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## *Anti-intellectualism as romantic discourse*

When I told friends that I was heading off to a doctoral program in U.S. intellectual history, they either seemed mystified – “Do we *have* an intellectual history?” – or found the entire proposition somewhat funny: “*American* intellectual history!? Isn’t that an oxymoron!?” More skepticism awaited as I began my studies. Classmates repeatedly subjected me to playful, if remorseless, interrogations about the wherefores and whithers of this so-called history of the American mind. I had to wonder what I was doing studying a subject that people think does not exist.

I might have dismissed this doubting American intellectual life as a curious national pastime until I experienced firsthand its transatlantic dimensions. While teaching an undergraduate course on “U.S. Intellectual History” as I was writing my doctoral thesis in Germany, I asked my students what drew them to a course on American thought. They confessed without a whiff of irony and no intended disrespect: they simply wanted to be in on the joke.

A curious thing happened as I got to know my students and they got to know American thinkers like Margaret Fuller,

Herbert Croly, and Cornel West. I came to realize that my friends, classmates, and students hadn’t said anything about American culture that these very thinkers hadn’t said themselves. Just as West had lamented the “good American fashion” of fostering a “truncated perception of intellectual activity,” and Croly had likened the “American intellectual habit” to that of “domestic animals,” Fuller had warned about an America devoid of “intellectual dignity,” capable of only cultural “abortions,” “things with forms . . . but soulless, and therefore revolting.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed our very own thinkers have argued for a specifically American version of the betrayal of the intellectuals: it is the *intellectuals* who have been betrayed by a culture hostile or indifferent to their ideas.

The vision of American history as one long *durée* of resistance to intellectual pursuits received its classic formulation in Richard Hofstadter’s 1963 study, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. The suffocating political culture of the 1950s following Adlai Stevenson’s defeats confirmed Hofstadter’s view that “resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it” had been a defining feature of American life. In Hofstadter’s text, “anti-intellectualism” takes on

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many guises: the disavowal of rationality and learning in early American Protestantism; impatience with abstract thought and preference for practical knowledge on the frontier, in business, and in progressive education; populist hostility to the elitism of genteel reformers, monastic academics, and policy experts. According to Hofstadter, though diverse, these sentiments in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American religious, political, and economic life shared a general disregard for intellect, making “anti-intellectualism” an axiomatic expression of the American experience.<sup>2</sup>

*Anti-Intellectualism* is a systematic analysis of a cultural malady, but it is also a history of a grievance; therefore, even at its most restrained, it is a deeply personal document. Hofstadter’s unusually qualified and tentative conclusions signal what his scholarly critics regarded as the book’s shortcomings in conception and tone. Many took issue with the elusiveness of Hofstadter’s conceptualization of “anti-intellectualism,” unsatisfied with his apologia that it “does not yield very readily to definition.”<sup>3</sup> Rush Welter argued that anti-intellectualism was at best “a protean concept,” and used to articulate nothing like a “national commitment so much as a cluster of expressions and activities that may or may not have held the same meaning for all.” Cushing Strout complained that the book documents “[f]eelings” which are “diverse, ambivalent, and no index to social isolation.” While documenting these feelings, Hofstadter exposed his own, producing a confessional history of a confession that “skates . . . on what he knows to be thin ice.”<sup>4</sup>

If analytically imprecise “anti-intellectualism” was also deeply felt, but Hofstadter did not manufacture this

cultural attitude nor was he the first to identify it. Indeed his accomplishment was the way in which he rehearsed a complaint that, by 1963, had become commonplace. Though the term “anti-intellectualism” came into vogue in the 1950s, the image of American culture as uniquely hostile to critical intellect enjoyed a long and dynamic history in American thought. It moved all along the political and cultural grid, as partisans from the left and right, and commentators liberal and conservative, pressed it into service. We come closest to understanding Hofstadter’s argument if we see its roots in a romantic critique of American culture. His critique, like many before him, is a romantic longing for an America not yet achieved. By examining the romantic origins and prehistory of the trope of American anti-intellectualism, we can understand how a culture purportedly hostile to ideas cultivated a rather unappealing one with enduring appeal.

