

Edited by  
**ARTHUR M. MELZER,  
JERRY WEINBERGER, AND  
M. RICHARD ZINMAN**

Between  
Philosophy  
and  
Politics

**THE**

**PUBLIC**

**INTELLECTUAL**



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# The Public Intellectual

*Between Philosophy and Politics*

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Arthur M. Melzer, Jerry Weinberger,  
and M. Richard Zinman

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# Acknowledgments

This is the sixth volume of essays to be published by the Symposium on Science, Reason, and Modern Democracy. Established in 1989 in the Department of Political Science at Michigan State University, the symposium is a center for research and debate on the pressing political and intellectual issues of our time. It sponsors lectures, conferences, publications, and teaching, as well as graduate, postdoctoral, and senior fellowships. Its specific mission is to explore the intersection of public policy and philosophy: to study the problems of America's political culture in their vital connection to America's intellectual culture.

This volume grew from the symposium's eighth annual program, "The Idea of Public Intellectual," a lecture series and a conference held at Michigan State during the 1996–1997 academic year. The conference was organized by the symposium and the Center for Theoretical Study, an institute of advanced studies jointly administered by Charles University and the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic. It was designed to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of Charter 77, the human rights movement founded by dissident Czech and Slovak intellectuals that prepared the way for the Velvet Revolution.

In planning the conference, we worked closely with Martin Palouš, then senior research fellow at the Center for Theoretical Study and now ambassador of the Czech Republic to the United States. We thank Ambassador Palouš for his essential contribution to our joint enterprise. We also thank Ivan M. Havel, director, and Ivan Chvatík, codirector, of the center, and their colleagues, especially Josef Moural, for their valuable support.

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# Introduction

*Arthur M. Melzer, Jerry Weinberger, and M. Richard Zinman*

There is a growing realization today that the character of intellectual life in the West, especially in its relation to society, is undergoing a fundamental shift. A variety of factors—the rise of postmodernism, rapid changes in the world of computers and the media, the growth of the information economy—contribute to this perception. It would be very difficult at this point, however, to formulate a clear conception of where this change is leading us. But this vague, nagging impression also brings powerfully to the fore the converse question: *From what* are we changing? Exactly what *is* and *has been* the character and social role of intellectual life in the modern West? At or near the core of this issue is the uniquely modern phenomenon of the “intellectual” or “public intellectual” (we use the terms interchangeably). On the principle that the outlines of a phenomenon become clearest when it has begun to change or disappear, the time may be particularly ripe to undertake an examination of the modern intellectual.

According to Aristotle, man is the rational animal—but also the political animal. It is, therefore, a permanent question for human beings: What is or should be the relation between the two, between the life of the mind and social life, between ideas and events, between thought and action, reason and history? Is it possible or even desirable for theoretical speculation to guide political practice or shape history? And through what means? How should the two realms of theory and practice be connected? One possible response to these questions—the one uniquely characteristic of our times—is the “public intellectual”: a class of hybrid beings standing with one foot in the contemplative world and the other in the political.

Historically, however, this is a most unusual response. Most cultures do not produce intellectuals. They are a rather late arising Western phenomenon—and one that now seems to be changing and perhaps disappearing (or so it has been reported for the past fifty years). Certainly, societies that produce intellectuals spend a lot of time questioning the meaning and value of what they have produced. Consider only two of the more extreme views heard today.

The first holds that intellectuals are basically perverse and “detached” in an unhealthy way. Theory is for the most part merely an escape from practice (“those who can, do”); so these intellectualizers are out of touch with life and almost always deformed in one way or another

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—egg-headed, pointy-headed. Specifically, intellectuals are essentially moved by resentment because the mainstream culture does not understand or respect them. Thus they endeavor to pay society back for its neglect by taking a countercultural stance: antipatriotic, antireligious, antibourgeois, anticapitalist, and anti-American. When they teach, they inevitably corrupt the young, as Socrates was said to have done in Athens and as the professorate surely does in the modern university. They've taken a public stand on all the great issues of the day—and almost always wound up on the wrong side: they were wrong about communism, wrong about socialism, wrong about the 1960s.

The opposite view holds that intellectuals are actually secular prophets who would lead us to the promised land if only we had the maturity and good sense to listen to them. They do indeed stand outside and against their cultures, but this very alienation gives them the salutary detachment and the purity that enable them to function as the conscience of society and as the vanguard of enlightenment and social progress.

