American intellectual historians sometimes complain that their subfield has declined in visibility and importance since the 1950s when it enjoyed the services of giants – Richard Hofstadter, Merle Curti, Perry Miller, and Henry Steele Commager. The complaint is misleading. Intellectual history may have suffered a relative decline beside the new social history, but it is practiced more intelligently and by more people than ever before. In the decades after 1960 intellectual history opened itself to the insights of the social sciences and literary theory, feminism and multiculturalism, without being disabled by them; to the contrary, it became more rigorous in research techniques and more guarded in the making of facile generalizations than ever before. Historians came to appreciate the need to consider the social location and cultural characteristics of intellectuals as a group. Their ability and willingness to contextualize their subjects showed an unquestionable advance over the work of their predecessors. Intellectual history in the last five decades has wrestled with a range of philosophical questions, including: the power of ideas as instruments of social change; the ability of influential writers to shape and change the course of government policy; and the benefits and drawbacks of social advocacy in the guise of historical study. It has done so in an often lively and imaginative way, ensuring it an important place in the broader context of American historical study.

Intellectual historians were both participants in, and analysts of, the era’s social debates and controversies. They bore witness to the climax and decline of liberalism, the rise of “new” and “neo” conservatism, the short but intense impact of the New Left, the rise of feminism, and the long debate about American poverty. In those years America’s intellectual infrastructure, the research universities, grew vast and prompted fears of an academic overspecialization that would close out all but highly trained specialists from participation. Further complicating matters, the insights of postmodernism and literary theory began to cast doubt on the relationship between social realities and intellectuals’ analysis of them. Issues previously confined to the philosophy department’s epistemology specialists began to appear at the heart of debates over race, gender, and poverty.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s intellectual historians doubling as liberal social analysts dominated the landscape. Miller, Curti, and Commager saw themselves as defenders of American civilization against the threat of communism from the left and the threat of philistine McCarthyism from the right. Curti’s *The Growth of*
American Thought (1943), Miller’s The New England Mind (1939/1953), and Crammer’s The American Mind (1950) all assumed, as their titles suggest, that there was something identifiably American about a certain kind of thinking. Their characterization of this national style as processual, indebted to scientific method, but pragmatic and oriented to everyday affairs, was prescriptive as well as descriptive. By the standards of their successors, these historians were insensitive to variation and contradiction within the traditions they explored. They had no time to spare for ethnic variation or the literature of minority groups, and they scarcely glanced at female authors (Perry, 1984; Pells, 1985; Novick, 1988).

These historians wrote under the shadow of the Cold War, and it is clear in retrospect that they were defining the “American Mind” as the antithesis of the “Soviet Mind.” Americans, said Daniel Boorstin, another postwar liberal luminary, were experimental, tolerant, open-minded, democratic, and entrepreneurial; all these qualities were desirable. No wonder, then, that communism had made so little headway in America; its “Mind” was closed, dogmatic, tyrannical, and bureaucratic. America’s intellectual spokesmen were nevertheless anxious. Marxists, after all, believed that socialism was destined sooner or later to take over all industrial economies in accordance with the laws of history. Werner Sombart had published Why Is There No Socialism in the United States? back in 1906 and the question had remained implicit in most discussions of political economy ever since. Socialists asked it with impatience; anti-communists asked it with dread. Not until the Reagan/Thatcher/Gorbachev years of the 1980s could historians relinquish the question and begin to see socialism as a vital episode in the history of Western intellectual, economic, and political development, but not as their inevitable destiny.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (The Vital Center, 1949) and Reinhold Niebuhr (The Irony of American History, 1952) were also prominent figures in the liberal camp. Fearing ideological contamination from left and right, they tried rhetorically to position themselves and America at the heart of Western civilization. They denied the conservative claim that liberalism lacked solid intellectual or religious foundations; indeed Niebuhr was the era’s leading Protestant theologian (Fox, 1987). They also denied the socialist claim that liberalism was merely a fig leaf of decency for rapacious capitalism. Instead Schlesinger and Niebuhr argued that American liberalism’s dedication to progress, freedom, equality, and minority rights made liberalism the heart and soul of American history. A like-minded liberal economist, John K. Galbraith, gave a name to the era with The Affluent Society (1958), in which he argued that America’s incredible economic growth had not yet been matched by an equitable distribution, and that the society must now strive for “social balance.” Galbraith’s subsequent work, strongly consonant with the New Deal heritage, argued for a powerful central government as counterweight to the power of corporations (Waligorski, 1997; Okroi, 1998).

The defense of New Deal liberalism also underlay what is remembered as the “consensus” school of American historiography, whose character was nicely encapsulated at the time in John Higham’s History (1965), which is today equally useful as a primary and as a secondary source. Richard Hofstadter was a key figure in this school and his books The American Political Tradition (1948) and The Age of Reform (1955) are among its principal documents. Almost equally important was Louis Hartz, who argued that a homogeneous political and intellectual culture of liberalism had char-
acterized the nation’s relatively conflict-free past, because it had been spared the ordeal of feudalism. Schlesinger’s hefty trilogy on the New Deal era, published between 1957 and 1960, is a classic work in this idiom, though with lingering debts to the Progressive historical tradition in which he had been raised.

