If an emancipatory policy is inseparable from critical thought, it is nonetheless
doubtful that such a task can be left solely to professional academics. This problem has
questions the limited and ultimately misleading scope of "campus jargon" about
"diversity" now widely employed in American public space. As early as 1987, in a landmark
book, *The Last Intellectuals*, the author worried, not without arousing controversy, about
the consequences for public debate of the growing weight of the university in intellectual
life. The work, which had attracted the attention of authors such as E.P. Thompson and
Murray Bookchin, thereby criticized a new generation of professors, that of the author,
formed during the 1960s and 1970s, who had challenged the establishment and the
university institution but had ended up, more than any before - albeit dressed up to
appear « radical » - by integrating it.

An unindulgent observer of his own milieu, Professor Emeritus at the University
of California, Los Angeles, although he never obtained full tenure status, Russell Jacoby
has written on the Frankfurt School, the heterodox currents of Marxism and
psychoanalysis, the springs of violence as well as the meaning of utopian thought. He has,
moreover, without always sharing the sometimes more conservative dimensions of their
analyses, rubbed shoulders with thinkers such as Christopher Lasch or the lesser-known
founder of the journal *Telos*, Paul Piccone. With a constant interest in intellectuals from
outside the academic world, even whose work proved inseparable from a risky life as a
revolutionary.

From his first book, the author proposed to fight against "social amnesia" which
prevents, by forgetting the past, from thinking in appropriate terms the criticism of the
present *status quo*, beyond the dominant tendencies of the moment. Pursuing this
inspiration, the interview he gave us does not only propose to present an itinerary and a
work that is too little known in France, despite its undeniable interest : this historical
insight, which does not only concern American intellectual life, would also like, along the
way, to raise, from an emancipatory perspective, some significant questions about what
contemporary social criticism should be.

FABIEN DELMOTTE
American New Left and Critical Theory

Fabien Delmotte: Before approaching your book The Last Intellectuals, I will come back to the first stages of your journey, insofar as they can shed light on its meaning. What were your early influences? How did you come to be involved politically?

Russell Jacoby: I cannot pretend my trajectory was unique. I was born in New York at the end of World War II, the same week that Hitler died, to secular Jewish parents. My parents belonged to an informal community of what was a largely Jewish leftists. Already in high school I was a bit of a protester. One of my earliest school writings objected to nuclear war drills. The Cold War was at its height—this was the 1950s—and on occasion the school conducted nuclear war drills exercise in which students pulled our desks away from the windows and got under them in case of a nuclear attack. This was not only ridiculous but rendered nuclear war acceptable. By the early sixties a national group had formed in which I had joined, SANE (National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy), which called for nuclear disarmament. Everywhere in the country the political situation was heating up: nuclear disarmament, the civil rights movement, and Vietnam War. Moreover, they were connected. For instance, Martin Luther King, Jr. supported SANE and nuclear disarmament.

After high school I entered the University of Chicago. But the political situation at the school seemed dark and depressing compared to the nearby University of Wisconsin, Madison, which seemed lively, and in my second year I transferred to Madison.

When I arrived at the University of Wisconsin, Madison in 1964 I encountered a substantial new left. Studies on the Left, one of the earliest new left journals, came out of Madison. Two refugee professors, George L. Mosse, the offspring of the family that had owned the leading German daily newspaper, and Hans Gerth, a student of Karl Mannheim, the sociologist, became intellectual mentors for a number of us. Herbert Marcuse’s One Dimensional Man appeared in 1964 and I joined what was a small group of Frankfurt School Marxists, who were trying to learn German and acquire various key texts. We obsessed over Georg Lukacs and his History and Class Consciousness; its English translation did not appear till 1971. While I never studied directly with any of the Frankfurt School figures, I became a student of their work. I had some contact with Marcuse and he wrote a promotional comment for my first book, Social Amnesia: A Critique of Conformist Psychology. At the same time, along with my confreres I was active politically, especially in the Committee to End the War in Vietnam. I also joined Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).

Beginning in the 1970s, you began to participate in the review Telos, created in 1968 by Paul Piccone.
Yes, Piccone was the driving force behind *Telos*. Graduate students in philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo founded *Telos*. It emerged at a flashpoint of the 60s, in May 1968, and sought to break the stranglehold of a provincial Anglo-American philosophy. Translations and introductions to European thinkers and radicals filled the early issues. Piccone came from an Italian working class family, which might have inoculated him against leftist clichés about the working class. "We knew the 'proletariat' all too well to harbor any illusions about its alleged emancipatory potential," Piccone declared to explain *Telos*'s uncompromising rejection of conventional Marxism.

