

*Through finely drawn portraits, Leon Fink recreates  
the engaged, exciting, and often troubled world of the  
Progressive Era's public intellectuals.*

# Progressive Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Democratic Commitment

LEON FINK

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Leon Fink

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*To the memory of Herbert G. Gutman,  
Christopher Lasch, and Edward P. Thompson,  
three teachers who treated history  
as the people's business*

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## Acknowledgments

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I WAS FIRST drawn to the subject of this book by an invitation to comment on an excellent paper by George M. Fredrickson on intellectuals and the labor question at the American Historical Association annual meeting in December 1985. The occasion marked the first time since graduate school courses with Christopher Lasch that I had been forced to reckon seriously with the social role of intellectuals as a group. At the same time, without my fully realizing it, two other influences were pushing me in a similar direction. A sense of drift felt by many in my designated field of labor history raised my curiosity about the genealogy of this sub-discipline. And, also in 1985, my advisor and dear friend Herbert Gutman died. Altogether, I sensed a break in my own career and a heightened interest in the background of the profession I had chosen. Soon, plunged into research about the Wisconsin School of labor historians and fascinated with the materials and questions I was encountering, I began to expand my research into a free-ranging inquiry about the intellectual activists of the Progressive Era. By a curious serendipity, my personal quest coincided with the growth of a literature of academic self-scrutiny and disciplinary historiography, as symbolized most meaningfully by Russell Jacoby's *The Last Intellectuals* (1987) and Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream* (1988).

Over the next couple of years, I began to merge my continuing interest in the history of working people and democratic politics with this new stimulus from intellectual history, through interdisciplinary graduate courses on intellectuals and politics and the history of the social disciplines at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill alongside colleagues Donald Reid, Judith Farquhar, and Stephen Leonard. In addition, I enjoyed the advantage of three leaves from teaching responsibilities, including fellowships from the University's incomparable Institute for the Arts and Humanities (twice) and the Kenan Trust as well as the National Humanities

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The fact that the chapters in this book deal with such diverse subject matter has led me to call on a wide-ranging list of scholars for further assistance, whether in the form of quick but crucial references or reaction to drafts of individual chapters. An undoubtedly incomplete list of those to whom I am so indebted includes David Carlton, John Brown Childs, Steven Cohen, Sarah Deutsch, Tom Dublin, Melvyn Dubofsky, James Epstein, Daniel Ernst, Ellen Fitzpatrick, Lacy Ford, Mary Furner, Julia Greene, Cindy Hahamovitch, John Higham, Walter Jackson, Joshua Miller, Christina Nelson, John Norman, John V. Orth, Peter Rachleff, Steven Sapolsky, Philip Scranton, Bryant Simon, Kathryn Kish Sklar, Judith Stein, James Stewart, David Strand, and Joe Trotter. Several academic events—including the Southern Labor Studies Conference, the British Society for Labour History, the University of Wisconsin's Perspectives on Labor History Conference, the Reynolda House Culture and Democracy Conference, and the Triangle Intellectual History Seminar—gave me the chance to try out pieces of the work in process before a stimulating audience.

I am grateful for permission to draw on previously published articles. "'Intellectuals' versus 'Workers': Academic Requirements and the Creation of Labor History" was published in the *American*

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I also acknowledge my deepest appreciation to the librarians and archivists who helped me along the way, especially those at the Special Collections Department, Alderman Library, University of Virginia; the State Historical Society of Wisconsin; the South Caroliniana Library of the University of South Carolina; the South Carolina Department of Archives and History; and the Manuscripts and Archives Department of Yale University Library. My home during most of my research and writing was Davis Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where I have long depended on the consistent combination of cheerfulness and professionalism from the staff at the research, interlibrary loan, and circulation desks. In addition, fellow scholars Will Dunstan and William S. Powell proved valuable and supportive library neighbors.

Historical research is inevitably a collaborative enterprise, but sometimes the sense of cooperation (and indebtedness) is especially acute. In the course of my work I effectively stumbled on three scholars with whom I was at least in part plowing a common field. In each case—Jack Stuart on the Wallings and Mary Mac Motley and Harvey Neufeldt on Wil Lou Gray—my partners welcomed me, giving generously of their own research and insights.

