The Age of Irony?

Susan Searls Giroux

I recall surfing the Web the morning after the fateful midterm elections of November 2002, searching for a handle on what seemed to me a deeply troubling outcome in every respect. I felt I understood the consequences all too well; I was stuck on Why. Then I caught a glimpse of the headline that proclaimed: "The Chickens Have Elected Colonel Sanders." Clever, I thought, but churlish. A cynical condemnation of both the government and the people. It's hard to laugh at the need for faith and conviction in times of such gross uncertainty and fear, no matter how dubious the results seem. But it's easy to dehumanize. Certainly the election results—and public reaction to mainstream national politics in general—demand
a more complex accounting than simple reflex-irony: the masses are dupes, what do you expect? How does one not let one’s rage at injustice boil over into contempt for its victims?

Only two years in office, George W. Bush and the Republican party had apparently succeeded, as election results indicate, in selling the American public on the concept of permanent war, both at home and abroad. The borderless war on terrorism, of course, continues unabated as Afghani caves are blown up in search of the ever-elusive Osama bin Laden, and foreign students in the U.S. are routinely surveilled, harassed, corralled and interrogated. And the war against Iraq will surely be in full swing by the time this essay appears in print, in spite of the lack of support from constituencies as multiple and various as “old Europe,” the Pope, world leaders for peace like Nelson Mandela and Jimmy Carter, high ranking military officials in the Pentagon, and the growing protests of everyday people worldwide. After his father, the younger Bush plans to liberate the people of Iraq from the iron grip of a cruel dictator. Of course, no one disagrees that the Iraqis are suffering. But Bush’s strategy (and this is what has provoked the dissenters worldwide—what broke their irony bone) is to bomb the very civilians victimized by Saddam Hussein—a bit like curing a headache through decapitation. One supposes, like Kim Jung-II, that North Korea, and other countries in the “axis of evil” may well be next, with the costs in human life and economic stability worldwide being anybody’s guess. Then there’s the below-the-official­radar but no less comprehensive war within the nation’s borders. But this one’s difficult to name. A holy crusade? A class war? A war on children? Urban centers? Civil liberties? The Constitution? Women’s rights to privacy? Compelling evidence for each interpretation abounds. But this war defies reduction. Perhaps that is why it hasn’t yet appeared on CNN—it doesn’t offer itself up as a brand name or logo, like the catchy “Shock and Awe” battle plan for Iraq, shrink-wrapped and up for sale to those of us who’ve just tuned in.

If one is a believer in public opinion polls, one assumes that, in spite of such monstrous policies, Bush enjoys broad popular support. But isn’t it more clearly the case that gallop polls—sponsored by giant media conglomerates—construct public opinion to suit their interests rather than merely report it, as astute media analysts such as Noam Chomsky, Ed Herman, and Justin Lewis, have consistently argued? And shouldn’t we also consider, given flagging voter turn-out rates (the lowest of any Western democracy), who participates in elections and why? Understanding the public’s response to national political agendas requires
thinking about the kinds of information the public has had access to about their representatives—whether they've been served flashy sound bytes or detailed, specific information about party platforms. It necessitates investigation of what information has been excluded from national debates. It means considering the constraints on people’s time to search out and digest alternative viewpoints not readily available on FOX or CNN. And it requires thinking about the rhetorical effects of spin. What do popular proposals like tax cuts mean? What do they really mean for everyday people? In an economic downturn, who doesn’t respond to the promise of more money in the pocket—even if it means putting a lot more money in wealthier people’s pockets, too? And how does the mobilization of fear work to galvanize voters and stir their patriotism—to divert their focus from home economics to homeland security? When my mother hears that the national terrorist alert has been bumped up a level or two, or a new threat amid endless news reports on biological or chemical weapons attacks, she calls to remind me to “buy Senator Frist’s book.” I ask if that bit of advertisement was part of the same newcast that has her so unnerved. She reprimands me for being cynical: he is someone to trust, a public servant and a doctor.

