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Anti-intellectualism in American Life

RICHARD HOFSTADTER

Richard Hofstadter

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RICHARD HOFSTADTER



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E. A. H.
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PREFATORY NOTE



WHAT IS ordinarily done in prefaces I have tried to do in my first two chapters, which explain the origin and the intent of this book, as well as its central terms. But one thing should be particularly clear at the beginning: what I have done is merely to use the idea of anti-intellectualism as a device for looking at various aspects, hardly the most appealing, of American society and culture. Despite the fringes of documentation on many of its pages, this work is by no means a formal history but largely a personal book, whose factual details are organized and dominated by my views. The theme itself has been developed in a manner that is by choice rather impulsive and by necessity only fragmentary.

If one is to look at a society like ours from its nether end, so to speak, through scores of consecutive pages, one must resolve to risk wounding the national *amour-propre*, although this can only divert attention from the business at hand, which is to shed a little light on our cultural problems. One must resolve still more firmly to run some slight risk of encouraging the canting and self-righteous anti-Americanism that in Europe today so commonly masquerades as well-informed criticism of this country. For all their bragging and their hypersensitivity, Americans are, if not the most self-critical, at least the most anxiously self-conscious people in the world, forever concerned about the inadequacy of something or other—their national morality, their national culture, their national purpose. This very uncertainty has given their intellectuals a critical function of special interest. The appropriation of some of this self-criticism by foreign ideologues for purposes that go beyond its original scope of intention is an inevitable hazard. But the possibility that a sound enterprise in self-correction may be overheard and misused is the poorest of reasons for suspending it. On this count I admire the spirit of Emerson, who wrote: “Let us honestly state the facts. Our America has a bad name for superficialness. Great men, great nations, have not been boasters and buffoons but perceivers of the terror of life, and have manned themselves to face it.”

R. H.

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PART 1

Introduction

Anti-intellectualism in Our Time



• 1 •

ALTHOUGH this book deals mainly with certain aspects of the remoter American past, it was conceived in response to the political and intellectual conditions of the 1950's. During that decade the term *anti-intellectualism*, only rarely heard before, became a familiar part of our national vocabulary of self-recrimination and intramural abuse. In the past, American intellectuals were often discouraged or embittered by the national disrespect for mind, but it is hard to recall a time when large numbers of people outside the intellectual community shared their concern, or when self-criticism on this count took on the character of a nationwide movement.

Primarily it was McCarthyism which aroused the fear that the critical mind was at a ruinous discount in this country. Of course, intellectuals were not the only targets of McCarthy's constant detonations—he was after bigger game—but intellectuals were in the line of fire, and it seemed to give special rejoicing to his followers when they were hit. His sorties against intellectuals and universities were emulated throughout the country by a host of less exalted inquisitors. Then, in the atmosphere of fervent malice and humorless imbecility stirred up by McCarthy's barrage of accusations, the campaign of 1952 dramatized the contrast between intellect and philistinism in the opposing candidates. On one side was Adlai Stevenson, a politician of uncommon mind and style, whose appeal to intellectuals overshadowed anything in recent history. On the other was Dwight D. Eisenhower, conventional in mind, relatively inarticulate, harnessed to the unpalatable Nixon, and waging a campaign whose tone seemed to be set less by the general himself than by his running mate and the McCarthyite wing of his party.

Eisenhower's decisive victory was taken both by the intellectuals themselves and by the critics as a measure of their repudiation by America. *Time*, the weekly magazine of opinion, shook its head in an unconvincing imitation of concern. Eisenhower's victory, it said, "discloses an alarming fact long suspected: there is a wide and unhealthy gap between the American intellectuals and the people." Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in a mordant protest written soon after the election, found the intellectual "in a situation he has not known for a generation." After twenty years of Democratic rule, during which the intellectual had been the main understood and respected, business had come back into power, bringing with it "the vulgarization which has been the almost invariable consequence of business supremacy." Now the intellectual, dismissed as an "egghead," an oddity, would be governed by a party which had little use for or understanding of him, and would be made the scapegoat for everything from the income tax to the attack on Pearl Harbor. "Anti-intellectualism," Schlesinger

remarked, “has long been the anti-Semitism of the businessman.... The intellectual ... is the run today in American society.”¹

All this seemed to be amply justified when the new administration got under way. The replacement, in Stevenson’s phrase, of the New Dealers by the car dealers seemed to make final the repudiation of intellectuals and their values—they had already been overshadowed by the courthouse politicians of the Truman years. The country was now treated to Charles Wilson’s sallies at pure research, to stories about Eisenhower’s fondness for Western fiction as a reading matter, and to his definition of an intellectual as a wordy and pretentious man. But during the Eisenhower administration the national mood reached a turning point: the McCarthyite rage, confronted by a Republican president, burned itself out; the senator from Wisconsin isolated himself, was censured, and deflated. Finally, in 1957, the launching of the Sputnik by the Soviets precipitated one of those periodic surges of self-conscious national reappraisal to which the American public is prone. The Sputnik was more than a shock to American national vanity: it brought an immense amount of attention to bear on the consequences of anti-intellectualism in the school system and in American life at large. Suddenly the national distaste for intellect appeared to be not just a disgrace but a hazard to survival. After assuming for some years that its main concern with teachers was to examine them for disloyalty, the nation now began to worry about their low salaries. Scientists, who had been saying for years that the growing obsession with security was demoralizing their research, suddenly found receptive listeners. Cries of protest against the slackness of American education, hitherto raised only by a small number of educational critics, were now taken up by television, mass magazines, businessmen, scientists, politicians, admirals, and university presidents, and soon swelled into a national chorus of self-reproach. Of course, all this did not immediately cause the vigilante mind to disappear, nor did it disperse anti-intellectualism as a force in American life; even in the sphere most immediately affected, that of education, the ruling passion of the public seemed to be for producing more Sputniks, not for developing more intellect, and some of the new rhetoric about education almost suggested that gifted children were to be regarded as resources in the cold war. But the atmosphere did change notably. In 1952 only intellectuals seemed much disturbed by the specter of anti-intellectualism; by 1958 the idea that this might be an important and even a dangerous national failing was persuasive to most thinking people.

