

**The Anxiety of Irrelevance: Power, Dissent, and the
Contest of Intellectual Virtues in the 1950s**

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Senior Thesis

April 2010

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Acknowledgments

If there is one thing about this essay that most satisfies me, it is that the process of writing it felt like a fitting conclusion to my undergraduate career. In conceiving of my project, I wanted to draw out the issues that most challenged me over four years of study, and to try to interrogate them, side by side, one last time. I want to say at the outset, then, that I believe each one of my extraordinary teachers at Columbia has contributed to this project. There has been no greater intellectual pleasure over the last four years than discovering unforeseen connections between the different texts and problems that I had the opportunity to investigate with each of them.

There are, of course, a few whom I must identify here individually. Professor William Leach guided our seminar with great patience and taught me much about good historical writing. In addition to serving as my second reader for this essay, Professor Casey Blake laid the groundwork for my exploration of American intellectual history. He introduced me to many of the figures who have most inspired—and at times, troubled—me in my study of the past, and with whom I hope to continue to engage long after the completion of this project. I am grateful, as well, to Professor Ross Posnock, whose course pushed me to question the role of the thinker in American society, past and present. Finally, I'd like to thank Professor Matthew Jones for challenging my assumptions about the history of ideas, and for contributing significantly to my understanding of the practice of history in general.

My friends also deserve recognition for their contributions. It has been a privilege to have so many curious, thoughtful, and provocative interlocutors with whom to share the last four years. I want to thank them as well for giving me space when I needed to work, but more importantly, for always knowing how to fill the time when I didn't.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, who equipped me with the tools that enabled this project and made it fulfilling: they taught me to ask questions, and to be excited at the prospect of being challenged by the answers.

I.

There was a certain moment, the writer Norman Podhoretz recalled, when the American intellectual gained access to the American Century. Reflecting on a life spanning most of the twentieth century, and indeed most of the ideological battles that shaped it, Podhoretz identified the period following the Second World War as one that brought a pronounced shift in the way American intellectuals approached their country. “I was caught up in a new mood,” he wrote. “America truly was a land being newly found or discovered; and the explorers in this instance were formerly ‘alienated’ writers and intellectuals.”¹

To some extent, this memory served the particular autobiography Podhoretz sought to construct. Like other newly conservative intellectuals of his generation, he saw his ideological conversion as both a political and a spiritual turning point, marked by a patriotic and a broader intellectual awakening. The newfound “American” territory Podhoretz described was one from which he and his cohort would never depart.²

At the same time, Podhoretz’s recollection was not solely defined—or corrupted—by his subsequent ideological turn to the right. In his own memoir, the socialist literary critic Irving Howe came to a similar conclusion: that the postwar years

¹ Norman Podhoretz, *My Love Affair With America: The Cautionary Tale of a Cheerful Conservative* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 116-117.

² The “neoconservatives” of the 1950s and 1960s, Michael Kimmage tells us, looked to Whittaker Chambers’s *Witness* as a model for their own intellectual autobiographies. For these writers, “politics had an autobiographical dimension, each autobiography a chapter in the collective conservative turn.” Michael Kimmage, *The Conservative Turn: Lionel Trilling, Whittaker Chambers, and the Lessons of Anti-Communism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 11. Terry Cooney also warns us of the particular imposition of retrospective sources on the historiography of the New York Intellectuals, while still acknowledging their potential for “genuine vitality” and “intellectual seriousness.” Terry Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals: Partisan Review and Its Circle* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 4.

had fundamentally ruptured the intellectual culture in which he and his colleagues had taken part. But unlike Podhoretz, Howe had recognized the danger of this shift and refused to have any part of it; it seemed that those who welcomed the sort of “discovery” which Podhoretz lauded were in default as intellectuals. To succumb to the seduction of patriotism and conformity was, for Howe, incompatible with the responsibilities of intellectual life. Indeed, he wrote, “the lines of separation that had defined intellectual life—lines between high and middlebrow, radical and acquiescent, serious and popular—were becoming blurred.” If expressions of patriotic enthusiasm and concordance with national culture were the intellectual vogue, then it was Howe’s responsibility to resist them, to exercise the very duty to challenge consensus that he perceived to be threatened.³

Despite their distinct ideological obligations, both Podhoretz and Howe had correctly identified a significant discourse of the postwar years, one which sought to interrogate what American society had to offer its intellectuals, and vice versa.⁴ Chief among the manifestations of this discourse was the *Partisan Review* symposium of 1952 on “Our Country and Our Culture,” convened in order to “examine the apparent fact that American intellectuals now regard America and its institutions in a new way.” A group of writers, critics, and professors assembled by the editors were asked for their

³ Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1982), 170-172.

⁴ I am working off of a definition of “discourse” in intellectual history developed by David Hollinger, as “a social as well as an intellectual activity,” an “interaction between minds.” Hollinger writes that more important than shared “values, beliefs, perceptions, and concepts,” discourse is marked by shared *questions*. I find this notion useful for looking at the engagement between intellectuals in a way that resists a “left-right” or “liberal-conservative” framework. David Hollinger, “Historians and the Discourse of Intellectuals,” in *In the American Province: Studies in the History and Historiography of Ideas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 132.

assessment of what seemed the “apparent fact,” as well as for their concerns as to its implications. What impact, for instance, would such a realignment have on the “tradition of critical non-conformism,” the intellectual’s impulse to scrutinize and dissent? What connection was there between the behavior expected from an intellectual, and the political, social, or cultural character of his environment?⁵

What began then presumably as an evaluation of postwar American culture became in effect a contest over intellectual virtues, the commitments and responsibilities which not only distinguished an intellectual from the rest of society, but validated his place in it as well. What did the words themselves mean—non-conformity, skepticism, dissent, alienation—and what use were they to a thinker in a society marked by the sense of triumph and complacency we have come to associate with the “fifties”? In what ways might patriotism and economic security interact with or even undermine these virtues?

For some participants in this discourse, the crucial component of the presumed intellectual transformation—and that which it was most important for intellectuals to protect—was a new American freedom. An individual liberty defined largely in opposition to the Soviet system was the marker of the kind of society that had now made room for its thinkers.⁶ And that society, so the narrative went, as the model and protector both of liberal political values and Western intellectual traditions, was one which

⁵ “Editorial Statement,” in *American and the Intellectuals* (New York: Partisan Review, 1953), 1-5. The essays published in this volume are reprinted from the original symposium, which was published over several issues of the magazine in 1952, under the title “Our Country and Our Culture.” Thus, all further citations of this volume will refer simply to “Our Country and Our Culture.”

⁶ Even as I make this claim, I should note that I believe it is important to consciously avoid reading the Cold War as the overriding context for the “Our Country and Our Culture” symposium, and for the discourse I am examining as a whole. In this respect, I follow Martin Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1950s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 5-7.

intellectuals should embrace. The conception of progress behind this liberal intellectual scheme was rather simple: as the political and material conditions of society improved, so too would the conditions of the intellectual life.

There was, by contrast, a more radical approach to the question of the postwar cultural reassessment. Critics of the terms of the 1952 symposium, Irving Howe chief among them, argued that the dissent of the individual artist or writer was the critical intellectual virtue to be upheld, regardless of the character of the American political or cultural landscape. It was not the job of the intellectuals, these critics argued, to applaud the society which sought to include them, but rather to help create one which they themselves sought, one which would still permit them their roles as critics, skeptics, and where necessary, dissenters. The idea that America itself could be the “basis of strength, renewal, and recognition” was, to this group, misguided. Such support was to be found, the sociologist C. Wright Mills wrote, in individual consciousness or broad intellectual traditions, and not in national identification.⁷

It might seem, then, that the radical critique of the intellectual reconciliation with American culture was based on an essential rather than a contingent definition of intellectuals. In other words, whereas the liberal conception of the intellectual seemed to adapt to the progress of American political life, the radical conception saw the intellectual’s role as fixed: the true intellectual, as dissenter, was perpetually distant from political consensus and power. However, we should not allow such a reading to obscure what radicals themselves understood to be the positive value of dissent, its ability to drive progressive change. That conception was in many ways consistent with the basic

⁷ C. Wright Mills, “Our Country and Our Culture,” 76.

assumptions of earlier generations as well, who believed that the intellectual was in fact central to the work of national progress. In the first decades of the twentieth century, those whom the historian Steven Biel calls “independent intellectuals” disengaged from institutions in large part to ensure a stronger public impact.⁸ Even for Randolph Bourne, the intellectual failure of the pro-war liberals stemmed not from their essential assumption of the power of intellectual action, but rather from the notion that such potential could be realized through a project like the First World War. Indeed, the War was, in Bourne’s eyes, precisely the impediment to free thought and criticism, the tools which supported the young intellectual’s ability to contribute to American democracy.⁹

The following generation went even further, I would argue, in its confidence in the link between intellectual production and social betterment. In the 1930s, many radical writers came to view an alliance between intellectuals and the working class as the crucial force of revolutionary change. However, implicit in this new engagement was a puzzling contradiction: if the working class was, as Waldo Frank put it, “the chief instrument” for bringing about a new American order, then what need was there for the participation of the intellectuals? There was, therefore, a certain audacity behind the premise that intellectuals mattered to a great degree; on this count Frank himself was

⁸ Steven Biel, *Independent Intellectuals in the United States, 1910-1945* (New York: New York University Press, 1992).

