

Chapter 10

On Intellectuals

Mike Wayne and Deirdre O'Neill

Introduction

This essay explores the social and political role and significance of the intellectuals within capitalist society. It sets out to define the intellectual and the nature of what they produce (ideas) and their relationship to broader class relations. It shows how key Marxist thinkers provide the basis for a socio-economic understanding of the activities and products of the intellectual. At the heart of transforming the current role of the intellectual within the existing divisions of labour, lies the project to democratise the social role of the intellectuals. This requires expanding the social base of the intellectuals and connecting their activities to a self-reflexive project of social and political transformation. This is the basis and definition of truly *critical* thought. In this essay we discuss how Marx and Engels' began the task of establishing a theoretical framework for a historical and materialist account of the intellectuals in *The German Ideology*. We show how the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci further developed our understanding of the intellectual and we clarify and add to his key distinctions between the traditional and organic intellectual. Having set out the theoretical framework and broad philosophical and political implications of the intellectual, we then look at role of the intellectual in the post-Second World War era, up to our contemporary moment. We discuss the relationship between the middle class and the hegemonic intellectual, the difficulties posed for the middle class intellectual to be genuinely counter-hegemonic and the need for the reconstitution of organic intellectuals from

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

the working class. Finally we explore these issues in relation to the media and especially oppositional digital and social media practices.

Marx and Engels on the Intellectuals

The starting point for thinking about a Marxist conception of the role of intellectuals must be Marx and Engels' work *The German Ideology*. It is here that they begin to situate intellectuals in relation to the dominant class forces. "The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production at its disposal" (Marx and Engels 1989, 64). This formulation would grow in relevance with the development of the mass media. At the same time, the very growth of what Ensenzberger later called the 'industrialisation of the mind' (Ensenzberger 1982) would require the development of a sophisticated account of intellectual production that could avoid the twin traps of reducing it to the economic class interests of the dominant class who formally own the media or believing that it transcended class relations and struggle. Marx and Engels noted that "mental production" was delegated to the "thinkers of the class (its active, conceptive ideologists)]" (Marx and Engel 1989, 65). The beginnings of an account of intellectual production that could register how it may be affected by broader social, political and economic changes and conflicts is evident where they state that a "cleavage" between intellectuals and the dominant class "can develop into a certain opposition and hostility", although they are also (overly) quick to state this conflict "automatically comes to nothing" if the dominant class to which the intellectuals are attached, are "endangered" (Marx and Engels 1989,65). Their own political trajectory suggests that this is not necessarily the case.

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

Marx and Engels no doubt had in mind in this section of *The German Ideology* the German intellectuals and philosophers from whose ranks they emerged in the 1840s and from whom they wished to establish an epistemological and political break. *The German Ideology* opens with a satirical account of the post-Hegelian scene, in which Left and Right Hegelians fought over the legacy and meaning of the master philosopher Hegel, who had died in 1831. In the minds of said protagonists, these philosophical battles were momentous, a “revolution beside which the French Revolution was child’s play” (Marx and Engels 1989, 39). Dissecting the moment, Marx and Engels lampoon the series of fashions and fads to which this intellectual production fell victim. In terms that seem strikingly relevant today, they pinpoint how commodification and competition erodes the authentic usefulness of ideas which suffer a gradual “deterioration in quality, adulteration of the raw materials, falsification of labels”, the results of which “is now being extolled and interpreted to us as a revolution of world significance, the begetter of the most prodigious results and achievements” (Marx and Engels 1989, 39-40). With only a little less of a sweeping dismissal, these words do seem more than a little pertinent to some of our own intellectual ‘revolutions’ in recent years.

The problem for Marx and Engel’s was that the Left Hegelian ‘revolutionary’ philosophy “never quitted the realm of philosophy” (Marx and Engels 1989, 40). As a result, methodologically it remained flawed in its ability to ground idea-systems in their real conditions of existence. “It has not occurred to these philosophers” Marx and Engels noted, “to inquire into the connection of German philosophy with German reality, the relation of their criticism to their own material surroundings” (Marx and Engels 1989, 41). It was this lack of self-reflexive interrogation that made German philosophy an ideology. Their own philosophy, historical materialism, would break with this lack of self-reflexivity and provide the basis for a

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

socio-economic understanding of the activities of the intellectual. The intellectual and the most prestigious form of intellectual production, philosophy, could not, in their view, be seen as some free-floating, universal group transcending social conflicts. Ideas and the producers of those ideas had to be socially contextualised.

Along with this methodological break there was a political break to be made from the Left Hegelians. The intimations of change, the analysis of the need for change, the need to identify the forces of change and press them forward in a progressive direction, could not occur unless philosophy was integrated into those social forces and political action. As Marx famously put it in the Twelfth Thesis on Feuerbach: “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways, the point is to *change* it” (Marx and Engels 1989, 123). In re-uniting philosophy with democratic social change Marx and Engels aim no less than to set in reverse the entire historical development of intellectual production and consciousness in class societies. This development has been marked by the division of labour between manual and intellectual labour and within the latter, the development of ever more specialised regions such as philosophy, ethics, theology, law, etc. (Marx and Engels 1989, 51-2).