Today it is possible to look at the political culture of the 1950’s with some detachment. If there was then a tendency to see in McCarthyism, and even in the Eisenhower administration, some apocalypse for intellectuals in public life, it is no longer possible, now that Washington has again become so hospitable to Harvard professors and ex-Rhode Island scholars. If there was a suspicion that intellect had become a hopeless obstacle to success in politics or administration, it must surely have been put to rest by the new President’s obvious interest in ideas and respect for intellectuals, his ceremonial gestures to make that respect manifest in affairs of state, his pleasure in the company and advice of men of intellectual power, and above all by the long, careful search for distinguished talents with which his administration began. On the other hand, if there had ever been an excessive confidence that the recruitment of such talents would altogether transform the conduct of our affairs, time has surely brought its inevitable disenchantment. We have now reached a point at which intellectuals can discuss anti-intellectualism without exaggerated partisanship or self-pity.

The political ferment and educational controversy of the 1950's made the term *anti-intellectualism* a central epithet in American self-evaluation; it has slipped unobtrusively into our usage without much definition and is commonly used to describe a variety of unwelcome phenomena. Those who have suddenly become aware of it often assume that anti-intellectualism is a new force in this or that area of life, and that, being a product of recent conditions, it may be expected to grow to overwhelming proportions. (American intellectuals have a lamentably thin sense of history; and modern man has lived so long under the shadow of some kind of apocalypse or other that intellectuals have come to look upon even the lesser eddies of social change as though they were tidal waves.) But to students of Americana the anti-intellectual note so commonly struck during the 1950's sounded not new at all, but rather familiar. Anti-intellectualism was not manifested in this country for the first time during the 1950's. Our anti-intellectualism is, in fact, older than our national identity, and has a long historical background. An examination of this background suggests that regard for intellectuals in the United States has not moved steadily downward and has not gone into a sudden, recent decline, but is subject to cyclical fluctuations; it suggests, too, that the resentment from which the intellectual has suffered in our time is a manifestation not of a decline in his position but of his increasing prominence. We know rather little about all this in any systematic way, and there has not been very much historically informed thinking on the subject. A great deal has been written about the long-running quarrel between American intellectuals and their country, but such writings deal mainly with America as seen by the intellectuals, and give only occasional glimpses of intellect and intellectuals as seen by America.²

One reason anti-intellectualism has not even been clearly defined is that its very vagueness makes it more serviceable in controversy as an epithet. But, in any case, it does not yield very readily to definition. As an idea, it is not a single proposition but a complex of related propositions. As an attitude, it is not usually found in a pure form but in ambivalence—a pure and unalloyed dislike of intellect or intellectuals is uncommon. And as a historical subject, it can be called that, it is not a constant thread but a force fluctuating in strength from time to time and drawing its motive power from varying sources. In these pages I have not held myself to a rigorous or narrow definition, which would here be rather misplaced. I can see little advantage in a logically defensible but historically arbitrary act of definition, which would demand singling out one trait among a complex of traits. It is the complex itself I am interested in—the complex of historical relations among a variety of attitudes and ideas that have many points of convergence. The common strain that binds together the attitudes and ideas which I call anti-intellectual is a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life. This admittedly general formulation is as close as I find it useful to venture toward definition.³

Once this procedure is adopted, it will be clear that anti-intellectualism cannot be made the subject of a formal history in quite the same way as the life of a man or the development of an institution or a social movement. Dealing as I do with the milieu, the atmosphere, in which American thinking has taken place, I have had to use those impressionistic devices with which one attempts to reproduce a milieu or capture an atmosphere.

Before giving some examples of what I mean by anti-intellectualism, I may perhaps explain what I do *not* mean. I am not dealing, except incidentally, with the internal feuds and contentions of the American intellectual community. American intellectuals, like intellectuals elsewhere, are often uneasy in their role; they are given to moments of self-doubt, and even of self-hatred, and at times they make acidulous and sweeping comments on the whole tribe to which they belong. This internal criticism is revealing and interesting, but it is not my main concern. Neither is the ill-mannered or ill-considered criticism that one intellectual may make of another. No one, for example, ever poured more scorn on the American professoriate than H. L. Mencken, and no one has portrayed other writers in fiction with more venom than Mary McCarthy; but we would not on this account dream of classing Mencken with William F. Buckley as an enemy of the professors nor Miss McCarthy with the late senator of the same name.⁴ The criticism of other intellectuals is, after all, one of the most important functions of the intellectual, and he customarily performs it with vivacity. We may hope, but we can hardly expect, that he will also do it with charity, grace, and precision. Because it is the business of intellectuals to be diverse and contrary-minded, we must accept the risk that at times they will be merely quarrelsome.

