INTELLECTUALS AND POLITICS

Social Theory in a Changing World

Edited by

CHARLES C. LEMERT

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5

KEY ISSUES IN SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

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SAGE PUBLICATIONS
The International Professional Publishers
Newbury Park London New Delhi

For information address:

SAGE Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Newbury Park, California 91320

SAGE Publications Ltd.
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
M-32 Market
Greater Kailash I
New Delhi 110 048 India

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Intellectuals and politics : social theory in a changing world / edited by Charles Lemert.
p. cm. — (Key issues in sociological theory ; 5)
Most of the essays were originally presented at a colloquium sponsored by the Theory Section of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco on Aug. 13, 1989.
ISBN 0-8039-3731-8 (c). — ISBN 0-8039-3732-6 (p)
1. Intellectuals—Political activity—Congresses. 2. Intellectuals—Attitudes—Congresses. 3. Political culture--Congresses. 4. Political sociology—Congresses. I. Lemert, Charles C. II. American Sociological Association. Theory Section. III. Series.
HM213.I5455 1990
306.2—dc20 90-21368
CIP

FIRST PRINTING, 1991

Sage Production Editor: Judith L. Hunter

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This series of annual publications is designed to crystallize key issues in contemporary theoretical debate. Each year, the chair of the Theory Section of the American Sociological Association has the authority to organize a "conference within a conference" at the annual meeting. The intention is to provide a forum for intensive public discussion of an issue that has assumed overriding theoretical importance. After the miniconference, the chair assumes the role of volume editor and, subject to final approval by the series editors, prepares a volume based on the reworked conference papers.

We hope that this periodic focusing of theoretical energy will strengthen the "disciplinary matrix" upon which theoretical progress in every science depends. Theoretical consensus may be impossible, but disciplinary integration is not. Only if a solid infrastructure is provided can communication among different orientations be carried out in the kind of ongoing, continuous way that is so necessary for mutual understanding and scientifically constructive criticism.

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INTRODUCTION

CHARLES C. LEMERT
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MANY SUPPOSE THAT the world has changed. This supposition, so alluring today, is not without its troubles. If the world is changed, then in what does the change consist?

One would imagine, upon reading the news from East Central Europe, that the change of deepest moment is the collapse of the post-World War II political order. But Timothy Garton Ash observes that the demands of Civic Forum for a new Czechoslovakia founded upon an independent judiciary, free elections, a market economy, and the like boil down to little more than the dream of a "normal country in the center of Europe" (*The New York Review of Books,* January 18, 1990, p. 46). Dreams of normality fashioned out of the daily residue of the West's unfinished business are common to struggles throughout East Central Europe, as they are in the Baltic, Central America, and Asia. If, in the same spirit, revolutionary students in China take the Statue of Liberty as their emblem, we cannot, then, draw easy inference from these appearances of world change. The chapters by Craig Calhoun and Michael Kennedy in this volume explain the complicated but direct effect of very traditional Western values on revolutionary thinking in both China and Eastern Europe.

In the same report on Czechoslovakia, Ash reminds us that the 1988 protests against the riot police were memorable for the defiant chant, "The world sees you." One suspects there is truth in this observation. Chinese students in the United States faxing up-to-the-minute news of events in Tiananmen Square *back* into China in June 1989; many hundreds of international observers in Nicaragua on election night, among them Jimmy Carter; the international celebrity status of Lech Walesa, Nelson Mandela, Vàclav Havel—all these, and others, are signs of a worldly gaze of vast scope and acutely focused moral purpose. Yet, Martin Jay's discussion, in this volume, of the all too natural association of visual metaphors with modernizing political domination is fair caution against a naive reappropriation of the global village as explanation for world revolution.

It seems, therefore, improbable that what might yet be changed in the world is either its objective structures or its technical capability to project moral forces across national boundaries. Rather, if there is change of world magnitude, it is more likely an upheaval, deep and wide, in how people *think* the world.

It is, after all, very difficult today to possess a settled conviction about the state of world politics. Political opinions, even those voiced with conviction, seem less able to enforce, or even to hold, position against the resistance they encounter. At the moment, in the early 1990s, Presidents Gorbachev and Bush are apt metaphors for the state of thinking about the world. Inheritors both of world power, neither seems quite certain what to say about the events unfolding before him. Each resorts impulsively to threat of invasion, and its execution, in Lithuania and Panama. Yet, neither is able to put a persuasive spin on these moves. The surer voices are the calmer—those of Vàclav Havel, Lech Walesa, Fang Lizhi, Vytautis Landsbergis, Nelson Mandela. They are, perhaps, more certain to the degree they have done their thinking in local jails or otherwise under threat.