⁹ I am reminded here in particular of the comment Bourne made in his final letter to his mother, tragic for its proximity to his death less than one month later: “Now that the war is over people can speak freely again and we can dare to think. It’s like coming out of a nightmare.” Bourne to Sarah Bourne, New York, 21 November 1918, in *The Letters of Randolph Bourne: A Comprehensive Edition*, ed. Eric J. Sandeen (Troy, NY: The Whitson Publishing Company, 1981), 425.

guilty, perhaps increasingly so as he perceived the stakes of history being raised and the need for upheaval intensified.¹⁰

The recollection of this history in the context of the 1950s debate shows us that dissent did not by any means necessitate isolation or alienation. On the contrary; the defense of dissent rested on the claim that intellectual non-conformity was not only a virtue for the individual thinker, but was in fact a good for society, a means of effecting progress. Even the novelist Norman Mailer, who in 1955 extolled some of the very same conditions—“despair, isolation, contraction and spiritual exile,” in his words—that his contemporary proponents of the new intellectual “comfort” deemed obsolete, seemed to value such conditions principally as progressive historical forces. “Only when the artist is ready to accept” those circumstances, Mailer wrote, carrying the argument for the writer’s historical agency even further than had Frank in the 1930s, “can he be able to find the expansive energies and the unrestrained enthusiasm which continue the essential dialectic of human progress.”¹¹

Despite the certainty of such rhetoric, the confidence expressed by some radicals in the positive value of dissent, we should acknowledge what seems to some degree the defensive nature of the radical posture. The position staked out by Howe, for example, in

¹⁰ Quoted in Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (1961; repr., New York: Columbia University, 1992), 193. In his foreword to the published edition of the proceedings of the 1935 American Writers’ Congress, Frank wrote that despite their ideological deviations, members of the Congress were “held together by common devotion to the need of building a new world from which the evils endangering mankind will have been uprooted, and in which the foundations will live for the creating of a universal human culture.” Naturally, the gains made amongst intellectuals would be spread to others: “The real fruit of this gathering of creative American forces will live, invisibly yet fatefully, in the works of hundreds of American writers and, *through them, in the living experience of the American people.*” Waldo Frank, “Foreword,” in *American Writers’ Congress*, ed. Henry Hart (New York: International Publishers, 1935), v. Italics mine.

¹¹ Norman Mailer, “What I Think of Artistic Freedom,” *Dissent* 2, no. 2 (1955): 192.

the 1952 symposium and beyond was not simply a reassertion of a timeless truth about intellectual virtue, but was in fact an attempt to respond to a worrisome American scene. In other words, for Howe and others who regarded critical dissent as part and parcel of being an intellectual, the proposition that intellectuals were and should be comfortable, secure, and integrated in postwar America was deeply unsettling. The notion of stability and of intellectual security in the absence of crisis thereby provoked a kind of crisis in and of itself.

What's more, for many intellectuals (radical or otherwise), there was a real value to a climate of crisis as opposed to one of stability. As many had believed they learned from the period of Depression and World War, the need to act, to respond to external events, could provide an opening for intellectuals, an opportunity to effect change and even propel the movement of history. The absence of such crisis, then, or perhaps even the suggestion of its absence, could thus reasonably cause intellectuals to worry about their own marginalization. Without an outlet for action, how was an intellectual to distinguish himself in society?

There is, at the same time, a parallel question for historians, as to what role we ought to assign moments of crisis in the narrative of intellectual history. Should intellectual history be the story of a series of crises, and the various attempts by intellectuals to respond to such historical moments? It is my hope that my examination of the crisis of intellectual virtues and self-definition in the 1950s can inspire further consideration of this larger historiographical question.¹²

¹² Richard Pells, for one, writes that his own book is “about the way certain American writers in the 1940s and 1950s interpreted and tried to cope with the major events of their time.” Richard

Of course, I do not mean to suggest that the period in question was devoid of political or social crisis, or of the potential for a sense of interaction with history that had so energized previous generations of intellectuals. The course of world events at that time is clear enough; American intellectuals were not somehow immune to the exigencies of the Cold War, nor, as Richard Pells points out, were they necessarily prepared for them.¹³ But while these events did intervene in the discourse of intellectual virtues, they did not *create* it. The issues posed by the *Partisan Review* symposium and its respondents existed as problems for intellectuals prior to the 1950s, and the answers to them were not formed solely in response to new external pressures. What's more, the liberal and radical camps I have mentioned often seemed to assess the status of the intellectual against two fundamentally different contexts: for the liberals, the defense of American freedom proceeded primarily against external threats, while the radicals sought to preserve the virtue of dissent in the face of largely internal societal forces.¹⁴ In the case of both groups, above all, the discourse was characterized by the interaction of fixed assumptions with historical contingencies, by the need to refashion previous conceptions of intellectual virtue to meet the particular needs of intellectuals in the 1950s.

So too, I contend, were these intellectuals moved by a need to reassert their own social legitimacy in a society which, for various reasons, some of them suggested by the

Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), vii.

¹³ Pells, *The Liberal Mind*, viii.

¹⁴ A more convenient way of phrasing this difference would be to say that if the liberals operated in a Cold War context, the radicals operated in a Postwar one. I should also note, here, that I do not assume that such a thing as a monolithic "Cold War culture" existed during this period to begin with. See Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert, ed., *Rethinking Cold War Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), especially the contributions of Kuznick and Gilbert, "U.S. Culture and the Cold War," 1-13, and Alan Brinkley, "The Illusion of Unity in Cold War Culture," 61-73.

1952 symposium, might no longer find them useful as a distinct class of thinkers, if indeed it had at all before. We might call this concern the anxiety of irrelevance; it informed intellectuals' approaches to the presumed reconciliation with American culture and their formulations of intellectual virtue more broadly.

The various responses to this problem of irrelevance also highlight a deeper issue at stake in the contest of intellectual virtues. Implicit in the interrogation of the “new” role of the American intellectual was the question of power; specifically, was proximity to or the service of power suitable for someone calling himself an intellectual at all? To answer affirmatively in some sense followed logically from the liberal notion of integration, that is, of the convergence of individual intellectual and national interests as an enabling trend rather than a stifling one. Even if the liberals did not anticipate the gradual elimination of intellectuals in American culture, they may, like progressives of the early twentieth century, have accepted and even welcomed the absorption of the intellectual class into a larger technocracy. To that end, the realities of bureaucratization and institutionalization—particularly as manifested in the expansion of the American academy—were, as Russell Jacoby notes, significant sources of anxiety for those intellectuals who condemned the new conformity.¹⁵

This question too, of the suitability of aligning intellect with power, was not unique to the 1950s. Indeed, it is important to consider the degree of continuity between assumptions about intellectual empowerment, authority, and command of events

¹⁵ Many of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Progressives placed their hopes in a professional managerial class of experts; one notable expression of this kind of thinking was Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914); Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 72-73. For the critique of the professional classes, see in particular the work of C. Wright Mills in this period.

throughout the different challenges which intellectuals faced in the twentieth century. Such a view can help us observe what I believe is the new significance that the question of power takes on in the history of the postwar period. Though intellectuals were not pervasive in federal administration during the 1950s, by the next decade the employment of social scientific “expertise” was prevalent.¹⁶ Moreover, the stories of the contest of intellectual virtues and the ideological adjustments among the New York Intellectuals during the Cold War are unquestionably linked. While it is difficult to fully define what we have come to call neo-conservatism as a set of political and social beliefs, there is at least one historical point about it that we may reasonably make: that neo-conservative politics, particularly in the past several decades, has been marked precisely by its exercise in power at the highest levels of American government. It is my hope, therefore, that by highlighting the problem of power in the postwar discourse, I may be able to sharpen our understanding of the historical emergence and the assumptions of neo-conservatism. Not only does such a task matter for those of us who have been deeply troubled precisely by the political projects of neo-conservatives, but it may ultimately help validate the radical insistence on dissent and skepticism of the intellectual service of power in general.

Finally, it remains for me to address two potential objections to the premise of my work. First, some will argue that the set of writers and thinkers I have chosen to study is too parochial, given that the group associated with periodicals such as *Partisan Review*, *Dissent*, and *Commentary* were all essentially what we have come to call “New York Intellectuals.” While I acknowledge the locality of this group, and the limitations that it

¹⁶ For more on this political development, see Howard Brick, *Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998) and Bruce Kuklick, *Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

could conceivably impose, I nevertheless do not choose to study it because of any mystical authority lent by its very name. Rather, I see this group of individuals as those who most explicitly, most passionately, and most prolifically engaged with the issues of intellectual virtue, self-definition, and self-justification in this period. So too were they the ones most directly influenced—both inspired and haunted—by the experience of the generation which preceded them. Put more simply, and to return to David Hollinger’s definition, what these writers had in common was a preoccupation with certain questions.¹⁷

The second and more fundamental of the objections I face as I set out is the challenge: Why “intellectuals?” What bearing do the ideas of an elite class have on the experience of most other people? Rather than claiming to possess the definitive response to this challenge, I submit that it is precisely this question that my study takes most seriously. Whether or not the ideas of these intellectuals have any import for the history of their period or our own can be fairly questioned; however, there can be no doubt that these individuals, to varying degrees, *believed* that their ideas mattered, and that their lives were not solipsistic but instead could be valuable and relevant to their fellow citizens—and we should try to understand why. To examine the arguments over the meaning of the term “intellectual” is concurrently to consider the term’s worth. At the very least, we know that intellectuals tend to speak loudly, and to speak often; when they seek to lead us, then, we must listen seriously, if we are to know whether or not to follow.

¹⁷ Hollinger, “Historians and the Discourse of Intellectuals,” 132.

II.

Lionel Trilling, diagnostician of postwar liberalism and *Partisan Review* stalwart, saw the history of the twentieth-century “American intellectual class” as one defined by crisis. The 1930s, Trilling contended, or more accurately the era of upheaval that became known as the “thirties,” had established the concerns and formed the political makeup of the intellectual class that endured through the subsequent decades. It was not merely a sustained political tradition, however, that Trilling traced to the Depression generation, but a style of intellectual activity as well: what he deemed “the moral urgency, the sense of crisis, and the concern with personal salvation” that sprung from the radical politics of the intellectuals and would characterize their action from that point on.¹⁸

Trilling’s sketch was an imperfect one, at least for its simplification of history. Trilling’s equation of radicalism with intellect excluded political (and geographic) outliers—such as the conservative critics of capitalism—from the intellectual narrative of the Depression generation. By the same token, Trilling obscured the historical significance of New Deal liberalism for the intellectual life of the period as well as the decades that followed.¹⁹

What Trilling seemed to capture far better than the politics of the radical period was its intellectual mood, with the “moral urgency” and “sense of crisis” being the

¹⁸ Lionel Trilling, “A Novel of the Thirties,” quoted in Hilton Kramer, *The Twilight of the Intellectuals: Culture and Politics in the Era of the Cold War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), xi.

