

THE
INTELLECTUAL AS
AN AGENT OF
SOCIAL CHANGE
BY PAUL POTTER

Paul Potter is SDS President and a member of the ERAP Cleveland Community Project. He is a past National Affairs Vice-President of the U.S. National Student Association. This paper is based on a speech given at the SDS Convention in 1963.

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I'm glad that my topic is the intellectual and not the universities as agents of social change --- although I intend to speak about both, I want to make a critical differentiation. At every conference of this sort there is eventually a panel on agents of social change. I feel somewhat type-cast in this role. It's the second or third time in the last two or three panels I've been on that I've discussed this. However, I do think that perhaps now I have something to say which, if not new, is reconstructed in its phraseology and may throw some light on problems we've been concerned about in the past

I want to try to do three things: First, I want to try to locate the origins of the defeat of the intellectuals as agents of social change in the post war era. Secondly I want to talk about the centers of change in society and in the universities --- centers that are opening up to the intellectual the possibility of a responsible role as an agent of social change. And from this, I want to talk briefly about a new conception of the university; a conception in which the university is neither autonomous from society nor the focus of the social Establishment, a conception in which the university is an aspect of the intellectual's life, used by him where it becomes relevant.

I wish that Roger Hagan* were here. But in his absence I'd like to suggest to those who know him --- who know of his work in the Hughes campaign, who know of his involvement in the Committee of Correspondence and a variety of other activities, his increased interest in S.D.S. and other youth movements --- I want to suggest that Roger Hagan is a good example of the kind of person I want to talk about: the new intellectual, the revitalized intellectual, the intellectual who is playing a role in social change.

It is necessary for me in this, or in any discussion of the intellectual in the University, to start with a fairly important fundamental, and that is that the universities are not autonomous. They're not autonomous and they've never been autonomous in this society --- and I suspect in any society. There are good sociological reasons for this. The university's role is not to be an autonomous agency but to be a well-integrated training center for the society; the university provides society with certain parts of the machinery of the social system.

Especially this society --- if we go back and examine historical roots, we can find out why it is that the universities in this country have always been particularly well integrated into the power structure, particularly well integrated into the service of the economy and of the status quo. I don't have time to go into that, but I think that it is a subject that most of you can develop easily enough from your own experience and knowledge.

While I'm on "autonomy" let me note that there has been an essential

*editor's note: Roger Hagan has taken a leave from his teaching and research responsibilities at Harvard, to edit the Committee of Correspondence Newsletter, a publication dealing with issues of peace and disarmament.

problem of definition, a blurring of lines in the liberals' view of what autonomy is. Autonomy has been defined in society by the A.A.U.P.* and by other agencies as a little leeway, as freedom from outside pressures, as a possible margin of operating room in which to develop some new ideas and some new programs and some new techniques. "Autonomy" has not been set forth within the intellectual community as a positive notion --- a notion that the university has a role to play in the social organism: as critic, as dissenter, as iconoclast of the values and accepted modes of operation of that social organism.

Yet in any event, the university is not autonomous. But what does not follow from the university's lack of autonomy in the system, is a necessary lack of autonomy for the intellectuals --- for the members of the university. There is no need for the intellectual to be subservient even if his university is. This is a paradox I'll attempt to develop. But in fact, in the post war years, the intellectuals have been subservient, in a very funny way. Autonomy for the intellectual has meant isolation. It has meant the ivory tower, the retreat from full participation in society.

Involvement, on the other hand, has meant to the post war intellectual service in the Establishment. And there has been very little leeway for any third kind of role for the intellectual to develop. So that, in the late fifties, there was a good deal of celebration of the fact that intellectuals were to be found in all power structures of the society; that they were working in labor-management relations, that they were working in every government project and committee, that they were working for Congress. This was service to the Establishment, this was not a dissenting role. This was a role that has become a caricature, I think, and I'll return to that in a few moments.

