whom Murray Bookchin dedicated his "Post-Scarcity Anarchism" had little use for intellectuals. He answered the question that Scialabba poses, 'what are intellectuals good for?' with "very little" or a "less than little." Some fifty years ago, Weber formulated the "law" of the "dwindling force of cognition in bourgeois society." (Weber's "The Problem of Social Consciousness in Our Time" is

¹¹<http://www.danieldrezner.com/research/publicintellectuals.doc>

available¹² on a Situationist web site. I reformulated the idea in the “Falling Rate of Intelligence” in “Telos” many years ago). Society progresses in information and facts, but regresses in understanding. Intellectuals weave the veil. George, as do others on the anarchist-inflected left such as Chomsky, agree; they judge intellectuals servants of power. End of story. The old IWW graphic that Scialabba uses for his book cover leaves no room for doubt. “We Fool You” runs the tag line for the intellectuals–priests, professors, and pundits.

In an age of self-importance and self-promotion the flat-out denunciation of intellectuals is refreshing—and too simple, as Scialabba himself knows. In fact he calls for “public political intellectuals of a new sort,” but he is not exactly convincing on this score. The names he offers are either long gone (Maurice Merleau-Ponty), recently gone (Richard Rorty) or do not represent a new generation (Chomsky). Perhaps it is too soon to identify a new generation, and perhaps it will not take shape as did previous generations. Let us hope. What is worrisome, however, is how it is going to eat. The Internet allows new voices, but it also undercuts the traditional magazines and newspapers that at least pretended to pay. The Web forces more people to join in the rat-race to earn a living or find an academic or neo-academic position – or vanish. With some small changes Wilson’s note could be redone today: “Edmund Wilson is delighted to: Read Manuscripts,” etc. As the institutions get fatter, intellectuals get weaker, more proof of the dwindling force of cognition in bourgeois society.

¹²<http://www.bopsecrets.org/CF/social.consciousness1.htm>

Hommes de Lettres and Inorganic Intellectuals - Henry Farrell

I've been reading George's essays for years, but it is only when one reads a large number of them together that one really sees the interconnections. His interests are diverse. Borges, in 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,' notes that the critics of Tlön

often invent authors: they select two dissimilar works - the Tao Te Ching and the 1001 Nights, say - attribute them to the same writer and then determine most scrupulously the psychology of this interesting homme de lettres. . .

George, when he dedicates the book to Chomsky, Rorty and Lasch, may seem to be doing something similar as an exercise in self-definition - what philosophy on earth might possibly unite these three? The careful reader will at least be able to discern the outlines of an answer to this question when she finishes reading this book. While this answer is not as much an abstract *philosophy*, as a carefully elaborated set of political and critical judgments, which are both attractive and *useful*. George's lens upon the world reveals relationships that would otherwise remain occulted.

One of the themes running through these essays is the proper role of the the public intellectual. George would like public intellectuals to have two features - a grounding in literary culture and a real connection to political debate. As he notes, however, these two requirements are difficult to reconcile with each other in the modern world. This dilemma is described most clearly in one of the earlier essays in the book, "The Sealed Envelope"

The very ideal of cosmopolitanism, of the intellectual as 'anti-specialist,' uniting political and aesthetic interests and able to speak with some authority about both, may be obsolescent. Though almost always decried, this is an ambiguous prospect. The culture of professionalism and expertise, the bureaucratization of opinion and taste, are not merely mechanisms of social control or a failure of nerve. They are also in part a response to genuine intellectual progress. There's more to know now than in the 1930s, and more people have joined the conversation. Perhaps the disappearance of the public intellectual

and the eclipse of the classical ideals of wisdom as catholicity of understanding and of citizenship as the capacity to discuss all public affairs are evidence of cultural maturity. Intellectual wholeness is an almost irresistibly attractive ideal; but nowadays too determined a pursuit of it must end in fragmentation and superficiality.

and, a little later,

It might seem obvious, for example, that Reaganomics was bad for ordinary Americans - this, if nothing else, a contemporary leftwing intellectual ought to be able to affirm with confidence. Unfortunately, some undeniably honest and intelligent people affirm the contrary. One who is determined to see 'all sides of every question' must then learn how to distinguish among ways of measuring family income, job creation and job loss, unemployment and several other economic indicators, along with the basics of monetary theory. For a literary intellectual, this is quite a chore.

George then abandons this line of inquiry rather abruptly, and begins to speak instead to the declining effectiveness of eloquent prose. The reader (at least, this reader) is left with the perception that he believes the gap between the values of the traditional public intellectual and the skills needed to engage in technically detailed economic and political debate is, if not, perhaps insuperable, at least too large to be traversed without very great effort and risk. This (if I am right in my reading) is the point at which I start to disagree with George - these observations are a starting point rather than a place of closure.

If the defining dilemma of the public intellectual is how to reconcile a proper grasp of culture with a modicum of political efficacy, then we need to think quite clearly about what culture is, and how it relates to politics. There are many reasons why public intellectuals have either declined in importance, or been co-opted (see e.g. Russell Jacoby's discussion of the changing material conditions of intellectual life here and in his book), but one important explanatory factor is surely surely the retreat of high culture. This is an old theme of debate (one of my favorite versions is Randall Jarrell's essay, 'A Sad Heart in the Supermarket') but an important one. The role of the literary intellectual depends not on literary high culture being general (which it has never been) but enjoying sufficient currency that it is deferred to by elites when it is not embraced. As public intellectuals lament, high culture no longer does this - leftwing intellectuals disagree with their conservative counterparts as to the cause of the decline, but both perceive it as real and problematic. The apex of contemporary elite culture is not occupied by writers, poets and artists, but by a chimerical combination of Jack Welch, Malcolm Gladwell, Thomas Friedman, and the anonymous scribes of the *Economist* magazine. Large circulation publications either fail even to pretend to pay attention to high culture (*Time* and *Newsweek*) or commoditize it (*Vanity Fair*, which is less a magazine than a locus of exchange between celebrities who wish they were intellectuals, and intellectuals who wish they were celebrities).