In the hypercommercialized new world (dis)order, the appeal of cynicism is certainly a felt one. Foremost, it seems a necessary defense; after all, isn’t somebody always trying to sell us something? And it’s a means for translating a demeaning sense of helplessness and insecurity—now the hallmark of deindustrialization in the West—into a seemingly more dignified posture of hip disengagement with politics. Or, it’s a rationale for embracing the “one market under God” dystopia of neoliberal capital because another world appears simply impossible. Certainly, the folks at Viacom (the parent company of MTV and its sister channel Comedy Central) have been attempting to snare that most lucrative of markets—global teens—on precisely this cynical hook for years. The “anti-marketing” marketing of the early 1990s, exemplified in those hugely successful Sprite commercials that tell kids not to let an actor tell them what to drink have paved the way for what I call “anti-programming” programming. In new hit shows on MTV like “Jackass” or Comedy Central’s “The Man Show,” content is merely filler, reduced to the crudest common denominator (lots of breasts, body slamming, fart jokes and “poo-diving”) necessary to maintain kids’ attention between commercials for GAP, Coca-Cola, or Mars/M&Ms.

The question that few seem to be asking is this: Does the culture industry succeed in producing the cynical subjects that it consistently
hails? As I've suggested, one can understand the lure of cynicism in today's climate, but this is not the same as saying that most teens or adults are, in fact, cynical i.e. that they really trust no one, or have become "post-political" (or, the academic counterpart, mere "cultural theorists") who've traded in critical questioning (or ideological critique) for hip irony or rank sellouts to consumer culture. In these respects, I disagree with Rob Wilkie's two-pronged critique of the "imaginary resistance of the mainstream left" and the new "post-political" politics endemic to postmodern culture more broadly in his recent _JAC_ essay, "'W' as a Floating Signifier: Class and Politics after the 'Post.'" I do agree with him, however, that, left-liberal opposition—inside or out of the academy—to successive neoliberal administrations has been largely ineffectual in the last few decades. But the reasons for this, I hold, have less to do with the "cultural turn" of left academicians, as Wilkie would have it, than with those factors that are largely outside of and broader than the university, as I will elaborate later in this essay.

I disagree with Wilkie because his assessment of the depoliticizing effects of a retrenched post-political culture (as evidenced by products of the culture industry like _That's My Bush_ and the faux theoretical "subversiveness" of postmodern academic culture from figures like Lyotard or Butler) cannot account for the revival of politics among various grassroots movements worldwide, most notably the anti-war movement. The presumption of "post-politics" among teens (the target demographic of _That's My Bush_) in particular denies the rise of myriad forms of youth protest globally within the last five years, as evidenced by Seattle, Prague, Genoa, and Montreal. Nor can Wilkie's analysis account for youth's allegiance to progressive cultural producers like Aaron Magruder, Michael Moore, or Naomi Klein for every hipster like Terry Parker and Matt Stone. To be sure, the new cynically oriented, "anti-programming" shows like Comedy Central's _South Park_ or _That's My Bush_ have (or had, in the latter case) a following, but so do alternative satiric sites like _The Onion_ and _AdBusters_ that make critical use of contradiction and irony in the interests of advocacy—no "side-less-ness" to speak of here. But more importantly, youth protests in the street or through culture jamming reflect the critical capacities of audiences to resist the mass-mediated cynicism and depoliticization whatever the hip packaging—capacities utterly ignored in Wilkie's attempts to demystify the seductions of "post-political pedagogy of the joke." Wilkie's analysis, in short, fails to distinguish between theorizing the culture of cynicism and reproducing it in his own politics. For him, determination equals effects, thus cancel-
ing out any possibility for registering resistance, theorizing popular culture and public institutions as contested sites, or recognizing the multiply determined and often contradictory nature of new social movements.

