The Self-Inflicted Wounds of the Academic Left

By TODD GITLIN

Truly this is a bizarre time for the life of the mind in America. The airwaves and best-seller lists are noisy with anti-intellectual jeers. The ruling party embraces the nostrums of "No Child Left Behind" while tossing the teaching of all subjects besides reading and math to the winds. Many of its leaders declare that the Republic was founded not in the name of enlightenment but as a "Christian nation." When the topics of evolution, climate change, stem cells, and contraception arise, the president of the United States blithely jettisons scientific judgments. On the evidence of his dialogue with reporters, and his behavior toward underlings like former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill and the former Environmental Protection Agency chief, Christine Todd Whitman, his interest in and capacity for reason are impaired.

Conservative pundits apologize for him. According to his rapturous chronicler, Fred Barnes (Rebel-in-Chief), early in 2005, Bush devoured Michael Crichton's novel State of Fear, which maintains that global warming is a scientific fraud, and met with Crichton at the White House for an hour. They were, Barnes writes, "in near-total agreement." Meanwhile, the great straight-talking hope of the ruling party makes ready to traipse off to Jerry Falwell's university, while another leading candidate for the presidency, a medical doctor, diagnoses a brain-damaged patient from a family videotape. Nor is the reign of fantasy limited to the titular leaders. One year ago, 79 percent of Republicans (and 37 percent of Democrats) still believed that Saddam Hussein's Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction when the war began, according to public-opinion experts Yaeli Bloch-Elkon and Robert Y. Shapiro.

In this perverse climate, dissenting intellectuals might gain some traction by standing for reason. They might begin by asking how it came to pass, over recent decades, that reason in America was defeated. They might explore the subject of public ignorance, its origins, tactics, and prospects. They might also study contrary tendencies, including scientists' resistance to ignorance. They might investigate how it happened that the academic left retreated from off-campus politics. They might consider the possibility that they painted themselves into a corner apart from their countrymen and women. Among the topics they might explore: the academic left's ignorance of main currents of American life, their positive tropism for foreign saviors, their reliance on intricate jargon, their commitment to keeping up with post-everything hotshots of "theory" from more advanced continents. Instead, in a time-honored ritual of the left, a number of academic polemicists choose this moment to pump up rites of purification. At a time when liberals hold next to no sway in
any leading institution of national government, when the prime liberal institution of the last century — organized labor — wobbles helplessly, when most national media tilt so far to the right as to parody themselves, the guardians of purity rise to a high pitch of sanctimoniousness aimed at ... heretics. Liberals, that is.

Liberals, they argue, are a powerful force of accommodation — baby-boomer liberals particularly, baby-boomer liberals in the humanities even more particularly. These heretics are not a generation preparing to shuffle into retirement counting their 401(k)'s but a cunningly if undeservedly potent clique standing astride the culture, betraying the masses and fending off bright alternatives to ideological darkness. Only their treason could possibly explain the triumph of the barbarians' reign of error.

There is scarcely an institution of higher learning where such insinuations cannot be heard. Now several books emerge along these lines, from serious publishers who must believe there is a market for them. Timothy Brennan, a professor of comparative literature, cultural studies, and English at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, pulls the theoretical shotgun off the shelf and writes in *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* that during the last quarter-century, "cultural scholars in universities were instrumental in shaping public sentiment," "their influence was for the most part mixed, at times even disastrous," and that "the humanities played a large and influential part in the descending spiral of political options since 1980." Eric Lott, a professor of English at the University of Virginia, narrows the target, declaring in *The Disappearing Liberal Intellectual* that "a liberal cadre of writers and academics ... helped blaze the way for the rightward turn that has given us Most Hated Nation status abroad and a paranoid, bloated, and revanchist state apparatus at home. ... For at least a decade and a half, boomer liberalism has helped obstruct useful thinking about U.S. cultural and political complexities, let alone the relation of these to the larger world."

Interestingly, not least, never least — if column inches and broadcast occasions are measures — the cottage industry known as David Horowitz confirms that this cadre (and its allies among those whom Professors Brennan and Lott consider enemies) is stupendously powerful, so much so as to require the immediate attention of some two dozen state legislatures, and maintains (in *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*) that they "ought to trouble ... every American who cares about our country's future." So if universities "often refer to themselves as institutions dedicated to 'social change,'" and "the radical Left has colonized a significant part of the university system and transformed it to serve its political ends," as Horowitz writes, then crashing disappointment must be the lot of the scheming professors, for they have left no apparent trace on the White House, Congress, the federal courts, or the economy, or even (if Professors Brennan and Lott are right) the Democratic Party.