¹⁹ Malcolm Cowley’s memoir of the 1930s seems to acknowledge, in retrospect, the disconnect between this fact of history and the oppositional certainty of the radical (especially Communist) left at the time. See Malcolm Cowley, *The Dream of the Golden Mountains: Remembering the 1930s* (New York: The Viking Press, 1980), 218. For more on the debates over association with FDR and the New Deal, see Richard Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 22-23.

operative occupational concerns of the intellectuals themselves. In a sense, Trilling was making the argument that the intellectual history of the thirties (and implicitly, of his contemporary moment) was defined not so much by the answers to particular political questions, but by the set of resources and practices used to formulate them.²⁰

There is no question, moreover, that the memory of the thirties had profound effects on the intellectual culture of the postwar years. Not only did the engagement with Communism inform the Cold War politics of countless intellectuals of the 1950s, but the experience of crisis during the Depression later shaped the discourse of intellectual virtues itself. Many of the leading contributors to that discourse literally came of age during the thirties, and their conceptions of the power of radical action were forged in it. Those on the left in particular came to feel, as Irving Howe wrote, as though they had a “privileged relationship to history.” The “dramatic” tendency in the Marxist view of history, Howe commented on behalf of his generation, “made each moment of our participation seem so rich with historical meaning.”²¹

“Participation” was the operative word; radical politics did not just instill in the intellectuals a sense of the rush of history, but also a profound sense of their own ability to shape or even command it. Howe, too, perceived a certain radical intellectual “style” as the distinguishing marker of this (his own) new generation, one owing to the particular context of the thirties: “a flair for polemic, a taste for the grand generalization, an

²⁰ Irving Howe made a similar move in a 1968 essay in which he wrote the following of the radicalism of New York Intellectuals in the thirties: “From a doctrine it became a style, and from a style a memory.” Irving Howe, “The New York Intellectuals,” reprinted in *Selected Writings 1950-1990* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 244.

²¹ Irving Howe, “New York in the Thirties: Some Fragments of Memory,” *Dissent* 8, no. 3 (1961), reprinted in *The New York Intellectuals Reader*, ed. Neil Jumonville (New York: Routledge, 2007), 32.

impatience with what they regarded (often parochially) as parochial scholarship, an internationalist perspective, and a tacit belief in the unity—even if a unity beyond immediate reach—of intellectual work.”²²

If these discoveries about the occupational virtues of being an intellectual were in fact as powerful as Howe depicts them, it would help explain the reach of the radical style even among those who were not explicitly *political* intellectuals.²³ Indeed, it is hard to discount the allure of the period of activity that Howe describes. The “intensity and fervor, a reality or illusion of engagement, a youth tensed with conviction,” that so absorbed Howe’s comrades, was just as much an intellectual opportunity as it was a historical condition. Understanding the formative environment of the 1930s in this way should help us recognize the staying power of the sense of crisis and historical certainty even after the exigencies of the Depression (and later the War) had passed.²⁴

Still, as natural as it may be to look solely to the Depression generation to illuminate the intellectual experience of the 1950s, we do so at the risk of obscuring other critical moments in which notions of influence, power, and certainty were tested among intellectuals. To be sure, even the tumultuous contests of the thirties did not emerge wholly independent of previous debates, nor did those thinkers who came of age in that decade break entirely from the past and their own radical predecessors.

²² Howe, “The New York Intellectuals,” in *Selected Writings*, 244.

²³ Alfred Kazin is one example of a New York intellectual who distanced himself from politics. But even as he tried to subordinate radical doctrines to his own intellectual craft (literary criticism), Kazin (who, for instance, did not contribute to the “Our Country and Our Culture” symposium of 1952), could not help but get caught up in the spirit of historical urgency of his peers. See Alfred Kazin, *Starting Out in the Thirties* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 3-25.

²⁴ Howe, “The New York Intellectuals,” 244.

The setting of the First World War and the liberal intellectual flirtation with power during it is, for our purposes, one of the most illustrative of such historical examples. Of course, the intellectual responses to the European conflict and American intervention in it have already been well charted in historical literature, as has the interaction between intellect and power brought on by the war. It is not my intention here, therefore, to re-tell that story, but rather to highlight certain threads within it which can be of use in understanding the period that followed. By examining the commitments and motivations of those intellectuals who found themselves absorbed in, and eventually to some degree, betrayed by, the experience of power, we can consider the degree to which the contests to of intellectual virtues in later generations were not so much articulations of new crises but rather reformulations of old ones.

In his discussion of the origins of what he calls the “new radicalism,” Christopher Lasch links the development of American intellectual culture with broader political trends taking shape at the turn of the twentieth century. The emergence of the new kind of intellectual, Lasch argues, was related to but not wholly dependent on the fate of the progressive movement. The development of expansive federal power, along with a “new readiness” to use that power and a turn towards scientific and pragmatic methods in doing so were among those strands of a “progressive” political climate which Lasch finds related to but not in control of the new radicalism. Even more important than these trends, he writes, was the “confusion of politics and culture” (a move beyond the political reform of the Progressive movement), which supported the notion that “men of learning

occupy or ought to occupy the strategic loci of social control,” and which therefore had “an obvious appeal to intellectuals.”²⁵

It was this impulse to control that I would argue was not only most apparent at the moment of the World War, but also which continued to challenge intellectuals during the Depression crisis and in the postwar years. And a central manifestation of that impulse, at least in the first decades of the twentieth century, was the assumption that the mobilization of intellect, on behalf of the state if necessary, could be a crucial gesture towards national progress. That assumption was implicit in the hopeful progressivism of someone like Herbert Croly, whose aim to recapture the “Promise of American Life” was not based on a whiggish dream of certain historical progress, but rather on the need for individuals (and the collective society) to take control of history, and to seize such progress for themselves.²⁶

This premise should account, to some degree, for Croly’s establishment of *The New Republic* in 1914 as an engine for social change, not just a forum for intellectual articulation. Above all, writes Lasch, the journal “was to stand for mastery,” the term put forth by Croly’s collaborator Walter Lippmann as the desired end of politics in his influential book of the previous year. Mastery was not necessarily a new concept, but it could be achieved with a new degree of success given modern conditions and scientific capacities. Indeed, the “scientific spirit,” wrote Lippmann, was the very “discipline of

²⁵ Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type* (1965; repr., New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1986), xiii-xiv.

²⁶ Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (1909; repr., New York: Capricorn Books, 1964), 5. David Levy has argued for an understanding of this text that refines the force of progressivism as the primary influence on its production. David W. Levy, *Herbert Croly of the New Republic: The Life and Thought of an American Progressive* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 131.

democracy, the escape from drift, the outlook of a free man.” With the proper infusion of expertise into state power, it seemed, the full potential of a modern democratic society could be realized for a much wider and more equitable constituency.²⁷

There was a sense, then, and not exclusively among liberals, that the promise of American life and the promise of intellectual life were fundamentally linked. Still, the liberal-progressive emphasis on the pragmatic mode of reform seemed to belie more traditional notions of intellectual practice. That is to say, at least, that Lippmann’s promotion of the “scientific spirit” and technocratic authority—somewhat ironic given that Lippmann was himself no scientist but rather a theorist—offered an image of a more *active* intellectual, a thinker involved in meeting the challenges of his society instead of confining himself to solitary thought and writing. Thus the gesture towards the incorporation of intellectuals into positions of political power was, to some degree, a turn away from the concurrent move towards independence and extrication from institutions. It was, however, in line with the broader trends which Robert Wiebe suggests were central to the emergence of modern American society leading up to the First World War: the convergence of the centralization of state authority and the bureaucratization of society, the increasing incorporation of experts as a means of management.²⁸

While we should acknowledge this process of incorporation as just that—a process of change over time—the experience of the war stands out as a definitive moment in our historical imagination, as it did in the intellectuals’ own memory of the twentieth

²⁷ Lasch, *The New Radicalism*, 183; Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), 269, 276.

²⁸ See Steven Biel, *Independent Intellectuals in the United States, 1910-1945* (New York: New York University Press, 1992); Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

century.²⁹ More than an entanglement with power, the war was in retrospect a test of the notion that power and intellect could be aligned. So too did it challenge the authenticity and compatibility of various impulses among engaged intellectuals. While the conflict between aggressive nationalism and reluctant pacifism was the political battle on the surface between the war liberals and war critics, it was the deeper test of intellectual assumptions—about the movement of history, the possibility of progress, and the intellectual potency in controlling both—that, for our purposes, marks the story of the war and the intellectuals.³⁰

It is useful to keep this larger conflict in mind when we recall that the association of liberals (particularly those in the *New Republic* circle) with the Wilson administration's war aims was by no means inevitable. Though the *New Republic* established itself close (geographically and intellectually) to political power, it is unlikely that its editors conceived of that relationship coming to bear on military or diplomatic matters. Foreign conflicts, to be sure, tend to inconvenience the course of domestic social reform, and it therefore took a degree of intellectual manipulation to align the goals of liberalism at home with what was quickly deemed to be liberalism abroad. In other words, the war was adopted ex post facto as a liberal project, but did not follow logically from the liberal pragmatist framework under which the *New Republic*, for one, had previously presumed to operate. Nor, in entering into this kind of association with government, did the liberals seem to recognize the distinction between the limited

²⁹ Lasch, for one, writes that the war “left [American radicalism] with wounds from which it never entirely recovered.” Lasch, *The New Radicalism*, 182.