Wilkie is quite correct to point out that as far as theorists in the academy go, the question of “sidedness” is altogether murkier. But what does this ambivalence mean? To a significant degree, it seems to me part of the protocol of scholarly production—most of us abjure the role of Comedy Central clown. Rigorous scholarship is supposed to reflect the complexities of the social spaces and practices under examination. It is supposed to be analytical, thorough, socially relevant, and, crucially, open to revision. The question all academics must grapple with is when this call for complication turns into obfuscation, when ambivalence turns into pusillamnity. But so too, we must also ask when the demand to “take sides,” or our claims to truth and certainty parrot the fundamentalism and abusiveness of the far-right Bush administration. How often have we heard it: “Either you are with us, or you support terrorism.” And it is to this latter set of concerns that Wilkie’s analysis seems indifferent, and the upshot of this apparent myopia is disconcerting.

Let me be very specific about what I mean. Like the Bush administration, Wilkie sees the “mainstream left” or the “cultural left”—there is some slippage in his terminology—as a troubling impediment to the forward movement of contemporary politics. The Right attempts to pin the blame for social ills ranging from AIDS to single motherhood to international terrorism on the “cultural relativism” that discourses of postmodernism and postcolonialism allegedly promote. Wilkie blames the “cultural left”—neoliberal sheep in wolves’ clothing—for the ascendancy of the Right through its refusal to “take sides,” in so far as these same “relativistic” discourses have displaced ideological critique, and hip irony displaces the centrality of class struggle, resulting in the general depoliticization of the public. It is not my intention here to defend the scholarly contributions of two decades of cultural theory, clearly an impossible task for the space at hand, and really unnecessary. The assertion that the “mainstream/cultural” left no longer engages in political economy is a largely indefensible proposition, as is the presumption that political economy can be so easily disentangled from culture, as if “class” is not lived as an identity category or the mode of production itself hasn’t taken a cultural turn, with the displacement of commodities like steel and cars by intangibles like information, images and lifestyles. Does anybody really suppose we would be better off had left-leaning
academicians remained the high priests of classic nineteenth-century
counts of political economy? Would we be the wiser without Raymond
Williams’ analysis of mass communications? Or Edward Said’s critique
of Orientalist mythologies parading as official knowledge? Or Simone de
Beauvoir’s challenge to gendered hierarchy? How, without these tools,
would we understand the impact of global media on the Iraqi War with all
its companion images of Arab barbarism and despotism? Or the social
function of the “wild West” machismo projected by the Bush administra-
tion? Far from depoliticizing various constituencies, hasn’t this work
expanded the range of ways that people can meaningfully struggle for a
genuinely democratic social order?

Further, Wilkie’s dismissal of the “cultural left” shares something in
common with the right’s convenient discovery of the “underclass”—both
tentities having emerged on the heals of the traumatic decade of the 1960s.
The birth of the “underclass” in the mid-1970s coincided with the general
rightward movement of successive administrations hungry for law and
order following the political dissent of the 1960s. It reflected a new social
imaginary that no longer valued an open society, one that was inclusive
and comprehensive, responsive to and responsible for all its citizens. The
generic image of the underclass encompassed a range of groups—high
school drop outs, illegal immigrants, poor unwed mothers, drug addicts,
the homeless, and various street criminals—who really have nothing in
common, except that society has found them “non-productive,” “de-
pendent,” “pathological” and thereby outcast, beyond redemption.
The trait that unifies them is the belief that society would be better off
without them, that there is “no good reason for their existence”
(Bauman, Work 66).

