

Partisanship, Race, and the Public Intellectual

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“The problem,” wrote John Dewey in *Freedom and Culture*, “is to know what kind of culture is so free in itself that it conceives and begets political freedom as its accompaniment and consequence.” I take it that Dewey thought this act of recognition was a problem for the intellectual, specifically, in the instance of this essay, the American intellectual who lives in a society that professes freedom as a value to be cherished virtually above all others, except, arguably, equality. But Dewey seemed to be stating this as a unique epistemological problem in a democratic society: how does one know this type of culture that so professes freedom as its consequence and what does it mean to know it.

It might be said that intellectuals in our society of whatever political persuasion try to seize the idea of freedom as their own. That is to say, whether liberal or conservative, in our American understanding of those terms as a kind of simplistic catch-all for our great political divide, the partisan intellectual always argues that his or her side is the side of freedom: the conservative argues that limiting government coercion is freedom and all freedom is essentially defined by how much one is disentangled from the compulsions of the state; and the liberal argues that the democratic state, as a bulwark against oppression and injustice, as an agent in the equalization of power, is a necessary agent in producing and safeguarding freedom. Naturally, both the liberal and the conservative are quite willing to limit the freedom of the people they dislike; that is, both liberal and conservative define, each in his or her own terms, what can be called “that which is so intolerable that it cannot be tolerated in a free society.” (Intellectuals would refer to the intolerable not as people at all but forces; to impersonalize makes it easier to generate passion, even hatred. For the force becomes something inhuman, something distinctly other, whether it is the poor or the criminal or the agents of state power in the conservative’s mind, or the corporation or the criminal justice system or the bureaucracy of finance in the liberal’s mind.) In fact, it seems impossible for either to conceive of freedom as anything but the enhancement of the status of freedom for some and the diminishing of the status of freedom for others. This is what the culture wars, as they were once called a few years back, were all about. We cannot have a culture that is so free in itself that it conceives and begets political freedom as its accompaniment and consequence, as its natural outgrowth, as it were, unless we know it as this kind of culture, so argued both liberals and conservatives. And in various sorts of learned discourses, both liberal and conservative intellectuals described, through a number of guises, what that kind of culture was: whether it was a culture that supported popular simplifications of Marx, Freud, Evolution, or Existentialism or a culture that condemned vulgarity and subjectivity.

We have, in recent years, heard a great deal about public intellectuals, more, I think, than we had heard, say, before World War II, more perhaps than we need to know or than the subject may be worth. The term “intellectual” is a late 19th century expression, and it came into existence not only with the mass production of books and newspapers but, more importantly, the invention of mass education, mass transportation and mass communications, the modern research university, the rampant professionalization of charity, welfare, and philanthropy, the rise of science, the mass reproduction of

everything from music to automobiles that have created a consumer society, all of which were either in full swing or had their roots in late-19th century western culture. The items on the list I enumerated have gone into shaping how we experience freedom and how we learn about it, and have made the public intellectual a presence of some considerable vigor. The sheer proliferation of the objects, diversions, and possibilities for, life in modern society made modern society, as Walter Lippmann pointed out in *The Phantom Public*, “not visible to anybody, nor intelligible continuously and as a whole.” Abundance blunted not only the meaning of experience but also the pleasure to be found in abundance itself. So, it might be said that the public intellectual’s job is to make the society visible and intelligible in some holistic or specialized way to itself, to make abundance at least a pleasurable experience, if not entirely coherent, so that people could be cognizant of freedom (whether they are being told to celebrate the abundance of freedom as symbolized by the abundance of things and choices they have or whether they are being told that they are being unfairly denied or cheated of freedom by nefarious agents, even by abundance itself; whether they are being told that true freedom is external authority or whether they are being told that true freedom is utter antinomianism; whether they are being told that true freedom is absolute equality or whether they are being told that true freedom is natural inequality). The problem was epistemological for the intellectuals and the public: “to know what kind of culture is so free as to have political freedom as its natural consequence.” Lippmann also wrote that “the citizen gives but little of his time to public affairs, has but a casual interest in facts, and but a poor appetite for theory.” It is the public intellectual’s job to provide the citizen with an opinion, a rational, empirical, or rhetorical scheme, about the things, which he or she cannot possibly sit down to try to become truly informed about, whether it is the bible made easy or a biography of Mozart. The public intellectual, in the spirit of selling, a defining pastime in America which, as Jacques Barzun has suggested, has made everyone anxious about being on the shelf, as it were, is not required to be truly sincere, only convincing. Public intellectuals are not meant to teach so much as to persuade. There is a good deal of anti-intellectualism in American society, a fair amount of which is generated by intellectuals themselves, whose worst enemies are other intellectuals, and who are capable of knowingly saying the most irresponsible, venomous, distorted stuff imaginable. This anti-intellectualism can compromise what intellectuals wish to do but it does not prevent it and sometimes is an aid to the public intellectual’s appeal. Many of these matters are discussed in Jacques Barzun’s 1959 work, *House of Intellect*, one of the best, most accessible books on the role of public intellectuals in American society.

