

AMERICA. *Lite*

*How Imperial Academia Dismantled Our Culture
(and Ushered In the Obamacrats)*

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America-Lite



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DISMANTLED OUR CULTURE
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For my Jane, my mother and my father

Acknowledgments

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prologue

Before and After

EVERYONE KNOWS THAT AMERICAN CIVILIZATION CHANGED IN THE 1960S and '70s. When President Obama's generation reached adulthood in the 1980s and afterward, the nation had altered fundamentally from the one in which their parents grew up. A revolution in American culture had transformed the landscape. Let's take a quick tour around this cultural revolution—glance it over from outside. Then we will stop the bus and get off and look deeper.

Before the cultural revolution, it was taken for granted that instilling patriotism was a duty of every U.S. public school. After the revolution, ROTC disappeared entirely from the Ivy League, not to return until 2011.

Before the cultural revolution, America was assumed to be a Christian or Judeo-Christian society. As Britain struggled against Nazi Germany in 1940, President Roosevelt said in a radio address, "Today the whole world is divided between human slavery and human freedom-between pagan brutality and the Christian ideal."

Before the cultural revolution, police duties used to be described as protecting the citizenry from "crime and vice." "See you in church" meant "see you around." "Red-blooded American" was used routinely and without irony, as in: "Hemingway and Steinbeck are red-blooded American authors."

Before the cultural revolution, literature, music and fine arts were increasingly the property not only of the rich but of the educated middle classes. When John Kennedy invited Robert Frost to read a poem at his inauguration, Frost's poetry was known all over the English-speaking world. Frost himself was a first-rate international celebrity, along with other big-league artists. A Hemingway or Calder, a Leonard Bernstein or Copland or Picasso was respected in the art world, but all these men were top-draw celebrities also. Today, virtually no one outside the arts community knows of a living poet, painter or classical composer.

Before the cultural revolution, there was no sex education in public schools. Sex and sexuality (including homosexuality) were inappropriate topics for classroom discussion in high school, not to mention the lower grades. Before the cultural revolution, access to birth control was restricted, in theory, to married couples. The legal status of abortion was regulated separately by each state.

Before the cultural revolution, there were no coed college dormitories with young men and women living in bedrooms on the same floor. Before the cultural revolution, visiting between men and women students on campus was regulated by "parietals," which limited male visiting in female dormitories to certain times, and usually required girls to return to their dormitories by set hours and to sign out before leaving for the evening, listing their destinations or plans. When men visited women in their rooms or vice versa, the "three on the floor" rule came into play: the door must always be open and there must be three feet on the floor the whole time.

(I remember learning about parietals, when I was a young teenager, from a college

student who had witnessed their abolition with satisfaction. He was a counselor at tennis camp, a type of summer camp where you did nothing but play tennis all day long, grunting occasionally as needed; no nonsense about tents or kayaks or campfires. In the late 1960s, you wore white on the courts—not pale buff, not powder blue; *white*.)

Modern commentators are apt to express routine anger that girls were regulated so much more strictly than boys. But the colleges were legally *in loco parentis*, in the parent's place, until court decisions in the 1960s and '70s freed them from this tight spot; and they set a more careful watch on girls because girls were more vulnerable than boys, more likely to be abused. Do modern liberals deny that women are more likely to be abused? They like to believe that the sexes are interchangeable. And they'd also like to believe that crimes committed by men against women are a much worse problem than crimes committed by women against men—which is only common sense. But you can't have it both ways. Are we interchangeable or not?

The destruction of the etiquette that used to govern relations between men and women, along with many other rules of the social road, is one of the deepest, darkest consequences of the revolution, and one of the least understood. Of course, custom and etiquette evolve constantly, and new customs arise to replace old ones. But it takes many years for new and natural customs to emerge. *How else but in custom and in ceremony / are innocence and beauty born?* (Yeats.)

The deliberate smashing of etiquette in the wake of America's cultural revolution—everyone please toss your ancient crystal stemware *that way*, straight into the fireplace, thank you!—reminds one of similar destructive acts early in the French and Soviet revolutions. The French quickly returned to their old ways (“think left, live right,” say the French, dropping their principles in the trash on the way out), whereas post-Soviet Russia remains a lawless and dangerous society. America, on the other hand, still has two deep reservoirs of manners and etiquette: the military and some conservative churches. America is always a special case, and this story is not over yet.

What many observers fail to consider when they shrug off or laugh off the protocols that used to govern social relations, especially between men and women, is that “good manners” and “proper etiquette” are names for *formal* behavior. And everyone carries out formal rules in approximately the same way. Formal behavior is rehearsed. Informal or unmannerly behavior is improvised, unrehearsed. Because it is unrehearsed and improvised, it reveals personality in a way that formal behavior never can. Mannerly, formal behavior is a screen protecting from view the informal, improvised behavior that is self-revealing.