To be sure, it is problematic to compare the destitution and exclusion
visited on the “underclass” as a result of being so named with that of the
“cultural left,” who are better off by almost any measure—I merely want
to point out a pattern. The discovery of the “cultural left” appears to do
similar work in undermining both the institutions that support social
welfare and the possibility of dissent. The invention of the underclass
enabled the dismantling of the welfare state and its support services for
children, the elderly, the sick and the needy, while public monies no
longer spent on compassionate services were funneled into unprec-
edented prison expansion. Similarly, the discovery of what the right calls
“tenured radicals” or the Real Left calls “the cultural/mainstream left”
signaled the need to clean house in the public institutions of higher
learning. Such acrimony only abetted the emerging corporate university’s
efforts to downsize or eliminate those fields of inquiry, programs, or departments beginning with “post” or ending with “studies.” The culprits are familiar: postmodernism, postcolonialism, women’s studies, queer studies, ethnic studies, cultural studies, media studies, as well as critical pedagogy, or philosophy after Hegel. Here, too, another heterogeneous assemblage of groups were lumped together as a whole. They were deemed useless, without a productive role (or, apparently, without a theory of production), even pathological by virtue of their challenges to “neutral scholarship” and “mainstream values” (the rightist version) or their delusions of being “resistant,” even “Revolutionary” (the Real Left version). The condemnation of the “underclass” like that of the “cultural left” amounts to polemical attack, with potentially devastating material consequences, designed not to prompt public dialogue, exchange, or critical reflection about what an open, democratic society requires, but to exterminate the other, reconceived as the enemy.

Curiously, for all of Wilkie’s articulated concern about the need to struggle for economic and social justice through the critical foregrounding of class-based forms of oppression, his analysis remains decidedly cultural and his rhetoric replete with postmodern play (perhaps this is purposeful parody? “post-irony”? or “irony with a wink”?). Although I don’t think his essay transcends the very categories he challenges, certainly I agree with Wilkie that political economy remains crucial (which is not to say central) to any form of scholarship committed to the institution of a fully realized substantive democracy. Hence, in what follows, I’d like to provide that kind of analysis in the interests of pursuing what to me is the implicit question posed by Wilkie: How do we understand the lack of effective opposition (so far) to neoliberal economic policies that promote staggering inequality and social suffering for pretty much everyone who is not a member of the new global elite? While I’m not inclined to believe that we’ve all been cajoled into apathy by “post-pedagogical” apparatuses of global capital ranging from sit-coms to cultural studies, the question underlying these very incomplete answers is an honest one—and very timely.

In order to illustrate my position, I will take a different tact from Wilkie’s. Rather than look at the pedagogical implications of actors playing politics on cable TV, I want to take up what we might learn from how actors becoming political activists in real time. I’m referring to the recent decisions made by specific actors who in the last year have publicly condemned the Bush administration’s plans to invade Iraq and its foreign policy more generally. Let me provide a few examples. In the October 17,
2002 issue of London’s *The Guardian*, Woody Harrelson published an editorial entitled “I’m an American Tired of American Lies” in which he condemned the impending war with Iraq as “a racist and imperialist war” lead by “warmongers who stole the White House” and “hijacked a nation’s grief” by declaring “perpetual war on any non-white country they choose to describe as terrorist.” For Harrelson, situating the Iraqi conflict within a history of imperialism is only one context for understanding the impending military action. He also insists on situating it within a neoliberal political economy: “To the men in Washington, the world is just a giant Monopoly board. Oddly enough, Americans generally know how the government works. The politicians do everything they can for the people—the people who put them in power. The giant industries that are polluting our planet as well as violating human rights worldwide are the ones nearest and dearest to the hearts of American politicians.” So if “the people” generally know this, how does he explain their apparent submission? He writes, “In wartime people lose their senses. There are flags and yellow ribbons and posters and every media outlet is beating the war drum and even sensible people can hear nothing else.” They lose their senses in a double sense, Harrelson suggests, people become fearful, and that fear galvanizes them, particularly when their children are called to fight, and their senses are impaired—blinded and deafened—to anything but wartime propaganda.