I must disclose an interest. I have the distinct honor, or something, of being attacked in all three books. I will not detain the reader by responding here in detail. Horowitz's slapdash charges include the claim that in my recent writing, I consider my country "ultimately unworthy of [my] respect and even allegiance," when as any reader with a brain will discern, I distinguish between the country that is worthy of respect and
allegiance and the government policies that are not. Brennan declares that I have committed "Zionism and ... apologies for U.S. imperial intervention in Iraq, Latin America, and elsewhere." I must have misplaced those apologies somewhere amid the haystack of words I've poured out in recent years against Bush's misguided, disastrous expedition in Iraq and the strategy that accompanies it. As to Zionism, since I do believe that Israel — along with other less-than-perfect nation-states in the Middle East — has the right to exist, I suppose I plead nolo contendere. Here, I am less concerned to defend myself than to examine the attacks and see what light they cast, even inadvertently, on the pathos of the academic left today.

Professor Brennan's is the more coherent and astute argument, though of the books in question here, his is by far the murkiest in expression. Beneath the murk, though, the skeleton of an interesting argument protrudes, for Brennan knows that the prevalence of radical rhetoric in certain university quadrants does not signify political clout. His saving grace is a certain ironical eye, the anatomical feature necessary to appreciate the downright peculiarity of the situation of left-wing intellectuals today. He maintains that a pseudo-radical left has colonized a significant part of the university system — but unlike Horowitz, he believes this left serves anti-political ends. What Horowitz considers a takeover, Professor Brennan thinks was a period of defeat, when the left-wing "vision of the political past was banished from public discussion." How did that happen? Three processes intertwined: "the deadening effects of middle-class immigration and entry into the university of intellectuals who either were, or were related to, formerly colonized peoples, and who therefore automatically registered as the oppressed when this was often far from the case"; "the popularization of right-wing philosophies from interwar Europe in which a fundamental confusion reigned between conservative and radical rejections of capitalism"; and "hyper-professionalism."

Stirring together these forces produced identity politics, or what Professor Brennan calls "the politics of being," but this trend induced "paralysis" rather than useful (or "agential," as he prefers) activity because it did not produce or value political belief — in particular, left-wing politics. Marxism and left Hegelianism, the ideological good guys, were forced to masquerade as "post-structuralism." Multiculturalism — pluralism in many colors, but no challenge to plutocracy — triumphed over genuine leftism. As a result, "an entire generation has been taken out of politics."

In Professor Brennan's view, the climate of critical discourse that passes under the name "theory" has gone mainstream. It is "widely practiced and believed in the culture at large," inspiring "Hollywood scriptwriters, advertising executives, and the composers of neo-punk bands," infecting "urban avant-garde theater circles, alternative publishing, and middletbrow journalism" alike. Recent obituaries for theory, by the critic Terry Eagleton among others, are no more than feints. "In fact," Brennan writes, "the announcement of theory's death can be seen as a pre-emptive gesture by theory's proponents, designed to pump new life into a failing project by giving it a different and more updated rubric (under the sign of 'biopolitics,' 'local knowledge,' 'the cultural turn,' and so on)." Theory's "decentered subjects" and such purport to be radical departures from dead ideas but in truth share "the American credo of the middle way." They divert from the world-
historical task of uprooting capitalism. They are nothing but ... "middle-class." Speaking in behalf of the world's proletariat, Professor Brennan need say no more.

Professor Brennan wants academics to do politics — not cultural-studies' flourishes of consumerist anarchism, disdainful of organization, that amount to "a stay-at-home sort of politics." He knows that politics is more than a theory of meaning, or a round of applause for the latest fad in popular culture, or the silly abstractions of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (Empire, Multitude). He agrees with liberal and social-democratic critics (though without crediting us) that the theory turn of the 70s was politically disarming, by which I do not mean charming or propitiatory. When students in freshman composition at a university like my own are compelled to read third-rate imitators of Walter Benjamin, they are not inspired to organize against the depredations of capital. They are, as Professor Brennan says, inspired to aestheticize social analysis.

But what does Professor Brennan wish the professoriate to embrace instead? Evidently some sort of root-and-branch class-based revolutionism — a variant of the old-time religion. "The crimes committed in the name of communism are real," he acknowledges, "but they ... are certainly no match for the atrocities launched by liberal capitalism, which, far from being officially acknowledged, are completely disavowed or excused." No need to know much about Stalinism or Maoism, then, or the actual Soviet-style policies of that stylish icon, Che Guevara. Such researches might get in the way of the necessary enthusiasms.

