

Radical Intellectuals in American Culture and Politics, or My Talk at the Gramsci Institute

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I am going to paint with a very broad brush, indeed parody the American and European intellectuals' picture of American culture, and of the role of left intellectuals in American politics, during the period roughly from 1945 until 1970. This is the view that I grew up with, and which still predominates, particularly among older intellectuals. I will then offer, tentatively, a different picture, a "post-imperial" analysis of American culture and politics that has somewhat different implications for left practice. My thought is not to discard the more familiar view, but rather to add an angle. (I actually did give a much shorter version of this talk at the Gramsci Institute in Rome, Italy, on April 4, 1987; I would like to thank Giovanna Cavallari for organizing that event.)

• 1 •

We begin with a set of general characterizations of U.S. culture. It is:

- individualist (cowboys),
- materialist (gangsters), and
- philistine.

Philistinism is not just a minor, superstructural detail, since intellectuals, left, right, and center, get access to American politics through culture, and the quality of culture therefore is a factor determining their influence. The charge of philistinism can be divided into subcharges.

- There is absence of culture, meaning just the absence of ancient objects widely understood to be beautiful.
- There is absence of culture in the sense of lack of interest in literature and the arts, and a low level of cultural accomplishment where there is interest (exception made, perhaps, for Hemingway/Fitzgerald/Faulkner, jazz, abstract expressionism, and some other random favorite of the speaker).
- There is “bad taste” in the production of daily life, whether in the private sphere of commercial artifacts or in the design of public buildings and spaces, including in both spheres a bad attitude toward natural beauty, with commercial advertising the paradigm of desecration.
- There is a hostile attitude toward culture, meaning not bad taste but a distinct antipathy toward high cultural accomplishment and the milieu that produce it, both of which are dismissed as impractical, elitist, too difficult, useless, or whatever.
- There is the manipulation of mass consciousness by mass media, which seem to shape taste and cultural choice with relatively little resistance either from folk habits and customs or from elites, and to have low cultural standards in exercising this power.
- There is the “one dimensionality” identified by the Frankfurt School: the reactionary political effect of the manipulation of mass culture is that capitalism substitutes passive modes of depoliticized consumption for the higher forms (active, individual but also public, high quality, potentially transcendent of any given social reality) through repressive desublimation.

I think most American and European left intellectuals see these traits of American culture as a development within (or a degeneration of) Western European culture as a whole, and as closely tied to the transformations of capitalism. Moreover, we tend to regard American capitalism as the most advanced in the world, so that developments here give indications of probable or at least quite possible events in the less advanced capitalisms of Western Europe (though this view is certainly far less prevalent today than it was twenty years ago).

The idea that the philistinism of American culture is a threat to Western Europe is one of the bonds uniting left and right in the Old World. It owes a part of its force to the developmental theory just sketched, in which the US is

to Europe as California is to the East Coast. It also relies on imageries of addiction and sacrilege, with an analogy being perhaps the Chinese mandarin reaction to Western culture during the period of the opium trade. The cover of the book *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics* by W. F. Haug (a German), published in Britain, is a photo showing the Piazza San Marco scattered with pieces of black trash that spell the words "Coca Cola."

• 1 a •

American and European left intellectuals tend to have much the same image of American politics. The salient traits of our politics are:

- There is no working-class party.
- There is neither a socialist nor a communist party.
- The presidential campaigns that epitomize American politics are determined by how skillfully rival candidates within the political center spend millions of dollars "marketing" themselves, like soap powders, through intellectually contentless advertising and vacuous campaign speeches designed to play a few seconds on the local TV news.

The single most important fact explaining these traits is American economic growth over the twentieth century.

The connection is that the American working class has struck a deal with the American ruling class, renouncing political radicalism in exchange for economic well being.

American culture as I described it above has a complex role in this deal. First, it is both the product and the cause of economic development: endless economic expansion and the opportunities for advancement it offers breed the individualism, materialism, and philistinism that in turn provide the spiritual fuel, the true "spirit of capitalism" the system needs to keep going.

But this is also a culture of false consciousness in the service of capitalist stability. The main costs of American-style development are grotesquely exaggerated disparities between rich and poor—rendered particularly repulsive by the vulgarity of self-made economic elites—and the absence of safety nets, so that the squalor at the very bottom is worse than anything Western Europeans will tolerate for their (native born) poor.

Ind., mat., and phil. all bolster fantasies in the mass of workers that they too will one day become millionaires, or at least escape economic marginality. These fantasies pacify them in the face of the conspicuous consumption of

the rich, and reconcile them to the dreary, culturally empty quality of everyday existence in America.

Perhaps even more sinister, the culture of ind., mat., and phil. combined with the appearance of endless opportunity creates an illusion of accountability for one's economic fate. The poor are poor because they lack initiative or talent or because they are ethnically or racially inferior, according to the popular understanding. In this way, popular culture generates self hatred rather than proud working-class consciousness at the bottom of the heap, as well as indifference among those just above the bottom to the horrible fate of those below them.

•1b•

America is thus the land of Gramsci. Civil society is not just strong, it is forged of steel. The state can be federal, and decentralized even at the provincial level, because the war of motion—in which capital relies on state violence to back its power in the streets or at the factory gates—is an insignificant aspect of American political life. When political violence does occur, it is likely to be more lethal than in Europe, but disorganized, as in the use of murder and massacre against dynamite in the early labor movement, or the National Guard against unarmed urban rioters (who were looting stores rather than building barricades) in the sixties.

Consent to capitalist rule, in the form of the bargain of radicalism for economic growth, is the defining characteristic of the whole society. The organic intellectuals of the ruling class enforce the bargain through the media, exercising a degree of cultural control that was unthinkable when there were still peasant cultures, and local elites in daily contact with the masses.

Hegemony is intensified by an odd trick: the political elites of the United States, whether liberal or conservative, reject virtually all of what Europeans see as normal political discourse. Even in the age of Reagan, the media devotes a surprisingly large amount of time and energy to denouncing as equally pernicious "extremists of the right and left." The crucial dichotomy, in the official ideology, is the one between pragmatism and ideology, and the dichotomy is fundamental to the point of defining alternative modes of being.

Ideologues, according to the ideology, are "true believers," who are likely to be psychologically rigid, doctrinaire, prone to "orthodoxies," self-righteous, often violent when others refuse to submit to their plans, perennially willing to justify evil means by noble ends, in short the legitimate heirs

of Hitler and Stalin (who merge in the public mind into a single composite extremist personage). Radical criticism of the system is ideological a priori.

Ideology thus stabilizes in two different ways: the organic intelligentsia of the ruling class persuades people (and of course is itself persuaded) that the existing American system is by a vast margin both the freest and the richest in the world. This same intelligentsia preaches that people who contest this message belong to a dangerous sub-species, the "ideologues," who are legitimately excluded from public discourse because they are compulsive liars and cheats. McCarthyism still lurks just below the surface of American political life.

