
“Scholar as Sitting Duck”: The Cronon Affair and the Buffer Zone in American Public Debate

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Amid the ongoing struggles over the collective bargaining rights of public employees in the state of Wisconsin, one incident stands out for what it reveals about the current status of intellectuals in the United States. This is the public controversy surrounding University of Wisconsin historian William Cronon, whose March 2011 posting on his blog *Scholar as Citizen* elicited a swift reprisal from state Republicans. Cronon argued that the Wisconsin budget repair bill should be understood as part of a long historical pattern of state legislative action coordinated by a network of conservative interest groups, particularly the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a free market advocacy group that drafts “model legislation” for conservative legislators. Days later, Wisconsin Republican Party officials, citing the historian’s status as a state employee, submitted an open records request for e-mails sent to and from his university account. The incident made national headlines and prompted pointed responses from University of Wisconsin administrators and the American Historical Association.

Writers on the Left interpreted the Republican Party’s actions as a “vindictive,” McCarthyist smear tactic meant to intimidate Cronon.¹ More broadly, some argued, the move constituted an assault on academic freedom itself. Without dismissing either of these charges, I would submit that the “Cronon affair” is better understood, not as indicating a pervasive threat to academic freedom per se, but

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1. Paul Krugman, “American Thought Police,” *New York Times*, March 27, 2011.

as an object lesson in the marginality and ineffectiveness of intellectuals in American public debate. In particular, the incident highlights some of the formidable obstacles faced by scholars who wish to carry out a civic-intellectual mission. To grasp this point, however, requires setting aside momentarily the episode's ideological dimension and locating it within the wider history of struggles over the proper role of experts and intellectuals in American life.

American Intellectuals and the 1960s Critique of Technocracy

Broadly speaking, the first half of the twentieth century was marked by a tremendous growth in the political role of experts in the United States. By the start of the 1960s, experts of various kinds had secured for themselves key roles in the management of the economy, the creation and implementation of the social programs of the welfare state, and the expansion of the defense industry. As the *New York Times* put it in 1963, "Never before have so many scholars and scientists been in the business of giving the Government advice."² When it came to military advice, for example, the *Times* noted that "the most important fount of strategic wisdom is what the lingo calls the 'think factory,' like the RAND (Research and Development) Corporation." In economic affairs, the leading supplier of policy advice was arguably the Brookings Institution, which had assisted in the development of the Marshall Plan and the Kennedy administration's wage and price guideposts of 1962. In foreign policy, the Council on Foreign Relations had become the leading supplier of diplomatic advice and talent since its founding in 1920.³

The relevance of these distant precursors of the Cronon affair lies in their influ-

2. Arthur Herzog, "Report on a 'Think Factory,'" *New York Times*, November 10, 1963.

3. On the history of RAND, see Bruce L. R. Smith, *The RAND Corporation: Case Study of a Nonprofit Advisory Corporation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966); Paul Dickson, *Think Tanks* (New York: Atheneum, 1971); and Louis Miller, *Operations Research and Policy Analysis at RAND, 1968–1988* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 1989). On Brookings, see Charles B. Saunders, *The Brookings Institution: A Fifty-Year History* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1966); Donald T. Critchlow, *The Brookings Institution, 1916–1952: Expertise and the Public Interest in a Democratic Society* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1985); and James A. Smith, *Brookings at Seventy-Five* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1991). On the Council on Foreign Relations, see Laurence H. Shoup and William Minter, *Imperial Brain Trust: The Council on Foreign Relations and United States Foreign Policy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977); Robert D. Schulzinger, *The Wise Men of Foreign Affairs: The History of the Council on Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); Peter Grose, *Continuing the Inquiry: The Council on Foreign Relations from 1921 to 1996* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1996); and Inderjeet Parmar, *Think Tanks and Power in Foreign Policy: A Comparative Study of the Role and Influence of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1939–1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

ence on the political upheavals of the 1960s, which in turn contained the seeds of the Wisconsin controversy. During the 1960s, activist movements of both the Left and the Right were motivated partly by suspicions about the growing power of technocrats. The connection was signaled, for example, in the double-sided development of “new class theory,” which originated among Marxists but later came to be embraced by neoconservatives. Of course, conservative and progressive suspicions of experts took different forms and had different targets during the 1960s. Conservatives were especially wary of the New Deal bureaucrats who managed the welfare state. To a greater extent than the Left’s, their suspicions centered also on the university, which they had come to regard as hostile territory. The latter skepticism was apparent among conservatives already in 1951, when William F. Buckley Jr. issued his famous condemnation of his alma mater in the book *God and Man at Yale*.⁴ Buckley’s view was that the American university system had been overtaken by liberal faculty members who imposed their political beliefs on students under the guise of academic freedom.

