

“Education and the Academic Left:  
Critical Reflections on Todd Gitlin”

By Douglas Kellner

Todd Gitlin distinguished himself in the 1980s with well-received books that dealt with the role of the media in the 1960s anti-war movement, with the 1960s scene grounded in his activism with SDS and progressive movements, and with the nature and complex roles of television in U.S. society (1980, 1983, 1987). In the 1990s, he moved from the left toward a more reformist liberalism and began criticizing multiculturalism and what he saw as a fragmented postmodern identity politics in his book The Twilight of Common Dreams (1995). Since 9/11 he has focused his critical energies more intensely on the left and in particular the “academic left.”<sup>1</sup>

Todd Gitlin’s The Intellectuals and the Flag (2006) collects essays of the last decade ranging from his response to the 9/11 terror attacks to polemics against the academic left and what he sees as its abstract and abstruse theory, postmodernism, and cultural studies. While his polemics with the left on issues of patriotism and the flag generated an acrimonious exchange in The Nation that I engage below, I am focusing in this review on Gitlin’s critiques of various types of social theory and research, of what he calls the academic left, and his reflections on education and the university. My argument will be that Gitlin’s critique articulates with the rightwing attack on the university and academic left, reproducing positions associated with Allan Bloom in The Closing of the American Mind (1987).<sup>2</sup> Like Bloom, Gitlin bemoans the influence of German romanticism, Big T Theory, cultural studies, and certain versions of multiculturalism, thus positioning Gitlin as the leftwing of the right’s attack on the university and academic left.

Gitlin’s Critique of the Left and Public Intellectual Pantheon

Gitlin’s Introduction to The Intellectuals and the Flag, “From Great Refusal to Political Retreat,” opens with a snide dismissal of Herbert Marcuse who popularized the phrase “great refusal” and sectors of the New Left that practiced it. For Gitlin, the great refusal’s “absolute rejection of the social order” represents a “purity of will” and “more than a little futility” (3). The concept “is the triumph of German romanticism” and “a shout from an ivory tower” (3).

In fact, Marcuse always countered the refusal of specific modes of thought and behavior with alternative ones, as when he championed critical and dialectical thought against the conformist modes of one-dimensional thought, or pointed to the aesthetic dimension as a utopian projection of ideals of a freer and happier world in contrast to existing suffering and unfreedom.<sup>3</sup> Gitlin calls for an “intellectual Renaissance” and, arguably, the sort of grand theoretical and utopian vistas of Marcusean thought could help produce a rebirth of the left and the development of alternative politics and pedagogy.<sup>4</sup> Marcusean vision contained an unblinkered view of forces of domination and oppression, countered by the “great refusal” and projections of an alternative vision of emancipation, freedom, and justice.

Curiously, Allan Bloom too singled out Marcuse for attack, claiming in his infamous The Closing of the American Mind that Marcuse was the most important philosopher of the 1960s counterculture, and that the spread of his theories led to “the betrayal of liberty on America’s campuses.” Moreover, Bloom claimed that German thinkers like Nietzsche,

Heidegger, and Marcuse have spread a corrosive nihilism and seduced the youth, writing that the U.S. imported “a clothing of German fabrication for our souls, which... cast doubt upon the Americanization of the world on which we had embarked” (1987, p. 152). In an era of aggressive militarism and neo-imperialism from the Reagan administration through two Bush administrations, we might argue that any casting of doubt on U.S. imperial aspirations is a salutary contribution for which Marcuse should be thanked. Revealing his inability to grasp the philosophical dimension and challenges of Marcuse’s thought, Bloom also wrote of Marcuse: “He ended up here writing trashy culture criticism with a heavy sex interest” (1987, p. 226), a simply ludicrous claim.

Marcuse was a steadfast defender of the need for utopian vision of a better world and having a positive alternative to existing society to guide radical social change. Although Gitlin claims to appeal to intellectuals in his book, a social type never defined by him, he does not really present an emancipatory vision for the left, beyond patriotism and liberal reform, does not lay out a clear agenda or lines of activism for intellectuals in the present age, and on the whole seems more interested in the promotion of liberal thought and politics, and trashing the academic left, rather than developing radical alternatives.

Indeed, Gitlin is better in attacking the Left and progressives than developing viable theoretical and practical alternatives. In The Twilight of Common Dreams, he deplors fragmentation and identity politics and calls for “building bridges,” but his polemics tend to burn rather than build alliances, and he does not really offer any suggestions concerning how differences can be mediated. Gitlin’s mode of thought tends toward polarization and dichotomies rather than mediation. Championing the enlightenment and reason, he does not see how postmodern views can articulate with classical modernist ones to develop more robust modes of critique, theory, and practice, nor, as I will argue below, does he offer ideas for the reconstruction of education that combine traditional progressivist ideas with newer radical ones.

While calling for articulating common dreams and hopes, this imperative has remained largely empty, as Gitlin continues to polemicize and ostracize rather than to synthesize and offer constructive perspectives for a better future. It is symptomatic of his largely negative thought that he chose to dramatize the twilight of common dreams, rather than the dawn of new ones. In The Intellectuals and the Flag, Gitlin chooses to valorize liberal and left liberal theorists over more radical ones.

