Review Essay

Reckless Minds or Democracy's Helpers? Intellectuals and Politics in the Twentieth Century

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Books Under Review

Civility and Subversion: the Intellectual in Democratic Society
Jeffrey C. Goldfarb
Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, 263pp.
ISBN: 0521627230.

The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics
Mark Lilla
New York Review of Books, New York, 2001, 216pp.
ISBN: 1590170717.

The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy
Russell Jacoby
Basic Books, New York, 1999, 252pp.
ISBN: 0465020011.

The Role of Intellectuals in Twentieth-Century Europe
Jeremy Jennings (ed.)
Special Issue of The European Legacy, 5(6), 2000.

Is liberal democracy a breeding ground for an independent and critically minded intelligentsia? Do public intellectuals require a cultural authority that has disappeared in Western societies? Does the counter-attack upon Enlightenment values spell the end of the intellectual as modernist 'legislator' (Bauman, 1987)? And, has the (purported) decline of the public culture of various democratic states led to the demise of the political intellectual? These questions are central to the different texts considered in this essay. The answers provided by three of them testify to the continuing influence of two well-established, divergent characterizations of the public intellectual.

First, in the minds of thinkers for whom 'modernity' signals a watershed in societal development, the rise and fall of the public intellectual represents a distinctive, and indicative, phenomenon of the last three centuries. This figure is central to some of the major accounts of the modern social order, and has

often been associated with the dissemination of enlightenment ideals and a willingness to defend its values in the teeth of local prejudices and partisan convictions.[1] The birth of the public intellectual is dated variously — the aftermath of the revolutions of 1848 for some, the Dreyfus affair for others. Numerous academic interpreters, and public commentators more generally, are increasingly of the view that this species of intellectual passed away at some point during the final years of the twentieth century.

A second approach arises from a less familiar, but still important, perspective upon modern thought and thinkers. This is associated with a raft of scholars — Leo Strauss and Alasdair McIntyre among them — who locate the travails and errors of modern intellectuals upon a much larger canvas: the historical sweep of Western philosophy (Melzer, 2003). Current preoccupations with the disappearance of an independent and influential intellectual culture are on this view to be replaced with a consideration of some of the great unresolved dilemmas animating Western thought and culture, and the inadequacies of modern attempts to wrestle with these. These challenges include: the troubled relation between philosophical ideals and practical politics; the role of an intellectual elite in preserving certain timeless moral ideals in the teeth of conventional morality; and the need for today's intellectual 'high priests' to spell out to a political community the implications of possible deviations from its most cherished traditions. From this perspective, the focus upon the historical specificity of the modern intelligentsia is less important than the efforts of political communities to respond to the grand dilemmas that afflict them. Most contemporary interpreters of intellectuals — typically located in the disciplines of intellectual and cultural history, as well as sociology — orientate to the first of these two approaches. The second generic perspective is associated with a number of 'epic' interpretations of the development and decline of Western moral thought. In terms of the books considered here, Jeffrey Goldfarb exemplifies the brand of normative argument associated with the first of these interpretations, while Mark Lilla re-connects contemporary Anglophone political theory with aspects of the epic alternative. Russell Jacoby, by contrast, continues a vein of nostalgic polemic for a cadre of radical, independent-minded intellectuals and mingles elements of both of these interpretations. Meanwhile, the contributors to the special issue of *The European Legacy* (dedicated to 'The Role of Intellectuals in the Twentieth Century') offer thoughtful and historically informed reflections upon these and other normative characterizations of intellectuals. These point, in different respects, to the fertility of an interpretative terrain beyond both interpretations.