It was in this context that conservatives began a major institution-building effort designed to counter the perceived hegemony of liberal thought. As Cronon himself argued, the Wisconsin GOP’s response to his blog post can be read as “yet another example . . . of the impressive and highly skillful ways that conservatives have built very carefully thought-out institutions to advocate for their interests over the past half century.”⁵ Believing themselves shut out from the major culture-producing institutions of American society, conservative leaders focused much of their attention during the 1960s and 1970s on the creation of new organs of cultural influence. The project gained momentum in the 1970s as movement leaders formed alliances with business elites and built an extensive network of organizations, including political action committees, legal foundations, periodicals, foreign policy groups, campus organizations, and advocacy groups.⁶ The

4. William F. Buckley Jr., *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of “Academic Freedom”* (Chicago: Regnery, 1951).

5. William Cronon, “Who’s Really behind Recent Republican Legislation in Wisconsin and Elsewhere? (Hint: It Didn’t Start Here),” *Scholar as Citizen*, scholarcitizen.williamcronon.net/2011/03/15/alec (accessed July 29, 2011).

6. The literature on this topic is large and growing. Among many sources, see Sidney Blumenthal, *The Rise of the Counter-Establishment: From Conservative Ideology to Political Power* (New York: Times Books, 1986); Jerome L. Himmelstein, *To the Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001); and John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America* (New York: Penguin, 2004). For a review, see Neil Gross, Thomas Medvetz, and Rupert Russell, “The Contemporary American Conservative Movement,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 37 (2011): 325–54.

centerpiece of the effort, however, was the creation of think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, and the Manhattan Institute.⁷

As I noted above, however, similar misgivings about technocrats informed the philosophy of the New Left. For example, fears of nuclear catastrophe came to be associated with the Cold War planners of the “military-industrial complex.” A more general distrust of experts could be found in *The Port Huron Statement*, the 1962 declaration of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). The statement’s authors lamented “the use of modern social science as a manipulative tool” and decried “social and physical scientists” who, “neglecting the liberating heritage of higher learning, develop ‘human relations’ or ‘morale-producing’ techniques for the corporate economy, while others exercise their intellectual skills to accelerate the arms race.” Contrasting the 1960s with the previous historical period, the SDS authors argued that if “our liberal and socialist predecessors were plagued by vision without program,” then “our own generation is plagued by program without vision. All around us there is astute grasp of method [and] technique . . . but, if pressed critically, such expertise is incompetent to explain its implicit ideals.”⁸

Given this similarity between the 1960s activists of the Right and the Left, what accounts for the different trajectories of the two movements, particularly the fact that the New Left critique of technocracy did not generate the same kind of political institution-building effort as the conservative critique? The standard answer to this question is that the New Left intellectuals retreated into the academy and became, in the memorable phrase of Roger Kimball, “tenured radicals.”⁹ But while it is true that intellectuals of the Left were more likely to take up residence in the academy, this fact alone does not account for the divergent outcomes. In the first place, it overlooks the fact that some New Left intellectuals pursued the same strategy as their conservative counterparts. Consider Marcus Raskin and Richard Barnet, two 1960s radicals who started the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) in 1963. In the present context, what is most notable about IPS is its striking similarity with what would become the preeminent think tank of the Right, the Heritage Foundation. Both organizations were formed by a pair of ex-legislative aides whose purpose was to advance a moral critique of the technocratic establishment, one from the Left and the other from the Right.¹⁰ Moreover, both orga-

7. See Thomas Medvetz, *The Rise of Think Tanks in America: Merchants of Policy and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

8. Students for a Democratic Society, “*Port Huron Statement*” (1962), www.h-net.org/~hst306/documents/huron.html (accessed September 30, 2011).

9. Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990).

10. In the case of Heritage, the two founding figures were Paul Weyrich and Edwin Feulner.

nizations performed a kind of self-credentialing function for their founders, who wished to challenge the reigning definition of “expertise” but lacked the credentials needed to be seen as experts in the conventional sense of the term.

Against a simple story of retreat from politics, then, I would argue that the relative weakness of the progressive critique of technocracy must be traced to multiple causes. The first was an enormous difference in material support from American business. As scholars such as Kim Phillips-Fein have recently shown, the flowering of conservative institutions was made possible by the mobilization of big business activists intent on rolling back the taxes and regulatory mechanisms of the New Deal era.¹¹ The economic dislocations of the early 1970s in particular focused their energies on new ways of promoting the ideology of the free market. The second cause of the progressive activists’ relative failure was a greater pattern of state repression. IPS, for example, spent much of the 1970s and 1980s engaged in costly and demoralizing legal battles—the first a lawsuit filed against the Federal Bureau of Investigation (which had infiltrated the organization as part of its counterintelligence program efforts) and the second a protracted battle with the Internal Revenue Service, which attempted unsuccessfully to revoke IPS’s tax-exempt status.¹²

Finally, while intellectuals of the Left were more likely to pursue careers in the university, it was not the mere fact of academic employment that tempered their critique of technocrats, but also a culture of academic professionalism that elevated value-neutrality over civic engagement as the primary regulative norm. More than their European counterparts, American scholars defined their success in terms of the model of the “expert possessed of a neutral body of knowledge.”¹³ It is worth noting, furthermore, that this culture of professional neutrality has not one but two profiles: first, an “ivory tower” face that rewards self-isolating displays of technical and theoretical proficiency over public outreach, and second, a *technocratic* face that encourages political participation among scholars, so long as their contributions are based on technical knowledge as opposed to moral interventions.