Gitlin celebrates “Three Exemplary Intellectuals,” who he believes advanced a “largeness of vision,” wrote “accessibly, even stylishly,” while exhibiting lucidity and activism (9ff). For Gitlin, David Riesman, C. Wright Mills, and Irving Howe were all original scholars, social critics, and public intellectuals of a sort that have allegedly disappeared in the present.

However, were Gitlin to have probed more deeply into the origins of Riesman’s and Mills’ work, he would have found that the ideas of the neo-Marxist German refugees from German fascism labeled the “Frankfurt School” provided crucial models of a critical theory of society and influences on Riesman, Mills, and other scholars of the postwar period.<sup>5</sup> Riesman’s The Lonely Crowd reproduced the ideal-type model developed by Marcuse, T.W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, and the critical theorists into the transition from a more individualist centered society to more massified ones. Further, the sort of snappy and “puckish phrases” that Riesman coined and Gitlin praises (17) followed T.W. Adorno’s practice without, however, Adorno’s depth and originality.<sup>6</sup>

A penetrating study by Neil McLaughlin, “Critical Theory Meets America: Riesman, Fromm, and The Lonely Crowd” documents the impact of Erich Fromm on Riesman and the strong similarities between their works.<sup>7</sup> McLaughlin also engages the intense debates over Riesman’s work in the past two decades including interventions by Allan Bloom, Alan Wolfe, Jeffrey Goldfarb, Stjepan Mestrovic, and others, all of which Gitlin ignores. Oddly, although Gitlin wrote an introduction to a new edition of The Lonely Crowd and spun it off for an opening chapter of a section in his book, he does not engage any of the recent critical scholarship about Riesman, does not contextualize his reading of Riesman in the sociological and theoretical currents of the day, and does not follow how Riesman’s work is still in play in contemporary debates. Gitlin’s hermeneutic is a narcissistic one, contextualizing Riesman in his own personal history and using Riesman to buttress his own politics and intellectual interests, highlighting his own encounters with Riesman rather than the larger sociological currents and issues that Riesman addressed and debates in which his work figured.

This aversion to scholarship, we will see, typifies Gitlin’s superficial discussions of intellectuals and academic trends throughout his book. Gitlin’s next praise-worthy intellectual of the post-War period is the towering Texan C. Wright Mills, but once again Gitlin does not engage the vast literature that has accumulated around Mills, the various discussions of his work, or competing interpretations. Nor does he provide adequate contextualization of Mills’s work within the currents of the social thought of the period that most influenced him.

As it turns out, Mills, like Riesman, was influenced by those unspeakable (for Gitlin) German romantics of the Frankfurt School. Mills’ critique of “the two dominant tendencies of mainstream sociology, the bloated puffery of Grand theory and the microscopic marginality of Abstracted Empiricism” (33) followed the Frankfurt School model and practice that Mills acknowledged as an influence. In a 1954 article, Mills described the dominant types of social research as those of the Scientists (quantitative empiricists), the Grand Theorists (structural-functionalists like Talcott Parsons), and those genuine Sociologists who inquire into: "(1) What is the meaning of this — whatever we are examining — for our society as a whole, and what is this social world like? (2) What is the meaning of this for the types of men and women that prevail in this society? and (3) how does this fit into the historical trend of our times, and in what direction does this main drift seem to be carrying us?"<sup>8</sup>

Mills then comments:

I know of no better way to become acquainted with this endeavor in a high form of modern expression than to read the periodical, Studies in Philosophy and Social Sciences, published by The Institute of Social Research. Unfortunately, it is available only in the morgues of university libraries, and to the great loss of American social studies, several of the Institute's leading members, among them Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, have returned to Germany. That there is now no periodical that bears comparison with this one testifies to the ascendancy of the Higher Statisticians and the Grand Theorists over the Sociologists. It is difficult to understand why some publisher does not get out a volume or two of selections from this great periodical (ibid).

Further, Mills' critique of "administrative research" that Gitlin cites (36) was influenced by the work of Adorno and the Frankfurt School. In addition, the Frankfurt School model of the culture industry shaped Mills's focus on the media and the cultural apparatus.<sup>9</sup> Hence, although Mills and Riesman are worthy of re-reading and presenting as models of critical social theory and research, their work should be read in the context of the critical theory of society developed by the exiled theorists of the so-called Frankfurt School including Adorno, Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, and Leo Lowenthal who had strong although often unacknowledged influences on the critical social and cultural thought of their epoch, and who arguably provide more productive resources for critical social theory and research today than the theorists extolled by Gitlin. Although they are more difficult and demanding than their American colleagues of the period, much of their work was accessible to the public, and in particular Marcuse and Fromm had the impact as public intellectuals that Gitlin is otherwise extolling, although their politics are more left than liberal (as was C. Wright Mills who can easily be placed in the pantheon of First-Rate Thinkers and Intellectuals of their era, along with members of the Frankfurt School).