“Do not expose your private affairs, feelings or innermost thoughts in public. You are knocking down the walls of your house when you do.” (Emily Post, *Etiquette*, 1940.)¹

In assaulting the protective shell provided by etiquette or good manners, the cultural revolution and its consequences promoted the destruction of privacy; in fact, of the whole idea of privacy. The internet, too, makes it easy to party naked. The extent to which young people responded to the internet by voluntarily stripping off their privacy is startling. But it wouldn't have happened—not to the same extent—if the revolution hadn't prepared the way. Andrew Ferguson recently wrote about the mainstream press's incomprehension of Donald Rumsfeld, who was unwilling to reveal his

innermost emotions in public, even while being interviewed by the highest-paid talent on television. ² Bitter old man.

Before the cultural revolution, one's elders and those in authority were sometimes addressed as *Sir*, *Madam*, Miss. First names were used ordinarily by permission, among friends. College teachers called their students "Mr. Robinson," "Miss Whitney," as if they were grownups. These small touches gave society a more formal and therefore a more private tone.

Custom and ceremony, manners and etiquette are eggshells easily crushed, impossible to reassemble. The etiquette between teachers and students that made colleges function socially and not just intellectually, and—vastly more important—the customs that governed relations between women and men (or rather, ladies and gentlemen) were largely destroyed. It was easy for feminists to order men to stop treating women like ladies: taking off hats, rising, holding doors, leading the way downstairs and following upstairs, paying a lady's way when you have asked her out, and so on. Men were only too happy to oblige. Men never were big etiquette enthusiasts.

But it turned out that this sort of etiquette was the rubric under which nearly all other sorts were organized. The sledgehammering of the ideas of "lady" and "gentleman" led to the destruction of good manners generally. And feminists, despite their terrible strength and Achillean wrath, would have been unable—had they tried—to invent and impose a new etiquette to replace the old. A new crop of manners must be patiently awaited. Such crops mature slowly, over generations.

One change is harder to see and measure than any other; it can only be felt. But it is the most important of all. In a previous book, *1939: The Lost World of the Fair*, I put it this way:

Authority still lingers in small pockets here and there. But those are tidal pools; the grand sweep of ocean is far away. Power remains today just as it always has, but not authority. Authority has all but vanished. Its disappearance from American life is just as significant an event, I believe, as the closing of the frontier.

Authority in 1939 New York was vested, of course, in the country's powerful and popular president. It was vested in Mayor LaGuardia, Parks Commissioner Moses, renowned pastor Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick of Riverside Church, Columbia University's eminent president, Nicholas Murray Butler; and in teachers, priests, rabbis and ministers throughout the city, in the *Herald Tribune* and the *New York Times*, in mothers and in fathers. Authority was vested in the cop on the beat, even in the railway conductor on his rounds. ³

The cultural revolution swept it all away.

And the most far-reaching of all revolutionary transformations : in the two decades following 1965, the proportion of young mothers who worked full-time rose from one-third to two-thirds. This colossal shift of energy and focus had deep consequences for the economy, for the rearing and education of children, and in the unease so many young parents feel so persistently. The economic consequences were large and good, although they have been insufficiently studied: breaking open a vast new keg of

potential talent was steroid for American productivity. But who keeps track of the costs? Perhaps those are recorded only at the deepest levels of human personality laid down in childhood, never revealed.

So the cultural revolution's message—its doctrine, viewpoint, ideology—covers many topics, from race to religion, from attitudes about America to beliefs about the meaning of family. You may approve some or all of these changes. Whether you do or not, you cannot deny that the United States has been profoundly transformed. Before the cultural revolution, Americans lived a different kind of life, in a different texture of time.

chapter one

Intellectuals and the Cultural Revolution

IN 1957, WILLIAM DEVANE, DEAN OF YALE, MADE A CASUAL STATEMENT THAT no one noticed at the time. But in retrospect it's remarkable.

Our national leaders for the most part are men of integrity, idealism, and skill; our literary and artistic people command an international respect such as they never had before; our scientists and engineers, especially the latter, are the wonder and envy of other nations; our teachers in our colleges and universities are learned and devoted.¹

In 1957, Americans were pleased with America and proud of it. They had problems and knew it, but were undismayed.

Less than twenty years later, that proud confidence was gone, crumbled like mud-bricks into flyblown clouds of dust. “No one knows which way to turn and which way to go,” wrote the great essayist (and lifelong optimist, patriot, liberal) E. B. White in 1975.² “Patriotism is unfashionable,” he wrote in 1976, “having picked up the taint of chauvinism, jingoism, and demagoguery. A man is not expected to love his country, lest he make an ass of himself.”³ The nation got over its low spirits, but Americans no longer speak about their country the way DeVane did back in 1957.

The dean of Yale had spoken with comfortable pride—the relaxed, easy pride of a father whose child is a success and everyone knows it; the pride of a patriot whose country can tolerate being admired. He expressed the old elite's belief in Americanism.