Incidentally another leftist Italian-American of working-class origins chaired my department when I was in graduate school. Like Piccone, Eugene Genovese, a well-known historian of American slavery, dressed in fine suits. (Piccone’s family worked as tailors). Genovese once addressed us motley graduate students, mainly from New York City and its suburbs, as we clomped about in work boots, blue jeans, and work shirts: "You think the workers like what you are wearing?" he sneered. "They despise it and you." He fingered his own fine threads. "This is what they like. This is what they would wear if they could." Piccone would have agreed. They were right, of course.

Piccone rejected orthodox Marxism. He was a student of phenomenology, in particular of Enzo Paci, an Italian philosopher he translated into English. He and *Telos* cast around for a new kind of Marxism and worked through—and discarded—various traditions, including the Frankfurt school and Habermas. His mind worked like a band saw, discarding what he considered useless in the radical tradition.

I saw in the documentary film *Velvet Prisons: Russell Jacoby on American academia* that you were in Paris around May 68.

Around May 68—but not May 68! I arrived in Paris the following Fall. I missed May 68 by half a year, I’m sorry to say. But Paris still felt under siege. Anti-riot police—CRS—seemed to be everywhere, a brooding presence waiting on street corners in their buses for the next outbreak. An electricity permeated the air. I was officially in Paris to attend a seminar given by the historian Georges Haupt, who also edited a series of books on socialism for Maspero, but I don’t think I ever attended. There was too much to do! For a moment we were all enamored by the Situationists. I stayed with friends who had a cat named Guy Debord (laughs).

You still regularly come in Paris, don’t you?

I often come to Paris, since my partner lives here. But I never had much contact with French intellectuals, perhaps because my intellectual orientation remains with the Frankfurt School and German Marxism. In fact the relationship between French and German Marxism puzzled me. Much later I tried to write a book—it did not happen—on the not very-well-known Norbert Guterman. I was

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interested in Guterman because he seemed to be a living link between a German and French critical Marxism. Guterman partook of the Frankfurt School, but in the 1920s and 30s he lived in Paris and worked with Henri Lefebvre. He and Lefebvre collaborated on several projects; for instance, they put out in 1934 the first French edition of Marx's almost unknown early writings—the “humanist” Marx who wrote of alienation. The Situationists took much from Lefebvre, especially his “critique of everyday life.”

Your early writings criticized approaches within the New Left centered on personal change and individual well-being, which underestimated the need for transformation of social structures.

In parallel, you have challenged the claims of "scientific" Marxism, which intended to secure the "correct line" through science and technology; and you have questioned the left fetish of progress. This question of technological progress still concerns you.

Lenin’s remark that “Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification” represents a simplistic Marxism. It posits that technology is inherently progressive and that all we need is to democratize or control it. Indeed, the Soviets loved American technology, especially Henry Ford and Frederick Taylor. The idea that technology needs only to be better utilized remains seductive, but misleading. The notion that a new society will simply adopt the technology of the old society fails to see that technology itself bespeaks historical forces. Are automobiles neutral technological facts? “Progressives” have often succumbed to the myth that advances in technology are all positive. We must rethink these issues.

In my last book, On Diversity, I have a chapter on technology and its impact on children’s imagination and spontaneity. Children have Ipads at the age of 2. Strollers come with Ipad holders. But what are these children watching? The stuff is designed by adults. These technological advances invade the unstructured space of childhood, which is the basis for imagination. The point is: technology is not neutral and technological advances do not necessarily constitute progress.

You were interested in the Frankfurt School, but also, more generally, in the "defeated" tradition of "Western" Marxism (as opposed to Soviet Marxism), with which you associate, for example, Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Korsch or Pannekoek.

Without of course renouncing the possibility of political victories, you criticize "the ethos of success", when it renders indifferent to the truth and values only the "winners". An ethos whose trace you find, not only among the capitalists, but also in the dominant currents of Marxism and the left. This question of success, in different forms, is, as we will see, always central to your different books.