The Cronon Affair in Context

This brief sketch of the recent conditions surrounding the politics of intellectualism in the United States suggests two points that have gone largely unnoticed in

11. Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York: Norton, 2009).

12. Medvetz, *The Rise of Think Tanks in America*.

13. Loïc Wacquant, “The Self-Inflicted Irrelevance of American Academics,” *Academe* 82, no. 4 (1996): 21.

the discussion surrounding the Cronon affair. The first helps explain why Cronon's intervention in the matter elicited such a fierce response from the Wisconsin GOP. Put simply, Cronon's intervention was an affront to the Republican Party because it disclosed one of the key tensions in the strategies of conservative intellectuals in the United States. Since the 1960s, they have often relied on a delicate balancing act that involves signaling both intellectual autonomy and heteronomy, by which I mean a willingness to produce intellectual tools expressly for the benefit of political clients.¹⁴ This strategy is built into the very form of the hybrid institutions that have served as the main vehicles of conservative thought. Organizations such as ALEC operate a mixed strategy by remaining formally separate from corporations, parties, and lobbyists while systematically tailoring their work to the needs of conservative politicians, business elites, and media specialists. The advantage of this approach lies in its flexibility, which gives conservative intellectuals the ability to switch roles strategically as the situation demands. Just as Karl Marx dreamed of being a hunter in the morning, a fisherman in the afternoon, and a critic at night, a conservative intellectual like Charles Murray can act as a pundit in the morning, an activist in the afternoon, and a quasi-academic scholar at night. The key vulnerability in this approach, however, lies in the fact that it requires extensive *boundary work*, or a set of practices designed to create and institutionalize socially recognized lines of separation between "intellectual" and "political" activity.¹⁵

The second overlooked point about the Cronon affair concerns the relative ineffectiveness of more autonomous intellectuals as actors in American public debate. Cronon observed that conservatives rely on a large, well-organized network of organizations in which the ostensibly separate practices of policy formation, lobbying, and expert evaluation are closely interconnected. From the standpoint of an academic scholar—regardless of his or her political persuasion—this network functions like a *buffer zone* separating the worlds of scholarly and political practice. Given the size of this buffer zone, the academic scholar who wishes to become a meaningful participant in political affairs has two options. The first is to enter through its academic portals (especially the public policy schools and university-based policy institutes that sit at its periphery). But to do so is to subject

14. By using the idea of a balancing act in this way, I am drawing on Gil Eyal, *The Disenchantment of the Orient: Expertise in Arab Affairs and the Israeli State* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006).

15. For a similar use of this idea applied to Israeli intellectuals, see Eyal, *The Disenchantment of the Orient*.

oneself to its rules, the first of which is the need to orient one’s research to the pre-packaged categories and questions of political debate. Becoming a viable “policy expert,” in short, usually means angling one’s work to the topics that garner the most funding, accelerating its production to match the temporality of the policy cycle, abbreviating its form to appeal to political professionals (e.g., by writing “policy briefs”), and speaking in sound bites that are useful to journalists. Lost in this game of “policy research” are the possibilities of carrying out long-term research, asking original questions, or suggesting that policy debates be reframed.

The second option available to the scholar who wishes to intervene in political affairs is to circumvent the buffer zone by writing for a public audience and refusing to subordinate one’s thinking to the demands of political professionals, moneyed sponsors, or the media. However, as the Cronon affair illustrates, scholars who take this route face certain risks. The first is the risk of public censure, as Cronon himself discovered. The more immediate danger, however, is that of a *double marginalization*: that is, marginalization from a public debate already dominated by political professionals who can select from a wide array of technocratic products to bolster their preheld viewpoints, and marginalization from one’s own academic discipline, which is unlikely to offer significant rewards for attempting to enlighten public debate. This last point helps explain why the second strategy is viable mainly to scholars who already have an abundance of academic prestige. Cronon, for example, is a Rhodes scholar, a MacArthur “genius” grant recipient, a winner of the prestigious Bancroft Prize in history, and the president-elect of the American Historical Association. It is no coincidence, furthermore, that his main scholarly defender in the affair was Paul Krugman, a Nobel Prize–winning economist whose prestige no longer depends solely on his standing in the academy. With little left to prove to other academic scholars, Cronon and Krugman can afford to reinvest their academic capital in public debate. The most important lesson of the Cronon affair, however, is that rank-and-file scholars have less incentive to follow this route.