The thirteen chapters in this book—all by close observers and, in some cases, practitioners of the phenomenon at issue—primarily address, in different ways and from different points of view, four essential and interrelated questions. What are the defining characteristics of the public intellectual? When and why did they first arise? Are they a good thing—both for society and for intellectual life? Are they now disappearing, as is often claimed, or only mutating into some other form?

The first five chapters concern the past and primarily describe the historical origin and development of the public intellectual. Arthur Melzer begins with a brief attempt to define the public intellectual and state what is historically unique about it. Thomas Pangle then takes us back to the Greek enlightenment, where the phenomenon essentially did not yet exist. Through an interpretation of the closest Greek analog to the intellectual—the Socratic “citizen philosopher” or the Platonic conception of “political philosophy”—he tries to show *why* it did not exist and how philosophy had to be fundamentally transformed in its relation to theology, as it began to be in the Renaissance, for something like the public intellectual to emerge. Paul Rahe picks up the story in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, where the public intellectual and the attendant hope for a “Party of Reason” first come into their own. But the dangers of this new phenomenon—doctrinairism, the neglect of political prudence, revolutionary subversion—now become fully apparent, as Rahe shows through a discussion of the warnings issued by Burke, Hume, and Tocqueville. It was Rousseau, however, who engaged in the most complex exploration of the promise and especially the inner tensions and dangers of the modern intellectual, as Chris Kelly shows in his account of Rousseau's famous quarrels with Voltaire, Diderot, and the other philosophes. Finally, Gordon Wood shows how something like this whole history was recapitulated on the American scene: the Founding Fathers were not yet intellectuals but neoclassical, philosophical aristocrats. Yet they created a modern democracy in which people like themselves could not long endure—to be replaced, among other things, by public intellectuals.

The remaining chapters focus primarily on the present. Staying within the American context, John Diggins traces the history of intellectuals—their character, social role, and self

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understanding—from the Founding Fathers to the present. Josef Joffe analyzes the present state and possible future of the American intellectual—whom he sees as representative of the whole species—in light of various social changes like the retreat of intellectual life into the universities, the increase in specialization, the growth of the “new class,” and the spread of relativism.

Returning to the European scene, Pierre Hassner picks up the story where Rahe and Kelly left off, bringing us into the twentieth century. In particular, he continues the focus on the dangers and vices of intellectuals through an analysis of the “totalitarian temptation,” the mystery of their slow-to-die flirtations with fascism and especially with communism. Tony Judt further explores these dangers but also focuses on one public intellectual who combated them in his case study of Raymond Aron. Finally, Adam Michnik, moving the scene to Eastern Europe, reminds us of the heroic role played by dissident intellectuals in the struggle against communism, while also warning of the danger that such heroes and moralists can pose in times of peace and reconstruction.

Implicit in all these discussions of the vices of intellectuals is a sense of what the public intellectual still could and ought to be. Explicit reflections on this question finally come to the surface toward the end of Michnik’s essay. This is also the main subject of Ira Katznelson’s discussion of Karl Mannheim, Robert K. Merton, and C. Wright Mills. Similarly, Martha Nussbaum presents a case study of how contemporary philosophy has a vital role to play in the alleviation of human suffering. One issue that emerges in these three pieces, although it has been a leitmotiv running throughout the volume, is the question of how the intellectual’s public role can continue in a world dominated by relativism or the postmodernist rejection of universal truth.

Having discussed the promise of the modern intellectual as well as the tragic side, especially the totalitarian temptation, we conclude with the comic side. That is the theme of Saul Bellow’s chapter (and of his novels). He begins with the question of why so many modern artists and intellectuals have been comic writers, but eventually brings the question around to why they are themselves such comic figures.

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**I**  
***THEORY***

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# 1

## *What Is an Intellectual?*

*Arthur M. Melzer*

Today, when we think of the term “intellectual,” Sartre and Camus are probably the first examples to come to mind. But if we look to the historical origins and upper reaches of the phenomenon, Voltaire and Diderot are the classic representatives. To flesh out and localize the idea, one might also name Tom Paine, George Orwell, Dwight Macdonald, Lionel Trilling, Edmund Wilson, Hannah Arendt, Mary McCarthy, and more recently Irving Kristol, Edward Said, Betty Friedan, and Stanley Fish.