It is important, finally, if we are to avoid hopeless confusion, to be clear that anti-intellectualism is not here identified with a type of philosophical doctrine which I prefer to call anti-rationalism. The ideas of thinkers like Nietzsche, Sorel, or Bergson, Emerson, Whitman, or William James, or of writers like William Blake, D. H. Lawrence, or Ernest Hemingway may be called anti-rationalist; but these men were not characteristically anti-intellectual in the sociological and political sense in which I use the term. It is of course true that anti-intellectualist movements often invoke the ideas of such anti-rationalist thinkers (Emerson alone has provided them with a great many texts); but only when they do, and only marginally, is highbrow anti-rationalism a part of my story. In these pages I am centrally concerned with widespread social attitudes, with political behavior, and with middle-brow and low-brow responses, only incidentally with articulate theories. The attitudes that interest me most are those which would, to the extent that they become effective in our affairs, gravely inhibit or impoverish intellectual and cultural life. Some examples, taken from our recent history, may put flesh on the bare bones of definition.

• 3 •

We might begin with some definitions supplied by those most acutely dissatisfied with American intellectuals.

Exhibit A. During the campaign of 1952, the country seemed to be in need of some term to express that disdain for intellectuals which had by then become a self-conscious motif in American politics. The word *egghead* was originally used without invidious associations,⁵ but quickly assumed them, and acquired a much sharper overtone than the traditional *highbrow*. Shortly after the campaign was over, Louis Bromfield, a popular novelist of right-wing political persuasion, suggested that the word might some day find its way into dictionaries as follows:⁶

Egghead: A person of spurious intellectual pretensions, often a professor or the protégé of a professor. Fundamentally

superficial. Over-emotional and feminine in reactions to any problem. Supercilious and surfeited with conceit and contempt for the experience of more sound and able men. Essentially confused in thought and immersed in mixture of sentimentality and violent evangelism. A doctrinaire supporter of Middle-European socialism as opposed to Greco-French-American ideas of democracy and liberalism. Subject to the old-fashioned philosophical morality of Nietzsche which frequently leads him into jail or disgrace. A self-conscious prig, so given to examining all sides of a question that he becomes thoroughly addled while remaining always in the same spot. An anemic bleeding heart.

“The recent election,” Bromfield remarked, “demonstrated a number of things, not the least of them being the extreme remoteness of the ‘egghead’ from the thought and feeling of the whole of the people.”

Exhibit B. Almost two years later President Eisenhower appeared to give official sanction to a similarly disdainful view of intellectuals. Speaking at a Republican meeting in Los Angeles in 1954, he reported a view, expressed to him by a trade-union leader, that the people, when presented with the whole truth, will always support the right cause. The President added:⁷

It was a rather comforting thought to have this labor leader saying this, when we had so many wisecracking so-called intellectuals going around and showing how wrong was everybody who don't happen to agree with them.

By the way, I heard a definition of an intellectual that I thought was very interesting: *a man who takes more words than are necessary to tell more than he knows.*

Exhibit C. One of the issues at stake in the controversies of the 1950's was the old one about the place of expertise in political life. Perhaps the high moment in the case against the expert and for the amateur occurred in 1957 when a chain-store president, Maxwell H. Gluck, was nominated to be ambassador to Ceylon. Mr. Gluck had contributed, by his own estimate, \$20,000 or \$30,000 to the Republican campaign of 1956, but, like many such appointees before him, was not known for having any experience in politics or diplomacy. Questioned by Senator Fulbright about his qualifications for the post, Mr. Gluck had some difficulty:⁸

FULBRIGHT: What are the problems in Ceylon you think you can deal with?

One of the problems are the people there. I believe I can—I think I can establish, unless we—again, unless I run into something that I have not run into before—a good relationship and good feeling toward the United States....

FULBRIGHT: Do you know our Ambassador to India?

GLUCK: I know John Sherman Cooper, the previous Ambassador.

FULBRIGHT: Do you know who the Prime Minister of India is?

GLUCK: Yes, but I can't pronounce his name.

FULBRIGHT: Do you know who the Prime Minister of Ceylon is?

GLUCK: His name is unfamiliar now, I cannot call it off.

Doubts about Mr. Gluck's preparation for the post he was to occupy led to the suggestion that he had been named because of his contribution to the Republican campaign. In a press conference held July 31, 1957, a reporter raised the question, whereupon President Eisenhower remarked that an appointment in return for campaign contributions was

unthinkable. About his nominee's competence, he observed:⁹

Now, as to the man's ignorance, this is the way he was appointed: he was selected from a group of men that were recommended highly by a number of people I respect. His business career was examined, the F.B.I. reports on him were all good. Of course, we knew he had never been to Ceylon, he wasn't thoroughly familiar with it; but certainly he can learn if he is the kind of character and kind of man we believe him to be.

It is important to add that Mr. Gluck's service in Ceylon was terminated after a year by his resignation.

Exhibit D. One of the grievances of American scientists was their awareness that American disdain for pure science was a handicap not only to investigation but also to the progress of research and development in the Department of Defense. Examining Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson in 1954 before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, Senator Stuart Symington of Missouri quoted earlier testimony in which the Secretary had said, among other things, that if there was to be pure research it should be subsidized by some agency other than the Department of Defense. "I am not much interested," Secretary Wilson had testified "as a military project in why potatoes turn brown when they are fried." Pressing Secretary Wilson, Senator Symington pointed to testimony that had been given about the lack of sufficient money for research not on potatoes but on bombers, nuclear propulsion, electronics, missiles, radar, and other subjects. The Secretary replied:¹

Important research and development is going on in all those areas....

On the other side, it is very difficult to get these men who are trying to think out ahead all the time to come down to brass tacks and list the projects and what they expect to get.... They would just like to have a pot of money without too much supervision that they could reach into....

In the first place, *if you know what you are doing, why it is not pure research.* That complicates it.