There is a corner of this canvas (remember it is my parody of an orthodox view) for the late 1960s, an interpretation of what might seem the incongruent events of that period that renders them consistent with the rest of the picture. First, the revolt of youth was a combination of self-indulgent, culturally retrograde, repressively desublimatory stuff, like rock 'n' roll and drugs and free love, with serious but self-interested stuff, like opposition to the draft. When the war in Vietnam was over, the cultural dimension was all that remained, and it quickly turned to "me decade" narcissism.

The civil rights movement followed by the uprising of the urban black masses won temporary concessions. When the threat of black violence had been crushed by state force or receded in exhaustion, white society went back to its business, and the black community split into a deteriorating underclass and co-opted bourgeoisie.

•1c•

The tale of the left intelligentsia in this America is a sad one quickly told.

Left intellectuals have little or no access to the cultural consciousness of the masses, since this is to be had only through the mass media, controlled by organic intellectuals of the ruling class who believe that left intellectuals are either crazy or evil, but in either case won't help sell anything to a philistine audience.

Left intellectuals have little or no hope of participating in the exercise of state power, since this is to be obtained only through a party system which does not include working-class or ideologically left formations.

In so much as they accept this state of affairs, and attempt to build their prestige directly with the masses, circumventing both the media manipulators and the state apparatus, left intellectuals find themselves up against an individualist, materialist, and philistine popular culture which quite simply won't

listen to them. Our most characteristic attitude is that of prophets without honor in our own country.

There are nonetheless a collection of left niches, now well enough defined and funded so that at least a few young people can aspire to a career. For example, there are radical social critics (mainly in universities), who despair of exercising any kind of state power, but play Jeremiah against capitalist decadence (e.g., Noam Chomsky, Christopher Lasch). There are radical policy intellectuals, "pragmatists" who nudge social democratic state managers and union officials to the left (e.g., the Institute for Policy Studies, Michael Harrington), and outsiders formulating socialist critiques and programs (e.g., Barry Bluestone). And there are "social activists" who define themselves as spokespeople for politically marginal groups and causes (minorities, women, the environment, peace, consumers, inhabitants of neighborhoods ignored by city hall, etc.) that are collectively to play the traditional role of the people, or the proletariat, but are for the moment disenfranchised (e.g., Ralph Nader, Acom). Finally, there are thousands of jobs, teaching sociology or political science or anthropology, in the American system of decentralized mass higher education, far from power but with at least some hope of tenure.

This situation may at first appear to be essentially one of impoverishment and impotence. On second glance, it may be one of privilege, at least in the future. This possibility is bound up with that of a "post-industrial" interpretation of current developments in the West. By this I mean the hypothesis that the economies of these countries will be increasingly white collar, knowledge based, and decentralized, with less and less clear distinction between state and private activity. It also depends on a critique of the implicit contrast with Europe that runs all through and indeed determines this description of the United States.

•2•

The intellectuals' picture of American culture is very much constructed by way of contrast with Western European culture, rather than with, say, the way of life of Nigeria or Singapore. When we say the US is materialist, individualist, and philistine, we mean to contrast it with Denmark or Italy.

We think of Denmark and Italy as relatively spiritual, communal, and cultured.

Spiritual seems an odd category for the left, but it is very much what the left cares about. It doesn't (usually) mean religion, but it does mean a humanist ideology of spiritual uplift, in which the living out of political or

personal ideals is imagined to count for more and materialist possessions to count for less than they do in the United States.

The communal dimension means that Europeans don't treat the (native born) poor as badly, that they react in a less dog-eat-dog way to social crises than the Americans, that they maintain networks of mutual support and caring, familial or geographic, that they imagine would be absent across the Atlantic. It also means that the state is expected to supervise all of life (e.g., regional planning) in a way it isn't in the United States.

What the higher level of culture means is that these countries own a stock of high quality cultural objects, continue to produce high quality objects and performances, appreciate them, subject the masses to media that honor and inculcate high cultural values under the supervision of a cultural elite, all under conditions of contest, such that no political tendency (or, for that matter, the "no-tendency tendency") controls culture in the interest of the status quo.

This picture of European cultural difference seems to me to be shared by the intelligentsia of the left, center, and right. Again, it is something that binds Europe together in opposition to America, no matter what the disagreements on other issues.

What it amounts to is that European left intellectuals identify with European high culture in a way that is essentially "national" rather than left wing. They love their historic European way of life and consider it superior to that of the Russian and American outlanders. The culture, such as it is, of these marginal colossi is either third rate, or their own in the way the Italian architecture and the Italian contents of the Louvre are French: by purchase, exile, or pillage, and by those means alone. American intellectuals tend to share this view of their own culture.

•2a•

European politics, by contrast with American, consists of contention for state power by political parties that represent coherent interest groups each of which also possesses a coherent political ideology with pretensions to universal validity. The question in European politics is: according to what principles shall society be organized. The role of the state is to implement the social decision of this question by restructuring society to correspond to the chosen ideal.

The right, center, and left possess intelligentsias that staff their political parties and their media, and provide government personnel when they exercise state power. They also provide analysis, or "theory," through which

political leaders supposedly interpret current events and formulate strategy. The intelligentsias do these things because it could not well be otherwise: the literate, theoretically trained groups within each of the large divisions of humanity naturally take over the intellectual functions, under the direction, of course, of the mass, whether that consists of business people or the working class. The basic difference between parties is substantive: the working-class parties have numbers, utopian vision, and correct theory (usually Marxism), while the capitalist parties have state power, money, and bourgeois economic and political theory.

•2b•

Europe is the land of Gramsci according to a different model than America. In Europe, there are commonly held high cultural standards, and the multifarious vulgarities of the United States are just not permitted, my dear. It is true that culture is conservative, but in a quite different way: institutions like the Catholic hierarchy, the civil service, the military, and the part of the media that is owned outright by capitalist interests use their prestige to endorse reactionary values and positions in the affairs of the day. The battle of the left is to create a socialist culture that will, needless to say, be superior to that of the old guard and of the vulgar new money, meaning that it will be popular and progressive, but will nonetheless meet the highest standards of the European cultural tradition.

•2c•

It is often my impression, putting parody aside, that Western European left intellectuals are mesmerized by three master images:

(A) the image of the philosopher king legitimately entitled to exercise power in society by virtue of his possession of *correct theory* (Plato);

(B) the image of the intellectual as the ally of aristocracy on the side of cultural refinement against the gross, philistine bourgeoisie from which the intelligentsia springs (Molière); and

(C) the image of the left intellectual as wielder of "the lightning of philosophy" that will "strike into the virgin soil of the proletariat" (Marx in the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right"*).