Though we cannot yet know the effects of a nationalist urge on these expressions of just but local concerns, one can consider this to be the change in the world: Those with global power deploy their authority in the absence of compelling ideas; while those with limited, or no, real authority revise grand, enlightenment ideas for the humblest of purposes—independent judiciaries, market economies, free elections. When these staples of democratic political theory are announced in sane, well-measured tones, one finds them shocking perhaps by virtue of being clean of the menaces by which in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries they were used to justify the worst sorts of global ambition. Jeffrey Alexander's defense and elaboration of democratic ideas, and George Ross's description of the shift, in France, from grand and global ideas to a milder, familiar liberalism may be signs of the times. Normal uses of simple ideas may, at the moment, be exceptional. Normality arising from a shift in the balance of power between power itself and knowledge may not be so terrible after all.

Readers of this volume will have the advantage of seeing more clearly the shaped meanings of events of the moment. Yet, the authors contributing to this book's open-ended discussion of politics and intellectuals are well within their rights to frame their thoughts with current politics in near or, at least, shadowy background. Though each is an accomplished academic thinker, none is exception to the rule of contemporary social theory that its writers are, one or another way, influenced by the politics of the 1960s generation. All were at least close observers or, at near or remote engagement, actors in the political events to which they refer in their theories of intellectuals and ideas.

Dick Flacks and Ivan Szelenyi possess assured, and well-known, places in the recent histories of American and Hungarian politics, respectively. Roslyn Wallach Bologh, as her chapter makes clear, is one of numerous feminists who consider their academic and scholarly work in the last generation necessarily political. Alex Dupuy is both at home in the Caribbean

region he analyzes and, today, thoroughly familiar with the struggles of those African American academics who, like feminists and others, must consider the university a political field. George Ross lived and worked in Paris close to the political left he discusses. Craig Calhoun was in Tiananmen Square as events unfolded in June 1989, and Michael Kennedy was frequently in Poland during the rise of Solidarity to power. Martin Jay's role in the interpretation and critique of critical theory and other politically intended traditions of social theory has made him a major voice in the politics of theory. No less, Jeffrey Alexander's sustained revision in numerous writings of the traditions of sociological theory owes no small debt to a personal commitment, shared by many others, to reconsider sociology in light of his experiences as a student radical in the late 1960s.

If it turns out to be true that what is changed about the world is how we think the world, then it is reasonable to believe that those contributing to this volume, and many like them, may no longer be considered "mere" intellectuals. I would not wish to press this point to extremes. Alex Dupuy's compelling demonstration of just how narrow the vision of First World intellectuals can be and Ivan Szelenyi's personal confession of the extreme difficulty even a participant has in predicting outcomes are sufficient cause for restraint. Yet, restraint can be its own excess.

There is warrant enough to consider the proposition that very real political events occurring from Wenceslas to Tiananmen squares bear some direct and important relation to changes in the last generation in social theories of the world by, even, academic intellectuals. Social theories are necessarily shaped by the experiences of theorists, most especially the experiences of their youth. The experience common to authors of social theory today is the politics of the 1960s, however refractory or to some (like Allan Bloom) repulsive those experiences were. Think simply of the vocabulary one must now learn—"decentering," "emancipation," "power/knowledge," "fractured identities," "deconstruction," "Afrocentrism," "difference," "the Other," and so on. Whatever one thinks of the terms and the ideas, it would be strange to ignore their affinity to a political history since the early 1960s in which the world has indeed been decentered first in Africa, then in Asia, then in the Europes and the Americas. It is indisputably a world in which difference and otherness, more than merely intellectual notions, are the daily experience of peoples no longer so deeply intimidated by old men in Beijing, Washington, and Moscow.

What is it about intellectuals themselves that they so often doubt that, between ideas and politics, causation can move in both directions? To be sure, social theorists have always recognized and defended the role of intellectuals in history. But it is surprising that, during a time in world history when ideas seem to be making a difference, academic intellectuals remain cautious. Even

granting that skepticism is our proper professional attitude, one cannot help but wonder why academic intellectuals in the United States are reluctant to entertain the idea that the world is changing because thinking is changing. There is, even among those specifically invited to pose bold thoughts, a degree of tentativeness, or outright skepticism, in many of the chapters in this volume. There may be a good, if insufficient, historical reason.