This presents some significant problems for traditional leftwing public intellectuals. How can they influence political and social debate (let alone politics and society more generally - and their broader impact is limited under the best of circumstances) if people don't *care* about the kinds of knowledge that they have to bring to bear? And there is a lot of influencing that needs to be done. Many of the shared assumptions of American politics (the primacy of the market; the positive effects of American military hegemony; the generally benign influence of business on American life) are sorely in need of challenge. This, under George's account is the task that leftwing public intellectuals *should* be engaged in - while the consequences of success would be modest (at best, perceived verities would be called into question a little), it is probably the most useful thing that public intellectuals can do in our current era.

One possible strategy towards achieving these aims might be characterized as the *Dissent* approach - that is, carrying on as if nothing very consequential had changed. *Dissent* was founded by Irving Howe in the 1950s to speak to leftwing intellectuals, but also to speak to wider public debates. Over time, although its politics have mellowed considerably, it still carries out the first of these roles quite well. Whether one likes its politics (some on the left clearly do not), it frequently publishes intelligent and perceptive articles on American and international politics and culture. What it mostly fails to do is to influence public debate. If you publish an article in *Dissent*, you are sure to reach a significant group of intelligent readers sharing a certain set of political sympathies. But your intellectual influence is highly unlikely to travel beyond that group. *Dissent* has become disconnected from wider public debates through no fault of its own - the high culture that it implicitly appeals to simply isn't shared any more by elites, let alone the profanum vulgum.

A second possible response is what you might call the *Z* magazine approach. Here, the strategy is not to speak to a high culture that isn't what it used to be, but to create a more congenial public culture *de novo*. This may be as much the product of expedience as advance planning - perhaps, if you are Noam Chomsky, and you find that the *New York Review of Books* doesn't want to publish you any more, you have sufficient incentive to set up your own counter-hegemonical institutions in cooperation with those who sympathize with you. In any event, if you genuinely believe that the institutions of public debate are fundamentally and irredeemably corrupt, then you are almost *required* to create your own.

The problem is that this is, at best, a very chancy strategy of change. Success (defined as significantly changing the tenor of public debate) is unlikely. And indeed, while Chomsky's efforts have been quite successful in one way (they have created a self-reproducing group that at the least has some presence on most university campuses), I don't believe that they have created a sufficient critical mass to really reshape debate in the ways that Chomsky would like them to. Nor do I think they are likely to in future. I don't know how many people read and are substantially influenced by Noam Chomsky - let's call it *n*. I suspect that even if Chomsky had 10^n supporters, he would not be able to dent the existing elite consensus - consider, if you disagree, the effective invisibility of 2003 anti-Iraq war protests involving hundreds of thousands of people in the main venues of American public

discourse. Finally, trying to attract a significant counter-public has arguably hurt the quality of Chomsky's argument - even George, who admires Chomsky greatly, acknowledges that his earlier polemics are better and more subtly argued than his later.

All this leads me to prefer a third option (or, more honestly, I would probably prefer the third option anyway, since it is the one that I am personally most comfortable with - the defence against alternatives comes after the preference). I suspect that learning how to read and understand the technical literature of economic indicators and the like is not only not as much of a 'chore' as George thinks it is, but is nearly essential to public intellectuals who want to make a modest dent in the current consensus. Reversing Gramsci, we need more 'inorganic intellectuals,' that is, intellectuals who understand the technical underpinnings of the existing consensus well enough to operate with them, without, at the same time, subscribing to the accompanying political assumptions. In other words, if American public intellectuals really want to push back against the dominant culture, they need to understand it, and more particularly, they should have at least a nodding acquaintance with the technical vocabularies that underpin it. This is all the more so when one notes that fields of expertise which underly the current consensus, such as economics and international relations, are at best an indifferent fit to the ideological purposes that they have been turned to.

Consider the relationship between economics as a discipline, and its degraded public form, Econ 101. The gap between the two is considerably wider than most non-economists appreciate. There is a far wider range of variation in 'respectable' intellectual positions among actual economists than there is among the journalists, wonks and pundits who purport to interpret their findings. Most economists are broadly in favor of free markets and free trade, but beyond that, they differ substantially on issues such as the proper role of government regulation, the consequences of minimum wage laws and so on.

Moreover, economic theory doesn't actually lend unambiguous support for the expansion of free markets and limitation of the role of government (here I simplify arguments from Jack Knight and Jim Johnson). General equilibrium results provide some theoretical support for the idea that markets are as efficient in satisfying people's wants (under certain notions of efficiency) as we can possibly get. This (if anything) underpins the ideological case, beloved of right wingers, for the superiority of markets and the happy consequences of market-promoting reforms for all sections of society.

The problem is that these results, while mathematically sophisticated, are hopelessly unrealistic. Real life markets are plagued with information problems and asymmetries, many of which may be systematically skewed in favor of some actors (the powerful) and against others (the less powerful). The current received wisdom's relentless emphasis on pro-market reforms not only hurts some people, but it may systematically hurt particular groups while benefitting others. Partial equilibrium analyses (i.e. analyses that don't try to model an entire economy) allow economists (and indeed left wing social scientists like Knight and Johnson) to construct more accurate models of actually existing markets, which takes some account of these effects. But we have no warrant to believe that these models

have the normatively attractive features of general equilibrium models.