Schlesinger went on to become an adviser to President John F. Kennedy and Niebuhr made it onto the cover of *Time* magazine, while other liberal celebrities of the era, like Walter Lippmann, continued to play the role of “public intellectuals” (Steel, 1980; Riccio, 1994). The rise of academic hyperspecialization since then has led a more recent generation of critics to fear that the age of great public intellectuals, the brilliant generalists, has ended (Jacoby, 1987). The postwar baby boom and the increasing need for technologists and experts fed an immense expansion of universities in the years 1945–65. Their story has been told in various ways. David Hollinger (1996) is most attentive to the faculty’s cosmopolitan and scientific ideals, and to the way in which the American academy became increasingly hospitable to Jews. Several recent collections discuss the distortion of research priorities engendered by the Cold War itself. Weapons research preoccupied the physicists, not surprisingly, but even fields ostensibly more remote, such as anthropology and psychology, were drawn in by the lure of big research dollars for work on how to demoralize an enemy or how to influence peasant groups’ behavior in Indo-China (Montgomery, 1997; Simpson, 1998). Moreover the universities themselves were swept by McCarthyism, showing academic freedom to be a weak reed and jeopardizing the livelihood of all who had been communists or “fellow travelers” (Schrecker, 1986). Hofstadter’s *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963) investigated the paradox of a nation suspicious of experts nevertheless training more of them and depending on them more than any other society in history.

Among the groups destined to make a big mark on American social thought were the “New York Intellectuals” gathered around *Partisan Review, Commentary*, and later *Dissent* (Bloom, 1986; Wald, 1987). Mainly second-generation Jews in revolt against their families’ religious heritage, and inspired by ideals of universal liberation, these critics had been attracted to the political left during the Great Depression but, in most instances, had revolted against the political brutality and cultural philistinism of Stalinism by 1940. Leading figures included Morris Cohen, Sidney Hook, Irving Howe, Philip Rahv, Irving Kristol, Lionel Trilling, Alfred Kazin, Nathan Glazer, Daniel Bell, William Barrett, and Seymour Martin Lipset. Peripheral figures included Hofstadter (who was half-Jewish and half-Lutheran), the great literary critic Edmund Wilson (an old WASP), and the novelist Mary McCarthy (a lapsed Catholic). Historians Michael Denning (1996) and Paul Gorman (1996) explore the rich cultural life of the era in which this group was politicized and explain its allure. Some of the New Yorkers, as Kristol later (1983) recalled, had dabbled in Trotskyism, which for a time had seemed to represent communism with a human face. By the postwar years, however, most of these figures had abandoned what they regarded as a repressive political left and had begun to make peace with American institutions – and then to enjoy the rewards the nation had to offer. This discovery that America was happy to have them is cleverly depicted in *Commentary* editor Norman Podhoretz’s autobiography, *Making It* (1967), whose smug tone enraged his detractors.

The New York “family” divided over an appropriate response to McCarthyism, the more or less official attempt between 1947 and 1955 to purge American
communists and their sympathizers from public life. Irving Kristol, by then an editor of CIA-subsidized *Encounter*, regarded Stalinism as so vicious that he could not work up much ire against the Wisconsin demagogue. Others in his circle, particularly Irving Howe, editor of *Dissent*, saw McCarthy’s threats and smears as an attack on American civil liberties; the dispute drove a deep wedge into the group’s allegiances (Howe, 1968).

Unlike the liberal anti-communists and the New York “family,” members of the New Conservative intellectual movement were strident anti-communists and often outright defenders of McCarthy. One of the biggest shifts in the intellectual historiography of recent decades has been the recognition that these conservatives (whom Bell [1955] and Hofstadter [1965] once casually brushed aside with social-psychological insults) played as important a role in American life as their liberal counterparts (Nash, 1975; Miles, 1980; Hoeveler, 1991; Allitt, 1993). Some of these New Conservatives, including James Burnham, Will Herberg, Whittaker Chambers, and Max Eastman, were ex-communists, now convinced that nothing was deadlier to the future of the world than communism (Diggins, 1975; Weinstein, 1978; Tanenhaus, 1997). The New Conservatives were led by William F. Buckley, Jr., whose journal, *National Review*, founded in 1955, became the intellectual center of the movement on the East Coast while Russell Kirk’s *Modern Age* was its midwestern standard-bearer. Richard Weaver’s *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948), Buckley’s *God and Man at Yale* (1951), and Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind* (1953) were the movement’s first big statements. Edmund Burke and Cardinal Newman played the same role for these conservatives that John Locke and Thomas Jefferson had played for the liberals. The New Conservatives provided an intellectual justification of American civilization, by arguing the close connection between a free society, a market economy, anti-communism, and freedom of religion. Their economics gurus were Friedrich von Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, and later Milton Friedman, and they recognized a theoretical debt to such European émigrés as Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin (Nash, 1975; McAllister, 1996).

