Benjamin Aldes Wurgaft

Within Sight of Syracuse

Recent news articles have portrayed my father, Leo Strauss, as the mastermind behind the neoconservative ideologues who control United States foreign policy. He reaches out from his 30-year-old grave, we are told, to direct a “cabal” (a word with distinct anti-Semitic overtones) of Bush administration figures hoping to subject the American people to rule by a ruthless elite.

—Jenny Clay Strauss, Letter to the *New York Times*

Jenny Clay Strauss published a letter in the *New York Times* on June 7, 2003, in hopes of dispersing the cloud of suspicion that had fallen over her father, the political philosopher Leo Strauss. Her consternation was understandable: many commentators, from journalists to academics, had pointed to Strauss as a major influence on neo-conservatives in Washington, and some had even identified him as the intellectual godfather of the Bush administration’s policy in Iraq. If we listen to those critics who trace Bush’s attempts to spread democracy by force back to Strauss’s ideas, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq indicate a philosopher-king’s desire to create an ideal *demos* from above. Ironically, Strauss himself cautioned against applying political philosophy directly to public policy, not out of modesty, but because he took a dim view of those intellectuals who inhabited the “public world” of politics. Real thinkers, thought Strauss, should avoid that world and its tendency to compromise the quest for philosophic truth.

The introduction to the recent *The Truth about Leo Strauss*, by Catherine and Michael Zuckert, offers a catalogue of attempts to link Strauss with Bush foreign policy, as well as a meditation on Strauss’s posthumous transformation into a public figure. It is important to note that the commentators who see Strauss as an influence on the Bush Administration run the gamut from respected journalists (generally of the Left) like Seymour Hersh of the *New Yorker*, to the more conspiracy-minded thinkers associated with Lyndon Larouche. The most extreme of these critics insist that Strauss meant to influence politics in Washington from the start of his tenure at the University of Chicago. There are also more moderate claims: Earl Shorris, in the pages of *Harper’s*, calls Strauss
“the accidental father of the worst in American politics” (italics mine). Still, it is very difficult, given the politicization of Strauss’s legacy, to keep his “influence” on political thought from shading off into a “conspiracy” among his followers, and indeed, this is a slippage that many critics are content to allow.

The transformation of a private scholar into a public figure of sorts truly presents a paradox. After all the stories we have been told about the decline of our public intellectual culture—think of Russell Jacoby’s The Last Intellectuals, Richard Posner’s Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline, and Paul Johnson’s Intellectuals—it seems that we have found, in Strauss and his followers, the opposite of the public intellectual, the inevitable result of the disintegration of informed public debate. In contrast to the engagement of figures like Jean-Paul Sartre, Noam Chomsky or, perhaps, Tariq Ramadan, the ringleaders of the “Straussian conspiracy” influence things from behind closed doors. If they do take the stage and address the American public, they conceal their true intentions behind a series of lies, justifying this with a Straussian political philosophy that advocates lying to the governed. The people, after all, must be protected from knowledge they are too immature to understand. Straussians thus wield power by not speaking to us, and their influence resembles a mirror version of the influence wielded by typical public intellectuals, replacing the intellectual virtue of “transparency” with that of secrecy.

Vilifying the Straussians and their obfuscations suggests a desire for greater sincerity in public discourse. But what fundamental expectations about intellectuals in politics does it reveal? Are we nostalgic for activist intellectuals who may or may not have roamed university hallways and editorial offices in an earlier age? There is, of course, a substantial literature on the role of the intellectual, including important works by Alvin Gouldner and Edward Shils. Many recent works, influenced by cultural studies, have moved away from their sociologically inflected attempt to define the intellectual’s role, instead analyzing the moves we make in talking about intellectuals. For example, they ask how the terms public and intellectual, which seem to join together the ideals of democracy and social legitimacy, on the one hand, with the ideals of transcendental and ahistorical reason, on the other, form an odd couple. The term “public intellectual” may obscure rather than illuminate the real functions of professional thinkers in society. Indeed, the term “intellectual” tends to overflow any specific discussion in which it is deployed: try to talk about “intellectuals” as champions of progressive political values, and it quickly becomes clear that they are also the elitist defenders of high culture, as T.S. Eliot might have wanted.1 While specific themes do emerge out of this discussion—the problem of membership in, or alienation from, specific identity-based

1 See Allen’s very helpful summary of the term’s history in “The Meanings of ‘An Intellectual’,” as well as Feuer’s “The Political Linguistics of ‘Intellectual’ 1898-1918.”
communities, the question of how the public is constituted, and of course the perennial question of whether intellectual life is flourishing or in deep decline—the new commentaries are self-consciously aware that we can never finally resolve these questions.