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All paths in the university seem to turn ultimately back upon the university and back upon the established order within it. The academic pecking order; the establishment of professional organizations and the criteria of excellence they set forth; ---all of these were turned back upon the bureaucratic organization of the university, upon the isolation of the intellectual, or upon his faithful service to the Establishment and to the status quo. This left those intellectuals who wished to play a dissenting role in a peculiarly exposed position. There was not a place for them to go. There was no home for them. The university which was supposed to provide their home was not willing to play that role. The agencies in which they might work, in which they were welcomed, were not agencies that wanted critical dissent: They were agencies that wanted expert advice in carrying out the already established programs. And this was a pattern, I think, which dominated the post-war era. There are exceptions to that. In some sense I make this position an archetype more than it may have been. But let me give you a few specific examples of how the intellectuals were exposed.

I think the whole debate on civil liberties that raged in the post-war era and especially in the '50s is a good example of this exposure. It was a debate that was divorced from any analysis of the problems of the society at large. It was a fraudulent debate. It was a debate which

*A.A.U.P.: American Association of University Professors.

could only have been a significant debate in a society that was actually threatened by anarchy or by imminent revolution. It was not a real debate and yet the intellectuals participated in it with vigor because it seemed to be the only way of extricating themselves from the squeeze that they were in.

Another example would be the A.D.A. and its development --- the amalgamation presumably of labor and intellectuals into a vital political force, an amalgamation which in its very effectiveness led to the co-optation of more intellectuals into the power structure, rather than the freeing of the intellectuals from the burdens of an oppressive university system.

A final example, one which I'll return to later, of the impetus of the intellectual in the universities, was (and is) beautifully illustrated by faculty politics. There exists the most petty, mundane, bureaucratically centered system of politics that I can imagine. It is not a set of political activities that has as its basis the idea of liberating the university from the society. It is a set of politics which is organized around personal advancement, prestige, centers of influence and power within the university --- not within society.

But I think there has been a change. I think that the change is becoming increasingly evident and the change is what I want to talk about most of all. For the first time, there are alternatives to the intellectual other than service to the Establishment or isolation from society, and those alternatives are being enunciated and proclaimed and implemented by social movements in the society. For the first time there is a base of power outside the university to which the intellectual can turn. There is an autonomous base of power which he can utilize in freeing himself from the strictures of the university system, in defending himself from the exposed position which he held in society until 1955 or later.

This essentially is another place to go. It is a home. It is not the home that any of us predicted. The home that we've been looking for is in the university, and the home of the intellectual is finding social movements: in political action and agitation.

Out of this comes a new view, a new view that is expressed by an increasing number of intellectuals and students who consider themselves intellectuals (and by some who do not consider themselves intellectuals). That is that they no longer think of the university as a Gestalt --- as a possibility of a new synthesis, of a deep and beautiful image shimmering in the far-distant future. They think of the university very concretely as a mechanism they can utilize, that they can manipulate to gain certain ends which they consider important.

The symbol of the "old order," of the intellectuals of the fifties, is Arthur Schlessinger, and the reaction to Arthur Schlessinger underlines the healthy reaction of the intellectual to the trap that they were (and Schlessinger is) in. And the more articles that Arthur Schlessinger writes, lecturing intellectuals, telling them that they are out of their minds not to be serving the Establishment, the better off we'll be. The more he writes, the sooner we'll have a conscious political movement among intellectuals that will permeate into areas of the university and society which as yet have not been touched.

Intellectuals want direct power. They no longer want to deal with power as an abstract symbol of the classroom and of lectures. They want to utilize power for social ends and from this insurgency comes autonomy. From this insurgency comes autonomy and there is the paradox. Autonomy is not isolation. Autonomy is involvement and this is the critical factor which I think we have submerged in our own particular ways of talking about university reform as the penultimate goal of our new society.