It is reported that when the Russian Hegel-scholar, and post-war French bureaucrat, Alexandre Kojève, was approached for advice by some of the leaders of the student uprisings of the late 1960s, he cryptically suggested that

they 'learn Greek'. Mark Lilla, who reports this anecdote, endorses the spirit behind it in a highly readable set of essays on the political pitfalls that opened up for some of twentieth century Europe's leading philosophical minds. Linking the different stories of their fateful attempts to pin their standards to the politics of either the radical left and right in these years is, he suggests, a common disposition — a disgust for the blandishments of liberal democracy and an underlying empathy with the ambitions of the dictator. The Platonic idea that *Eros* supplies a common root to the craving for power exemplified by tyrants and the excess of moral passion to which intellectuals are prone underpins the parables he unfolds. These rely upon a pointed critique of the ethical failings of those philosophers who came to admire and justify some of the totalitarian regimes and anti-democratic causes of the last century. These thinkers were guilty of the modern sin of divorcing their intellectual convictions from a sense of proportion about the political world they inhabited. An important, related target of this critique is the conviction of today's theoretical radicals that they can distil 'progressive' meanings from the ideas of such figures as Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, all of whose writings engendered a profoundly anti-liberal sensibility.

The case that weighs most heavily upon Lilla is Heidegger, and specifically the significance of his infamous tenure as Rector of the University of Freiburg during the years of Nazi rule. This compelling tale is succinctly told in the first of the book's chapters, and is revealingly structured around an account of the three-way friendship — both personal and philosophical — that grew between Heidegger, Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers. Recording the attempts of Arendt and Jaspers to come to terms with Heidegger's flirtation with Nazi politics, he underlines the value of Jaspers' post-war attempt to make Heidegger accept a degree of responsibility for the political misjudgements that his philosophical ideas could engender. Lilla also notes the importance of Arendt's conviction (in Arendt, 1958) that politics needs to retain a degree of autonomy from the ideals favoured by those intent on the *vita contemplativa*. Heidegger's 'supra-political' philosophy and obsession with the impending cataclysm represented by the arrival of a new world obscured his perception of the character of Nazi politics. He was marooned in his own philosophical mind-set, unable to respond proportionately to unfolding political events. While Arendt's judgements are given considerable weight and treated sympathetically in this essay, Lilla does not, however, endorse her conviction that politics and philosophy need to be sealed off from one another (p. 44). If the norms of rationality and justice are handed over to the philosopher, by what standards can events and actions in the domain of politics be evaluated? And, as Plato asked of the city that turns its back on philosophy: who can legitimately stand against the tyrant without the philosopher's ideals (pp. 44–45)?

Lilla's argument cuts across the fault-line between two of the most familiar and entrenched positions favoured by Anglophone political philosophy. He rejects the assumption that the liberal state can be best justified through the rigorous application of moral principle (what Raymond Geuss terms the ideal of 'pure normativity' in (Geuss, 2002)). And he implicitly questions those who advocate moral agnosticism in the 'political' case they make for liberal democracy. Lilla enjoins political philosophers to defend democratic institutions and culture for a mixture of historical, moral and pragmatic reasons, and to adopt the Platonic ethos of suspicion towards their own more grandiose, redemptive ambitions. They should recognize that philosophy needs a greater appreciation of the imperfect cave, from which it seeks escape: 'where the passions and ignorance of human beings obscure the Ideas' (p. 45). In the opening and closing essays of this collection, he directs us towards the timeless moral and psychological dispositions of intellectuals. These, he suggests, provide the key to the tragic nature of the relationship between politics and philosophy.

The Reckless Mind is most fertile, and provocative, when Lilla addresses the prevalence of apocalyptic, anti-democratic themes favoured by radical thinkers of the early twentieth century. *Eros* is invoked here in relation to a different aspect of the moral psychology of modern intellectuals — their role as latter day clerics in a world where authoritative religious tradition has been displaced. Religious concerns, he tells us, informed Carl Schmitt's political and constitutional analyses of Weimar Germany, notably his powerful analogy between political and ecclesiastical authority. And it is to theological traditions that we must turn to understand Walter Benjamin's fascination with apocalyptic and messianic themes, a focus that underwrote his turn to Marxism–Leninism. That these figures, and more recent equivalents like Foucault and Derrida, are held in such high esteem by self-styled radicals, troubles Lilla greatly. He declaims 'a remarkable lack of seriousness' among current interpreters of Schmitt for instance (p. 65). What bothers him about the radical fancy for such thinkers is that contemporary interpreters ignore the depth and character of the anti-liberal passions that they helped inflame. There is a distinction to be made, he argues elusively, between liberalism's 'genuinely philosophical critics from those who practice the politics of theological despair' (p. 76). The themes of redemption through violence, the imminent arrival of a new social order and a messianic conception of revolution, were, he insists, integral to the political thinking favoured by sections of the intelligentsia in twentieth century Europe.