³⁰ For more on the ways in which the war debate was infused with broader self-reflection on the social role of the intellectual, see Biel, *Independent Intellectuals*, 62-63.

application of expertise and a broader acceptance of intellectual influence on political power.³¹

Moreover, even before the United States entered the war, the editors of the *New Republic* seemed concerned as to the implications for intellectual potency that the conflict would have. The journal's position, Lasch contends, "rested less on a critical analysis of the issues involved than on a powerful emotional abhorrence of neutrality in all its forms, at the national and the personal level alike." This "fear of neutrality, of political impotence," Lasch continues, "was the key to the contradictions in which *The New Republic* so often found itself entangled." So too did it govern the journal's critique of the so-called "passivism," the refusal of dissenters to take an active position, to acknowledge the possibility of positive pragmatic change through war.³²

It was this plank of the liberals' position which the young cultural critic Randolph Bourne identified in his critique of the move to support the war, and the deconstruction of it amplified his case against American intervention. Not only was the support of intervention a misguided political position in Bourne's eyes, but the adoption of the war as a liberal project was the worst kind of intellectual overreach, wherein *The New Republic* and its circle had subordinated the appreciation of pragmatic reality to the pursuit of action, certainty, and control. Bourne was highly conscious of the problems

³¹ Lasch, *The New Radicalism*, 190-191. On the intellectuals' miscalculation of their own influence, Robert Wiebe writes: "But the specialist who attempted to move beyond his sphere almost always fell from grace. Such men as Herbert Croly and Walter Lippmann, hoping that Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson would seek 'experts' in political philosophy, only suffered frustration. In the realm of broad policy, each political leader was his own expert." Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, 197. It may be of interest that Lippmann, for one, retained a great deal of influence in later years as a journalist and opinion-maker. For his full biography, see Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (Boston: Little Brown, 1980).

³² Lasch, *The New Radicalism*, 191-192.

these impulses posed to the life of the mind, and that consciousness informed (and lent authority to) his wartime commentary.

Though it was sharpened by the war, Bourne's assessment of the intellectual's social role—specifically, of his capacity for political influence—had begun to form in significant ways prior to the conflict and the battle of ideas it brought. Steven Biel places Bourne's model of intellectual life squarely within the larger trend towards the independence of "freelance" activity in the early twentieth century. "In the minds of Bourne and his contemporaries," Biel writes, "the removal from the academic ivory tower did not destroy the educational function of thinkers and writers." Rather, that move expanded the intellectual's "potential for persuasive influence," precisely by widening the audience for (and thereby further democratizing) the fruits of the intellect.³³

There should be little doubt, then, that Bourne himself sought to increase the avenues for intellectual action, based on a fundamental belief in the potential for what he called the "creative desire" (particularly on the part of young thinkers) to revitalize American democracy.³⁴ However, Bourne did not seek to realize that impulse within the context of political or institutional power. Quite the contrary, he sought to highlight the distinction between the mobilization of expertise by the state and the contemplative exercise of intellect that could itself still be deployed for pragmatic purposes. Still in many respects committed to the teachings of William James, Bourne could accept neither the overwhelming scope of war as an intellectual project (what James might call its

³³ Biel, *Independent Intellectuals*, 57.

³⁴ Casey Blake has argued for a reading of Bourne and his "Young American" peers which emphasizes their commitment to "a communitarian vision of self-realization through participation in a democratic culture." Casey Nelson Blake, *Beloved Community: The Cultural Criticism of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Lewis Mumford* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 2.

“bigness”) nor the cooptation of what he called the “gay passion of ideas” on its behalf. If anything, the Jamesian spirit (and indeed the very call of the engaged intellectual) instructed the thinker to doubt rather than accept, to unsettle rather than affirm.³⁵

Accordingly, Bourne’s attack on the war intellectuals targeted their fundamental naïveté: they had allowed themselves to be manipulated by the Wilson administration by succumbing to a complacent overconfidence in the power of their own action. Put another way, Wilson’s overtures to the intellectuals exploited their exaggerated sense of agency, their belief “that it was they who effectively willed” the war. The liberals were governed by an instinct shared by intellectuals of all persuasions, Bourne suggested: the “craving for action” which led thinkers to seek outlets not just for thought or expression, but also for *practice*.³⁶ For the liberals, the crisis had to be converted into an *opportunity*; in their urge to seize the moment of crisis, though they failed to see that war, more than any other outlet they could have chosen, could not be controlled. What’s more, by overlooking (or worse, denying) the inexorable nature of war in the hope that it could lead to ends other than its own, the intellectuals had jeopardized the instrument which Bourne believed could in fact spearhead real change: the creative potential of the young intellectual. Progress may have depended in part on the ability of young intellectuals to harness opportunities for action, but the war was not such an opportunity.

³⁵ Randolph S. Bourne, “Twilight of Idols,” in *War and the Intellectuals: Collected Essays, 1915-1919*, ed. Carl Resek (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 64. For more on Williams James’ public commitments, see George Cotkin, *William James, Public Philosopher* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994). On the question of unsettling received wisdom, Edward Said asserts that: “Least of all should an intellectual be there to make his/her audiences feel good: the whole point is to be embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant.” Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 12.

³⁶ Bourne, “The War and the Intellectuals,” in *War and the Intellectuals*, 3, 11.

Rather, the very persistence of the war, Bourne wrote in July of 1917, might destroy “the only genuinely precious thing in a nation, the hope and ardent idealism of its youth.”³⁷

As damning as Bourne’s critique was and continues to be, embedded within it was a surprising note of sympathy. That is, we cannot help but acknowledge Bourne’s recognition of the spiritual strivings of the liberal intellectuals, the degree to which they were victims of impulses to which he too might have given in. In the case of the war, the liberals’ “craving for action” had come into conflict with Bourne’s own. It was his *appreciation*, then, of their desire for an outlet for thought, his understanding of the anxiety of intellectual “impotence” which, I would argue, helped enable so profoundly perceptive a critique of their misjudgment. For if the anti-war “Utopian” intellectual must live, as Bourne suggested, with the knowledge that “he is ineffective and that he is coerced,” then he can surely understand his peers’ submission to the war and what it offered: “the crowning relief of their indecision.”³⁸

Ultimately, Bourne was not prepared to yield to the intellectual need for “certitude,” for the “dogma to cling to” which, as he knew too well, was of particular aid to the intellectual in a period of “danger and disaster.”³⁹ His awareness of the urgency of the day, of the need for a vibrant cultural and political criticism to sustain American democracy, was troubled by his acknowledgment—which could only have grown in light of the historical monster that was the war—of the limits of intellectual action. On the one hand, this limitation was undoubtedly a problem for Bourne; at the same time, his awareness of it may have granted him a kind of intellectual liberation, the benefits of the

³⁷ Bourne, “Below the Battle,” in *War and the Intellectuals*, 21.

³⁸ Bourne, “A War Diary,” in *War and the Intellectuals*, 41; “The War and the Intellectuals,” 11. Bourne suggested the concern of impotence in “Twilight of Idols,” 58.

³⁹ Bourne, “The War and the Intellectuals,” 12.

move, in the words of Ross Posnock, to make “creative use of impotence rather than merely lamenting it.” It followed from Bourne’s understanding of the state apparatus that the intellectual’s exercise of power or political control was an impossibility, a myth to which the war liberals had clung. The course Bourne charted instead, in the face of the impotence that was “socially constituted by the economic demands of the modern imperial State,” writes Posnock, was to “turn this very powerlessness into the impetus for a constructive skepticism, a ‘robust desperation’ and a ‘heightened energy’ of ‘apathy’ that ‘does not dread suspense.’”⁴⁰

That language highlights Bourne’s vision for a different kind of intellectual potency, one which resisted both the passivity of total alienation and the corrupting force of political power. In that sense, he was an exemplary figure for the radicals of later generations, and prefigured some aspects of the position the dissenters of the 1950s would stake out for themselves. There was a certain empowerment that came with the humility of his relationship to history, his ability to resist the impulse which had brought other intellectuals to war: “the longing,” as Christopher Lasch calls it, “to commit themselves to the onward march of events.” If Bourne indeed became the outsider of legend in the memory of so many of his intellectual successors, perhaps it was for this reason: his refusal to accept without criticism—even in a time of crisis when the notion might have served his psyche well—the allure of mastery, the order of the day.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ross Posnock, “The Politics of Pragmatism and the Fortunes of the Public Intellectual,” *American Literary History* 3, no. 3 (1991): 575. It is important to note, as well, that Posnock considers Bourne’s “creative use of impotence” to mark a break from the Jamesian model, or in his words, the Jamesian “impasse.”

⁴¹ Lasch, *The New Radicalism*, 223. A brief account of the staying power of Bourne the icon after his death appears in Carl Resek’s introduction to *War and the Intellectuals*, vii-xv. However, the notion that the “Bourne legend” as appropriated in the 1920s championed the writer

Despite his early death in 1918, Bourne's cautionary message was not lost on later generations of young intellectuals.⁴² Not only were the liberals discredited by the failure to realize the "progressive" war aims, but Bourne's elucidation of the dilemma of intellectual action rang true for many amidst the fallout of war and the emergence from it of a society that was becoming increasingly unrecognizable and distasteful. It may have been in light of Bourne's confrontation with the intellectual power seekers and his articulation of some limitations of the thinker's force that Harold Stearns found himself forced to ask in 1921 what became an iconic question for the period: "What can a young man do?" Writers like Stearns found themselves increasingly isolated, obstructed in the pursuit of a more vibrant American culture. Even where enthusiasm for the life of the mind still existed, the sense of promise through action was significantly depleted. "Of course," wrote Stearns with despair, "our young intellectuals waste much time in discovering the hollowness of our institutions; of course their tone is often fretful and peevish; of course there are always those to identify freedom with mere running away from life and playing like a happy animal."⁴³

as outcast obscures, as I have suggested above, Bourne's commitment to public engagement, even when in severe dissent from political consensus. Alfred Kazin also saw Bourne as an exemplary figure, one who "must always seem less a writer than the incarnation of his time." For Kazin, the icon seemed connected not so much to his war dissent, but to his commitment to a progressivism erased irrevocably by the war. "Above all," he wrote, "Bourne was the perfect child of the prewar Enlightenment; when its light went out in 1918, he died with it." Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1942), 183.

⁴² For an argument for Bourne's relevance to the contemporary moment, see Robert Westbrook, "Bourne Over Baghdad," *Raritan* 27, no. 1 (2007): 104-117.

⁴³ Harold Stearns, *America and the Young Intellectual* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1921), 22-23. Despite his empathy for the resignation of his peers, Stearns longed for its reversal. "Can not we do something," he wondered in closing the essay "What Can a Young Man Do?", "to make it possible that the answer to the question set forth as the title of this paper must not forever be—Get out!" Stearns, 168.

