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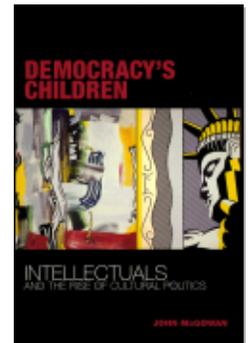
Democracy's Children

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Democracy's Children: Intellectuals and the Rise of Cultural Politics.

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II

ROADS FROM THE PAST, PATHS TO A FUTURE

These final three chapters widen the frame in an attempt to locate contemporary intellectual practice in historical and theoretical perspective. Chapters 5 and 6 are, in some ways, two efforts to address the same topic: the implication of intellectuals in a vocabulary dominated by the terms “modernity” and “culture.” It is not simply the fact that these terms structure a master narrative of dubious validity that troubles me. I am also struck by the persistent pattern of interpreting particulars (whether events or texts) by elucidating their relation to some hidden substrate, be it a historical period, ideology, the social imaginary, or the dominant culture. We may have escaped the economic reductionism of vulgar Marxism, but varieties of base/superstructure thinking are still the norm. The individual is still understood as an instance of the general, with its variations from the base serving to mark its particularity. And we still favor totalizing general forms that structure the entire social field. Everything is related to everything else, because all things are symptoms or manifestations of the underlying culture. The intellectual’s role is to elucidate these relationships in order to make the submerged substrate visible.

Although not usually receptive to deconstructionist doublethink, my attempts in this part of my book to undo these ingrained interpretive habits acknowledge that to think is to generalize *and* struggle to disrupt the reliance on totalizing, systematic maps. I favor two tactics, dearticulation and performative articulation. Neither is explained or exemplified here

to my full satisfaction. These chapters are part promissory notes and part stumblings around in the dark. I try, for starters, to think about how we could manage to be pluralists, to think of things as, in some cases, unrelated to one another; to resist, in other words, the patterns of relationship that are already in place in intellectual work. Pluralism begins, we might say, as a work of disaggregation and dearticulation. From there, it moves to the insistence that all relationships are contingent and hence to be understood as the product of human sense-making. To place things in relation to one another is a human action and is best understood as performative. The goal is to take responsibility for these actions and to make them, as much as possible, purposive. Articulations do not reveal some deep structure; the relationships are as much surface phenomenon, with exactly the same ontological weight, as the things related. And the audience's acceptance of any particular articulation is utterly contingent as well. The potentially transformative interactions that characterize democracy as a way of life rest on this double contingency of the patterns of relationship I forge as my way of understanding and shaping the world, and of what happens when I attempt to share that vision with others even as they articulate their own visions. The democratic part rests on the existence of a public space for these multiple articulations, the refusal to privilege any particular vision, and openness to (even eagerness for) these energizing connections with others.