We surely know one when we see one. What, then, is an intellectual? We sense that there is something new or historically unique about the phenomenon—that it did not exist in the ancient or medieval worlds but is emblematic of the life of the mind in modernity. But in what does this uniqueness consist? How does the intellectual differ from the other species of “knowers” familiar to us: the prophet, the scientist, the expert, the scholar, the enlightened statesman, the philosopher, the sophist? All of these represent different postures toward knowledge and indeed different ways of life. What is the specific posture and way of the intellectual? What does he do and how does he understand himself? What strange turn of human consciousness or new ideological or historical conditions have given rise to the modern intellectual?

Generally speaking, “knowers” differ regarding the source of their knowledge (divine or human), regarding the subject matter of their knowledge, and regarding the ground for their valuing and pursuing knowledge. Concerning the last point, does the person seek knowledge as an end in itself or merely as a means—to the welfare of society, for example? How, in other words, does the love of knowledge relate to the other major sphere of human life, the moral-political? What should be—and, realistically speaking, *can* be—the relation of theoretical knowledge to social action, of reason to history?

Using these questions to make some obvious distinctions, the intellectual’s knowledge is typically secular, deriving from the unassisted exercise of the human intellect; so in this respect he or she differs fundamentally from the priest or prophet (although we will see that, in other

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respects, he bears a peculiar resemblance to the priest). The intellectual, although secular, also differs from the scientist because his or her knowledge concerns the human world, the sphere of politics and culture. He is distinguished from the expert, the specialist, and the technician because his knowledge is not “technical” or “instrumental,” merely a tool to some further end and therefore exact, narrow, and specialized. Rather, he is a generalist and a “person of ideas”: someone who loves ideas largely for their own sake and therefore especially large and sweeping ideas. Yet—and here we approach the core—for all his love of ideas, he is not the scholar or academic because he has a vital concern for the practical application of ideas and the welfare of society. He writes op-ed pieces and magazine articles. He is “committed” and “engaged.” The intellectual “takes a stand.” Still, for all this emphatic practical concern, he is not the enlightened or intellectual statesman, like Woodrow Wilson, James Madison, Cicero, or even Plato’s philosopher-king, for he holds resolutely to a posture of detachment, even “alienation,” and regards direct political involvement as something that would compromise his very being as an intellectual. He is not part of the establishment. Being an outsider and a misfit is somehow an essential part of his identity and self-understanding.

It would seem, then, that the unique and defining characteristic—as well as the central paradox—of the public intellectual is an inner tension or contradiction on the crucial issue of theory and practice, contemplation and action. If he is primarily a lover and explorer of ideas, why is it so *essential* to him to take a public stand? But, if he is primarily concerned with the welfare of society, why is it so *essential* that he be an alienated idea lover who stands apart from and even disdains society? Does he embrace the world of ideas in order to *help* society—or to *escape* it? Somehow he necessarily claims *both* things. His characteristic stance toward society is both concerned and hostile, both attached and detached. Thus to answer the question, What is an intellectual? is to explain this strange contradiction at his core, this posture of “detached attachment.” What is the origin and inner necessity of this stance, and why is it uniquely modern?

It may be useful to consider the one remaining type of “knower” that the intellectual, in some respects, most resembles: the philosopher, particularly the political philosopher. This intellectual ideal was most prevalent and most elaborately described in the classical world, especially in the dialogues of Plato. This knower too claims a nontechnical, sweeping, and secular knowledge of the world of politics and culture; and he too is somehow both political and yet detached from politics. Is the intellectual, then, the same as the classical political philosopher? Is Plato the archetype of the intellectual?

Somehow it strikes our ears (for many of us, at least) as anachronistic and wrong to call Plato an intellectual. Despite the resemblance, there are clearly important differences between the classical political philosopher and the intellectual, difficult as it may be to put one’s finger on precisely what they are. A brief consideration of these differences—three in particular—will help clarify the specific character and origins of the detached attachment at the core of the modern intellectual.