The basis of a democratic conception of the intellectual is at least sketched out in this early work. Since consciousness for Marx and Engels develops out of our everyday practical productive life, satisfaction of needs and the production of new needs and the co-operation this requires, then an explicit and self-conscious reconnection of intellectual functions to the social production of life would seem both possible and desirable. Habermas argued that by “turning the construction of the manifestation of consciousness into an encoded representation of the self-production of the species, Marx discloses the mechanism of progress in the experience of reflection...” (Habermas 1978, 43). Yet Habermas warned that this was

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

vitiated by the fact that self-reflection was reduced to and made identical with labour. In so doing Marx “reduces the process of reflection to the level of instrumental action” (Habermas 1978, 44). If this were the case then Marx would be no more than a philosopher of the factory, as it were. But Marx neither saw labour in such instrumental terms (he saw it as intrinsically creative even if tasked with meeting certain historical needs) nor saw the intellectual and creative functions as having their highest manifestation necessarily within the material production of the species. Marx’s philosophy is perfectly capable of sustaining the view that our intellectual activities find their highest culmination in culture, communication and aesthetics, where some distancing from immediate needs have been established (Wayne 2014, 140-48). Historical materialism is not reductionist in relation to consciousness and its specialised manifestations, it merely poses the crucial question: what are the methodological and political-moral implications of the idea that intellectual activity has certain conditions of existence that involve the totality of society?

The question of the actual and desirable relationship between the intellectual and other forms of labour is significant primarily because it is capitalism that has the instrumental view of labour (which Habermas uncritically accepts in its impoverished form as inevitable). Furthermore, today it is capitalism that poses a clear and present danger in reducing intellectual activity to serving the needs of the labour process, subordinate as it is to capital, and thus eliminating the critical component of reflective thought. In order to realise that critical component Marx and Engels recommended articulating thought to those social agents struggling for progressive change. The internal conflicts within the ‘conceptive ideologists’ of the dominant class (the fight between the Right and Left Hegelians) were not insignificant. It helped expand the repertoire of discourses available and

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

seed the ideas for change. However, for these seeds of change to be activated required intellectuals to break both methodologically and politically with the dominant class. This is what Marx and Engels did in fact do.

Gramsci on the Intellectuals

The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) has widely and rightly been seen as making a significant contribution to the Marxist understanding of the role of intellectuals. Like Marx and Engels he argued for a democratic conception of intellectual activity. Taking the most prestigious form of intellectual production, philosophy, as an example, he argued that “all men [sic] are “philosophers”” insofar as everyone has a specific conception of the world, a “worldview” which they have forged out of their experience and circumstance. The task was to develop philosophy, both in its specialised form as scholarship and in its everyday form, into “critical awareness” (Gramsci 1967, 58). As we have seen, for Marx and Engels, the philosophy of the intellectuals would develop its critical potential the more it could interrogate its conditions of existence. With a slight nuancing, the same prescription was applied to the philosophy of everyday life. Gramsci argued that it needed to develop critical awareness by a) not accepting ideas and value-systems passively from the dominant institutions in society and b) overcoming its fragmented and disparate character and developing itself as a systematic and coherent worldview in the way traditional philosophers have had the time to do with their own more ‘rarefied’ systems. The ideal of developing a popular form of critical philosophy would have to overcome and address a number of problems concerning the actual historical development of intellectual production and its relationship to powerful socio-economic groups. It would have to overcome firstly the fact that “All men [sic] are intellectuals...but not all men have in society the function of

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

intellectuals” (Gramsci 1998, 9). This is the division between intellectual and manual labour. Secondly, within the ‘function of intellectuals’ there are different types of intellectuals.

Gramsci identified two types of intellectuals. The first were what he called the traditional intellectuals, which he defined rather ambiguously in both historical terms and social-ideological terms. The historical definition of traditional intellectuals refers to the way intellectuals associated with one mode of production need to be assimilated by the intellectuals associated with a rising class and a new mode of production. So that for example, the intellectuals of the feudal mode of production (clerics, scholars, artists) had to be integrated and re-functioned according to the new practices and needs of the capitalist mode of production (Gramsci 1998, 10-11). Likewise, the intellectuals developed within capitalism would become the ‘traditional’ intellectuals vis-à-vis the development of a socialist mode of production, and again would need to be assimilated into new social priorities and needs. Gramsci also defined traditional intellectuals as those within the capitalist mode of production that remained remote and aloof from the economic and political needs of the capitalist class despite their assimilation. Again clerics and philosophers and perhaps much of the arts and humanities within the academy might once have fallen within this type of intellectual function, where non-instrumental metaphysical values could be articulated. These intellectuals are ‘traditional’ when compared to Gramsci’s other main category: organic intellectuals.