It might seem curious, then, that in 1930s, many of the trappings of the earlier intellectual self-fashioning—proactive commitment and a sense of participation in history, for example—would return. But the onset of the Great Depression, and the proliferation of radical visions for the reconstitution of society which gained currency among intellectuals in its wake, contributed to the sense that once again, the exigencies of the day presented thinkers the opportunity to become actors. The mood of urgency and crisis that Lionel Trilling would later deem formative for the intellectual class seemed to supplant any feelings of despair and disenfranchisement retained from the shock of the post-World War period and the exile of the 1920s.⁴⁴

Still, as Richard Pells explains, the distinction between the decades preceding and following the economic collapse of 1929 was not as absolute as later memory would have it, precisely because of this sense of intellectual opportunity. In many respects, Pells writes, the Progressive predecessors of the depression generation “provided a symbolic union of thought and action whose example the 1930s would try to duplicate in form if not in substance. For the generation of intellectuals who came to maturity during these years, the Progressive crusade offered a unique opportunity to influence policy, develop and publicize programs appropriate for the new society, and help generate a revolution in literary as well as in political life.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ The classic account of the departure of American intellectuals from their home soil is Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (1934; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 1994).

⁴⁵ Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 2, 9. Warren Susman also cautions against unchecked assumptions of novelty (particularly on the question of ideology) in the periodization of the Thirties. Warren I. Susman, “The Culture of the Thirties,” in *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 150-183. So too does the problem exist in defining the cultural break between the

It is important to note that the opening for participation in the linked cultural and political reform of American life encompassed a range of political commitments and models of intellectual engagement. Terry Cooney writes of two camps on the left, each with its own understanding of how to proceed with necessary reform. His scheme is not unlike the distinction between the liberal and radical conceptions of progress which I have laid out for the 1950s. On the one hand, he writes, there were those who “emphasized the importance of planning, of technical expertise, and social engineering, in producing a more just, efficient, orderly, and humane society.” These thinkers “argued for the virtues of a rationalized society managed by experts who would serve the public interest.” Against this group Cooney sets the radicals who were “more attracted to visions of conflict and class power, to glorifications of action, to the idea of revolution.” These figures were, of course, more attracted to Marxism, and they distrusted the liberal models of economy and reform.⁴⁶

It is the latter, more radical contingent, which more frequently comes to bear upon the popular imagination of the thirties as the “ideological”—or even further, the “red”—decade. There can be little doubt of the feeling of historical certainty which radical ideologies provided intellectuals, of the comfort countless writers, critics, and artists took from the adoption of a cause.⁴⁷ In many respects that cause, the enactment of a new society, was a “daydream,” as Malcolm Cowley called it in his memoir of the period.

pre and post-World War I periods; see Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912-1917* (New York: Knopf, 1959), ix-xiv.

⁴⁶ Terry A. Cooney, *Balancing Acts: American Thought and Culture in the 1930s* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 10-11.

⁴⁷ This security of ideology did not fuel the adoption of Communism only in the 1930s. Whittaker Chambers, an earlier convert, recalled the appeal of Communism as an answer to the “crisis of history” and his choice “a choice against death and for life.” Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (New York: Random House, 1952), 191-196.

But it was one birthed from the uneasy mood of the time and justified by the notion that out of crisis came opportunity. As Cowley put it, amid the collapse of American society “there was hope as well, the apocalyptic hope that a City of Man would rise on the other side of disaster.” The conditions of crisis were, for the intellectuals, the conditions of possibility.⁴⁸

Such aspirations as Cowley described were not limited to traditional spheres of expertise in political or social policy. Indeed, much of the historiography of intellectual life in the 1930s has focused on the attempts by writers and literary critics to align the practice of art with the progress of history.⁴⁹ The contingencies of the decade forced writers to consider their function in society; as Richard Pells asks “What did ‘commitment’ mean for men who had previously supposed that the articulation of ideas and the perfection of technique were sufficient in discharging one’s political and moral responsibilities?” The answer, for many, lay in the move towards participation, the belief of the writer’s role in history, particularly in the collective struggle to reach utopia. The rapid motion of history compelled the writer to act, to harness his craft to the forces of change. Perhaps writers, disadvantaged as they were by doubts (not just others’ but their own as well) about their social worth in a time of crisis, had to adopt an even stronger

⁴⁸ Cowley, *The Dream of the Golden Mountains*, xii. Since I am employing memoir here as an illustrative source, I should point out that Warren Susman urges us to take stock of the degree to which memory has imposed a narrative of ideological commitment on the historiography of the 1930s. Still, I believe that the insistence in memoir of the power of ideological commitment and the appeal of certainty can be profoundly revealing in and of itself as to the aspirations of intellectuals. See Susman, “The Culture of the Thirties,” 151-153.

⁴⁹ The classic studies of literary radicalism include Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (1961; repr., New York: Columbia University, 1992) and James Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America* (New York: Wiley, 1968). For a more recent but related work of radical literary production in the 1930s and 1940s which engages with earlier histories, see Alan Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

confidence in the power of intellectual participation. They had to believe, once again, in the connection between the possibilities of intellectual and national progress. How the two could be realized in tandem was more difficult to answer, but it was a question to be postponed. Whether he realized it or not, Granville Hicks, in his address to the Second American Writers Congress of 1937, captured this underlying ambiguity in the adoption of historical certainty: “We face the future, hoping—perhaps unreasonably in view of what we know about the past—that we can persuade it to let us do our work.”⁵⁰

We know that for most believers the sense of possibility did not last. Radical commitment and the belief in intellectuals’ agency were undone in part by the betrayals of the Soviet Union, in part by the usurpation of radical action by the perceived success of New Deal liberalism. Nor could the intellectuals point to measurable results in the way of social change as a means of credibly demonstrating their own potency; as Richard Pells points out, though the crises of the 1930s may have subsided, many (if not most) of the problems that the radicals had aimed to address had not.⁵¹

The problem was only amplified, just as it had been for the previous generation, by the deeper uncertainty brought on by world war. For after 1945, which intellectuals could look comfortably upon their relationship to history, their sense of agency in shaping the progression of events? The world made by total war and genocide was one

⁵⁰ Pells, *Radical Visions*, 152; Granville Hicks, “The American Writer Faces the Future,” in *The Writer in a Changing World*, ed. Henry Hart (New York: Equinox Cooperative Press, 1937), 182.

⁵¹ Pells, *Radical Visions*, 368. It should also be noted that the sense of participation offered by radical ideology was not exclusive to intellectuals. What’s more, many came to question—and rightly so—the degree to which Communist Party leadership had a genuine interest in sustaining the leadership of intellectuals. Richard Hofstadter, writes David Brown, “emerged from the thirties permanently alienated from radical politics,” largely because of his belief that Communism would ultimately erase the role and freedom of the intellectual. David S. Brown, *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 125.

of little clarity for intellectuals, even those who had previously pledged their loyalty to the cause of defeating fascism. If the intellectual class was to regain its sense of purpose, let alone its sense of authority, it would need reconsider the basis of each in a postwar world.

I will conclude, therefore, with two anecdotal illustrations of this collapse of intellectual confidence, both from writers who would continue to play a central role in the New York intellectual culture but whose ideas were profoundly informed by the experience of depression and war. The first comes from Dwight Macdonald, whose commentary on the transformation of the individual and the state in war sheds particular light on the sense of epistemological crisis at the time, and whose message, like Bourne's before it, would haunt later thinkers confronting later wars.⁵² In the essay "The Responsibility of Peoples," published in 1945, Macdonald described the increasing involuntary submission of individuals to larger forces. "Modern society has become so tightly organized, so rationalized and routinized that it has the character of a mechanism which grinds on without human consciousness or control," Macdonald wrote. "The individual, be he 'leader' or mass-man, is reduced to powerlessness vis-à-vis the mechanism. More and more, things happen TO people." This trend, and the moral confusion it engendered—particularly in the wake of mass killings—was not, to be sure, discerning of literary or scholastic capacity, and in addition to the designations "leader" and "mass-man," Macdonald might as well have added "thinker."⁵³

⁵² See Noam Chomsky, "The Responsibility of Intellectuals," *The New York Review of Books* 8, no. 3 (1967).

⁵³ Dwight Macdonald, "The Responsibility of Peoples," reprinted in *Politics Past: Essays in Political Criticism* (New York: The Viking Press, 1970), 52.

The second illustration comes from Alfred Kazin, who concluded his account of the 1930s with an oft-cited scene of doubt: his memory of watching newsreel footage of victims of the Nazi death camps at the close of the war. Implicit in his recollection of the “unbearable” shame the footage brought him and his fellow theatergoers was an acknowledgment of the overpowering force of contingency, and the feeling of helplessness against the rush of events which was a departure, to say the least, from the excitement and possibility of the thirties.⁵⁴

Though the stakes were far higher in this case, the sense that Kazin described of being left behind by history, of lacking the resources to confront a world made anew and unfamiliar, was not unlike his own account of Randolph Bourne’s tragic realization a quarter century before:

He described in terms of his own experience the fate of the progressive idealist in a world overrun by war, a world of which the high hopes of 1910-1917 had given no warning, a world to which reason and art and the experimental school alone could give no clue. He had spent his life seeking the American promise as his education had prepared him to understand it; and when the war came it seemed to him that his education had betrayed him.⁵⁵

If intellectuals were to proceed with the kind of confidence they had enjoyed in the thirties, they would have to find ways to move beyond this new uncertainty, to create a space for themselves from which to confront the unique problems of the postwar order. And they would have to redefine for themselves the promise of American life and the promise of the life of the mind, and to grapple once again with the relationship between the two.

⁵⁴ Kazin, *Starting Out in the Thirties*, 166.

⁵⁵ Kazin, *On Native Grounds*, 185.

III.

