

Inventing the Egghead: the Battle over Brainpower in American Culture

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Aaron Lecklider, who teaches American studies at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, proposes to stand the last century of American intellectual life on its head, or at least on its side. In keeping with Antonio Gramsci's project of looking beyond the world views of traditional intellectuals – the ones who get paid to write and talk – he wants to resurrect the working class's organic intellectuals, the non-professionals who exercise 'brainpower' even if they're not credited for it by snobbish conservateurs who carve out exclusive domains where cultural capital confers privilege upon the best and the brightest. Popular culture, Lecklider writes, has been for the last century 'a critical site in shaping American ideas about brainpower' (p. 225).

Intelligence, he argues, is contested domain. The town has as much of it as the gown. This is a clever idea, and Lecklider, frequently original, carries it a considerable distance—sometimes farther than the evidence warrants. His starting – and finishing – point is that the charge of 'anti-intellectualism' famously and exhaustively leveled by Richard Hofstadter against American culture is actually self-fulfilling, for Hofstadter and his allies, failing to acknowledge that intellectual life could be conducted by non-professionals, 'opened historians to attack by ordinary women and men for attempting to preserve an elitist category, creating a cycle of misunderstanding that continues to manifest in contemporary American life' (p. 222). Hofstadter, from this point of view, 'bracketed off intellect from the brainpower of ordinary women and men and divorced intelligence from working-class cultural politics' (p. 222). By implication, it's no wonder the left has been crammed into the margins of history. But Lecklider has prepared a clever flanking movement. The conflict over who is entitled to be regarded as intelligent may even culminate in a happy ending:

Reclaiming the history of an organic intellectual tradition in American culture represents a starting point for envisioning intelligence as a shared commodity across social classes; wrested from the hands of the intellectuals, there's no telling what the brainpower of the people has the potential to accomplish (p. 228).

Lecklider begins his counter-history in the early decades of the 20th century.

Even as managers downgraded ordinary workers, adopting Taylorist methods to ‘transform’ themselves into ‘scientists’ (p. 26), vast numbers of working-class Americans refused to believe that managers and their hired hands held a monopoly on brains and intellectual interests. Institutions including amusement parks, comic books, public lectures, and summer schools cultivated the sort of intelligence that did not need – indeed, might actively resist – the sort of formal education on offer in the decades before 1920, when fewer than one 18–24-year-old in 20 was enrolled in college. Brainpower, Lecklider insists, was the subject of class struggle. Contra Hofstadter – who looms in the shadows as Lecklider’s foil throughout, emerging as an explicit *bête noire* in the epilogue—America as a whole was not ‘anti-intellectual.’ Rather, at least at the turn of the 20th century, ‘anti-intellectualism coexisted with representations of an intellectually gifted working class’ (p. 8). The history of intelligence in American culture, he argues, is ‘tortuous’, ‘considerably more complicated’ than the straightforward declinist narrative embraced by scholars such as Hofstadter, Lasch, Lewis Coser, C. Wright Mills, Herbert Marcuse and – odd company on this list – Reinhold Niebuhr (p. 224).

He does offer a good deal of evidence that brainpower was not exclusive to a single class. Lecklider is strongest when he examines union educational programs, for here he can offer not only the prospectuses of educators but testimony from women who engaged in these programs themselves. The International Ladies Garment Workers Union adopted ‘Knowledge Is Power’ as a slogan in the 1910s (p. 71), followed by ‘the future of the world lies in the hands of intelligent and well-informed workers’ (p. 76). Workers’ education began with radical ideals—the residential Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers (BMSS) ‘promot[ed] workers’ power in the workplace and society’ (p. 70) – but over the years it devolved into practical coursework. Lecklider is exacting when such programs fall short of revolutionary ideals, chastising the BMSS for ‘divorcing ... classroom experiences from everyday life in the workplace, thus compartmentalizing intellectual labor as distinct from working in industry’ (p. 78). To justify his criticism, he cites Bryn Mawr’s dean quoting one student asking ‘bemusedly’, upon arriving on campus, ‘Where are all the factories’ (p. 78)? But a single remark, especially one cited by a dean, is hardly conclusive evidence that conducting the school on a campus in the summer ‘introduced’ an ‘obstacle’ to the correct cultivation of class consciousness among organic intellectuals (p. 78).