Liberal and conservatives alike owed transatlantic debts. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American intellectuals had felt distinctly inferior to their European counterparts and, as studies by James Kloppenberg (1986) and Daniel Rodgers (1998) have shown, American reform and social policy ideas drew heavily on European models. Even world dominance after World War II and an unrivaled institutional support for intellectuals in a thriving and expanding university system were not enough to banish this sense of inferiority. Dependence on external intellectual blood transfusions persisted. First came the Frankfurt School (founded 1923), a body of mainly Jewish German intellectuals on the left whose Institute for Social Research had had to be disbanded with the election of Hitler in 1933 but had been refounded in New York as a branch of Columbia University (M. Jay, 1973). These intellectuals made no pretense of being “objective” or value-neutral; they intended, rather, to understand society with an eye to transforming it. Their leading figures, Max Horkheimer, Leo Lowenthal, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Erich Fromm, and Herbert Marcuse practiced what they called “interdisciplinary materialism,” trying to take advantage of the growing sophistication of the social sciences’ empirical techniques and linking them to Marxist theoretical foundations. They were also among the first social theorists to incorporate Freudian
psychoanalysis into Marxism (systems which, as Jay shows, had previously seemed antithetical).

Completely unsentimental about the proletariat (unlike Denning’s “popular front” Marxists of the 1930s), they were sharply critical of American “mass culture.” They were no more willing to celebrate it than the Spanish conservative Ortega y Gasset, whose *The Revolt of the Masses* (1930), a classic statement of patrician distaste for the common people, also enjoyed a vogue among American intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s. Adorno’s *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) drew on developments in social psychology to state his theme with bleak clarity – it argued that lower-middle-class Americans were susceptible to fascism. Adorno’s book, and Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1948), arguing the essential similarity of Nazism and Stalinism, owed a debt to another Frankfurt classic, Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom* (1941). Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and *One Dimensional Man* (1964) similarly argued that the apparent freedoms of affluent America were illusory – his phrase was “repressive desublimation” – and became compulsory reading for members of the early New Left (Gitlin, 1987; Isserman, 1987).

Psychology and psychiatry played an increasingly prominent role not just among these émigrés but more broadly in postwar American social thought (Lunbeck, 1994; Herman, 1995). A vast literature debated ideas about the human individual, the nature of “selfhood,” and the relationship between self and society (McClay, 1994). Psychological warfare studies and dismaying revelations about the inability of American prisoners of war in Korea to stand up to communist “brainwashing” suggested that psychological pressures had created a feeble new character type in America. *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) by David Reisman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney argued that the tradition-oriented personality of earlier epochs had been displaced, first by the hard-driving, “inner-directed” personality of early capitalism, then by the weak “other-directed personality” of the modern corporation. Reisman’s other-directed personality (similar to what William Whyte called “the organization man” in a book of the same name) lacked the strong inner gyroscope to guide him single-mindedly through the world in pursuit of his goal. He depended instead on the validation and reassurance of his friends, neighbors, and colleagues.

Members of the “lonely crowd” comprised the “conformist” suburbanites, now much stereotyped in younger historians’ accounts of the 1950s. They amused themselves with “middlebrow” culture and got heavily criticized for it by Dwight Macdonald, around whom a vigorous scholarly debate has raged in recent years. Biographer Stephen Whitfield (1984) describes Macdonald as a shallow but engaging contrarian while Michael Wreszin (1994) and Gregory Sumner (1996) both portray him as a more impressive figure of lasting intellectual significance. Offsetting Macdonald’s critical approach to popular culture was the enthusiastic embrace of it by a younger generation, reared on movies, radio dramas, and now television. Several distinguished American writers had already tried their hand at movie reviewing, notably James Agee, the author of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). Thanks in part to the work of Robert Warshow in the 1950s, film began to enjoy the status of art, deserving of the same kind of critical scrutiny and respect as poetry and theater.

In the 1960s, moreover, “Pop” artists like Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Robert Rauschenberg would seek out and artistically transfigure such everyday objects as Campbell’s soup cans, boys’ war-story comics, and fast foods. Far from
condemning them as products of a decadent middlebrow world, like Macdonald, however, they celebrated them. Warhol did as much as anyone to erase the lines between high and pop culture and the 1960s was the decade in which the idea of the avant-garde – art whose shock value paved the way for a new sensibility – expired in a welter of styles, forms, and artistic theories (Hughes, 1981; Wolfe, 1985; Hobbs, 1997).

The social upheavals of the 1960s transformed the intellectual landscape in countless other ways, making it the most ideologically contentious decade in America since the 1930s. Students politicized in the civil rights, voter registration, anti-war, and anti-draft movements grew up to analyze their own generation’s work according to standards their parents would have shunned. The 1960s itself bore witness to a great deal of intellectual parricide. The “sixties” sensibility of the New Left made it reluctant to admit debts to any ancestors. Denigrating the rigidity of the old communists by contrast with their own flexibility was a good way for New Left leaders to establish their credentials. In reality, guidance from Michael Harrington, Irving Howe, Max Schachtman, and other alumni of the Old Left was of lasting value. Maurice Isserman’s study (1987) of these connections is convincing. New Left historians, like their predecessors, found inspiration in Europe. Their intellectual godfather was the English historian E. P. Thompson, whose The Making of the English Working Class (1963) is a twentieth-century historiographical classic. Its subtle analysis of class formation as a continuous process and its insistence on the agency of working men and women in shaping their own way of life had the short-term effect of pushing intellectuals to the historical margins. In the long run, however, historians of the left learned from Thompson to place their intellectuals in a fuller social context. Almost equally influential was the Italian Marxist and cultural theorist Antonio Gramsci, whose ideas were first and most brilliantly adapted to the American historical setting by Eugene Genovese in his studies of slavery. Gramsci’s notion of class hegemony, supported by what he called “organic intellectuals,” was a starting point for New Left historians analyzing what to them was the vexing durability of American capitalism.

