

Culture of the Intelligentsia

The first question to ask about a contribution with such a pretentious title as this is, why take time off to write it? The simple answer is that examining and admiring oneself is an occupational disorder for intellectuals; but that is too simple. Just to state this topic for discussion in *Arena* (and this journal is a long way from being first in the field with the discussion) seems to involve the assumption that here is a significant group in social and political terms, a group whose ideas and actions we expect will somehow influence what happens in society at large.

Influence, however, does not mean the same as power. At one edge, this group shades off into the realms of power; at the other, into the free-wheeling artists who make their livelihood from their creative insights and skills. But this group as a whole is not a part of the 'power elite'.¹ Rather, it consists of the creators, the innovators, the administrators, the technologists, the educators, the opinion formers of contemporary society. The members of this group might be described, in the fashionable American jargon of the 1920s, as 'social engineers'; they might be compared with the Mandarins, the scholar-bureaucrats of Imperial China.² As a very long shot, we might even suggest that they constitute the only finally indispensable element in industrial society: once all is socialised, there will be no employers; once all is automated, there will be no workers in the old sense; there will only be the planners and the technologists who keep society and industry working. But still, this is not power; the intelligentsia stand somewhere between the powerful and the powerless. It has, however, become almost a commonplace of sociological, and even political, discussion that this group has an increasing social weight, as both production and government grow more complex, and the special skills of the intelligentsia are

more in demand.

This is a group that is easier to identify than to define. Clearly it is not, in Marxian terms, a class. Among its members are independent, self-employed professionals and freelance artists; employees of government and semi-government institutions and private enterprise. The members of the group have no obvious common ideology. Politically, they range from communist to 'radical conservative'; from dedicated commitment to social activity, to the complete rejection of commitment and ideology. Even their incomes are widely spread, from the moderate well-being of teachers to the wealth of leading lawyers and doctors. At first sight, it seems that all this group has in common is a higher education, a boiler-ticket for admission to the profession of social engineer. The question I want to ask is this: is there, beyond this common educational background, a common culture, a common style of life? Because, if there is not, it is hardly worth discussing the group as a group, for it would have no discernable identity.

When I first considered this article, I thought that it would be possible to gather some empirical evidence, and to draw some conclusions from that. But that proved grossly over-optimistic. Very little sociology has been done in Australia, and what little there is has not asked the questions I am interested in. Market research seemed another possible source, but market-researchers (at least those I asked) do not use the sort of categories I need. So what follows is, unfortunately, not solidly grounded in factual observation and statistics; it is rather a series of impressions and guesses, which might turn out to have some truth in them, but which might equally prove to be wildly wrong.

To start with the elementary Marxist propositions that social being determines consciousness, and that a man's work situation is the most important aspect of his social being, may seem to beg the question, to assume what has to be proved. But one must start somewhere.

To begin, then: are there, despite all the disparities, common elements in the work situation of the members of the professional intelligentsia which are significant for their culture, their style of life? Some common elements can be distinguished.

First, the work of the intelligentsia is not *directly* productive, in the sense that they produce physical com-

modities. Rather, their work is ancillary to production; they investigate and plan and administer the processes of society and production; they train and educate and entertain and serve the members of society. In their occupations, they are concerned with ideas, with the statement and solution of problems, with the translation of theory into practice. In their workplaces, they are surrounded by the material trappings of ideas, by libraries and laboratories.

Secondly, in their work situation, they enjoy a relative independence. They are less dominated by time; they have more possibility of planning their work to follow their inclination. The esoteric nature of their professional skill means that they tend to be responsible to themselves; they are not in the simple sense servants, nor are they usually bosses (although they may be leaders). The results of their work are judged primarily by their peers.

Thirdly, their work is individual in its character, rather than collective; they are not part of any production line. They are able to follow a piece of work through from plan to execution; they are not isolated from the results of their work, not 'alienated' in the usual sense of this overworked word.