A good deal of the most recent discussion about public intellectuals has been specifically about the number of highly visible black intellectuals that have appeared on the scene since, say, 1980. It is not terribly difficult to explain the arrival of these people as a significant presence:

First, race has become a nearly obsessive topic in American culture these days and there is a need for a cadre of people who can discuss it in relatively sophisticated terms, or at least, with more nuance than one might encounter in the average newspaper. Now, in many instances, whites still do talk about race or race relations, but, more and more, especially in the realm of dissecting and understanding the black perspective, the black intellectual is called upon to interpret matters for the white public, and, interestingly and increasingly, for the black public as well, although clearly not in the

same way for both. Or put another way—a black intellectual is bankable as a public figure inasmuch as he or she can speak for one public while being able to speak to the other. It is a sign of an important change in American democracy that such a figure is necessary for the organs and media of the culture to create a coherent image or message of what the culture aspires to be out of the profligate chaos of what it is. But it must be understood that American society constantly reshapes itself by reshaping the idea of freedom, thus, reshaping the idea of the culture that defines itself as that from which political freedom is a consequence. Why race has become such an obsessive topic in American culture is, too, fairly easy to discern and I shall discuss that momentarily.

But to return to the issue of the arrival of the black public intellectual: the second reason for their appearance is that there does now exist what can be called a black public, that is, a large configuration of educated African Americans with sufficient time on their hands to cultivate themselves as responsible and knowledgeable citizens; a black public that needs to be informed about and aligned with a set of advocacy positions. In this way, the black public is not different from how Walter Lippmann described the public generally. Black public opinion counts for something, and the marshaling of it in support or opposition to something in this country can cause a crisis. Public intellectuals help marshal public opinion. The other important point that Lippmann raised about the public in general is its investment in “a regime of rule, contract, and custom.” The black public is just beginning in important ways to legitimate its own system of rule, contract, and custom and to engage seriously as equal citizens the rule, contract, and custom of the larger society. Black intellectuals are meant to function in both interpretative realms of the black public and the general public. The rise of professionalism among black Americans necessitates the need for a class of professional intellectuals who are meant to serve as partisans of their interests, to articulate and make coherent a number of view points within the black community, or if not a number of disparate view points, to legitimate a certain set of orthodoxies about the nature of black experience, the meaning of black values, and the direction of black interests. In other words, a black public needs a set of intellectuals to help shape, not a black culture, but a useable version of American culture and American ideology for the purpose of maintaining a viable black identity that can, with moral integrity and political astuteness, support the idea of an American culture and American ideology.

The third reason for the emergence of black intellectuals is that blacks have achieved a sufficient presence at certain important cultural institutions that produce and support intellectuals such as research universities, government and corporate agencies, and the world of public and private philanthropy. There were, of course, black intellectuals before, say, 1960, but there were hardly any places to sustain them. The most important institution in the black community, the black church, was not a good place of sustenance for intellectuals, although it did maintain a few. Nor were black colleges good places, none of which could be considered research institutions on the order that we might normally think of. Black colleges did their bit, under-financed and over-burdened as they were, to sustain black intellectual life but it was not their primary purpose to do that. Beyond this, there was virtually nothing in American society to support a black person who wanted to live a life of the mind, a life of ideas, except perhaps the Communist Party where most black intellectuals and thinkers cut their teeth in this country before 1970. But that is another story. With the destruction of Jim Crow, and the

advent of affirmative action, much has changed in this regard in the nurturing of blacks who wish to live the intellectual's life which requires nearly as much maintenance as supporting the life of a high-level performance athlete. Both the presence of black intellectuals in these institutions and places have made both blacks and whites uneasy or unsure about what claims can be made about the change in character in the institution as a result of permitting blacks to be there. This unsetting has given that small number of blacks with access to these institutions and who operate within them both a sense of visibility and a curious sort of isolation that intensifies a need for racial solidarity and for representative-ness in two senses that legitimate racial solidarity. First, blacks demand that more blacks be permitted into these institutions to provide a genuine representation of the group in the institutions. Second, the blacks within the institution are expected to represent the politics and psychology of the group as a way of ensuring their own sense of being genuine. This, in turn, legitimates their demand for blacks in the institution. All of this is their effort to create within the professional culture of the institution the political freedom that is the consequence of any free institution, as we Americans all assume. In other words, blacks are trying to make the institution work for them as Americans seeking a workable American culture and ideology.