Another development in left historiography, as in the New Left itself, was the tendency to downplay the study of institutions and to take existential revolutionaries like Che Guevara as heroes in preference to organizational leaders like Lenin. Just as the New Left drew recruits from middle-class college students rather than from the working class, so historians under its influence tended to scant the importance of trade unions and formal parties (Socialist, Communist) in their study of the radical past. Staughton Lynd’s Intellectual Origins of American Radicalism (1968), for example, had nothing to say about the labor struggles of the 1930s, seeking instead for inspiration from Tom Paine and nineteenth-century middle-class abolitionists.

The New Left transformed the mood and priorities of American radicalism. It also midwifed the birth of modern feminism. As countless “sixties” memoirs now attest, women in “the Movement” found that their menfolk expected them to have sex, shop, cook, and clean up the mess, without showing much respect for their political views (Evans, 1979; Echols, 1989; Shulman, 1999). Stephen Buechler (1990) paints a useful, schematic picture of feminist intellectual developments and, like Isserman, points to continuities with earlier movements, showing analogies with the branches of early twentieth-century feminism. Rose-Marie Tong’s Feminist Thought (1998) explores the central ideas in more detail, while Alice Echols and Sarah Evans make
an effective case for the transformation of the personal into the political among New
Left women.

Liberal feminism, handily symbolized by Betty Freidan’s *The Feminine Mystique*
(1963) and the National Organization of Women (NOW), argued that women were
psychologically damaged by being confined to the role of housewives and mothers
after enjoying a wide-ranging liberal education. As a matter of individual human
rights they should, rather, be free to fulfill the hopes roused by their teachers and
enjoy all the career options open to men, especially since most middle-class careers
made few demands on physical strength. The second strand of feminist thinking –
“women’s liberation” – was more radical: identifying men as the antagonists of
women, it argued for something analogous to the old Marxist call for class struggle,
substituting “women” for proletariat and “men” for bourgeoisie. As described by
Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millett, and later Andrea Dworkin, men were forever per-
secuting women, who in turn had to learn to ally with one another and then fight
back against the patriarchal foe. A more muted reaction followed, in which Jane
Alpert, Carol Gilligan, and others argued for feminism not on the grounds of men’s
and women’s similarities but because of their differences. Women’s propensity for
nurture, according to this argument, made even those who were not actually mothers
approach the world, each other, and whatever difficulties they faced in a sharing,
cooperative, maternal way (Rosenberg, 1992).

Feminists early developed an interest in the past and began to show how incom-
plete all prior histories had been. A mawkish early phase of seeking inspirational
“foremothers” quickly gave way to a profounder analysis of the distinction between
biological “sex” and socially created “gender” (Scott, 1988; Kerber, 1997). Uncom-
fortably aware that “feminism” itself was predominantly a white, middle-class phe-
nomenon, white feminists were eager to include the insights of poor and minority
women. Black women writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, along with Asian
Americans (Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan), Native Americans (Mary Crow-
Dog), and Hispanics (Vicki Ruiz), all emphasized the contrast between men’s and
women’s historical experiences. As the feminist intellectual historian Rosalind Rosen-
berg wrote (1992, p. 235): “Because they knew first hand the protective power of
female bonds in a racist society, these minority women tended to value gender and
cultural differences more positively than many white feminists did. To them, equal-
ity did not necessarily mean the erasure of difference.”

One point on which feminists of all types could agree was that women were eco-
nomically vulnerable. To be an unmarried woman, a divorcee or a widow, even in
the affluent society, was to be at risk of poverty. Indeed the “feminization of poverty”
was one of the principal women’s policy issues of the post-1970 era. Some poverty
analysts, like Daniel Patrick Moynihan, argued that female dominance contributed to
the pathological dysfunction of black families by denying black children any famil-
arity with hard-working, self-disciplined, male role models. Others, like Carol Stack
in *All Our Kin* (1974), argued that female kin networks were one of few sources of
strength available to poor women in the face of implacable economic circumstances.

Poverty in general, not just its gender aspect, was the subject of an energetic debate
from the 1960s onwards. A relatively minor issue in the social thought of the 1940s
and 1950s, it came into sharp focus for academics through the work of the anthrop-
ologist Oscar Lewis, and for the general public through Michael Harrington’s
surprise bestseller, *The Other America* (1962). Lewis believed that a “culture of poverty” was passed along from generation to generation and that its characteristics were present orientation, fatalism, and machismo. (This worldview was memorably and sympathetically depicted in Elliott Liebow’s *Talley’s Corner* [1967], describing the difficult lives of a group of men on a Washington, DC street corner.) Lewis also believed, however, that collective movements such as the Cuban Revolution or the American civil rights movement could energize the poor and bring them out of their passivity and dependency (Patterson, 1981; Katz, 1989). President Johnson’s “War on Poverty” programs aimed to overthrow this culture of poverty and found intellectual reinforcement in John Rawls’s theory of distributive justice. In line with Lewis’s ideas about the transformative powers of activism, moreover, the War was premised on the idea that the poor should actually run their own programs; there should be, in the language of the legislation, “maximum feasible participation.” The programs, however, soon ran into difficulties, because they coincided with the inner-city riots of the mid-1960s and the abandonment of nonviolence by influential sections of the civil rights movement.

