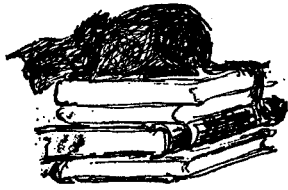


Book



Reviews

ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM IN AMERICAN LIFE. By Richard Hofstadter. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1963. 434 pp.

ACCORDING TO RICHARD HOFSTADTER, anti-intellectualism is a deeply ingrained quality of American life. Americans are averse to what he calls "the life of the mind." They ruthlessly reduce thought to practice, and commune through feeling and emotion rather than through intellect; in short, they are driven by the twin furies of practicality and primitivism. Hofstadter recounts a melancholy history of how anti-intellectualism has triumphed in religion, politics, business and education. Before the advent of democracy in the early 19th century, intellect, or the life of ideas, was accorded an honored place in these institutions. But the place of intellect has been contracting ever since; intellect has withered by a sort of democratic law of entropy. Hofstadter is especially eloquent on the decline of intellectual standards in education. The 20th century, he argues, has witnessed the debasement of the public school curriculum by "life adjustment" courses. He holds John Dewey's ideas largely responsible for this.

But Hofstadter's history of anti-intellectualism rests on the fallacy of opposing intellect to practicality and primitivism. All activity, whether it is theoretical physics or dishwashing, unites thought, practice and feeling. The important question is what kind of thought, practice and feeling is involved in any given activity, and the answer to that will depend on what kind of activity it is. As a result of the profound change that came over American life in the 19th century old distinctions based on class gave way to new ones based on the ideal of equal opportunity. The new democratic ethic consisted of several contradictory strains. It gave rise to a form of low grade evangelism, to corrupt politics, to rapacity in business, and Hof-

stadter makes much of these. But it also produced the likes of Horace Mann, Albert Finney, Abraham Lincoln and Walt Whitman. Hofstadter's dichotomy between intellect on the one hand and practice and feeling on the other dragoons both these contrary species of democracy into the same ranks.

This dichotomy vitiates his criticism of Dewey's ideas on education. He quarrels with Dewey's belief that children should be encouraged to learn in accordance with their natural desires, and that in the course of applying their knowledge to reality they grow, each new application being a fresh creative experience. To Hofstadter, these beliefs embody the quintessence of anti-intellectualism. Through their influence education has come to center its attention on the desires of the child rather than on the objective standards of excellence to which the child should be expected to rise. Schools, Hofstadter finds, give to life adjustment courses the same, or perhaps greater, value than to intellectual ones. In some schools courses on dating and beauty care may count for as much as those on history and English. Hofstadter would like to see the schools restore an intellectual hierarchy of values.

Hofstadter is right in deploring an educational system in which so much of the curriculum is taken up by life adjustment courses. But he is wrong to hold Dewey's ideas responsible for it. Dewey sought to end society's hypocrisy in teaching children abstract principles which bore no relation to the lives they were going to lead. He proposed that the schools bring ideals and reality into closer and more honest accord with each other. But Dewey's ideals and conception of reality had little in common with those of the life adjusters. He thought the schools should embrace a democratic system of values, one that would efface the false distinction between intellect and practicality. For Dewey the classics and

higher mathematics were no less practical, were no less bound up in a child's feelings and desires, than woodworking and automobile repair. One activity was the equal of the other. The child, he maintained, should develop his own hierarchy of values, not be fitted into one, and should use intelligence as an instrument of creativity, not as an instrument of authority and privilege.

Dewey's ideas are open to grave criticisms, but they did not sire the life adjustment courses that are taught today. These are designed to fit the child into a hierarchy of values dominated by advertising and business techniques. The school, responsive to business interests, encourages children to desire and act in such a way that they become increasingly dependent on those interests. Dewey on the contrary hoped that children would become increasingly independent as they mastered trades or techniques through their own exertions of will and discipline. The responsibility for what has happened in American education rests not with Dewey but with those conservative forces that have sprung up in the past several decades and that are especially strong in local school districts and among school boards and administrators. Hofstadter is aware of this. He writes:

The new education was also at bottom politically conservative, but its warm rhetoric about democracy, its philanthropic approach to the child (not to speak of its having become the object of much harassment by right-wing cranks) made it seem, at least to its advocates, "progressive" or even radical.

What the new education aims to do, Hofstadter continues, is

not primarily to fit them [children] to become a disciplined part of the world of production and competition, ambition and vocation, creativity, and analytical thought, but rather to help them learn the ways of consumption and hobbies, of enjoyment and social complaisance—in short, to adapt gracefully to the passive and hedonist term *adjustment*. For this world it is deemed important that the pupil learn, not chemistry, but the testing of detergents; not physics, but how to drive and service a car; not history, but the operation of the local gas works; not biology, but the way to the zoo; not Shakespeare or Dickens, but how to write a business letter.