Let me emphasize that these images are none the less powerful for the fact that radical intellectuals profess to subordinate themselves and their theories to the masses, or to the outcome of democratic processes. Because of the belief that correct theory (philosophy) gives a claim on political power, because of the alliance of intellectuals with the pretensions of aristocracy, and

because of the idea that the intellectual aristocrat is the natural leader of the masses, the subordination of the intelligentsia is, to put it mildly, never close to complete. Indeed, to their American counterparts, European left intellectuals, no matter how radical, seem astonishingly elitist.

In this world of images, the state is the intellectuals' instrument for rationally transforming social life at the behest of the people. The only questions of significance are how to get hold of it and how exactly to deploy it for their purposes. The basic choices are:

- State power by organizing the working majority into mass parties that will dominate representative democratic institutions, while playing by their rules
- State power through revolutionary direct action, ranging from guerilla warfare through terrorism to the organization of a revolutionary mass party
- State power through some strategic combination of the above

• 3 •

I have been describing an understanding of Europe and America that has been around for a long time, at least since the late 1940s, and, as I said, it is the view I grew up with. In the remainder of this paper, I present a different view, without trying to supersede tradition altogether. The implications are anarcho-syndicalist; the European theorist who seems to me closest to my perspective is the Foucault of "Two Lectures" (in *Power/Knowledge*) and of the methodological discussion in volume one of his *History of Sexuality*.

A first and it seems to me elemental point about the post-war picture is that it is out of date in its hopeful presentation of European cultural autonomy. For forty years Western European culture has been Americanizing even more rapidly than the cultural guardians of left and right feared; by the late 1960s it seemed to me, a youth of 25, that Europe had simply succumbed to American cultural imperialism. Today it seems plain that the two continents are far more similar than they were then, and I think it would be difficult to support such once self evident propositions as that Yankees are individualist, materialist, and philistine by comparison with old-worlders.

Let me speak plain: a very large part of European culture is simply American culture, sometimes imposed by commercial force, but just as often eagerly, addictively absorbed. Because we have been so successful at abuse and seduction, it is more important now than it once was that Americans and

Europeans develop an intelligent understanding of the roots of our now common situation. And it seems to me that the old picture of American culture is little better than reactionary today.

Nor do I think European politics are any longer more ideological or more principled than American, or that the European left intelligentsia has a realistic hope for state power through left wing parties, or a real chance to use state power rationally to transform society in the direction indicated by utopian ideals and correct theory. We are all basically in the same boat, at this moment in history, and no one has a good idea of where we're going. I am not going to argue any of these propositions, obviously controversial though they may be. I hope what I have to say about America will be interesting even to those who reject them out of hand.

•4•

Europe has become more like America, but we were not, to start with, as much like Europe as we seemed, so that the outcome of our rapprochement is conjectural.

American culture differs from that of Western Europe because it is the common property of a heterogeneous post-imperial society, rather than of a nation in the European sense. To my mind, the relative impotence of the American left intelligentsia derives less from the absence of culture or the power of capital than from the independence of the American lower orders—the lower middle, working, and welfare classes and the racial and ethnic minorities. The origin of that independence is in the nineteenth century-history of the US as a European colony that happened to be run by the settlers rather than from a metropole.

•4a•

There are two familiar frameworks for understanding America. One is that of "equal opportunity," the "melting pot," and "everyone in America is or aspires soon to be middle class." The emphasis is on groups in motion from a highly particular ethnic past that differentiates them from everyone else in the society into a more abstract, deracinated but also modernized American present. The re-valuation of ethnicity among the intelligentsia in the last two decades is more an expression of this understanding of America than a contradiction of it—reaffirming it by fighting it strictly on its own terms.

The other framework is that of class, within which we pursue a left-wing critique of capitalist mass society focusing on the Western shore of the North Atlantic. Class divisions mean divisions along economic lines, whether in the orthodox mode of "relation to the means of production" or in the sociological mode of "education, income, occupation." The critical premise is that under the classless surface, behind the apparent hegemony of bourgeois values, there is the dirty secret that the US is no less riven than Western Europe.

I am proposing that we try to understand the US and the role of its intelligentsia in yet another way—by analogy to Third World societies constructed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the European empires.

When we Americans focus on our former colonial status, we sometimes compare ourselves to Argentina and Australia, European "settler" societies that wiped out or marginalized their "small" indigenous populations. But there are two other colonial types that are helpful as analogies in contrasting the US and Western Europe. First, there are the slave societies based on race and racist ideology (Haiti, Jamaica, Brazil). Second, there are "composite" societies in which, after conquering a set of contiguous tribes or peoples mainly engaged in agriculture and handicrafts, the European power joined them together in a colony and then encouraged non-European migrants from other cultures to move in to do economic activities other than farming (Malaya, Mozambique).

•4b•

The US is a former slave society of the type in which slavery is based on race, and in which there is still mass racial prejudice. It seems unreal to analyze American race relations as though we were either a "melting pot" or a straightforward class society with divisions based on economic categories. The culture of a former slave society is bound to be a hybrid in a different way from that in which all cultures are hybrid, with its own special set of privilegings and secret influences.

For example, ethnic divisions among American whites are always understood in the context of a more fundamental division between whites and blacks, and American ethnicity is thereby surely constituted differently from European. (The French are sometimes a different "race" from the Italians, the Northern Italians from the Southern.) The image of "white woman" in the US differs from that of "white woman" in Western Europe in ways that are perhaps traceable to the co-existence in the white American mind of the

white woman with a contrasting slave-descended black woman stereotyped as Mammy, maid, or prostitute.

The history of slavery, continuing racial discrimination, and the deindustrialization of the last 20 years have produced a black underclass numbering in the millions. The existence of such a group, massively "different" from mainstream America not in one way—color—but in all the ways of an oppressed culture, reenforces the acute sense of race that helped constitute the group in the first place.

The simultaneous emergence of a large black working class and a substantial black bourgeoisie, integrated with whites at work and living outside the ghetto, but socially segregated (and self-segregated), creates new political and cultural possibilities. But what is happening is not reducible to anything as simple as the assimilation of blacks to white society, and may, if anything, increase tensions between working-class whites and non-underclass blacks.

In a former slave society thus organized, the intelligentsia of the "master" race, whether reactionary or progressive, is unlikely to occupy the same position of taken-for-granted legitimate authority vis-à-vis any of the groupings of slave-descended people that the Norwegian intelligentsia, say, occupies in relation to the Norwegian masses. The black underclass, in particular, may be a "natural" constituency for white radical intellectuals, but it is one they approach with little or no claim to be taken seriously as political allies, let alone political leaders.