Stephen Steinberg’s *Turning Back: The Retreat from Racial Justice in American Thought and Policy* (1995), a vigorous blend of intellectual history and advocacy, asserts that the real issue in the poverty debate all along was not the culture of poverty or the heritage of prejudice, as many participants alleged, but structural racism. Systematic job discrimination, as Steinberg tells it, was always more important than questions of individual psychology. He reminds readers that the 1963 March on Washington itself was largely about the very practical matter of jobs for black men. In a series of bravura passages Steinberg annihilates Nathan Glazer’s argument that African Americans would eventually follow the upward path of other immigrant groups, Moynihan’s family-breakdown model, and William Julius Wilson’s argument that African American disadvantages were principally a matter of class rather than race. The issue is race, Steinberg insists, and only a massive commitment to affirmative action in the all-important arena of jobs could begin to set things right. Steinberg’s muscular prose makes invigorating reading but his polemic is too blunt, and he is unable to make awkward evidence contradicting his thesis disappear.

Daniel P. Moynihan’s *The Negro Family* (US Department of Labor, 1965), mentioned above, was the most controversial of his many contributions to the poverty debate. Working for the Johnson administration, influenced by Lewis, and sympathetic to the aims of the civil rights and anti-poverty programs, Moynihan was dismayed to find that his remarks about “a tangle of pathologies” had put him in the center of a furor; he felt he was unjustly accused of racism. Another Moynihan book, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding* (1969), written in the wake of that controversy, can now be seen as the debut of “neoconservatism,” the era’s most important new trend among political and policy intellectuals. Neoconservatives were, according to Irving Kristol, another of their standard-bearers, “liberals who have been mugged by reality.” Kristol, an alumnus of the New York “family” and an increasingly voluble supporter of America’s role in the Cold War, shaped the new movement’s distinctive blend of analysis and advocacy (Steinfels, 1979). Like Kristol, neoconservatives often originated in the anti-Stalinist left of the New Deal era, and then flourished in the social sciences professorate in the 1950s and 1960s; by the early 1970s many of them had concluded that their optimism about the possibilities of social and political engi-
neering had been misplaced. The “long hot summers” of the 1960s were the decisive experience that disabused them of their earlier optimism. The urban riots, after all, came not in the dark night of Jim Crow and economic depression but at a time of improved civil rights and in the middle of an economic boom. Neoconservatives’ meditations on this paradox led them to argue that government poverty programs unwittingly did more harm than good, creating incentives against work, draining away billions of taxpayers’ money, and nurturing grievance constituencies (Gerson, 1997).

The development of neoconservative ideas can be traced closely in the pages of the *Public Interest*, a policy affairs journal run by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Bell through the 1960s and 1970s. Edward Banfield’s *The Unheavenly City* (1970) was a classic statement of their outlook. Cities, as this pessimistic Harvard urbanologist told it, were concentrations of crime, idleness, dishonesty, and dysfunctional families, made all the worse by the meddling of liberal ideologues armed with government dollars. Among his and other neoconservatives’ targets were social science and policy wonks, the bureaucratic intellectuals, professors, and journalists to whom they gave the name “the new class.” New class intellectuals, as they told it, claimed value-neutrality for their studies while surreptitiously feathering their own nests by justifying the continued expansion of the federal government and the appropriation of funds to support their research. Whether “the new class” really was a class in the old sense was doubtful. After all, the neoconservatives were usually professors, journalists, and bureaucrats too, in a very similar structural situation. Were they part of the new class, or did their opinions exempt them?

Neoconservatives like Jeane Kirkpatrick entered the conservative administrations of Ronald Reagan and George Bush, Sr. If the emphasis of Great Society programs had been on nurturing equality, the watchword of the neoconservative 1980s was on nurturing entrepreneurs. Milton Friedman, George Gilder, and Michael Novak were among the writers on economics to argue that entrepreneur-driven growth benefits everyone and that its good effects trickle, or even flow, down to the poor (Dorrien, 1993). Their work also enjoyed the highbrow support of philosopher Robert Nozick, a leading critic of Rawls’s *Theory of Justice* (1971) whose own influential book, *Anarchy, the State and Utopia* (1974), made a powerful theoretical case for the minimal state. The most controversial neoconservative book of the 1980s was Charles Murray’s *Losing Ground* (1984), which condemned the entire legacy of the Great Society programs, arguing that urban poverty, crime, and family disarray were worse than they would have been if the federal government had done nothing at all. Intellectual historians had long pondered the relationship between social thought and public policy. Did intellectuals’ ideas ever get put into practice? Yes. Murray’s example (like Michael Harrington’s in an earlier round of the poverty debate) suggested that a writer who hit the right note at the right moment could have a big impact. By 1994, when a new edition of *Losing Ground* was published, America’s entire welfare apparatus was being dismantled by Congress, with no author more frequently cited by the politicians than Murray.