Most of the chapters here were originally presented in a colloquium sponsored by the Theory Section of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco on August 13, 1989. Thus they were shaped to a degree in the days of hope for change in China. They now appear in writing after the changes in East Central Europe. They may be read in the midst of other changes. Important as these events are, it would be wrong not to consider also that, during this same period, the academy in the United States has become increasingly embroiled in a sometimes vicious debate over, precisely, the role of politics in college and university curricula. The specific issue of these debates, provoked first by Allan Bloom's book, *The Closing of the American Mind,* is the list of concepts and texts central to academic social theory. Bloom, any number of Washington bureaucrats, and increasing numbers of conservative faculty and students explicitly fear that the world is changing too much and that these ideas are the cause. They have, accordingly, launched a counterattack. Perhaps those who, at least theoretically, believe in the political power of ideas hesitate to proclaim the power of intellectuals because, many of them just old enough to remember McCarthyism, they see perhaps not the same thing but another kind of broad cultural revulsion against powerful ideas.

The contributors to this book and the ideas they express, whatever their cautions, are sure witness to the principle that social theory is beyond the academy because academics are among those intellectuals who are causing the world to think, and be thought, differently . . . and, thus, to change.

CONTENTS

PART I

Social Theory and Political Intellectuals

Chapter 1

MAKING HISTORY AND MAKING THEORY

Notes on How Intellectuals Seek Relevance

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1. THE DEVELOPMENT OF social theory is not necessarily best understood as happening in a self-contained framework or as arising simply out of desires to make "scientific" sense of the world. To make social theory is frequently to attempt to make history. Social theories are levers intellectuals use to influence power structures, to facilitate political outcomes, to enable groups interested in exercising control to improve their practice, to justify their ascendancy, to achieve their goals, or to advance their interests.

It is, however, too crass to assume that social theories mask intellectuals' efforts to gain power for themselves as individuals or as a class. Theories sometimes have such functions—but it may well be that theorists would rather think and talk than exercise institutional authority and that what most of us hope for most of the time is that our thinking and talking might actually help improve the world.

The problem, of course, is that we do not know how to get our words to make a difference simply by saying them. To teach and speak, to write and publish, does not guarantee that we have listeners—and the audiences we have may not be in a position to use ideas to accomplish the social change we advocate. Intellectuals seeking historical relevance inescapably must search for connection to those capable of exercising social power.

2. Two avenues of historical relevance seem to have typically been available to social theorists. One was to find connection with established power elites; alternatively, one might try to link to social forces seeking to replace or overthrow established power centers. Ever since sociology began as a self-conscious discipline, its practitioners have assumed that the purpose of the enterprise was to improve the capacity of elites to govern, to enhance the rationality of authority, and particularly to enable those in positions of power to understand the potential costs—to themselves and to the social order—of pursuing narrow self-interest and short-run advantage. For example, the more that markets and their logic determined action in society, the

more potential relevance there was in theoretical perspectives that called attention to the social costs of rationalization, industrialization, and desacralization. Sociologists from the beginning of their effort to create the discipline have sought to sensitize elites to the need for certain kinds of planning, tried to provide them with a rational basis for understanding the nonrational, and warned of the potential for social conflict and breakdown inherent in modernization.[1]

To a considerable extent, the development of sociology can be traced in terms of the degree to which the theoretical efforts of sociologists were (and were not) utilized in managing the state and other formal institutions. It was not until the post-World War II period that sociology came fully into its own as a state-sponsored enterprise in the United States. Those who went to graduate school in the 1940s and 1950s constitute the generation with the greatest optimism about how a professionally trained elite with access to the state would provide the means for sociology to achieve social relevance. When I took my first job in the mid-1960s, I was told, by one of the most prominent sociologists in my new department, that there was really only one political hope for sociologists and that was for us to position ourselves to advise the powerful. This, he said, was a highly moral enterprise because, without us, power would be exercised irrationally; with us, there was a chance for the rational exercise of authority. At the time, I thought this advice symptomatic of the man's own, rather unique, conservatism; later, I came to see that he was bluntly expressing postwar sociology's fundamental political aspiration.

Marx (1975, p. 257) provided a very different answer for the intellectuals' problem of historical relevance: "Philosophy cannot realize itself without the transcendence of the proletariat, and the proletariat cannot transcend itself without the realization of philosophy." Philosophy finds its historic relevance in the proletariat; human emancipation requires that the lightning of thought strike deeply into the virgin soil of the people. So wrote Marx at age 25. It is illusory to think that one can have historical effect simply by addressing one's fellow intellectuals in the self-isolating language of the merely theoretical. Moreover, if the goal of theory is human emancipation, how can it be fulfilled if intellectuals ally with elites and strengthen their capacity to rule?

