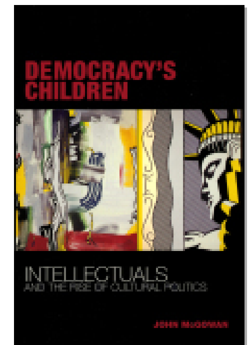
Democracy's Children



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Preface

> My remarks are addressed to those, who by their use of speech and through their explicit formulation of general ideas, have been able or are now able to attempt to have an influence on how their society evolves and the course of history.
>
> —CORNELIUS CASTORIADIS

This book is about the vicissitudes of intellectual practice, viewed from a pragmatist and pluralist perspective. Most of the essays concern U.S. literary intellectuals over the past thirty years. But this provincial focus is expanded in the last three chapters. In every case, I strive to identify the aspirations and strategies of those contemporary humanistic intellectuals who want their work to intervene in the political and cultural formations of our time. I am interested in situating such intellectuals within the institutional setting—the academy—in which they almost all work and within the more general culture that they wish to influence. And I am interested in locating their favored method of intervention—cultural politics—alongside other political strategies.

The results of examinations can look dismissive. But I count myself among these intellectuals whom I am attempting to describe, explain, and assess. So my emphasis on the difficulties, obstacles, and contradictions of this enterprise is not meant to belittle it. But I also do not think there is any self-evident legitimacy or virtue attached to the intellectuals' efforts. There is nothing pure or simple about intellectual work, from its motives to its

means and consequences, so I am afraid that I constantly take back with one hand what I have given with the other. I hope my book recaptures the tone and intellectual acuity of a book I love—Alvin Gouldner's *The Fate of the Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class* (1979)—more for the clear, cold eye it casts on its subject than for any of its specific arguments.

My swings between sympathy and criticism, affirmation and rejection, both stem from and help explain my reliance on the essay form here. I am a committed pluralist (I outline some of my reasons for that commitment in the final chapter), which means (among many other things) that a synthetic view of "the intellectual" is not, I believe, possible. The opportunities, concerns, and roadblocks any intellectual faces keep shifting. What worked elsewhere is no sure guide to what will prove effective here and now. These essays each attend to specific sightings of the species in different habitats and base their appeal on an attempted resonance with the reader's own engagements on similar, but not identical, terrain. If the gentle reader keeps in mind that the focus is on humanist, especially literary, intellectuals who hope that their work will have social and political consequences, my to-and-froing may appear more intelligible and less frustrating.

My ambivalence about cultural politics is worn on my sleeve throughout these essays. By cultural politics I mean the attempt to intervene in cultural processes of representation, categorization, and reflexive understanding, with a focus on the ideological production of values and beliefs along with adherence to them. I am willing to recognize the importance of cultural politics as one form of political activism. But I balk at views that make cultural politics primary. Take, for example, Nancy Armstrong's claim that "the most important achievement of 'the sixties' was . . . to shift the theater of political activism from the plane of physical actions, conflicts we call real, to the plane of discourse, conflicts over how our relation to the real should be imagined." What follows from this claim? "Something got permanently turned around in the process, I am suggesting, and the outcome of military actions, hunger, trade policies, as well as elections and, yes, university search committees, began to depend on how those under consideration were represented, how well they managed the information about themselves. . . . To come to this conclusion is to admit that any responsible political action depends on understanding the world so classified as the real and primary one, the one that must be changed if the material conditions in which people live and die are going to improve" (2000, 323–24). I am skeptical that "something got permanently turned around" and think the effectiveness of cultural politics is

often similarly overstated. But I hardly think cultural politics—the intervention in discursive processes—has no effects. So I try in the following essays to think about where and how a cultural politics makes sense—and where and how it runs up against limits to its powers. As I explain in the introduction, the rise of cultural politics to its current prominence is overdetermined; the two crucial factors are (1) the academic venue of most intellectual work and (2) the shift since the 1960s from antiliberal socialism to social democracy as the political position of choice among left-of-center Westerners.

A word about the historical origins of the category "intellectual" is in order. The actual word dates from the 1820s, but I follow various writers—most notably Lewis Coser (1965) and Jürgen Habermas (1991)—in placing the origin of the species in the eighteenth century. Intellectuals are democracy's children insofar as they are called into existence in plural societies in which freedom of speech and the press combines with wide-open debate among competing visions of the good life, the good polity, and good art (among other issues). I was tempted to call this book "Democracy's Waifs" because "children" does not quite capture the way in which democracy both creates the intellectual (by providing the public stage for his or her appearance) and trivializes the intellectual's work (by placing it in the context of so much intellectual work and alongside commercial activities that ignore that work with impunity). There is almost always something forlorn about the intellectual, always a sense of being slightly irrelevant, something that motivates the corresponding dream of hooking up with the true source of social power, whether that source be the state or the proletariat. Hence Gramsci's (1971) notion of the "organic" intellectual who is seamlessly woven into a social group. The intellectual rarely, if ever, feels organic. And the contemporary practitioners of cultural politics are no different, as is beautifully caught in Stuart Hall's rueful description of the origins of cultural studies: "[T]here is no doubt in my mind that we were trying to find an institutional practice in cultural studies that might produce an organic intellectual. We didn't know precisely what that would mean . . . and we weren't sure we would recognize him or her if we managed to produce it. The problem about the concept of an organic intellectual is that it appears to align intellectuals with an emerging historical movement and we couldn't tell then, and can hardly tell now, where that emerging historical movement was to be found. We were organic intellectuals without any organic point of reference" (1992, 281). I am interested in the tension between a culti-

vated ironic distance and a deep desire to belong found in much intellectual work.