Gitlin's valorization of Irving Howe is more problematical. In a chapter on "Irving Howe's Partition," Gitlin documents Howe's diremption of his literary studies and political work with the journal Dissent, which Gitlin participated in, but he does not really provide many good reasons why Howe's work is worthy of restudy. While Gitlin himself seems bothered by the split between aesthetics and politics in Howe's work, he does not see how the mediation of the two in Adorno, Marcuse, and Fredric Jameson is more productive than Howe's "partition."<sup>10</sup>

#### Gitlin's Academic Nightmares

But it is in Part II "Two Traps and Three Values" that Gitlin's agenda clearly comes to the fore in a polemic against Theory, postmodernism, and cultural studies. Gitlin is put off by what the "academic left in particular has nourished ... [as] 'theory': a body of writing (one can scarcely say its content consists of propositions) that is, in the main, distracting, vague, self-referential, and wrong-headed" (68). As an example: "Michel Foucault became a rock star of theory in the United States precisely because he demoted knowledge to a reflex of power, merely the denominator of the couplet 'power/knowledge,' yet his preoccupation was with the knowledge side, not actual social structures. His famous illustration of the power of 'theory' was built on Jeremy Bentham's design of an ideal prison, the Panopticon — a model never built" (69).

In fact, in a dazzling array of texts with different methodologies and problematics, Foucault explored relations between power, knowledge, institutions, discourses, and practices and cannot be reduced to linguistic idealism as Gitlin suggests. Also, Foucault's analysis of the Panopticon illustrates a shift from one regime of punishment to another and is not a metaphor for the power of theory as Gitlin claims, and in fact shows Foucault's strong emphasis on social institutions and analysis.<sup>11</sup>

In the next few chapters, Gitlin continues his polemic against the academic left, Theory, and contemporary culture. His method is to take some academic trend like Theory or cultural studies that he sets up in an ideal type model and then attacks. But as with his failed attempt to dismiss Foucault and Theory, he often misrepresents his object of critique and exhibits a kind of pop sociology of the sort he himself criticizes rather than offering rigorous and illuminating analysis. Indeed, his own critique of superficial pop sociology could easily be directed against his own work: "Pop sociology is sociological imagination

lite, a fast-food version of nutriment, a sprinkling of holy water on the commercial trend of the moment, and a trivialization of insight” (41).

As an example of Gitlin’s own pop sociology, take his comments on the complexity of the postmodern debates that roared from the 1980s into the 1990s. Gitlin opens his chapter on “The postmodernist mood” with a pastiche of the famous analysis of Fredric Jameson and Jameson’s stages of premodern, modern, and postmodern culture, and then reduces Jameson and David Harvey to exemplars of a “bleak Marxist account” of the phenomenon (78). Gitlin generally dismisses postmodern theory and culture as “blank,” indifferent, and nihilistic, with “a taste for sarcasm, snarkiness, and cultural bricolage” (80). Yet he does allow at the conclusion of his polemic a “good” postmodernism defined as a “politics of limits [that] would be at once radical and conservative — it would conserve. It would respect horizontal social relations — multiplicity over hierarchy, coexistence over usurpation, difference over deference: finally, disorderly life in its flux against orderly death in its finality. The democratic vital edge of the postmodern — the love of difference and flux and the exuberantly unfinished — would infuse the spirit of politics, as it deserves to” (85).

Gitlin acts like he invented this model of a positive postmodernism, but in fact it characterizes burgeoning traditions of the postmodern turn which Gitlin ignores in his polemic, allowing him to present a more attractive version of postmodernism as his own invention at the conclusion of his polemic.<sup>12</sup> In fact, Gitlin has not read much postmodern theory as his failed presentation of Foucault indicates, and his pop sociology does not present much of an engagement with the complex tradition of the postmodern, exhibiting intellectual regression rather than a Renaissance of critical thought or advancement in scholarship.

Gitlin is not much better at cultural studies, opening his polemic with the admonition that anyone practicing cultural studies should know to situate their work in the context in which it emerges, querying: “why should cultural studies refuse to see itself through the same lens?” (87) In fact, most of the major figures in British, North American, and global cultural studies discuss the origins of and debates within cultural studies, and situate their work within this context. There are by now stacks of books and journal articles on the development of different traditions of cultural studies, divisions and debates within the field, and differing models and methods, that exhibit, contra Gitlin, a high degree of methodological reflection and contextualization, as well as intense polemics within the field.<sup>13</sup>

It is, in fact, not clear why Gitlin is so negative and polemical against postmodern theory, cultural studies, or Big T Theory. It seems Gitlin has encountered some annoying and superficial examples or exemplars of Theory, postmodernism, and cultural studies which so outraged him that he dismisses entire fields because some within, say, cultural studies fall prey to jargon, an affirmative populism, or do trivial work. To be sure, one can find examples of shoddy scholarship in any field or tradition, but Gitlin identifies his targets of polemic tout court with lapses and mediocrity. But by generalizing from the worst tendencies, he provides caricatures and easy straw targets that he can mightily demolish.