By what logic, then, does Hofstadter hold Dewey accountable for this situation? By a logic under which, as we have noted, Dewey is lumped together with the life adjusters because he, like them, espouses practicality and is therefore anti-intellectual.

Anti-intellectualism as it emerges from Hofstadter's book may be interpreted as hostility to traditional standards of excellence. Hofstadter reproaches the American ethic of insurgency and equality for violating the solemn canons of intellect, for disregarding where it does not disrespect the life of the mind. Now this is a legitimate criticism. There is no doubt that America is notoriously a nation of boobs, philistines and prigs, and it is well that Hofstadter, like Mencken before him, reminds us of it. But has the nation been anti-intellectual? It has, but only if the term is conceived as narrowly as Hofstadter conceives it—as an *attitude* toward intellect or excellence or the life of the mind. An attitude alone is hardly worth serious notice when set alongside the history of Western anti-intellectualism. Let us turn to that history for a moment.

Before the 18th century an intellectual class as we know it—a class which claims free thought as an inviolable right—did not exist. It was infrequent for an "intellectual" to repudiate all religious and social sects and embrace the ideal of universal truth. But in the 18th century the most important thinkers in Europe were embracing precisely this ideal. The Enlightenment marked the turning point in the history of the intellectual class, for it established free thought as a good in itself, and it gave intellectuals a degree of autonomy they never had before.

During the 19th century intellectuals turned increasingly to the problems of society, many of them becoming ideologues of revolution. After the fall of Napoleon, repression of intellectuals was a fact of life for most European countries. East of the Rhine it remained a fact of life throughout the century. Anti-intellectualism developed into a formal ideology—an ideology directed against the very existence of the intellectual class—with the appearance of Fascism in the 20th century. Wherever Fascism triumphed it expelled, imprisoned, tortured or killed intellectuals. The intellectual class reached the nadir of its for-

tunes in the 1930's and 40's. The emergence of Communism in Eastern Europe after World War II has given rise to a new form of anti-intellectualism: the utilization of intellectuals as propagandists, as specialists in the distortion of history, as spiritual uplifters, and the like. The point here is that European anti-intellectualism, despite its variations from period to period, from country to country, has had the one objective of forcing intellectuals, the inveterate, obstreperous nay-sayers of society, to give up their independence.

What has American anti-intellectualism been by comparison? Not until World War II has authentic anti-intellectualism, consisting of acts, not merely of attitudes, been a force in America. How strong and how sustained a force remains to be seen.

ALBERT FRIED

THREE INTELLECTUALS IN POLITICS, James Joll, Pantheon, 203 pp., \$4.50.

WHAT MAKES THESE three essays, respectively about Leon Blum, Walther Rathenau and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, into a single book? In his introduction, James Joll writes: "The three men who are the subjects of these essays were born within ten years of each other and, at first sight this might seem all they have in common." One is tempted to agree—with that, and with the fact they are indeed, as the title indicates, three intellectuals in politics. Joll's defense, in the introduction, of the unity of his book seems weak, and in the final paragraph he apparently gives up the effort altogether: "These essays were written independently of each other, because of the intrinsic interest of the men who are the subject of them, and not in order to force comparisons or contrasts." This may need nothing more than its quality to defend its presence in a collection.

Yet, in the end, the unity of the work does suggest itself. These men are, after all, three European intellectuals of the same generation who have gone into politics. This is the political generation that first came to grips with the advanced technology produced by the industrial revolution,

that first struggled with the social problems ensuing from this technology, that came to political maturity during the first great technological war of our era, and that lived on to see the shadow of a second. Furthermore, as intellectuals, these men are three unusually articulate representatives of that generation. Being, at the same time, three very different men—as different, Joll suggests, as the nations that produced them—they can be seen to constitute three aspects of European man encountering the twentieth century.

One can also see a significance in the fact that they are *intellectuals* who have gone into politics. Theirs is precisely the generation in which the European intelligentsia began to go into active politics in unusually large numbers. They are the perpetrators of the *trahison des clercs* that Julien Benda, their contemporary, described. The French Revolution and the movements of the nineteenth century had forced European politics into taking on the form of competing systems of ideas; ultimately even the conservatives turned from such resolutely non-ideological leaders as Bismarck to the fascist movements, with their arrays of authors and would-be ideologists, such as Hitler and Mussolini themselves, at their head. There had been intellectuals in politics before to the extent that politics seemed a heroic pursuit (an illusion generated by frequent revolutions). It was looked upon by such men as Lamartine as a manifestation of the poet's Byronic role. But it is not until Leon Blum's generation (Blum was born in 1872) that politics comes to seem for the intellectual as likely a career as poetry, and that politics forces itself, largely with the weapon of ideology, into being something that not even the poet can avoid.

BLUM'S LIFE ITSELF constitutes a kind of representative history. In his early years, he was the lion of that genteel and cultured world of late nineteenth century Paris that is most familiar to us through the writings of Marcel Proust. A literary critic, a man of sensibility, Blum would seem to have been a man who would have been