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The Academy Is Unstable and Degrading. Historians Should Take Over the Government, Instead.

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What does it mean to be a public intellectual?

When scholars discuss this question, they generally assume that the primary path to publicness is to engage with a mass audience. A public intellectual, in other words, writes long-form features or op-eds in widely read magazines, appears on television, gives speeches in popular forums, or sends tweets that go viral. The supposition, in short, is that the public intellectual's main task is an educational one centered on bringing knowledge to ordinary people in the hopes, over time, of raising consciousness and advancing some political goal.

Academics have long excelled at this task, and their efforts have unsurprisingly intensified in an era when the university has become subject to the will of Donald Trump, Betsy DeVos, Scott Walker, and other know-nothing politicians. Scholars in my own discipline of history have since 2016 achieved an unprecedented presence in the public sphere. This is reflected most clearly on Twitter, where historians like Keisha Blain, Ibram X. Kendi, Kevin Kruse, and Natalia Mehlman Petrzela are able to connect immediately with thousands of ordinary people living across the globe.

It is this type of educational arrangement that most academics think about when they think of themselves in relation to the public sphere. But there is a second way that scholars, particularly those who identify with the social-democratic left, should contribute to public life: by engaging with state institutions through participation in the intellectual technostructure — think tanks, policy schools, university centers — that since World War II has shaped U.S. policy.

In the mid-1990s, Todd Gitlin acidly remarked that "while the Right has been busy taking the White House, the Left has been marching on the English department." The question for us today is what we on the left do when the English department — or indeed, the college of arts and sciences writ large — ceases to exist as a place of stable employment. Simply put, it is up to the current generation of academics to think through diverse ways of being public in an era when university employment is, for most of us, contingent, unstable, and degrading. Creating avowedly socialist policy organizations could help alleviate the permanent jobs crisis in which we find ourselves — and, over time, help transcend the crisis of capitalism affecting us all. Indeed, working for a policy-research organization, unlike many "alt-ac" careers, would enable academics to use their research skills in a direct way.

Since the 1950s, left-wing intellectuals critical of the United States' domestic and foreign policies have been reluctant to participate in policy making. In his 1956 book The Power Elite, for instance, the sociologist C. Wright Mills excoriated "men of knowledge" who worked with political and military elites. Mills averred that because intellectuals gained influence only when

they endorsed ideas supported by their government patrons, they could not fulfill their primary social function of criticizing power. "Accordingly," Mills insisted, "in so far as intellectuals serve power directly … they often do so unfreely." Mills maintained that modern intellectuals needed to recognize that "only when mind has an autonomous basis, independent of power, but powerfully related to it, can mind exert its force in the shaping of human affairs."

Mills's criticisms were repeated a decade later by Noam Chomsky, who gave them voice in his biting 1967 essay "The Responsibility of Intellectuals." "It is the responsibility of intellectuals," Chomsky unambiguously proclaimed, "to speak the truth and to expose lies." American intellectuals, he lamented, consciously disregarded this duty. Chomsky highlighted examples in which intellectuals aligned with power over truth, from Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.'s lies about the Bay of Pigs invasion to Walt Rostow's false assertions about Soviet aggression. In an uncharacteristically nostalgic register, Chomsky bemoaned the "scholar-experts who are replacing the free-floating intellectuals of the past," who supposedly used their detachment from the state to speak truth to power.

Mills's and Chomsky's criticisms became gospel for many left-wing intellectuals in the 1960s and beyond. To work with the state was to abandon one's intellectual responsibility. And indeed, there is much to be admired in this perspective. The American state, especially its carceral, surveillance, and security apparatuses, is a brutal institution that has caused enormous death and destruction abroad, as well as facilitated oppression at home. It makes sense that one wouldn't want to work in the service of oppressive goals.

But from the standpoint of 2019, I am not certain that the broader rejection of policy engagement that Mills's and Chomsky's critiques implied was wise. Were Mills and Chomsky correct to assume that radical intellectuals could have little effect on U.S. policy?

The history of libertarianism, the most influential radical movement in modern U.S. history, suggests that they were not. On the contrary, the libertarian success story indicates that intellectuals can effect significant change by working within the strictures of the American political system. This assertion is in no way intended to disparage the critical educational and organizing work in which left-wing intellectuals have traditionally engaged. But in our current moment of crisis, socialist academics might consider adopting a diverse political strategy that relies on both grass-roots agitation and engagement with the political elite.

The success of libertarianism is indeed rather striking. Just 70 years ago, libertarians stood on the fringes of American politics; in the last two decades, however, they have exerted a profound impact on public policy. How did a movement whose members were historically attacked as unserious radicals come to occupy such a prominent Beltway perch? The surprising story of libertarianism's rise suggests that well-organized radical intellectuals have the capacity to shape U.S. politics.