First, although both types are marked by a well-advertised “detachment” from political engagement, there is a profound difference in the source and nature of their detachment. The



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philosopher, as distinguished from the intellectual, tends to avoid political action because he has attained—or at least seeks—a radical withdrawal from and transcendence of the practical realm as such. Impressed by the smallness, illusoriness, and ultimate futility of all the goals of political life, the classical philosopher endeavors to find his good in the realm outside of politics and practice, outside of the “cave,” in the detached contemplation of the cosmos.<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, he takes men’s political hopes and longings seriously, but primarily to ground and dialectically ascend to the transpolitical, theoretical life. Plato did speak of philosopher-kings and had his own political misadventures in Syracuse. But he also stated clearly that if a philosopher ever engaged in politics or agreed to rule, it would not be because he thought it a great and noble good but an unavoidable necessity: “No one willingly chooses to rule and get mixed up in straightening out other people’s troubles; but he asks for wages.” And the only “wage” the philosopher cares about is the avoidance of a great penalty: “The greatest of penalties is being ruled by a worse man if one is not willing to rule oneself. It is because they fear this, in my view, that decent men rule, when they do rule... they enter on it as a necessity and because they have no one better than or like themselves to whom to turn it over.”<sup>2</sup> Most thinkers in the classical tradition may not have been either so extreme or so blunt in their characterization of political involvement. But there was widespread agreement that, although theoretical knowledge is useful for practical life, and although practical life is necessary for us in various ways since we are not pure minds, still the wholly detached *vita contemplativa* is simply the highest. After all, in the classical view, the whole purpose of society—and of the practical life that serves it—is to promote human excellence, perfection, and happiness. And the latter is ultimately to be found in the philosophic or contemplative life. Clearly, then, the purpose of philosophy is not and cannot be service to society, but, if anything, the reverse. The detached, contemplative life is our final end.

The public intellectual, by contrast, is defined less by his escape from the cave than by his flight from the ivory tower. However much he may pride himself in his love of ideas and truth, he self-consciously rejects the contemplative ideal of withdrawal and detachment, and is vitally concerned to “make a difference,” to “take a stand,” to “help society.” Given the depth of his practical concern and attachment, what the basis is of his famous posture of detachment remains unclear for the moment, but what is certain is that it does not stem from the radical, almost otherworldly transcendence of the practical sphere that is at the core of the classical philosophical ideal. The intellectual tends to regard that ideal and that sort of detachment as a fairy tale. His own stance is somehow an emphatically this-worldly detachment.

A second reason why it sounds wrong to call Plato—or the philosopher in general—an intellectual is that the former is a great genius, an original thinker of the first rank, whereas the latter typically is not. Almost any intelligent person, we sense, can become an intellectual. Philosophers are rare, singular occurrences, like saints, whereas intellectuals are numerous enough to form a class, an intelligentsia, a “priesthood,” an ongoing institution with its own place and role within society. In short, the modern concept of “intellectual” generally denotes a larger and lower order of thinkers, intellectual retailers who, consciously or unconsciously, elaborate, apply, and popularize the thought of the great, epoch-making thinkers.

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One might see an inner connection between these first two characteristics of the intellectual—concerning detachment and rank. When Plato discusses the character of the philosopher in the *Republic*, he puts primary emphasis precisely on what I have called detachment. The genuine philosopher is not merely someone who particularly delights in or excels at learning, but someone who has undergone a radical and wrenching “turning around of the soul” by which he sees through and separates himself from all the fond illusions and false hopes of ordinary life, of moral/political life. It is only by virtue of this difficult process of disillusionment and disengagement that he is able to make contact, for the first time, with the deepest and truest need of his soul: an erotic hunger to know and contemplate the truth for its own sake. The genuine love of truth, in other words, is not something that we all begin with—it is the rare achievement and the defining characteristic of the philosopher.

Now, this philosophic conversion is something that very few can undergo—but many can admire. And that is why, as Plato goes on to discuss, the philosopher always tends to produce in his wake a crowd of pretenders, imitators, and approximations—like the Sophists, rhetoricians, and other intellectually gifted nonphilosophers that populate the dialogues. The defining characteristic of these intelligent nonphilosophers is that, lacking genuine philosophic conversion and detachment, they have become “men of ideas” and professional knowers, not because they love the pure truth for its own sake and above all things, but because they love the honor, nobility, or social advantages that attach—within certain cultured societies—to the ideal of the truth lover. Thus it is precisely their attachment to certain goods of social life, especially honor, that leads them to mimic philosophic detachment. Permanently torn in this way between attachment and detachment, Plato’s intelligent nonphilosophers would seem to be precisely what we mean by the class of intellectuals.<sup>3</sup>

The comparison is powerful and revealing but, in the end, not completely adequate or fair. For there is something that distinguishes the modern intellectual from the ancient rhetorician or Sophist no less than from Plato and the ancient philosopher. This difference—the third on our list—concerns the all-important modern idea, alien to classical times, of progress: the faith that the advance of theoretical knowledge and its public dissemination will lead to social and material progress for all—a new faith concerning the role and power of reason in history.