The special situation of Mary Mac Motley—as the great-grandniece of her historical subject—raises another group to whom I owe thanks. I have been immensely aided by the special exertions as well as candid recollections of the descendants of the central characters in this book. Anna Walling Hamburger, Peter B. Lauck, and Mark Perlman have also greatly enriched my effort by their understanding of their parents’ lives and their commitment to the historian’s enterprise.

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Although this project has in many respects represented a diffuse and far-flung adventure, one woman's gaze has helped to keep it and its author in order. Susan Levine has read and reread the multiple drafts of the work and, as ever, has made its writing worthwhile.

I dedicate this book to three people who died during the course of the project but whose lives sustain me still. Different in intellectual focus and political as well as personal styles, they shared a willingness to induct a young recruit into the mysteries of the craft and convince him that history must be a part of any noble dream.

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# Introduction

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IN HIS provocative volume of 1987, historian and cultural critic Russell Jacoby lamented the disappearance of what he labeled “public intellectuals,” that is, “writers and thinkers who address a general and educated audience.” Due to a host of changes—the decline of bohemian urban centers, the rise of a self-insulated academic professionalism, selective repression of academic free spirits, and assimilation of once-dissident Jewish voices—a tradition of engaged, left-wing social commentary (most closely associated in Jacoby’s mind with such post–World War II New York writers as Alfred Kazin, Lewis Mumford, C. Wright Mills, Edmund Wilson, Irving Howe, Dwight Macdonald, Daniel Bell, and Lionel Trilling) appeared to have all but exhausted itself. A younger generation of educated radicals, moreover, had not only failed to occupy the cultural space of its progenitors, but had also appeared to have traded in its own earlier commitment to social and political change for the blandishments of academic tenure and the prestige associated with specialized journals and conferences.<sup>1</sup>

Yet no sooner than it took to say Kaddish for the public intellectual did the figure vigorously, and self-consciously, reappear. The combination of outside attack on the universities, internal self-scrutiny (including Jacoby’s volume), and wider social polarization and politicization led many academics in the 1980s and 1990s to seek new outlets for their work and greater contact with a variety of extra-academic publics. The phenomenon of the new public intellectual (most notably associated with a prominent, if diverse, group of African-American writers and critics) has been duly noted in the nation’s press: indeed, according to one computer archive, no

fewer than 248 stories appeared on the subject between the end of 1987 and the beginning of 1995 in major newspapers and magazines.<sup>2</sup> The impulse for connectedness, moreover, echoed not only in individual authors who managed to escape professional journals in favor of mass-circulation outlets but also in institutional initiatives, such as citizenship education, service, and applied learning programs, which were intended to reunite thought and action on college and high school campuses and to link the campus to the world outside.<sup>3</sup>

Since Jacoby coined the term “public intellectual,” concern for the academic’s social function has become a matter of widespread scrutiny. For humanities and social science scholars on the nation’s campuses, two related trends have been apparent. First, there is an administrative preoccupation with a “return to [undergraduate] teaching” as a necessary corrective to the perceived self-indulgent and professionally driven “research” focus of university faculties. Second, among the scholars themselves there is a renewed search (and renewed cache) for effective connections with a larger audience. While both tendencies in my view hold promise, they may prove disappointing as sources of democratic cultural renewal. (The teaching role I will not emphasize here, except to note that there is obviously a built-in tension between demands to concentrate one’s intellectual attention on—versus beyond—the classroom.)<sup>4</sup>

Quickly shorn of its oppositional political trappings, the idea of the public intellectual has all too easily emerged as simply a new and preferred style of scholarly self-presentation. Connection to an audience, or a public, today pretty well exhausts the common understanding of what the public intellectual is about. Interpreting Jacoby’s text as an unnecessarily pessimistic “jeremiad” on academic narrowness, historian Neil Jumonville concludes his own book-length treatment of the postwar New York intellectuals with the cheerful assurance that “future generations of intellectuals will find or found new outlets for work in the generalist vein.” And indeed, other commentators have already found the species in full bloom. In one recent citation, for example, even former President Jimmy Carter is viewed as “more engaging in his other role as a public intellectual, the accessible yet cerebral commentator who eschews academia’s only-for-specialists approach to writing.” Similarly,

about two prominent African-American scholars we learn that “the *Atlantic* and the *New Yorker* have branded [Henry Louis] Gates [Jr.] and [Cornel] West America’s new breed of ‘public intellectuals,’ because they’re as comfortable inside walls of ivy (Harvard, where they both teach) as on Ted Koppel’s set or the pages of every important periodical.”<sup>5</sup>

The problem with such definitions is that they beg the question of purpose. Market share and celebrity, rather than any serious message or project of social transformation, risk becoming the new standards of intellectual significance.<sup>6</sup> This is surely not what the author of *The Last Intellectuals* had in mind when he warned that “younger intellectuals have responded to their times, as they must; they have also surrendered to them, as they need not.”<sup>7</sup> At least to the extent that Jacoby (and the rest of us) would address a *political* (and not just a communicative) problem facing radical democrats, we must look beyond the constraints of styles of expression and focus on the basic relationships—or lack thereof—between the intellectuals and their would-be coalition partners.