Let me skip back to the old order for a moment because I want to trace an important aspect of that order into the new. In the old order, with the pecking order, with the politics, with the service of the Establishment, with the isolation, there was a tremendous amount of cynicism. I think that if the universities were shot through with this cynicism (It has been called "goofing off;" Norman Mailer, I think, would call it a particular kind of academic himpsterism), then there was an understanding on the part of the intellectuals that the work they were doing was not important, that it was devoid of deep meaning for themselves; there was a peculiar kind of alienation for the intellectual which had expression in the rejection of Labor, in the rejection of the masses of the people, and a turning inward of the universities --- looking at the navel and hoping to find a way out of the problems which had their roots in the social structure. This alienation had its expression in the students: A hundred thousand a year drop out because they can't take it any longer, because they find it detached and drifting away from the elements of life that are meaningful to them. The alienation is found in the introductory psychology lecture where the student is told as he walks in the door that nothing he learns is to be utilized in his life experience because it is esoteric. It is found in the elevation of all knowledge in sociology, in large numbers of fields, to the realm of esoteria and remoteness.

This cynicism remains and if anything, it has been strengthened. Yet in the past when intellectuals were cynical they dreamed of the day when the university might be reformed. Today, I think that is receding. And instead, intellectuals are thinking increasingly of how they can use the University to accomplish pragmatic ends. So they are manipulating structures. And instead of having the old academic entrepreneur who milks Foundations and the university system itself, who builds pyramids of people around him in order to work effectively in a social movement, be it peace research, be it civil rights, be it any of the number of things which any of you might name. And this is terribly important because this concept of exploiting the university underlies a new movement among a growing minority of intellectuals who are active.

Why is it that the university tolerates being milked for money and being placed in a position where it is supporting movement which normally it would not desire to support? I want to bring out two points in answer to this. First of all, there's an inability of the Establishment today in American society to comprehend or to deal with the kinds of problems that are increasingly becoming apparent. And there's a need, an organic need, in the social system to loosen up and to allow people more freedom in exploring these problems. So there is a desire, increasingly on the part of informed Establishment members (and I include President Kennedy in that) to have new thought flowing up through the social structure, to allow some mobility, some freedom, and some leeway. That's one reason.

The other reason, and I think this is particularly significant, is the increasing inability of the social system to handle conflict. There is a minority of intellectuals, however, who are willing to talk publicly about the needs for change. The university system is buckling because it would rather pay off this group of intellectuals than continue to have the kind of adverse publicity which works to the detriment of the university system in the eyes of the State and the legislature and the other key institutions upon which the university depends for support.

How this change of which I've talked is coming about is an important new experience for intellectuals. There is an end, I think, of the old romance about power. Power was something that Time Magazine had, power was something that congressmen had, power was something that only the people at the pinnacles of bureaucratic structures could hold and the only way to obtain access to power was to serve those structures and exert minor influence on their peripheries. But there is a new understanding, gained through direct participation in social movements, that power is something that can be created, that it can be generated at the base of the social structure; and the intellectual can obtain power by involving himself in the emerging centers of power in society: the civil rights movement, the peace movement, the discussion of economic issues. So there is an end to the romantic vision of power as something that could not be touched and there is a beginning of self-conscious use of power for the accomplishment of certain goals.

Thus, there are not two separate communities, the university and society. What we have, and what has brought about this increasing familiarity with power, is a multiplicity of communities --- a continuum, a give and take, a series of networks and organizations and seminars and discussion groups which are incorporating different people into different structures; and there is a high degree of mobility, back and forth, in and out of the university. Roger Hagan is out for a couple of semesters; I would guess he'll be back in the university system in a couple more semesters. There is this kind of switching of roles, and there is a new sense of freedom in the ability of the intellectual to move into society and into social environments that he has never experienced before.