To understand the concept of organic intellectuals, we have to first relate this concept to two other concepts in Gramsci’s work: the economic-corporative and hegemony. Gramsci argues that the political consciousness of a dominant class is one which must move beyond merely a defence of its own economic interests. It must move firstly to unite with other fractions of its own class, in the way that different kinds of capital, such as industrial,

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

financial, commercial and landed capital have historically done. If a class stays at just this level of defending its economic interests, it stays at the level of the economic-corporative. Beyond establishing intra-class cohesion a dominant class must move beyond their own collective interests and command the moral-political terrain across society, so as to convince all other classes that *their* interests can be met by aligning themselves with or accepting the rule of the dominant class. When a dominant class achieves this, it is not merely dominant but also hegemonic (Gramsci 1988, 205-6). By hegemonic, Gramsci means that this is a class that wins (at least to some degree) the consent of the exploited classes to their situation.

It is the role of the organic intellectuals to produce this consent and to do so they work primarily to change and influence culture, morality and political agendas. Classically, organic intellectuals would have been found in political parties, in the top most prestigious newspapers, in public relations and advertising and perhaps today also in think tanks. These intellectuals are tied organically to the economic and political needs of the dominant class. In recent times, these are the thinkers, commentators, editors, writers, broadcasters and so forth that try and persuade the general population that neo-liberalism means progressive reform.

However, Gramsci also refers to the practical organisers of production, the scientist and the engineer for example, and today also we would say managers, as intellectuals. We might think that the organic intellectual would automatically include these kinds of intellectuals organised at the heart of the production process. But this interpretation is at odds with Gramsci's analysis of the economic-corporate activity of the dominant classes and the need to go beyond their immediate economic needs and build political alliances and broader political-moral projects (such as neo-liberalism). A number of writers have suggested that with the expansion of corporate and state bureaucracies, the economic-corporate role of the

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

intellectual, working within and primarily concerned with the needs of the state or the company, has expanded (Boggs 1993, and see Pratschke in this volume). This has led to the expansion and redefinition of intellectual functions that are neither ‘traditional’ because they are so obviously tied to the dynamic and moving terrain of occupations responding to economic forces, nor are they ‘organic’ in the sense that their agenda is more focused on the smooth functioning of an apparatus rather than the broader project of public persuasion and politics. We need then to supplement Gramsci’s analysis with a new category, that of the *technocratic* intellectual. This is the ‘expert’ in science, engineering, law, economics, management, even the trade union leader and negotiator, etc. They embody specialised and instrumentalised forms of knowledge. They work within the framework of policy, which ultimately stems from the broader political struggle conducted on the terrain of the masses and the organic intellectuals. They administer but do not determine, they examine how things work but not why things work as they do, and within that framework they may produce new solutions, products and ideas. If they become great advocates of such new ideas and practices that re-shape how we look at the world more broadly, from Henry Ford to Steve Jobs, then they lift themselves out from the merely technocratic intellectual onto the terrain of the organic intellectual. The technocratic intellectual, long dominant in the natural and social sciences, has been in the last few decades, reshaping the humanities and arts as well as the critical social sciences. Edward Said argues that the greatest threat to independent intellectual thought comes from the dominance of this technocratic type of intellectual. For Said:

The major choice faced by the intellectual is whether to be allied with the stability of the victors and rulers or – the more difficult

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

path – to consider that stability as a state of emergency threatening the less fortunate (Said 1996, 35).

We can now tabulate the different types of intellectual functions we have discussed:

1. Traditional: either eclipsed by the new rising class and/or the economically and politically marginalised intellectuals within capitalism.
2. Technocratic: numerically the biggest class of contemporary intellectual activity, working within economic-corporative horizons.
3. Organic Intellectuals. They are defined not by their occupation but by the scope and compass of the change they seek to initiate.

This category can be subdivided between:

i) Hegemonic organic intellectuals who work on behalf of the capitalist class and whose main business is in helping to shape the broader political-moral, social and cultural agenda.

ii) Counter-Hegemonic organic intellectuals. They work to call the dominant frames of reference, the dominant assumptions, and the dominant policy trends that favour capitalism, into question. They are organically tied to the classes and groups for whom stability is ‘a state of emergency’. This group can in turn be sub-divided between:

ii. a) those that, like Marx and Engels, come from the middle classes but who have distanced themselves from the hegemonic group

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

politically, psychologically and ideally, in terms of their practices (but often they fall short of this crucial need to democratise their practices, retaining instead the stamp of elitism);

ii. b) those intellectuals that develop from *within* the working classes and other subaltern groups (but who must resist assimilation and neutralisation within the established institutions).