Faith in progress is rooted partly in the rise of modern natural science—and of its agent the “scientist,” a uniquely modern species of knower with a fundamentally new intellectual stance. Unlike the ancient natural philosopher who sought to understand nature—in a posture of passive and loving contemplation—for the fulfillment and perfection of his own soul, the modern scientist actively probes and manipulates nature largely in order to conquer it for the physical well-being of humankind.

On the moral and political front, the belief in progress stems originally from the Enlightenment project: the concerted effort to subvert the ancien regime (indeed, all “traditional society,” dominated by prejudice and superstition) and replace it with rational society (“modernization”)—and all of this, not through direct rule but through the gradual transformation of consciousness or public opinion by the broad dissemination of philosophy and science (“enlightenment”). And just as modern natural science has its unique agent—the

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scientist—so the Enlightenment has an agent unique to it—the modern intellectual (in his original form). This is a completely new species of knower defined in terms of a fundamentally new intellectual project, a new conception of what a knower can do and be. The movement of enlightenment and progress, together with all of its epistemological and political presuppositions, forms the original basis and continuing background of the new concept “intellectual.”

It is, for example, because of this essential, if often unarticulated, connection to the modern movements of progress and enlightenment that it feels not only wrong but *anachronistic* to apply the term “intellectual” to Plato or the Sophists—or, for that matter, to Chinese Mandarins, medieval scribes, and so forth. One can no more speak of intellectuals in fifth-century Athens than of missionaries—both are agents of a movement or project that did not exist in that time and place. This is also why, whereas “philosopher” clearly indicates a way of life of the individual, “intellectual” is more of a sociological term, denoting a particular social role or function. And it is with a view to just this social role that we intuit that intellectuals are and should be relatively numerous, constituting a class, and of a rank midway between the great minds and the people—so as to serve the function of transmitting and popularizing philosophic knowledge.

Above all, it is the link to the modern conception of progress that primarily explains the intellectual’s unique posture toward society, his contradictory stance of detached attachment. First, the attachment.

Modern intellectuals are characterized by the fact that they have open to them a radically new employment for their talents, a novel mission for theoretical intelligence, a unique calling that simply did not exist in previous times: the world-historical role as enlighteners and agents of progress. They live in a world that takes for granted the existence of a whole dimension of reality unsuspected by earlier ages: “History” or “Progress” or the “historical process.” And they are ineluctably drawn to orient their intellectual lives toward this new dimension—to *attach* themselves to the historical process and seek to “make a contribution.” They are captivated by the idea that their inner mental experiences are not merely private events but can and should have grand historical consequences. This was not an idea or way of life available or imaginable to premodern knowers. A classical thinker like Cicero could occasionally aspire, through his writings and especially through his political action, to contribute to the welfare of Rome. But this remained on the level of ordinary politics: particular reforms, local in their reach, temporary in their application, and enacted through the prudence, power, and good luck of the particular individual, Cicero. Surely, he never dreamed of transforming the nature of politics, of making Roman society rational or enlightened—for example, by eliminating polytheism, superstition, and other prejudices. On the contrary, he attempted to rule Rome largely by means of those prejudices while also moderating them. But the way of life of the modern intellectual is based on an altogether new kind of hope or ambition. This hope—rooted in the belief in progress—contains at least the following elements, which dwell at the back, if not the front, of the intellectual’s mind and condition his whole self-understanding and life activity.

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First, the intellectual, as he sees himself, does not stand alone, relying on his own individual and uncertain powers, stymied at every turn by the age-old forces of custom and irrationality, but is a participant in a “movement” or force larger than himself, the onward march of enlightenment. He lives in the inspiring belief that his own thoughts and insights, however small or partial, once “published” in the modern sense—with the help of the printing press and a vast social and material infrastructure designed for targeted as well as mass distribution—will reach out beyond him, combining additively with the contributions of thousands of others in order somehow to “make a difference” and improve society. Second, the historical process to which he is contributing will bring not mere reform, but fundamental transformations, altering the very character of society. Third, these changes are not temporary or fragile (like ordinary moral or political reform) but more or less a stable, permanent, even “thing-like” achievement, a new “stage” of “history.” Fourth, this change comes through or involves the transformation of consciousness by the dispelling of prejudice and the spread of theoretical truth. Thus large, abstract ideas, the stock-in-trade of the intellectuals—as distinguished from ideas diluted and applied by the prudence of intelligent statesmen, like Cicero—play a direct and crucial role in the world of action. And fifth, this progress can lift nations, whole regions, perhaps eventually all mankind to new historical levels.