Lecklider is at pains to show that BMSS students struggled to ‘resist assimilating to middle-class values and behaviors ... by taking an active role in developing the BMSS curriculum and taking charge of discussion within the program’ (p. 81). When the students declared their desires, they were pluralist. They wanted diverse things. So, for example, ‘Bryn Mawr’s immigrant students agitated for the admission of African American women, a campaign that was successful by 1926’ (p. 82). They also expressed an ‘urgent wish’ for music appreciation (p. 81). Was this a fight to ‘resist’ middle-class acculturation, or was it an empowering affirmation of a love for music?

Here, as elsewhere, we see Lecklider straining as he tries to clamp the cultural life of workers into class-struggle polarities. Sometimes he views it as helpful to educate well-rounded workers as opposed to equip organizers with directly usable skills; at other times, when a centralized Workers Education Bureau guided by the American Federation of Labor promotes the decidedly reformist goal of building worker confidence, thus enabling workers to meet employers ‘on equal footing’ (p. 88), Lecklider is not sure whether such efforts, arguably ‘middle-class,’ also contributed to the molding of some sort of collective working-class consciousness.

Turning to African-American currents, the Harlem Renaissance, and the making of urban black identity, Lecklider is more interested in writers than schools or musicians. He notes that for all their antagonisms, W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington shared a ‘fundamental agreement that freedom begins in the mind and that building alliances begins with expanding access to brainpower’ (p. 96). His most interesting artifact is Claude McKay’s novel, *Home to Harlem* (1928), where dialectical possibilities of brain-brawn transcendence play out in homoerotic overtones. The bookish character Ray, a Haitian waiter whom a ‘repulsive’ black character calls ‘that theah nigger professor’ (1), is affectionately counterposed to his bosom buddy, Harlem’s brawnier, party-going, opium-smoking, ‘primitive’ sailor Jake. While some play poker,

Ray reads *Crime and Punishment*.⁽²⁾ He quotes from Goethe's *Werther*.⁽³⁾ But books don't make him 'dopey'.⁽⁴⁾ In McKay's view, Ray:

felt more [than Jake] and his range was wider and he could not be satisfied with the easy, simple things that sufficed for Jake ... he drank in more of life than he could distill into active animal living. Maybe that was why he felt he had to write.⁽⁵⁾

Lecklider reads *Home to Harlem* as 'a special form of resolution to the artificial division of mind and body in modern black fiction' (p. 112). He has a point, but it would better be put without the graceless jargon in which he declares that McKay 'prioritizes queer affection' and that 'McKay's depiction of their relationship highlights the boundedness of intelligence within black experiences of embodiment' (p. 114). The clumsiness of the abstraction is somewhat reminiscent of the passage in *The German Ideology* where Marx and Engels mock the philosophers' absurd habit of disguising a fact ('The cat eats the mouse') with a pseudo-profundity ('Devouring of the mouse by the cat is based upon the self-consumption of nature').

Too commonly, Lecklider's conceptual categories are too clumsy to enfold the dynamic complexity of an interesting story; and so schematic as to be overwhelmed by the preoccupations of the recent past. At his most Procrustean, he stretches shreds of evidence into a shape that suits his overall argument. Loading the shreds with significance, he tends to stretch the evidence past the breaking point. Thus, he devotes an entire chapter to the image of Albert Einstein and the theory of relativity after the First World War. This is more than one-tenth the entire length of the book, but what it delivers is meager. Lecklider reads relativity as implying 'that ordinary people's observations were always wrong' (p. 51), when in fact it implied that *everyone's* everyday observations – including physicists' and capitalists' – were, *for certain purposes*, wrong. He cites at some length a single conservative's allegation that relativity was 'a symptom of Bolshevism in an unstable world': the illusion of the curvature of space, wrote this worthy, Columbia astronomer Charles Lane Poor, was what happened 'when Bolshevism enters the world of science of course!' (p. 59, citing an article by Poor called 'Jazz in the scientific world'). But how representative was Poor? Lecklider ends this chapter in a conceptual blur:

Though representations of Einstein failed to resolve the contradictions at stake in defining American identities following World War I, his brainpower was used to filter these contradictions through a fascinating individual whose legacy was the subject of contentious division.