Though the notion of America either as Edenic paradise or savage wilderness has long animated European thinking about America, the notion that it was therefore either unburdened by or ill-suited for intellectual rigor took on particular form in the romantic imagination. As James Ceaser has argued, the romantics looked to the American democratic experiment as a symbol of modernity and freighted it with their own fantasies and fears about the “destiny of the modern world.”<sup>5</sup> Whereas eighteenth-century European discourse about America focused primarily on the conditions of the natural environment, in the early nineteenth century attention shifted to its forms of human culture. Of special interest to German romantics in particular was the notion of the organic ties between a people,

their relationship to the homeland, and their styles of expression. Because Americans were not a *Volk*, but a mix of “races,” transplanted to rather than historically rooted in the North American continent, German romantics wondered about the sources of aesthetic inspiration and the qualities of the intellect of people who were not a *people*, a nation of affiliation but not of belonging, an adopted homeland, but not an inherited *Fatherland*. Fascinated with the intellectual characteristics of what Nietzsche would later refer to as the “new human flora and fauna”<sup>6</sup> taking shape in the new world, they described these new cultural types in oracular terms: were they heralds of intellect at its dawn or twilight? Models of mind unburdened by hollow pieties, or aimless imaginations without sail or ballast? For the romantics, American culture and the human qualities it produced served as a powerful symbolic field on which to test their ideas about the organic relationship between the individual imagination and the soul of a people, a culture, and its environment, and the prospect of a people politically liberated yet socially and psychically unified.

The redemptive promise of American culture can be seen most vividly in Goethe’s enthusiasm for the youthful intellect of a people free from the entombing memories of history. Goethe, himself the living monument of European *Kultur*, long fancied that he would steal away to America, experimenting with his own ideas about emigrating in *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1796) and again in *The Travelings of Wilhelm Meister* (1821). Though he never traveled to America in body, he journeyed there in mind, devouring studies of its ethnology, geology, politics, and economy, and speculating about how the happy circumstance of its location – both geo-

graphical and in the course of human history – might help cultivate the liberated spirit of its inhabitants. In 1819, he envied “Northamericans” who can be “happy” to have “[n]o ancestors and no classical soil” and who were liberated from the psychic weight of a now parched and impotent feudal and classical past. In an 1827 poetic love letter “[t]o the United States,” Goethe effused:

America, yours is the better lot  
Than is our continent’s, the old.  
You have no ruined castles’ rot  
Nor marbles cold.

Nor is your inner peace affected  
In your present active life  
By useless thought which recollected  
Lead to useless strife.<sup>7</sup>

From across the Atlantic, Goethe imagined a world that promised not the absence of intellect, but rather an “inner” life returned to its right state: innocent, sloughed free of encrusted traditions, and liberated to know itself and the universe in terms of its own making.

Countering Goethe’s vision of American imaginative freedom and innocence was the stronger romantic current that viewed American intellectual and cultural life as torpid, formless, and crude. Some of the most potent denunciations of American cultural apostasy came from the Austrian romantic poet, Nikolaus Lenau. Unlike most romantics, who formed their strong views of American intellect having never stepped foot on the continent, Lenau made the transatlantic voyage for a six-month stay in northwestern Pennsylvania from 1832 – 1833. He came steeped in the romantic longing for America shared by many German-speaking liberals of his generation, who envisioned it as paradise of

untamed nature and untrammelled liberties – the poet’s natural environment.

Almost immediately upon arrival, however, Lenau’s exalted image of America began to collapse. Expecting a sublime landscape, he discovered a dreary, monotonous, and cold country gripped by winter. After just eight days in America, Lenau concluded that such an uninspiring environment could not create a nation of poets, only a people who lacked an eye for beauty and ear for song:

The American has no wine, no nightingale. . . . [T]hese Americans are incredibly loathsome, small merchant souls. Dead, stone-dead to the life of the mind are they. . . . I think it seriously and extremely significant that America has no nightingale. It seems to me like a poetic curse. A Niagara voice is necessary to teach these scoundrels that there are higher gods than those that are struck off the mint.