Such observations about the extremist propensity of European philosophers in the tumultuous years of the first half of the twentieth century are by no means novel. Lilla's position is far more distinctive, and troubling, for his suggestion that the philosophical contours of this apparently unusual historical epoch reveal facets of the moral psychology of intellectuals more generally; and for his conviction that by giving in to such reckless passions — which in

contemporary terms mean the fashionable stances of anti-humanism, anti-foundationalism and deconstruction — political theorists are repeating the mistakes of their forebears. By contrast, he pronounces that there was only one serious political intellectual in post-war France — Raymond Aron. Under-pinning this rather startling judgement is Lilla's endorsement of Aron's anti-leftist argument about the incompetence and naivety of the intelligentsia when it came to political matters (p. 204). The latter comes the closest to Lilla's own normative account of the political intellectual as sober contributor to, and restrained critic of, democratic life. Such figures as Aron understood that the 'real responsibility of European intellectuals after the war was to bring whatever expertise they had to bear on liberal-democratic politics' (p. 204) and to exercise a degree of moral proportion about the injustices of different regimes.

Lilla's attempt to transcend the confines of historical and national context in his interpretation of these figures is likely to come up against the instincts of the historian of political ideas. Holding these figures to be ethically 'responsible' for the political implications and appropriations of their ideas requires the exercise of a degree of moral, as well as hermeneutic, judgement by their scholarly interpreters. But from what basis is such a reckoning to be made? He oscillates between the idea of judging thinkers according to their own values, and exercising an external moral judgement founded upon a mélange of contemporary social norms and a heavy idealization of Platonic philosophical practice. Few philosophers pass muster according to the latter standards. Equally, some important moral distinctions — say between the consequences of Heidegger's Nazism and Foucault's political dabblings — are occluded as a result. The latter comes in for some particularly rough treatment. Commending James Miller's controversial biographical study, he remarks that, '[t]he story he tells is at turns bracing, poignant, and horrifying' (pp. 140–141). Foucault's intellectual obsession with the transgressive possibilities involved in 'limit-experiences' culminated in his own irresponsible behaviour in the bath-houses of San Francisco. It also informed his 'foolish and fruitless detour into the politics of his time, a detour that raises important questions about what happens when someone takes seriously Nietzsche's doctrine of willed self-creation and uses it to guide his political engagements' (p. 141). Written in this vein, the history of the thinking of political intellectuals turns into the finger-wagging of the Victorian moralist.

More importantly, his intellectual portraits are characterized by their paucity of attention to the swirl of ideological currents and political forces in contention during this period. By treating these thinkers independently of any assessment of the ideological traditions that they absorbed and reworked, Lilla is able to stress the personal psychology and flexible morality of his 'cases'. Yet such a stance paradoxically leaves his position wide open to a counter-ideological reading. The notion of the responsible intellectual practising the art

of self-mastery in the service of the democratic cause looks suspiciously like an idealization of the mid-century, Anglophone liberal philosopher.

A comparison between Lilla's idealized liberal thinker and the figure at the heart of Jeffrey Goldfarb's celebration of democratic intellectuals (in his recent *Civility and Subversion*) is instructive. These authors share a common anxiety about the (non-liberal) ideological fantasies to which the intelligentsia is prone. This similarity aside, Goldfarb strikes some very different notes in his more optimistic account of the value of the political intellectual to the civic culture of liberal societies. Despite his primarily sociological frame of reference, the ideal of the democratic intellectual that he sketches is strikingly congruent with the hopes animating those political theorists who stress the deliberative dimension of democratic politics.