The combative Murray further outraged academic conventions in the 1990s with *The Bell Curve* (1994), co-written with psychologist Richard Herrnstein. Moving beyond the culture-of-poverty idea, indeed beyond cultural categories altogether—the hallmark of nearly all American social science of recent decades—the two authors
introduced what to many observers was an ominous appeal to biological evidence. They argued that American social scientists had for too long relied on cultural explanations of human difference. Accumulating evidence, they believed, pointed to differences between whites’ and blacks’ overall levels of intelligence, with blacks less well represented at the high end (Fraser, 1995; Fischer, 1997). Carl N. Degler’s *In Search of Human Nature* (1991), a controversial work of intellectual history, also broke the “biological” taboo. It showed how social Darwinism, dominant in the social sciences at the end of the nineteenth century, had yielded to cultural explanations in anthropology, sociology, history, and psychology in the early twentieth century. Now, Degler argued, improvements in scientific methods and striking findings by such biologists as E. O. Wilson were reviving the plausibility of biological explanations of social phenomena. This book, too, occasioned a lot of grumbling, but Degler, one of the grand old men of American historiography, was clearly no ignorant “biology-is-destiny” type.

Liberal intellectuals felt that if anyone was losing ground in the 1980s it was themselves, as Reagan’s brand of conservatism became mainstream. Liberals could hardly avoid admitting to themselves and each other that the aftermath of the Great Society had been a sobering disappointment. It had sustained a succession of withering attacks from the right and found no champions to match the caliber of its old heroes (Matusow, 1984). Liberalism lacked a single animating force because its advocates no longer agreed even about the central importance of economic growth or the meaning of social justice. Some liberal writers had been influenced by the 1970s “ethnic” movement and the new multicultural ideal, which contradicted the earlier commitment to a colorblind, individualistic society. Others had been influenced by environmentalism, a movement that shifted from the margins to the mainstream almost as rapidly as Reagan-style conservatism. Environmentalists, preoccupied with the hazards of pollution, overpopulation, species extinction, and an allegedly deteriorating quality of life, queried whether economic growth, long central to liberal thought, could any longer be thought of as a good thing, and whether social justice goals should be pursued at the risk of environmental sustainability. The mood of liberal impotence is ably embodied in the work of economist Lester Thurow, the inheritor of Galbraith’s mantle as the preeminent liberal economist. His *The Zero-Sum Society* (1980), with its sober description of the economic paralysis of the late 1970s and the high political cost of effecting any changes, stands in dramatic contrast to the swashbuckling tone of neoconservative manifestos from the same years.

Among liberal intellectuals, ironically, declining political energy correlated with growing theoretical sophistication. As they appropriated the anthropological definition of culture and took the principle of cultural relativism more seriously than hitherto, they found it more difficult to be confident that policies aimed at social progress were justifiable. In the late 1970s the Carter administration’s investigation of the problems of American families found itself unable to reach agreement about what a “family” was. At the same time a collection of essays on *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (1979), peppered with references to Mary Douglas, Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, and cultural symbol-systems, shied away from the confident generalizations that had been the hallmark of liberal intellectual historiography earlier in the century. In his contribution, for example, Lawrence Veysey wrote that “generalizations, . . . to be credible, must be extremely hard-earned. They require far more
arduous preparation, far more careful spadework, far closer attention to logic, than many of our predecessors a generation ago were aware” (Higham and Conkin, 1979, p. 23). Gordon Wood wrote in the same collection that intellectual historians needed to learn from the anthropologists how to contextualize their subjects. “If we are to write fully satisfying intellectual history we will need a kind of zoom lens that will enable us to move easily back and forth from the small, close-up world of unique events and individual volition where men try to use ideas for their own particular purposes to the larger aggregate and deterministic world of cultural conventions and collective mentalities where ideas control men” (Higham and Conkin, 1979, p. 37). The contributors, notably Wood and David Hollinger, were also more acutely aware than pre-1960 intellectual historians that there is a culture of intellectual life and that intellectuals have to be regarded not just as thinking individuals but also as a social group, and sometimes as representatives of particular social classes.

Two intellectual descendants of liberalism, as it unraveled, were multiculturalism and postmodernist theory. Drawing on the American tradition of pluralism and mutual tolerance and the anthropological ideal of cultural relativism, multiculturalism emphasized that an individual’s starting point, the “subject position,” in a particular time, place, and community will vitally affect how he or she understands the world, as will the starting point, community, gender, class position, and race of each reader. This perception could sometimes be invigorating, but it raised the hazard of solipsism.