Organic Intellectuals Today

In his 1967 essay on the role of the intellectual in Western democracies Chomsky considered the intellectual in relation to the concepts of responsibility, power and truth seeking. He argued that their relative power bestows upon them a responsibility to interrogate, critique and expose the disastrous effects of right wing ideologies.

Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyse actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions. In the Western world, at least, they have the power that comes from political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression. For a privileged minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are presented to us (Chomsky 1988, 60)

There are two significant contextual points to be made here. Firstly Chomsky was writing in relation to the Vietnam War over fifty years ago.

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

It was a challenge to the intellectuals of the time to expose the lies that were disseminated in order to justify a war that killed over a million people in total. Secondly he is referring here to a particular kind of intellectual, that is the *counter hegemonic intellectual*. As we have pointed out in the discussion of Gramsci, we can consider the role of intellectuals in two ways as hegemonic or as counter hegemonic. While the type of intellectual Chomsky refers to is one that works to expose the facade of the powerful there are intellectuals who can just as easily play a role in reinforcing the status quo. The Vietnam War as with the Iraq War in 2003 had its intellectual cheerleaders, giving power the gloss of higher ideals (the 2003 war was we were told about defending and extending freedom, democracy, etc.).

Conventionally those who are considered to be intellectuals –or we could call them professional thinkers -have hailed from the upper and middle classes. This is not because these groups possess an inherent intelligence consistently absent from the working class. Rather it is because those from the middle and upper class designated as intellectuals -or as Gramsci would have it fulfilling the function of the intellectual- are in possession of the social, cultural and economic capital that makes such a designation possible and ensures they are recognised and acknowledged as such by other members of their class. This means it is possible to understand the hegemonic intellectual not in relation to a superior ‘intellect’ (whatever that might mean) but in terms of their significant role in the reproduction of the socio -economic relations of capital.

It remains true today that the majority of contemporary hegemonic organic intellectuals in the UK are drawn from the middle and upper classes. The decision-making professions within which many institutional intellectuals operate are dominated by privately educated Oxbridge graduates who possess a shared culture, value system and set of attitudes

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

which when taken together coalesce into a world view which they hold in common. The link between education and the production of intellectuals has meant that formal education has been a crucial filter by which to reproduce an intellectual class dedicated to reproducing the class system (Reay 2010, 400). It is within the private education system and the universities of Oxford and Cambridge that the middle and upper class intellectuals learn about the way in which the world works. Here they are prepared to run that world as if opposition to their view of the world is a deviance from the norm.

What this means in effect is that as members of a middle class elite whose perspective is universalised, intellectual engagement with the condition of society and the way in which it is organised and regulated is filtered through the sensibilities of those for whom the prevailing structural arrangements do not appear to be alienating and exploitative. Whilst there is no suggestion that the hegemonic intellectual is unable to engage critically with the world –indeed they even, at times, are able to appear radical- the depth of their analysis and level of critical engagement is typically limited because the position they inhabit is a privileged one. Consequently their radicalism only appears as such when presented to other hegemonic intellectuals. Significantly their intellectual endeavour evaluates the immediate situation and typically accepts the given parameters in place to make sense of that situation while a more critical intellect “evaluates evaluations” (Hofstadter 1966, 25). As Schwartz has pointed out many university students are aware of the reason that corporate boardrooms should promote diversity “but few question the concept of corporate rule itself” (2013,184) .

If the role of the critical intellectual as Chomsky claims is to make public what the powerful would rather keep hidden, we need to recognise the significance of this in relation to a contemporary society consistently

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

divided along class lines and to realise any intellectual endeavour wishing to 'evaluate the evaluation' must eventually engage with the question of class and the unequal distribution of economic and cultural resources which class divisions rest upon. It is the approach to this question we would argue that separates the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic intellectual. As Marx made clear it is only by engaging with the question of class, the ways in which class is structured and reconfigured over time, that we can begin to understand the nature of capitalism and come to terms with his claim: "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx 1985, 79).

The crucial point here is that for the hegemonic middle class intellectual, class is not an overtly exploitative or antagonistic relationship. Their experiential horizons are confined by lives of privilege where the politics of identity takes a primary position. The last thirty years of neoliberalism has witnessed class as a source of intellectual analysis take second place to the politics of race, sexuality and gender, concepts that affect the middle class the most. In the meantime economic inequality has increased to historically high levels, the working class have been incrementally excluded from the public sphere and immigrants forced to live and work in the most appalling conditions. Yet those in positions of intellectual power have normalised and universalised this inequality. While their own class world becomes normalised questions of class, which are essential to any transformative process, are secondary. This has allowed for an on-going abdication of any responsibility towards the working class and no demand for a critical self-interrogation necessary to consider the role class plays in the social relations of exploitation. As Marx has made clear, it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social being that determines consciousness (Marx 1977, 181). While it is possible, through social change and political events (e.g. war, political

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

revolutions, etc.) for consciousness to be reconfigured and established dominant patterns of social conditioning that has formerly shaped a life to be questioned, the tendency is for social being to produce the consciousness that is most conducive for the reproduction (within a range) of the social relationships in which social being is formed.