Exhibit E. The kind of anti-intellectualism expressed in official circles during the 1950's was mainly the traditional businessman's suspicion of experts working in any area outside his control, whether in scientific laboratories, universities, or diplomatic corps. Far more acute and sweeping was the hostility to intellectuals expressed on the far-right wing, a categorical folkish dislike of the educated classes and of anything respectable, established, pedigreed, or cultivated. The right-wing crusade of the 1950's was full of heated rhetoric about "Harvard professors, twisted-thinking intellectuals ... in the State Department"; those who are "burdened with Phi Beta Kappa keys and academic honors" but not "equally loaded with honesty and common sense"; "the American respectables, the socially pedigreed, the culturally acceptable, the certified gentlemen and scholars of the day, dripping with college degrees ... the 'best people' who were for Alger Hiss"; "the pompous diplomat in striped pants with phony British accent"; those who try to fight Communism "with kid gloves in perfumed drawing rooms"; Easterners who "insult the people of the great Midwest and West—the *heart* of America"; those who can "trace their ancestry back to the eighteenth century—even further" but whose loyalty is still not above suspicion; those who understand "the Groton vocabulary of the Hiss-Acheson group."² The spirit of this rhetorical *jacquerie* was caught by an editorial writer for the *Freeman*:³

The truly appalling phenomenon is the irrationality of the college-educated mob that has descended upon Joseph R. McCarthy.... Suppose Mr. McCarthy were indeed the cad the "respectable" press makes him out to be; would

this ... justify the cataclysmic eruptions that, for almost a year now, have emanated from all the better appointed editorial offices of New York and Washington, D.C.?... It must be something in McCarthy's personal makeup. He possesses, it seems, a sort of animal negative-pole magnetism which repels alumni of Harvard, Princeton and Yale. And we think we know what it is: This young man is constitutionally incapable of deference to social status.

McCarthy himself found the central reasons for America's difficulties in areas where social status was most secure. The trouble, he said in the published version of his famous Wheeling speech, lay in⁴

the traitorous actions of those who have been treated so well by this Nation. It has not been the less fortunate or members of minority groups who have been selling this Nation out, but rather those who have had all the benefits that the wealthiest nation on earth has had to offer—the finest homes, the finest college education, and the finest jobs in Government we can give. This is glaringly true in the State Department. There the bright young men who are born with silver spoons in their mouths are the ones who have been worst.

Exhibit F. The universities, particularly the better-known universities, were constantly marked out as targets by right-wing critics; but according to one writer in the *Freeman* there appeared to have been only an arbitrary reason for this discrimination against the Ivy League, since he considered that Communism is spreading in all our colleges:⁵

Our universities are the training grounds for the barbarians of the future, those who, in the guise of learning, shall come forth loaded with pitchforks of ignorance and cynicism, and stab and destroy the remnants of human civilization. It will not be the subway peasants who will tear down the walls: they will merely do the bidding of our learned brethren ... who will erase individual Freedom from the ledgers of human thought....

If you send your son to the colleges of today, you will create the Executioner of tomorrow. The rebirth of idealism must come from the scattered monasteries of non-collegiate thought.

Exhibit G. Right-wing hostility to universities was in part a question of deference and social status, but in part also a reflection of the old Jacksonian dislike of specialists and experts. Here is a characteristic assertion about the equal competence of the common man (in this case the common woman) and the supposed experts, written by the amateur economist Frank Chodorov, author of *The Income Tax: The Root of All Evil*, and one of the most engaging of the right-wing spokesmen:⁶

A parcel of eminent economists, called into consultation by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund to diagnose the national ailment known as recession, came up with a prescription that, though slightly condensed, covered the better part of two pages in *The New York Times*. The prominence of these doctors makes it presumptuous for one who has not "majored" in economics to examine the ingredients of their curative concoction. Yet the fact is that all of us are economists by necessity, since all of us are engaged in making a living, which is what economics is all about. Any literate housewife, endowed with a modicum of common sense, should be able to evaluate the specifics in the prescription, provided these are extracted from the verbiage in which they are clothed.

Exhibit H. Although the following may well be considered by discriminating readers as anti-cultural rather than anti-intellectual, I cannot omit some remarks by Congressman George Dondero of Michigan, long a vigilant crusader against Communism in the schools and against cubism, expressionism, surrealism, dadaism, futurism, and other movements in art:⁷

The art of the isms, the weapon of the Russian Revolution, is the art which has been transplanted to America, and today, having infiltrated and saturated many of our art centers, threatens to overawe, override and overpower the fine art of our tradition and inheritance. So-called modern or contemporary art in our own beloved country contains

all the isms of depravity, decadence, and destruction....

~~All these isms are of foreign origin, and truly should have no place in American art.... All are instruments and weapons of destruction.~~

Exhibit I. Since I shall have much to say in these pages about anti-intellectualism in the evangelical tradition, it seems important to cite at least one survival of this tradition. The brief quotations are taken from the most successful evangelist of our time, Billy Graham, who was voted by the American public in a Gallup Poll of 1958 only after Eisenhower, Churchill, and Albert Schweitzer as “the most admired man in the world”:⁸

Moral standards of yesterday to many individuals are no standard for today unless supported by the so-called “intellectuals.”

I sincerely believe that partial education throughout the world is far worse than none at all, if we only educate the mind without the soul.... Turn that man loose upon the world [who has] no power higher than his own, he is a monstrosity, he is but halfway educated, and is more dangerous than though he were not educated at all.

You can stick a public school and a university in the middle of every block of every city in America and you will never keep America from rotting morally by mere intellectual education.