Moreover, it is easy to see why black intellectuals in a former slave society with a vast, persistently racially prejudiced white majority might occupy an ambiguous, uneasy position vis-à-vis white intellectuals and white people in general, as well as toward the black underclass. They are likely to draw the issues of cultural nationalism and political empowerment differently from intellectuals allied with the working class in a society with a feudal past, even though both groups live in class societies that have some equality of opportunity.

The view of the American black community as living in an "internal colony" has been familiar on the (white) American left for about 20 years now, along with a common sense that white radical intellectuals should "organize their own communities" and then engage in coalition politics with groups led by blacks. My thought is that this approach has something to offer an analysis of the relations of radical intellectuals to other groups in American society.

•5•

American national mythology emphasizes the agency of immigrant groups, their *choice* to come here rather than accept religious persecution (Puritans, Jews, Armenians), famine (the Irish), or political defeat (refugees of 1848, Cubans, Vietnamese). It emphasizes that the “search for a better life” in America is social as much as economic.

There is a lot of truth in the myth. But it leaves out the agency of the American and Western European ruling classes that *chose* to put capital together with labor in some places rather than others, framed laws that permitted or encouraged immigrant agency, invested in ocean transportation and brand new slums, paid taxes to build Ellis Island. Through these policies, the nineteenth-century American elite treated the US as a resource to be developed through intelligent population management, much in the way the European powers treated their colonies.

The relations between American intellectuals and the “masses” are filtered through ethnic differences that have roots in this “market for immigrants” as well as in the slave market. The United States is one of those societies where the current racial/ethnic mix is what it is in part because in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries English, French, Belgian, Dutch, German or American capitalists and state managers took to intentionally moving large populations from racially homogeneous areas with a “labor surplus” (created by the world imperial economy) into mixed areas with labor shortages of various kinds.

Unlike the Byzantine Empire, which just forcibly transplanted whole “nations” from one part of Asia Minor to another, the European empires mainly moved people by offering them jobs for more money than they could earn “at home.” Then they supported them socially and politically in colonial enclaves under a European commercial and planter elite (the famous “divide and conquer” formula).

I am thinking particularly of Burma, where the British encouraged the settlement of Indians and Chinese along with the ethnic Burmese and the indigenous hill people. I am thinking of British Guyana, where Indians, blacks, native Americans, and Hispanics coexist, or Kenya where there were, before independence, Arabs, Indians, Africans, and white English settlers. Hawaii, with its Hawaiian, Japanese, Chinese, and “white” populations is another example, one that is useful in understanding the continental US.

We can roughly contrast these composite societies with “Great” Britain, or the Russian Empire, where the rulers hooked up more or less

homogeneous territorial groups into a heterogeneous totality that was first a geographic collection and then a "nation." And we can also contrast them with colonies in which a settler group "peoples a new land."

Many of the European immigrants to America fit the mold of settlers, since they arrived in the US hoping to become small or large farmers, yeomen rather than peasants, businessmen, or professionals, bringing at least an early modern form of Western European culture based on education and "liberal" values. These are the Northern Europeans from the industrializing imperial countries that were long favored by American immigration laws.

But at one time or another in their history, many American immigrant groups have looked more like the groups in the composite colonial societies (or like the Third World "guest workers" in Western Europe today)—they have lived in the US thinking of themselves as "abroad" or "overseas" to make money, sending a lot of their earnings home and thinking of going home altogether as soon as possible. In the US, and in the composite societies where they have not been expelled by nationalist independence movements, they have gone through the drama of realizing they will never go home, that home is nowhere, that home is the new land.

At one time or another, many Chinese, Japanese, Puerto Rican, and Mexican immigrants have fit this mold: here for economic reasons, retaining ties to reference cultures to the West or South, with their own languages and current history, cultures that remain real alternatives to Americanization. The status of Asians and Hispanics is complicated by the facts of "free" migration (no enslavement) and racial prejudice, differentiating them from and linking them with blacks. Neither the rhetoric of abstract Americanism nor that of class captures the reality of Hispanic Los Angeles.

Many European immigrants came from the non-modern, non-industrial, non-imperial periphery of nineteenth-century Europe, from peasant societies experiencing labor surpluses. They were Irish, Southern Europeans, Slavs, and Jews from Eastern Europe, looking for unskilled industrial work in large cities or for small commercial opportunities. They were initially more like the Indian dockworkers of Rangoon than like the German settlers of the Upper Midwest.

European migrants from the periphery, and many of their descendents, still differ from the Yankee/Northern Europeans in their consciousness of America because they don't see themselves as just "owning" it. They have "made it" in America, in their own image of themselves, against enormous odds—defined by their position in Europe before emigration.

And they differ from Asians and Hispanics in their self-definition as white, assimilated and entitled to their *positions acquises*, ambiguously based

on merit and group solidarity in the struggle for upward mobility, in institutions like schools, labor unions, state bureaucracies, and small business. Here the best analogy may be to the *colons* of Algeria (only some of whom were French) or to the Afrikaners of South Africa.

New York (and London) are closer to modern Istanbul, with its collection of ex-Byzantine, ex-Ottoman peoples in enclaves, than to Paris, Rome, or Berlin.

•6•

The idea that “the population of the US is more racially and ethnically heterogeneous than that of Denmark and France” is often invoked to explain why it is that social welfare policies that have worked in Western Europe to confine the worst kinds of nineteenth-century urban squalor to foreign guest workers haven’t or won’t work in the US. The point is sometimes racist (“blacks are hopeless”), but also sometimes that because of heterogeneity there is less class solidarity within the lower groups, and more willingness of the white majority to allow the black poor to go the wall.

But ethnic and racial heterogeneity, understood as a specifically post-imperial phenomenon, is important for a quite different reason. Advertising, television, the popular magazines and comic books, the Edsel, roadside diners and neon signs, evangelical or fundamentalist religion, the proliferation of plastic objects, asbestos and then aluminum siding, hot dogs, Wonder Bread, fast food and then fast French food, Animal House, The Dating Game and commercial dating services—all these in their American diversity reflect a dramatic collision of African, Asian, Latin American, and Southern and Eastern European *peasant and folk* cultures with the stunning material possibilities of the New World industrial revolution.

The outcome of this collision is the popular culture of American modernity, which was originally one of a kind, the only one in which *the decision what to do with extravagant new wealth was largely unconstrained by the power of an existing national high cultural elite that could shape collision along “respectable” lines*. One result is a dramatic difference in the experience of American as opposed to European intellectuals, including radical intellectuals.

•6a•

Spanish or Austrian intellectuals, left, right, and center, relate to the Spanish or Austrian working and lower middle classes as members of a common culture; the intellectuals happen to possess superior credentials according to a standard of superiority that is racially, nationally, and above all historically shared. They also exercise, whatever their particular origins, an entitlement to deference that comes from centuries of intelligentsia association with aristocratic and then bourgeois class rule.