The problem then becomes one of praxis; of intellectual work that is able to inquire into and evaluate the connection between ideas and their material affects and translate them into new ways of being as Marx and Engels called for in *The German Ideology*. The process of re-evaluating ideas about the world can bring about the potential to transform the world. Thus conservatives and liberals are certainly not averse to acknowledging that inequality exists, but they never come up with policy ideas that could remotely change this situation. When they are confronted with policy ideas that could have a positive impact on inequality, they attack those ideas as ‘extreme’ because they encroach, necessarily on the prerogatives of private property. Gramsci linked the economic rule of the elites to the complex practices of everyday existence where to a great extent there is an unquestioned conformity to the rules and conventions of a given social order. This intellectual acceptance of hegemonic boundaries, this refusal to surmount the imposed limitations of the institutions, politics and ideological framework of neoliberalism, illuminates the distinction to be made between the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic intellectual.

Non-conformity to these rules, a refusal to live by their precepts, engenders in the counter-hegemonic intellectual the condition of potential isolation and marginalisation and indicates an acknowledgement that analysis is informed by and dependent upon action – and vice versa. At present the hegemonic power of the dominating groups is such that the critical analysis required for strategic explorations of the consequences of

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

objective material structures exists in isolation from the action required to transform society.

This is no more apparent than in the claim associated with the Occupy movement that began in the US: ‘we are the 99%’. This slogan functioned to differentiate the majority from the obscenely rich capitalist class minority right at the top of society. We would argue that this contradictory model of inclusivity is problematic and functions to exclude the working class by smoothing out the differences in lives that are significantly different *within* the majority. On the one hand the slogan draws attention to a powerful global elite at the top of society who exist in a shadowy world of financial deals and political agreements. At the same time it eradicates the peculiarities, oppressions and exploitative relationships of many members of the working class and the very real class differences and conflicts that exist between groups within the 99%. This collapsing of the working classes and the more privileged lives of the comfortable middle class into one homogenous mass inevitably functions to exclude the working class from the struggle for change and leads to a weakening of the potential to build intellectual and political arguments and crucially, anti capitalist alliances that acknowledge the material realities of working class life. As a ‘unifying’ slogan it is unable to engage with the complexities of a classed stratified, multi ethnic globalised world. What is envisaged, as a tool against neoliberalism becomes in effect a method of annihilation – a theoretical and essentialising meme which both conceptually and practically results in the destruction of the working class as a category. Similarly, orthodox Marxist conceptions which equate ‘the working class’ with wage-labour are problematic, since they disavow the different types and levels of cultural, social and economic advantage the middle class wage-labourer has, as well as their position of administrative, managerial or intellectual dominance over other strata within the category of ‘working class’.

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

This returns us to the concept of praxis and its relationship to working class intellectuals. What it demonstrates is the need for the middle class intellectual to adequately address their relationship to existing structures and patterns of inequality in which they are implicated and their increasing control of the means of communication, their domination of the media, academia and other decision making professions, all of which are conduits for the transmission of power and the construction of ideology (O'Neill and Wayne 2013). The truly counter-hegemonic middle class intellectual who seeks an organic relation to the working class must remember that, as Marx wrote in 'The Theses on Feuerbach', "it is essential to educate the educator" (Marx and Engels 1989,121). A dialectical relationship of mutual learning means that organic intellectuals must also emerge from *within* the working class.

The counter-hegemonic working class intellectual traditionally was dependent on organisations and institutions such as trade unions, adult education institutions and socialist parties (Rose 2001) to provide the means to develop as counter-hegemonic thinkers. Yet neoliberalism has progressively destroyed or neutralised these organisations. It is a political truism to claim neoliberalism is responsible for the rolling back of the welfare state and the destruction of the public services that function within it. One of the consequences of this is a shrinking of the public sphere and the access to it that is essential to making subaltern voices heard (Wacquant 2008).

Neoliberalism has destroyed the fabric of the communities in which the working class found material and ideological strength and in the process strategically depoliticised the working class. The left intelligentsia has receded into a kind of "ideological policing" (Hall 2012, 9) obsessed with theories of differences and transgression that has resulted in its increasing insignificance and the erosion of the concept (and practice) of

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

social solidarity. Schwartz reinforces this point in his discussion of radical theory:

As the right's growing hegemony from the 1980s onwards eroded majoritarian support for progressive taxation and universal public goods, radical theory, through its dominant concerns for difference and transgression, abandoned any intellectual defence of the core democratic value of social democracy (Schwartz 2013, 395).