During the past few years the intellectual props have been knocked out from under the theories of men. Even the average university professor is willing to listen to the voice of the preacher.

[In place of the Bible] we substituted reason, rationalism, mind culture, science worship, the working power of government, Freudianism, naturalism, humanism, behaviorism, positivism, materialism, and idealism. [This is the work of] so-called intellectuals. Thousands of these “intellectuals” have publicly stated that morality is relative—that there is no norm or absolute standard....

Exhibit J. In the post-Sputnik furor over American education, one of the most criticized school systems was that of California, which had been notable for its experimentation with alternative curricula. When the San Francisco School District commissioned a number of professional scholars to examine their schools, the committee constituted for this purpose urged a return to firmer academic standards. Six educational organizations produced a sharp counterattack in which they criticized the authors of the San Francisco report for “academic pettiness and snobbery” and for going beyond their competence in limiting the purposes of education to “informing the mind and developing the intelligence,” and reasserted the value of “other goals of education, such as preparation for citizenship, occupational competence, successful family life, self-realization in ethical, moral, aesthetic and spiritual dimensions, and the enjoyment of physical health.” The educationists argued that an especially praiseworthy feature of American education had been⁹

the attempt to avoid a highly rigid system of education. To do so does not mean that academic competence is not regarded as highly important to any society, but it does recognize that historically, *education systems which stress absorption of accumulated knowledge for its own sake have tended to produce decadence.* Those who would “fix” the curriculum and freeze educational purpose misunderstand the unique function of education in American democracy.

Exhibit K. The following is an excerpt from a parent’s report, originally written in answer to a teacher’s complaint about the lax standards in contemporary education. The entire piece is worth reading as a vivid statement by a parent who identifies wholly with the non-academic child and the newer education. As we shall see, the stereotype of the schoolteacher expressed here has deep historical roots.¹

But kindergarten teachers understand children. Theirs is a child-centered program. School days were one continuous joy of games and music and colors and friendliness. Life rolled merrily along through the first grade, the

second grade, the third grade ... then came arithmetic! Failure like a spectre arose to haunt our days and harass our nights. Father and mother began to attend lectures on psychology and to read about inferiority complexes. We dragged through the fourth grade and into the fifth. Something had to be done. Even father couldn't solve all the problems. I decided to have a talk with the teacher.

There was no welcome on the mat of that school. No one greeted the stranger or made note of his coming. A somber hallway presented itself, punctuated at regular intervals by closed doors. Unfamiliar sounds came from within. I inquired my way of a hurrying youngster and then knocked at the forbidding threshold. To the teacher I announced my name, smiling as pleasantly as I could. "Oh, yes," she said, as if my business were already known to her and reached for her classbook, quick on the draw like a movie gangster clutching for his gun.

The names of the pupils appeared on a ruled page in neat and alphabetical precision. The teacher moved a bloodless finger down the margin of the page to my daughter's name. After each name were little squares. In the squares were little marks, symbols that I did not understand. Her finger moved across the page. My child's marks were not the same as those of the other children. She looked up triumphantly as if there were nothing more to be said. I was thinking of the small compass into which she had compressed the total activities of a very lively youngster. I was interested in a whole life, a whole personality; the teacher, merely in arithmetical ability. I wished I had not come. I left uninformed and uncomfortable.

Exhibit L. The following remarks have already been made famous by Arthur Bestor, but they will bear repetition. After delivering and publishing the address excerpted here, the author, junior high-school principal in Illinois, did not lose caste in his trade but was engaged for a similar position in Great Neck, Long Island, a post which surely ranks high in desirability among the nation's secondary schools, and was subsequently invited to be a visiting member of the faculty of the school of education of a Midwestern university.²

Through the years we've built a sort of halo around reading, writing, and arithmetic. We've said they were for everybody ... rich and poor, brilliant and not-so-mentally-endowed, ones who liked them and those who failed to go for them. Teacher has said that these were something "everyone should learn." The principal has remarked, "All educated people know how to write, spell, and read." When some child declared a dislike for a sacred subject, he was warned that, if he failed to master it, he would grow up to be a so-and-so.

The Three R's for All Children, and All Children for the Three R's! That was it.

We've made some progress in getting rid of that slogan. But every now and then some mother with a Phi Beta Kappa award or some employer who has hired a girl who can't spell stirs up a fuss about the schools ... and ground is lost...

When we come to the realization that not every child has to read, figure, write and spell ... that many of them either cannot or will not master these chores ... then we shall be on the road to improving the junior high curriculum.

Between this day and that a lot of selling must take place. But it's coming. We shall some day accept the thought that it is just as illogical to assume that every boy must be able to read as it is that each one must be able to perform on a violin, that it is no more reasonable to require that each girl shall spell well than it is that each one shall bake a good cherry pie.

We cannot all do the same things. We do not like to do the same things. And we won't. When adults finally realize that fact, everyone will be happier ... and schools will be nicer places in which to live....

If and when we are able to convince a few folks that mastery of reading, writing, and arithmetic is not the one road leading to happy, successful living, the next step is to cut down the amount of time and attention devoted to these areas in general junior high-school courses....

One junior high in the East has, after long and careful study, accepted the fact that some twenty percent of their

students will not be up to standard in reading ... and they are doing other things for these boys and girls. That's straight thinking. Contrast that with the junior high which says, "Every student must know the multiplication tables before graduation."