Like Jacoby, I believe that such an analysis requires a historical perspective, yet I prefer to extend the time line of social group formation to emphasize those we might consider the nation’s first, rather than its so-called last, generation of public intellectuals. The pre-World War I American intellectuals, as I selectively review them in the following pages, certainly attempted to engage with a larger public. Indeed, as I see them, a sense of responsibility, even stewardship, of a democratic mass citizenry defines these progressive reformers—accounting at once for their compelling messages as well as their peculiar predicaments. The gap between democratic theory and social practice has long disturbed idealistic Americans, but perhaps never with greater urgency than in the first decades of the twentieth century. Progressive intellectuals characteristically combined individually persuasive forms of expression with specific institutional strategies and political projects of redress. A missionary sense of public service marked their lives; they aimed for more than placing clear prose in commercially accessible outlets. In short, their degree of effort—if not success—I think was greater than that of most of their latter-day counterparts and thus worthy of close inspection by those who would wish to reawaken a public intellectual vocation.

Those I shall call intellectuals—that is, those who play a socially interpretive role as speakers, writers, or group leaders based on their own advanced learning—have wrestled since the early days of the Republic with their separation from the mass of their fellow citizens. On the one hand, the power of democratic ideology, a binding nationalism, and/or an evangelical faith in the redemptive spirit have led a significant number of these uncommonly well-educated men and women to identify with the circumstances and aspirations of ordinary working people. On the other hand, misunderstanding, condescension, and outright disappointment are often the most visible legacy of their initiatives. Intellectuals have played a crucial part in every democratic reform wave in American history; yet just how to advance the ideal of democratic culture and how to act as a cultured democrat remain troublesome questions.

As early as 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson gave eloquent voice to basic dilemmas facing the socially conscientious American scholar. Concerned to transcend the increasingly narrow specialization of roles imposed on ministers and other professionals by a spreading marketplace economy, Emerson sought out a vocation as lyceum lecturer and writer that left him free to address the common good from a position of relative independence. Aiming to reconcile public and private spheres of insight as well as colliding social factions, Emerson's self-reliant scholar would discover the keys to the impartial common good, serving as a kind of moral compass for an undisciplined democracy.<sup>8</sup> Yet the very standards of judgment that Emerson set for himself, in particular his refusal to be compromised by worldly temptation, inevitably set him up for disappointment from that part of the public which did not or could not practice his chosen virtues:

One has patience with every kind of living thing but not with the dead alive. I, at least, hate to see persons of that lumpish class who are here they know not why . . . The worst of charity, is, that the lives you are asked to preserve are not worth preserving. The calamity is the masses. I do not wish any mass at all, but honest men only, facultied men only, lovely & sweet & accomplished women only; and no shovel-handed Irish, & no Five-Points . . . or 2 millions of paupers receiving relief, miserable factory population, or Lazzaroni, at all.<sup>9</sup>

From the beginning, therefore, the American intellectual had chosen a paradoxical vocation: a social critic committed at once to identification with the whole of the people and an elitist whose own mores and life situation would prove somewhat alienating from the very public he or she had chosen to serve.