My second book, which was really my dissertation, Dialect of Defeat, takes up defeated traditions within Marxism. It raises questions that I believe remain valid: what constitutes success in left-wing politics? How do you judge success politically? Does it take 10 years, 20 years, 50 years? Soviet Marxism silenced critics for decades because of its “success.” Leninism worked—until it did not.
But its early critics were prescient—and we can learn from these critics of “successful” politics.

In many ways a left after the 1960s sought success, which led to a dubious Third Worldism. We had leftists who thought they were following Mao or Che, because the latter “succeeded.” But it made no sense. The Chinese or Cuban revolutions depended on armed struggle and organizing peasants, but what does that mean in New York City or Chicago? It was nuts. And did these revolutions “succeed?” By what criteria? The left has damaged itself in its search for success.

The influence of universities and the decline of intellectuals

Your questioning of the belief in progress also stems from your critique of the university and its almost monopolization of intellectual life. You criticize the consequences of this and its impact on critical thought and the relationship of authors to the public.

Perhaps you could start by introducing the book The Last Intellectuals?

This book, well-known work in the United States, has not been translated into French.

I proposed a generational account of American intellectuals, those born around 1900, 1920s and 1940s. For earlier American intellectuals the university remained peripheral because it was small, underfunded, and distant from cultural life. The Edmund Wilsons and Lewis Mumfords earlier in the 20th century to the Jane Jacobs and Betty Friedans later saw themselves as writers and journalists, not professors.

What I called a transitional generation, the largely Jewish New York intellectuals, ended up later in their careers as professors, but usually they lacked graduate training. When Daniel Bell was appointed to the faculty of Columbia University in 1960, officials discovered that he did not have a Ph.D.—and bestowed it on him for his collection of essays (The End of Ideology). This incident indicates something of the commitment of these men—and they were men; they wrote lucid essays for a public, not monographs or research papers for colleagues.

But the story changes for the next generation—my 60s generation. In pose we were much more radical than previous American intellectuals. We were the leftists, Maoists, Marxists, Third Worldists, anarchists, and protesters who regularly shut down the university in the name of the war in Vietnam or free speech or racial equality. Yet for all our university bashing, unlike earlier intellectuals, we never exited the campus. We settled in. We became graduate students, assistant professors and finally—a few—leading figures in academic disciplines. Unlike earlier intellectuals, we became narrow professionals, not public intellectuals.

The irony is that we were more left-wing than the previous generation, but also more devoted to established institutions—the university. We networked, went to conferences, cultivated colleagues who could aid our career. An anarchist ethos infused the 60s movement, but this spirit vanished.

The earlier American writers and leftists were public intellectuals, not just professors. Consider a book like Monopoly Capital (1966) by Paul Sweezy and Paul Baran, which had a great impact—and was written to be read. But look today at the leading American Marxists or leftists. They are known basically by graduate students, people such as Homi Bhabha at Harvard, Frederic Jameson at Duke,
Gayatri Spivak at Columbia or Judith Butler at Berkeley. They cannot or do not want to write a lucid sentence. Their works are read by colleagues or graduate students.

At the same time a disdain for journalism arose. One of most damaging comments in the university about someone’s work is that it is “journalistic.” That means it is readable and superficial. The presumption is that jargon and obscurity indicate deep and subversive thought. Of course, this is bunk. Read Marx or Nietzsche or Freud; their best work is lucid and clear.

I should note that originally I had planned that The Last Intellectuals would be a comparative study; that is, I would look at American, French, German and English intellectuals. I was going to make related arguments about the evolution of intellectual life in each country. For all the differences between France and the United States, we see some of the same developments. Consider the shift, say, from Sartre and Camus to Althusser, Lacan, Foucault or Derrida. Evidently these authors were well-known, but they were much more professionalized than Sartre and Camus; they were much more insular and obscure. Indeed, they had the reputation of being cryptic, which certainly was not true of Sartre or Camus. Unlike the previous generation, they were not public intellectuals. I gave up the comparative aspect of the book as too unwieldy, and focused simply on the US.

Many people see something positive in university professionalization in that it promotes the autonomy of thought or the search for truth, and resists market or media imperatives.

I do not want to contribute to an anti-intellectualism, which is always close to the surface in the US. Yes, universities can be refuges for thinkers and scholars, protecting them from market and government pressures. At the same time, it would be naïve not to look at the imperatives that define academic life. How many professors look for truth—or defend it? I have recently written about the Salman Rushdie saga. How many American professors of literature—and there are thousands—have forthrightly and publicly defended Rushdie and freedom of speech? I believe the answer is: zero. Why is that?