Robert Redford takes a less inflammatory, but critical approach to the U.S. policy in the Middle East in his editorial, “The Highest Patriotism Lies in Weaning U.S. From Fossil Fuels” in the *Los Angeles Times* on December 2, 2002. A long-time environmental activist, Redford charges that “The Bush administration’s energy policy to date—a military garrison in the Middle East and drilling for more oil in the Arctic and other fragile habitats—is costly, dangerous and self-defeating.” He even offers the Republicans an alternative strategy, suggesting that we “increase auto fuel economy standards to 40 miles per gallon” with technology that already exists. A plan, he claims, would, in addition to saving Alaska’s Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, “keep energy dollars in the American economy, reduce air pollution and create jobs at home.” Failing to do so means guaranteed “homeland insecurity.”

Perhaps the most infamous of these efforts among Hollywood’s glittering elite were the interventions of Sean Penn, who not only wrote “An Open Letter to the President of the United States of America” for which he paid $56,000 to place in the *Washington Post* on October 18, 2002, but also traveled to Baghdad to conduct a personal appeal for peace.
Penn condemned the President’s hypocritical rhetoric and his callow appeals to patriotism in the following terms:

Many of your actions to date and those proposed seem to violate every defining principle of this country over which you preside: intolerance of debate (“with us or against us”), marginalization of your critics, the promoting of fear through unsubstantiated rhetoric, manipulation of a quick comfort media, and position of your administration’s deconstruction of civil liberties all contradict the very core of the patriotism you claim. You lead, it seems, through a blood-lined sense of entitlement.

He challenges the Bush administration’s warmongering foreign policy and its economic recklessness at home, making humanistic appeals to saving the lives of innocent children worldwide:

How far we have come from understanding what it is to kill one man, one woman, or one child, much less the “collateral damage” of many hundreds of thousands. Your use of the words “this is a new kind of war” is often accompanied by an odd smile. It concerns me that what you are asking of us is to abandon all previous lessons of history in favor of following you blindly into the future. It worries me because with all your best intentions, an enormous economic surplus has been squandered. Your administration has virtually dismissed the most fundamental environmental concerns and therefore, by implication, one gets the message that, as you seem to be willing to sacrifice the children of the world, would you also be willing to sacrifice ours.

Now, what is my point in bringing such elaborated examples of celebrity activism to bear on how everyday people respond to national politics and public life? What might be the pedagogical implication of their interventions? I suppose one’s first guess might be that I’m merely pointing out the ultimate postmodern chiasmus: Globetrotting Hollywood stars report news, spread word of dissent, challenge official narratives, name names, and demand radical change. Meanwhile, those folks traditionally assigned such tasks as servants of the public—political officials and the watchdogs of journalism’s Fourth Estate—speak in clever sound bites and pose for the camera, placating the corporate interests who contribute to their campaigns or signs their paychecks. Politicians, in short, are only playing the role of public servants, looking the part. It’s all a charade, a joke, and one that the general public recognizes as such and refuses to take part in. But no, this is not my point at all.

When Penn appeared in Baghdad before reporters, photographers
and TV crews from all over the world to explain his journey to the Middle
East, he replied: "I am a citizen of the United States of America... I
believe in the Constitution of the United States, and the American people.
Ours is a government designed to function 'of,' 'by,' and 'for' the people.
I am one of those people, and a privileged one" (Solomon; emphasis
added). Similarly, when dozens of Hollywood actors assembled in Los
Angeles to publicize a letter urging President Bush to avoid a preemptive
invasion in the Middle East, a reporter asked why the government should
care about the feelings of Hollywood actors. Martin Sheen, who plays the
President on ABC's The West Wing, replied, "I think the president should
care about all citizens" ("Celebrities"). Hollywood's elite thus derive	heir authority not from their status as celebrities, but from their obliga­
tions as citizens. Indeed, far from being unpatriotic, they are fulfilling the
responsibilities of sovereign citizens of a putatively democratic nation.
As much as I laud their dissent, I'm nonetheless troubled by it, or troubled
by what it represents. When did civic participation become a function of
privilege? What does the practice of citizenship require of us in this
media-saturated, neoliberal, globalized, downsized, world of risk and
insecurity?