Among patriotic doctrines, Americanism is nearly unique in being a whole political worldview. Its creed is liberty, equality, democracy, and American Zionism: America as the promised land, the shining city on a hill, a nation tasked by God to be a beacon to the world; to be the world's only biblical republic. Thomas Jefferson, in his second inaugural, confirmed the colonial doctrine of the New Promised Land, of America as the New Israel. “I shall need,” he said, “the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life.”

America had a mission, as Abraham Lincoln said: “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in.” America is always in the midst of great work—making itself better; resolving its contradictions and problems; realizing its own nature; transforming itself step by step, inch by inch into that shining city. “The United States,” said the French minister of culture and distinguished writer André Malraux, at the White House in 1962, “is the first nation to become the most powerful in the world without having sought to be so. Its exceptional energy and organization have never

been oriented to conquest.”⁴ Auden called it, simply, “the first egalitarian society.”⁵

Today, when Americans praise their own nation, they do it defiantly ; that unselfconscious patriotic pleasure is gone. What caused the American mood to crumble between William DeVane’s statement and E. B. White’s? The civil rights struggle couldn’t be the answer; for one thing, it united rather than divided the country, except for the segregationist Old South. Maybe the bitter split over the war in Vietnam explains it. But that can’t be right; can’t be the whole truth. Antiwar protests were powered by the New Left and “the Movement,” which originated in Tom Hayden’s “Port Huron Statement” of 1962, before the nation had ever heard of Vietnam. And the New Left picked up speed at Berkeley in the Free Speech Movement of 1964 and early ’65, before the explosion of Vietnam. Bitterness toward America was an evil spirit shopping for a body when Vietnam started to throb during 1965.

Norman Mailer, an elder statesman or court jester of the antiwar movement, had vented his explosive, histrionic bitterness at American society back in 1956, in the “morally gruesome” (as Norman Podhoretz called it)⁶ “White Negro,” an essay that endorses, backhandedly, black murder and mayhem against whites.⁷ Vietnam was Pandora’s box in reverse, where all the restless, violent, hate-ragged rancor in America came swirling together into a cultural black hole. Not for nothing was the 1955 James Dean movie *Rebel Without a Cause* an icon for Mailer, who mentioned it in his notorious piece, and for the hipsters of the late 1950s, who flowed into the hippies and Yippies and the Movement of the 1960s. First came hatred, then the cause. But why rebel *without* one?

Of course I have already named a cause, or DeVane has: despite its struggles over integration and its Cold War fears and tensions, America was a thriving, powerful, exuberant, virile, blooming nation in the 1950s and early ’60s; and young Americans—the brooding Hamlets among them—were haunted by their fathers’ monumental achievement in making it so. And the sullen, swaggering Iagos felt stifled, and jealous of what their fathers had done without their help: in the Second World War, those fathers had beaten out the very fires of hell. No feat could stand beside that without seeming small, and who would ever admire them as their fathers had been admired? *O, beware, my lord, of jealousy, / It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock / The meat it feeds on.* (Iago to Othello.) But there is more to it.

To find out what, we must reach for a different time and place: Britain during the Second World War. “The sniggering of the intellectuals at patriotism . . . has done nothing but harm,” wrote the great author and thinker George Orwell in 1940.⁸ “In England,” he wrote, “patriotism takes different forms in different classes, but it runs like a connecting thread through nearly all of them. Only the Europeanized intellectuals are really immune to it.”⁹

Forward to 1975, and E. B. White again: “Patriotism is unfashionable A man is not expected to love his country.”

Here is another way of measuring: In the 1950s, the proportion of American children born to unmarried mothers was stable at around 5 percent. During the ’60s it started moving upward, and by 1975, when E. B. White spoke for a nation in anguish, it had reached 10 percent. And it kept rising: to 30 percent in 1995 and 41 percent today. (The 41 percent includes 73 percent of non-Hispanic black children, 53 percent

of Hispanic and 29 percent of non-Hispanic whites.) This is bad news for American children, as we have known for decades. Children who grow up with a father and a mother on the premises do better in almost every way than children of single mothers. Many studies confirm the fact, which (after all) we already knew; it's only common sense.

While the count of illegitimate babies was rising like an apparition out of the desert, the eminent sociologist James Q. Wilson wrote in 1995, "There is no more radical a cultural division in all of history than that between the attachment ordinary people have for the family and the hostility intellectuals display toward it."¹⁰

Many people suppose that intellectuals (as Auden wrote of poets) make nothing happen. But what if they do make things happen? Where would that put us? Up a creek is the right answer. Patriotism has been beaten bloody and the family is on the ropes. It has been a great epoch for American intellectuals.

Intellectuals are rebels without causes. Chess players look for games and intellectuals look for arguments. They *must* champion unpopular causes, *must* oppose society or they will get no pickup arguments—and arguing is their world; it is what they do. "Dispute was his art form," said Mary McCarthy, wistfully, about her once-lover Philip Rahv—a leading figure among midcentury New York intellectuals.¹¹ "He thinks too much," said Julius Caesar about Cassius; "such men are dangerous." Cassius was dangerous not because he brooded constantly but because he brooded about *himself* constantly, and about his grievances. Intellectuals do that.