Fourthly, they are attached to their profession at large, rather than to the particular institution they work in. Because of this, they are relatively mobile as between institutions and locations, but can move without losing touch with the mainstream of their profession. They are oriented towards considerations of professional prestige, rather than towards income and promotion.³ They measure success by professional, rather than commercial standards. Because of this, they are less dependent on personal contact and influence, on the creation of an acceptable image, for their advance; their situation allows more for non-conformity, even eccentricity.

Finally, because of the growing demand for their services, they have a relatively high degree of security in their employment; they are able to plan ahead with a fair degree of confidence.

This is, of course, a vastly over-simplified picture. In detailed discussion, I would have to qualify every one of these propositions—but not, I think, out of existence. It is also a one-sided picture—but I have been trying to isolate those factors which *distinguish* the work situation of the intelligentsia from that of other sections of the community.

In summary, it seems that, in comparison with these other strata, the intelligentsia are more independent as to the planning and execution of their work, and freer from the master-servant relationship; that they gain more satisfaction from their work, and suffer less frustration; that they are less bound to the market and to commodity production. If, despite its *simpliste* and tendentious character, this description bears some relation to the actual situation of the intelligentsia, it should have some significant consequences for their culture and style of life.

It is this relative independence which appears to the intelligentsia as the most valuable aspect of their situation⁴, and it is this which dominates their style of life. In one way, this seems to emerge as a desire on the part of the intelligentsia to distinguish themselves from other strata of the community—which is only another way of saying, to define themselves.

In the broadest terms, the lifestyle of any community is set by the mode of production—the quantity and quality of the goods and services produced, the relations between men which emerge from the processes of production and social living. But within this very general framework, every individual is subject to a series of particular influences. The most important of these are probably the established mores of the community as a whole; the precepts and patterns of behaviour absorbed from the family environment; the norms of belief and conduct established by the social groups to which the individual belongs, his peer group. Among these influences, it seems to me that the peer group is the most important for members of the intelligentsia.

Although they are always present, community pressures tend to be resisted. The work situation of the intelligentsia is different from that of other sections of the community, and that leads to the assertion of other differences. The response to family influence is more complex: sometimes it is rejected; more often it seems to be simply irrelevant. The important feature here is social mobility.

The intelligentsia tend to perpetuate themselves, in the sense that most of their children grow into the same social group. But this group is growing fast—faster indeed than the general population—and therefore it must recruit from outside. For working-class and some migrant families, the recruitment of their children to the intelligentsia means upward social mobility, the fulfilment of social ambition.

For middle-class and other migrant families, it means cross mobility, the achievement of security, perhaps prestige.⁵ For the children of either group, the style of life from which they have come is irrelevant to their new situation. The intellectual gap may be too wide. Or the social goals of the parents (security, conformity, prestige) may conflict with the desire of the children for professional satisfactions and independence.

There is commonly, among recruits to the intelligentsia, a loosening of family ties, which is reflected in their social and leisure activities. But those who are moving upwards have little difficulty in finding acceptance in their new group (often at the expense of abandoning the old); this is perhaps the main reason why the English 'angries' have no considerable parallel in Australian intellectual life.

In this situation, then, the peer group becomes the most important style-setter for the members of the intelligentsia; these are the norms to which they seek to conform. And the most significant features of this seem to me to be the desire for independence and individuality, the assertion of distinctiveness—which itself implies an assertion of group identity.

This desire and this assertion take two forms: an inner withdrawal, the rejection of the 'conventional wisdom', the bourgeois norms; and an external declaration of independence, the rejection of the material trappings conventional to the society. The second of these derives from the first. It is the outward manifestation of the repudiation of a degraded mass culture which reduces the individual to a consumer of mindless and tasteless mass production. It is an assertion of the barrenness of conformity to 'respectable' norms, of submission to the self-imposed mindlessness of what Dwight Macdonald has described as 'mid-cult'. And it is a repudiation of the vulgarity of conspicuous consumption: the flamboyance of the intelligentsia takes the form of possession not of more of the socially approved artefacts, but of different artefacts. It is true that this process involves conformity to another pattern, but the virtue of this is that it is a minority affirmation, and the pattern is one which stresses individuality.