In reality, we know the present oligarchic government doesn't
respond to all citizens—only citizens with money. But not only money.
Taking up the responsibilities of citizenship in the new global order
demands time, mobility, and a modicum of security to allow diversion
from the world of work. Hence, I would argue that what we are witnessing
now is not only the privatization of government (that is, government
increasingly wedded to the protection of elite interests), but also the
privatization of protest and the very practice of citizenship itself. And
this, finally is my point: Ordinary Americans haven't cynically removed
themselves from national political debates because they've become
disinvested, having been finally "let in on the joke"; rather, they've have
been largely excluded from public life by virtue of having to work more
than they've ever had and for much less compensation in terms of either
salary or time off. Such conditions, I hope to illustrate, pose a very serious
challenge to people's ability to become reasonably informed about public
debates let alone participate in them.

It is now well known that the new global economy, far from achieving
that utopian vision of a global village where everyone enjoys the fruits of
economic growth and technological advance, is one of extreme polariza­
tion and fragmentation. It creates unprecedented riches and power among
those already prosperous, and staggering destitution and despair among
those already struggling to survive. Such polarization is in part a function of the capitalist economic system itself: those with wealth see their bank accounts grow much faster than those who have no money. In the decades following World War II, such in-built inequality was kept in check in two principal ways. One was to redistribute income through progressive taxation and investment in public goods and services for the benefit and security of the commonweal (in the form of quality public schools, hospitals, transportation systems, social security, medicare, and so on). The second was to ensure American workers the opportunity to earn a living wage, if not the much vaunted American dream.

With the rise of neoliberal economics, Americans have witnessed a profound restructuring of the tax system in the 1970s and 1980s such that "by 1995, the richest one percent of Americans had gained over a trillion dollars, and now owned over forty percent of the nation's wealth" (Zinn). That's money transferred out of public coffers directly into the pockets of the rich—the triumph of "trickle down economics." In a New York Times Magazine article entitled "For Richer: How the Permissive Capitalism of the Boom Destroyed American Equality," Paul Krugman describes the "big winners" of successive tax cuts in the following terms:

The top 10 percent contains a lot of people whom we would still consider middle class, but they weren't the big winners. Most of the gains in the share of the top ten percent of taxpayers over the past 30 years were actually gains to the top 1 percent, rather than the next 9 percent. In 1998 the top 1 percent started at $230,000. In turn, 60 percent of the gains of that top 1 percent when to the top 0.1 percent, those with incomes of more than $790,000. And almost half of those gains went to a mere 13,000 taxpayers, the top 0.01 percent, who had an income of at least $3.6 million and an average income of $17 million.

Currently, the Bush administration is planning yet another wave of tax cuts to benefit the wealthiest Americans in the name of "economic stimulus," even as neoliberal guru and Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan warns against such a move (and mayors of every major city in the country are left to negotiate deficits—as high as thirty-eight billion dollars in California—entirely on their own).

In addition to a massive tax restructuring that has starved social programs for the benefit of the very rich, we've also seen the stagnation of wages for working people. According to an analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data compiled in the 1999 Economic Report of the President, the median hourly wage in 1998, when adjusted for inflation was seven
not only are workers today earning less than they were twenty-five years ago, but executive pay has skyrocketed. CEO salaries and perks were recently brought to light in the wave of scandals involving Enron, Worldcom, Global Crossing, and Adelphia, where corporate CEOs were running companies for the sole purpose of making themselves fabulously wealthy at everyone else’s expense. Nor did Ken Lay et al. prove any kind of exception to the general rule of corporate governance. In fact, the pay gap between top executives and production workers grew from 42:1 in 1980 to a staggering 419:1 in 1998 (excluding the value of stock options), according to Business Week’s “Forty-ninth Annual Executive Pay Survey.” The same report notes that “Had the typical worker’s pay risen in tandem with executive pay, the average production worker would now earn $110,000 a year and the minimum wage would be $22.08” instead of the current wage of $5.15. And how does this wage figure in terms of yearly salary? A 40-hour week at $5.15 per hour “nets a pre-tax annual income of $10,300, or about $6,355.00 below the official 1998 poverty line for a family of four.” In contrast to these poverty wages, “the average large company chief executive was paid $10.6 million, a 36 percent jump over 1997.” In short, the consequences of neoliberalism’s concerted attack on progressive taxation, social welfare, and a living wage has meant that “from 1983-1997, only the top five percent of households saw an increase in their net worth, while wealth declined for everyone else,” according to the January 2000 Federal Reserve Bulletin.