Edmund Wilson's "Appeal to Progressives," published in *The New Republic* in January, 1931, was in some sense the first announcement of the challenge the 1930s would pose for American intellectuals. The liberalism of Herbert Croly and his circle, Wilson wrote, was no longer capable of serving the needs of the times. So too, it seemed in light of the current crisis, that liberalism's account of progress was fundamentally flawed; those who fancied themselves "progressives" could no longer believe as Croly did, Wilson contended, that the "American spirit would be strong enough to compel American capitalism to restrain and reform itself." What was needed to replace liberalism was a "genuine opposition," a desire to draft new solutions rather than assume the validity of old ones—to embrace, to put it one way, the radical over the settled.⁵⁶

Wilson proposed no specific systematic plan of change (he was uncomfortable with dogmatic Communism, for one), but his essay is suggestive of the approach that many intellectuals took to the crisis of the 1930s. The quickening collapse of the American economy was as much an opportunity as it was a crisis, offering the chance for action, for a struggle to implement radical dreams. As I have suggested in the previous chapter, this sense of opportunity must have been seized by the thirties intellectuals in part to sustain the feeling of relevance at the very least, or a more authoritative control at most. To some extent, though, in pursuing the kind of participation which supported those aspirations, intellectuals lost sight of the very contours of their own social status which Wilson himself had considered vital. On the eve of the Depression, Wilson found those limits to the intellectual's social authority to be crucial, precisely for maintaining

⁵⁶ Edmund Wilson, "Appeal to Progressives," *The New Republic* 65, no. 841 (1931): 234-235, 238.

the intellectual's capacity to critique and to confront real problems. Wilson's model intellectual was able, in Richard Pells's words, to "preserve his personal independence, critical intelligence, and ethical vision, while at the same time discharging his social responsibilities."⁵⁷

If in the 1930s this model was altered to give way to the committed revolutionary, it was perhaps owing to the sustaining nature of urgency and crisis for intellectuals; to respond to crisis, to participate at the forefront of history, was at once an act of political realization and self-legitimization.⁵⁸ By the 1950s, however, such an opportunity was no longer available. Despite the uncertainties of the postwar atmosphere, there was no Writers' Congress, no Popular Front, no clearly accessible outlet for intellectual energy.

We can view the 1952 *Partisan Review* symposium on "Our Country and Our Culture" as one site—indeed, I would argue, the most fertile site—in which intellectuals struggled to define their practice in light of this development, to articulate the impact the new order would have on intellectual virtues and responsibilities. For some, the absence of a crisis on the scale of the Depression was a welcome relief; the climate of crisis had given way to economic stability and the comfort—albeit menaced by Soviet opposition—of American military strength. This was not necessarily the nation that liberal intellectuals had envisioned, but it was one in which they could live, and more importantly, one in which they could continue their craft. The freedom of postwar America was at once to be applauded and defended; it would open up new avenues of intellectual participation in national life.

⁵⁷ Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions*, 41-42.

⁵⁸ See my opening discussion in the previous chapter, on Trilling's view of the intellectual style forged in the Thirties.

At the same time, the more radical participants in the symposium doubted the degree of prosperity in postwar life, and were not eager to settle in to a culture of stability regardless; nor were they prepared to accept that the new role of the American intellectual was to fight the Cold War. For this group, Edmund Wilson's portrait of the intellectual as engaged, but from a critical and independent position, was still of great use. This model of a kind of robust dissent offered radical intellectuals a new self-justification, even in the absence of a large-scale external crisis; it informed the radicals' efforts to undermine both the image of a more inviting postwar society as well as the notion that to be included or comfortable in society as such was in fact a virtue for intellectuals at all.

The contributions to the 1952 symposium, then, were a set of attempts for intellectuals to find new forms of meaning, new virtues to cling to in a moment which seemed to lack the sense of historical urgency which marked previous intellectual experiences. It is the dialogue between particular strain of responses that stressed the Cold War responsibilities of intellectuals, and those that maintained the necessity—and potency—of dissent, which I believe best captures this search for meaning. Each strain, I take it as my presumption, was formed at least in part with an eye towards combating the anxiety of irrelevance, which in this period stemmed more from concerns about the intellectual's role in history than from the sense that the country was anti-intellectual. For that reason, I seek to reorient the story of 1952 away from the intellectuals' supposed

quarrel with America or American culture towards the intellectuals' quarrel with themselves.⁵⁹

To be sure, to cast the discourse as a debate between patriotic and unpatriotic intellectuals is to misunderstand—or deliberately mischaracterize—the position of the dissenters. Neither a distrust of conformity and a belief in the importance of skeptical thought necessitated or even suggested a disavowal of national affiliation. We should recall the degree to which, in the 1930s, even the most radical critics of capitalism themselves were committed to the notion of an American exploration, particularly in the move to document Great Depression society. These writers were driven by a new kind of nationalism, as Alfred Kazin put it, “the urge born of the crisis to recover America *as an idea*.”⁶⁰

The memory of this impulse within American literary radicalism is crucial in the face of any effort to equate dissent with rejecting wholeheartedly an American cultural tradition. Take, for example, Norman Podhoretz's recent estimation of the great cultural output which the so-called “discovery” of American had spawned in the 1950s. Since, for Podhoretz, the embrace of that “discovery” stood in opposition to the dissent of the radicals, it follows that to resist conformity in 1952 was at once to dismiss the value of 1950s literature as Podhoretz sees it. It need hardly be said that such was not the case;

⁵⁹ My choice to focus on the contentious discourse of intellectual virtuous does come at the expense of charting the particular criticisms of American mass culture. The two subjects were of course linked, not least in the 1952 symposium. George Cotkin convincingly connects the challenge of self-definition for postwar intellectuals with the anxiety associated with the growth of mass culture. George Cotkin, “The Tragic Predicament: Post-war American Intellectuals, Acceptance and Mass Culture,” in *Intellectuals in Politics: From the Dreyfus Affair to Salman Rushdie*, ed. Jeremy Jennings and Anthony Kemp-Welch (New York: Routledge, 2001), 249-250.

⁶⁰ Kazin, *On Native Grounds*, 489. On the documentary impulse of the 1930s, see for example, Pells, *Radical Visions*, 194-201; Peter Conn also notes the degree to which that impulse was an excavation of the American past, in *The American 1930s: A Literary History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Podhoretz collapsed the distinction between a cultural affiliation that utilized national resources for aesthetic exploration, and accommodation to the American political scene of the day.⁶¹ As Irving Howe wrote in his symposium response, “Instead of assuming that America is a person whom one must marry or divorce, embrace in ecstasy or trample in scorn, I prefer to distinguish among aspects of its behavior and tradition.”⁶²

Despite Podhoretz’s conservative revisionism, some of the liberal voices in 1952 did in fact acknowledge, and even emphasize, the recovery of an American tradition in the 1930s. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. contended that the twin shocks of depression and the rise of fascism sent intellectuals at that time looking for “ground to stand on,” and that they found it in American foundations. In Jacques Barzun’s view, the mode of participation in the 1930s—particularly for writers involved in WPA programs—birthed a surprising new “sense of solidarity—with one another as well as with their birthplace.” The development of this collective sensibility, he continued, made intellectuals appreciate a new and in his view, particularly American condition: “the get-together, corn-husking democracy of mutual help.”⁶³

To make good republicans out of intellectuals was not, however, the effect of the native explorations in depression culture; nor was the account of intellectual acculturation which had its roots in the experience of the 1930s and early 1940s a purely objective historical one. Indeed, this version of history had currency for those liberals who sought

⁶¹ Norman Podhoretz, “Intellectuals and Writers Then and Now,” *Partisan Review* 69, no. 4 (2002): 507-509. Despite the fact that Ellison rejected the imposition of politics on his writing, few would argue that his work embraces the American landscape of the 1950s without reservation or criticism.

⁶² Irving Howe, “Our Country and Our Culture,” 56.

⁶³ Arthur Schlesinger, “Our Country and Our Culture,” 101 Jacques Barzun, “Our Country and Our Culture,” 14.

to normalize the premise of the symposium, that intellectuals had fundamentally revised their stance towards their country. The argument implied that such a new stance was a natural outgrowth of trends beyond the intellectual's control; that such a position was mutually beneficial for intellectuals and the rest of society; and that to participate as a "working part of the nation" (Barzun's words) was fully commensurate with the intellectual's own sense of personal responsibility.⁶⁴

These claims did not indicate a reactionary requirement of nationalism among intellectuals, but they did impose upon dissenters a rather rigid definition of participation in national progress. The projects identified by Schlesinger and Barzun as having drawn intellectuals into national culture—rehabilitating the economy, winning the battle against fascism—were struggles with which radicals themselves *were* aligned, ones which even, as I have suggested in the previous chapter, bestowed an appealing sense of authority upon intellectuals.⁶⁵ But these efforts were ultimately ones with which there could be no quarrel. Therefore, to commit to the collective American progress seemed to entail a moral imperative, a forced consensus which left little room for the role of the dissenting critic in future efforts. Taken to its extreme, this imposition could have a smoothing effect on intellectual expression, similar to what Richard Pells notes occurred with the onset of the Second World War. The engagement with external enemies was a "relief," he writes, not just for its empowerment of intellectuals, but for its perceived potential to

⁶⁴ Barzun, "Our Country," 14.

⁶⁵ George Cotkin places Schlesinger, for one, in the tradition of William James and the pursuit of a "strenuous, non-utopian engagement with domestic and foreign problems." Schlesinger, Cotkin goes on, recognized the need for this strenuous engagement in combating political extremism, in his articulation of the "vital center." George Cotkin, "William James and the Strenuous Responsibility of the Liberal Intellectual," in *The Liberal Persuasion: Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and the Challenge of the American Past*, ed. John Patrick Diggins (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 264, 273-274

“cleanse the atmosphere of all the ideological disputes and social disappointments that had characterized the waning years of the depression.”⁶⁶

The liberal model of intellectual acculturation presumed, further, that cosmopolitanism was an undesirable trait. Granted, Howe and other radicals accepted their American identity not just as a *de facto* condition but as one with a cultural heritage upon which to draw when suitable. However, Howe too saw a connection between the resistance to setting “roots” and the preservation of critical dissent: “Almost always,” he wrote two years after the symposium, “the talk one hears these days about ‘the need for roots’ veils a desire to compromise the tradition of intellectual independence, to seek in a nation or religion or party a substitute for the tenacity one should find in oneself.” There was something to be said, in other words, for rejecting the *reliance* on parochial identification as a means of resisting the erosion of critical faculties. This argument, we will see, carried much weight for the champions of dissent.⁶⁷

However, the choice for national identity was one which the liberals made to seem both inevitable and crucial. Indeed, even while maintaining the value of what *Partisan Review*'s editors termed “critical non-conformity”—particularly in the critique of mass culture—the liberals saw the adoption of the American homeland as the necessary result of the Second World War, the breakdown of European civilization, and the rise of Communism. These developments had brought the United States to a position of cultural and political primacy, “the protector of Western civilization,” so the premise

⁶⁶ Pells, *Radical Visions*, 363-364.