Intellectuals are always a minority and, no matter how influential they become, they are always the straight man. They almost never rise to the most powerful positions in this or any society. And they make less money than people of comparable education and intelligence in other lines of work. You would have to be an out-of-work, freelance ditch digger to make less—anyway, that's how it seems to intellectuals. They are supposed to have their minds on bigger things than mere stuff got with money, and often they do; but still they have mortgages and bills to pay and children to propel (slowly and painfully) through college, dollar by dollar by dollar, with tuition and fees rising every ten seconds. For all these reasons, disaffection or "alienation" comes with the job. Of course they are rebels. Any society that does not give its intellectuals money, does not give them prestige but does give them cultural influence is grossly foolish; is asking for trouble. And almost deserves what it gets.

Constitutionally aggrieved as they may be, there has been a radical change in the role of American intellectuals: a cultural revolution that took place during the post—World War II generation, 1945—1970. It changed America so dramatically the change is hard to measure or grasp—like a fireworks bloom that leaves you dazed, stunned, temporarily seeing nothing but the flash itself re-echoing in strange colors; or a strong right jab to the face that yields similar results. The revolution transformed America's identity: fixed this nation up with a new life story, new worldview, new opinions. How could anyone miss a revolution—and such a big one?

Answer: the flash (culminating in the grandiose late 1960s) was dazzling, but the changes it created have been emerging gradually ever since. As in all revolutions, the struggle came first and then its consequences, which are still developing. The

knockout punch is quick, but you might spend a long time on the mat. And your face might be rearranged forever.

The conventional view is that the civil rights movement and Vietnam and feminism are what changed the country. But the antiwar movement and modern feminism were *consequences* of the revolution. The civil rights movement sustained and expanded the revolution. For the thing itself, we have to look elsewhere.

The cultural revolution began right after World War II and was concluded triumphantly by around 1970. The effects of the revolution on American society were already making themselves felt in the late '60s, before the struggle was over. The first wave of consequences was complete by the late '80s. And the effects continue to take shape today. The revolution itself was made of just two big events.

First, the Great Reform of elite American colleges, which changed them from society colleges into intellectuals' colleges. The reform was a coup of the intellectuals, in which they took control of a vessel where they had previously only been passengers (and in many cases, third-class passengers). I present no list of elite colleges; the term is elastic on purpose. I'm speaking of a hundred-odd schools, give or take. I will give many examples.

The other big event, simultaneous with the Great Reform but separate from it, was the rise of Imperial Academia. Professional schools and graduate schools and the bachelor's degree itself grew steadily more important. A nation that had once prided itself on its neat display of fancy academic houseplants now found itself surrounded by them, as their outward-pushing branches and relentlessly exploring tendrils pushed into every corner of America's life. The intellectuals' college became the Imperial University. Elite universities had always been influential in American culture, but in the generation after World War II they took charge. Thereafter, American culture was in their hands, because of the enormous influence of their alumni and the direct influence of the institutions themselves—on journalism, business, the arts, every other college in the country and (most important) on grade school teaching at every level.

This changing of the palace guard, and the growing importance of the palace itself, was no mere bureaucratic shuffle. The revolution delivered a powerful message, like an explosive left hook: "Left-liberalism is good for America; left-liberalism is the standard by which all political ideas must be judged." Intellectuals tend to have strong political opinions, usually left-liberal ones. The great critic Lionel Trilling, describing the character of "the American intellectual class," calls it, "through all mutations of opinion, predominantly of the Left."¹² And the cultural revolution didn't merely launch lots of left-liberal ideas into circulation; it allowed left-liberals to capture the plates and the presses and the whole cultural money supply. Thereafter, down to the present, intellectuals have controlled the standard of value in American culture.

Because they are natural rebels, intellectuals are natural left-wingers. Yet the facts are easy to misconstrue. Among intellectuals who care about politics, government and national affairs, about three-quarters (let's say) are left-liberals—an enormous majority, though it would seem to leave plenty of conservatives to go around. But in reality, conservative intellectuals are tremendously rare. The reason is a multiplier effect that's simple and important.

Politics probably matters to around 10 percent of intellectuals; the other 90 percent

don't care much. Within the inner political core, three-quarters is more than enough to set the tone or drift. And the resulting impression in the institution: "the political people around here are strongly Democratic." (Turn on three heaters and one air conditioner, and the room still gets warm.) So the 90 percent of intellectuals who don't care much about politics are likely to become left-libs just to accommodate the committed kernel. And left-liberalism propagates through the intelligentsia like a ripple on a smooth lake. It leaves the committed conservative 2.5 percent unchanged, while nearly all the rest are turned various shades of left.