Meanwhile, postmodernists intensified a long-developing attack on the idea that there was an historical truth to be discovered by patient research and impartial presentation of evidence. Literary theorists in the decades after 1970 pointed to the remoteness between an event and the language used to describe or explain it. Language itself could no longer be regarded simply as the medium through which historical truth was passed along from author to reader. Historians had long been aware of the significance of style and rhetoric in reinforcing the effectiveness of an historian’s argument – Carl Becker and Charles Beard had been debating the point back in the 1920s and 1930s – but many had continued to assume that history was a form of writing that, if done right, really could tell readers the truth about what happened in the past. Surely meticulous archival research and careful weighing of evidence in accordance with time-honored procedures and rules would make it possible to describe what the past was like, especially in an arena where numerous historians were constantly correcting each others’ work in an atmosphere of constructive rivalry? Otherwise there was little difference between real history and mere historical fiction, in which “real” and imaginary characters were jumbled together indiscriminately. Such confidence became harder to sustain as the influence of Foucault and Roland Barthes began to be felt. Hayden White’s books *Metahistory* (1973) and *Tropics of Discourse* (1978) were, for historians in America, particularly influential bearers of the bad news.

Although the effects of the “linguistic turn” were felt less heavily among historians than among scholars of literature, the fact that there were effects at all caused alarm to those who held to the old positivist and objectivist ideal. John Diggins, for example, lamented the theoretical turn taken by the “Academic left” of the post-1970 generation (Diggins, 1992). Previously, he noted, the left and its intellectuals had been confident that their methods provided them with incontrovertible truths about society and a recipe for changing the world. Now, bogged down in literary
theory and philosophical quibbles over language, left intellectuals had lost the ability
to communicate with and inspire the working class, or anybody else. In dismay
Diggins pointed out to his colleagues and erstwhile comrades that there could be no
political substance to a movement that did not even claim to know the single truth
about a single reality out there in the world. Similarly, in Denying the Holocaust
(1993), Deborah Lipstadt addressed the dangers of devaluing the idea of a single
definite historical truth at a time when certain writers were denying that the Holo-
caust had ever taken place.

It is impossible to read Diggins, Lipstadt, and others without sympathizing. But
then, neither is it possible to read the theoretical objections to them without admit-
ting their plausibility too (Hayden White was, after all, a forceful and convincing
stylist who knew how to make the best of a good case!). A related complaint, voiced
frequently in the 1980s and 1990s, was that the technical language in which these
linguistic issues were debated was hard to follow without an advanced degree in the
appropriate field. Russell Jacoby, another acerbic critic on the left, decried the unin-
telligibility of academic prose and the disappearance of “public intellectuals” com-
parable to Lewis Mumford, Edmund Wilson, and Walter Lippmann in an earlier
generation. Not only were today’s intellectual leaders unreadable, he concluded
(offering the example of Fredric Jameson), they had also committed themselves to
an academicism of the most sterile kind, further severing their connections to what-
ever sources of radical activism might be out there in the world. A systematic
discussion of these language and overspecialization problems can be found in Peter
Novick’s superb and far-ranging book, That Noble Dream: The Objectivity Question
and the American Historical Profession (1988). Novick shows in convincing detail
how the traditional claim of writing “objective” history had already become inco-
hherent by the time of the linguistic debates of the 1970s and 1980s, even as it was
passionately defended by a new generation of “hyperobjectivists.”

Russell Jacoby’s The Last Intellectuals (1987) can be seen, in retrospect, as part of
the “culture wars” debate of the late 1980s and 1990s. The debate began with the
firing of a few conservative salvos, notably Allan Bloom’s The Closing of the Ameri-
can Mind (1987), E. D. Hirsch’s Cultural Literacy (1987), and Roger Kimball’s
Tenured Radicals (1990). These books deplored what their authors saw as the
growing ignorance, illiteracy, and immorality of young Americans and the perversion
of intellectual life by former countercultural militants who had risen to positions of
power and influence on American campuses. Closely related to these attacks was a
series of laments for the decline of traditional religion and religious values, including
Richard Neuhaus’s The Naked Public Square (1984) and former Education Secretary
William Bennett’s De-Valuing America (1994).

In 1992 the National Endowment for the Humanities invited UCLA professor
Gary Nash and a group of California historians to write national guidelines for the
study of history in schools. To the scholars’ dismay, they found their draft proposal
attacked by cultural conservatives as an example of all that was wrong with contem-
porary education. Nash defended his group while other academic historians tried to
rebut other aspects of the attack (Levine, 1996; Lucas, 1996; G. Jay, 1997; Nash
et al., 1997). Lawrence Levine, the ablest of these respondents and a Macarthur-
winning superstar of American cultural history, was able to show in convincing detail
that American higher education had always been an arena of debate and controversy
and that many of the so-called “traditional” curriculum items favored by conservatives had in fact been regarded as dangerous novelties at the surprisingly recent time of their introduction.

A jargon phrase in the culture wars debate was “paradigm shift,” used by writers on both sides to give the impression of fundamental changes in the order of things. It originated in Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), one of the most important books of the post-World War II era. Kuhn, an historian and philosopher of science, studied crucial intellectual turning points from the past and discovered they were marked by an entirely new conception of the universe. These rare moments he referred to as “paradigm shifts” and they were successful, he argued, when accumulations of evidence previously adduced in support of the old view were shown to be even more effective when adapted to the new one. The Copernican revolution, the subject of another of his books, was a case in point; its paradigm shift took scientists from the assumption of an earth-centered universe to the assumption of one centered on the sun.