Few recent books display their anxiety about intellectuals in politics more openly than Mark Lilla’s *The Reckless Mind*. Lilla sees “recklessness” in the actions of many prominent thinkers who gave their vocal support to Left causes, and while he also has appropriately harsh words for Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger, the bulk of his book is given over to condemning philosophers who lent their cultural authority to Communism. Lilla’s understanding of the relation between philosophy and political life is rooted in the Platonic idea that *eros* is the force governing both: it yields the love of knowledge on the one hand and the love of power on the other. For Lilla, the pursuit of knowledge represents the healthy expression of our erotic drives, but the pursuit of power represents their perversion, for actual political regimes can never resolve the questions at the root of the human condition. For illustration, he offers the story of Plato’s famous trips to Syracuse to give philosophical instruction to the tyrant Dionysius the Younger. Plato was attracted to the possibility of creating a philosophical ruler, but found his ambitions thwarted: Dionysius spurned philosophy, then claimed to have learned and perfected it on his own and set himself up as a disastrous philosopher-king. While Lilla’s invocation of *eros* seems forced, and he provides little historical detail to support his claims, he does cogently critique utopianism, an important force in modern intellectual history, not to mention political life. Turning away from Syracuse, as Lilla proposes we do, involves the recognition that the love of wisdom is intimately tied to the love for power, and that the former is always endangered by the latter.

If Lilla’s picture of intellectuals turning tyrant echoes Julien Benda’s *La Trahison des Clercs*, Edward W. Said presents a more hopeful view in his *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. Said’s book, his last completed before his death in 2003, reflects both his experiences as an activist on behalf of the Palestinian cause, and his ambivalent role within the humanities in the United States. Throughout a career spent teaching English literature, Said identified strongly with humanism and its implied universalism. At the same time he found himself siding with the forces of multiculturalism and with efforts to reshape our vision both of the Western canon and of “canonicity” itself. *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* resolves that tension by describing a more “open” canon, and a critical practice that both transmits and critiques tradition. In the final chapter, “The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals,” Said shows how this reformed humanism can help us to understand the political role of the intellectual. He argues that intellectuals have a duty to report, to their readers, listeners, or viewers, the links between our cultural practices and
the social conditions that underlie them, uncovering relations of power by analyzing discourse. While Said describes this practice of “humanism as disclosure” in compelling terms, his discussion seems to ignore several crucial questions. Where does he think the duty to disclose comes from? Why should a set of vocational commitments automatically lead to a set of political ones? The responsibilities that Said describes only seem to apply to activists and critics of the status quo; they thus cannot apply to all humanists, much less all intellectuals.

In contrast to Lilla and Said, who define the intellectual as a social type and ask whether such persons can integrate the life of the mind with political action, a very different genre has emerged which shifts the conversation about intellectuals and their publics to what I might call a therapeutic register. A landmark of this approach is Bruce Robbins's 1993 *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture*, which confronts the claim that both intellectuals and the Left have declined because of professionalization within the American academy. Robbins suggests that instead of seeing institutional affiliation and professionalism as “betrayals” of the higher purposes of intellectual life, we should reconcile ourselves to these as inevitable social facts. Instead of imagining the intellectuals as conversing (or failing to converse) with a “higher power,” we should attend to their conversations with other people. For Robbins, the problem of the intellectual begins on that social level, with Said’s trope of “The great modern or, if you like, post-modern fact, that of standing outside of cultures” (Robbins 62). Because she must always establish a distance from the audience she addresses, the intellectual must stand apart from even those with whom she aspires to stand. Nor could she escape that alienated relation by abandoning the pose of the public intellectual: her “publics” would follow her, in the form of what Robbins calls the “professional unconscious.” He writes that:

> Versions of ‘the public’ have been internalized by critics and...these internalizations act with real force upon the profession's psychic economy, whether or not they correspond faithfully to extra-professional collectivities. (88)