The European cultural elite has deployed this cultural (as opposed to political) authority to shape the use of industrial power over nature along lines that are intrinsically continuous with earlier forms of material and social life. The modern working classes live differently and act differently from the European peasantries of the late middle ages and the early modern period, but the actual content of those differences seems to have been as much or more the product of the higher orders, the aristocracies, the bourgeoisie, and the intelligentsia, as of autonomous peasant or worker choice in the uses of wealth.

Of course, European intellectuals have sometimes chosen to define themselves as organic intellectuals of the working class, whether through the vehicle of Marxism or Christian socialism. When they do so, they bring with them to their new allegiance the limited but real Weberian "traditional authority" that their culture has assigned—across class lines—to the roles of artist and thinker, along with the personal attributes associated with their class origins.

The (presumptive) class superiority and prestigious specialized function of the intelligentsia are sources of power over the working class in the shaping of radical projects. But they are also an aspect of the general power of the cultural elite which disciplines each European society to conform to national norms of good taste in the choice of household objects, legitimates existing standards of high culture, reproduces traditional forms from etiquette to religious ritual, in short preserves the cultural hegemony of the intelligentsia (as opposed to the political hegemony of the bourgeoisie).

(I have overdrawn the picture for effect. A more nuanced version would emphasize the relative autonomy of the European working classes manifested in, say, Methodist religion, the music hall, the trade union movement, the Paris Commune, or the struggle of household servants to define the daily conditions of their existence. Moreover, class differences between radical intellectuals and workers create distance and resentment within the left, rather than just empowering some over others.)

•6b•

The English-speaking white settlers of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century North America had an organic intelligentsia on a similar model. It too had “aristocratic” pretensions based on an unbroken tradition of elite culture, and put forward a claim to political leadership based on its possession of correct theory. It traced itself back both to middle or upper class cultural figures and to religious dissident or politically dissident yeoman or artisan (not peasant) ancestors in England and Scotland. This group was well represented among the Founding Fathers, as it had been in the early leadership of the Massachusetts Bay and Virginia colonies.

It is part (*perhaps* the dominant part) of the lineage of the modern American (white) intelligentsia, which was formed by actual intermarriage as well as by intellectual crossbreeding with Northern European and Jewish refugee intelligentsias, and by recruitment of upwardly mobile ethnics (many also Jewish) through the educational system.

The political and business power of the pre-Civil War gentry, the old American ruling class, did not survive the combination of immigration and industrialization. Or rather, betrayed by their own classical liberal *laissez-faire* ideology, the gentry let new wealth submerge them and then absorb them piecemeal into a new economic elite.

The old intelligentsia did better at survival, taking on new groups and ideas without ever altogether losing its English flavor. It was less successful at the job it chose, or was assigned, of nationalizing the immigrants, working always at a disadvantage, with the tools of the trade—Reason, the prestige of culture, and traditional association with aristocracy. New Americans imitate and aspire, to a certain extent, across America’s rigid color line and more fluid ethnic lines, but they also ignore what doesn’t appeal to them, and change everything for the worse, from the point of view of the old elite, even when they are trying as hard as they can to assimilate. The American intelligentsia has never come close to occupying, in relation to the post-imperial American masses, a role like that of its European counterparts.

There are three reasons for this. First, the intelligentsia formed in the way described has no “traditional” claim to authority over the post-imperial racial and ethnic subgroups of the US, since it is racially and ethnically “other” to those subgroups. Second, the post-imperial subgroups came from cultures that did not have intelligentsias, in the Western or Northern European nineteenth-century sense, at the time they emigrated. (Some of them came

from countries like Ireland and Greece that were then developing intelligentsias through nationalist struggle against the empires.)

Third, the emigrants left their elites behind. No Mandarins or Shinto priests came to the West Coast to build railways; neither the ancient landowning families of Southern Italy nor the literary/political upper middle classes of the North figured prominently on Mulberry Street. When peasant or small trader groups reconstituted themselves as “ethnics” in the US they did so in the mode of bricolage, adapting social forms from their home countries to possibilities of social mobility and cultural innovation that had been anathema. Irish America bears only an oblique relationship to Irish Ireland.

The slavers and the slave owners quite deliberately brought Africans to America with as little specific cultural baggage as possible. The conditions of slavery made it impossible for blacks to reestablish their specific, highly diverse African social patterns here (though no one could stop them from bringing African culture, reconstituting it and weaving it into everything American). The structures of prestige and political authority of the modern black community are a new product—there is no “traditional” African elite in the US that can trace its origins behind slavery.

These diverse “decapitated” American communities were not just waiting to hook up as subordinates to the early nineteenth-century political class, bourgeoisie and intelligentsia, to form a new nation on the European model. They generated their own business, political, literary, and social elites at a furious rate, playing the game by mixed rules, inventing hierarchies that dealt with but did not fuse with pre-existing structures.

In spite of recruitment across racial and ethnic lines, the intelligentsia in the US is closer to an ethnic group than to a specialized, hegemonic corps within the division of labor of class society. Relations of the racial and ethnic minorities with the intelligentsia are partly relations of “mass” to “elite,” with all the overtones of subordination within a unified cultural matrix, and partly relations across cultures like those of the heterogeneous colonial societies I described above.

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It is not that the cultural elite of the US can find no role at all in what was once “its own” society. It’s just that the role is more post-imperial than European.

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Here are four areas of intelligentsia endeavor that are time-consuming and may keep the wolf from the door:

- There is the preservation of a post-imperial old settler enclave amidst the alien flood, so that Harvard, PBS, NEH, and the *New York Times* sometimes seem like the decolonized Polo and Tennis clubs in Kuala Lumpur or Cotonou, where planters and merchants once gathered behind “White Only” signs.
- There is a “mission civilatrice” (like that of the school system and publishing industry of the French Empire), teaching what was once called “American” and is now called “mainstream” culture, as a second language, to those willing and able to pay for assimilation. (In this role the intelligentsia often slides down the social scale into a mere “service,” rather than “culture maven” capacity.)
- The “expert” gets “access” to state managers and public opinion by appealing to science while denying any political or cultural agenda that might conflict with the norm of American pluralism, and can exercise great covert power for good or evil through the subterfuge, indeed may reproduce in a disguised form the very dominance of class- and culture-specific values that ideology disavows.
- Cultural *bazaari* peddle absolutely anything that will sell to the enormous mass of would-be upwardly mobile first, second, and third generation post-imperial immigrant subgroups, working in Hollywood, commercial television, Madison Avenue, the self-improvement industry, Fashion Avenue, the home design and home decorating trades, the music business, the design of RVs, power boats, and mail order catalogues.