All this carries a number of implications. Most importantly for current purposes, it suggests that there is room for quite radical leftwing accounts of the economy that start from the same theoretical basis as more 'conventional' accounts (self-interested individuals and all of the rest of it) but that reach dramatically different conclusions. See, for an example of how this might work, Sam Bowles' leftwing economics text, which is theoretically reasonably 'orthodox,' but politically quite radical. Moreover, one can mount a quite devastating internal critique of the more ideologically loaded forms of economic thinking - this is my interpretation of much of Jack Knight's work. Right of center institutional economists and sometime popularizers such as Oliver Williamson argue that firms will, if left to their own devices, create efficient institutions of self-governance (a position with obvious political implications for regulation and anti-trust). But *will* self-interested firms really have incentives to do create efficient institutions, when they are not faced with perfect competition? Economic theory, if read with any care whatsoever, provides strong reasons for skepticism - the more plausible prediction is that they will push to create institutions that maximize their own selfish distributional gains.

The point here is that there are important gaps between economic theory itself, and the ideological purposes it is put to in public debate. These gaps can be exploited, especially when (as is often the case), right wing ideologues simply don't understand the theory that they are purporting to bring to the masses. If you can show that right-wing arguments often *fail on their own terms*, and get this to stick a little in public debate, then you (as a leftwing public intellectual) will have performed a useful task. You may also find that some of your own arguments and preconceptions change in the process, but this is by no means necessarily a bad thing (leftwing accounts of politics often presume too much on the benignity of their fellow human beings - a dollop of economic reasoning can be a healthy astringent). But you will be able to engage with the *actually existing* elite culture in a useful way - showing how its basic assumptions are sometimes fundamentally flawed, based on basic misunderstandings, incomprehension of underlying results etc, and other times at the least eminently challengeable. There are potential pitfalls. Most obviously, you can easily get co-opted yourself. But (given the particular circumstances we face in the US), this still seems to me to be the most promising strategy for left-leaning public intellectuals.

All of this is boilerplate - I hardly imagine that I am the first person to make these arguments. But there are far fewer inorganic intellectuals on the left than there should be, and most of the ones that there are are marginalized. Sam Bowles and Herbert Gintis are, by any reasonable estimation, among the best thinkers in the Marxist tradition today - but I'll wager that most Marxists and left radicals haven't read their work (and perhaps haven't even heard of them). Doug Henwood, who is perhaps the left-leaning public intellectual most familiar with how finance capital *actually works* doesn't get much pick-up outside a specific set of discussions centered on economic commentary (he certainly doesn't get nearly the attention he deserves). Possibly the best left-leaning general-readership book of the last few years is Tom Slee's *No-One Makes You Shop at Wal-Mart*. It is substantively

important - an introduction to game theoretic reasoning, and how game theoretic reasoning (if followed through properly) provides strong justification for leftwing policy measures. It is furthermore excellently written, with clear and forceful prose, easily comprehensible to anyone who is prepared to think through its simple examples. But it has gotten very little attention, in large part, I suspect, because it falls between ideological stools. Leftwingers (who tend to be humanists) are likely to be suspicious of its emphasis on game theory, while rightwingers won't like its political conclusions. This is, I think, a problem.

I don't think that George would necessarily disagree with the broad brush-stroke version of this argument (as the quotes above suggest, he explicitly recognizes the value and importance of technical knowledge). But he doesn't have much to say about how the gap between the kind of public intellectualizing that he *admires and enjoys*, and the kind of public intellectualizing that he *recognizes as most likely being necessary* can be closed.

I myself don't see any reason why they can't be. The technical skills required to acquire a tolerable understanding of economics (let alone international relations theory, or business organization), enough to grasp the basic gist of an argument and the evidence being supplied to support it, are not hugely onerous. All that is required is a little mathematics and a capacity for logical deduction. Nor do I think that the gap between literature and these disciplines is as wide as it might seem at first. Many of the current era's most significant novelists (Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, William Gaddis, Richard Powers) are on the cusp between the two - they deploy technical knowledge so as better to understand and depict social relations.

My best guess is that the sense that acquiring this knowledge is a 'chore' for the literary intellectual is less the result of innate difficulties or intellectual incompatibilities, than of the way that the role of the literary intellectual has been sociologically constructed. In other words, there isn't much stopping literary intellectuals as a general matter from engaging with these kinds of knowledge, except for the generalized sense that literary intellectuals *don't* engage with these kinds of knowledge (NB that this is not intended as a reproof to any individual intellectual - that this is not an individual problem is precisely the point). In my ideal world, public intellectuals would straddle this divide - not all of them, and not each of them to the same extent - but our current bifurcated culture on the left, and, even more, the belief that this bifurcation is ineradicable, would be gone.

Steady Work - Scott McLemee

Since writing the foreword to *What Are Intellectuals Good For?* (incorporating a few paragraphs from a profile of George Scialabba¹³ published three years ago) I have returned to the book in a recent column¹⁴ about Isaac Rosenfeld. The intention in each case was not to provide a reasonably accurate precis of George Scialabba's work, worthy exercise though that would be, but to engage with the author at the level of his project.

To put it another way, I have not been writing *about* George so much as *to* him. With hindsight that was probably also true of an essay called "After the Last Intellectuals"¹⁵ that appeared in *Bookforum* a couple of years ago.

Simply recycling what I've already written is never appealing. It seems like a better use of this opportunity is ask George about some things left implicit, or undeveloped, in my last *de facto* open letter. That was the piece on Isaac Rosenfeld, an exemplary modern case of the public intellectual as unhappy consciousness¹⁶.

Putting it that way is already a problem, however. To be a public intellectual now tends to mean refusing "unhappiness" except, of course, as a gesture within the performance space of the media. The experience of a complicating and impassable distance between thought and actuality — between consciousness and the possible receptivity of the world to criticism or action — is not the same as acting indignant or confrontational. The differences between Randolph Bourne and Michael Eric Dyson go beyond the fact that one of them lives in an age when it is possible to publish a book of transcripts of his CNN appearances, though that has at least something to do with why only one of them is worth reading. (About ten years ago, in the pages of *In These Times*, I tried to launch the expression "publicity intellectual" to cover that sort of thing, but the expression never caught on, which is probably just as well.)