More portentously and tendentially he sees the upsurge in cultural studies as a sign of the defeat of the left (90f), an equation of style and politics (93), and engagement with the pleasures of popular culture and the discovery of tendencies of resistance within cultural studies as consolation for political defeat (95f). In fact, Gitlin does not appear to like media or popular culture, providing a totalizing broadside assault rather than discriminating

analysis and critique. In a summary of his book Media Unlimited (2002), Gitlin rails against the sentimentality, vulgarity, crudeness, fragmentation, triviality, and violence in pop culture, in a rant suspiciously close to conservatives. He worries about the collapse of the canon, of critical standards, and decline of reason itself much like your run of the mill conservative (103-112).

In fact, individuals within the field of cultural studies study everything from the ephemerality of pop television or advertising to art film and classical music, many deploy aesthetic and ethical norms of critique, and most ignore divisions between high and low culture which many claim are eroding because of cultural implosion on both ends of the divide.<sup>14</sup>

While Gitlin asserts that “the informal curriculum of popular culture absorbs much of our students’ mental attention,” (108), he does not acknowledge how the media constitute a pedagogy, nor does he discuss developing media literacy as a counterpedagogy, in which individuals learn to read, dissect, interpret, critique, and evaluate the media, thus empowering themselves against media manipulation. Likewise, he does not show much enthusiasm for computer culture, nor in his brief discussion of education does he talk of the need for information, computer, and multiple media literacies.<sup>15</sup>

#### Gitlin on Education and the University

Gitlin has not written much on education or the university, but after his polemic against the media in The Intellectuals and the Flag, he has a short section on “Education and the Values of Citizenship” (pp. 112ff). As noted, Gitlin notes “the informal curriculum” of the media, but believes its “immediate gratification” obstructs serious education, and that colleges and universities can only achieve their higher goals when they “combat the distraction induced by media saturation” (113). Gitlin fails to note that media education can provide tools to empower students and citizens against media manipulation, that artifacts of media culture can be put to useful pedagogical purposes, and can inspire students to engage in a broad range of academic and political inquiries and debates.

Critically analyzing media texts, using them to illuminate contemporary cultural, social, or political realities, and showing how they articulate with public discourses and debates, can provide sources of critical knowledge. But in a firmly conservative anti-media position, Gitlin wants to wash his hands of the media, keep himself clean, and not engage in unsavory interaction with low culture. As Henry Giroux notes, however, U.S. democracy in the Bush era is increasingly “dirty democracy,” and the media are highly implicated in the general morass,<sup>16</sup> but part of the problem could also be part of the solution. That is, teaching students media and information literacy can help them critically distance themselves from mainstream corporate media, seek out alternative sources of culture and information, but also learn much about contemporary media and politics by critically studying media culture.

But, oddly, Gitlin polemicizes against the universities and higher education providing any particular sort of political education or, especially, mobilization, claiming “universities ought not to be entrusted with any political mobilization in particular” (113). This comment is stunningly reactionary and bizarre coming from Gitlin who was involved himself in civil rights, anti-war, and other political mobilizations of the 1960s. Our generation received some of our most lasting educational experiences in political debates, mobilizations, and movements and I would bet that Gitlin himself accrued career-making academic and political capital through his well-documented and usually self-touted political activity of the 1960s and 1970s that he often cites in his writings and academically exploits.

Gitlin wants “universities to embrace citizenship, not particular uses of citizenship” (113). But precisely engaging in citizenship involves debate on particular issues like war and peace, immigration, civil rights, and other burning issues of the day. Such critical engagement often provides important pedagogical experience in sorting out different positions, developing arguments for specific views, coming to respect competing positions, and mediating between conflicting positions and, when possible or desirable, reaching consensus.

Gitlin asserts that “universities serve bedrock purposes of higher education in a democracy when they spur reasoned participation in politics and the accumulation of knowledge to suit” (114), and one can agree with him on this. But I would think that precisely “reasoned participation” in politics as part of an education for citizenship can be developed, refined, and improved in actual political participation, that one can learn through doing, and that there should be no absolute dichotomy between the university and politics, as if they were separate universes. Clearly, knowledge comes from political experience as well as books and seminars. To gain the informed and tempered knowledge needed for intelligent democratic participation and citizenship, one should be open to multiple sources of knowledge and test knowledge and ideas through practice, allowing one to further refine and develop one’s positions.

Further, Gitlin’s notion of reasoned reflection is rather thin and his pedagogy is non-existent. While there is a vast literature on deliberative democracy, practical reasoning, argumentation, and consensus building, Gitlin does not discuss or contribute to this literature. In fact, he rather glibly states that: “for years, while teaching at Berkeley, New York University, and Columbia, I have noticed how frequently students have difficulty understanding what an argument is. Many, asked to make an argument on a particular subject express an opinion — or even an emotion (‘I feel that’). Many high school graduates arrive at the university without learning what an argument is” (116).