The history of libertarianism's ascent begins with Murray Rothbard, an economist who spent most of his career at Polytechnic Institute of New York, in Brooklyn, and who is today largely forgotten outside libertarian circles. The son of immigrant Marxist Jews, as a young scholar Rothbard encountered the radical free-market ideas of the Austrian exile Ludwig von Mises. Specifically, Mises's influential Human Action (1949) inspired Rothbard to develop a political theory he dubbed "anarcho-capitalism," which combined anarchist philosophy with a capitalist faith in free markets.

Rothbard spent his life spreading the libertarian gospel and organizing the budding libertarian movement. One of his most clever moves was to frame libertarianism as a fundamentally American ideology. As Rothbard argued in his For a New Liberty (1973), the American Revolution was "explicitly libertarian," defined by the Founding Fathers' desire to disconnect "the State from virtually everything." The tragedy of American history was that various events, from the Louisiana Purchase to the Civil War to the New Deal, betrayed the revolution by increasing the authority of the central government. For Rothbard, the goal of libertarianism was to return the nation to its supposedly anti-statist roots.

But how could a very small radical movement enact major changes in a society whose politics were still organized around the New Deal? To develop a political strategy for libertarianism, Rothbard embraced Mises's elitist notion that, as the latter wrote in Human Action, "the flowering of human society depends on two factors: the intellectual power of outstanding men to conceive sound social and economic theories, and the ability of these or other men to make these ideologies palatable to the majority." Rothbard decided that to spread the libertarian gospel he must, as he affirmed in 1965, "creat[e] … centers of intellectual inquiry and education, which will be independent of State power" but dedicated to transforming U.S. politics.

In 1977 Rothbard helped found the Cato Institute with the aid of Edward Crane, a libertarian operative, and Charles Koch, a right-wing billionaire. Cato quickly developed the two-pronged strategy that still guides it today. First, per Rothbard's vision, Cato seeks, as its website avers, "to identify and develop the future leaders, thinkers, advocates, and supporters of the libertarian movement, thereby promoting the principles of individual liberty, limited government, free markets, and peace." In other words, it hopes to fashion generations of laissez-faire evangelists. Second, Cato embraces the perspective of Crane and Koch, who wanted the think tank to affect public policy directly by producing expert reports and lobbying congresspeople and other politicians. By combining Rothbardian notions of public education with Cranian ideas of policy advocacy, Cato has brought libertarianism to the center of American politics and, according to the University of Pennsylvania's Think Tanks and Civil Societies program, has become one of the United States' most influential think tanks, particularly in the areas of economic, education, and social policy.

Cato's success has a lot to teach socialist intellectuals. At the most general level, it demonstrates the importance of not limiting intellectuals' activities to any one sphere. While left-wing intellectuals should continue to educate the public, they should also consider whether it is possible to work more explicitly with the policy elite. Specifically, Cato's history and present influence suggest that think tanks are critical means to develop, promote, and spread ideas that currently stand outside the mainstream. It might therefore be useful for left-wing intellectuals to create avowedly socialist think tanks that complement incipient efforts like the People's Policy Project, a left-wing organization founded in 2017 that is dedicated to publishing "ideas and analysis that assist in the development of an economic system that serves the many, not the few."

Even though such think tanks could never replicate the energy of grass-roots opposition, they could perhaps be important means by which left-wing academics channel grass-roots anger toward specific policy goals, incubate a generation of leaders, and establish solidarity across class and regional lines. Think tanks will probably continue to exert significant policy influence, and a network of socialist think tanks could become a critical means to bolster radical ideas.

While there are manifold obstacles that prevent left-wing intellectuals from repeating precisely the libertarian success story — most notably, the left doesn't have as easy access to billionaires as the libertarian right (though some, like George Soros, might be sympathetic), nor does the left's anti-capitalist message appeal to the American elite — this does not mean the battle isn't worth fighting, especially in a moment when socialism's popularity is surging. After all, a lack of funds and elite support has never stopped the left from organizing, and one can easily imagine a number of mechanisms — union dues, Patreon fund raising, grass-roots campaigns — that could be used to establish a network of socialist think tanks and research organizations.

Left-wing intellectuals can do more than educate the public, necessary though this task may be. Given that there are almost no tenure-track jobs, the majority of the next generation of intellectuals — like my own generation — will probably have to look outside the university for employment, and policy making is a sphere that could benefit from the academic's commitment to empirics, empathy, and contingency. Furthermore, why should left-wing scholars cede the policy ground to those on the center or right? Trump's election has opened a space to reconsider policy assumptions that were previously unquestionable, and if left-wing scholars don't organize themselves in ways that bring their ideas to the policy elite, we're less likely to bring about the world in which we want to live. Socialists' advice won't always be heeded, but if we were able to close one prison, stop one drone strike, or break up one big bank, would the effort not be worth it?

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