In 1976 I wrote an article—famous in very small circles—called « The falling rate of intelligence », which argued that the capitalist command accumulate or perish, applied to the university, where it is formulated as publish or perish. You must publish, and it doesn’t matter what. Many studies confirm that quantity, not quality matters in the academic world. Most articles by sociologists are not read. They’re listed or cited. It’s the product which matters. There exists a reference source, The Citation Index, which has been used as a criterion to advance careers. It simply measures how often an author has been cited or footnoted. Presumably the more you are cited, the more important you are. And there’s a direct connection between how much you publish and how much you are cited. Whether your work has merit is not relevant.

You often draw the reader’s attention to the role of acknowledgments in academic books.

Mine are short. But in the typical academic book they look like telephone directories—pages and pages of names, contacts, institutions, awards. It is obvious the acknowledgements are acts of networking or career building. They declare how important the author is, how many people he or she knows. It is a
statement, saying, “Look! I am a player in this field. I hang out with academic luminaries. I am invited to many conferences.” It is also a warning to any reviewer, saying in effect “See, how many influential people I know! See how many enemies you will make if you attack my book!”

You believe material conditions influence thinking and you pay particular attention to the socio-economic transformations, such as the gentrification of cities, that recasts intellectual life.

Yes, here I am still a Marxist. Earlier intellectuals were in some sense bohemians. They were precarious freelance writers; they lived in the cities and hung out in cafés. My generation grew up on college campuses—and never left. Those material conditions led to very different writings, not lucid essays for the public, but scholarly essays for specialized colleagues—or grant applications for foundations. To succeed you had to be very careful whom you criticize. You operated in mini-academic fields where your future depends on the support of colleagues.

This is not a question of moral failing. The move into the university has to do with economic and urban realities. Public interest magazines declined. Cities became more expensive—and universities grew rapidly. The cheap urban bohemia basically vanished. When Edmund Wilson published in *The New Republic* in the 1920’s, I think he got paid something like 200 dollars. That’s basically the same sum you got paid in the 1960’s. But in the 1920’s you could rent an apartment and live for a couple of months. In the 1960’s, you could get a couple of nice meals. The economics of urban bohemia get transformed. For a would-be intellectual the signs all pointed in the direction of the university.

My own students sometimes say « oh, I want to be an intellectual ». Well, if you want to be an intellectual in America, I tell them you have three choices (laughs): You have a wife or a husband who will work and support you; you have a wealthy family and don’t have to worry about earning a living; or you pursue academic career. But the last and the most common option comes with heavy costs. You enter the university with the hopes of becoming an intellectual and addressing general issues. But climbing the academic ladder takes a toll. After 10-15 years, if you are lucky, you attain tenure and have the security of writing what you want. But by that time, you have forgotten what you wanted to write or are no longer able; you have become a specialized professor, not a public intellectual.

One of your previous books centered on the psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel, *The Repression of Psychoanalysis*, defended the idea that psychoanalysis lost part of its meaning, when it became professionalized and integrated in American life, as a legitimate and respectable discipline.

Yes, this was totally consistent with *The Last Intellectuals*, and with Freud himself. Perhaps his least read work—maybe because of its uninviting title— but one of his clearest and most prescient is *The Question of Lay Analysis*. In this work, he defended psychoanalysis from medical doctors. Freud was afraid that the medical profession would take over psychoanalysis, and turn it into an expensive therapy, which is more or less what happened in the United States. In other words, he wanted psychoanalysis to play a role in public intellectual life, and not become a monopoly of medical doctors. I don’t think it is an accident—to use the old
Marxist phrase—that some of the most important psychoanalysts did not have medical degrees, people like Erich Fromm and Erik Erikson.

*The Last Intellectuals* describes this general change in the conditions of American intellectual life, but it is also, as we have seen, a commentary on the integration of the left within the university as well as the collapse of the *New Left* and revolutionary hopes. Here we find you questioning what success means. Is this new presence of leftists in the university a political success? After all, conservative movements have for decades managed to win victories and even capture popular discontent without a university base.

I think this is a decisive issue. The University moves left as the rest of society moves right. What does that mean? Again, this returns to the problem of the academization of the left. If we have great leftists in the university, they mainly address each other. Ironically, conservatives, who historically have distrusted bureaucracies and professionalization, have managed to keep alive a discourse that is more lucid and engaging than left-wing professors.