It is this radical new conception of what a knower can do and be in the world, this wholly new employment for theoretical intelligence, this lofty historical mission unimagined by earlier times, that induces the intellectual to be vitally and essentially *attached* to society and its future, unlike the classical philosopher. Indeed, he is more than attached: he tends to be highly public-spirited and idealistic, not to say moralistic. This is a phenomenon that we have grown used to and so take for granted. But through it, the modern, public intellectual stands in striking contrast to the Sophists and other intellectual nonphilosophers of the ancient world, who, seeing through and liberated from the way of life of ordinary citizens and yet lacking all notion of such a grand historical employment, most often inclined to open cynicism, self-seeking, and exploitation. The modern intellectual remains idealistic and attached to society because the faith in progress gives him something extremely important to do.

But, at the same time, the modern, Enlightenment idea of progress also explains the other half of the intellectuals’ inner contradiction: the resolutely detached or apolitical posture strangely adopted by these highly attached, idealistic, and engaged individuals. The basis of this posture is the new conception, implicit in the idea of progress, of how reason or truth can be a force shaping politics and history.

The classical view was expressed by Plato: “Unless the philosophers rule as kings ... and political power and philosophy coincide in the same place ... there is no rest from ills for the cities” (*Republic*, 473d-e). This famous statement means that reason and truth can indeed shape history, can guide society—but only to the extent that rational individuals rule politically. Reason has no force of its own, no power in history other than the political power that rational individuals may chance to acquire. And Plato also knew that the political rule of the rational, of the philosophers, was extremely unlikely and, more, that the effort to make a rarified quality like “wisdom” or “truth” into a title to rule is, in practice, very dangerous: an open invitation to charlatany and endless subversion. Therefore, he had little belief in the political force of

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truth or in the coming of a rational society. There may indeed be progress in knowledge among a few philosophers, but the political impotence of reason or truth is such that this does not translate, in any systematic or significant way, into progress for society at large.

The modern belief in progress could emerge only on the basis of a new conception of the workings of reason in the world, according to which it has a force of its own, independent of rulers and politics. Perhaps stimulated by the example of Christianity—which conquered without an army and changed the world using only Scripture and an apolitical clergy—philosophers like Hobbes conceived the hope to transform the politics of the West through a book and a new intellectual clerisy to teach and propagate it. Reason and truth could rule the world nonpolitically by shaping public opinion, by transforming public consciousness, in a word, by *enlightenment*. To be sure, earlier thinkers thought it possible, within limits, to mold public opinion—but not to make it fundamentally rational, not to “enlighten” it. Even Plato’s philosopher-king, for example, who shapes the whole education of his subjects starting from birth, who oversees every game they will play, every song or poem they will hear, even he does not make them truly rational. That is why he needs to teach them “noble lies” and myths. Even he does not hope to rid public life of prejudice but only to rule by means of it. The wise man, according to Plato, cannot *spread* his wisdom to the people—that is precisely why he must *rule*. The unstated premise of philosopher-kings is the impossibility of enlightenment. Conversely, the idea of enlightenment—and of its agent, the intellectual—is premised on a rejection of the need and demand for the political rule of the wise. Reason can guide the world through public opinion—and so it can and should reject the ever troublesome title to rule of wisdom (in favor of consent), a title that has in fact been a great source of irrationality and strife in politics. The unique posture of the public intellectual is based on this modern understanding of the relation of reason and history, of the enlightening power of truth. And this new understanding provides the first key to the intellectual’s particular “detachment”: he is by no means indifferent to practice, but he is confident, as no knower before him was, that he does not need to rule or be politically engaged in order to help make the world rational and right.

We must go further: the intellectual believes that he must positively *avoid* political rule, for nonrule is one of the essential preconditions of his right and power to rule public opinion. Plato and other classical thinkers, with their highly political approach to human affairs and culture, emphasized that it was the political rulers, bathed in the majesty of public power and authority, who had the greatest power to mold public opinion. A community tends to follow the leader. But various phenomena, above all the rise of Christianity, dramatically demonstrated how, under the right circumstances, men without power—and thus without the stain of compromise and injustice that the attainment and exercise of power inevitably require—could claim a purity and moral authority that the politically powerful could never match. This is how the meek inherit the earth. The modern intellectual is largely based on this clerical model.