The destruction of the civil society in which the working class had established some organisational and institutional bases, has also eroded the links between the working class and the middle class. Middle class intellectuals could once be rooted in working class struggles such as trade union movements, social movements (such as Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners) or in the colleges and working-men's institutes, civil rights protests, and so forth. As all of these have become weakened, so the role of the counter-hegemonic radical intellectual has declined. Our reading of this situation leads us to suggest that the middle class counter-hegemonic intellectual requires movements and working class intellectuals to work along side and to learn from. A symbolic moment when the working class counter-hegemonic intellectual and the institutional production of middle class intellectuals converged, was Jimmy Reid's 1972 inaugural address as Rector of Glasgow University. Reid was a leading figure in the 1971 work-in to save the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders from bankruptcy. In Britain now it is virtually unthinkable for a University to appoint a radical trade union leader to such a position and to acknowledge that the 'educators need educating'. Ours is not the era to give such a platform, such a vindication and such an acknowledgement, to a radical organic intellectual of the

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

working class. In his famous address Reid made a direct appeal to the students as intellectuals in the making:

A rat race is for rats. We're not rats. We're human beings. Reject the insidious pressures in society that would blunt your critical faculties to all that is happening around you, that would caution silence in the face of injustice lest you jeopardise your chances of promotion and self-advancement. This is how it starts, and before you know where you are, you're a fully paid-up member of the rat-pack (Reid 2010).

Yet if the old established platforms (the universities, the press) have become integrated into the neoliberal order and hostile to participation of the working class as critical thinkers, new spaces have opened up around the digital media.

Counter-Hegemonic Spaces and the Digital Media

In our multi-media saturated society the significance of the media as a site of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic struggle takes on a dynamic role in framing our social and historical experiences and the ways in which they are interpreted, evaluated and made sense of. Within the dominant media environment, the processes of public debate, policy-making and political power are asymmetrically skewed towards both the middle classes and large capital interests. The dominant media are run by middle class intellectuals who largely operate within the spectrum of liberal and conservative thought and opinion in the current period. In the UK, the leading editorial thinkers on the premier liberal paper *The Guardian* have overwhelmingly been privately educated and went through Oxford or Cambridge. They police the boundaries of the acceptable and at their more

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

‘radical’ end of the spectrum they present as counter-hegemonic intellectuals and ‘left-wing firebrands’. The ideological effect of incorporating ‘radical’ politics inside such dominant organs is that anything outside those boundaries can be labelled and dismissed as ‘extremist’.

One example of the policing of who gets to speak, where and on what issues is Russell Brand. Brand crossed boundaries that unsettled the established hierarchies and divisions of labour. Here was an ‘entertainer’ who became politicised and began commenting critically on political matters. But he was also from a working class background that was outside the golden Oxbridge circle and this seemed for many liberals to disqualify him to speak on political issues and be a political actor (See Fisher 2013, El-Gingihy 2014 and for an example of the established political commentators’ collective noses being firmly put out of joint, O’Hagan 2014). ¹ In particular his critique of the current state of representative democracy in the UK and its inability to bring about progressive change (through voting) enraged many in the political and media class who are invested in the status quo. Brand disrupted the middle class norms of style in the way he talked (the accent and content), the way he dressed, his very tactile interactions with interviewers, etc., all spoke to an informal unpredictability that was seen as a symbolic attack on ‘serious discourse’. Brand launched his Trews news channel on You Tube which has more than one million subscribers and which regularly makes the media itself and their questionable shaping of the public agenda, his topic. ² The development and popularisation of such media literacy is an important component of the oppositional digital and social media world, which defines its identity precisely in terms of its difference from the dominant media. The dominant media in turn fear this growing media literacy and meta-commentary on its practices since it calls them to account and

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

deconstructs the naturalisation of the dominant media's perspectives. The success of Brand's Trews channel demonstrates that the digital and social media also threaten the dominant media in terms of audience reach and not just ideological critique.

Social media and digital media may also be seen as a counter-hegemonic model of labour or intellectual production. In contrast to those that have a corporate contract, bloggers, micro-bloggers, commentators, memes, online papers, You Tube political rappers such as bin-man Sean Donnelly (NXTGen) and so on, produce material in their spare time and in most cases for free.³ The demographic background of the politicised social media are far more diverse than the narrow private school/Oxbridge nexus that filters and shapes the formation of British intellectuals. Although social media is often criticised for encouraging a privatised and individualistic politics (the so-called 'keyboard activist'), we would argue that it can be a perfect example of praxis. Social media offers a means of offering clear and succinct explanations of what is happening and why it is happening; it provides the 'theory' in a idiom that is accessible to non-academics, and that can seed political action.

The digital and social media help produce horizontal communication that is very important in helping people overcome the sense of isolation and marginalisation that one feels when they have political views and opinions that find little or no place in the dominant media. In such a situation of tacit censorship it is easy to believe that few people share those beliefs and opinions, and this can lead to a demoralising atomisation of the left. Since many of the public spaces where working class people used to congregate have been decimated, virtual networks in the social media have provided one forum to reconstitute such opportunities for conversation and knowledge exchange. As with any other form of media, the social and digital media can be used for a variety of purposes, including highly

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

reactionary ones. But the left has often shown itself to be suspicious of social and digital media as a mode of political engagement and this has meant underestimating its potentialities, or concentrating exclusively (in a reaction to the techno-determinists and techno-utopians) on the way the political economy of the internet for example is dominated by corporations (Dean 2009).