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It is of the *bazaari* role, shared with inventive entrepreneurs with no high-toned background at all (Cecil B. DeMille, John DeLorean, Crazy Eddie), that the American intelligentsia should be most proud. There are sinister antecedents in the textile and hardware industries of Manchester and Sheffield that created new designs and new products for the colonial markets of the British Empire, destroying native handicrafts all over the world. But the results in America were more benign: a dose of anarchy in the culture market led to a limited triumph of aesthetic modernism, rather than to the

one-dimensionality or repressive desublimation that was all the Frankfurt School could see.

The influence of aesthetic modernism over the landscape, the machines, the appurtenances of daily life from Coke bottles and paper plates to skyscrapers and picture windows, Miami Beach and Las Vegas, is *partly* explained by mundane factors like efficiency in creating a lot of new stuff fast. But the particular forms of the American cult of the new and up to date flow also from the conditions of post-imperial post-peasant heterogeneity.

There was not much that was genuinely democratic about the aesthetic modernist turn, since millionaires and big capital played the major role, served in the quest for profit by an army of intensely middle class cultural workers. But they were philistine millionaires and big capitalists, selling to a deracinated mass audience. The cultural workers lost power as European elite standards receded before the buck, and gained it as there was less and less to inhibit them from gambling that something truly wacky would get backing and sell millions.

The independence of the lower middle, working, and welfare classes, their émigré freedom from any integrated, hierarchical cultural matrix, made them open to the experimental marketing strategies of new companies with new designs. The notorious conservatism of folk culture was shattered by the very fact of moving to America. When people began to have money, they "bought whatever they wanted" in a way they never would have in "the old country," and their children lack even the memory of those constraints.

The result was not that the diverse forms of peasant taste repressed in the hierarchical societies of Europe or Asia or Latin America could finally express themselves through the free market. A Barbie doll is not a shadow puppet liberated from traditional society. The immigrants had no access to the production of American culture except through the medium of a national intelligentsia that was itself an internally diverse rival ethnic group.

My point is that the army of mainly Yankee, Northern European, and Jewish cultural workers were dealing with a new kind of mass market—one not bound together by any single national culture, one without traditional elites even within its subcultures. The *bazaari* had to innovate because there was nothing "old" they could expect to appeal beyond a fraction of the market. When they found their commitment to modernism and an interest in the most sophisticated aesthetic happenings in other places, they could sell the masses Fiestaware, the art moderne movie house facade, and the Airstream aluminum trailer, if only they made them, by European elite standards, "loud" and "tacky" enough.

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What we got, putting peasant and folk culture together with economic growth and aesthetic modernism, was very often horrible. There is much truth to the view that the Americans have simply wasted the part of their natural heritage they haven't desecrated, and made tragically little of their now shrinking wealth. But the result is also sometimes thrilling. By contrast, European *low* culture seems dead since the early nineteenth century.

For example, compare German or English with American commercial television. The Yankee product is vulgar, raw, repetitive, extravagant, dead as a doornail for hours at a time, but also bizarre, potentially surprising, genuinely non-elite even though mainly constructed by foresworn elitists pandering to what they regard as the bad taste of the client masses. American television is also visually inventive (e.g., the rise of the video art form, its infiltration of the spot advertisement) and full of odd, endlessly evolving faddish beauty.

European television (Benny Hill to the contrary notwithstanding) is just plain boring. The reason for this, I imagine, is that high cultural standards, embodied in national cultural elites who possess real power through state control of broadcasting, simply will not permit the explosion of experimental profit-motivated vulgarity that is the institutional form for progress. Afro-Anglo-American rock 'n' roll is another epochal event that could only happen when the cultural establishment had lost control of the record industry to the vulgarians.

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Both the horrible and the thrilling represent the first large scale attempt to put aesthetic modernism into practice. Because it was happening only in the US, it seemed peculiarly American. Because it was driven by post-imperial nouveau wealth, it was peculiarly American.

But much of the European and the American self-hating critique of this culture is just the traditional aristo-symp intelligentsia critique of peasants everywhere. Individualism, materialism, and philistinism are Molièrian categories with which to flay the vulgar parvenu not far enough removed from the windowless cottage of his ancestors.

A great deal more of the critique is aimed at aesthetic modernism itself, rather than at anything specific to our shores. The Western intelligentsia in general, and the left in particular, has been hostile to its own avant garde (when the intelligentsia fails to react in this way, the avant garde has to invent

something new to "blow their minds"). Since the avant garde has exercised more influence over popular culture in the United States than anywhere else, a traditionalist (i.e., aesthetically reactionary) left intelligentsia finds U.S. culture particularly hard to stomach.

In spite of the critique, or in blissful ignorance of it, the American fusion of independent mass taste with modernist aesthetics has "taken off." The younger generation of intellectuals tend to see it as an organic national style, with its own internal dynamism, to be hated and appreciated in its particulars rather than deplored as a whole. What was once a crude "pidgin" mixture of two wildly disparate cultural languages (peasant and avant garde) has become a "creole," a language in its own right, capable of developing, indeed sure to develop in ways that will involve and surprise us.

The lesson of this experiment for Western Europe, shifting uneasily in the bonds of American cultural imperialism, cannot be that tradition is best. An aesthetic tradition that has become an "option" is just antiquarian bad taste, as the decimated folk cultures of the Third World attest. The Europeans will have to make something new of bits and pieces that now include modernism itself.

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If the relationship between the American intelligentsia and the American "masses" is at all as I've been describing it, it was never likely that radical intellectuals in the US could live the European dream. We simply lack the base of traditional authority that has been the hidden underpinning for the influence of thinkers on European radical politics.

Of course, there is more to it than that. The American state does not exist in the sense that the national states of Europe exist, because of the fragmentation of formal political power not just through federalism but also because of municipal home rule and regional administration by autonomous agencies. And the American working class seems obviously ill-adapted to the role of "virgin soil" for the wielders of the "lightning of philosophy."

It seems unlikely that radical intellectuals will exercise significant power through representative democratic institutions (above the municipal level), and more unlikely that they will succeed at or even be drawn to revolutionary direct action. It seems to me that, in America at least, we would do better to take seriously the sixties injunction to "organize your own people." By this I mean that *radical intellectuals should entertain the project of radicalizing the intelligentsia by splitting its soft liberal center into opposed left and right groups.*

•8a•

The American intelligentsia is numerically enormous, partly because the US is such a big country, and partly because the educational system is much larger in relation to the economy as a whole than it is anywhere in Europe. There are many millions of intellectual workers. Within occupational subcategories, we have multitudes where European countries have coteries. (For example, there are about 5,000 law teachers in the US.) This intellectual mass is just too big to be elite. But it *is* a significant social and economic force in the society as a whole, in the mode, say, of the unions or the financial sector.