The ability to complain in a suave, topical, and/or contrarian manner is, of course, very delightful. But George has questioned¹⁷ it as a sufficient basis for critical engagement with culture and society, and rightly so. He worries that the public sphere is an echo

¹³<http://www.insidehighered.com/views/mclemee/mclemee165>

¹⁴<http://www.insidehighered.com/views/mclemee/mclemee250>

¹⁵<http://www.mclemee.com/id206.html>

¹⁶http://www.stjohns-chs.org/general_studies/philosophy/Romantic/hegel.html

¹⁷<http://www.nplusonemag.com/farewell-hitch>

chamber dominated by figures who are on the speed-dials (not to mention the payrolls) of the powerful. Rather than being intellectuals, they are the spokespeople and flak catchers for corporate or government interests. Surely he is right about that, too.

But I want to challenge George a bit on his alternative, which is to call for intellectuals to be really public-minded and critical, and to show more activist spirit. They should be speaking truth to power, and so forth.

Challenging him here is not the same as arguing that he is wrong. I agree that criticism and activism are part of what intellectuals are good for. Not that this necessarily involves making a big production number of it, striking poses and gesturing broadly; in fact, we're probably better off without that sort of thing. (Nothing that Susan Sontag ever wrote or said or did about Bosnia ever seemed intended to persuade her fellow citizens of much except how very passionate Susan Sontag was about Bosnia. This was only just so much of a contribution.) Being an activist intellectual should involve a certain amount of boring activity, even rather a lot of it, often done in quiet settings, none of which merits a line on anyone's C.V.

This expectation does lead into a bit of a conundrum, however. For it seems to presuppose the existence of some reserve of values, commitments, influences, inspirations, ideas, ideals, superego energies, etc. In other words, a supply of meaning that nourishes the critical intelligence and allow it to sustain itself — even without much extrinsic reward or obvious encouragement, and when necessary in the absence of any.

This cannot be understood purely as a question of individual character, temperament or commitment. But there are moments when the issue is posed, and resolved, at that level. (Such being one of the points Rosenfeld insisted on.) It is a matter of ethos. That inevitably brings in questions of community or tradition: Just where is this reserve? What does it look like? And what allows *it* to sustain itself? I often read George's work with the hope he will drop some hint of his thoughts on this score, but maybe the best thing would be just to ask him outright.

Thinking about this can very quickly lead into paradoxes — with “the herd of independent minds” being an efficient way to express one of them. There is always an express lane of authorized heterodoxies. They are now often very conveniently codified in a syllabus. In some quarters, if you fail to assimilate them properly, you are not “professionalized” and ostracism then follows. (If Nietzsche came back from the dead long enough to see some of the petty careerism his work has made possible, he'd start talking to horses again, and storing his own feces in a drawer.) When I asked about what values and commitments enable critical intelligence to sustain itself, this is not exactly what I had in mind.

Now, it may be that George has come to his own *sui generis* resolution of this problem, by way of a distinctive biographical trajectory. He once belonged to Opus Dei and was able to read modernist writers and thinkers only by special permission. Talk about “transgression” now comes cheap, but chances are George experienced it in ways reminiscent of a Dostoevsky character, and it had real consequences for his life as well as his thought. I admire this quite a bit. The measured quality of his prose reflects a mind trying to take its

bearings in full awareness of the abyss between how he once would have answered Kant's three questions and how he would consider them now. This also gives his politics some edge.

On that score his work is often reminiscent of the spirit that prevailed in working-class literary and educational circles about one hundred years ago. To quote Jonathan Rée's *Proletarian Philosophers: Problems in Socialist Culture in Britain, 1900-1940* (Oxford, 1984), the energetic quality of discussion in those groups was "not just the exhilaration of having filched something which their oppressors wanted to keep for themselves..."

There was also something disruptive about the theoretical content of what they learned. The world of knowledge into which they had forced their way was, to many of them, a world of radicalism, if not of socialism: it contained some substance which seemed to corrode the ideological compound which, they felt, their bosses used to keep them down. They read Darwin, Huxley, and Haeckel, or studied botany and phrenology, and the unction of natural theology curdled. They read Buckle or studied history, and existing social arrangements began to seem contingent and provisional. They read the poetry of Shakespeare and Burns (but not Morris - his works were too expensive), and perhaps glimpsed the possibility of escaping the narrow, puritanical circle of a joyless, sexless deontology of work. And beyond that, their athletic enthusiasm for self-improvement through intellectual exercise provided them with a model of social progress: they had a sense that they themselves were shifting, by their own efforts, from a crabbed, superstitious, and fearful parochialism to a bold and oceanic inclusiveness of vision, in which the infinite universe could be grasped as a whole. Surely, this individual betterment could be repeated on a social scale, and then the divisions between classes, nations, or groups would be accorded their true (that is to say, their vanishingly small) significance.

Now *that's* a metanarrative.

It was not unique to the British working class. If you read accounts of the early socialist movement in France, Russia, the United States, and elsewhere, the same tendency stands out. The precise local references vary, though not all that much. In one place they read Whitman, and in another, Pushkin, but that's about it.

Isaac Rosenfeld was a product of this tradition, even if he did also satirize it. In a short story called "The Party," he portrays the melancholy routines of a radical sect that gathers to argue in a dingy meeting hall. (This story gives me flashes of *deja vu*. Either that or post-traumatic stress disorder. The difference is one of nuance.) The centripetal tendencies of such a milieu are not very pleasant, sometimes, but they are certainly no worse than what you find at a big academic conference. People don't wear nametags, because they get to know each other all too well.