What receives less attention in discussions of the new global economy, though it is no less obvious and no less devastating, are the growing inequalities that mediate everyday people’s relation to seemingly abstract notions of time and space. According to Jeff Gates, author of Democracy at Risk: Rescuing Main Street from Wall Street, the work year for average Americans has expanded by 184 hours since 1970, which translates into an additional four and a half weeks on the job for the same or less pay—outpacing even the workaholic Japanese. Citing Bureau of Labor statistics, Gates reports that “the typical American now works 350 hours more per year than a typical European—almost nine full weeks.” Those Americans “fortunate” enough to be working are working more than ever in spite of the fact that “they have less parental leave, less affordable day care, and the least number of paid holidays and vacations of all industrialize nations” writes Noreena Hertz, author of The Silent Takeover: Global Capitalism and the Death of Democracy (49). The fallout for individuals’ family life and community life are striking, as Arlie Russel
Hochschild makes clear in her influential *Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work*, where she documents that the corporate employer has come to replace community, family and friends as the primary source of nurturance and social identity. The consequences of such pressures for American workers are chronic anxiety, depression, insomnia, physical and mental illness as a result of a vicious cycle of overwork, consumption (and increasing credit card debt), and lengthening commutes. Gates concurs with these findings, noting that “More than sixty-five million anti-depressant prescriptions were written in 1998” and “parents spend forty percent less time with their children today than they did thirty years ago” (“Ownership”). Given such dire constraints on individuals and their family and community life, what are the implications for a democratic society, which depends on the active self-government of its citizens?

Increasingly, government officials and media pundits implicitly or explicitly suggest that the complexities of U.S. foreign policy or domestic economic policy require a level of expertise beyond the ken of lay people; hence, public policy decisions should be left to themselves, professionals whose credentials and years of experience enable them to grasp the intricacies of economists’ graphs and charts and or the military’s plans for preemptively striking the alleged enemies of America’s “freedoms.” Not only is such advice self-serving to the professional political class, but it is dangerous to a democracy “of, by, and for the people.” It asks that ordinary people cede their voice, relinquish their role as citizens. But it is nonetheless equally true that we live in a very complicated world and that attempting to understand how it works demands no small measure of free time. Citizenship requires time for the task of locating and researching various positions on key policy debates (a task even more complicated given the paucity of alternative views in the dominant media sources), for reading and critiquing, sorting out ideological claims buried in “the facts,” and weighing alternative positions in terms of the human costs and social costs as opposed to simply financial costs. Without that time, Paul Street concludes, “brain-weary worker-citizens tend to become over-reliant on the often bad, generally biased, and heavily filtered information manufactured by those whose salaried task is to shape mass opinion in the interests of those who pay their salaries” (3). The upshot is apparent public approval for policies that sharply mitigate against the interests of ordinary people. This is not simply a matter of being “duped” or cajoled into political indifference. It is a function of deprivation, of being deprived of the information one needs to make informed decisions on
Response Essays

matters of grave social concern, of being deprived of time to think through the choices and consequences of public policy decisions, of being deprived of one’s family and community to reinforce the ethical fibers of the social contract, and deprived of any sense of security to foster anything other than the frightened reactions of the beseiged.