While Goldfarb shares Lilla's wariness about the perils of the intelligentsia's *hubris*, he also believes that public intellectuals are vital to the establishment of a properly deliberative democratic culture. Indeed, '[w]hen intellectuals leave the stage, democratic performance ends in failure…' (p. 1). They are invaluable both for their understanding of the importance of a civilized public conversation and for their willingness to bring to public attention the importance of 'civility' and other related democratic values (p. 206). But in a democratic community, intellectuals are not merely required to promote and abide by the formal rules and shared understandings that make civilized interchange possible. They are uniquely equipped, and duty bound, to highlight and subvert popular prejudices, customary understandings and social practices that hamper the full realization of the democratic spirit. The democratic intellectual is Janus-faced: at times a missionary bringing the virtues of 'civilized' talk to many of the uncivil portions of the social world; and at others, donning the mantle of the trouble-maker and critical outsider. Throughout this book, he wrestles with the political and moral implications of how these two normative roles can be reconciled, and when it is appropriate to pursue either. Much, he observes, depends on context. The pro-democracy intelligentsia seeking to subvert the communist regimes of Eastern Europe in the 1980s rightly focused on promoting the values associated with an independent public sphere and 'civil society'. But in a country like the United States, where civil and political liberties are established, yet profound social inequities hamper the democratic ethos, subversion and challenge are the order of the day.

Much of the force of his arguments hinges upon his celebration of the deliberative aspect of democratic politics. The idea of intellectuals as *agents* and *exemplars* of a deliberative culture is connected to the claims that, first, political debate is substantially improved if citizens argue with and hear each other properly, and that such processes are likely to yield wiser political outcomes. This second claim is the more difficult of the two, though the first is,

of course, far from uncontentious. Neither argument is convincingly substantiated. Indeed, when Goldfarb casually observes the 'prevailing mediocrity of political decisions observable world-wide' (p. 5), it is tempting to wonder if he is not himself guilty of the sin that he elsewhere denounces — of holding an overly scholastic, unworldly view of politics. Such a stance betrays an exaggerated confidence in the beneficial consequences of intellectuals' input into political decision-making.

A further, related assumption that also needs more persuasive defence concerns his commitment to protecting public debate from the intrusions of ideology. He grounds this dichotomy upon a rather shaky distinction — between considered and responsible intellectual interventions that are informed by moral principle, and arguments that stem from dangerous and dated ideological paradigms. The capacity to reflect critically upon, and achieve some hermeneutic distance from, everyday political and ideological practices, is a reasonable definitional expectation of intellectuals. But this attribute ought to be separated from the more problematic contention that 'good' intellectuals transcend the burdens of culture and political tradition. This latter idea is sustained by an overly stark dichotomy between intellectual practice and ideology in Goldfarb's, and some other liberal, conceptions. It lacks persuasiveness in societal contexts where differences over values and morality are the sources of some of the major disagreements in democratic life and provide significant opportunities for public intellectuals to be heard. Equally, such a dichotomy underplays the interwoven character, and mutual influence of, liberalism and some of its ideological rivals in democratic contexts. Finally, it is worth considering what would public debate and political life be like *without* figures who draw upon oppositional ideological traditions to ask critical questions about government policies, challenge conventional morality and defend the merits of non-liberal cultures and projects?

For Goldfarb, however, ideologies (except, presumably, liberalism) are tainted by their association with 'vanguardist' models of intellectual practice. For all the moral force of this critique of, say, Marxist–Leninism, he fails to consider if his own position might be open to a similar accusation. How can the 'civilized' intellectual avoid the vices of condescension and elitism that he sees as dangers for democracy? In this respect, his invocation of the term 'civility' is a worry, rather than a reassurance. Deployed here as an apparently transparent, untroubling value, it possesses a murkier set of meanings as well, and these are hard to evade entirely. The appearance of this term in modern European thought — in part through its association with the ideals of courtly etiquette developed by the French nobility in the 17th and 18th centuries — has bequeathed various layers of meaning to 'civility', with the result that it is an almost inevitably ambiguous term (Banfield, 1992). Even when used by avowed democrats, it can help sustain an elite concern with establishing forms

of social discipline and disseminating particular notions of character among the 'uncivilized' segments of the populace. The 'innocence' of Goldfarb's position in relation to these debates is not reassuring. In historical terms, there are plenty of examples of intellectuals, social elites and state functionaries legitimating their unease about, and contempt for, the hurly-burly of mass politics, and justifying various constitutional and political strategies to head off popular input, on the grounds of 'civility'. Indeed, Goldfarb's *ad hominem* remarks about the moral deficiencies of contemporary popular culture appear to represent a continuing echo of such a sensibility.