Gitlin blames this deplorable situation on an “educational system ... in default,” anti-intellectualism in American life, and the ubiquitous media. This polemic also devalues today’s youth and students, about which Gitlin does not seem to have a particularly high opinion. But Gitlin does not address how to overcome the challenges of contemporary education to produce engaged and informed citizens and has nothing on pedagogy or how to educate students for democracy. Although there is one reference to Dewey and the link between education and the cultivation of publics (p. 35), he does not engage Dewey’s copious writings on citizenship for democracy, practical pedagogy, or reforming and reconstructing the institutions of public education. Nor does he engage critical pedagogues like Paulo Freire or reflect on the role of the teacher, student, and relationship between student and teacher. Not only does he not engage critical pedagogy, but he seems oblivious to the fact that pedagogy exists as a challenge for teachers to engage in more reflective, responsible, and competent teaching.

To a significant degree, Gitlin’s polemic against theory disarms him from providing the tools necessary for reconstructing education for democracy. For it is theorists like Dewey, Habermas, or Paulo Freire who provide tools to empower students in the arts of argumentation, reasoning, consensus, and societal participation. Theory helps provide the Big Picture that can help produce context for students to situate facts, make connections, see contradictions and conflicting positions, and, if possible or desirable, reach consensus. For Gitlin, by contrast, theory is mere jargon and academic status badges, and while there is no

question theoretical discourses can degenerate into babble and rote recitation of fixed positions and vocabularies, the challenge is to make theory work, to engage it in practical problems and contexts, and to use it as a tool of pedagogy and insight and not mystification. Simply eschewing theory per se, as Gitlin tends to do, is disarming and disingenuous, and reproduces the worst sort of anti-intellectualism that Gitlin otherwise distances himself from.

While Gitlin genuflects toward the conservative position that higher education should focus on teaching the canon and a “common curriculum” (115), he does not offer any practical examples of how to critically engage texts, to contextualize them in broader currents, to promote critical literacy, or to relate texts to both cultural traditions and ongoing and contemporary intellectual debates. Oddly, Gitlin never reflects in his book with “intellectual” in its title on what constitutes an intellectual, how education and intellectuals articulate, the role of intellectuals in politics, or particular challenges of intellectuals today.<sup>17</sup> He also fails to perceive that there is no contradiction between teaching the classics and contemporary texts from women, people of color, gays and lesbians, or other voices usually excluded from the dialogue of contemporary education. Innocent of dialectics and theory, and hostile to multiculturalism and variegated discourses and practices of his bete noire the academic left, Gitlin performs instead in his discussion of education the reproduction of conservative clichés without advancing any critical thinking about the university and higher education today, or public education, beyond conservative complaints and nostrums.

#### Gitlin, Politics, and the Culture Wars

Positioning himself more and more with rightwing positions in the academic cultural wars, Gitlin attacks those on the left who criticize his work as “witch hunters” who are after “heresies.” Gitlin sees himself as an independent thinker and heretic who dares to dissent from common left wisdom. In fact, issues and positions on the left itself have been fiercely contested since the ‘60s, and the positions Gitlin himself ends up affirming are ever more frequently simply those of conservatives, such as his trashing of theory, cultural studies, postmodernism, the “academic left,” and university-based activism.

Gitlin generally ignores work on the university and the cultural wars such as that of Stanley Aronowitz, Henry Giroux, and Susan Searls Giroux which might enable him to see the extent to which his positions on education and the university articulate with the right and can be seen as part of a broader assault on the university as a democratic public sphere.<sup>18</sup> Gitlin’s work also shares with the right attacks on the academic left as a political and pedagogical force for democratizing education, bringing in new voices and perspectives, and advancing a progressive multiculturalism. In the culture wars that have raged since the 1960s, Gitlin thus finds himself increasingly on the right, attacking progressive movements and tendencies within the university and, more recently, within society and the polity at large.

Gitlin has obviously suffered pain and indignities at the hands of the academic left, postmodernists, cultural studies, and critical theorists, and much of *Intellectuals and the Flag* and other post-9/11 writings can be read as a record of his anger and wounds. In a revealing aside, Gitlin bemoans the passing of forceful modes of writing “just as the strong silent style was about to pass into the netherworld, thanks to Kate Millett and other feminists” (45). Such below the belt polemical thrusts reveal a sharp animus against feminism that obviously cloud his judgment. Hence, although Gitlin champions reason against allegedly irrational

avatars of the academic left much of his rant falls short of the demands of critical reason and strong scholarship.

In the concluding section on “The Intellectuals and the Flag” Gitlin recounts his experience of the 9/11 terror attacks in New York which took place about a mile from his home, his solidarities with New Yorkers, his emerging patriotism and support of Bush’s Afghanistan incursion, and his disillusionment with the Bush administration and their subsequent response to terrorism and invasion of Iraq. Gitlin delineates in The Intellectuals and the Flag, a sharply critical position against the Bush administration, that I share, but again he sets up ideal types of leftists who are against all sorts of military intervention, while failing to see the dangers of Islamic radicalism, and are unable to connect with a broad public so as to work for progressive social change. No doubt, there are leftists that fit this model, but once again Gitlin’s brush-strokes are too broad, villainizing the left as such, and particularly his bete noire, the academic left.