So there aren't two communities; there is a series of communities and a kind of interchange of material and ideas and people that is going on within that series of communities. This interchange ranges from fairly esoteric research organizations on the economy or peace or conflict resolution, to the people who are in the field and on the line --- collecting signatures and picketing and going to jail. This kind of flow back and forth is the current dynamic which keeps the whole system operating. The key words are mobility and network. We find a new sense of mobility, a self-conscious sense of the ability of the people to move in society, up and down in the social structure, in and out of roles, in and out of class conditions. Thus the university becomes a center for research, for training, for mobility, for holding networks together, for inspiration, for new thinking --- the list could go on.

I want to be more concrete than this, though. I want to show how the interchange works and I want to use names. I attended a meeting the other day, a very interesting meeting of adult Negro leaders in the South and they were talking about the role of Negro leadership and social change in the South. Today these are men, most of whom are one and

two and even three generations removed from us, who've been involved in struggles for equal opportunity in ways I think we would have identified at one time as "Uncle Tomism." But they are good men, they are men who've elevated themselves into critical positions in the social structure and who have been able to deal with the white power structure, who have been able to develop a conception of how to operate that under the pressure of the new student movement has shown itself to be much more flexible than we often understand.

However, I don't want to talk about them. I want to talk about the SNCC worker who addressed them: Julian Bond, who's been working in the student movement since its inception and who came to talk to them about his organization. These men, who have a tremendous amount of experience and knowledge, grilled him for 45 minutes about a lot of very technical issues: how you operate, how you negotiate, conceptions of the power structure, weaknesses of the student movement, sophistication and so on. But in three years of operating in this kind of situation, Julian Bond and many, many others like him, have developed a sophistication that in many ways is much more profound than theirs. It is more profound because it comes from a more basic dissent and has benefitted from the additional clarity which comes in that dissent.

Julian Bond will be back in the university within a couple of years. That's an example of people moving in and out. He'll bring his experience to intellectuals, many of whom will be changing roles with him in turn; will be going out of the university and may or may not come back in later. Rennie Davis, who's in this room, is attempting to gather together fifty thousand dollars to begin a Peace Activities and Research Center at the University of Illinois. That's something we didn't consider just a few years ago. It's a new kind of thinking that comes from a familiarity with power and a belief that power is an instrument we can use for our own ends.

Dick Flacks, along with others in his Peace Research and Education Project at Michigan, works in and out of the university; he works with A.R.E.P., he works with the Conflict Resolution Center, he has a number of places he can call "networks" that he fits into. And he helps to tie these together. Tom Hayden (journalist, student, and former S.D.S. President) who's involved in more networks that I would want to enumerate, is in the university now but will be out in a couple of years, and may be back again after that or not... I don't know. But he is one of those people who continues to support this mobility.

Tim Jenkins (SNCC worker, law student, and former NSA vice-president), who is not here today because he's taking lawyers to Mississippi, integrates people from the university systems and from other systems into the movement, and Tim moves in and out of these structures. Peter Countryman (Northern Student Movement director and sometime Yale student) and dozens and dozens of others are examples of what I've been talking about.

What is happening is what in December I was wont to call a dropping out of the system. But what is critical about the new situation is that although people are dropping out, they are hanging on with one hand and are knocking the system for all it's worth. And they are getting away with it as well.

I think that now we must pause and think a bit about the attractiveness of the picture I've attempted to sketch. Because if it is correct, it means that the romance is over. It means that in a sense the community of scholars is no longer something that is on the horizon. The community of scholars is drifting into the archives of the library and is being replaced by a much more explicit and comprehensive framework of social change. And I think that we have to understand this in all its implications; we especially have to understand that in giving up the conception of the community of scholars, we do not fail to replace it with another conception which is as coherent and humane and as beautiful as that conception was. We have to replace it, not with a revised conception of a community of scholars, but with a community of people: a community which includes not only scholars but workers and housewives and individuals from all walks of life who will, I hope, make up the kind of community in which the community of scholars would have existed, but in which there are much more attractive and meaningful alternatives to that once-heralded situation.