These exhibits, though their sources and intentions are various, collectively display the ideal assumptions of anti-intellectualism. Intellectuals, it may be held, are pretentious, conceited, effeminate, and snobbish; and very likely immoral, dangerous, and subversive. The plain sense of the common man, especially if tested by success in some demanding line of practical work, is an altogether adequate substitute for, if not actually much superior to, formal knowledge and expertise acquired in the schools. Not surprisingly, institutions which intellectuals tend to be influential, like universities and colleges, are rotten to the core. In any case, the discipline of the heart, and the old-fashioned principles of religion and morality, are more reliable guides to life than an education which aims to produce minds responsive to new trends in thought and art. Even at the level of elementary education, schooling that puts too much stress on the acquisition of mere knowledge, as opposed to the vigorous development of physical and emotional life, is heartless in its mode of conduct and threatens to produce social decadence.

• 4 •

To avoid some hazards to understanding, it is perhaps necessary to say that a work given single-mindedly to the exploration of such a theme as this must inevitably have the effect of highlighting its importance in a way that would not be warranted in a comprehensive history of American culture. I can only say that I do not suffer from the delusion that the complexities of American history can be satisfactorily reduced to a running battle between the eggheads and the fatheads. Moreover, to the extent that our history can be considered one of cultural and intellectual conflicts, the public is not simply divided into intellectual and anti-intellectual factions. The greater part of the public, and a great part even of the intelligent and alert public, is simply non-intellectual; it is infused with enough ambivalence about intellect and intellectuals to be swayed now this way and now that on current cultural issues. It has an ingrained distrust of eggheads, but also a genuine yearning for enlightenment and culture. Moreover, a book on anti-intellectualism in America can hardly be taken as a history, though it were meant to be a balanced assessment of our culture, any more than a history of bankruptcies could be taken as a full history of our business life. Although I am convinced that anti-intellectualism is pervasive in our culture, I believe that it can rarely be called dominant. Again and again I have noticed, as I hope readers will, that the more mild and benign forms of anti-intellectualism prove to be the most widespread, whereas the most malign forms are found mainly among small if vociferous minority groups. Again, this is not as it perhaps should be, a comparative study: my concentration on anti-intellectualism in the United States is no more than the result of a special, and possibly parochial, interest in American society. I do not assume that anti-intellectualism does not exist elsewhere. I think that it is a problem of more than ordinary acuteness here, but I believe it has been present in some form and degree in most societies; in one it takes the form of the administering of hemlock, in another of town-and-gown riots, in another of censorship and regimentation, in still another of Congressional investigations. I am disposed to believe that anti-

intellectualism, though it has its own universality, may be considered a part of our English cultural inheritance, and that it is notably strong in Anglo-American experience. A few years ago Leonard Woolf remarked that "no people has ever despised and distrusted the intellect and intellectuals more than the British."³ Perhaps Mr. Woolf had not given sufficient thought to the claims of the Americans to supremacy in this respect (which is understandable, since the British have been tired for more than a century of American boasting); but that a British intellectual so long seasoned and so well informed on the cultural life of his own country could have made such a remark may well give us pause. Although the situation of American intellectuals poses problems of special urgency and poignancy, many of their woes are the common experiences of intellectuals elsewhere, and there are some compensating circumstances in American life.

This book is a critical inquiry, not a legal brief for the intellectuals against the American community. I have no desire to encourage the self-pity to which intellectuals are sometimes prone by suggesting that they have been vessels of pure virtue set down in Babylon. One does not need to assert this, or to assert that intellectuals should get sweeping indulgence or exercise great power, in order to insist that respect for intellect and its functions is important to the culture and the health of any society, and that in ours this respect has often been notably lacking. No one who lives among intellectuals is likely to idealize them unduly; but their relation as fallible persons to the vital function of intellect should remind us of the wisdom of the Church, which holds that although the priesthood is vulnerable to the errors and sins of the flesh, the Church itself remains holy. Even here, however, I do not forget that the intellect itself can be overvalued, and that reasonable attempts to set it in its proper place in human affairs should not be called anti-intellectual. One does not care to dissent when T. S. Eliot observes that "intellectual ability without the more human attributes is admirable only in the same way as the brilliance of a child chess prodigy."⁴ But in a world full of dangers the danger that American society as a whole will overesteem intellect or assign it such a transcendent value as to displace other legitimate values is one that need hardly trouble us.

Possibly the greatest hazard of this venture is that of encouraging the notion that anti-intellectualism is commonly found in a pure or unmixed state. It seems clear that those who have some quarrel with intellect are almost always ambivalent about it: they mix respect and awe with suspicion and resentment; and this has been true in many societies and phases of human history. In any case, anti-intellectualism is not the creation of people who are categorically hostile to ideas. Quite the contrary: just as the most effective enemy of the educated man may be the half-educated man, so the leading anti-intellectuals are usually men deeply engaged with ideas, often obsessively engaged with this or that outworn or rejected idea. Few intellectuals are without moments of anti-intellectualism; few anti-intellectuals without single-minded intellectual passions. In so far as anti-intellectualism becomes articulate enough to be traced historically or widespread enough to make itself felt in contemporary controversy, it has to have spokesmen who are at least to some degree competent. These spokesmen are in the main neither the uneducated nor the unintellectual but rather the marginal intellectuals, would-be intellectuals, unfrocked or embittered intellectuals, the literate leaders of the semi-literate, full of seriousness and high purpose about the causes that bring them to the attention of the world. I have found anti-intellectual leaders who were evangelical ministers, many of them highly intelligent and some even

learned; fundamentalists, articulate about their theology; politicians, including some of the shrewdest; businessmen or other spokesmen of the practical demands of American culture; right-wing editors of strong intellectual pretensions and convictions; various marginal writers (vide the anti-intellectualism of the Beatniks); anti-Communist pundits, offended by the perversities of a large segment of the intellectual community; and, for that matter, Communist leaders, who had much use for intellectuals when they could use them, but the utmost contempt for what intellectuals are concerned with. The hostility so prominent in the temper of these men is not directed against ideas as such, not even in every case against intellectuals as such. The spokesmen of anti-intellectualism are almost always devoted to some ideas, and much as they may hate the regnant intellectuals among their living contemporaries, they may be devotees of some intellectuals long dead—Adam Smith perhaps, or Thomas Aquinas, or John Calvin, or even Karl Marx.

