

Too right to redress wrongs

The Intellectuals and the Flag

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Recognition, pity, fear, reversals of fortune, clearly identifiable tragic flaws and mythical heroes of sociology and leftist politics from the golden age of the 1950s and 1960s - all the canonical elements of Greek tragedy are here in this collection of seven essays by Todd Gitlin. The essays trace what Gitlin considers the "tragedy" of the New Left in the US. Gitlin first describes three seminal thinkers (David Riesman, C. Wright Mills and Irving Howe) who outlined fundamental intellectual principles and analysed social concerns. These helped the New Left to its "unprecedented victory" in helping to stop an "unjust war"

(Vietnam) and address major social, economic and political problems in the 1960s and early 1970s. Finally, Gitlin takes a look at the movement's demise as an active force for political and social change and cultural self-conception in the past three decades.

The Right has developed effective strategies, mechanisms and philosophies that have given it control of American politics since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Right-controlled media report what can be made to look like authoritative findings of right-wing think-tanks and the electorate follows what should be non-issues to the polling booths. A "disciplined alliance of plutocrats and right-wing fundamentalist Christians" has brought this about. Meanwhile, the New Left has gone from radical engagement in real politics to a self-willed and narcissistic marginalisation. Ironically, Gitlin has followed a similar path, from 19-year-old radical activist in Students for a Democratic Society in 1963 to his current role as public intellectual and professor of journalism and sociology at [Columbia University](#).

The symptoms of the New Left's ailments are not hard for Gitlin, one of its major and founding champions, to diagnose. The New Left takes the Quaker dictate of "speaking truth to power" too strongly to heart.

Its practitioners enjoy their roles as "torchbearers of opposition" and prefer purist marginalisation to the dirty business of political mobilisation and compromise and even illusion-shattering self-examination.

This trend has been exacerbated by the tenets of postmodernism, by increasing American anti-intellectualism, by the "popularisation" of higher education and by the Right's manipulation of post-9/11 patriotism.

We can recognise in all seven essays clear causes for lamentation. The powerlessness of the New Left has had bad consequences for American democracy and we should fear for its future. The New Left no longer writes, like Riesman did in *The Lonely Crowd*, "intelligent analysis directed to intelligent readers". The New Left has retreated into postmodernist posturing, while sociology as a discipline mainly continues to do what Mills saw it doing in 1959: it uses "a set of bureaucratic techniques which inhibit social inquiry by methodological pretensions, which congest such work by obscurantist conceptions, or which trivialise it by concern with minor problems unconnected with publicly relevant issues".

Still, when Gitlin himself examines a crucial issue, such as the need in a democratic culture for no one to be "exempted from common duties", and applies it to military decision-making and universal conscription, he cannot bring himself to engage in real political discussion.

The New Left is still left talking with itself on the sidelines, while the Right plays the game and even sets the rules and chooses the officials who enforce them.

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