Add to this the undoubted talents of intellectuals and their propensity to feel distinctly superior to everyone else, plus their relatively low salaries and status (outside their own circles), and there is more than enough to account for an American intelligentsia that's 97.5 percent left-liberal, or thereabouts. It's only human nature.

Today, intellectuals are smothering American society. They are not doing it on purpose, not conspiring. (Do algae conspire to choke a pond?) They are just going about their business.

What is their business? What is an intellectual? "To be a *littérateur*," wrote the great German Jewish thinker Walter Benjamin, "is to live under the sign of mere intellect, just as prostitution is to live under the sign of mere sex."¹³ Substitute *intellectual* for *littérateur* . . .

But that's not fair. We'll try again.

An intellectual is a theory maker. Intellectuals sit on their front porches cutting, sewing, patching, mending theories. An intellectual's job is to account for facts, or replace them, by theories. An intellectual substitutes for the intractable bloody mess called reality a seamless, silken tapestry of pure ideas.

All thinkers use abstraction and invent theories; inventing theories is thinking. But a theory must be transparent and flexible to be any good. When facts change or new facts emerge, the theory must be adjusted or, if need be, thrown out. An effective thinker cares passionately about theories and abstractions but is obsessed with reality, keeps his eye on the ball, never loses sight of the facts.

Intellectuals, however, are subject to a dangerous occupational hazard—dangerous to the rest of the world, that is. The hazard is to study theories instead of facts. Facts are messy and sticky and ugly, the half-sucked lollipops of Fate. Theories are simpler and sometimes beautiful. And so intellectuals are too likely to turn into professional Christos, hiding huge volumes of ugly reality under acres of simple pink wrapper tied with a ribbon. Intellectuals are too likely to be cognitively nearsighted: theories stay sharp while the facts behind them go all fuzzy. "It is a mistake to think that an intellectual is required to be intelligent," writes Mary McCarthy; "there are occasions when the terms seem to be almost antonyms."¹⁴ More precisely: most intellectuals *are* intelligent, but their insistence on peering at the world through cotton-candy theories means that, smart as they might be, they are (unfortunately) predisposed to beliefs that are silly and false.

Nowadays we don't like to generalize, lest we should arrive at inconvenient or forbidden conclusions about some nation or race or religion. "But I am considering each of these groups as a whole," writes Julien Benda, the wise and cranky French Jew who called intellectuals of an earlier generation to account in his masterpiece, *Treason*

of the *Intellectuals* (1928). “This means that I shall not feel myself contradicted by a reader . . . so long as this reader is obliged to admit that as a whole each of these groups does manifest the characteristics I have indicated.”¹⁵

An exclusive taste for the theoretical sets an intellectual apart from other thinkers or writers or artists or scholars or scientists who are just as smart and know just as much as he does. An ordinary thinker hungers for concrete detail. He wants to get down and play in the sand, feel the grit beneath his fingernails, smell the dust, see the quartz points sparkle in the sun: wants to know all about real people and places and things and goings-on. This love of concrete detail is just as clear in Richard Feynman’s classic three-volume introduction to physics (the “abstract” science of physics) as in any good novel or history book. But to an intellectual, those details are just distracting gossip and noise. The theory—the *backbone* of reality, not the trivial little fish bones that encumber it—is what’s important.

A small child might invent a theory that says “a rose is a red flower.” If someone shows the child-theorist a pink rose, he might say to himself, “pink is (after all) merely pale or watered-down red, so my theory is still valid.” Now suppose someone shows him a white rose; he might say, “white isn’t really a color at all, it’s the absence of color, and this poor specimen is probably an albino or some kind of atypical exception. My theory holds.”

So far, he has been acting like any effective thinker. Theories or abstractions are the way we understand the world. The real challenge comes when someone shows him a yellow rose. An effective thinker will say, “I conclude that my theory is wrong.” An intellectual will say, “I conclude that this isn’t a rose.”

Theorizing is the reason men *understand* and don’t just sit passively in the bleachers and snooze. We need theories to think; can’t think without them. Yet theories can be dangerous. To reel round the world with blinders on can be deadly, to you and everyone in your path.

A simple example from the 1960s: Mainstream (left) intellectuals had a theory that all children learn better in racially integrated classrooms. In the South, the races had been separated by law, and it was fairly easy to abolish those unjust laws and allow the races to mix naturally in school. The theorizers then turned their attention elsewhere. In some northern cities, they found schools that were nearly all black. No law said they had to be, but the schools were in black neighborhoods (often slum neighborhoods) where no whites lived, and so, naturally, the schools were mainly black.