Marx believed that workers, driven by necessity, would organize themselves in their collective interest and that, by participating actively in the working-class movement, intellectuals had a special role to play. Workers might find in their own experience the capacity to engage in local resistance and to win short-run amelioration of their conditions of life. What they would not spontaneously see was their shared historical mission to free humanity from domination altogether. Workers' own experience would not permit them to identify common bonds with workers of alien culture, language, and race,

neither would it enable them to see an alternative social framework that superseded capitalism. The special role for intellectuals in the workers' movement was precisely to teach the necessity of transcending nationalism and overcoming the given structures of property relations—to teach the working class its potential as the social vehicle of universal emancipation. In the *Manifesto*, Marx defined communists as intellectuals who engaged in this kind of teaching. They might be drawn from the working class themselves or, more likely, from other classes—but their historical relevance and their capacity to grasp social truth depended on their readiness to merge their own fate with that of the proletariat.

Marx did not want the communists to form their own party; it was the workers and their indigenous leadership who would establish an organizational format capable of leading and speaking for the workers—and communist intellectuals ought to be participants in that party-building process. The mass working-class party would provide the specific institutional structure that would give the work of intellectuals historical meaning, direction, and influence.

Thus, when modern social theory was beginning to develop systematically, its creators charted two seemingly different pathways for making theory historically influential—to formulate a theoretical framework for rationalizing and professionalizing the practice of ruling elites or to construct a guide for the struggles of the organized proletariat.

3. In the 100 years since, efforts to follow these paths have had rather unexpected results, to say the least. By the turn of the century, some radicalized intellectuals were already impatient with workers' resistance to the historical mission offered them by theory. This impatience, spurred by the revolutionary situation in Russia, achieved its highest theoretical expression in Leninism. Among the ways that Lenin revised Marx was to insist that intellectuals not just merge into the workers' movement but become its professional (that is, full-time, fully self-conscious) vanguard. Communists in the Leninist mold were not simply to teach certain principles and contribute to a broad process of class development—they were equipped by virtue of their theory to take charge of the direction of that development. Lenin seemed to suggest that the very notion of an intellectual separate from full-time revolutionary activism was invalid. To make a difference, one must be a part of a collective that seeks to take the leadership of the movement and that aims to govern in the name of the working class.

In moments of revolutionary possibility, Lenin declared, leadership goes to those who are most selfless, least constrained by problems of personal livelihood, and most capable of seeing the big picture and articulating the boldest strategy. The intellectual as part of the revolutionary vanguard makes history directly, in action and not just words. In the aftermath of the Bolshevik

Revolution, Lenin's way posed a powerful practical and moral challenge to many intellectuals in many parts of the world.

Western European social democratic intellectuals, however, abjured Lenin's revolutionary totalism. Lenin's solution solves the problem of relevance for intellectuals by abolishing the intellectual in favor of a disciplined professional elite of a new type. European social democracy created instead a looser, mass-based party led by professional politicians. It was a structure in which socialist intellectuals could find audience, direction, and relevance. But the routinization and bureaucratization of social democracy resulted in a historic role for party intellectuals that, for many, did not seem fundamentally different from the state-oriented practice of more conservative colleagues. Indeed, to a very considerable extent, twentieth-century social theory has been shaped by the disillusionment of radical intellectuals with the emancipatory potential of the mass party. Michels early on compelled attention to the conservatism and bureaucratism of these parties. The rise of fascism, despite the apparent strength of German social democracy, raised deep questions about the effectiveness of the party form as an instrument of authentic change. The weakness of the social democratic model and the authoritarianism of the Leninist model greatly spurred the development of Critical Theory between the wars, as disillusioned German intellectuals tried to transcend the limitations of Marxist theory for comprehending their world and of socialist strategy as a means for changing it. Critical Theory contributed enormously to the theoretical development of sociology and social psychology—but its practitioners were not able to overcome their political impasse.[2]

In the United States, on the other hand, most politically minded intellectuals hoped that their theoretical and policy-oriented efforts would find increasing influence among the policy elite. The fluidity of the American polity, and the absence of working-class parties, led even socialist intellectuals to seek access to those in power.[3]

By the end of World War II, there was wide hope for a continuing development of the New Deal as a political coalition within the Democratic party and as a governing framework. State-sponsored reform would be designed and evaluated by social scientists. Academically based research would be supported by the public budget and would serve increasingly to identify social problems and test solutions. Trained practitioners of reform would flow out of the professional and graduate schools and into a growing public sector. The welfare state was to be a marriage of social science and social concern. The intellectual, the progressive politician, the labor leader, and enlightened civil servant—all were key elements in the leadership and professionalization of social reform.