⁶⁷ Irving Howe, “This Age of Conformity,” *Partisan Review* 21, no. 1 (1954): 14-15. For more on the concept of “rootlessness” and the problem of cosmopolitanism for intellectuals, see Ross Posnock, “How It Feels to Be a Problem: Du Bois, Fanon, and the ‘Impossible Life’ of the Black Intellectual,” *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 2 (1997): 323-349.

of the symposium went. “For the first time in the history of the modern American intellectual,” wrote Lionel Trilling, “America is not to be conceived of as *a priori* the vulgarest and stupidest nation of the world.” This position was not merely achieved by default, argued Barzun, but rather: “Countless deeds of valor, or organized brawn, *and of intellect*, showed that the nation as a whole could act and learn and achieve; so that it was no disgrace, no provincialism, to accept America and admire it.”⁶⁸

With the protection of Western culture came the protection of political and intellectual freedom as well; surely this, the liberals contended, should be enough to sway for the nation to gain the trust and loyalty of the intellectuals. America had thus become a country not only receptive to the practice of intellect, but also the only viable environment in which to sustain that practice. And to consider the question of what constituted intellectual life, then, was made easier by the simple realization that the basis of that life was in jeopardy. “The task of the intellectual,” Sidney Hook asserted, “is still to lead an intellectual life, to criticize what needs to be criticized in America, without forgetting for a moment the total threat which Communism poses to the life of the free mind.” It was clear to him, therefore, that the contribution of criticism to American society must not be separated from the concurrent defense of that society when it faced existential threat.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Lionel Trilling, “Our Country and Our Culture,” 111; Barzun, “Our Country,” 14.

⁶⁹ Sidney Hook, “Our Country and Our Culture,” 50. Arthur Schlesinger posed the matter in slightly different terms, when he wrote: “Tocqueville could not have been more right; political freedom is the indispensable preliminary to any effective defense against the leveling of culture.” Thus the protection of intellectual freedom (not only from Soviet Communism, Schlesinger pointed out, but from McCarthyism as well) was the principle condition which the other essential duties of the intellectual, including serious cultural critique. Schlesinger, “Our Country,” 103.

Hook's contribution to the symposium offered perhaps the most explicit statement of what I have been calling the liberal answer to the question of intellectual virtues. That is to say, he made clear what he and others saw to be the inextricable link between the preservation of the intellectual life and the preservation of American freedom. The "new" American intellectual recognized his role in adopting the Cold War imperative; if there were any previously, his primary pursuit became action rather than contemplation, the support rather than the scrutiny of definitive moral categories. This imperative was no more a threat to intellectuals than to people in any other mode of life, argued Hook, but the critical capacity should have led intellectuals to recognize it and embrace it with more rapidity and more certainty. As forceful as it was, Hook's articulation looks benign in light of Lionel Trilling's earlier assertion of the Cold War's existential stakes:

We are people who believe that our very existence is defined by our freedom to think and speak as we choose and, in the arts, to make what we choose. And so the extreme limitation of that freedom by a human agency does not appear to us merely as the curtailment of a right—it appears as nothing less than annihilation.

It is unclear whether Trilling here intended to address his professional peers or the Americans people writ large, but regardless, the implication for the hierarchy of intellectual responsibilities was the same. It was impossible to conceive of defining intellectual virtues, it seemed, without recognizing that the first condition to be preserved was intellectual freedom itself.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Hook, "Our Country," 46. I would suggest that it was this kind of assumption about the Cold War which led even a figure as independent and subversive as Dwight Macdonald to reject the pointed neutrality of the past and "choose the West." As Macdonald wrote in that famous expression, delivered in the same year as "Our Country and Our Culture," the struggle between Western democracy and Communism was a "fight to the death between radically different cultures." Macdonald held this position despite painting a less romantic picture of Western freedom than some others. Dwight Macdonald, "I Choose the West," in *Politics Past*, 198.

The severity of such rhetoric highlights the crucial challenge that the Cold War liberal framework posed to dissenters from the symposium's claims. The threat to free thought, and the proposition that an intellectual found himself without the choice but to defend it, indicated that intellectual life in America was once again to be defined by the mode of urgency to which thinkers had flocked with ease in the past. Once again an external conflict penetrated the center of intellectual life, a new crisis to which intellect was to be mobilized. Such mobilization was, as we know, considerably alluring to the active mind; it suggested that radicals would have to defend not only the merits of dissent as a virtue, but as a means of intellectual potency.

The chief critic of the consensus of 1952, and thus the most vocal of radical dissenters, was Irving Howe. While several others were dissatisfied with the symposium's proposition of an intellectual reconciliation with national culture and argued for the maintenance of the intellectual's critical responsibilities, none presented as forceful a case as Howe against the submission to, or worse, the embrace, of conformity. Howe's critique, begun in 1952 with "Our Country and Our Culture" but expanded more forcefully in the following years, not only reflects an unwillingness to bend the creative and constructive powers of intellect to consensus or the service of power, but also a refusal to accept the imposition of the Cold War on the intellectual's self-definition as put forth by some of his liberal contemporaries.⁷¹

⁷¹ The list of dissenters from the basic premises of the symposium most often includes Howe, Norman Mailer, and C. Wright Mills. Richard Hofstadter, for one, named them as the only contributors "at odds with the acquiescent mood of the editors' questions," while Howe referred to "three or four" unnamed participants who went against the grain and maintained their "earlier radical views." It is curious to note, though his facile account of the symposium merits no further review, that John Patrick Diggins declares Mailer to be the sole dissenter from the presumption of the intellectual reconciliation with national culture. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in*

Howe did acknowledge, in his contribution to the symposium, that the threat of totalitarianism warranted the defense of democracy by even the “socialist intellectual.” However, he was quick to note, the intellectual was to take up that task “while maintaining his independence from and opposition to the status quo.”⁷² The juxtaposition of these two responsibilities is crucial, as it immediately distinguishes Howe’s position from that of the liberals I have examined above. Howe could recognize the threat to intellectual freedom as did Hook, for example, but did not need to subordinate all other concerns to it. Nor did he accept the premise that the practice of intellect, at least his practice, could be subsumed into the Cold War binary. This resistance was in some sense similar to his rejection of the notion that the intellectual could be classified as either amenable or adversarial to “American life.” In either case, the imposition of categories to which the intellectual was to attach himself eroded the adherence to nuance and the preservation of a critical perspective.⁷³

In addition, Howe rejected the notion that American culture—as Trilling claimed in his essay—had undergone a noticeable maturation. The spirit of the twenties or thirties had not been met or surpassed by contemporary writers, wrote Howe, a fact which helped undermine the notion that the new “closeness” to American culture had reinvigorated the literary sphere. Such skepticism of the cultural benefits of intellectual accommodation was tied to Howe’s doubt that “high” or “serious” culture in general was gaining a foothold in postwar America. Questioning the evidence of such a development,

American Life (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 395; Irving Howe, “The New York Intellectuals,” 257; John Patrick Diggins, *The Proud Decades: America in War and Peace, 1941-1960* (New York: W.W.Norton and Company, 1988), 266.

⁷² Irving Howe, “Our Country and Our Culture,” 53.

⁷³ Howe, “Our Country,” 56.

Howe argued that instead the popular was outpacing the high-brow, and that the serious was being co-opted by the demands of the market.⁷⁴

Specifically, he attacked the “recent effort of academic critics to house-break our great writers,” a move which reduced Melville and Hawthorne from challenging figures to recognizable middle-class types. Indeed, the corruption of literary criticism was of particular concern, both for what it said about the decline of American culture and about the erosion of the role of the critic. What could be more egregious a dereliction of intellectual duty than to sterilize the rich sources of American literary tradition? The critics to whom Howe was referring had, in a sense, erased the very conflicts and crises which Howe saw as the source of intellectual strength. The problem persisted and continued to preoccupy Howe in the years to come: in 1956, he wrote an essay attacking the portrayal Orwell as a “moderate hero” by one English biographer. The heroic Orwell, Howe claimed, demanded not a conventional narrative but rather an account that traced “the series of moral and intellectual crises, the painful confrontations of a man who was driven to plunge into every vortex of misery or injustice that he saw, yet had an obvious distaste for the trumpery of modern politics.” The figure depicted otherwise, through a narrative which ignored such crises, “was not the one, he could not have been the one, who wrote *1984*,” Howe contended.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Howe, “Our Country,” 55.

⁷⁵ Howe, “Our Country,” 54; Howe, “Orwell as a Moderate Hero,” *Partisan Review* 23, no. 1 (1956): 104-105. On the question of misappropriation of literary icons, which was of course a common point of contention, see also the exchange begun by Richard Chase on Hawthorne in 1949: Richard Chase, “The Progressive Hawthorne,” *Partisan Review* 16, no. 1 (1949): 96-100; Newton Arvin, Robert Gorham Davis, and Daniel Aaron, “Correspondence: Liberalism and Confusion,” *Partisan Review* 16, no. 2 (1949): 221-222, and Howe, “Magazine Chronicle,” *Partisan Review* 16, no. 4 (1949): 416-427. Howe’s piece is of note, among other reasons, for its concluding articulation of what I am proposing are the key markers of his dissent: “There is, for intellectuals at least, one kind of politics that would help fill our voids and sweep aside the

That review, especially in light of Howe's "Our Country and Our Culture" essay, recalls the argument of another key dissenter from 1952, Norman Mailer. While Mailer did not precisely share Howe's cultural politics, nor his style of public presentation, he did share a concern that the new model of intellectual affirmation caused American culture to contract rather than expand, to become duller and more passive. "Where the fifties theorized about totalitarianism in far-off places," Morris Dickstein writes, "Mailer found a creeping totalitarianism here at home, 'a slow death by conformity,' he said, "'with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled.'" The artist's role, then, in Mailer's eyes was one of fixed historical significance: he bore the responsibility for combating the stifling trend of accommodation. "It is the artist," he wrote in 1955, "embodying the most noble faculty of man—his urge to rebel—who his forever enlarging the walls."⁷⁶

In 1952, while accepting the claim that a widespread intellectual reorientation had taken place, Mailer nevertheless denied, as had Howe, that the resulting national sensibility had produced great literature. With respect to the once-honored authors of the previous generation and their collective turn from "alienation to varying degrees of acceptance, if not outright proselytizing, for the American Century," Mailer pondered rhetorically: "Dare one mention that their work since the Second World War has been singularly barren and flatulent?" We should take this bit of audacious criticism as evidence of the parallel between Mailer and Howe: if for Howe the stand against conformity was a defense of intellectual virtue, then for Mailer it was a defense of artistic

academicism, mystifications, and reaction noted here; and that is the politics of intellectual criticism, secular intransigence, devotion to radical and scientific values, and a refusal to raise the flags of power. This minimum ground may be the price of survival. To say no—is that really so hard?" Howe, "Magazine Chronicle," 427.