It is, as the communitarians say, community. Love it or leave it. I find it impossible to do either. It matters to me to know that there is a tradition of cosmopolitan-intellectuality-from-below. There is a certain tendency now to assume that, no, on the contrary, this is all a matter of nostalgia, a dream of halcyon yesteryears. That oh, so sophisticated certainty tells us something about how completely the prevailing institutions have made themselves seem indistinguishable from intellectual life as such. (An inability to imagine existing outside certain familiar patterns is how those familiar patterns come to look like life itself.) But anyone who has actually been exposed to it knows otherwise, and also knows that it was no Golden Age picnic. To quote my *Bookforum* piece mentioned earlier: “Bohemia can be fun if you have money; otherwise, it is hard on the nerves.”

The tradition Rée described is now a long way from being robust. But does it make any sense to call for an activist mode of public-intellectual activity if you assume that every trace of it is dead?

Part of what I have taken from reading George’s writings over the years is a sense that some spark of that tradition is still being transmitted, who knows how, and that it may yet revive. The effort involved is not particularly rewarding on any terms but its own. That is beside the point. Or conversely perhaps it *is* the point. I would like to hear more from George about this. He has been at it a while. I want to understand how he keeps going.

Response - George Scialabba

The previous symposium posts and comments are an embarrassment of riches. Doing them justice is out of the question, of course, but here goes.

I.

As Michael notes, “persuasive” is a little slippery. I probably should have written “plausible” instead. I do, though, mostly agree with Richard Bernstein (and E.D. Hirsch, among others) about the desirability of children steeping themselves in the history and literature of their own language, culture, and society before setting out to explore others. To some extent, the reasons are *a priori*. I believe that outgrowing intense early attachments, and the generally manageable emotional conflicts this involves, are a developmental necessity. Children should first identify with their parents, country, neighborhood, religion, ethnic group, and baseball team. This identification supplies the sense of environmental mastery that is foundational to a healthy psyche. Soon enough they will notice that their parents, country, religion, etc. are imperfect in this way or that. This recognition induces ambivalence about previously unquestioned (moral, cultural, etc.) authority. To grow gradually into this ambivalence – into an acceptance that parents can both love and (sometimes unfairly) punish, that a religion can both inspire and delude, that a baseball team can stink and still be worth rooting for – is an essential maturational task. If it’s not accomplished, then the ambivalence becomes disabling and psychic boundaries unstable; one’s emotional appetites are erratic and oversized; one alternates between resentful submission to authority and indiscriminate rejection.

The same argument (more or less) is made in a non-psychoanalytic form by Michael Walzer in *The Company of Critics* and *Interpretation and Social Criticism*. First, according to Walzer, we uncritically assimilate a local history and morality. Later conflicts with other traditions are resolved not by transcending both in favor of cosmopolitan detachment but by reinterpreting the local story, finding a meaning for new experiences in its familiar terms. As in the psychoanalytic case, the secure possession of a specific identity is what enables the recognition of otherness.

So far, pretty abstract. But of course, my sense of how politics and art are related comes

first of all from my own experience. I read James's *Portrait of a Lady* and Lawrence's *Women in Love* before I'd heard of feminism. Imaginative identification with those brave, gifted women and their struggles to lead full, independent lives produced in me an immediate commitment to sexual equality. The same for racial equality, when I encountered Twain's Nigger Jim, with his ineffable dignity. Blake and Shelley first taught me to question authority. And like Orwell (or was it Shaw? or both?), I came to socialism via Dickens; in my case through those heaven-shaking, heart-stabbing words that follow the death of the poor ragamuffin Jo in *Bleak House*:

Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day.

Likewise, the masterpieces of Russian, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Hebrew, Hindu, Urdu, and every other literature furnish plenty of materials for a far-reaching moral and political education – if taught well. If taught badly, no curriculum is much use.

And that's why I'm skeptical of programmatic multiculturalism – not because it's multicultural but because it's a program, bureaucratically designed and administered. (To the extent that it's the result of individual teacherly enthusiasm, of course, it can only be a good thing.) Taught with passion and imagination, the traditional humanities are moral and political dynamite. But from the cheap plywood of educational methodology, no sturdy or elegant thing was ever fashioned.

Since Bernstein's book and the high tide of the curriculum wars, another powerful critique of multiculturalism has appeared, this time from the left, in the shape of Walter Benn Michaels's *The Trouble With Diversity* (2006). It's not a brand-new line of argument. It echoes Jacoby, Jim Sleeper, Adolph Reed, Thomas Frank, and others; and many CTers have doubtless weighed in on it in various forums. (Some have actually found it less than fully persuasive – I stick my tongue out at you.)

Michaels argues that identity politics is a mistake: not just tactically – because it makes it harder for liberals to win elections – but also strategically – because changing the racial and sexual distribution of privilege is the wrong goal. If the problem is that blacks and women are disproportionately unemployed, underpaid, uninsured, and undereducated, then the solution is full employment, a more generous minimum wage, universal health insurance, and Head Start, all to be paid for by progressive taxation and reduced defense spending. In short, class politics plus robust enforcement of existing anti-discrimination laws. What society's most vulnerable women and blacks most need (and, in general, want) is economic equality. Curricular inclusion and elite representation are far less important to them – and, not coincidentally, far easier to win from our rulers.