Increasingly, those who enjoy the privileges of citizenship, who have a reasonable measure of economic security and leisure time are the very privileged themselves, “the globals,” to use Zygmunt Bauman’s nimble phrase. The globals come from the world of politics, or sports, or show business—in short, the world of celebrity. He compares their authority and power to that of Christianity in a bygone era:

The authority of the [globals] is secured by their very remoteness; the globals are literally “out of this world,” but their hovering above the worlds of the local is much more, daily and obtrusively, visible than that of the angels who once hovered over the Christian world: simultaneously inaccessible and within sight, lofty and mundane, infinitely superior yet setting a shining example for all the inferiors to follow or to dream of following; admired and coveted at the same time—a royalty that guides instead of ruling. (Globalization 53–54)

What are the lessons to be learned from Penn and other celebrity activists? At one level, they give legitimacy to and so inspire civic responsibility through their very public, very visible dissent. At another level, their actions implicitly reflect the increasingly “remote” possibility for “the locals” who do not have the time, the mobility, or the means “to follow or to dream of following” the lead of celebrities in this or any other regard. “Segregated and separated on earth,” Bauman concludes, “the locals meet the globals though the regular televised broadcasts of heaven. The echoes of the encounter reverberate globally, stifling all local sounds yet reflected by the local walls, whose prison-like impenetrable solidity is thereby revealed and reinforced” (54). I take Bauman’s remarks to underscore the material gravity, the solidity, as well as the psychological impact, the sense of imprisonment, that vast social inequalities produce, not to suggest that everyday people, “the locals,” cannot resist, struggle, or organize against injustices. Recognition of such constraints, after all, remains fundamental to any strategy for individual or collective agency.

There is a tendency among some left intellectuals to depoliticize the very politics they call for by refusing to recognize the distinction between complicity with forces of domination and the felt reality of powerlessness. There is a important distinction to be made between manipulation of the
alleged masses and the contradictory, if not complex ways, in which individuals and movements grope to find the ideological, cultural, and material resources to both understand the forces that bear down on their lives and to respond to them. This is why cultural politics, or any kind of democratic politics, matters. It provides a space for engagement and persuasion, for translating private considerations into public issues, individual isolation into collective struggle. Intellectuals who fail to recognize such possibilities often find comfort in totalizing narratives in which the hard work of pedagogy, persuasion, and ideological struggle is dismissed with a myopic fervor distinguished less by its understanding of the material forces that shape people's lives than by scriptural references to the purity of class politics. Politics now becomes an exclusionary field where the cultural and the everyday is marginalized, if not dismissed as either irrelevant or a betrayal of doctrinal logic. It is precisely this theoretical move that imitates the global champions of neoliberal capital, who never look back, who travel unfettered by the burdens and complexities of space and time, who dismiss the locals as either too stupid or too cynical.

The inequalities visited on the ordinary people are material, not intellectual. Mistaking the one for the other reproduces cynicism and disdain for their plight. The fact that everyday people do take part in protest—that worldwide millions have gathered to protest against the U.S. threat of war against Iraq as I write this—in spite of such vicious constraints on their time, health, and spirit—suggests that this is not a time for cynical dismissal but real hope and possibility.

Pennsylvania State University
University Park, Pennsylvania

Notes

1. Certainly, as I've written elsewhere, I recognize some culpability among academicians for their declining relevance to public life. My concern is not with their commitment to "cultural theory" or even "theory" per se, often derided as too hopelessly complicated or difficult. Rather, I take issue with a kind of professional insularity that prevents intellectuals of various political persuasions from translating their work into more public spaces. For an elaborated analysis, see Giroux.

2. Though this has not prevented a variety of academics like Todd Gitlin and Michael Tomasky from making a similar (rather self-interested) charge. For a thorough critique of this argument see Kelley and Willis.
3. The following statistics are taken from "Ownership Statistics" on Gates' Web site, sharedcapitalism.org. These facts are also reproduced in Jeff Gates' new book, Democracy at Risk: Rescuing Main Street from Wall Street.

Works Cited