To be sure, there were intellectuals after Emerson who sought conscientiously to avoid self-alienation from the “lumpish class” or “mass.” Walt Whitman, for one, offered a lyrical, if carefully impersonal, embrace of the democratic crowd.<sup>10</sup> In a ringing defense of the “popular democracy” that had willingly performed a “labor of death” to defeat the “secession-slave-power,” Whitman, in *Democratic Vistas* (1871), defended the masses from outside skeptics as well as their own debilities. Taking note of the long-laid “repugnance between a literary and professional life and the rude rank spirit of the democracies,” Whitman acknowledged the defects of his heroes: “I myself see clearly enough the crude, defective streaks in all the strata of the common people; the specimens and vast collections of the ignorant, the credulous, the unfit and uncouth, the incapable, and the very low and poor.” In the end, he argued, it was precisely the role of government (and by inference scholars too) to educate the masses—“not merely to rule . . . but to develop, to open up to cultivation, to encourage the possibilities of all beneficent and manly outcroppage, and of that aspiration for independence, and the pride and self-respect latent in all characters.” Democratic civilization, he believed, must not rely on “the rule of the best men, the born heroes and captains of the race (as if such ever, or one time out of a hundred, get into the big places, elective or dynastic)” but on the capacity of government “to train communities through all their grades . . . to rule themselves.”<sup>11</sup> Whitman eloquently outlined a vision of democratic intellectual practice; a poet, he left it to others to fill in the details.

In a more strategic manner, Harvard graduate and antislavery agitator Wendell Phillips had similarly beseeched college students for years “to leave the heights of contemplations [and] come down to the everyday life of the people.”<sup>12</sup> In 1881 he returned to the Harvard forum of Emerson’s “American Scholar” address to offer his own instruction to “the Scholar in a Republic.” The “book-educated class of the North,” Phillips thundered, had ever a betrayed a

"chronic distrust of the people." Succumbing to pedantry and elitism if not the direct blandishments of antidemocratic political patrons, professional academics had all too often missed out on the liberating moments of "true education" as in the exploits of a John Brown. Yet Phillips, like Emerson, looked to the independent intellectual as a positive, even potentially redemptive, democratic force. While the politician and the cleric perforce defended their own selfish interests, the scholar might stand "outside of organization with . . . no object but truth—to tear a question open and riddle it with light." A democratic culture ultimately depended on its intellectuals "to refine the taste, mould the character, lift the purpose, and educate the moral sense of the masses on whose intelligence and self-respect rests the state."<sup>13</sup>

For decades to come, other educated men and women, in the spirit of Emerson, Whitman, and Phillips, would act out the heroic social role of popular tribune and moral prophet. By the late nineteenth century, however, particularly as workers, farmers, and other previously marginalized groups including women and African-Americans organized themselves into tangible political blocs, the image of the "movement intellectual" offered an alternative to the lonely, if independent, voice of democratic sympathy. Labor editors such as John Swinton in New York and Phillips Thompson in Toronto acted out a new wave of democratic culture creation from within the meteoric life of the Knights of Labor. Temperance and women's rights advocates similarly built new communicative networks even as they attended to practical political measures.<sup>14</sup> Educated sons and daughters of the American middle or upper class, such as Henry Demarest Lloyd, Henry George, George Bellamy, Frances Willard, and Florence Kelley, likewise attached themselves to the democratic ferment of their times.<sup>15</sup> In each case, the activist-intellectual's role contained something of the figure of the Emersonian moral critic and something of the Phillipsian agitator, but something new as well. The promise of a democratic mass movement suggested the possibility of a more intimate and permanent connection between ideas, organization, and power: more than a mere catalyst of protest, the scholar might even serve as a leader of the people.

The potential for such a populist bloc uniting intellectuals with

more plebeian social elements in a face-to-face democratic space dimmed considerably by the turn of the century. The collapse of visionary and broad-based social movements like the Knights of Labor and the People's Party narrowed the operative social space at once for independent radicals and middle-class "friends of the working-man." The intellectual-worker alliances that continued were either localized, limited to educational initiatives, and/or increasingly top-down if not paternalistic in execution.<sup>16</sup>

But beyond such contingent influences also lay the irrepressible force of an expanding social division of labor. Education itself, an increasingly formal process, fitted the graduate with an occupation and daily work environment physically removed from industrial neighborhoods. The spreading white-collared middle class sought protection from, not solidarity with, the disorderly elements of immigrant-dominated central cities.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the core elements of nineteenth-century popular democracy were all coming under suspicion. The new, science-oriented universities, like the efficient business corporations that partially sustained them, typically nourished values diametrically opposed to such tradition-centered and patronage-bound institutions as political parties, craft unions, and ethnic families.<sup>18</sup> Not group loyalty and community welfare but individual merit and "objective" standards of performance were the watchwords of the technocratic institutions that both trained and absorbed the nation's brainpower. In the circumstances, "democracy" became less a description of an egalitarian social order and more an abstract alternative—to be debated—of governmental and civil order.