To be sure, unlike the Christian priest, the secular intellectual cannot bolster his power by claiming a connection to divine providence; but he can and does claim to be the agent or interpreter of “History.” Again, he cannot attempt to subvert the authority of the politically powerful by appealing to the Christian doctrine of the sinfulness of worldly success and power, but he does make use of the antipolitical ethos of modern liberalism with its demotion

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or denigration of the public sphere, its deliberate separation of political power from moral and religious authority, its view of power as a necessary evil. Liberalism embraces something like the Christian transvaluation: the politically superior are no longer considered morally superior, but if anything the reverse. The liberal slogan is “power corrupts.” It follows that we must look for moral guidance among those without power.

Yet not just anyone without power: not those who primarily seek wealth or position, for they will only speak for their class interests. But also not the “virtuous,” on whom traditional society relied—the religious and secular moralists whose direct and proclaimed goal is the moral improvement of others—for, in the skeptical, liberal view, the virtuous “improvers of mankind” almost always wind up in the end (if not from the very beginning) trying to control others for their own honor or profit. The only one who can really be trusted is the detached truth-loving or beauty-loving intellectual, for he alone has found something in this world to love more than wealth and power and (perhaps) even more than the welfare of society itself. It is only this extreme detachment and withdrawal—founded on the love of ideas and a certain contempt for society—that can render a man relatively immune to the seductions of interest and partisanship and thus make him a worthy guide for society. Thus the public intellectual is *necessarily* defined by a posture of detachment, alienation, and nonconformity: he is the outsider, the misfit, the bohemian. He has not compromised, conformed, or sold out. It is this social and existential stance outside the system—more than any educational attainment or innate genius—that is the basis of his superiority, his credibility, his right to rule public opinion. Only the intellectual, by virtue of his *detachment* from society, is able to see and be willing to speak the truth to society.

In sum, it is the idea of progress—with its new conception of the relation of reason and history—that produces and explains the mind-set of the modern intellectual and the contradiction of detached attachment that defines him. It attaches the gifted nonphilosopher to society, as never before, by creating a new calling or mission for theoretical intelligence, by inviting the intellectual to be a crucial participant in the founding of a new social order. But at the same time, it necessarily forces the intellectual to detach himself and withdraw from society and political involvement—even to deny, on some level, his attachment and desire to lead society—for that is the precise condition of his credibility and influence. Not despite, but because of his overriding desire to help society, he must convince others and himself that what he really loves is truth and not society. The modern intellectual is that unique form of knower who ceremoniously disdains and turns his back on society—the better to serve it.

It would be more accurate to say that this is the first and most basic stratum of the modern intellectual. Significant variations were introduced as ideas changed regarding the precise relation of reason and history. To the Enlightenment view—that the power of reason in the world primarily depends on the conscious, if indirect or unpolitical, action of the intellectuals—were added more robust theories of history according to which reason is an impersonal force imbedded in the “historical process” itself and intellectuals are to be understood as interpreters, agents, and expressions of this larger process. Again, intellectuals, being agents of change and opposition, necessarily varied as their enemies varied. In the initial (and relatively unified) stage, they were defined against traditional society—against the superstition and

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privilege of the ancien regime. In triumphing over these enemies, however, they eventually acquired new ones (splintering in the process)—for some, it was the newly hegemonic bourgeoisie, for others, the antibourgeois movements of fascism and communism. And whichever side they took, increasingly their enemies included the intellectuals of the other side.

Having emphasized the crucial link between the modern intellectual and the idea of progress, it is necessary for me to speak briefly of that variant of the species—the “romantic” strain—whose extreme opposition to society culminates in the rejection of the belief in progress itself. The romantics, in this somewhat idiosyncratic sense, would include such varied figures as Flaubert, Stendahl, the early T. S. Eliot, Céline, Thoreau, and Kerouac. Among romantic intellectuals, the sense of being agents of social progress shrinks toward the vanishing point, while the sense—the cult—of alienation becomes the primary theme. This limit case is in a way the most revealing. Despite their explicit doubt of progress, the romantics may still be called intellectuals because their famous alienation does not lead them quietly to turn away from society to a purely contemplative life, or alternatively to revert to an exploitative posture. It drives them to *épater* the bourgeois, to *tell* society how hopeless and beyond all help it is—in the obscure hope that, in the end, this will in fact do some good. In other words, the romantics remain intellectuals in the decisive respect because they *cannot keep their thoughts to themselves*. They continue in the grips of the Enlightenment faith in the act of “publication.” They remain addicted to the idea that their inner mental lives must ultimately have some public purpose, some larger historical meaning. They either find such a purpose or live in the anguished pursuit of one.