It would also be mistaken, as well as uncharitable, to imagine that the men and women who from time to time carry the banners of anti-intellectualism are of necessity committed to it as though it were a positive creed or a kind of principle. In fact, anti-intellectualism is usually the incidental consequence of some other intention, often some justifiable intention. Hardly anyone believes himself to be against thought and culture. Men do not rise in the morning, grin at themselves in their mirrors, and say: "Ah, today I shall torment an intellectual and strangle an idea!" Only rarely, and with the gravest of misgivings, then, can we designate an individual as being constitutionally anti-intellectual. In any case, it would be of little value in this enterprise—and certainly it is no concern of mine—to classify or stigmatize individuals; what is important is to estimate the historical tendency of certain attitudes, movements, and ideas.⁵ With respect to these, some individuals will appear now on one side and now on another. In fact, anti-intellectualism is often characteristic of forces diametrically opposed to each other. Businessmen and labor leaders may have views of the intellectual class which are surprisingly similar. Again, progressive education has had its own strong anti-intellectual element, and yet its harshest and most determined foes, who are right-wing vigilantes, manifest their own anti-intellectualism, which is, though different in style, less equivocal and more militant.

To be confronted with a simple and unqualified evil is no doubt a kind of luxury; but such is not the case here; and if anti-intellectualism has become, as I believe it has, a broadly diffused quality in our civilization, it has become so because it has often been linked to good or at least defensible, causes. It first got its strong grip on our ways of thinking because it was fostered by an evangelical religion that also purveyed many humane and democratic sentiments. It made its way into our politics because it became associated with our passion for equality. It has become formidable in our education partly because our educational beliefs are evangelically egalitarian. Hence, as far as possible, our anti-intellectualism must be excised from the benevolent impulses upon which it lives by constant and delicate acts of intellectual surgery which spare these impulses themselves. Only in this way can anti-intellectualism be checked and contained; I do not say eliminated altogether, for I believe not only that this is beyond our powers but also that an unbridled passion for the total elimination of this or that evil can be as dangerous as any of the delusions of our time.

¹ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.: "The Highbrow in Politics," *Partisan Review*, Vol. XX (March-April 1953), pp. 162-5; *Time*

quoted here, p. 159.

2 The only American historian, to my knowledge, who has concerned himself extensively with the problem is Merle Curti in his suggestive volume, *American Paradox* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1956) and in his presidential address before the American Historical Association, “Intellectuals and Other People,” *American Historical Review*, Vol. LX (January 1955), pp. 259–82. Jacques Barzun, in *The House of Intellect* (New York, 1959), has dealt with the subject largely in contemporary terms and largely with internal strains within the intellectual and cultural world. An entire number of the *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. XI, No. 3 (1955), was devoted to discussions of anti-intellectualism by various writers.

3 For an interesting exercise in definition, see Morton White: “Reflections on Anti-Intellectualism,” *Daedalus* (Summer 1962), pp. 457–68. White makes a useful distinction between the anti-intellectual, who is hostile to intellectuals, and the anti-intellectualist, who is critical of the claims of rational intellect in knowledge and in life. He treats at some length the respective strategies of the two, and their points of convergence.

4 These considerations serve as a forcible reminder that there is in America, as elsewhere, a kind of intellectual establishment that embraces a wide range of views. It is generally understood (although there are marginal cases) whether a particular person is inside or outside this establishment. The establishment has a double standard for evaluating the criticisms of the intellectuals: criticism from within is commonly accepted as having a basically benign intent and is more likely to be heard solely on its merits; but criticism from outside—even the same criticism—will be resented as hostile and stigmatized as anti-intellectual and potentially dangerous. For example, some years ago many intellectuals were critical of the great foundations for devoting too much of their research money to the support of large-budget “projects,” as opposed to individual scholarship. But when the Reece Committee was hot on the trail of the foundations, the same intellectuals were not happy to see the same criticism (among others more specious) pressed by such an agency. It was not that they had ceased to believe in the criticism but that they neither liked nor trusted the source.

Of course, not only intellectuals do this; it is a common phenomenon of group life. Members of a political party or a minority group may invoke a similar double standard against criticism, depending on whether it originates from inside or outside the ranks. There is, moreover, some justification for such double standards, in historical fact if not in logic, because the intent that lies behind criticism unfortunately becomes an ingredient in its applicability. The intellectuals who criticized the foundations were doing so in the hope (as they saw it) of constructively modifying foundation policies, whereas the line of inquiry pursued by the Reece Committee might have led to crippling or destroying them. Again, everyone understands that a joke, say, about Jews or Negroes has different overtones when it is told within the group and when it is told by outsiders.

5 The term was taken up as a consequence of a column by Stewart Alsop, in which that reporter recorded a conversation with his brother John. The columnist remarked that many intelligent people who were normally Republicans obviously admired Stevenson. “Sure,” said his brother, “all the egg-heads love Stevenson. But how many egg-heads do you think there are?” Joseph and Stewart Alsop: *The Reporter’s Trade* (New York, 1958), p. 188.