But the theory said that *schools must be racially mixed*. So the intellectuals said, “Fine; let’s go find some white children and ship them in—and ship some black children out.” This brilliant solution led to the idiocy of forced busing, whereby white children were loaded on buses and driven right past their own schools in their own neighborhoods deep into strange neighborhoods, where they were dumped in strange schools. Often these faraway neighborhoods were crime-ridden and dangerous, as a special bonus. At the end of the day, the children were put back on buses and hauled home. Meanwhile, black children also found themselves herded onto buses and hauled to strange neighborhoods and unfamiliar schools. It would have been more efficient if a large transport plane had simply scooped up a load of white children at a central depot every morning, and then dropped them—equipped with parachutes, of course—

at all the right places. This might have been the obvious next step had the policy been allowed to mature.

Insofar as race bigotry caused those dangerous all-black neighborhoods, it was unjust that blacks should have had to live and go to school there. But the right solution could not possibly have been to import white children, because that only added a second injustice to the first. But mainstream left-intellectuals care about *Justice*, not justice; not mere human beings. “Disregard for truth and the preference for ideas over people,” writes the English historian Paul Johnson, “marks the true secular intellectual.”¹⁶

Johnson is decidedly conservative, but this view of intellectuals is hardly restricted to conservatives. George Orwell’s view of intellectuals, as Trilling summarizes it, was this: “the contemporary intellectual class did not think and did not really love the truth.”¹⁷ For all Trilling’s courtly restraint in restating it, this is a shocking accusation. *Intellectuals do not think*. “The most irresponsible and corrupt group of all,” writes the thinker and critic Nicola Chiaromonte (about Italy in the post—World War II generation), “is, I would say unhesitatingly, today’s intellectuals. They follow the crowd instead of setting an example, quibble instead of thinking”¹⁸ Worse: they are not *really* truthful (says Orwell). They rate “true theories” higher than mere, trifling, accidental, disorganized, dirty *fact*.

Keeping political theories in tune with reality can be hard, discouraging work. The left and the right are equally apt to neglect it. But just now it happens to be the left that is blinded by obsolete theories.

When young people learn left-liberal theories at school instead of facts, they can’t see America no matter how hard they try. They see only the ridiculous, grotesque masks that intellectuals have fashioned: Western civilization is distinguished mainly by awfulness, likewise the United States; there is no great literature; there are no heroes (or none who are white males); Judeo-Christian religion is a curse; patriotism is absurd; there is no high culture; there are no ethical absolutes; no one has the right to be “judgmental”; and so on. Too many teachers show their students only this horrible *masked* America, because for too many teachers it is the only America they know. They were reared and educated wholly in the Masked Era.

There are two Americas, one real, one masked. The real nation is implausibly large, four hundred years deep in the tall weeds and wildflowers of time, a doer of grave wrongs and magnificent rights, complex but ultimately (beyond all question) great and beautiful. And the masked nation: much simpler, theory-shrouded, yet ominous and frightening and dangerous. President Obama calls himself “a student of history.” But he studied masked America, as we will see.

The opaque, smooth, soft, silken cobweb of theory spun by intellectuals reflects a deliberate choice. The intelligentsia has repeatedly *chosen* not to know mere, concrete, gritty facts. It has chosen to be ignorant of what is actually happening in the world, by picking its facts and news sources to avoid the slightest upset to elegant finished theories or tender and perhaps underdeveloped intellectual organs. Silken shrouds that hide messy details and sharp edges, and make big pictures invisible, are valuable to intellectuals and (so they believe) to their students. An intellectual who teaches at a top college will have students who land fancy, influential jobs, and the ed school that

is part of the university learns to teach masked history too, so it will be passed on faithfully.

Intellectuals invent theories and teach them to Airheads. Airheads learn them and believe them. In an intellectual's classroom, some students become disciples—intellectuals in their own right. Some reject the whole nonsense and become realists. The vast middle group, Airheads-to-be, simply sunbathe and, without making any special effort, absorb a great deal of radiant theoretical wisdom.

Intellectuals don't think; they have already thought. They have figured things out once and for all, and see the world through the delicate pink cotton candy of the theories they have spun. Airheads, on the other hand, never need to think at all. Theories and doctrines are laid out for them, like clothing for a young child by a thoughtful mother. They slip right into their nice neat clothes every morning and head forth to romp. See how happy the president looks in his!

Not all thinkers or educators are intellectuals. Artists obviously think, and some are regular full-bore thinkers. Paul Johnson absolves Edmund Wilson of being an intellectual on the grounds that he was actually a “man of letters.”¹⁹ Such a man knows, reads and thinks as much and as deeply as any intellectual, and might be just as much of a theory spinner. But he is too attached to the nuanced details that make some particular man or mood different from all others to be an intellectual. Mary McCarthy, at one time Wilson's wife, was fascinated by intellectuals because she lived among them, was easily seduced by their blandishments, and could pass for one herself. Yet McCarthy is also pronounced not guilty; she was “not a political animal at all,” writes Johnson, “not really interested in ideas but in people.”²⁰ (The author and (undoubted) intellectual Elizabeth Hardwick calls McCarthy a “woman of letters,” and on that basis alone she is—according to Johnson—not guilty.)