Now, why has the topic of race become such an obsession in the United States must be considered. First, it must be remembered that race and especially racism have been topics that have absorbed both the popular and intellectual mind in this country for the last few hundred years. They have figured tragically in our political ideology, ambivalently in our moral philosophy and science, in our social mores, in our religion, and in our popular cultural expressions. So, the current preoccupation must be understood as a continuation of a long-standing fixation. What is different about the race obsession now is the unquenchable need to have blacks talk about themselves, almost to the exclusion of their being able to talk publicly about anything else. The roots of this, I think, can be traced to the Harlem Renaissance, a period in American social history that occurred roughly between 1919 and 1930, when blacks became highly visible in both popular and high-brow culture as both objects and participants. It was at this time that African Americans, living the south in great numbers, migrated north and became an urban people, a people associated with industrialization and modern life, a people capable of launching a mass political movement (Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association in 1917), of serious vocational organization (Rube Foster started the Negro Baseball Leagues in 1920 in Chicago), of absorbing and using contemporary political and social theories, particularly socialism and sociology, for their own ends. These developments certainly made it important to other black people that blacks assess themselves rigorously and relentlessly. But what made this important to whites was black people's association with something that was very modern, indeed—not psychology, but psychologizing, the popular belief in the power of manipulating mental and emotional moods and states of being. Blacks became associated with a new aesthetic movement called jazz at a time—with the emergence of both records and radio—when music was starting to occupy an important place in the psychological make-up of average people because music was becoming so pervasive and because it was identified with powerful anti-intellectual impulses. Blacks, in other words, were central in inventing a revolutionary music at a time when music was beginning to occupy a centrally important place in human consciousness. Second, blacks were associated with underground urban

culture at a time when urban culture was exploding as a vital force in human consciousness because of Prohibition. It was these two connections between blacks and the new modern American consciousness that made black public intellectual possible. The need to psychologize about freedom or to see freedom more as a set of psychological moods or experiences through an art form like jazz and a geography like the modern city rather than through something explicitly political, made the idea of black people talking about their experience attractive, indeed, essential to whites in order for them to have an understanding of their culture as something so free that political freedom was its consequence. (Oddly, black people, in the public American mind, have been symbols of slavery and thus, seen as repressed beings but this has always been a relatively minor view. In the 20th century especially, blacks have become psychologizing symbols of freedom—artistic freedom, sexual freedom, freedom of consciousness.) I think one can clearly see the nature of the problem of the black public intellectual; he or she was and is a product, actually, as cross-over figures, of anti-intellectual forces and not permitted the same range of interests as their white counterparts. In part, this happened because whites, on the whole, were never very interested in having blacks talk about white experience or any other experience but their own) in any useful way except as a self-conscious black person reacting to it.

Now, Jacques Barzun, in the opening chapter of *House of Intellect*, listed three enemies of intellect: art, science, and philanthropy. The black public intellectual has his or her versions of these same enemies. In the realm of art, black music stands as enemy to intellect because, first, music, even more intensely than any other art because it is neither verbal nor visual, evokes strong anti-intellectual, mystical, or sensual impulses. It has hampered black public intellectuals, who feel rightly estranged from a white intellectual tradition and insufficiently bolstered by their own, to make black music essentially an intellectual paradigm or model for their own work. Black public intellectuals have also been hampered by social science, even though the social sciences have produced a number of important black intellectuals. Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray, among others, have pointed to the downside of social science in their criticism of it: its tendency to a jargon of abstraction; its analysis of “cure,” as social science divides the world into a system of “behaviors,” either pathological or healthy; its wish to quantify human experience, so that it might conform to and have the objective force of physical science. As the black critics of social science have said, all of this hampers the way black intellectuals can discuss black experience, especially as social science analysis so dominates the discourse of African American intellectual life. Philanthropy is inevitable as the black public intellectual must advocate, reasonably so in the light of his or her experience, an absolute equality. But whether this demand for absolute equality is presented as a militant leftism that is depended on a “structural” analysis of so-called political reality or on an appeal to the guilt or benevolence of the powerful as a “humanist” or “religious” analysis of so-called human nature, these are merely the masks for a rhetoric of compensation, a rhetoric of reform. Inasmuch as black public intellectuals are aware that they speak for a so-called “deficient” group, or a group in need of enabling or help, they inevitably wear one of these two masks. Indeed, the black public intellectual is usually quite deeply aware of speaking for a “deficient” group; as he or she makes greater claims for the accomplishments of the group, the more apparent is the self-consciousness of speaking for a “deficient” group. These three—music, social

science, and philanthropy—as political mission or religious duty have debilitated by the black public intellectual.