6 Louis Bromfield: “The Triumph of the Egghead,” *The Freeman*, Vol. III (December 1, 1952), p. 158.

7 White House Press Release, “Remarks of the President at the Breakfast Given by Various Republican Groups of Southern California, Statler Hotel, Los Angeles ... September 24, 1954,” p. 4; italics added. It is possible that the President had heard something of the kind from his Secretary of Defense, Charles E. Wilson, who was quoted elsewhere as saying: “An egghead is a man who doesn’t understand everything he knows.” Richard and Gladys Harkness: “The Wit and Wisdom of Charles Wilson,” *Reader’s Digest*, Vol. LXXI (August, 1957), p. 197.

8 *The New York Times*, August 1, 1957.

9 *Ibid.*

1 U.S. Congress, 84th Congress, 2nd session, Senate Committee on Armed Services: *Hearings*, Vol. XVI, pp. 1742, 1744 (June 2, 1956); italics added.

2 This mélange of images is taken from the more extended account of the scapegoats of the 1950’s in Immanuel

Wallerstein's unpublished M.A. essay: "McCarthyism and the Conservative," Columbia University, 1954, pp. 46 ff.

3 *Freeman*, Vol. XI (November 5, 1951), p. 72.

4 *Congressional Record*, 81st Congress, 2nd session, p. 1954 (February 20, 1950).

5 Jack Schwartzman: "Natural Law and the Campus," *Freeman*, Vol. II (December, 1951), pp. 149, 152.

6 "Shake Well before Using," *National Review*, Vol. V (June 7, 1958), p. 544.

7 *Congressional Record*, 81st Congress, 1st session, p. 11584 (August 16, 1949); see also Dondero's address on "Communism in Our Schools," *Congressional Record*, 79th Congress, 2nd session, pp. A. 3516–18 (June 14, 1946), and his speech "Communist Conspiracy in Art Threatens American Museums," *Congressional Record*, 82nd Congress, 2nd session, pp. 2423–24 (March 17, 1952).

8 William G. McLoughlin, Jr.: *Billy Graham: Revivalist in a Secular Age* (New York, 1960), pp. 89, 212, 213; on the Gallup Poll, see p. 5.

9 *Judging and Improving the Schools: Current Issues* (Burlingame, California, 1960), pp. 4, 5, 7, 8; italics added. The document under fire was William C. Bark et al.: *Report of the San Francisco Curriculum Survey Committee* (San Francisco, 1960).

1 Robert E. Brownlee: "A Parent Speaks Out," *Progressive Education*, Vol. XVII (October, 1940), pp. 420–41.

2 A. H. Lauchner: "How Can the Junior High School Curriculum Be Improved?" *Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals*, Vol. XXXV (March, 1951), pp. 299–301. The three dots of elision here do not indicate omission but are the author's punctuation. The address was delivered at a meeting of this association. See Arthur Bestor's comments in *The Restoration of Learning* (New York, 1955), p. 54.

3 "G. E. Moore," *Encounter*, Vol. XII (January, 1959), p. 68; the context, it should be said, suggests that Woolf was quite aware of the necessary qualifications to this remark.

4 *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (London, 1948), p. 23.

5 As a case in point, I have found it desirable to discuss the anti-intellectual implications and the anti-intellectual consequences of some educational theories of John Dewey; but it would be absurd and impertinent to say, on this account, that Dewey was *an* anti-intellectual.

On the Unpopularity of Intellect



• 1 •

BEFORE attempting to estimate the qualities in our society that make intellect unpopular, it seems necessary to say something about what intellect is usually understood to be. When one hopes to understand a common prejudice, common usage provides a good place to begin. Anyone who scans popular American writing with this interest in mind will be struck by the manifest difference between the idea of intellect and the idea of intelligence. The first is frequently used as a kind of epithet, the second never. No one questions the value of intelligence; as an abstract quality it is universally esteemed, and individuals who seem to have it in exceptional degree are highly regarded. The man of intelligence is always praised; the man of intellect is sometimes also praised, especially when it is believed that intelligence involves intelligence, but he is also often looked upon with resentment or suspicion. It is he and not the intelligent man, who may be called unreliable, superfluous, immoral, or subversive; sometimes he is even said to be, for all his intellect, unintelligent.¹

Although the difference between the qualities of intelligence and intellect is more often assumed than defined, the context of popular usage makes it possible to extract the nub of the distinction, which seems to be almost universally understood: intelligence is an excellence of mind that is employed within a fairly narrow, immediate, and predictable range; it is manipulative, adjustive, unflinchingly practical quality—one of the most eminent and endearing of the animal virtues. Intelligence works within the framework of limited but clearly stated goals, and may be quick to shear away questions of thought that do not seem to help in reaching them. Finally, it is of such universal use that it can daily be seen at work and admired alike by simple or complex minds.

Intellect, on the other hand, is the critical, creative, and contemplative side of mind. Whereas intelligence seeks to grasp, manipulate, re-order, adjust, intellect examines, ponders, wonders, theorizes, criticizes, imagines. Intelligence will seize the immediate meaning in a situation and evaluate it. Intellect evaluates evaluations, and looks for the meanings of situations as a whole. Intelligence can be praised as a quality in animals; intellect, being a unique manifestation of human dignity, is both praised and assailed as a quality in men. When the difference is so defined, it becomes easier to understand why we sometimes say that a mind of admittedly penetrating intelligence is relatively unintellectual; and why, by the same token, we see among minds that are unmistakably intellectual a considerable range of intelligence.

This distinction may seem excessively abstract, but it is frequently illustrated in American culture. In our education, for example, it has never been doubted that the selection and

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