The sheer numerical size, non-elite social character, and decentralized work organization of the intelligentsia make it a good terrain for the creation of small autonomous radical networks in workplaces, and a potentially significant base for dissident politics. The tradition of voluntary groups in the United States is very strong, and provides a kind of human capital for the uncentered politics that follows the demise of the industrial-state order.

The first implication of this approach is that radical intellectuals should learn the skill of workplace organizing. Most of us have had experience of successful autonomous radical activity through the single issue petition, fundraiser, or newspaper ad, putting together conferences or putting out publications for a left audience, or perhaps contributing to the issues staff of a political campaign.

What I am proposing is closer to, indeed an extension of the strategy of forming feminist and minority networks within professional subgroups, and black or women's caucuses in professional associations. But it is still different from these forms of activity, and difficult in its own particular way. It is a matter of conjecture whether radical intellectuals could succeed at it even if they were willing to try.

Workplace organizing involves long-term, multi-issue, emotionally complex relationships, both with allies and with opponents. Single issue organizing and networking pick mutually sympathetic intellectuals from their different contexts for a short time, and can treat opponents as emotionally distant targets for rhetoric. In the workplace, opponents are dangerous colleagues toward whom one feels ambivalent. There is dependence as well as confrontation. Allies are more like family members, with whom you have to work things out against the background of long involuntary association and mutual critique, than like "signers" or "people who agree with our position on *x*."

For all its difficulty, workplace organizing has a particular claim on us, just because it involves the detailed transformation of everyday life situations. The mobilization it induces, even if it involves small numbers, may be deep and enduring in a way that reform through state action may not be. But beyond that possible practical advantage, it reflects the underlying radical commitment to the humanization of work.

If we already knew how to humanize work, it might be plausible to argue for applying our knowledge first and most urgently to the lives of the "masses." But we don't know how to do it, either how to organize even ourselves for self-determination, or how to determine ourselves once organized. It seems fair to ask a person who aspires to be the "brains of the people" in the project of radical change to do at least an apprenticeship in his or her own back yard before offering us enlightenment.

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A first reaction to this proposal is likely to be that the material interests of intellectuals are so far divergent from those of the oppressed and exploited groups in American society that it is utopian to expect them ever to ally with those groups. I have two responses.

First, the proposal is to try to split the intelligentsia along a left-right axis, not to convert it en masse. Ideal or cultural interests and commitments, as opposed to material ones, play a real role in the life of this group. How the material and ideal or cultural interests intersect with politics cannot be determined a priori through a class analysis that never worked and that practically no one even *thinks* they understand anymore. The work of framing issues, interpreting situations, and organizing people *might* split the mushy center.

Second, the interests of the intelligentsia are harder to determine than traditional class analysis suggests. It is in many ways an autonomous corps with interests that diverge from those of all other groups, at the same time that the interests of particular members are in internal conflict. If it is true that the world is moving into some kind of post-industrial age, it will become harder and harder to argue that *any* group of this size is a totality occupying a *structural* position either of alliance or of inevitable opposition vis-à-vis any other group or groups.

High tech, decentralization of industry, the blurring of the distinction between service and manual work and of the class lines based on it, and the effacement of the membrane between state and civil society, will make politics more and more diffuse and pluralist. Whatever can be said at the very

abstract level of class material interests, the issues confronting cultural workers will continue to converge with those facing other workers in all sectors of the economy, so that alliances will be possible, though not in any sense inevitable.

Quite apart from the issue of material interests, the idea that organizing the intelligentsia could be a (not *the*) central activity of radical intellectuals seems to strike most of us as elitist and self-indulgent. The intelligentsia looks parasitic and privileged by comparison with Central American refugees or the black underclass, and the workplace and "lifestyle" issues that preoccupy it look frivolous compared to Reaganomics or the nuclear freeze.

This reaction seems to me a hang over of the traditional left European understanding of the political role of the intelligentsia. For white male radicals especially, it has been easy within that framework to explain why, over the last 15 years, we have done very little actual organizing of *any* social group (contrast the women's movement or the Jesse Jackson campaigns). We have taken either the attitude that "the times are not right," or that what we have to offer is "thought," which will find agents to put it into practice if it is theoretically sound.

When our "thought" is directed to the overall structure of late capitalism or to the problems of the groups most oppressed by late capitalism, we have felt politically correct, at least to the extent it is possible to be politically correct in a compromised class position in a time of mass quiescence. This attitude derives from the idea that a radical intelligentsia is the "theory" part of a mass movement of the left.

When we work on issues, it is important to us that they be issues that transcend intelligentsia interests, even though we find ourselves involved *only* with other intellectuals, just because working on issues is the closest we come to involvement in the political life of the country. It is important to be able to imagine that we would be playing the (European intelligentsia) role of acquiring state power to transform civil society according to a rational plan, if only the masses had the correct consciousness that would bring them into our camp.

Radical intellectuals who adopt these attitudes often seem to have split themselves into three parts: theorists of the left, coopted participants in the workplace and family arrangements of the dominant liberal culture, and issues activists networking with other intellectuals outside the workplace and also outside formal political institutions. I am arguing that not only the personal but also the professional is political, and that we should make intelligentsia workplace struggles a central part of our political lives.

This strategy involves the risk that to the very extent the left was successful in organizing intellectuals, it would indeed slide into parochialism. For this reason, the strategy looks more problematic, to me as an outsider, for feminist and minority intellectuals than for white males. Feminist and minority intellectuals have more substantial connections, to the women's movement and the minority communities, than white male intellectuals have to the working class or any other group outside the intelligentsia.

I am not suggesting abandoning any current strategy that works, but rather that we look for a new source of energy. Workplace organizing might build a left intelligentsia of a kind that has existed neither in America nor in Europe, one that would be capable of acting as a coalition partner with other organizing groups, rather than as theorist or tragic chorus. We could do more for the working class and for the various oppressed minorities of the US if we converted a substantial fraction of the liberal center to radicalism than we will ever be able to do within the European intelligentsia model.

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Organizing around workplace and lifestyle issues of the intelligentsia doesn't mean putting the choice between brie and hot goat cheese at the center of politics. We should look to the experience of the intelligentsia as a "quasi-ethnic group" in American society, and *see if the particular experiences that set that group apart from other groups provide the starting point of a left wing organizing strategy.*

Like the culture of the masses, that of the intelligentsia is more independent, and less an absence of Europe or an imposition by capital, than the orthodox view allows. Here are three traits:

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The intelligentsia has been strongly influenced by Freudian psychoanalytic ideas, by progressive education, and, since the sixties, by humanistic, third-force psychology. Everyday life in left culture, in particular, is saturated with "process-orientation." T-groups, touchy-feely, Esalen to EST, a thousand university-level training programs for social workers and others in "human services," have created a vocabulary, numerous conflicting styles, a kind of psychologistic consciousness that does not yet exist in Western Europe except on the fringes of the Green movement.