His firsthand accounts, excessively stylized and hastily spun as they may be, present America as intellectually desolate and culturally grotesque, a study in debased imagination and stunted intellect “in all [its] frightful banality.”<sup>8</sup>

Lenau’s frightful Americans had no nightingales flying above, but, making matters worse, they had no firm ground below. Using metaphors from nature – “roots,” “soil,” and “earth” – Lenau employed a romantic vocabulary to question the very grounds, or foundations, of American cultural and intellectual life. His objections were quite literal: American soil failed to nourish a vibrant cultural ecosystem at its roots. Whatever traces of culture existed “have in no sense come up organically from within,” he wrote. American culture was “groundless” [*bodenlos*], for its people lacked the shared historical, moral, and spiritual foundations vital

for collective imagination. Without roots in collective memory and tribal affections knitting the people to each other and to a homeland, he insisted that America was not a nation so much as a contractual arrangement: “That which we call fatherland is in America nothing more than security for one’s assets. The American knows nothing, seeks nothing but money, he has no ideas consequently the state is not a moral and intellectual. . . . Fatherland, but merely a material convention.” Americans’ single-minded pursuit of the here and now made Lenau thankful for the “Atlantic ocean” for providing an “isolating belt” protecting “the spirit and all higher life” back home from the deadening anti-intellectualism of America, “the true sunset land” – or, “mankind’s far west.”<sup>9</sup>

Critiques such as Lenau’s smart even more when they come from our very own Ralph Waldo Emerson. Though celebrated for giving form to a distinctly American intellectual tradition, Emerson also spent his career drawing attention to its shortcomings. He insisted that the life of the mind was a life well-lived and essential to a vibrant democracy, but he worried that forces in American life worked against that vital intellectual wealth. Drawing freely from romantic thought as he articulated his own concerns about American intellectual life, Emerson sought to make sense of the conditions which had yet prevented, though one day might foster, the native, democratic genius.

“American Scholar” (1837), Emerson’s most concise meditation on the American mind, is often exalted as our intellectual declaration of independence, despite the fact that it contains some of his strongest terms for describing American anti-intellectualism. Emerson expressed

concern about a “people too busy [for] letters”; a society that thinks of human life in averages and aggregates, as if men were “bugs,” “spawn,” and “the herd,”; the “sluggish and perverted mind of the multitude,” which showed regard only for “exertions of mechanical skill” but no esteem for the reason and revelation wrought by philosophical inquiry and speculation. He describes the American as caught up in the immediacy of making a living, while forgetting what makes life worth living, settling for a life as *Man Doing* rather than striving to be *Man Thinking*. Even the scholar fails to marry the *vita contemplativa* with the *vita activa*. Indeed, Emerson’s most pointed criticisms are not of the man in the mass, but of the specialized intellect; even our thinkers can’t get thinking right. According to Emerson, the “delegated intellect” was an enemy of intellect, a man in his “degenerate state,” loving answers, not questions. Emerson warned: “See already the tragic consequence. The mind of this country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself.”<sup>10</sup>

Emerson believed that the democratic mind could aim higher only by cultivating a new style of thinking organic to American experience. This required that it free itself from the bullying thoughts of foreign traditions. Emerson surveyed the American intellectual landscape and was chagrined to observe that the American Revolution had brought a political break with England, but not a cultural one with Europe. This, he argued, was possible only once American intellect ended its “long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands” and stopped feeding on the “remains of foreign harvests.”<sup>11</sup> For Emerson, all truths are achieved, not inherited – prospective, never retrospective. According to Emerson, it is only the “plain old Adam,

the simple genuine self” with no history at his back, who enjoys an original relationship with the universe.<sup>12</sup>

This is the Adamic Emerson – both herald and exemplar – of the new *Man Thinking*. And yet it’s hard not to hear his lyrical celebration of the impious mind as him shouting down his inheritance. Though Emerson spent his life hoping to capture the intellectual promises of American independence, he recognized the centrality of European influences on American culture. He himself drew inspiration from Goethe specifically in his quest for the self-begotten intellect, and from the European romantics generally in his aspiration for organic thought. His writings are saturated in ambivalence about America’s intellectual and cultural stature compared to Europe’s. Indeed all of his examples of genius in “The American Scholar” are European, and even after thirteen years of a continual quest for American intellectual distinction, he seems to have come up empty-handed, for none of the great men he classified in his *Representative Men* (1850) was American.