Although this is a book of essays, their arrangement plots an overarching argument. The introduction fleshes out the connection of intellectuals to democracy, while also suggesting that, as grateful children, intellectuals should be the champions of democracy, ever vigilant against the anti-democratic forces in modern societies. That such has not always been the case, both historically and in our own time, garners my attention (especially in chapter 4). Part 1 focuses on the contemporary intellectual as academic, while also considering the role and place of the academy within society at large. These chapters move from personal reflections on my own professional activities as critic (chapter 1) and teacher (chapter 2) to broader reflections on changes in the style and aspirations of academic intellectuals (chapter 3) and on changes in understanding the role of the university (chapter 4).

In part 2, I widen the frame. Chapters 5 and 6 look backward to consider the intellectuals' relation to modernity, culture, nationalism and other large-scale explanatory terms that were born at the same time (1750–1820) as intellectuals themselves. I agree with Ron Eyerman that "this notion of 'the intellectual' . . . first emerged in the new political context created by what has come to be called the transition to modernity . . . . Intellectuals were those who wrote or spoke out in public either as active supporters or as opponents of what they themselves identified as modernity" (1994, 37). I try to examine this implication of intellectuals with the very idea of modernity, of a transition from one way of being to another that occurs on a grand scale. My final chapter sketches some implications and consequences of the pluralist position toward which the earlier chapters gesture.

The political commitment that motivates my work is to democracy. If I aspire to Gouldner's mordant wit, the gentler tutelary spirits of this enterprise are John Dewey and Hannah Arendt. My core belief may be stated as the conviction that the cure for many of our social ills is more democracy, not less, and that there are powerful blocking forces working against democracy in contemporary society, even if few dare to speak openly against it. The intellectual committed to democracy strives to articulate what that vague and contested term can mean both practically and ideally, to lyrically evoke the virtues of democratic citizens and the joys of democratic culture, and to model in his or her own work democracy in action. The somewhat embarrassing whiff of the lay preacher inevitably

(unfortunately) haunts the intellectual's work, because the moral cannot be fully expunged from the political, and because exhortation is necessary where more overt forms of compulsion are eschewed. I try to be as hard-headed about democracy's limitations and the ways the term can be used to forestall thought as I am about terms such as "modernity" and "culture." Undoubtedly, I do not fully succeed.

Which brings us back to the question of form. This is a book of essays. I have provided short overviews for each of the book's two parts to orient the reader—and I have cross-referenced topics that are touched on in one essay to their fuller discussion in another essay. But I am committed to the informality of the essay form for a variety of reasons. I want to achieve the plain tone of one citizen speaking to others, and I want to suggest the tentativeness of one person trying out ideas, aiming to provoke various responses as much as trying to convince. These are not particularly personal essays in content (although more personal than standard academic prose), but they are personal in tone. They aim to portray a mind and sensibility at work. Central to my self-image as intellectual is the notion that everything is matter for thought, that my questioning and opining know no boundaries. If this sounds joyless, I can only respond that, on the contrary, it is the only way to keep the vital spark aglow. What's deadly is the curbing of curiosity and the timid assumption of territories from which I am barred that attends too scrupulous a respect for reigning authorities and proprieties.

I contemplated calling this book *Representative Me,* a take-off of a title used by that first great American essayist, Ralph Waldo Emerson. The point would have been that I rely, probably far too heavily, on my experiences and my concerns chiming with my readers' experiences and concerns. The essay as a rhetorical form makes a personal appeal—from one person to another—that scholarly prose tries to escape. The danger is that the reader will weary of the personal tone, the personal appeal, the sensibility ever on display, just as the writer is sometimes weary of self. The gain is a heightened sense of connection, an enlivening of the stakes.

The essay allows for assertion, the direct stating of "here is where I take my stand." (My editor vetoed the title *Pledges of Allegiance.*) I often only sketch in arguments or gesture toward the historical evidence that underlies a position taken. But I trust the reader will catch the point, and I try in the footnotes to point toward works where these questions have been taken up in detail by other writers on whom I rely and by whom I have been influenced. When I presented some of this work to a faculty

group in Chapel Hill, a philosopher remarked that he was pleased to see that he and I really did share common concerns, but philosophy went much more slowly, taking issues one small bit at a time. I was chastened—and it was only six months later that I realized that I would never master slowness. The only proper strategy for me was to go faster. The footnotes in this book are a compromise, curbing what is perhaps the over-reliance on allusion or on assuming my readers' familiarity with certain positions. But too many of our academic books are written as if for an audience (our students?) entirely new to the matter at hand. I am trying here to address adults—readers who have funds of knowledge, experience, and beliefs against which they will judge what I have to say. Our overly didactic forms do a disservice, not only by insulting the reader's intelligence, but also by providing a bad model of the opinionated give-and-take that aligns the intellectual with the democratic life. Essays as a genre—and these essays in particular—have no truths to hand over ready-made.