Gramsci's argument that everyone is an intellectual but that only some people have the social function of being intellectuals is relevant here. We are arguing that the digital and social media enormously expands the range of people who can assume the social function of being an intellectual. The genre of citizen journalism has been enriched by an influx of counter-hegemonic intellectuals who do not respect the narrow norms and rules of political discourse. To take one random example, Rachel Swindon has been micro-blogging on her Twitter account exposing Conservative MPs who voted to cut benefits while spending thousands of pounds of public money on their expenses claims. Interestingly this was a story in the dominant media back in 2009. But what Swindon has done is firstly pursue the story consistently over time, demonstrating that little has changed, whereas the dominant media tend to move on and have largely left the issue behind. Secondly, she has linked the on-going issue of MP's expenses to the brutal cuts in benefits under austerity politics. By contrast the dominant news media keep such issues separate, thus failing to make the connections that reveal the class dynamics of the social totality. On the back of this successful campaign (she has more than twenty-two thousand Twitter followers at the time of writing) Swindon has launched a blog declaring that the British media are failing to hold the Conservative government to account. Subscription models from readers/supporters often provide some financial support for this kind of citizen journalism.

Conclusion

Praxis is the integration of theoretical activities that have been cut off from the widest possible social base and restricted to elite demographics and narrow circles of action and knowledge. This is why Marx, Engels and Gramsci called for philosophy, the most elite but also most highly developed system of thought, to be brought back into contact with not 'reality' (since philosophy is hardly unreal) but the reality of the lives of the majority. Education – in the broadest sense and not just in formal institutions – is therefore a crucial part of developing praxis. Praxis means not only linking theory and practice, as it is typically defined, but *democratising* who gets to have access to those frameworks, perspectives and intellectual resources that provide the basis of critical thought and critical action.

The system-integrated intellectuals take different forms: the traditional intellectuals, remote from the immediate political or economic needs of capitalism, have always been on hand to provide spiritual, artistic, philosophical or other ideals that have provided important resources for the bourgeoisie in the ideological struggle. The organic intellectuals – those elites within the intellectual elite - who link the economic interests of the capitalist class with the broader strategic political and cultural goals of the class, fight the ideological struggle in the more immediate, day-to-day battle over the direction of social life. The massed ranks of the technocratic intellectuals follow their lead in the myriad institutions of modern society. It is from this dense bloc of integration that the middle class counter-hegemonic intellectual must emerge. Radical social change will need the critical leverage and resources within existing public opinion formation

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

which intellectuals from the middle class already have. The contradiction between their access to the most sophisticated intellectual culture and the absurdity and irrationality of capitalism has often thrown them into conflict with it. But counter-posing rationality against the evident waste and crisis tendencies of capitalism does not break down the privileged superiority of the intellectuals.

Intellectuals from the middle class can only play a truly counter-hegemonic role if they are sufficiently and critically self-reflexive about the class divisions and competitive culture from which they have emerged. Their educational privilege “creates a bond of solidarity which attaches him [sic] to his class, and still more attaches his class to him” (Benjamin 1998, 102). Even the ‘proletarianisation’ of the intellectual (real or imagined) does not alter this instinctive “bond of solidarity”. Benjamin’s call for intellectuals to change the production relations within which they work, to find ways of democratising the apparatus, to create collaborators and co-producers from their audience, must fight against the constant tendency of the broader social relations to shore up privilege and expertise (through cultural capital for example). The paradoxical task of the middle class counter-hegemonic intellectual is that they must aim to abolish their own conditions of existence, that is the class privilege from which they have emerged. Like withering the state, this has proved difficult to do, although there have been inspiring examples that provide pointers in the right direction.

The democratisation of the function of intellectuality requires then the development of organic counter-hegemonic intellectuals from the working class itself, without which the middle-class intellectual cannot forge an organic relationship to any class but their own. The danger for organic intellectuals of the working class is that they become assimilated within the status quo leaving behind their own class and taking on the hegemonic

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

precepts of the class in which they find themselves but in which they are heavily outnumbered. The institutions, organisations and workplaces which once would have fostered and nurtured working class organic intellectuals no longer exist or have been neutralised. This means that the possibility of organising around the demands of working class life – one of the functions of the counter hegemonic intellectual- is severely limited. As the neoliberal state privatises what once were accepted as public rights, the spaces for the counter hegemonic intellectual become severely restricted, particularly for those who wish to challenge the universalisation of middle class competitive individualisation. The choices for the working class counter hegemonic intellectual appear in our contemporary moment to be stark: incorporation into the traditional hegemonic institutions that reinforce the status quo –or an enforced, politically strategic marginalisation in which all conversations around class that actually include the working class are ignored. We have discussed how the digital media potentially and also in practice, have played a role in re-opening up civic-political spaces that have been closed down elsewhere. Of course it is not enough. Of course digital media openings for organic intellectuals in general must be linked with real political action, which must in turn be linked to re-enfranchising politically, socially and culturally, the working class. The social order does not want the evaluation to be evaluated from the interests and perspectives of the working class. Which is why democratising the function of the intellectual is so hard and so necessary.