My brief, admittedly sketchy analysis does, in some measure, explain both the attitudes and the works of two contrasting black public intellectuals—Ralph Ellison, who while writing about black music, particularly jazz, tried desperately to fit himself into a traditional American literary scheme—Twain, Hemingway, Eliot, Faulkner, James, and the like—because he so abhorred the implicit anti-intellectualism in the materials and language available to him as a black public intellectual; and Amiri Baraka, on the other hand, who elevated black music to an intellectual level, to a level where it was virtually the only authentic expression of black American life and placed on it, as Ellison noted, a burden it could not bear because he found it impossible to fit himself in either a black or white American literary scheme, and who, ultimately, devoted his energies to a celebration and mythologizing of the anti-intellectualism of the black public intellectual, an anti-intellectualism he masked as self-dramatizing political engagement. Each, in his own way, devised his own vision of a culture so free in itself that political freedom was its natural consequence: one, by defending American democratic values that tended to box him in politically as he more and more personified the “transcendent artist” and the other by condemning them for a set of oppositional values that had worth only because they were oppositional, a tautology that traps many black intellectuals.

Of the numerous black public intellectuals, most of whom have positions on university faculties, on the scene today there are bell hooks, Patricia Williams, Derek Bell, Orlando Patterson, Michael Eric Dyson, Anthony Appiah, Randall Kennedy, Thomas Sowell, and William Julius Wilson, to name a few. Nelson George and Stanley Crouch are among the most noted of these figures that do not occupy university positions and their independence makes them unique and important. Universities have become the largest employer of these intellectuals; most schools that consider themselves major or important want to have at least one or two, mostly in order to have some sort of race-based aspect to the curriculum (for the social and psychological good of the students), to demonstrate among things in this multicultural age the pedestrian fact that blacks have brains, too, (no one wants anything that involves the conspicuous use of brain-power to be all-white), and to be “role models” for the black students these schools try to enroll; ironically, this means that for these schools black intellectuals exist, largely, perhaps exclusively, for not only extra-intellectual reasons but almost for anti-intellectual reasons, for the black intellectual’s importance is connected almost solely with his or her race, their significance as a sociological phenomenon, and the significance of the race-based stuff they teach largely for its sociological resonance: what it means for the school to offer this, what it means for the students to take these courses with these professors, somehow everyone being liberated by it all in some mysterious way where through the very act of supposedly challenging the institution through one’s presence, the black intellectual merely confirms its legitimacy in the desperation that he or she exhibits in wanting the institution to confirm his or her own. The black intellectual, thus, in this regard, exists in a morass of public relations and sociological do-goodism in the defense of American liberalism as the ideology that must inform both elite and public education as an ideal and an industry. This is a position that I think, in the long run, can only make most people unhappy as they exist in the half-light of being both an endangered species and prima donnas, a kind of privileged twilight that is meant to mask or to dim their

continued marginal status in American intellectual circles on the whole. The most famous of this cohort of black university intellectuals are Henry Louis Gates, the director of the African American Studies Department at Harvard and Cornel West, also of Harvard University. Despite their enormous fame, status, considerable earning power, and great learning, their work is of very little consequence in American letters for very much the reasons I have outlined.

As someone who is considered by many a black public intellectual, I claim no special exception for myself from the general condition as I see it of the black intellectual in the American university and in American life. I directed a Black Studies Program for about seven or eight years and thought it odd, fruitless way for an institution to dispense charity, and a feeble attempt at minority “enabling.” The fact that Black Studies must liberate itself from the baggage of primitivism, Marxism, modernism, as Wilson J. Moses so aptly pointed out, that makes such self-defensive and, paradoxically, such confining places to work, is something few who teach in the area see. Black Studies wishes to create a black high culture, an elitist expertise, while somehow valorizing a black populism that undercuts all elitism as “white” and undemocratic and, therefore, reactionary. This is the painful, unhappy contradiction, reflecting the division within the black intellectual mind that wants solidarity as its moral duty and exclusivity as its right, that has defined the field since its birth on the white campus in 1969. I am, by way of my professional affiliation, a product of this contradiction.

I was educated at the University of Pennsylvania and Cornell University, so I have an “impressive” set of credentials to make me seem more important, by virtue of my education, than I am. I teach in a field, American literature, that seems to be transforming itself into something else: sociology for some, “theory” for others (who rather think themselves quite intellectual because they toss about a bunch of densely-worded thought-clichés), “culture” for still others (like myself who have decided that no canvas is too big to doodle and finger-paint upon); films for others (where, after all, everything from music scores to magazines ads are “texts” to be read and interpret). It is difficult to tell if this bad, but it seems to have little to do with literature, probably no one really believes in the study of literature anymore. It was always crusty, elitist, precious, artsy, insular, irrelevant (in a country driven by the practical and visionary), cliché-ridden (words like “moral,” “imagination,” “irony,” “binary,” “romantic,” and the like are enough to shut down any active mind) and produced, strangely, a monumental amount of bad writing from people who were supposed to know how to write. So, to be a black public intellectual and in the field of English, is, now, either an embarrassment of riches or an embarrassment of neuroses.