On a previous thread, we discussed the ideal of connoisseurship, i.e. of criticism concerned with judging aesthetic merit rather than explicating ideological presupposition and

implication. Of course one can do both, but who does? It's hard enough to do either. It isn't that I believe art should never be put to political use; on the contrary, art is quite as often about politics as it is about love, money, or significant form. I just think it should be done straightforwardly and pungently, in everyday conversation, rather than elaborately and obliquely, as part of a scholarly project of demystification. "Would you rather marry Madame Bovary or Major Barbara?" seems like an unanswerable argument for educating women. "You want Cedric Daniels (from *The Wire*) or Mark Fuhrman running your town's police department?" seems like a good opening wedge in an argument for racially integrating law enforcement. But finding "the Empire at work" in "the selectivity of and emphases in what is included and, by implication, excluded" in *Aida* (Said, *Cultural Imperialism*) doesn't really help much. I don't mind the politicization of culture, when done by amateurs. It's the professionalization of the politicization of culture that I'm dubious about.

Getting down to Michael's cases: Yes, I think I was too kind to Bernstein. There was a prosecutorial tone to his book and, as Michael suggests, an unwillingness to see (or acknowledge) what his targets were (rightly) exercised about that I should have brought out in the review. Perhaps I was bending over backwards: at the time I was constantly seething over the complacent banality and reflexive centrism of Times cultural coverage (including Bernstein's), and I remember admonishing myself that I ought to keep that feeling separate from my response to the book.

Too soft on Cockburn; too hard on Said? But Said was such a culture hero; I thought his reputation wouldn't even register a few knocks from me. (I doubt it has.) Besides, Cockburn wrote divine prose back then, before he soured, while Said's prose still sets my teeth on edge. That's what really ticked me off, I think.

About Mapplethorpe and Morrison: I confess I meant to induce some uncertainty over whether I endorsed or merely "ventriloquized" those judgments. I agreed with them, but not very confidently, and haven't revisited them. I actually liked Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*. But I thought Mapplethorpe was just preening. I didn't perceive any emotional content to the photos; they seemed as blank as New Yorker ads. Maybe I didn't look long or hard enough. I still don't much like Toni Morrison. No, I don't agree that she's the equal, as a narrator, psychologist, or stylist, of Coetzee, Lessing, and Garcia Marquez. I thought Borges, Calvino, Nabokov, Kundera, Larkin, Ted Hughes, Henry Roth, or Philip Roth should have gotten a Nobel instead.

II.

Lasch and Rorty did indeed stand "miles apart" on several big questions, as Rich ably enumerates. But on the biggest question – modernity, pro or con? – they at least stood on the same side of the Great Divide. Remember that avowal by Lasch I quoted (page 174):

Once and for all: I have no wish to return to the past, even if I thought a

return to the past was possible. The solution to our social problems lies in a completion of the democratic movement inaugurated in the eighteenth century, not in a return to a pre-democratic way of life. Socialism, notwithstanding the horrors committed in its name, still represents the legitimate heir of liberal democracy. Marxism and psychoanalysis still offer the best guides to an understanding of modern society and to political action designed to make it more democratic.

Lasch died in his prime, at 60. If he'd lived another decade or two, he might have sputtered out, making increasingly gnomish and ill-tempered noises, like Philip Rieff. Or he might have summoned a final great effort and tried to answer the profound questions he'd raised. I'd like to think the latter, but who knows? Alas, I don't see who else is going to answer them.

Rich appears to doubt that the questions Lasch raised – which boil down to: how have individual psychology, intimate relations, and political culture been altered by the drastic change of scale that industrialism entails? – are really all that urgent. Yes, maybe things have changed in roughly the way Lasch claimed in *Haven in a Heartless World*, *The Culture of Narcissism*, and *The Minimal Self*. At any rate Rich, after admirably summarizing Lasch's argument in those books – i.e., that mass society is “destroying communities; creating hollowed out individuals, lacking autonomy, vulnerable to consumer blandishments, oscillating between rage and fear; abdicating familial authority to faceless professional ‘experts’; and eviscerating any vestiges of local autonomy and worker skills in favor of giant state and corporate bureaucracies” – registers no disagreement. Instead he counters: what's so bad about that? – and what was so good about the world we've left behind? Pre-industrial life was insecure, benighted, brutish, and short, after all. Besides, there's no going back. If any historical development was ever irreversible, surely mass production is. No one has convincingly imagined any alternative – certainly Lasch didn't. In the name of what, exactly, did he continually disparage the only – admittedly mixed – blessings the toiling masses have ever enjoyed: unions, consumer goods, mass culture, the welfare state?

In the name, above all, of human nature and its limits. As Lasch explains in the lengthy autobiographical introduction to *True and Only Heaven*, it was raising a family that first prompted him to question progressivism. He had an ideal in mind – a lovely one, if you remember:

A house full of people; a crowded table ranging across the generations; four-handed music at the piano; nonstop conversation and cooking; baseball games and swimming in the afternoon; long walks after dinner; a poker game or Diplomacy or charades in the evening, all these activities mixing adults and children.

What threatened this family idyll was not only the occasional failures of capitalism: gross inequality, economic instability, war. It was the normal functioning of industrial society

that “thwarted the need for joy in work, stable connections, family life, a sense of place and historical continuity,” offering increased consumption as a substitute. Raw ambition, bureaucratic savvy, skilled self-promotion, rootless mobility – the whole pathology of the Organization Man – supplanted the pre-industrial ideal of “devoted service to a calling,” seen as its own reward, along with the respect of peers and neighbors. The degradation of work in his children’s world was Lasch’s original grievance as a parent.

The left’s traditional answer to this concern has been: 1) we’ll all share the disagreeable work more equally; and 2) there’ll be less and less of it, in any case, thanks to technological progress, which is, in principle, unlimited. Economic growth, equitably shared, will make possible leisure and abundance for all.

It’s not yet certain that this honorable socialist vision will have to be abandoned. But it’s looking increasingly likely. Lasch was one of the first to face that prospect and look unflinchingly at the consequences. The only possible futures, he thought, were: 1) ecological catastrophe; 2) a domestic and international caste system, with extreme and permanent inequality, harshly enforced; or 3) voluntary renunciation of universal material abundance as our goal and of mass production and centralized authority as the means. Obviously, only the last is even potentially a democratic future.