The therapeutic approach implied here does not mean forgetting the reality of our actual publics; instead, Robbins wants to rid us of the idea that research and writing in the humanities is ever truly free of an original “scene of address.” The idea that we can operate independently of other people, that scholars and teachers do not need to work through the issues of profession, public and vocation, is as Robbins points out, “continuous...with a long modernist tradition which conceives the intellectual as outcast and exile, autonomous and critical: in short, as free-floating Luftsmensch” (110). While Robbins might follow Said’s claim that we stand apart from our audiences, he also argues that we remain locked in the moment of addressing them.
The same desire for a therapeutic examination of the intellectual’s role animates Michael Warner’s more recent “Styles of Intellectual Publics,” published in the collection Just Being Difficult: Academic Writing in the Public Arena. The volume, inspired by the accusation that academic jargon diminishes the political effectiveness of many Left critics, considers the relation between style and politics in contemporary academic prose. Warner, as in his 2002 Publics and Counterpublics, embraces the idea that literary style performs politics, but attacks the assumption that a particular style is more politically effective than another. He responds to an essay by James Miller, “Is Bad Writing Necessary?” published in the late lamented Lingua Franca, which staged a confrontation between George Orwell and Theodor Adorno to show the political virtues of clarity in writing. While Adorno stood for difficulty, for forcing readers to struggle towards comprehension, Orwell stood for a transparency that could found a viable public intellectual culture. For Warner, Miller makes political outreach a numbers game of the most extensive audience, rather than asking whether or not a style of reading might itself be political. Against such assumptions, Warner invites us to take an introspective look at the scene of writing itself, and at the basic act of addressing an audience that always underlies our work. What Robbins calls a “professional unconscious” here becomes the ghost of the public. In an elegant riposte to Miller’s use of Orwell, Warner begins his essay with a scene from 1984, in which the main character tries to pen a diary entry and then is overcome by a question: for whom is he writing? The totalitarian society in which he lives deprives him of a public to address, and its secret police will doubtless read his entries: the only certainty is that there are no secrets, no privacy. Yet he still writes of his desire for freedom, in the “private” space of the journal, and to Warner this act symbolizes the “blocked wish” to transform one’s surroundings, one’s self, and one’s public through writing.

Stefan Collini’s recent Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain is a study in intellectual history that proceeds from the same premise as Robbins and Warner: namely, that we should investigate the question of the intellectual rather than understand it as a fixed social category. Collini coins the term “Dreyfus Envy” to describe the myth that Britain has lacked the tradition of oppositional and independent public intellectuals that other countries, France especially, have enjoyed. He challenges this notion through a series of case histories, showing that a wide variety of types of intellectuals have operated in Britain, from Orwell to A. J. P. Taylor. While Collini wants to rid the British of their Dreyfus Envy, he is also interested in what an “absence of minds” reveals about the British national self-image. Ultimately, there is something self-congratulatory and almost Whiggish about it, implying that things were just too fortunate and peaceful in Britain to produce intellectuals who opposed the political status quo. Collini dispels Benda’s notion of intellectuals as divorced from worldly
concerns, and he inquires into the way the idea of “public intellectuals” and “public debate” suggest models of the relation between theory and practice. In the manner of the best intellectual history, the book both presents a chronicle of ideas, and makes critical interventions that challenge the way we understand that chronicle. One weakness stems from Collini’s claim that the intellectual’s identity and social role are always determined by the specialized pursuit of truth, on the one hand, and the desire to reach a non-specialist audience, on the other. This recalls not only Benda’s claim that political and transcendental interests are always opposed, but also the Platonism inherent in Lilla and Strauss’s attempts to divide the philosophical truth from the quest for public power and influence. The complexities of Collini’s narrative demand greater nuance than this binary model can offer.

As a reading of Robbins, Warner and Collini suggest, the stories we tell about public intellectuals can become useful barometers of our political hopes and fears. The intellectual can represent at once a direct relation between theory and practice, a story about the political efficacy of language itself, and the hope that membership in a political community might heal the alienated, modernist rift that Said describes. Cautioning against investing all hope in educated spokespeople but also against jettisoning the idea of a sophisticated public sphere, these works urge us towards introspection regarding our representations of the intellectual. Perhaps their most important contribution, and one that Warner is especially good at bringing out, is a new emphasis not only on intellectuals but on the public they address. The adjectival part of the term “public intellectual” is as protean as its noun—publics do not simply exist, they are called into being, and frequently the wish for public intellectuals contains the additional desire for a better-informed and more reflective public at large.

Strauss’s own reluctance to address a non-academic public stemmed from his view that encounters between philosophy and politics had unpredictable and often dangerous results. Philosophers risked being labeled as subversives, and the public was forever hostile toward professional thinkers who seemed more loyal to the abstract truth than to their immediate communities. He articulated this view in the important collection *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, bringing together ancient Greek and medieval Jewish and Islamic sources to argue that the esoteric nature of many philosophical texts is central to their political role. By effectively writing in code, authors could speak to a small, elite audience and avoid the public sphere altogether. Without condemning democracy—after all, he came to see America as a welcome refuge after he fled Germany—Strauss felt that certain political truths were too dangerous to be left to a public insufficiently prepared to understand them. While such elitism is not a political virtue, Strauss’s close attention to the scene of address is
mirrored in the best contemporary writing on the public intellectual. His critique of the public intellectual and the “public” itself stemmed from his view that political concerns form the basic conditions governing the lives of philosophers. The typical public intellectual might claim to speak for truth within a mendacious political sphere, and thus represent a voice from “outside” politics. Strauss, like Robbins and Warner, would disabuse us of the notion that intellectuals could break through to that mythical “outside,” and through their effort, rid our politics of mendacity.

Works Cited