There's also a type of educator whose approach is schoolmasterly rather than intellectual. The schoolmaster might be an artist or scientist or man of letters, but cares also about teaching and approaches it in a particular way—as if it were sacred. The schoolmaster cares about education not just in detail, in his own classroom, but in the large: how is society educating the next generation? He sees himself in historical context. He reveres tradition (not uncritically) and is in that sense conservative. In *Jude the Obscure*, one of Thomas Hardy's characters calls Oxford University “a nest of commonplace schoolmasters whose characteristic is timid obsequiousness to tradition.”²¹ Unfair. No schoolmaster at Oxford (or Harvard or Yale) is obsequious. He feels the majesty of the institution and is borne up by it, driven forward like a fine sailboat before the breeze. But Hardy's sense of the schoolmaster as admiring tradition and having no wish to be loud or bold-colored is true. The schoolmaster might be brilliant, might be a genius, but is nonetheless mannerly, modest, underplayed. And underpaid. But a proper professor in the Oxford or Cambridge tradition is, after all, a gentleman of means. Homer and Horace and botanizing were never meant to be paying professions.

Mark Pattison, head of Lincoln College at Oxford in the late nineteenth century, wrote that “the separation between Jowett and myself [Jowett was master of Balliol] consists in a difference upon the fundamental question of University politics—viz

Science and Learning v. Schoolkeeping.”²² Schoolmasters are apt to make more of teaching or “schoolkeeping” than intellectuals do, but intellectuals are not necessarily indifferent to teaching. It’s only that intellectuals make no distinction between teaching and convincing, or teaching and arguing.

To an intellectual, teaching means winning the other person to your viewpoint. In a sense this is a compliment to college students, who are treated as full-fledged intellectual opponents—until they concede, whereupon they become junior colleagues. But it also means that many intellectuals see nothing wrong in turning their classes into argument and propaganda for their own views—and they do it as second nature, in all innocence. When they are accused of politicizing the classroom, their reactions are sometimes “who, me?” and other times “but how else could I possibly do it?”

“The adversary culture” is a phrase Lionel Trilling invented to describe the belligerence of modern intellectuals and culture-mongers. Irving Kristol notes that this is an old phenomenon, that opposition is oxygen to the intelligentsia, and to some artists too; for “artists and writers and thinkers . . . are outraged by a society that merely tolerates them, no matter how generously.”²³ The adversary culture, the intellectuals’ world, withers and dies without opposition, and that is what we have today at the core of America’s universities: dead forests, still formidable and spiky with their trunks, branches and thorns, but without a leaf, seed, chirp or howl of life anywhere.

The two big events that made up the cultural revolution stand in a rich and weedy patch of history, surrounded by other events that are not quite as tall, but almost. These were cluttered, difficult years for America, a meadow full of rustling wildflowers and junked cars up on blocks, leaking fluid from their rusting guts. During these years, often beautiful, often ugly, there were countless other influences on American culture. The struggle for civil rights goes back to just after the Civil War. The pacifism and appeasement that colored the opposition to the Vietnam War were ancient ideas that had been modernized by the British in the two decades following World War 1.

The antiwar movement stood proudly for everything that was right and just and fun and free and easy, against America in Vietnam, in favor of a North Vietnamese victory, in favor of Black Power. *Against*, above all, every manifestation of the old established American leadership (the *Establishment* for short) that had led America to triumph in history’s most cataclysmic war—a war on two fronts at opposite ends of the globe, against vicious, barbaric enemies. A war that made America admired and even (briefly!) loved around the world. A war fought by nearly the whole country, at least vicariously. A war that made America thoroughly and deservedly proud. And young people, members of the Movement, had missed *the whole damned thing*. To be left out of the greatest production in history and live your childhood in its shadow, its deep dark shadow . . .

The movement to end America’s war in Vietnam was a large event that has long made the cultural revolution itself hard to see. The war’s sharp claws gouged wounds in American flesh that healed slowly and left scars that might never disappear. And it played a big part in radicalizing the U.S. cultural establishment.

That the liberal establishment came to oppose the war bitterly makes it hard to

remember that America in Vietnam was a liberal idea—especially the militarily disastrous first phase, before Abrams replaced Westmoreland in command and Nixon replaced Johnson as president. But more than that, America in Vietnam represented just the same kind of heedless intervention by intellectuals in real life that was vigorously pursued by left-liberal intellectuals at home.

One of those interventionist schemes was the forced busing imposed, usually by court order, between the late 1960s and the early 1980s. As far as people could tell, it did no good whatever—although it did induce many white parents to pull their children out of public schools or just leave town. In 1978, the RAND think tank actually conducted a study to determine *why* white parents were opposed to forced busing. And racism was not the reason! (Yet the theory said it was! What is *wrong with* these crazy RAND people?) Parents were opposed because . . . they wanted their children nearby. They wanted them in neighborhood schools. *What kind of reason is that?* Don't these hicks understand that *the whereabouts of some random white child* can't possibly matter when *social justice* is at stake?