Many of us within the academic left have indeed engaged in critical analyses of terrorism, the militarism and authoritarianism of the Bush administration, and threats to democracy in the contemporary era without falling into the extremism, dogmatism, or sectarianism that Gitlin vilifies.<sup>19</sup> Once again, Gitlin ignores completely a vast literature by critical scholars of the academic left who address 9/11, terrorism, militarism, and the Bush administration, as if he were the only one presenting reasonable political positions and protecting academia and the polity from barbarians of the right and left.

Recently, a number of my UCLA colleagues and myself were attacked by a rightwing ideologue and stigmatized as members of a “Dirty Thirty” who allegedly used the classroom to indoctrinate students.<sup>20</sup> No evidence of the latter was found, and the controversy fizzled out after a week of intense coverage in the mainstream media. The so-called UCLA “Dirty Thirty,” re-self-defined as “In Good Company,” included professors involved in labor studies, women’s studies, gay and lesbian studies, Chicano, Asian, and Latin American studies, and other academic disciplines associated with social movements. Most, however, were blacklisted because of publications on their web-sites and in some cases political activities rather than their actual teaching or academic scholarship.

The attack exemplified rightwing interventions within the cultural wars that have raged on campuses since the 1960s whereby radicals and activists have been stigmatized as subversives and underminers of proper academic decorum, a critique Gitlin shares. For the past decades, rightwing ideologues have attacked the universities as hot-beds of radicalism and blamed leftists for indoctrinating students and illicitly politicizing the university. In turn, they have attacked all of the academic trends since the 1960s that includes waves of critical theories, development of programs organized around studies of gender, race, sexuality, and multicultural difference, and engagements with media culture such as cultural studies. Conservatives decry the decline of academic standards, subversions of academic canons and disciplines, and the politicizing of education — positions that Gitlin increasingly shares.

Gitlin’s arguments against the academic left thus ultimately reproduce and benefit the politics of the right in university cultural wars. Gitlin is repeating the criticisms that rightwing ideologues have been making against left academics since the 1960s, although he attempts to position himself in the liberal center, without really providing a defense or analysis of liberalism, which surely has its limitations and blind-spots, like any other political position.

In his polemic against the academic left, Gitlin often does not name names, so it is in fact not always clear who exactly he is polemicizing against, nor what his own counter-position is. In an article “The Self-Inflicted Wounds of the Academic Left” in *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, however, Gitlin intensifies his polemic against the academic left, writing that in today’s conservative hegemony and prevailing ignorance and unreason:

dissenting intellectuals might gain some traction by standing for reason....

They might investigate how it happened that the academic left retreated from off-campus politics. They might consider the possibility that they painted themselves into a corner apart from their countrymen and women. Among the topics they might explore: the academic left's ignorance of main currents of American life, their positive tropism for foreign saviors, their reliance on intricate jargon, their commitment to keeping up with post-everything hotshots of "theory" from more advanced continents. Instead, in a time-honored ritual of the left, a number of academic polemicists choose this moment to pump up rites of purification. At a time when liberals hold next to no sway in any leading institution of national government, when the prime liberal institution of the last century — organized labor — wobbles helplessly, when most national media tilt so far to the right as to parody themselves, the guardians of purity rise to a high pitch of sanctimoniousness aimed at ... heretics. Liberals, that is.<sup>21</sup>

This reductive assault on the academic left is pretentious and absurd. To deplore “the academic left's ignorance of main currents of American life” is insulting and ludicrous and I could easily cite 50 colleagues at UCLA who could be identified as members of the academic left who know as much about American life as Gitlin (indeed, perhaps they know more). To speak of the “positive tropism for foreign saviors” is equally absurd, for while there were cults of Che globally in the 1960s, and respect among the American left for revolutionists like Castro, Ho Chi Minh, Mao, and others, I know of few, if any, on the academic left who are searching for or celebrating “foreign saviors” (with the exception of some former leftists who have turned to religion and its saviors...). Nor are there many examples on the academic left (there are a few) who in the Age of the Bush-Cheney Gang targets liberals as the enemy.

Gitlin makes wild, unsupported, and arguably indefensible generalizations about the academic left without documentation or supporting evidence. He claims, however, that his broadside against the academic left is confirmed by two recent critiques of accommodations of liberals like himself to dominant currents of the U.S. political system and ideology, with the conjunction of an attack on the supposedly subversive role of U.S. university professors by David Horowitz.<sup>22</sup> In fact, none of the three books confirms the alleged far-reaching sins of the academic left that Gitlin paints in the lurid quote cited above. His *Chronicle* review is a tortured attempt to sort out the positions in Eric Lott’s critique of liberals like Gitlin and defense of positions that Gitlin abhors, Timothy Brennan’s critique of university cultural politics of left and right, some of which mirrors certain of Gitlin’s critique, and Horowitz’s disgraceful screed which should not really be symmetrized with the other books or dignified by attention. Gitlin’s associating of the three in the review implies a rather snide guilt by association.