*The Last Intellectuals* is now well known in the United States, but what was the reaction when the book was released in 1987?

The professors didn’t like it. All the classic notes were struck in the response. I was nostalgic for some « old white guys » intellectuals. Good riddance! We now have more diverse, more sophisticated, more theoretical intellectuals than those of the previous generation. The usual bromides were offered: Things were progressing! I was backward looking.

I saw that there was a positive reaction from EP Thompson, in a text of several pages, where he presents his conflicting relations with the university and discusses writing *The Making of the English Working Class* outside the circuit traditional academic. Your book also provoked reactions from academics, such as Edward Said, who at least recognized its importance.

The piece by E.P. Thompson, called « Reflections on Jacoby and all that, » was only published recently. Though he had some quibbles, I think Thompson basically agreed with me. Edward Said was more critical. Said took up my argument in his book, *Representations of the Intellectual*. It might be unfair but I think that the remarks of Thompson and Said reflect their divergent careers and choices. Thompson taught for years in adult education, meaning he taught adults who had jobs during the day and in the evening took classes. From an academic point of view, this is not prestigious work, but showed Thompson’s commitment to bringing knowledge into the community where people lived and worked. Said, on the other hand, spent his life in elite schools; he went to Princeton and Harvard and became a much-honored professor at Columbia University. Perhaps, unlike Thompson, he was a bit defensive when it came to attacks on the professorate. He summarizes my argument, and then rebuts it. But what does his rebuttal consist of? He states that being a public intellectual is “not at all inconsistent with being an academic.” And he gives examples; his first is “the brilliant Canadian pianist Glen Gould.” Now surely this is an odd example, since nowhere do I take up the issue of musicians; and whatever his merits it would be difficult to classify Gould as a public intellectual. Said continues with more example to refute me and
offers historians who have “had wide diffusion beyond the academy.” Whom does he propose? E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm and Hayden White. But these examples do not fly. Hobsbawm like Thompson was not a full-fledged academic, if only because he remained a life-long member of the British Communist Party; Thompson, as I mentioned, was hardly a typical academic; and Hayden White I am sorry to report has not had “wide” diffusion outside the campus. He is known only to the theory class. Three strikes and you are out.

Your book *The Last Intellectuals* examines many examples; you spoke of American anarchists as a relative exception to your observations on professionalization. You evoked the figure of Chomsky, who has criticized the collusion of intellectuals with power. You note that even though he was professor, Chomsky-as-critic operated as an outsider; that is, he was a tenured professor in linguists, but was not a credentialed specialist in foreign policy, the domain where he made his larger reputation. You also take up Murray Bookchin as an example of an anarchist non-academic radical thinker. You observe that while some progressives or Marxists encourage the seizure of power as an element of transformation, a notion in which "careerism and revolution" might converge, anarchists "distrust large institutions, the state, the university, and its functionaries. They are less vulnerable to the corruption of titles and salary because their resistance is moral, almost instinctual”.

I think there’s something to that. The anarchist impulse must infuse the Left, in particular the anarchist suspicion of authoritarianism and bureaucracy. And yes, Chomsky managed a career that few have been able to follow. He gained tenure and expertise in one area, linguistics, but then turned to an unrelated field, and becomes a vehement critic of American foreign policy. To put this differently, it would be difficult to imagine Chomsky as a tenured professor of political science.

I knew Murray Bookchin2 a bit. I once proposed to him that we write a book together; it was half a joke. A very popular American book was titled "Everything You Want to Know About Sex but Are Afraid to Ask." I proposed we write "Everything You Want to Know About Sects but Are Afraid to Ask," referring to Marxist and left-wing sectarian groups that seemed to be everywhere. I doubt the pun works in French. But there is a double joke here. I proposed it to Murray because he was very familiar with sectarian left politics—and more than familiar; he was a practitioner, as it were. This points to a paradox that bedevils some anarchism. On the one hand anarchists like Bookchin and others, perhaps the Situationists, were anti-authoritarian. On the other hand, they themselves were incredibly authoritarian, and regularly purged members who did not toe the line. The Situationists regularly expelled members for various theoretical infractions. Bookchin was very charismatic, but you had to agree with him. He wanted followers. I used call Murray Bookchin—privately!—an « anarcho-stalinist » (laughs).