Lecklider's chapter on pictorial and literary representations during the Great Depression is his most ambitious and rewarding. 'Depression-era representations of intelligence within mass culture reflected a producerist ideology that suggested brains could be trusted precisely because they were inextricable from material production' (p. 125). Under the sponsorship of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration, posters promoted libraries for all, not just brainiacs. If anything, the worker-hero of the 1930s was muscle-bound, not effete. 'New Deal posters recast workers in the center of civic life by aligning modern machinery with the pursuit of intelligence' (p. 143). Meanwhile, left-wing writers heralded the emergence of 'proletarian cognoscenti' (p. 146), while one ahead-of-her-time novelist, Tess Slesinger, in *The Unpossessed* (1934), sent up radical intellectuals for their estrangement from the sweaty body. Although here too Lecklider might be accused of Procrustean overstretch, he does intriguingly suggest that, in her view, at least, it is within same-sex relationships that body and mind best match.

What then of the explosive image of brainpower at work that followed Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Images of nuclear physicists in fiction and film are much-visited territory for scholars of Cold War culture ⁽⁶⁾, and perhaps this explains why, when Lecklider turns to the aftermath of the Second World War, he dwells on a narrow case: how journalists depicted the Oak Ridge, Tennessee nuclear laboratory as a nicely domesticated home town rather than the 'subversion, elitism, danger, and social transgression' (p. 190) far more visible in

popular magazines, newsreels, and science fiction when they addressed, directly or indirectly, the monstrosity of the Bomb. He pays little attention to the mad scientist so beloved of popular imagery in the Frankenstein tradition.

Instead, in his climactic chapter, he ushers onstage the caricature of the egghead, that sexless or effeminate archetype, weirdly subversive, contemptuous of 'the people,' a figure tailor-made to characterize Adlai Stevenson in two successive presidential elections. In popular imagery, why did the egghead loom so large, so contemptible? Lecklider answers his own question:

The Cold War egghead refracted cultural fears about the challenges to the American way of life posed by homophile politics, antiracist social movements, and a left that refused to disappear in spite of intimidation tactics, blacklists and HUAC belligerence (p. 192).

Lecklider, however, once again overplays his hand, focusing sharply, almost exclusively, on materials that make his point. To flesh out the image of the egghead, he devotes more than a dozen pages to the exegesis of two 1950s depictions of intellectuals as naïve crypto-Communists in the late 1950s: a single obscure science fiction story ('The chicken and the egghead'), written by Frank Fenton, a journeyman Hollywood screenwriter, and a play, *The Egghead*, by Molly Thacher Kazan, a thinly disguised defense of her husband Elia for having 'named names' – important, Lecklider insists, as 'one of the most complicated representations of the egghead in the Cold War era' (p. 214).

But why do these particular two artifacts deserve such attention? Why not consider, say, the hapless but endearing *Mister Peepers*, the bespectacled (a sure sign of eggheadedness) junior high school science teacher who had a successful three-year sitcom run (1952–5)? Why not its complement, the long-running *Life of Riley* (1944–51 on radio, 1949–50 and 1953–8 on television), in which one of the networks' few working-class regulars is a lovable oaf-dope? Why not Meyer Levin's best-selling novel of 1956, *Compulsion*, based on the Leopold-Loeb case of the two Chicago *Wunderkind* teenagers who, transfixed by a perverse interpretation of Nietzsche, committed a murder to prove they were *Übermenschen*? However you judge these popular works, aren't they more significant than a sci-fi story and a briefly running play?

In the end, Lecklider does not refute Hofstadter but does sketch a counter-current open to elaboration, and opens up more questions. How did it happen that 'elitism' became the *bête noire* of the oilman scion and Yale man William F. Buckley, Jr., and his legions of devotees? More could be done to trace the imagery of brainpower and eggheads through the saga of American conservatism's on-again, off-again marriage with (pace Lecklider) anti-intellectual populism of the Joseph McCarthy-Richard Nixon-George Wallace-Sarah Palin sort, with the eggheads transported to Washington, where they transmogrified into the striped-pants Alger Hiss and demoniac 'pointy-headed bureaucrats'. How did the fey egghead evolve into the elitist bogeyman: viz., the Al Gore (Harvard '69) against whom George W. Bush (Andover '64, Yale '68) successfully presented himself in 2000 as the people's tribune. The figures of elitist and counter-elitist in popular culture amply deserve a sequel, all the way down to Sarah Palin's failed, indeed counter-productive, blasts at 'the lamestream media' who pilloried her for claiming insight into Russian policies because 'You can actually see Russia from land here in Alaska'.

Notes

1. Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem* (New York, 1928), p. 114.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Home to Harlem*, p. 166.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *Home to Harlem*, p. 272.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *Home to Harlem*, p. 259.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *Home to Harlem*, p. 265.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See especially Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York, NY, 1985).[Back to \(6\)](#)

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