In *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy's narrator tells us, "As you got older, and felt yourself to be at the center of your time, and not at a point in its circumference, as you had felt when you were little, you were seized with a sort of shuddering . . . . All around you there seemed to be something glaring, garish, rattling, and the noises and glares hit upon the little cell called your life, and shook it, and warped it" (1966, 60–61). Chapters 1 and 2 of this book show me taking stock just as I felt that awful movement to the center of my time. I wanted to locate my allegiances amid the warping noises and glares. (Chapter 2 first appeared in *The Centennial Review* 40 [1996]: 5–30; I thank R. K. Meiners, Clint Goodson, and Judith Stoddart at Michigan State, who have been such stalwart supporters of my work.)

I have been luckier than Jude, however. Coming in from the circumference has involved me with others who have solicited my views; all the remaining chapters of this book were written at the request of those others, who also secured audiences for their first airings. I owe much to Regenia Gagnier and Donald E. Hall for the introduction (about half of which appears in Hall's edited volume, *Professions: The Future of Literary Studies* [Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001]); to Sharon Oster, who solicited and edited chapter 3; to Tony La Vopa, Gary Wihl, Steve Vincent, and Charles Capper of the Sawyer Seminar on Liberalism and its Cultures at the National Humanities Center, both for the intellectual vitality of that two-year enterprise and for requesting the work that, much revised, is now chapter 4; to John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff for making me write, much against

my will, chapter 5 and then, even more against my will, making me rewrite it several times (it appears in their edited volume, *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000]); to John Burt Foster for insisting that I turn a haphazard conference paper for the International Association for Philosophy and Literature Conference at George Mason University into a coherent essay (now chapter 6); and to Allen Dunn, Jim Nelson, Hilde Lindemann Nelson, Jonathan Dancy, and the philosophy department at the University of Tennessee for inviting me to talk on pluralism and then engaging my ideas so vigorously that chapter 7 bears very little resemblance to the paper they heard in Knoxville in early 2000; another portion of chapter 7 comes from a review essay commissioned by Craig Calhoun and first published in *Sociological Theory* 16 (1998): 292–97. Thanks also to the anonymous reader for Cornell and to the press's editorial board, both for their suggestions for revision and for reading the manuscript in the spirit in which it was intended. They gave me hope that my readers will be able to do the same. I also want to praise exemplary editor, Bernhard Kendler, who drives a hard bargain when it comes to titles. But he met his match in my daughter Siobhan.

Much of the time that I spent writing this book came my way through the good offices of two deans with whom I have had the pleasure of working closely at Chapel Hill: Linda Dykstra and Darryl Gless. I also owe time debts to Lloyd Kramer and Ruel Tyson of UNC's Institute for the Arts and Humanities. But my intellectual debt to them is even greater; my sensibility has been shaped by the Institute and its modes of intellectual interaction. Ruel and Lloyd have worked their magic on many UNC faculty, but I think I can safely claim to be their most fervent convert. Special thanks also to the Institute's many generous supporters, especially Janie and Billy Armfield. Large chunks of chapters 4 and 7 were written on the back porch of their Roaring Gap home. Finally, my gratitude to the University Research Council, the English Department, and the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina for funds that paid for this book's cover.

The older I get, the more people read my work in the various stages before it gets into print. The list of those who have aided in this book's production is so long that I cannot detail the contribution each made, even though each and every one of them richly deserves a particular word. To all of you: understand that this list says much less than I would say, given pages enough and time. Thanks to Charles Altieri, Bill Andrews, Suzy Anger, Susan Bickford, David Brehmer, Tony Cascardi, Rom Coles,

Jill Craven, Tyler Curtain, Kim Curtis, Randi Davenport, Doug Dempster, Eric Downing, Judith Farquhar, Jim Hevia, Eric Iverson, Nancy Jesser, Gary Johnson, Charlie Kurzman, Laurie Langbauer, Dom Lopes, Megan Matchinske, Carol Mavor, Mary Papke, Kevin Parker, Della Pollock, Bill Rasch, Lorena Russell, Rob Spirko, James Thompson, and Jeffrey Williams. Much of this book almost takes the form of a personal letter because I have so often articulated my thoughts with Allen Dunn and John Kucich as my imagined or actual audience. Every writer should be blessed with friends who blend such complete incredulity with such willingness to read—and even take pleasure in—every word.

Jane Danielewicz has been by my side since even before that night, five months pregnant, she endured two and a half hours in the stalled elevator in the Warwick Hotel. It's often difficult to be married to someone whom everyone loves so unreservedly, but I console myself with the knowledge that her adoring public only sees half her virtues. This book is dedicated to Kiernan and Siobhan McGowan, who are the true children of its title, and who will be blessed in this life if they only garner a small portion of the happiness they have given to their loving father.

JOHN MCGOWAN

Carrboro, North Carolina

DEMOCRACY'S CHILDREN