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2 It should be noted that one can find, online, two texts by Murray Bookchin on the question of intellectuals. The first, free, incidentally comments on Russell Jacoby’s book: https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/murray-bookchin-intelligentsia-and-the-new-intellectuals. The second is paid access: http://journal.telospress.com/content/1987/73/182.abstract.
You underline the distinct and independent trajectory of *Telos*, which we have already mentioned in relation to the New Left. In *Telos*, the curious reader finds, during the 80s, texts by Castoriadis, the new generation of the Frankfurt School and many other things; the journal also gave rise to sharp conflicts over the paths that critical thought should henceforth take. The journal turned to the development of a new populism, inspired by Christopher Lasch; and it opened up a dialogue with more conservative or "libertarian" authors, even from the far right, visible for instance with Carl Schmitt. You didn't go that route.

Schmitt was a step too far for me. But Piccone was not all wrong. He became convinced that the left was more or less careerist and sought jobs in the university or state bureaucracy. Resistance, he thought, came elsewhere, maybe from the street, from neighborhoods, from real people. He believed in self-constituted groups who do things on their own, from the bottom up. I might add he practiced what he preached. He physically put out *Telos* with the help of volunteers; that is, he set the type; brought the pages to the bindery; transported the finished magazine to the post office. He was also instrumental in buying an apartment building with dozens of others in the lower East Side of New York City, who all moved in—not to live communally—everyone had their own apartments—but to own and made decisions communally. This was populism in action!

You knew Christopher Lasch, whose work has also been noticed in France. How do you view him?

Christopher Lasch was the advisor to my doctorate thesis, and wrote the introduction to my first book, *Social Amnesia*. He might be called a Left/Right thinker. He came out of the Left but became disenchanted with some aspects of it—a bit like Piccone. He questioned the professionalization of child care and dismissal by the left of the family as only a site of oppression. By the end of his life, he became a bete-noire to the left. Yet I believe he has much to offer.

Lasch as well as some *Telos* contributors began to target what they called a “new class,” which Piccone saw as a vehicle of “artificial negativity”, a way the existing system manufactures dissent to validate the status quo. In a kindred matter, the American left has in recent years popularized a phrase coined by Barbara Ehrenreich, the "professional-managerial class", which Catherine Liu recently used in a small book, *Virtue Hoarders*. Are you interested in this question?

Yes, of course, but there are a million versions. I wrote an afterword to C. Wright Mills’s book, *White Collar*, which offered a similar kind of argument. Mills drew on an older German sociological literature about a new class which is not the working or ruling class. I think there’s something there. Evidently the eclipse of the old working class—both numerically and as subversive entity—is worth studying as is the emergence of managerial class. One of the best statements about this new class is found in the book by the ex-Trotskyist, James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution* (1941)

Although you are not particularly optimistic, you reject cynicism and resignation and argue for maintaining a "utopian" perspective, leaving open the possibility of radical change. If social amnesia can contribute to confirming the
status quo, the absence of representation of a future other can likewise lead us to be content with a very impoverished notion of the diversity of possibilities.

I make the argument that the utopian moment is crucial to a Left project. If you surrender it, what remains? Cleaner streets and better parks? These things are not unimportant but, historically a hope for a transformed society separated the left from simple reformers. But that hope is gone. Look at the recent strikes in France and compare them to those in the 60s, when also labor unions went on strike. But now not even a whiff of fundamental change is in the air. The issue is to keep retirement age at 62. The hope for social transformation has decayed into the hope to retire.

**Is there's a relationship between the end of independent intellectuals and the end of utopia?**

A good question, but I don’t have a good answer. I think probably such a relationship exists. I suspect utopians tend to be misfits, who are not successful professionals; and as the cultural spaces that allowed intellectual misfits to survive have dwindled, the utopian project loses out. Yet the history of the utopian project is depressing. That has to be admitted. The sixteenth century gave us the term “utopia,” the twentieth, “dystopia“.

**In the 1990s, when a new "ideology of the end of ideologies" took hold, in your view, elite universities developed diversity programs. Even if you were against discrimination, you observed that the gentrification of higher education, the homogeneity from a class point of view, was increasing. In your latest book, On Diversity, you argue that this diversity effort has spread across the United States to police stations and multinational corporations. You again wonder if we are not being confronted by a troubling process of homogenization or standardization.**

In my book, On Diversity I challenge the idea that the world is becoming more diverse. It seems pretty obvious the opposite is happening. A similar form of consumerism had spread throughout the globe. It’s bizarre that as the world becomes less diverse, the ideology of diversity flourishes. One might say that the diversity ideology is a response to the eclipse of diversity. As people become less different, they fetishize the remaining differences. They pretend they are more different than they are.

