

Todd Gitlin.

The Intellectuals and the Flag.

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Todd Gitlin's *The Intellectuals and the Flag* is an important and thoughtful essay-style book organized around a tragic event, three heroes and a political message directed at fellow Americans and egalitarian academics of good faith. Gitlin is a prominent sociologist of media who now teaches at Columbia University; before this academic career he was during the 1960s one of the most visible leaders of the student radical and anti-war organization Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). In the fall of 2001, Gitlin was writing a book on the various intellectual influences in his political and scholarly career, when two jet planes slammed into the World Trade Center about a mile from his Manhattan home. Like many New Yorkers and citizens of the world, he was moved by the courage and solidarity of average American citizens that terrible September morning. He put up an American flag on his balcony for a time, something unusual for a left intellectual and sociologist of his generation who had come to political maturity fighting against racism during the civil rights movement and protesting the brutal violence of the war in Vietnam. This small act provides the title for the book, and helps anchor Gitlin's political and intellectual reflections in a very personal way while leading us towards a discussion of global issues of common concern.

After the solidarity and emotion of the immediate aftermath of 9/11 had subsided, however, Gitlin and his wife took down the American flag since American solidarity with the 9/11 victims had morphed into nationalist fervor over George W. Bush's war on terror. As a result, Gitlin's deeply felt American patriotism came into conflict, once again, with the politics and morality of American militarism and the blinders that distort this great nation's understanding of the world outside of its borders.

Five years later, Gitlin produced this pithy little book of essays that discuss the sociology of David Riesman and C. Wright Mills, the literary and political insights of Irving Howe, and the political implications of patriotism, post-modernism and higher education. The book is largely focused around American political and academic debates, but the analysis holds many insights for Canadian sociologists and the general public. It is a serious intervention, worth thoughtful consideration.

The core of the book consists of Gitlin's excellent essays on Riesman, Mills and Howe, three intellectuals who provide role models for intellectual engagement, scholarly excellence and clear, straightforward and sophisticated writing. C. Wright Mills, of course, is well known to sociologists in Canada as the author of *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), a classic text that argues for a craft-like scholarship which addresses the social problems that people experience as personal troubles and illuminates them with sociological and historical analysis. Gitlin does an excellent job of filling out our picture of Mills with a contextual analysis of the American political scene in the 1950s and early 1960s that produced the C. Wright Mills we have come to know. Even more importantly and originally, Gitlin outlines engaging sketches of Harvard sociologist and public intellectual David Riesman and the New York intellectual and literary scholar Irving Howe. Riesman and Howe represent two challenging models of excellence and political insight whose work speaks to the core questions in Gitlin's book and our contemporary dilemmas, and thus are worth looking at in more detail.

Riesman was the most famous sociologist in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, having

written the best-selling sociology book of all time (*The Lonely Crowd*, 1950) and having appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine. Riesman was not really a traditional academic, however, since he did not have a PhD in the discipline and was far better known for his essays, books, undergraduate teaching and political engagements than for any peer review oriented scholarship. Today, we would call Riesman a public intellectual or, more recently, a public sociologist, and Gitlin pays tribute to Riesman's insights into popular culture and the sociology of education, and his willingness to get involved in political life, particularly anti-nuclear and peace activism at Harvard in the late 1950s and early 1960s when Gitlin was a student there. Although Riesman was a solid member of the liberal center in the United States, of which both Mills and the young Gitlin were critical, he offered insights and lessons that go beyond partisan politics and polemics. Riesman did quality research and writing, but never intellectually trapped by technical methods and obscure theory, he wrote on issues that matter in a clear and compelling way. Riesman was a principled and intelligent liberal, something only radical fools scoff at, and Gitlin makes a compelling case that Riesman deserves to be reread and his model honoured.

Certainly the same could be said about Irving Howe, the American literary critic and editor of the intellectual journal *Dissent*. While Riesman was born into a wealthy and cultured elite family and was always a liberal, Irving Howe was the son of Jewish immigrants and was initially an American follower of the dissident Russian Marxist Leon Trotsky. Howe was the most influential and highly regarded living intellectual spokesperson for an American version of democratic socialism when he died in 1993. Made famous by a best selling book about the experience of Jewish immigrants (*The World of Our Fathers*, 1976), Howe wrote extensively about US, European and Yiddish literature while also being politically active and engaged. The author of a famous essay in the early 1950s called "This Age of Conformity," Howe exemplified the engaged political intellectual who refused to be co-opted into state power and elite privilege. Howe also lived a double-life, in a sense, as literary scholar during the day and an engaged editor of the left-wing political magazine *Dissent* in the evening.

While critical of some of Howe's controversial but spirited writings about the literature of African-American novelists James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, Gitlin makes a good case for the value of what he calls Irving Howe's Partition — a carefully policed boundary between politics and art, style and political substance. Howe loved literature, and wrote thoughtfully, even brilliantly about Thomas Hardy, William Faulkner and Sherwood Anderson without mixing his political with his literary judgments. Moreover, Howe, like Gitlin himself today, was famous and controversial for his internal but loyal critiques of the left. Howe's great contribution as a social critic was his understanding that while a focus on style is essential in art and literature, it can be dangerous when (as Gitlin describes Howe's views) politics dissolves into style and is thus no longer politics, as was the case with the grandiose deceptions of the Black Panthers and the desperado nihilism of the Weathermen. We would do well to consider these issues, as we see more and more essentially aesthetic and philosophical writings in the contemporary post-modern university masquerading as real interventions in the politics of mass publics.