References to paradigm shifts are littered through recent historiography too. The importance of Kuhn to historians can be illustrated by consideration of George Marsden, the era’s foremost intellectual historian of religion, who has knowingly used the idea of paradigm shifts to good effect, first in *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (1980), later in *The Soul of the American University* (1994). Marsden knows how to make familiar things suddenly look strange. At a time when other historians of religion were consigning fundamentalism to the dustbin of history on the grounds that it was anti-intellectual, he showed, to the contrary, that it was a highly intellectualized system, but loyal to a pre-Darwinian scientific paradigm. And while they were marveling at the exceptional persistence of religion in America (unlike the other Western industrialized nations), Marsden was lamenting its catastrophic decline on university campuses.

Marsden felt a responsibility to reach out beyond a strictly academic audience to intelligent laity in the evangelical world from which he came, as did his colleagues Mark Noll, Grant Wacker, Joel Carpenter, and Nathan Hatch. A few other intellectual historians, fighting against hyperspecialization, also tried to reach a broader reading public. The feminist movement, which by the 1980s was divided into a highly theoretical academic branch and a hands-on activist side, found a high-caliber intellectual who could bridge the gap: Barbara Ehrenreich. The daughter of a Butte, Montana, copper miner, she had earned a Ph.D. in biology but abandoned academic life for work as a freelance writer. She drew admiring reviews from academics who recognized her books as real contributions to intellectual history. She proved that her feminist socialist ideas (she was also a leader of Democratic Socialists of America) could, with the right presentation, enjoy a wide and admiring audience. In *The Hearts of Men* (1983), *Re-Making Love* (1987), *Fear of Falling* (1989), and nine other books, she showed a gift for critical summary of trends in “expert” literature on family life, middle-class existence, psychology, the feminization of poverty, and sexuality. Her scorching satire, her gift for debunking, and her shrewd advocacy writing demonstrated a method of highly engaged and polemical intellectual history rarely found inside the faculty club.

Her male counterpart was Christopher Lasch, a public intellectual whose book *The Culture of Narcissism* (1978) became a classic statement of the sour
post-Vietnam, post-Watergate mood. Lasch had been a graduate student at Columbia under William Leuchtenburg and Richard Hofstadter, and Hofstadter’s use of psychological and social-psychological models (“status anxiety,” the “paranoid style”) had influenced his own work on the therapeutic character of Progressive-era radicalism (Lasch, 1965). In his view, every society has its own characteristic pathology. Whereas in Freud’s day obsessional neuroses had been common, America in the 1970s exhibited, instead, the diffuse anxiety characteristic of pathological narcissism. The typical “seventies” American, he claimed, was “facile at managing the impressions he gives to others, ravenous for admiration but contemptuous of those he manipulates into providing it; unappeasably hungry for emotional experiences with which to fill an inner void; terrified of aging and death” (1978, p. 82). The book, a surprise bestseller despite its psychoanalytical language and its bleak view of the world, found signs of narcissism in every American trend – even the introduction of the designated hitter in the American League! In the 1980s Lasch became ever more of a Cassandra, lamenting the decline of civic virtue, the family, and the republic. He turned to religion for consolation, becoming a regular contributor to the New Oxford Review (an intellectually stimulating journal run by a group of ex-Episcopalian converts to Catholicism). His last book, The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy (1995), argued that selfish meritocratic elites were poisoning the republic. Far from working to promote social justice, they sought to isolate themselves from the masses and turned their backs on the all-important civic world. Lasch’s books drew strong critical reactions but there was no question that he, like Ehrenreich, had found a way to engage serious social issues that could hold the attention of wide audiences within and beyond academia.

Other figures bridging the wide gulf between academia and the general educated middle class included Cornel West, the most distinguished in a recent generation of African American scholars, and Garry Wills. Wills claimed to be a conservative but had an outlook and offered policy proposals that had a “left-of-center-Democrat” flavor (Wills, 1979). Vastly learned, he never regained the wounding brilliance he had attained with Nixon Agonistes (1971), but his Pulitzer-prize-winning book on Jefferson, and penetrating studies of Madison, Washington, Lincoln, and Reagan, attested to his continuing sharpness.

American intellectual historians in the second half of the twentieth century participated regularly in the major scholarly journals, the American Historical Review and the Journal of American History, but did not create a journal of their own, apart from the annual Intellectual History Newsletter. Founded in 1979 in the wake of a 1977 conference on the condition of intellectual history, its editors feared that intellectual history was in danger of disappearing, partly in the face of the great vogue for social history, and partly as a consequence of intensive specialization among historians of science, law, anthropology, and other detailed subspecialties. The Newsletter has monitored developments in the field since then and still serves as a guide to the main directions and interests of intellectual historians. As the twentieth century ended, moreover, cultural and intellectual historians began to write summary narrative histories of the era, outlining its main characteristics and the central debates. Among them Richard Pells’s The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age (1985) and Stephen Whitfield’s The Culture of the Cold War (1991) make ideal introductions to the postwar years, while Howard Brick’s The Age of Contradiction (1998) and David
Hoeveler’s *The Postmodernist Turn* (1996) do a comparable job for the 1960s and 1970s. Such surveys, along with *Reviews in American History* and the *Journal of the History of Ideas* (for issues in the philosophy of history), are probably the most useful media by which to make contact with, and keep track of, developments in intellectual history, whose overall wealth and fertility can only be hinted at in a brief introductory review.

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