The diversity ideology, which came out of the university, has spread throughout the land. But what does it mean? Usually, it connotates group membership. Do we have the proportionate number of Latinos, African Americans, Asian Americans and other groups in our institutions? Proportionate to what? To their proportion in the population. But this is simply a mechanical approach. This is an effort to ensure that every quarter of society reflects the larger demographic realities. Not only is this a dubious goal, but what does it have to do with diversity, especially if everyone agrees? Where does intellectual diversity enter?

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3 This interview was conducted in February 2023.
Moreover this demographic diversity suggests the eclipse of the individual; that is, this mechanical diversity only makes sense if the individual represents the group. Hence the typical opening of many disputes or arguments: “I speak as an African American...” or “I speak as a Latino...” or “I speak as a lesbian...” The individual vanishes into group identity. The left upholds with equal vehemence two opposite positions. On one hand, it believes that identity is totally “constructed”, and you can be any sex or person or orientation. On the other hand, identity is blood or genetics. Willy-nilly, you are simply a member of racial or ethnic group.

You criticize the conventional idea of success implied by this diversity ideology, which is essentially quantitative: "more things, more items, more cars, more cultures". If everyone aims for the same things, where is the diversity?

Yes. We drive our Mercedes to the diversity conferences. We Google and shop at Amazon when we get home. The only groups that qualify as diverse do not want to be part of this society, for instance the Amish. But they are unimportant—and in part unimportant because they don’t want to partake of advanced industrial society. They do not want to join in; they want to keep their distance. They don’t even want electricity. But the major groups pushing for diversity share the same vision of the world; they more or less want the same things. They want to be let in, not left out. For progressives the diversity ideology is simply a catch-all idea. In the absence of any real vision or program, they latch on to diversity. Diversity is the opium of the left.

Your book on violence, which has appeared in French (Les ressorts de la violence. Peur de l'autre ou peur du semblable?) tried to establish that, in history, small narcissistic differences have proven to be more dangerous than genuine alterities.

My book on violence challenges the idea of vast differences between peoples. It’s a canard of liberal and left thought that we fear the stranger, and that fear drives violence. But from Cain and Abel to the present, most violence stems not from strangers, but from brothers—or kindred people. In the US at least, most violence is domestic, taking place in the family or among family members. Your well-lit kitchen is more dangerous than a dark street at night. And most wars are between peoples who share much. Not strangers! Look at the war between Ukraine and Russia today. But this idea is unpalatable. We prefer to talk about hostility or fear of the stranger.

Finally, can you talk about the difficulties encountered in publishing your work? You regret a lack of intellectual diversity in the American academic world. You criticize the avoidance and censorship that take precedence over reasoned answers as well as the challenges to freedom of expression. You fear confusion between the language of bureaucracy and the language of liberation.

It’s a complex issue. Yes, I had grave difficulties in publishing my book “On Diversity,” and almost gave up trying. I went through a dozen publishers. Academic publishers considered the book too far outside the liberal-left consensus. I was attacking diversity! God forbid! The book broached the subject from the left, but the left has become thin-skinned, censorious and judgmental. You must agree or
you are a right-winger. In recent years in the US the left has been surrendering its commitment to free speech.

To conclude, it should be noted that in the United States, the expression "public intellectual" which you introduced (even if the phrase existed in C Wright Mills's writings, which you quote) is now used shamelessly in all kinds of ways. You obviously did not have in mind the media expert or the star of the TV shows.

It’s almost the opposite.

You declare that small journals can sometimes be the only place for the independent « public intellectual » trying to think outside the box. You quote C Wright Mills: "Opposition to established culture and politics often consists of scattered little groups working in small circulation magazines, dealing in unsold cultural products." And you cite also Victor Serge, and observe that he was too revolutionary for the right and too politically incorrect for the left: « With our non-descript little journals, we have often seen clearly where statesmen have floundered. ». You note that with a life of imprisonments, exiles, and defeats— he died in Mexico after fleeing Europe-- Serge did not resign himself to inevitable failure or the status quo: “Yes we have lost but our spirit is strong...We have known how to win, we must never forget that.”

Exactly.

[Interview by Fabien Delmotte]

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