Gitlin confesses that he himself was the subject of critique in all three books and so much of his polemic seems to be payback against critics who have bruised his ego or

aroused his ire. Such polemics, however, articulate within broader ongoing debates and Gitlin is positioning himself within the rightwing critique of left academics and advancing their positions and politics.

The fiercest attack on Gitlin's recent work appeared in a review in The Nation by Daniel Lazare of his book The Intellectuals and the Flag, and he responded with unrestrained fury.<sup>23</sup> Lazare for Gitlin is "a hatchet man... who's sputtered against my work for years... On his Long March to expose apostasy and dig up Fragments of the True Left, no scruple impedes Lazare," who exhibits a "thuggish mind...".

Although one could agree with Gitlin against Lazare that Gitlin responds to the New York 9/11 attacks on multiple dimensions and not just as an American (patriot), and affirm that Gitlin's wavering on the Iraq war should not be assimilated to Thomas Friedman's position (a just cause but botched), nonetheless Gitlin does not answer Lazare's probing of his position on nationalism and patriotism, which is often quite different in varying countries and contexts. In fact, Gitlin does not really develop a coherent position on patriotism beyond quoting Mark Twain that "Patriotism is supporting your country all the time, and your government when it deserves it." As usual, Gitlin does not bother to sort out different concepts of patriotism and nationalism, positive and negative types and effects, nor present a viable concept of patriotism for the U.S. as it (hopefully) negotiates the end of the Bush era and an especially noxious period of U.S. militarism and interventionism.

Gitlin has little on how patriotism has functioned, often in problematic ways, during US history, where it has been mobilized to defend destructive military adventures and colonial expansion. He has nothing on how a nationalistic and often crusading patriotism is cultivated in the schools, shapes media culture, and plays out in domains of everyday life in the United States ranging from sports to holiday parades.<sup>24</sup>

Further, as noted, Gitlin has neither defined citizenship, sorted through the literature and debates on the topic, indicated how education could advance citizenship a la Dewey, nor spelled out a coherent account of patriotism and how it differs from nationalism. Gitlin's is a lazy thought and discourse, not engaging scholarly literature and failing to develop concepts or arguments, to sort out counterarguments and to adequately defend his own position. Nor does he make connections between topics like citizenship, patriotism, and education. This would, of course, involve theory that Gitlin avoids like the plague, thus disarming himself of the tools to make responsible arguments, show weaknesses in opposing positions, and to himself develop coherent positions. Further, his anathema to theory makes him rely on conservative and liberal commonplaces and to make unsupported generalizations.

Obviously, Gitlin has suffered academic insults and assaults that have traumatized him deeply, as have the horrific events of September 11 and the Bush-Cheney-Rove era of unparalleled crime, corruption, and assaults on the very foundation of U.S. democracy. Certainly, we need to rethink theory and politics for the challenges of the present age, but it is not clear that Gitlin provides much useful material for this enterprise, or that he will be the ally of progressive forces in the struggles ahead.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Todd Gitlin, The Whole World is Watching, Berkley: University of California Press 1980; Inside Prime Time, New York: Pantheon, 1983; The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage,

---

New York: Bantam Books, 1987; The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars, New York: Metropolitan Books, 1995; and The Intellectuals and the Flag. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Allan Bloom, The Closing of the American Mind. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> On Marcuse, the great refusal, and the New Left, see Douglas Kellner, Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism. Berkeley and London: University of California Press and Macmillan Press, 1984; and Herbert Marcuse and the New Left, edited with Introduction by Douglas Kellner. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> On Marcuse's contributions to developing a critique of education and alternative pedagogies, see the essays collected from a UCLA AERA panel and graduate seminar on "The Origins of Critical Pedagogy" in Policy Futures in Education, Volume 4 Number 1 (2006) at [http://www.wwords.co.uk/pfie/content/pdfs/4/issue4\\_1.asp](http://www.wwords.co.uk/pfie/content/pdfs/4/issue4_1.asp).

<sup>5</sup> On the Frankfurt School critical theorists and their influence, see Douglas Kellner, Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity. Cambridge, UK and Baltimore, Md.: Polity Press and John Hopkins University Press, 1989.

<sup>6</sup> See Kellner, Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity, op. cit and

<sup>7</sup> Neil McLaughlin, "Critical Theory Meets America: Riesman, Fromm, and The Lonely Crowd," The American Sociologist 21 (Spring 2001), pp. 5-26. It is stunning to me that Gitlin would ignore this fascinating study, readily available in libraries or on the Internet, and the vast literature on Riesman that McLaughlin engages. Gitlin is either extremely lazy and contemptuousness of serious scholarship, or arrogant, thinking that others' views don't really matter since its his opinion that counts. As we proceed, we shall see that Gitlin systematically avoids critical scholarship in the fields he engages.

<sup>8</sup> C. Wright Mills, "IBM plus Reality plus Humanism= Sociology," in Power, Politics, and People. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963, p. 572.