This last point takes me on to dangerous ground. So far, I have been trying to describe a set of common attitudes which seems to me to distinguish the intelligentsia (defined as that section of the community with professional tertiary

education) from other sections of the community. So far, I have not made an important distinction—that between 'intelligentsia' and 'intellectuals'. The latter, I would see as part of the intelligentsia, but I would restrict the term 'intellectual' to those who are concerned, more or less all the time, with the whole measure of the life of society and the individual personality. This is a very subjective definition, I know, but it is important to realise that members of the intelligentsia may be imprisoned by their narrow specialisms, 'routinised' in their thinking and activity, and that there is a distinction to be made between those who are so confined and those who are not. It is important for me to make this distinction at this point, because I think that what I am now about to say about the material aspects of the life of this social stratum may well apply to the intellectuals, rather than to the intelligentsia as a whole. But, if this is so, I would argue that, for these purposes, the intellectuals constitute the core of the intelligentsia, the pace-setters; that the characteristic pattern of thinking of the intelligentsia pushes them towards this way of life, while the pressures for general social conformity pull them away from it; that somewhere between the two poles they find an uneasy balance. What I want to discuss now is the material way of life; and here it is not hard to see (literally) some important and distinctive features.

There is, first, a preference for particular areas of living. In Melbourne, these are perhaps Eltham, Beaumaris, Carlton-Parkville, South Yarra; in other cities, I do not know, but I am sure they exist. These locations are desirable for their situation (semi-bush, close to city or university) and for group identification and solidarity, rather than for prestige or property values.

Along with this goes the preference for particular styles of housing. The contemporary small home, or the restored Victorian terrace, or flat, is in; the Housing Commission box, or the triple-fronted cream brick, is out. Modern conveniences are taken for granted, but they must be inconspicuous, not features; they are cons., not icons. Light Swedish-style furniture, and individually designed pottery and fabrics, are preferred. Wall decorations must be individual prints or paintings; even good painters like Van Gogh are out when they are hackneyed (the ubiquitous bar-room-romantic Straw-hat Sheila is unmentionable). Books are the selection of the occupant, and not of a book club (unless

one is a member for ideological reasons). Little magazines and the journals of opinion are in; the mass circulation magazines are out.⁶ The *Australian* may well be supplanting the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age*. The casual garden and native flora have priority over the ordered garden and the beds of annuals. Casual dress is strongly preferred—often for work and social engagements, as well as around the house. Mongrel dogs and Siamese cats are common; corgis and tropical fish are rare.

The style of eating is just as distinctive. The preference is for exotic foods. Continental and Chinese ingredients and recipes are common. Herbs, spices, sauces and other embellishments are a matter of course. Elizabeth David is so omni-present as to be old hat. Dry table wines are always served, but too much expertise is suspect. ('I don't know much about vintages, but I know what I like.')

The uses of leisure seem to me to make a distinctive pattern, too. Reading books (not just magazines, which are unhappily but commonly referred to as 'books' among working-class people) is taken for granted. My guess is that, offered a preference scale for consumer-durables, most people of this group would put a gramophone and LP records above television. The intelligentsia seems to provide the core of the audience for serious theatre, music (classical, folk, jazz), art films (a social survey of the Film Festival could verify this point). Social contact centres on visiting; this has suffered less among this group, post-TV, than among most; visiting is oriented on the peer group (and often on early-established university contacts) rather than on work groups or family. There is some suggestion from artists I know that members of this group are beginning to make participation in art classes and similar creative activities an important part of their leisure activities. By contrast, the group seems to share sport (both participating and watching)⁸ and the holiday environment with the community at large.