We all need intellectual heroes, and Gitlin does a very nice job of presenting the models of Riesman, Mills and Howe in ways that can inspire without leading to uncritical worship. Models for intellectuals today, of course, must address issues of race and gender in more sophisticated ways than all three of these intellectuals did, as products of their time and place. Gitlin probably gives Mills more of a pass on critique than he does Riesman and Howe; I, for one would raise more questions about some of the contradictions in Mills' professional behavior that have been discussed in the literature, while generally agreeing with Gitlin that Mills' general approach to sociology as a

non-technical craft is worth serious consideration and emulation.

While I generally agree with Gitlin's hard-hitting but very sensible political judgments, I would probably dissent from his characterization of the fundamentalist left as being represented by the late Palestinian literary critic Edward Said and Noam Chomsky. I agree with Gitlin, of course, about the need to oppose, in no uncertain terms, romantic and misguided sympathies with vicious anti-Americanism, murderous suicide bombings or Islamist extremism. The problem, for me, however, is that for all the great political insights of Riesman and Howe, only Mills went far enough in seeing the political implications of the American empire, something Said and Chomsky highlight for us. There is lots to disagree with in the political views of Said and Chomsky, to be sure, but one cannot credibly argue that they were guilty of the attachment to authoritarian politics that ruined many lives and political projects in the 20th century, as generations of intellectuals attached themselves to Stalinism in the 1930s and ultra left extremism during the 1960s. Nor do I think it is fair to suggest that Said and Chomsky represent fundamentalist judgments about America and world politics today, despite a range of objections one could offer against the tone and specifics of their arguments.

Few intellectuals were as important in the struggle against Stalinism in American intellectual life as Irving Howe and David Riesman (something Mills was all too fuzzy about). Gitlin himself represents, in my view, one of the clearest thinking internal critics of the errors as well as the democratic contributions of the movements of the 1960s. I personally would expand my conception of intellectual heroes worth emulation and intellectual engagement somewhat beyond Gitlin's cast, to include Said and Chomsky, as well as representatives closer to Gitlin's own generation such as Frances Fox Piven, Cornel West, Michael Walzer and Alan Wolfe. One can and should argue about heroes and models, as this provides both inspiration and direction for intellectual and scholarly pursuits. Moreover, since intellectual heroes inevitably must have a local and national grounding, it is worth considering the Canadian context as we read Gitlin's thoughtful essays, and reflect on the Canadian intellectual figures worth thinking with.

From my perspective, however, the section of the book most worthy of extended debate in Canada is the critique he offers of post-modernism and the anti-political populism of cultural studies, alongside his vision for the role of the university today. Proponents of social theory in Canadian sociology will not appreciate Gitlin's extended and harsh critique of French theory as represented by Foucault, and his scathing rejoinder to Stanley Aronowitz's claim that cultural studies is a social movement. From my perspective, however, Gitlin is right to question the political and intellectual value of an obscure French social theory that is often inflected with authoritarian politics and irrational anti-Americanism (as with Foucault and Baudrillard). Moreover, it is hard not to sympathize with the famous Polish thinker Adam Michnik, an intellectual who fought bitter battles with a Communist dictatorship and thus is rather less than impressed with the social movement aspirations of a cultural studies perspective oriented to the study and teaching of popular culture in ways that do not challenge any states, capitalists or, it can often be said, students (for a different perspective see Douglas Kellner, "Education and the Academic left: Critical Reflections on Todd Gitlin," *College Literature*, 33,4: 2006).

Even more importantly, at a time when universities in the United States are facing their greatest challenge to academic freedom and the free exchange of ideas since the McCarthyism of the early 1950s, Gitlin offers a vision of the university as a forum for political debate and citizenship that is not partisan to orthodoxies of the left, right or center. Gitlin knows well what it is like to be caught in the middle of political battles, both during the 1960s and more recently, when he has been

fingering as one of America's most dangerous professors by right-wing activist David Horowitz, and called a liberal sell-out by cultural studies scholars (see Eric Lott, *The Disappearing Liberal Intellectual: Or, How the Left Became the Center*, 2006). It might be tempting today to see the classroom as a place where one can strike a blow against global imperialism, capitalist inequality and the injustices of race, gender and class we see all around us. Gitlin makes a compelling case that this is a bad idea, opting instead to hold up intellectual standards, a certain civility in intellectual life and a disciplined and life-long commitment to radical social change (Irving Howe once called it steady work) in the real world of intellectual debate, political parties and democratic mass politics.

Canadians have been fortunate so far to have largely avoided the polarized climate we have seen develop on American campuses since 9/11. Nonetheless, Gitlin's moving tribute to his influences and mentors, and his wise suggestions on how to love one's country without falling into nationalist hysteria makes for valuable reading for Canadian intellectuals and sociologists. *Intellectuals and the Flag* offers direction, experience and insight in a world with which intellectuals must surely engage outside the university, but where violence and polarization seems likely to get worse before they get better.

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