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# A Generation of Intellectuals in Movement

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As generational phenomena, the social and political foundations of postmodernism are clear. One remarkable fact is that a significant number of its proponents (if not all its major theoreticians) received their political education during the times when Marxism and other emancipatory philosophies were experiencing a dramatic, if brief, renaissance in North America and Western Europe. This surge of interest was generated by the political and cultural effervescence produced by a curious confluence of circumstances. In the United States, the generalized breakdown of the consensual ideology, that had been so carefully constructed during the repression of the political Left after the Second World War, produced a radical difference of generational sensibilities, especially after the "generation gap" became a media and marketing rubric in the 1960s. In France, political frustrations were intensified by the prestige of the French Communist Party and other radical political organizations.

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The excitement of the 1960s — when it appeared as if the pace of historical change was accelerating — contributed to an apocalyptic mentality manifested in a variety of ways. In the United States, and without speaking of the trauma of street confrontation in a country unused to and intolerant of marches and demonstrations as modes of political expression, a succession of events psychologically marked the youth of the first post-war generation: the assassinations of John Kennedy (1963), Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy (1968), the spectacular riots in virtually every major city, the disruption or closing down of hundreds of colleges and universities from 1968 to 1970. To this must be added the latent physical fear inspired by the televised images of the Vietnam War and, for young men, the threat of conscription that affected all social classes despite and because of the complicated system of deferments. In an emotional climate of social optimism and political pessimism, an age cohort was formed within an historical situation representing radical change of some kind for all members of society. In France, and elsewhere, identification with diverse national liberation movements and, then, political convulsions in the late 1960s combined with the internationalization of a rebellious youth culture.

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One result of the restructuring of world productive relationships and national politics in the early postwar period, therefore, was a materially privileged generation habituated to thinking in terms of radical confrontation and "breaks" within an anxiety-producing environment. It is a generation afflicted by the double syndrome of impotence and megalomania, a generation convinced of the importance of immediate rewards and external appearances, and suspicious of the tendency towards abnegation required by the "deferred gratification" of the previous generation in particular, and more generally by revolutionaries. Postmodernism also reflects the increased commodification of the intellectual life itself and expresses the frustrations of members of a relatively privileged generation, materially comfortable but disillusioned by the discontinuance of the politico-cultural movements formative in their intellectual development.

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During the 1960s and early 1970s the trend within universities favored enrollment in the social sciences and humanities. It was, in this sense, a generation of intellectuals who used ideas 1) in order to locate themselves ontologically within a historically fluid social situation and 2) to challenge the prevailing structure of authority. As such, the postwar generation differed intellectually and emotionally from the university students of the late 1940s and 1950s, described by William H. Whyte in his *The Organization Man* (New York, Simon & Schuster) in 1956 as an unimaginative, conformist "generation of bureaucrats" oriented towards participation in capitalist business. In addition, the postwar generation was socially unique in that there was tremendous expansion of university populations in the Western countries (and elsewhere). It was a generation whose members generally expected to rise in the social structure.

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However, the onset of a global crisis of capital in the early 1970s combined with the maturation of the first postwar generation in order to moderate social idealism and political militancy. For those leaving the university as well as for those seeking employment within it, there was now no question of confrontational politics. Moreover, by the mid-1970s, those among the new generation of university-trained intellectuals who had obtained positions within the universities were obliged to conform to standards of academic expression. For all, political activity and even intellectual expression of engagement were moderated by either hopes for employment or promotion within the academy. Such consensual pressures could not be handled as institutional constraints had been during the 1960s. For this age cohort, political confrontation was now rejected, but epistemological confrontation was seized upon as a radical strategy of social accommodation. Significantly, the work of Immanuel Wallerstein gained great popularity in the 1970s. For example, declaring that the expression "third world" had lost its accuracy, his "sociological" discussion of the "capitalist world-economy" studiously refrained from referring to either the word or the concept of "imperialism". [1]

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When "postmodernism" emerged fully in the 1980s there was, therefore, already a strong sense of being in some kind of "post" condition. Daniel Bell, Alain Touraine and John Kenneth Galbraith had already popularized the notion of "postindustrial society". By 1980 the expression "postmarxism" was increasingly heard. Some sort of "break", many felt, had occurred. But what was it? In the middle and late 1970s the theorization of the cultural preoccupations of the new generation of Marxists was aided by the turn towards the "Frankfurt School" and "Critical Theory". The problem was that the commitment to social struggle was still too apparent in the formulations stemming from such radical influences. What was needed was an "epistemological break" capable of freeing the new social imaginers from the academically compromising, political positions inherent in Marxism, and yet retaining the element of confrontation in the realm of cultural analysis.