This development has political meaning, dramatically reinforcing the anti-sectarian, free-wheeling, anarcho-democratic, egalitarian, small group

oriented, improvisational strand in American left politics. It has also made it more respectable for middle class progressives to focus on organizing themselves, and on developing internal group processes, rather than joining or trying to create working-class organizations. The psychologistic style infuriates or just repels more traditional American intellectuals, whether of the left or right.

The workplaces of the intelligentsia are authoritarian, hierarchical, and repressive when judged by the standards that psychological humanism sets for group life. Most of the supervisors and workers in universities, hospitals, newspapers, and the like see themselves as subscribing to a vague list of humanist values that they know might be but never have been applied in their offices. It is often puzzling that there can be such consensus, however vague, and so little practical reflection of the consensus where it seems most relevant.

This is the first set of issues for intelligentsia workplace organizing. Taking humanism seriously within a formally liberal but actually repressive workplace can split the workforce along a new axis. Many who quite sincerely subscribed to liberal or humanist platitudes will find they don't like them at all when put into practice. Others will discover themselves as left political activists.

The next step is the formation of left minorities and the exercise of some real power in office politics, as opposed to the current situation of radical grumbling at the fringe. The slogan should be not "'68," the failed revolutionary moment, but "the '60s," a diffuse cultural rebellion with a thousand specific implications for daily life in the '90s.

•9b•

One of the things middle class white male intellectuals believed most strongly in the 1950s and early 1960s was that Europeans were more sexually "advanced" than Americans. This meant more pre-marital and especially more casual sex, toleration of extra-marital affairs, less censorship of sexually explicit books and films, skinny-dipping and nude sun bathing, more open, less tacky prostitution, and the Folies Bergères.

Europeans had a critique of American culture as up-tight Protestant, but also as child-centered and Momist. American women were innocent, energetic, wholesome, but also intrusive and dominant if given half a chance. American middle class men had renounced the fundamental male

prerogatives of the café, the gang of guys and the mistress in exchange for the gilded cage of suburbia.

That seems a very long time ago. Middle class white male intellectuals have undergone an experience—traumatic, transcendent, boring, epochal—of sexual liberation followed by white middle class feminist revolt that has left us confused and uneasy at home but distinctly supercilious abroad. The strongest and most successful social movement, cultural critique, and emerging political force in the United States is the women's movement. (There are brilliant feminist theorists in Western Europe, and they have begun to influence the American scene. But my impression is that feminism has barely begun to disrupt daily life—even that of the intelligentsia—and that in this respect Western Europe is simply a primitive milieu.)

The workplaces of the intelligentsia have always been full of gender politics, played out between men and women (it used to be bosses and secretaries), men and men, and women and women. But the issues have changed as more and more women have moved into professional and managerial positions. There are the almost invisible forms of discrimination against women at the top, and also changes in the polymorphous ways we sexualize our workplaces as men and women try to operate as equals within supposedly merit-based formal hierarchies.

Gender is grained so finely into the slightest of interactions that it would be impossible, even if it were desirable, to deliberately eliminate all its effects. But I think we should accept the radical feminist insight that our culture not only inculcates but also eroticizes the submission of women to the power of men. Male and female identity are socially constituted so that sexual pleasure reinforces gender hierarchy in everyday workplace relations, no matter how much we emphasize legal and institutional and even personal "gender blindness." When eroticizing domination and submission interferes with women's exercising power as equals, we should fight it, the way we fight other politically incorrect emotions, like, say, the desire for job security at any cost.

The project of organizing the intelligentsia is also that of figuring out how people of different genders and sexual preferences can cooperate *during* and *after* the moment of undiluted, intense, antagonistic otherness in which these patterns of subordination are fully acknowledged. It is not for straight white men to theorize or direct the rage against us (rage that is in no way less valid because we identify ourselves as leftists). The point (for us) is to learn to suffer it, control our inevitable counter-rage without groveling, change to the extent we can, and see what happens when the next gender issue cries out for coalition.

The hope is that post-rage, post-change coalitions will sometimes be intimations of what it would be like to have less of our being controlled in spite of ourselves by our histories as superiors and subordinates.

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In the 1950s and early 1960s, many intellectuals—white and black—believed that Western Europe was a place without deep race prejudice. That too seems a long time ago. It no longer seems likely that there is any place, or will soon be any place that is free of racism in the way we imagined Western Europe might be.

In the US, the white left is haunted by the memory of the early civil rights movement, the passionate feelings of self-discovery and of rejection when black pride and black nationalism emerged in the late sixties, and something between unease and anguish that twenty years later the issue of race sits just out of view in every discussion of social policy, every utopian discussion, every attempt at organizing *anything*. (In Europe, the best thing that could happen might be for guest workers to shake white society to its foundations.)

At the rhetorical level, the institutions where intellectuals work have embraced affirmative action more explicitly and more insistently than any other part of the economy. But the managers and much of the white staff of those institutions also see the goal of increasing minority presence as in direct conflict with the meritocratic principles that justify their place in the larger society. Common or garden racial prejudice is formally rejected at every level, but discrimination still works in myriad ways often invisible to whites, and institutional racism reigns supreme.

The result is hypocrisy, and lots of individual injustices to minority students, applicants for intellectual jobs, candidates for promotion, authors seeking publication, would-be institutional managers. An intelligentsia workplace organizing strategy has to be about these issues, and some success in creating coalitions across race lines within the intelligentsia seems a fair test for any claim by white radicals to participate in coalitions with black, Hispanic, or Asian masses.

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We can form coalitions through, not in spite of, the acknowledgement of a permanent condition of alienation within which there is no transcendent theory. There are only the theories that particular people, diffusely grouped according to what they experience as irreducible in themselves, are making

as tools in the undefinable project of liberation and community. This white male Talk aspires to be more than Chat but less than Thought, however paradoxical such an ideal may be. The left values associated with the particular historical experience of the American intelligentsia are not so much “things we know to be true that the authoritarian, sexist and racist larger culture refuses to learn from us,” as things to work on at work tomorrow.

•10•

The radical intelligentsia I have been describing is one of the endless plurality of cultural sub-groups within the United States rather than an organically powerful element in the class hierarchy. Our hope lies not in philosopher kingship nor indeed in any kind of state power, but in organizing our own millions with a view to linking up one day with other organizing millions. In the interim, there is the sense of loss and sense of gain that come of putting aside the lightning of philosophy to take tea with the bourgeois gentilhomme.

July 10, 1988