This was Emerson’s dilemma: American thinking was only *American* thinking in its Adamic form; and yet by his own example, his longing for newness was intimately bound up in what Harold Bloom has identified as the romantics’ anxiety of belatedness. “The romance-of-trespass, of violating a sacred or daemonic ground,” Bloom writes, is caught in a dilemma of its own design, for “meaning . . . cleaves more closely to origins the more intensely it strives to distance itself from origins.”<sup>13</sup> In his quest for literary and philosophical originality, and his zeal to break the vessels of European intellectual authority, Emerson continually reestablished Europe as the outsized measure of undersized American intellectual life by per-

sistently insisting that it is not. Emerson's dialectic between America as focus of a re-centered cultural map and America as "mankind's far west" and between the American thinker as the first man of a new intellectual history and a derivative mind in its "sunset," became the interpretive field upon which subsequent discourse about American anti-intellectualism would take place.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the specter of America as native grounds for anti-intellectualism continued to haunt Americans' thinking about homegrown intellect. Gilded Age liberal critics, editors, and educators – the New England born-and-bred reformers whom Hofstadter identified as the purveyors of "mugwump culture" – argued that while Americans had poured their energies into conquering a continent, they drained vital resources away from conquering the higher regions of the mind. The mugwumps viewed their role as custodians of culture, which, properly conceived and realized, was a corrective to, rather than coextensive with, economic and social life. They dedicated themselves to establishing intellectual institutions and journals of opinion, thus fostering an expansive literary public sphere to elevate the postbellum mind. Yet their writings testify to their persistent doubts that an Enlightenment republic of letters could ever compete with the growing American marketplace of goods.

In his 1874 critique of American "Chromo-Civilization," *Nation* editor E. L. Godkin offered what would become the classic formulation of the mugwumps' diagnosis of American anti-intellectualism: the smug, pecuniary "pseudo-culture" of the American bourgeoisie, which mistook the trappings of wealth for the accom-

plishments of culture. He argued that industrial democracy led to the mindless commercialization of American intellectual life. Though salutary in principle, the rise of small colleges and the common schools, the proliferation of popular educational institutions, and the expansion of print culture for middle-class audiences had vulgarized ideas and debased the process of their acquisition. This yielded a "smattering of all sorts of knowledge" that neither informed nor enlightened, but simply flattered "a large body of slenderly equipped persons" with the conceit of culture. According to Godkin, American chromo-civilization created a "society of ignoramuses" who substituted the accumulation of facts for the assimilation of real knowledge, and the consumption of goods for the cultivation of character. A perfect distillation of the capitalist environment from which it came, pseudo-culture viewed knowledge as commodity and understood material and moral progress as coextensive.<sup>14</sup>

Like Emerson, the mugwump critics were literary cosmopolitans with national aspirations, and yet for them the problem with American intellect was that it was all-too-native to the culture. They argued that the material conditions of the country shaped the character and quality of the American mind in an inverse relation: the history of abundance of material resources had depleted the American intellect. In his 1888 survey of "The Intellectual Life of America," Charles Eliot Norton offered a gloomy diagnosis of the growing disparity between the country's material wealth and its capacity for independent thought. As Norton saw it, while civilization is a necessary precondition for an elevated intellectual life, overcivilization is its death knell. In its short history, Norton argued, America had acquired with rela-

tive ease the material comforts and prosperity that other civilizations strove for centuries to achieve, and this “unburdened existence” had created an easygoing people, pleasant but too facile to create or even appreciate the higher arts.<sup>15</sup> Political liberty and material plenty had produced little depth of spirit or subtlety of mind.

Drawing on romantic ideals of culture as human cultivation, and republican notions of thrift and restraint, mugwump critics stressed that true knowledge could only be fostered from within, not acquired from without. However, if their theology preached that the kingdom of culture is within you, their liturgy suggested that it, in fact, came from Europe. Their cosmopolitan familiarity with and delight in the artistic and literary accomplishments of Europe both inspired and frustrated them. They viewed their role as critics to be cultivators of a still-fledgling American mind, to bring it out of the nursery and into the wider world. By now, the persistent characterization of American intellectual life as forever “young” was no Goethean celebration of intellectual curiosity and novelty, but an embarrassed assessment of an adolescent people unwilling to grow up. The mugwumps shared Emerson’s longing for a distinctly American culture – as well as his doubts that America would ever be able to pull it off. Unlike Emerson, though, they felt they had no option but to hold European arts and letters as the measure for America’s. If modernity propelled America toward a “chromo-civilization,” the mugwumps felt no anxiety – indeed they welcomed – cleaving to European origins and taking refuge in belatedness.