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The components of such a theoretical orientation had, in fact, already been formulated in France because of the stultification of both Marxist philosophy and the emergence of a new rationalism in the form of structuralism. For the postwar generation of intellectuals, oriented towards the social sciences, the key to their reconciliation with established institutions was found in the philosophical ruptures provided by structuralist philosophy. For François Dosse, the student generation in France of the 1960s ultimately acted-out the philosophies of a transitional generation, that of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser and Jacques Derrida: *"C'est une génération philosophique consciente du défi des sciences sociales, et qui rompt avec la rhétorique de l'exercice universitaire. Pour cela, il faut contourner, déborder les vieux appareils légitimes et routiniers de l'institution pour s'adresser directement à l'intelligentsia, en choisissant de nouveaux objets de la philosophie par un éclairage spécifique de l'actualité, en articulant la pensée à des champs sociaux, des institutions, gagnant ainsi une valeur praxéologique."* [2]

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The postmodern movement reflects the increased commodification of the intellectual life itself. It is the ivory tower given over to the "promotional culture" hypocritically decried by some postmodernists. This mechanism of transference or projection is perhaps logical in generations frustrated by their material satiety and the discontinuance of the politico-cultural movements formative in their intellectual development.

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It is not always easy to determine when a social thinker is motivated by a desire to know and to communicate his or her knowledge, or by the desire to exploit a particular situation in order to promote a career. The bureaucratization of intellectual life has certainly increased the latter tendency. Russell Jacoby's book on North American intellectuals —

*The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York, Basic Books, 1987) — has made this point in reference to contemporary political perceptions and social concerns. His thesis is all the more compelling when we consider that, upon criticizing the obscurantist language and crypto-elitism of some of the intellectual Left, he refrained from citing, among the examples that he gave, journals which published his own work or which used his name on their mastheads and are leading purveyors of the kind of hermetic language he finds objectionable (such as *Telos* or *the Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*). This is an excellent example of how the critical imagination is limited by professional considerations. Jacoby's admirable critique of the new academic empire builders was limited by his unwillingness to compromise the connections contributing to his own survival in the academic world. The unattached, "public intellectual", as Jacoby rightfully stresses, is a vanishing breed in the United States. "Networking" has become the key to the diffusion of ideas that are themselves seen as a product to be sold in the academic market place. It is managerial skill and merchandising which now take precedence over long and tedious intellectual work.

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At the same time, this very change has engendered those who feed upon it. It is now common to see some contemporary critiques of "promotional culture" used to promote an intellectual enterprise motivated by the desire to consolidate university careers. But such activity is logical given the cultural milieu and formative experiences of the post-war generation of university-trained intellectuals. Here is one of the sources of the use of the expression "similacra". The critic is the mirror image of that which he or she criticizes. Statement of a certain dialectic, product of the "dialectical imagination", or "bad faith" in the Sartrian sense of a truth used as a lie, of a strategy designed to avoid the appearance or the admission of guilt, the ultimate step in this process of self-justification as social criticism is when the academic promoter declares that his or her intention is to expose and combat the very tendencies upon which the critique is founded.

Generalizations about this phenomenon are of course subject to qualifications of different kinds. National differences are important. It is impossible, for example, to equate the perceptions of American "baby boomer radicals", Dutch "provos" and French "soixante-huitards". In Canada, for example, a peculiar cultural vantage point has contributed to the rise of social criticism at once liberated and frustrated by its isolation from the centers of power (the United States) and intellectual authority (France and England). The subordinate position of the Canadian economy and its intellectual elite has certainly allowed its artists and intellectuals to synthesize philosophical influences in a relatively original way. Just as national differences were pronounced in the post-French Revolution generation of Western European "romantics", so are they in the post-1968 generation of Western European and North American "gauchistes". However, in all countries, and in both historical epochs, we find the same tension between an unfulfilled social idealism and a determined egoism in which the individualist will is the central force.

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In Britain, in contrast to the other highly industrialized Western countries, the long-term, largely uninterrupted decline of the productive system has allowed anti-capitalist thought a greater depth of resistance. In particular, a current of Marxist analysis has developed more solidly within British academic institutions because, on the one hand, it was not simply rooted out as in the United States during the "McCarthyist" period and, on the other hand, was not compromised by too close identification with a powerful, and bureaucratically stultified Communist Party as in France. In spite of the reactionary turn of the mid-1970s that came to be labeled "Thatcherism", neither the individualism of the first postwar generation of left wing intellectuals nor the dissolution of the so-called socialist regimes of the USSR and Eastern Europe were sufficient to discredit anti capitalist thought in Britain as it came to be discredited in France.

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[1] See Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Capitalist World-Economy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979.

[2] François Dosse, "Le sujet captif : entre existentialisme et structuralisme", *L'Homme et la société* n° 101, 1991, p. 37.