Lasch may sometimes seem, as Rich suggests, merely grumpy or nostalgic. But there’s more to him, much more. The way we live and work now threatens our capacity for autonomy, stability, and intimacy. What should we do about it? It’s possible that one day, nearly all right-thinking people will be asking this question and will be grateful to Lasch for having been one of the first to press it hard. Hard enough to risk alienating even potential allies like Rorty and Rich.

III.

Aaron asks, very eloquently: “What is to be done?” People ask Chomsky this constantly, and his answer is always the same: “Give me a break. I talk to people in the Third World all the time, and they never ask, ‘what should we do?’ Instead they say, ‘this is what we’re doing – what do you think?’ You should do what they do: talk to one another, form groups, study your problems, find other groups that share your concerns, discuss strategy and tactics, pool resources, try one thing, then another, then another. Organizing a political movement is not rocket science, or even auto repair. It just takes initiative, dedication, and perseverance. You knew that.”

Which is not to say it’s easy. I have a clerical job in Harvard’s Physical Resources Division. My boss is ex-Navy, straight-arrow, average in every way; exercised about immigrants, disgusted with all politicians, voted grudgingly for Obama. During the financial crunch last winter, he was livid. Conversations around the office, among ourselves or with visiting contractors and workmen, were frequent, bitter, and entirely in accord. Every leftist imprecation I would toss out about “the system” or “the ruling class” met with immediate, emphatic assent. And every conversation would end the same way: “But what

can you do?” “Yeah, you can’t do anything.” They all had families (unlike me) and plenty of bills; and as Rich has pointed out about other workers, their jobs (full-time, unlike mine) left them very little spare time and energy. But with minor exceptions, they all knew perfectly well what should be done: higher taxes on the rich, campaign reform, national health insurance, less defense spending, fix the schools and the highways, kill all the lobbyists.

What should I have told them? Read Chomsky and Naomi Klein? Form neighborhood or online discussion groups? Send money to Fairvote.org or Corporate Watch? But they have no time to read, no energy to discuss, no money to send. Multiply them by a hundred million and the result is: no democracy.

Suggestions welcome.

IV.

Russell asks another fundamental question: “How Will Intellectuals Eat?” Independent intellectuals have always depended on conversations, lectures, seminars, libraries, museums, bookstores, newsstands, cafés, small publishers, little magazines, cheap apartments, and easy movement into and out of part-time jobs, preferably on the fringes of culture or academe. In other words, cities. In return, they supplied the civilization in “bourgeois civilization.”

Capitalist rationality is not synonymous with bourgeois civilization; on the contrary, it is the chief subverter of bourgeois civilization. By its inflexible logic, the material prerequisites of intellectual life were economically irrational. Inexpensive urban neighborhoods, small-scale enterprises, relaxed personnel policies all succumbed to the same polite, deadly formula: “We’re sorry, but nowadays investors expect a higher rate of return.” In an earlier example of industry consolidation, Nixon’s delightful Secretary of Agriculture, Earl Butz, helpfully advised small farmers and ranchers: “Get big or get out.” They got out, and American food is now, by and large, mass-produced dreck. Will the same thing happen to American culture? There are symptoms: the difficulty of getting non-blockbusters published, promoted, and kept in print; the pressure of bookstore chains on independents; the vast wasteland of Clear Channel radio; the metastasis of the Murdoch media empire. There are also exceptions, of course. There are always exceptions to trends before they become accomplished facts, as a great many people were eager to remind Russell when *The Last Intellectuals* appeared. But in general, I think Russell’s formulation here is spot-on: for nearly everyone, “the choice is to join an institution or die on the vine.”

Some institutions are more benign than others, to be sure. Universities are still, to some extent, havens in a heartless, spiritless world. But the extent is dwindling. Whatever the scholarly credentials of their presidents may be, universities are now run as businesses, by people who embrace managerialist ideology. Students are customers; trustees are mostly lawyers and businessmen; administrators are professionals rather than professors doing community service; donors are assiduously cultivated and (when it can be done without scandal) truckled to; and professors are encouraged, gently or forcefully, to become en-

trepreneurs, bringing in big grants of which the university takes its slice. As editors in publishing houses now consult the marketing division, deans consult the development office. Above all, first and last, costs must be cut and the workforce disciplined. There go those comfy, undemanding, dead-end jobs that once supported writers, painters, musicians, and other misfits. Will the Web save the situation? Certainly, many misfits thrive here. A few, like our Scott, even make a living here. But Scott (like Edmund Wilson) may be *sui generis* – at any rate, he’s not a child of the Web. He’s a print man in a cyber-world. Every Wednesday, after reading his column, I chant: “Two, three, many McLemees!” But I’m not holding my breath.

About the Web generally, I’m of divided mind. Politically, I’m optimistic. The Web could be just the thing for vanquishing anomie and enabling public conversation. Democracy, after all, simply is continuous conversation. (Though as Rich has reminded us, screen-to-screen relations can only supplement, not replace, face-to-face relations.)

Culturally, I’m pessimistic. Like Rich (I’m sure the epithet “bloviator of Hindenburg-like proportions” was meant affectionately), I’m an ardent fan of Sven Birkerts. As I say in the book’s final essay, I agree with Birkerts that cyberculture is not promoting general literacy – at least, the real article – but instead bypassing it. Life on the screen alters our psychic metabolism; Birkerts’ phenomenology of this process is unsurpassed. Depth and stillness are less prized; speed and horizontal connectivity are all-conquering. This is not good for intellect; ergo, not good for intellectuals.

V.