At the turn of the last century, American intellectual life had plenty of critics, but not all agreed that the culture of cap-

italism was the source of American’s intellectual transgressions. Harvard philosopher George Santayana knew American intellectual life had its problems, but none so damaging as the very solutions proposed by the mugwump critics themselves. He argued that the notion that culture affords a mental altitude from which to critique shallow commercialism was an evasive and regressive response to the intellectual challenges of modernization. If there was a problem with American thought, it was the problem of *not* viewing culture as a condition of daily life, and only as a corrective to it.

In his 1911 essay, “The Genteel Tradition,”<sup>16</sup> Santayana argued that Americans did have an intellectual tradition, albeit a “genteel” one, and therefore one ill-befitting its way of life and its people. It drew in part from a native source: a despiritualized Calvinism that bequeathed a lust for order and stringent moralizing, but no longer the “agonized conscience” and “sense of sin” that gave primitive Protestantism its form. The second and more dominant source, however, was the early-nineteenth-century European import, transcendentalism, which endorsed a subjective view of knowledge and an aggrandized conception of self. In Santayana’s genealogy, these two intellectual legacies crossed paths in the nineteenth century and consolidated their capital in the form of the genteel tradition: a moralistic and evasive intellectual temperament, suffused with light but no shadows, an unthreatened and unthreatening view of the universe and man’s place within it.

Santayana’s complaint with the genteel tradition was not only that it made an easy peace with the universe, but also that it took the universe on terms foreign to the American experience. The problem wasn’t that Americans had too

little regard for intellect and ideas, but rather *too much*. Americans loved their ideas, so long as they weren't *their* ideas, but inherited ones, preferably from Europe and preferably with no life left in them. He characterized American intellect as "old wine in new bottles," and "a young country with an old mentality," arguing that America never had to wait to create its own intellectual institutions and culture of arts and letters: it simply brought them over from Europe. He viewed Americans as intellectual latecomers with minds "belated, inapplicable." However, unlike Emerson who suffered its bad conscience, Santayana's latecomers welcomed intellectual belatedness as a mark of their arrival, taking pride in the fact that they refused to "let the past bury its dead."<sup>17</sup> Esteem for traditions remote from experience, though, signaled no genuine feeling for ideas; custodianship, he argued, resists the *life* of the mind.

For Santayana, America economically and technologically lunged toward the future, while intellectually it looked timidly to the past. He insisted that, until it made a home *of* modern America, intellect would never find a home *in* modern America. Despite his persistent criticism of the romantic imagination, Santayana drew heavily from romantic discourse to make his point. His writings are awash in organic metaphors of "soil" and "roots," and he consistently argued that a vital culture must grow in its "native" environment and cultivate forms expressive of its own "thundering, pushing life." The American imagination needed to make peace with its skyscrapers and corporations and make friends with their raw, energetic condensation in human form: the modern American. But even Santayana expressed doubts about how arable the soil of modernity might be:

[I]t is not easy for native [intellects] to spring up, the moral soil is too thin and shifting, like sand in an hourglass, always on the move; whatever traditions there are, practical men and reformers insist on abandoning; . . . nothing can take root; nothing can be assumed as a common affection, a common pleasure; no refinement of sense, no pause, no passion, no candour, no enchantment.

Dynamism has its own perils, and in a culture of business vitalism, all "theoretical passions" are either "sporadic" and fizzle out, or are indifferent from overstimulation.<sup>18</sup> A hectic, *bodenlos* culture creates an intellect after its own form, either too fitful or too blasé to sustain itself.

Santayana's strongest verdict against American intellectual life came in actions, not words, when he gave up his tenured professorship at Harvard in 1912 and left America for Europe for good. Before he left, though, his views of American anti-intellectualism made strong impressions on many talented Harvard students and their cohort – including Walter Lippmann, T. S. Eliot, and John Reed – themselves aspiring writers and thinkers who shared his chastened view of early-twentieth-century American culture. Their grievance started out personal: they wanted to make a living from the life of the mind, and felt the normal pangs of doubt and frustration as they saw few appealing career options. They surveyed American intellectual life and perceived forces hostile to the critical intellect not only in the worlds of business and commerce, but also within the university. Indeed their harshest criticisms were directed at the academy, which they viewed as too implicated in a business culture; the imperative for specialization and profit



had strangled the life out of learning. They saw themselves as “intellectuals,” which at the turn of the last century entered American English political and cultural discourse, quickly becoming a crucial term of self-definition among the young writers and thinkers eager to make sense of their roles in modern society. Instrumental to this new self-concept was the image of what modern thinkers were up against: a broader culture unwilling or unable to appreciate their service. They were sufferers, “bear[ing] the brunt of our America” and the “mass of dolts,” as Ezra Pound put it.<sup>19</sup>