Such visions got a big boost during the era of the New Frontier and the Great Society—indeed, it was in the 1960s that this scenario seemed to be really operative. Certain theoretical ideas about the causes of poverty and "social disorganization" were sources of major social programs that strongly affected politics and daily life in cities. Many of the features of the War on Poverty, of programs dealing with crime, and of educational reform were derived quite directly from theories developed by academically based sociologists.[4]

Social theory's moment in the sun turned out to be brief. War on Poverty programs had roots in an analysis that suggested that what the poor needed most were resources and space to organize politically (Reissman et al. 1964). Yet the same state that was willing to provide some sponsorship for a few self-organization experiments in American cities was devoting massive resources to suppressing such organization in the Third World. A Defense Department effort, Project Camelot, recruited scholars in an effort to "predict and influence politically significant . . . social change" in developing nations (Horowitz 1968, p. 289). The entire climate of the Vietnam era raised fundamental questions about the legitimacy of links between intellectuals and the state; the estrangement of American critical intellectuals and the American state that the war created seems, 20 years later, to be a continuing reality.

Such estrangement, however, is hardly total. Large numbers of liberal and left intellectuals would no doubt flock to Washington were an administration ready to show interest in their ideas in place. Indeed, in the last election campaign, the hunger for such an opportunity was evident in circles of politically minded intellectuals—perhaps most particularly among those who might be counted as members of the 1960s generation. The rage many felt toward Michael Dukakis seemed out of proportion to his flaws as a candidate; it expressed perhaps the deep disappointment that many felt in not having access to the national government that seemed, finally, to have opened with the passing of Ronald Reagan.

Thus, although the 1960s experience led to deep questioning about whether intellectuals should ally with the state and smashed the naive progressivism that dominated intellectuals' political discourse until that decade, there seems little doubt that a new wave of reformism in the national elite would sweep up large numbers of social scientists ready to swim in the tide of social change. Such a new wave is, however, proving quite elusive.

4. Something other than the weakness of Democratic party candidates seems to be blocking this sort of development. A deeper problem is that the size and character of the public sector required by statist theory appears increasingly incompatible with the fiscal and political consequences of corporate capitalism.

In the 1960s, the main line of development in the advanced industrial societies appeared to be corporatist. The state, operated by professional politicians, managers, and experts, would steer the national economy and ameliorate its political and social costs within a policy framework shaped by an ongoing dialogue among representatives of the major social sectors. In a postindustrial society, governed in this way, publicly financed enterprises (research and development, education, social service, collective goods production) would grow, employing a larger and larger fraction of the labor force. The strategic position of the private corporation and bank would be reduced, as knowledge and public planning became increasingly decisive.

Postindustrial theory helped explain a wide range of social and political happenings, including the student revolt, the state fiscal crisis, the transformations of politics then happening in the Western democracies, the apparent convergences between the West and the Soviet bloc, and much else. In addition to having considerable explanatory power, postindustrialism provided intellectuals with a promising theoretical foundation for their own political ascendancy. Indeed, the theory suggested that intellectuals would achieve historical relevance not by abandoning the study and the laboratory for political engagement but precisely by staying within the academy and doing the work that would increasingly be necessary for the society to operate. The university, not the private bank, would become the master institution in shaping the social future.

I think a case could be made that the reason the 1970s and 1980s have been so traumatic for so many liberal and leftish intellectuals has much to do with the way events have failed to follow the postindustrial scenario. The cause of our malaise is not Ronald Reagan or George Bush (or Margaret Thatcher); neither is it the surprising revitalization of free market ideology. These events—the political resurgence of the right—symptomize something even deeper. That is, they seem to belie the possibility, which undergirded much of the intellectual mood of the 1960s and early 1970s, that capitalist democracy might rather smoothly evolve into a corporatist state that would provide a framework for rational planning in the direction of social equality and balanced development—a framework in which intellectuals' work would be directly relevant to the social future.

Instead, for more than a decade, we've experienced systematic shrinkage of the public sector, constraining of the knowledge industry, deregulation of capital, increasing concentration of control in private boardrooms of transnational banks and corporations, and a movement away from social equality and planned development. The growth of the state, which in the 1960s was supposed to be essential for future economic growth, is now seen as a primary barrier to economic prosperity; planning that transcends the individual firm is thought to be inevitably irrational; and inequality is thought to be essential