Henry is right, of course, that “we need more . . . intellectuals who understand the technical underpinnings of the existing consensus well enough to operate with them,” who have “at least a nodding acquaintance with the technical vocabularies that underpin” dominant ideologies. I yield to no one in my admiration for Bowles and Gintis, along with the entire cohort of radical economists with whom they emerged thirty years ago. I tip my cap to Dani Rodrick for grappling conscientiously with trade theory; to Ian Shapiro for patiently demystifying rational choice theory; to Joseph Stiglitz for demonstrating that the usual “simplifying” assumptions about market exchange oversimplify drastically; to Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers for sifting through mountains of data on voting behavior and political contributions and formulating their “investment theory of elections,” one of the few genuine achievements of political science; to Chris Mooney and David Michaels for thoroughly documenting the corrupt pseudo-science with which industry frequently delays or defeats regulation. All of the above, like Chomsky, Stone, and Nader, are the kind of “new public intellectuals,” combining expertise with civic spirit, about whom I made wistful noises in the title essay.

All I meant to say is, let’s be clear about the obstacles. I’m afraid I muddied the waters by complaining that it’s hard for literary intellectuals to learn economic theory. Literary intellectuals don’t really need to learn economic theory. Plenty of graduate students and

junior faculty members already understand economic theory well enough to “mount a quite devastating internal critique of the more ideologically loaded forms of economic thinking” and to “show that right-wing arguments often fail on their own terms.” The question is, why are their views marginal? Why is Econ 101 dominated by pro-business simplifications rather than populist ones? Why do the media overwhelmingly prefer to quote pro-business economists rather than Doug Henwood or others with a bad attitude? Why are Lawrence Summers and Robert Rubin at Obama’s elbow rather than Joseph Stiglitz and George Soros? I think it’s less because left academics haven’t learned to speak with a public voice or because left public intellectuals haven’t mastered the technicalities than because (to simplify a little – see Chomsky and Herman’s *Manufacturing Consent* for the full monty) there are ideological filters of varying diameters at every stage in the formation of public opinion. The levers of social power – investment and job creation, media ownership, technical research, public relations, campaign finance, the revolving door into and out of government, etc. – are in the hands of business as a class, and they use them. (For a crucial example, see *Invisible Hands*, a fine recent study by historian Kim Phillips-Fein, which shows how a number of business organizations, angered by the New Deal, pretty much ordered up a movement – the New Right – that has succeeded in rolling much of it back.)

There is nothing surprising about this. Now as always, whoever pays the piper (professor, politician, policymaker) calls the tune. Not every single note, of course, but the overall concert program. If you don’t like it, you can always start your own orchestra.

VI.

Scott, acknowledging these grim truths, nevertheless asks where we might “find the home address of any counteracting tendencies,” might locate “some reserve of values, commitments, influences, inspirations, ideas, ideals, superego energies, etc” that would “nourish the critical intelligence and allow it to sustain itself.” In other words, whence cometh our hope?

Well, Chomsky, Rorty, and Lasch would certainly have different answers to that question. Chomsky would say that a certain irreducible minimum of creativity and self-expression is hard-wired into us. We require freedom in order to attain selfhood in exactly the same way our bodily organs (including language) require a proper internal (or linguistic) environment in order to attain mature form.

Rorty would not deny, I think, that our biological endowment predisposes us to the exercise of freedom and self-determination. But he struck a different balance than Chomsky between biology and culture, between drive and socialization. Human nature is stubborn, no doubt, but not immutable or unconquerable. Even if it requires tinkering with our genetic program, social control can ultimately, for good or evil, get “all the way down.” Which is why he acknowledged that his was “an ungrounded hope.”

Lasch, for all his severity, talked constantly about hope. What he meant by it remains

tantalizingly obscure. He sometimes referred to it as “trust in life,” or in “Being.” Here is his fullest definition, from *True and Only Heaven* (pp. 80-1):

Hope does not demand a belief in progress. It demands a belief in justice: a conviction that the wicked will suffer, that wrongs will be made right, that the underlying order of things is not flouted with impunity. Hope implies a deep-seated trust in life that appears absurd to those who lack it. It rests on confidence not so much in the future as in the past. It derives from early memories – no doubt distorted, overlaid with later memories, and thus not wholly reliable as a guide to any factual reconstruction of past events – in which the experience of order and contentment was so intense that subsequent disillusionments cannot dislodge it. Such experience leaves as its residue the unshakable conviction, not that the past was better than the present, but that trust is never completely misplaced, even though it is never completely justified either and therefore destined inevitably to disappointments.

I’m not sure I understand this, but I find it more illuminating than many things I do understand.

What keeps me going? I suppose it’s simple gratitude toward a few (doubtless idealized) exemplars of moral beauty. I worship the ground John Stuart Mill and George Eliot walked on and dread above all things writing a sentence that would have displeased either of them. And even on the brink of despair, the last sentence of *Middlemarch* has always seemed sufficient reason to stagger onward:

... for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.

Perhaps she wouldn’t mind my adding “and wrote now-unread book reviews.”

Beyond that, I’m not sure my own career, or version thereof, is particularly instructive. For one thing, my family was poor, so not having a middle-class lifestyle has never seemed quite so much of a sacrifice as it might have to others. For another thing, I never wanted children, knowing quite well that I was too fragile and unstable. Finally, I had a decade-long emotional collapse after leaving *Opus Dei*, which altered my career plans a good deal. Fortunately, my bewildered working-class family, the supportive 1970s Cambridge counterculture, and the comparatively generous pre-Reagan economy and welfare state kept me afloat. In a fully rationalized society and maximally efficient economy, I would have been toast. If anything about this twisted path seems to point the way for aspiring public intellectuals today, I’ll be pleasantly surprised.

Thanks to the symposiasts who prompted these reflections, and a hearty “you’re welcome” to all readers who find anything useful in them.

[END]