If the intellectual as social type was new, the notion that she had to suffer fools was not. In their assessments of American culture, the young critics merely provided new terms for an old way of thinking. While H. L. Mencken introduced the convention-hugging, fear-mongering “booboisie,” and Sinclair Lewis the American “Babbitt,” for whom the plump, smooth, mass culture of mediocrity was his native habitat, Emma Goldman was one of many radical thinkers who rediscovered the wrathful “Puritan,” who policed free thought and hounded liberated spirits. Few critics, however, generated as many terminologies for and genealogies of American anti-intellectualism as Van Wyck Brooks, whose most influential work was his 1915 analysis of the inner civil war between the “Highbrow” and “Lowbrow” in American thought. He characterized “Highbrow” as an isolated, abstract, otherworldly, and effete style of thought and relationship to ideas. It viewed culture as something disciplinary and decorative, and therefore, remote from the messy problems of daily life. The “Lowbrow,” by contrast, represented a style of thought that was very much of this

world: starkly practical, materialistic, uninspired by and incapable of speculative thought. Though the two tendencies rarely overlapped, they did meet in the form of a joint-stock conspiracy against the critical, engaged intellect. For Brooks, the spectacle of these dual tendencies revealed a history of the American mind rendered “stagnant from disuse,” unable to contemplate “the mature potentialities and justifications of human nature.” Brooks bemoaned, “[W]e have no Goethe in America and . . . we have no reason to suppose we are going to get one.”<sup>20</sup>

Like others before them, the young intellectuals turned to Europe in their quest for a distinct American culture. Spurred by a thirteen-month postgraduate tour in Europe, Brooks’s fellow critic, Randolph Bourne, argued that the American mind couldn’t be cultivated until it reappraised its relationship with European cultures. Echoing Emerson, Bourne worried that the American mind was “parasitical” and “lazy”; it reinforces its own “cultural humility” by slavishly appropriating “alien intellect,” he wrote. And yet the cultures of Europe should continue to serve American intellectual life, he maintained, but not as a giant museum or poaching ground, but, rather, as an example of living cultures that dialectically take the shape and give form to their particular experiences and environment. According to Bourne, European cultures viewed the life of the mind as a way of life; they valued experience, not the fruits of experience. Bourne admitted that abroad he enjoyed “the feeling of at-homeness which makes intelligible the world”<sup>21</sup> as yet impossible at home.

In trying to devise a new approach to American intellectual life and their role in it, the young intellectuals repeated the

standard references, the same romantic discourse of “barren soil” unable to “fertilize” “native” intellect at its “roots.” They also revived the Lenauian images of a *bodenlos* imagination and the wayward intellect’s yearning for home. This longing for intellectual grounds continued to animate their imaginations after the war, and many joined the postwar exodus to Europe, enabling them to experiment with the intellectual life they thought still impossible in America. They formed the “lost generation,” as Gertrude Stein called them, the prodigals and pilgrims who thought it better to be lost among the ruins of Europe than at home in an American wasteland.

The dramatic political realignments of the postwar era emboldened American intellectuals to rethink their narrative. America’s victory, and its newfound political, economic, and military hegemony, suggested that the old mental map, with Europe at the center and America at the periphery, needed to be redrawn. America’s new superpower status stimulated the development of its intellectual and cultural infrastructure at a pace and on a scale unprecedented. With the massive postwar expansion of higher education, the proliferation of think tanks and artistic foundations, and the continued growth of federal agencies in need of policy experts and political analysts, intellectuals had opportunities for institutional affiliation as never before. American intellectual life became a growth industry, and so, too, intellectuals’ interest in assessing the promises of these new alignments.