Professor Brennan, tracing his own arabesques, elevates gesture above argument. Like most heresy hunters, he is more interested in damning the villains than in making a case against their villainy — or in behalf of some more convincing worldview. Like most practitioners of theory, he is more interested in "positioning" the contenders than making a case for the validity of their theories. The question of how theory X diverges from theory Y takes precedence over the question of X's or Y's truth value or lack of it. If you want to know the ins and outs of Michel Foucault's concepts, or Edward Said's, Professor Brennan will gladly instruct you. If you want to know what their theories are good for and not so good for, however — how it was, say, that Foucault supported the Islamic revolution of Ayatollah Khomeini and Said went silent on Saddam Hussein's assaults on Iran and the Kurds — Professor Brennan has nothing to tell you.

Where Brennan writes a muffled prose, Eric Lott comes out blasting. Intellectuals who want "social-democratic reform" stand for "little more than political complacency with a relatively youthful face." He wants to "take out bourgeois thinkers," and he doesn't mean on dates. They, or we, are guilty of "crimes." They commit "treason against the left, if not indeed against the very vocation of the intellectual." Perhaps the person Professor Lott wants to take out is Ann Coulter.

Enamored of his gestures of virulence, Professor Lott is at pains to add that he has nothing against treason, mind you. What he wants is a "better treason" of the sort he engaged in some years ago in a University of Virginia organizing campaign for living wages. He labors under the impression that this admirable project was more than
admirable but momentous — a prefiguration of that up-from-below revolution that might result from a simultaneous casting off of white privilege and a trampling down of national boundaries, which are intrinsically "anti-democratic." It would seem that all that holds back the revolution is "the tenacious affective hold the nation-form exerts on liberal intellectuals." After all, doesn't Étienne Balibar, a longtime French Marxist lately scrambling for a fresh intellectual scheme, maintain that borders are "anti-democratic"?

Like George W. Bush, Professor Lott doesn't "do nuance." He has reissued one of the oldest, stalest stories in the annals of left-wing heresy-sniffing. It goes like this: Marx's "old mole" of "the revolution" is eternally burrowing upward toward the light, whatever obstacles "boomer-liberal nation-love" throws in its way. But misleaders slow it down. What Professor Lott calls "new social movements" (i.e., movements some 30 or 40 years old now), like "blacks, Chicanos, gays, lesbians, women, the disabled, and the working class" — "any one of these movements is liable to engage a dominant social formation at one of its weak points and spark a fire that will earn widespread solidarities." Professor Lott awaits the bracing whiff of a cleansing conflagration in that revolutionary morning. In the meantime: "I smell boomer blood."

It's hard to get on Professor Lott's left side unless one sticks with the uncontaminated "everyday resistances and activisms of many stripes all across the country," which are his only hope. "The New Black Intellectuals," by contrast — Cornel West, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Michael Eric Dyson, et al. — are "too often at ease with the compromises of liberalism," guilty of "a sometimes ingenuous faith in the educability of white Americans" — which, were it so, makes one wonder how the African-American minority is ever to improve anything. Sociologists like Mary Waters, historians like David Hollinger, critics like Ross Posnock and Stanley Crouch, philosophers like K. Anthony Appiah — all who challenge fixed notions of ethnic purity — are members of what Professor Lott considers (no compliment) "the color-blind club." Even so "great" a multiculturalist historian of American literature as Eric Sundquist has signed on to "the devil of liberal nationalism," a.k.a. "Americanism," a.k.a. "a logical bourgeois result of the bourgeois, albeit black, nationalism Sundquist espouses." There's no thought-crime Lott cannot charge by sprinkling a "bourgeois" or two on his sentences.

Thus do the frail forces of purification go apoplectic. As at many junctures when revolutionaries suffer defeat — as in the early 1970s, when the New Left unraveled in fratricide — they conclude they must have been stabbed in the back. Shrinking in real-world significance toward the vanishing point, they go hunting for enemies within. Such sectarian stuff may go over in certain English departments, but its purchase in the rest of the world is meager. It may heat up the revolutionary spirit to curse "boomer-liberal nation-love," but the hurting masses of the poor world — who love their own nations, by the way — might prefer some practical American politics, the kind that stands a chance of wresting the bully off their backs, "nationalist" as Professor Lott may consider it, to the frisson of his internationalist gestures.

Professor Brennan is right that the academic left is nowhere today. It matters more to David Horowitz than to anyone else. The reason is that its faith-based politics has crashed
and burned. It specializes in detraction. It offers no plausible picture of the world. Such spontaneous movements as do crop up in America — like the current immigrant demonstrations — do not emerge from the campus left. Neither do reformers’ intermittent attempts to eject the party of plutocracy and fundamentalism from power, to win universal health care, to protect the planet from further convulsions, to enlarge the rights of the least privileged. If more academics deigned to work toward reforms, they might contribute ideas about taxes, education, trade, employment, investment, foreign policy, and security from jihadists. But the academic left is too busy guarding the flame of nullification. They think they can fortify themselves with vigilance. In truth, their curses are gestures of helplessness.

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