It takes a think tank brimful of intellectuals to discover, by means of meticulous data collection and analysis, what any ten-year-old could have told them free of charge.

Hamlet is the apotheosis of the intellectual. He is brilliant, witty, knowledgeable, a fund of information. He can't wait to leave the royal court and get back to the university at Wittenberg. Pondering constantly, mainly about himself, he treats people like dirt—not deliberately, just carelessly. “Get thee to a nunnery,” he suggests sweetly to his erstwhile girlfriend, before he (accidentally) kills her father without compunction, and mocks her brother's grief at her graveside after she has been driven to distraction and suicide. “The cat will mew, and dog will have his day.”

“Scatter-site public housing” was yet another late-1960s inspiration, in which stable ethnic communities were bombed with multi-megaton low-income housing projects. Those projects tend to destroy the value of other houses in the neighborhood—that is a fact; the world happens to work that way—and many middle-class people put their life savings in their homes. The projects tend to increase street crime: another mere fact, of no significance to the new establishment. Hannah Arendt puts the case plainly (but you can hear her patience wearing thin) in a 1968 letter:

The trouble with the New Left and the old liberals is the old one—complete unwillingness to face facts, abstract talk, often snobbish and nearly always blind to anybody else's interest. . . .

The hypocrisy is indeed monumental. Integrated housing is of course quite possible and absolutely painless on a certain level of income and education, and it is a fait accompli in New York precisely in the expensive apartment buildings. No trouble whatsoever. The trouble begins with the lower income groups, and this trouble is very real. In other words, those who preach integration etc. are those who are neither likely nor willing to pay the price. And then look down their educated noses upon their poor benighted fellow citizens, full of “prejudices.”²⁴

The Vietnam War and the left-liberal domestic policies of the late 1960s and the '70s were equally inventions of the newly bold, newly powerful American

intelligentsia. In fact, they were two facets of the same war: the war of left-liberal interventionists against reality; the war of clean, elegant, elevated theory against messy fact. “They will hardly have the natural scientist’s patience to wait until theories are verified or denied by facts,” Hannah Arendt says of policy-making intellectuals in government. “Instead they will be tempted to fit their reality—which, after all, was man-made to begin with and thus could have been otherwise—into their theory.”²⁵

Today, intellectuals still attack social problems or alleged problems with the sledgehammers and welding torches of their people-blind theories. For example, Title IX is a 1972 law, an amendment to the 1964 Civil Rights Act, that has to do with equal treatment of men and women. Under this law, according to the bureaucratic powers that be, the number of women in college sports must equal the number of men. So *what* if that causes men’s teams to be junked all over the country? What are a few dozen, hundred, thousand disappointed young men (who even knows how many? who cares?)—what are these mere *individual lives* compared with the noble fight for social justice?

Suppose that men just happen to like sports better than women do? But how *could* men like anything better than women, or vice versa? Such a thing isn’t possible, because left-liberal theory (or Big Brother, or the god of the intellectuals) tells us that men and women are interchangeable—just as our child-intellectual could see that the yellow so-called “rose” was no rose at all; just as fighting in Vietnam by maximizing the count of Viet Cong dead (instead of liberating occupied territory) had to be the right way to do it, because the theory said so, and so did Robert McNamara (Berkeley ’37, Harvard ’39), McGeorge Bundy (Yale ’40) and Walter Rostow (Yale BA and PhD ’40): solid-gold liberal intellectuals every one of them.

Another fact makes the cultural revolution hard to see: names stayed the same while meanings changed. There were elite colleges before and after the revolution—mainly the same ones before and after: the Ivy League universities, a few small, tony liberal arts schools, the Stanfords and Dukes, the University of Michigans and a few other outstanding state schools. In the very top ranks, only the Seven Sisters (Vassar, Smith and the rest)—formerly women’s colleges—lost influence as the world went coed. Basically the list of fancy, prestigious names stayed the same, while the institutions were hollowed out like scraped squash, and new ingredients packed into the old shells.

The top colleges used to be society colleges; they were taken over by intellectuals. And yet they *remained* “society colleges” while society itself was redefined by the cultural revolution. In 2001, Austin Bramwell, who contributed an introductory piece to the fiftieth-anniversary edition of William Buckley’s *God and Man at Yale*, wrote that over the last half century Yale had “lost its unrivaled social cachet”²⁶ without getting anything distinctive in return. If that were true, Yale would *actually* be no better than Harvard! But today, Bramwell’s claim seems false. Prominent families are still eager to send their children to Yale, and the children are still eager to go—not, Lord knows, to learn anything (most of them), still less to become thinkers or scholars or scientists. They go to Yale to become prominent, powerful, successful, and naturally (why not?) rich and famous. And Yale, radicalized and intellectualized as it has become, does a fine job of meeting their needs. Thanks to Yale’s magic wand, they emerge gold-plated and fairy-dusted.