In the 1952 symposium devoted to the intellectual “reaffirmation and rediscovery of America,” the editors of *Partisan Review* asked prominent American intellectuals to consider the source of and inspiration for intellectual life “now that

they can no longer depend fully on Europe as a cultural example and a source of vitality.” With guarded optimism, respondents including Margaret Mead, C. Wright Mills, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. considered the conditions under which intellectuals might at long last break bread with American culture. Surveying recent history, Lionel Trilling noted, with some astonishment, that “[f]or the first time in the history of the modern American intellectual, America is not to be conceived of as *a priori* the vulgarest and stupidest nation of the world.” Sidney Hook argued that it was time to give up on the lament of “anti-intellectualism,” “the most popular conception of the alienated artist in America and the shallowest.”<sup>22</sup> *Time* magazine captured the widespread feelings that a truce was in order on its June 11, 1956, cover: “America and the Intellectual: The Reconciliation,” with a portrait of Jacques Barzun and the lamp of learning burning bright; inside the issue one could read an affirmation of the newfound mutual affection between America and her native intellect.<sup>23</sup>

And yet a funny thing happened on the way to the altar. These postwar affirmations of American intellectual life appeared precisely at the moment when the sentiment of America as native ground hostile toward critical intellect enjoyed a renaissance, and when “anti-intellectualism” became the standard term for expressing these feelings. The 1950s vogue for the term was new, though the term itself and the image of America it represented were not. The old romantic conception of America, alternately exalted or debased by its conditions for the cultivation of native intellect, proved ineluctable. Reviving the notion of American anti-intellectualism as a salutary protest against all

limits and doctrine, Barzun argued that the American suspicion of theory helped shield it from totalitarian political doctrines: “It is attention to practice and indifference to overarching beliefs that guarantee our innocence. . . . We are innocent because we have been – we still are – too busy to brood.”<sup>24</sup> Likewise many *Partisan Review* commentators argued that it was time now for America to get over her “adolescent embarrassment” of her intellectual stature, and to take on the role of “protector of Western civilization.”<sup>25</sup>

Though the political map of the Western world had been redrawn, the old narratives about America’s intellectual

role were not. America was now a superpower, Western Europe its economic and political beneficiary, but, as Philip Rahv confessed, “It is hard to believe that western Europe has lost its cultural priority for good.”<sup>26</sup> The prehistory makes clear that anxieties, like those espoused by Rahv, about American “anti-intellectualism” more properly belong to an idealized, romantic vision of America. Yet Rahv’s estimation makes equally clear the enduring difficulty in shedding romance for reality in how we think about both the American intellect and the American intellectual.

#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Cornel West, “The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual,” in *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 305; Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 420; Margaret Fuller, “American Literature,” in *Papers on Literature and Art* (New York: John Wiley, 1848), 124.
- <sup>2</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage, 1963), 7.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> Rush Welter, review of *Anti-Intellectualism*, by Richard Hofstadter, *Journal of American History* 51 (1964): 482; Cushing Strout, review of *Anti-Intellectualism*, by Hofstadter, *Journal of Southern History* 29 (1963): 544 – 545.
- <sup>5</sup> James Ceaser, *Reconstructing America: The Symbol of America in Modern Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 1.
- <sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 356.
- <sup>7</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, as quoted in Christian Melz, “Goethe and America,” *The English Journal* 38 (1949): 248.
- <sup>8</sup> Nikolaus Lenau, *Werke und Briefe: 1812 – 1837*, Band 5 (Vienna: ÖBV, 1989), 230 – 231, 247.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 247, 244, 247, 244, 246.
- <sup>10</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “American Scholar,” *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems*, ed. Robert Richardson, Jr. (New York: Bantam, 1990), 95, 86, 82 – 83, 99.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.
- <sup>12</sup> R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), vi.
- <sup>13</sup> Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 35, 62.
- <sup>14</sup> E. L. Godkin, “Chromo-Civilization,” in *Reflections and Comments: 1865 – 1895* (New York: Scribner’s, 1895), 201 – 203.

- 15 Charles Eliot Norton, "The Intellectual Life of America," *New Princeton Review* 6 (1888): 314.
- 16 George Santayana, *Santayana on America*, ed. Richard Colton Lyon (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1968).
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- 23 "Parnassus, Coast to Coast," *Time*, June 11, 1956.
- 24 Jacques Barzun, as quoted in "Parnassus, Coast to Coast," 70.
- 25 Reinhold Niebuhr, *America and the Intellectuals*, 80; "Editorial Statement," *America and the Intellectuals*, 3.
- 26 Philip Rahv, *America and the Intellectuals*, 90.