Notes

1. Brand was accused of sexism by some high profile commentators. The delight with which they leapt onto his remarks about his 'love of a good women' curing him of sexism suggested a certain keenness to find something to attack him on and deflect away from the other unequal power relations he was drawing attention to. In fact Brand showed a good deal more reflexivity about his own sexism than his critics did of their own class privilege.

2. See <https://www.youtube.com/user/russellbrand>.

3. We do not agree with the argument that voluntary cultural labour for online digital dissemination constitutes 'exploitation' in the Marxist sense. Such labour produces no value directly (no ratio between investment and surplus extraction). Even when advertising makes use of this content, this is a re-distribution of value produced elsewhere by the workers who produce the goods which advertisers sell on behalf of their clients. Labour that chooses to produce what it wants, when it wants and without any direct economic compulsion, can in no way be described as 'value producing'. If it was, there could be no Marxist theory of capitalist crisis rooted in the tendency for the rate of profit to fall. See Williamson elsewhere in this volume for more on this question.

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

References

Benjamin, W. (1998) *Understanding Brecht*. Trans. A. Bostock. London: Verso.

Boggs, C. (1993) *Intellectuals and the Crisis of Modernity*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Chomsky, N (1967) A Special Supplement: The Responsibility of Intellectuals. *New York Review of Books*. February 23.

Dean, J. (2009) *Democracy and other neoliberal fantasies, communicative capitalism and left politics*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.

El-Gingihy, Y. (2014) 'Russell Brand vs the bloody liberal majority', *New Internationalist*, <https://newint.org/blog/2014/10/28/russell-brand-liberal-majority/#comments>

Enzensberger, H.M. (1982) *Critical Essays*. New York: Continuum.

Fisher, M. (2013) *Exiting the Vampire Castle*. *The North Star*. Available at: <http://www.thenorthstar.info/?p=11299>

Gramsci, A. (1967) *The Modern Prince and other writings*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Gramsci, A. (1988) *A Gramsci Reader*. Forgas D (ed) London: Lawrence and Wishart.

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

Gramsci, A. (1998) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Hoare Q and
Nowell-Smith G (eds) London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Habermas, J. (1978) *Knowledge and Human Interests*. London: Heinemann.

Hall, S (2012) *Theorising Crime and Deviance: A New Perspective*.
London: Sage.

Hofstadter, R. (1966) *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. New York:
Alfred A. Knopf.

Mark, K. and Engels, F. (1989) *The German Ideology*. London: Lawrence
Wishart.

Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1985) *The Communist Manifesto*,
Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Marx, K. (1977) 'Preface To A Contribution To The Critique of Political
Economy'. *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Selected Works*, Vol.1.
London: Lawrence and Wishart.

O'Hagan, E. (2014) 'Russell Brand's 'love of a good woman' is not what
feminism needs', *The Guardian*, January 17.

[https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/17/russell-
brand-no-more-page-3-feminism?CMP=fb_gu](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/17/russell-brand-no-more-page-3-feminism?CMP=fb_gu)

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.

Reay, D. (2010) Sociology, social class and education. In: Apple M. Ball S.
and Gandin L. *The Routledge International Handbook of the Sociology
of Education*. London: Routledge.

Reid, J. (2010) 'Still irresistible, a working-class hero's finest speech',
The Independent, August 12.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/still-irresistible-a-working-class-heros-finest-speech-2051285.html>

Rose, J. (2001) *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*.
New Haven: Yale University Press.

Said, E. (1996) *Representations of the Intellectual*. London: Vintage.

Schwartz, J. (2013) A Peculiar Blind Spot: Why did Radical Political
Theory Ignore the Rampant Rise in Inequality Over The Past
Thirty Years? *New Political Science* 35 (3): 389-402.

Wacquant, L. (2008) Relocating Gentrification: The Working Class,
Science and the State in Recent Urban Research. *International
Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 32 (1): 198-205.

Wayne, M (2016) *Red Kant, Aesthetics, Marxism and the Third
Critique*. London: Bloomsbury.

Wayne, M. and O'Neill, D (2013) The Gentrification of the Left. *New
Left Project*. Available at:
[http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/th
e_gentrification_of_the_left](http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/the_gentrification_of_the_left)

From: *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century*
Brill 2018.