His position is rescued to some extent by his deliberate supplementing of civility with a restrained endorsement of the contrarian radical. There are times, he suggests, when democratic principle requires the uncivil interventions of oppositional thinkers, among whom he includes C. Wright Mills, Edward Said and Malcolm X. But he applies an important caveat to such a stance. This distinguishes his from the kind of post-modern and communitarian readings of intellectuals associated with, for instance, Bauman (1987) and Walzer (1987). Goldfarb remains uneasy about the relentless celebration of the subaltern and the local favoured by radical intellectuals. Perceiving the dangers of a narcissistic drift to 'permanent marginality' for these thinkers, he re-asserts the importance of a commitment to a singular democratic conversation, and to the possibility that persons and groups may revise their own demands and needs when engaged in uncoerced deliberative dialogues. Intellectuals are particularly well equipped to bring to public view the complexities and multi-dimensionality of social problems and cultural differences. They should not be content to reinforce the orthodoxies of identity politics or defend minority group traditions.

Goldfarb is adamant that it is part of the calling of a truly independent intelligentsia to reflect, at a distance, upon the self-understandings of particular social groups. There is a revealing silence in his argument, however, about whether the nation constitutes yet another particular grouping whose horizons are potentially limiting for the democratically orientated intellectual. The governing assumption of Goldfarb's, and other similar, accounts, is that the *habitus* of public intellectuals is the nationally constituted public sphere — a familiar, still largely unquestioned, conviction in the literatures devoted to Western intellectuals. One difficulty with this pervasive assumption is that it is often blended with the image of the intellectual as the bearer of the universal values of the Enlightenment. The tensions thrown up by these conflicting positions are rarely brought to the surface in such accounts.

According to a plethora of 'declinist' commentators in Europe and elsewhere, the demise of an independent deliberative sphere and the commercialization of public culture signal the likely disappearance of a critical intelligentsia.[2] This lament is central to Russell Jacoby's latest polemic, *The End*

of Utopia. In it, he continues his high-profile attack upon today's conformist and politically quiescent intellectual culture, focusing especially upon the demise of public debate about the ends of life: 'A new consensus has emerged: there are no alternatives. This is the wisdom of our times, an age of political exhaustion and retreat' (p. xii). Among the most significant causes of today's 'collapsing intellectual visions and ambitions' (p. xii) is a profound shift in the ideological, as well as intellectual, character of democratic debate: 'radicals have lost their bite and liberals their backbone' (p. xii). Among the major culprits for this decline is the adoption by purported political radicals of the ideology of multiculturalism, a souped-up version of 'a familiar idea of pluralism' that 'is presented as a conceptual and political breakthrough' (pp. xii–xiii).

While some of these gripes and anxieties have a fairly well-worn feel, a less familiar claim is also advanced by Jacoby. Contemporary political culture, he maintains, is blighted in part by the triumph of a pallid form of liberal orthodoxy that is now the default position among Anglophone political theorists. This master-orthodoxy has emerged as the victor during a period when liberalism's ideological challengers have fallen into abeyance. With the triumph of a desiccated, and increasingly refined, procedural liberalism, comes a fatal weakening of the utopian impulse to project alternative social and ethical trajectories into public life. Jacoby's stance invokes an interesting ideological ambiguity. The death of other ideological narratives appears to leave the political field to liberalism. But the crisis facing all its rivals afflicts liberalism too, and has drained it of vitality, depth and resonance: 'The problem is, this liberalism has turned vapid because a left that kept it honest has disappeared or turned liberal or both. A left constituted the liberal backbone; as the left vaporized, the backbone went soft' (p. 17).