<sup>9</sup> See Kellner, Critical Theory, op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> On the complex relations between aesthetics and politics developed by Marcuse, with some comments on Adorno and Jameson, see Douglas Kellner, editor, Herbert Marcuse. Art and Liberation. Volume Four, Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse. London and New York: Routledge, 2006

<sup>11</sup> On Foucault, see Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations. London and New York: Macmillan and Guilford Press, 1991

<sup>12</sup> On varieties of postmodern theory, see Best and Kellner, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> See Douglas Kellner, Media Culture. Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern. London and New York: Routledge, 1995. This text situates cultural studies within its political and cultural environment, and cites how many other figures in cultural studies do the same.

<sup>14</sup> Douglas Kellner, "Cultural Studies and Philosophy: An Intervention," in Toby Miller, editor, A Companion to Cultural Studies, Cambridge and Boston, Blackwell, 2001: 139-153. In a sharp critique of Gitlin's TV analysis in the 1980s, Elayne Rapping questions Gitlin's assumptions about television, claims he "expresses none of ... [its] complexity and contradiction[s]... the main reason for this failure, I think, is his implicit class perspective. He presents his entire study, not from the point of view of audience responses or network executives' political values, but instead from the point of view of the writers and producers who create the stuff." See *"Inside Prime Time*

---

**Knee deep in the big muddy,”** *Jump Cut*, no. 30, March 1985, pp. 17-18. For critique of an early TV anthology that Gitlin helped produce, see Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, "(Re)Watching Television: Notes Toward a Political Criticism," *Diacritics*, (Summer 1987), 97-113.

<sup>15</sup> See Douglas Kellner, "Technological Transformation, Multiple Literacies, and the Re-visioning of Education," *E-Learning*, Volume 1, Number 1 2004: 9-37; Jeff Share and Douglas Kellner, "Toward Critical Media Literacy: Core concepts, debates, organization, and policy," *Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of education*. Vol. 26, Nr. 3 (September 2005): 369-386; and Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner, "Oppositional Politics and the Internet: A Critical/Reconstructive Approach," *Cultural Politics*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, 2005: 75-100.

<sup>16</sup> Henry A. Giroux, *Stormy Weather: Katrina and the Politics of Disposability*. Boulder Colorado: Paradigm Press, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> On intellectuals, see Douglas Kellner, "Intellectuals, the Public Sphere, and New Technologies," in *Research in Philosophy and Technology*, Vol. 16 (1997): 15-32. On teachers as intellectuals, see Henry A. Giroux, *Teachers as Intellectuals*. Westport Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1988.

<sup>18</sup> Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux, *Education Still Under Siege*. Bergin & Garvey, 1993; and Henry Giroux and Susan Searls Giroux, *Take Back Higher Education : Race, Youth, and the Crisis of Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004.

<sup>19</sup> See Douglas Kellner, *From September 11 to Terror War: The Dangers of the Bush Legacy*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003, and *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy*. Boulder, Col.: Paradigm Press, 2005; Henry A. Giroux, *Beyond the Spectacle of Terrorism: Global Uncertainty and the Challenge of the New Media*, Boulder, Col.: Paradigm Press, 2005; Stephen Eric Bronner, *Blood in the Sand*. Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 2005; Carl Boggs, *Imperial Delusions. American Militarism and Endless War*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005. Gitlin rarely refers to literature from solid scholars on the academic left who he rather tars with broadside polemics and clichés, raising questions whether he really knows much about the “academic left” that has become the target of his rage and polemical assaults over the past decade.

<sup>20</sup> See <http://www.uclaprofs.com/articles/dirtythirty.html>. The blacklist was compiled by a former UCLA Graduate student Andrew Jones who had previously been fired by his mentor David Horowitz for pressuring “students to file false reports about leftists” and for stealing Horowitz’s mailing list of potential contributors to fund research for attacks on leftwing professors; see Stuart Silverstein, “Campus Activist Goes Right at ‘Em,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 22, 2006: B1 and B16 on Jones’ failure to hold down a job. Ultimately, Jones’ offer to pay students \$100 to spy on their teachers and record subversive comments aroused media critique and legal issues that distanced other conservatives from his witch-hunt.

<sup>21</sup> Todd Gitlin, “The Self-Inflicted Wounds of the Academic Left” in *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, Vol. 52, Issue 35 (May 5, 2006): B6.

<sup>22</sup> In the article cited in the previous note, Gitlin reviews Timothy Brennan, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right*. New York: Columbia University Press,

---

2006; Eric Lott, The Disappearing Liberal Intellectual. *New York*: Basic Books, 2006; and David Horowitz, The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America. New York: Regnery Publishing, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Lazare, “Review of Todd Gitlin’s The Intellectuals and the Flag, The Nation, March 20, 2006 and Todd Gitlin. “Hatchet Man’s Heresy Hunt...” The Nation, April 3, 2006: 2.

<sup>24</sup> For historical background on patriotism in the US, analysis of how it functions in everyday life and US culture and society, and a sharp critique of the connections between patriotism and militarism, see Boggs, Imperial Delusions, *op. cit.*