Cut off as they were from any immediate and obvious agent of social transformation, a significant stream of American intellectuals nevertheless not only clung to democratic ideals but developed vigorous forms of both political and cultural intervention. To be sure, such forms varied widely. At one extreme were those who rejected the accoutrements of intellectual privilege and adopted a life of permanent agitation among the common people. Such a spirit, for example, was Morrison Isaac Swift, Williams College graduate and Hegelian scholar who adopted the cause of the urban unemployed in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Attempting to charter a "social university" as a kind of counter-institution for the industrial work-

ing class, Swift in 1891 tried in vain to return his Ph.D. to Johns Hopkins and to have his name “erased from the list of graduates of the university.”<sup>19</sup> In his vicarious identification with the working class, Swift placed himself among that rebellious minority of middle-class intellectuals who would redirect their talents in open defiance of their own social backgrounds.

Another form of intellectual distrust and alienation from American centers of power was manifest in the tradition of “moral criticism” perhaps most closely associated with the philosopher-psychologist William James. It was James who imported the very term “intellectual” into the American lexicon after it had been revived in France amidst the Dreyfus Affair of the 1890s.<sup>20</sup> As Ross Posnock has argued, James articulated “the burden of the modern intellectual as the obligation to express *moral* outrage against modernity, what James repeatedly called ‘all big organizations.’”<sup>21</sup> In the language of the Puritan jeremiad, James summoned a society increasingly steeped in materialist accumulation and political corruption back to its simpler republican moorings.<sup>22</sup> The heroic intellectual, according to this script, might lead the people away from selfish and jingoistic indulgence and toward the fulfillment of America’s democratic promise.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the most direct twentieth-century descendants of the romantic-democratic James were the “Young American” critics—Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Lewis Mumford—who, like James, harnessed aesthetic and even spiritual values to the search for a “revitalized democratic community.”<sup>24</sup> Together, this moralistic tradition of democratic criticism best exemplifies what sociologist Edward Shils has called the “penumbral culture” of American intellectuals: “a society in which the intellectuals—literary, humanistic, and academic—for a century were alienated in sentiment and imagery from the nonintellectual elites, both national and local.”<sup>25</sup>

Most democratic intellectual activists of the early twentieth century, however, fell outside both the rebel and the romantic categories sketched above. Neither fully forsaking their educated or professional pedigrees in favor of pure rank-and-file-ism nor opting for an aesthetic distance from the corruptions of bourgeois society, they engaged—as intellectuals—in practical projects of what they most often called “progressive” political and social reform. Such projects,



however, inevitably bore the weight of problems that stemmed at once from social conditions in America and from the social position of the intellectuals themselves.

As far as the nation went, the issues for reform-minded intellectuals were twofold: *Could* the people prevail? The very material changes wrought by industrial capitalism—urbanization, mass immigration, concentrated power, poverty amidst progress—posed a formidable theoretical as well as political obstacle to democratic values. Many of the initiatives undertaken by populist, socialist, progressive, or later New Deal reformers—whether to municipalize public transit, to secure labor rights, or to provide the modicum of a welfare state—explicitly attempted to redress the problems of inequality and powerlessness in a machine age. Yet there was no obvious or enduring vehicle that would translate progressive ideas into progressive measures, and the obstacles—corporate power, political bossism, the courts—often proved overwhelming.

But another concern followed on the first. *Should* the people prevail? Those who enlisted from above in popular political struggles quickly encountered the frustrations of moving the masses in the direction of what was seen as their logical best interests. Ignorance, fear, cupidity, prejudice—all stalked every effort to rally the People against their Enemies. As early as the turn of the century, many self-styled democrats could not imagine democratic change arising spontaneously from the people; at best, it would need to be carefully laid on or at least brokered and managed by sympathetic experts allied to democratic constituencies.

Aside from the daunting internal complexity of the nation's social problems, the intellectuals' own circumstances also conditioned their response to the perceived crisis of democracy. Twentieth-century reform initiatives drew in large measure on a vast new pool of college graduates and postgraduates who had been at least temporarily freed from inherited social-economic roles. Together, urban-bohemian circles, independent newspapers and magazines, and college campuses provided new spaces for the consideration and amelioration of social ills. From such redoubts a host of new ideas soon helped to transform American education, social policy, and the law, and even—as pragmatic relativism—challenged conventional ideas about knowledge itself. Yet the very buoyancy of this creative