Jacoby's picture of the decay of the contemporary intelligentsia represents a complete inversion of Goldfarb's Arendtian anxiety. For Jacoby, it is the absence of ideologically informed, specifically leftist, argument that signals a wider process of public cultural decline. For all its faults — its ahistorical nostalgia and argumentative bombast in particular — his argument illuminates an intriguing and under-examined paradox arising from the relation of intellectuals to liberal polities. The freedoms associated with democracies that are both capitalist in their political economy and liberal in their institutional configurations have allowed 'intellectual' activities to proliferate to a greater extent than in any other societal model — if this term is understood to signal socio-professional occupation. Yet, if the word 'intellectual' is used to imply the cultural standing or authority 'which is taken to license and provide opportunities for addressing a wider public on matters of common concern' (Collini, 1999, 290), it would seem that the consolidation of consumer capitalism erodes one of the most important bases for and impulses animating the political intellectual — disputation over contending values, human ends

and different possible social trajectories. Nor is this concern simply the preserve of socialists like Jacoby. Michael Ignatieff speaks for other concerned commentators when observing that, '[i]n place of thought we have opinion; in place of argument we have journalism; in place of polemic we have personality profiles' (cited in Jennings, p. 781).

But, is the intellectual really in such mortal danger? And is the public culture of democratic states as devoid of intellectual input and 'civilized' debate as these latter-day jeremiads suggest? One of the virtues of the various essays collected in a recent special issue of the journal *The European Legacy* is that they invite us to place these concerns in an enlightening historical perspective. This reveals that conventional wisdom about the displacement of the critical, independent intellectual by the emergence of both the narrow academic expert and the opinionated pundit, is both historically misleading and analytically simplistic (Collini, 1994; Diggins, 2003). These pieces prompt a more subtle set of reflections on these themes. Their shared focus is upon the ways in which intellectuals in several European countries have helped shape, and come to depend upon, a variety of different 'publics'. They address this theme in essays that aim to promote a deeper historical understanding of the contexts and traditions shaping the work of particular political intellectuals, and a keener appreciation of nationally distinct modes and conceptions of intellectual practice.[3]

In the case of France, Jennings argues that despite a myriad of social, political and cultural changes dividing the start of the last century from its end, the well-known figures from the intelligentsia perform the role of public intellectual in remarkably similar ways to their vaunted predecessors. Stapleton, meanwhile, shows that even in mid-twentieth century Britain — typically regarded as a desert for the kind of enlightenment-shaped intellectual culture of its European comparators — figures like John Betjeman and Arthur Bryant acted as distinct species of national intellectuals.[4] They did so not by utilizing the principles of universal reason; but, distilling a subtle blend of English conservatism, anti-urban arcadianism and indigenous romanticism, they posed effectively as unofficial servants of the public good. Like their vaunted French counterparts, England's intellectuals were, until the second half of the twentieth century, able to ground their arguments in a fairly widely shared conception of national identity. Unlike their Gallic equivalents, however, they connected this identity not with the values of the enlightenment but with the history of the 'patria', the peculiarities of the English people, and the life and values of its rural communities.

Despite the different national and temporal contexts upon which they focus, these contributions reveal the continuing influence upon scholarly interpretation of a broadly Habermasian argument that counter opposes the democratic intellectual to the technical specialist and the shallow pundit. Peter Lassman's essay is, then, especially interesting because he embeds Habermas's

thinking in its own national and historical contexts. Those, like him, who have suggested a pivotal role for intellectuals in sustaining a democratic public sphere that is both 'capable of response, alert and informed' (Habermas, cited by Lassman, p. 817), and independent from the state, have been working against the grain of the German academic establishment. Here, there has flourished a 'mandarin' tradition that regards the credentials and consequences of the democratic political intellectual with suspicion. Lassman is aware that some of Germany's leading intellectual heavyweights cannot be easily accommodated to either the 'mandarin' or 'democratic' types: notably Max Weber, whose many journalistic and political writings did not prevent him from sneering at thinkers who dabbled in practical politics and succumbed to the self-delusions that for him typified political intellectuals. Lassman's focus upon Weber reminds us that today's complaints about the irresponsibility and shallowness of intellectual punditry have their own historical pedigree.