⁷⁶ Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 53; Norman Mailer, "What I Think of Artistic Freedom," 193

virtue. Efforts at integration or ingratiation on the part of the writer were likely to worsen his craft; Mailer's proposition that "the artist feels most alienated when he loses the sharp sense of what he is alienated from" rendered alienation as a source of inspiration, not disengagement or impotence.⁷⁷

What's more, both Mailer and Howe, in envisioning the artistic and intellectual life, shared a disdain for the static, the drying up of literary and intellectual output (what Mailer called the "barren and flatulent" literature) that stemmed from the acceptance of consensual culture and politics by writers and thinkers in the fifties. Mailer noted that the dominant intellectual discourse lacked discussion of troublesome issues such as modern war and the continuing crisis of capitalism. Presumably this impoverished discourse was the result of intellectual exhaustion, what Howe referred to as "the readiness of certain intellectuals to make their peace or strike a truce with the status quo"—the same readiness which led to the affirmations of American identity.⁷⁸

The dissent pronounced by Howe and Mailer was, in contrast to such stasis, a constructive force of political and cultural opposition. That is, the practice of dissent was governed by the impulse to challenge rather than negate, by the attempt to bring a gaze to bear on the status quo with the goal of achieving constructive but radical progress (specifically for Howe, democratic socialism). In the inaugural editorial statement for *Dissent* magazine, which Howe founded in 1954 as an organ of intellectual activity in opposition to the increasing conformity of *Partisan Review* or *Commentary*, he sought to

⁷⁷ Mailer, "Our Country," 67-68.

⁷⁸ Mailer, "Our Country," 69; Howe, "Our Country," 53-54.

highlight this constructive strand of criticism. “*Dissent* would be meaningless,” Howe and the editors noted from the beginning, “if in dissenting it did not also affirm.”⁷⁹

I have chosen to employ the word constructive here in order to draw out Howe’s vision of dissent as a program, not merely a defensive posture. It is true that to a certain extent, the impositions of fifties culture may have inspired a defensive posture on the part of radical intellectuals like Howe. But even in light of such forces as McCarthyism and the professionalization of intellect, Howe’s insistence on dissent as an intellectual virtue carries great weight on its own terms. Articulated as a means of intellectual practice, dissent could provide intellectuals with a sense of security against the anxiety of irrelevance. To be precise, the dissenter of the early 1950s sought to operate directly in contrast to what Jacques Barzun denounced as the intellectual insistence on “hating the present day.” The practice of dissent cast the intellectual as a contributor rather than a subversive, an active participant in cultural and political conflict rather than a withdrawn malcontent.⁸⁰

Just as Howe was conscious of the problem of self-justification for intellectuals, and took measures to formulate a vision of intellectual life that could combat it, he also knew that his model of dissent opposed another avenue of relief from the anxiety of irrelevance: the embrace of wealth, power, and institutional security. In the 1954 essay “This Age of Conformity,” Howe revisited his attack on the accommodation of the intellectuals from 1952, amplifying his critique of the embrace of power. The

⁷⁹ “A Word to Our Readers,” *Dissent* 1, no. 1 (1954): 4. Mailer served as contributing editor to *Dissent*, and later noted his appreciation of Howe’s “first-rate” polemical writing, as well as for the opportunities the new kind of magazine afforded him. See Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1959), 186.

⁸⁰ Jacques Barzun, *God’s Country and Mine: A Declaration of Love Spiced With a Few Harsh Words* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1954), 221.

abandonment of the goal of an intellectual life free from the aspirations of “commercial civilization,” argued Howe, signaled the submission of the independent and engaged intellectual to larger structures of power. This move was dangerous, as Howe noted, because “The institutional world needs intellectuals *because* they are intellectuals but it does not want them *as* intellectuals.” In other words, to accommodate or serve institutional authority was to fundamentally co-opt the critical functions of intellect.⁸¹

This was not a new argument, but it carried more urgency in the 1950s than it had for previous generations of intellectuals. As the convergence of intellectual professionalization and the reification of Cold War ideology inaugurated what Morris Dickstein calls the “reign of the expert and whiz-kid” in the halls of power, Irving Howe’s dissent appeared to remain a humble outlier among the models of intellectual engagement.⁸² Howe, though, had not abandoned the notion that the intellectual could be a positive actor; this belief he shared with the ascendant technocrats and planners. The difference between the two, however, lay in the stakes associated with trying to realize that belief. Needless to say, an intellectual misjudgment on Howe’s part, or a false estimation of his own agency in shaping events, would not bring wide-reaching consequences. American society, in other words, could afford the errors of his intellectual exuberance; when it came to the “whiz kids,” there was no such security.

⁸¹ Howe, “This Age of Conformity,” 11, 13. For a discussion of the connection between the institutionalization of intellectuals and the fear of their irrelevance, see Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals*, 72-78.

⁸² Dickstein, *Gates of Eden*, 61.

IV.

As he sought to assess the aspirations and anxieties of the intellectual class in 1962, Richard Hofstadter announced the central quandary which seemed to plague thinking men of uncertain commitment. “It appears to be the fate of intellectuals,” Hofstadter wrote, “either to berate their exclusion from wealth, success, and reputation, or to be seized by guilt when they overcome this exclusion. They are troubled, for example, when power disregards the counsels of intellect, but because they fear corruption they are even more troubled when power comes to intellect for counsel.”⁸³

Irving Howe did not fit in neatly with this scheme. Drawing on a model of intellectual virtue which deployed a robust critique of power along with a radical model of social progress, Howe was able to transcend the tenuous position which Hofstadter described. His warning against the allure of power for intellectuals in the 1950s was, moreover, proven prescient by the developments of subsequent decades. The most powerless intellectuals of all, Howe had contended, were those “who attach themselves to the seats of power, where they surrender their freedom of expression without gaining any significance as political figures.”⁸⁴ Consider the striking similarity between that assertion, delivered in 1954, and Christopher Lasch’s critique of the Cold War liberals of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. In light of the revelation of CIA influence in the organization, Lasch wrote that:

In associating themselves with the war-making and propaganda machinery of the state in the hope of influencing it, intellectuals deprive themselves of the real influence they could have as men who refuse to judge the validity of ideas by the requirements of national power or other entrenched interest. Time after time in

⁸³ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 417.

⁸⁴ Howe, “This Age of Conformity,” 13.

this century it has been shown that the dream of influencing the war machine is a delusion. The war machine cannot be influenced by the advice of well-meaning intellectuals in the inner councils of government; it can only be resisted.⁸⁵

The liberals of “Our Country and Our Culture” and their cohort did not explicitly call for the service of power as a means of realizing intellectual fulfillment or national commitment. However, to place the Cold War at the center of American intellectual life had its consequences for the independence of thought and intellectual action on which most liberals seemed to place a high value. The farce of their experience in the service of national power, and its amplification in subsequent decades with the rise of the so-called “defense intellectuals” (first liberal, then conservative), should caution us to check any future confidence we may have in our ability to mobilize knowledge to the cause of the state.

At the same time, the consequences of the intellectual engagement with power should cause us to rethink what so many intellectuals (and indeed this essay itself) presumed to be a crucial aim of intellectual life itself: to find a home. As we have seen, the search for national affiliation was not simply what Van Wyck Brooks sought in the 1930s, the recovery of an American past as a resource for literary and critical production.⁸⁶ It was instead the search for an outlet for intellectual practice, for an opportunity to shape history. The “discovery” of America, then, which Norman Podhoretz and many of his comrades lauded in the postwar period, was perhaps an opening for the pursuit of authority. To be welcomed by American society, by this logic, was perhaps to assume that one had been given an invitation to lead it.

⁸⁵ Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 111-112.

⁸⁶ Van Wyck Brooks, *Three Essays on America* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1934), 12.

Too many intellectuals in the twentieth century, however, were more interested in controlling history than they were in studying it. For to take stock of history would be to appreciate the limits of the power of the individual, particularly of the individual who believes his ideas can command the actions of others. This was a fact consistently disregarded by war-mongers masquerading as men and women of vision; instead of ideas, these men and women have been governed by what Malcolm Cowley termed the “daydream”. It would be a grave mistake for us to give them yet another chance to find their daydream interrupted by historical contingency.

Still, there is a role for the dreamer in our society, if not in the halls of power. In our own time of crisis, the appeal of radical visions remains, as does an appreciation for those who have tried to realize them. I find myself in sympathy with the words that Daniel Aaron wrote in 1961, at the conclusion of his own study of writers who found themselves confounded by the rush of history, desperately trying to take hold of it:

We who precariously survive in the sixties can regret their inadequacies and failures, their romanticism, their capacity for self-deception, their shrillness, their self-righteousness. It is less easy to scorn their efforts, however blundering and ineffective, to change the world.⁸⁷

A more humble dream, or a more restrained conception of the promise of intellectual life—one that engages the wider public, to be sure—may be what we will need to restore and expand the promise of American life.

⁸⁷ Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, 396.

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