Again, the famous romantic concept of “alienation” is anything but a return to the classical philosopher’s “detachment,” for it implies that the intellectual’s separation from society, while perhaps inevitable in the short run, is something essentially wrong that, in the course of history, should and must be overcome. That is why there is an element of bitter and rebellious disappointment in the alienation of the romantics. They are angry at society for not being something that they could love and believe in or for not being open to their guidance and aid. In sum, while rejecting the explicit belief in progress, the romantics still continue under the spell of the particular hopes and ambitions that that belief first set in motion. They continue to believe in—or to seek to believe in, or to rage against the inability to believe in—that uniquely modern way of life that harnesses together theoretical reason and fundamental social influence in the way promised by the idea of progress.

In fact, as time has gone on, the explicit belief in progress has become less and less necessary to ground the intellectual way of life. Today, primarily due to the rise of postmodernism, grand historical “narratives” are out of fashion and large numbers of intellectuals (not just anguished romantics) claim to reject progress (although faith in progress, like faith in God, is not so easily uprooted from the deeper recesses of the mind). But this has not, as one might have expected, significantly undermined the felt need for intellectuals. The explicit belief in progress was essential to the intellectual when he faced powerful and entrenched opponents in the form of organized religion and ancestral custom. He needed the theory of progress to help him convince society that it could and should be guided by

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theoretical reason instead. But today, the movements of progress and enlightenment have completely undermined traditional society, removing any alternative to something like the intellectual. In the modern world, the foundation of prevailing laws, principles, and practices is no longer sought in custom, tradition, and religion but in abstract, theoretical ideas. Ours is a post-traditional “age of ideology.” We see no alternative to being ruled by humanly constructed theories—and by the men and women who construct them. To be sure, there are still plenty of people around who complain about the harmful influence of the intellectuals—but they themselves tend to be or to rely on intellectuals. There is nowhere else to turn.

This entrenched power of the intellectuals has been further strengthened by the rise of democratically ruled nation-states, which has put ultimate power in the hands of mass public opinion. In order to mobilize this diffuse power, large ideas, sweeping theories, intellectual “vision” have become politically essential, as they were not in aristocratic ages. Still another factor making intellectuals a practical necessity is the great dynamism and ever accelerating change characteristic of modern life, for this means that old traditions and customs and indeed even yesterday’s ideologies quickly become obsolete. There is a constant need for new ideas, explanations, and theories—and for the suppliers of these. Amid all this flux, we are constantly interpreting our lives to ourselves, trying to get a fix on where history is taking us. Are we facing the “clash of civilizations”? Have we reached the “end of history”? Are we entering a postmodern era? We cannot stop asking such questions and so cannot stop needing intellectuals. In sum, we live in a new world in which an elaborate doctrine of progress or theory of history is no longer necessary in order to ground the role of the public intellectual. That role now answers to an obvious, pressing, and inescapable need rooted in the very structure of modern society.

Still, without a theory of progress or history, the question is, What will provide the intellectual with his standards? And without firm principles, how will he stand outside and against his society? Furthermore, the *need* for intellectuals that modern society now openly feels and acknowledges paradoxically poses a threat to their continued existence, for it makes real detachment and withdrawal ever more difficult. Intellectuals are becoming an institution, a profession. Bohemianism, “detachment,” and a countercultural stance are becoming mainstream phenomena. Cut off from the idea of progress, it is unclear whether, in the long run, the public intellectual can survive.

## NOTES

1 “Detachment” is, of course, a somewhat ambiguous term. In its broadest sense, it extends to a selfless indifference to one’s own personal good. In this sense, the classical philosopher is (or understands himself to be) the *least* detached of men because he alone lives for the true fulfillment of the human soul—philosophic contemplation. But doing so necessarily involves “detachment” in the narrower sense I am using: a transcendence of the material, social, and political attachments of ordinary life.

2 *Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 346e–347d; see 520a, 540b, and Aristotle *Ethics* 1134b4–7.



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