Richard Bellamy's contribution to the Jennings volume also confirms the singularity of national traditions for understanding intellectual practices, yet simultaneously reveals the trans-national purchase of rival normative accounts of political intellectuals. He considers whether Benedetto Croce's conception of the role of the intellectual offers an alternative to more recent normative categorizations of the intelligentsia: specifically to the idea of the intellectual as bearer of universal reason who claims the authority to 'legislate' to his fellow citizens, on the one hand, and the intellectual as the interpreter of local traditions and communal values to a wider public, on the other (Bauman, 1987). Croce developed a mode of theorizing that was attentive to the specificity of diverse 'practices, conventions and traditions in moulding human reasoning and of the need to focus upon the different ways people understood particular problems within the various spheres of their life' (Jennings, p. 790). He maintained a Hegelian commitment to the merits of a distinctly modern interpretative philosophy, and accompanying institutional and social patterns. The rational justification and defence of these, as well as a sensitivity to the implications and character of cultural difference and historical contingency, were the hallmarks, Croce maintained, of the political intellectual.

Taken together, the essays in this special issue offer some important counterpoints to, and qualifications of, the assumptions informing the grand narratives about political intellectuals unfolded by Lilla, Jacoby and Goldfarb. As Jennings puts it: 'Each of our countries … offers markedly different paradigms of the relationship of state to nation and of the place of the intellectual within the process of state building and the creation of a broader public culture' (p. 785). Together, they demonstrate that the 'story' of intellectuals and democratic politics in twentieth century Europe requires both an appreciation of the vagaries of national context and history, and an understanding of the prevalence of competing normative conceptions

of intellectuals that have spanned national boundaries and historical epochs.

The considerable merits of these essays aside, they also reflect the continuing centrality of a Habermasian-influenced conception of the normative character and political significance of intellectuals in democratic societies. This, however, is ripe for critical review. It assumes that the principal contribution of political intellectuals in a democracy stems from their input in, and role within, independent public spheres. Clearly, there is both historical and normative force behind such a view. Yet this is not the only dimension along which intellectuals relate to, and help shape, the political. It may well be worth asking whether there are other facets of the relationship between intellectuals and democratic politics that have been occluded by this emphasis, including the endeavours of those who have sought to open and exploit avenues between the world of ideas and the institutions that design and implement policies, as well as interactions between intellectuals and particular actors from the worlds of conventional (and unconventional) politics.

Two claims have helped sustain the assumption that it is through the public sphere that intellectuals make their important democratic contribution: the idea that good democratic intellectuals are distanced from malign ideologies (a position elaborated by Goldfarb); and a lingering suspicion of the motivations of thinkers who wish to engage in practical politics (a theme that is central to Lilla). Both are overdue for scholarly reconsideration. Regarding the first of these claims, much hangs upon whose particular perspectives are deemed morally principled and which merely 'ideological', and the plausibility of the (presumably non-ideological) grounds upon which such a distinction is made. The second claim — about the motivations and effects of intellectuals — is ultimately an empirical, as much as a philosophical matter, and defies easy demonstration.

Despite its limitations, the notion that the *habitus* and normative significance of the democratic public intellectual arise in relation to the national public sphere is pervasive. It informs the view of commentators like Ignatieff that the 'decline' of the civic culture of liberal democracy is primarily caused by the disappearance of the public intellectual — as opposed to, say, the impact of consumer capitalism, or the influence of neo-liberalism on citizens at large. Equally, the suggestion that the nation-state remains the site at which intellectuals exercise democratic voice and influence is overdue for reconsideration. Jennings' brief excursus on this question ought to constitute the springboard for more extended debate and analysis, and strikes a chord with issues currently holding the attention of political philosophers:

> In the future, as in the past, the intellectual will in all probability play a variety of diverse roles in a range of different sites and settings. In Europe,

the "national" intellectual, perhaps regrettably, looks more likely to be consigned ever more to the tyranny of nostalgia. In their place, there will be a need for intellectuals capable of embracing a reality characterized by ethnic diversity and increasing Europeanization, by the demands of both the local and the international. (p. 792)

It is also important to bring to the fore the neglected dimensions of the relationship of intellectuals to democratic politics. What of the variety of agents, policies, institutions and spaces that political intellectuals have addressed and sometimes shaped? There is an irony, for instance, about the coincidence of the idea of the death of the intellectual and the influence of some 'intellectuals' upon political debate and governmental policy in the last two decades. Both in Britain and the United States, there are numerous examples of non-specialist thinkers from the academy influencing and opposing government policy. Even more importantly, various individuals and intellectually orientated groups have been important, in these and other contexts, in shaping the ideological parameters within which political parties, leaders and electorates have operated. It is inadequate to dismiss such figures as mere 'technicians' or 'pundits'. The normative account of the democratic public intellectual exemplified by Goldfarb relies upon a dubious separation of ideology and intellectual practice that allows analysts to narrow their interpretative gaze when they consider the role and impact of political intellectuals. Without a broader, more plural conception of the integral relations of intellectuals to political culture and debate, it is hard to comprehend, for example, the character and rise of the Anglo-American New Right or the transformations of West European socialism in the latter half of the twentieth century.

  More generally, the focus of these different books upon the figure of the political intellectual reminds us of the degree to which this theme remains marginal, and perhaps esoteric, for political theorizing in its familiar Anglo-American incarnations. This may in part be because the analytic orientation of the leading exponents of this tradition renders a concern for the personal peculiarities and political purposes of the wielders of ideas as of secondary interest; or, for some, a distraction from the assessment of their truth content. Among more historically minded scholars, meanwhile, the notion that the political thinkers of the modern era were often also intellectuals who wrote for and addressed particular audiences, and whose ideas arose in the context of rounded political lives, is a more familiar one. Yet, here too there is a lingering suspicion of sociologically derived models of 'the intellectual' that appear to reduce political ideas to social processes or professional interests. The appearance of this clutch of studies, however, affords an opportunity to reappraise the indifference of much contemporary political theory to the

historical development, normative significance and current plight of the political intellectual. While Lilla suggests that an assessment of the moral psychology of intellectuals ought to inform such an engagement, Goldfarb maintains that these are among the central agents in the establishment and reproduction of a democratic society. Neither of these arguments, I have suggested, is as well founded as their authors believe. A more persuasive justification of the historical and normative importance of the public intellectual for political theorists arises from an appreciation of the pertinence of intellectuals to free public spheres, as Habermas and others maintain. Yet this needs to be supplemented by an appreciation of the relation between such figures and the multiplicity of 'publics' that have emerged within democratic states; the importance of political thinkers in shaping and challenging national self-understandings; and the role of intellectuals as conduits for, and shapers of, some of the most significant belief-systems of modern democratic politics.

Notes

1 One of the most influential expressions of this position is Mannheim's (1936) *Ideology and Utopia*.
2 These themes were previously aired in his best-selling, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (1989).
3 The full list of contributors is: J. Jennings, 'Intellectuals and Political Culture' (pp. 781–794); J. Stapleton, 'Cultural Conservatism and the Public Intellectual in Britain, 1930–1970' (pp. 795–813); P. Lassman, 'Enlightenment, Cultural Crisis, and Politics: The Role of the Intellectuals from Kant to Habermas' (pp. 815–828); J. Jennings, '1898–1998: From Zola's "J'accuse" to the Death of the Intellectual' (pp. 829–844); R. Bellamy, 'A Modern Interpreter: Benedetto Croce and the Politics of Italian Culture' (pp. 845–861); D. Fjellestad, 'Intellectual Self-Fashioning: The Case of Frank Lentricchia and Ihab Hasan' (pp. 863–874).
4 See also her discussion of national intellectuals throughout the twentieth century (2001).

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