Perhaps this is an over-selective, over-simplified picture. Undoubtedly, pressures of fashion and community conformity, and the pre-digested responses of 'mid-cult', penetrate deeply into the intelligentsia. But it still seems to me that the most significant aspect of their way of life is the expression of individuality, of separateness, which is suggested in this account. And it is no answer to say that this involves conforming to minority norms, because (barring the kind

of solution that Michael Fomenko sought unsuccessfully outside Cooktown) living in society inevitably involves the acceptance of some set of norms. What is different about this set is that it prefers innovation to repetition, the individual to the mass-produced, the natural to the artificial, the simple to the baroque, the astringent to the saccharine. It is oriented towards reflection, personal response and conscious choice—or at least towards the appearance of these.

This complex of attitudes has something in common with the social ideology of this group: the conventional wisdom, the clichés of bourgeois society are rejected along with the material conventions. The attitudes range widely, from sceptical questioning, to complete rejection of ideology, to total involvement in a rival wisdom. But, despite the differences between *Arena* and, for example, *Prospect*, *Dissent*, and the Sydney libertarian *Broadsheet*, there is also common ground—there is doubt and rejection in common, if not affirmation.⁹

There is a community of social attitude which, at first sight (and in the light of important ideological differences) seems surprising. The intelligentsia is relatively tolerant of deviant behaviour and belief. It asserts a 'personalist' morality, or a moral relativism—that is, it rejects absolute moral standards, unless these are personally accepted. It rejects the absolute claims of authority, and tends to fear power as self-destroying.¹⁰ (The attitudes of the Catholic and communist intelligentsia on this show interesting similarities). It is opposed to racial discrimination. It is even (and almost uniquely in Australian society) opposed to sexual discrimination: 'double standards' of sexual morality are less applied and men are more ready to share domestic responsibilities and work. It dislikes violence, whether personal, national or international. It seems to have an above-average sense of social responsibility (as expressed in participation in school and kindergarten committees, for example, and other such community organisations) but, at the same time, a political disillusion (that is, a disillusion with practical party politics, expressed either by rejection of political activity, or by identification with ideologically oriented chiliastic minorities). It is radical in attitude—whether the elitist radical conservatism of the right, or the mass radicalism of the left.

Again, this is a vast over-simplification, which requires all sorts of qualification. But there is something in this

core of common attitudes—and again it is an assertion of individuality, a rejection of stereotypes, the desire to follow a thought through to its conclusion and to retain control of the consequences of one's action.

I have been trying to delineate the distinguishing characteristics of the intelligentsia, those which set them apart from other social groups. Often, of course, these characteristics are modified by social pressures; but it seems to me that they are just as often renewed. It is this contradiction that is reflected in the conflicting tendencies which are discernible among the intelligentsia. On the one hand, there is a chameleon-like adaptation to the general society, an attempt to escape recognition and isolation. But on the other, there is the assertion of a kind of caste exclusiveness, which admits only those who accept the central values—that thought should proceed action, that response should be uninhibited by convention, that there is nothing that is undiscussable, that personal decision should be both encouraged and respected. This is the culture, in the broad sense, of the intelligentsia; its way of life is closely linked. True, it is challenged in many ways—by narrow professionalism, by concern for financial reward or social advancement, by the corruption of power, by the routinisation of work and thought, by the attraction of authoritarian means to total solutions. But it is self-renewing, because it arises from an essential social situation.

Finally, a few comments on culture in the narrower sense. I have already suggested that the professional intelligentsia is perhaps the main market for the creative arts, for both the high culture and the popular (as distinct from pop or mass) culture; and that this association dissolves into 'mid-cult' participation around the edges.

It seems to me that it is possible to isolate a series of attitudes to the arts, which are sometimes conflicting. There is at the same time a respect for the traditional high culture, and a rejection of this because it has become respectable, 'social' and institutionalised. There is a concern for technical proficiency, alongside an interest in the immediacy of expression of popular culture (jazz and folk), and a concern for innovation and experiment. There is a rejection of ideology, which is expressed on the one hand by the intellectual cult of the pop song and the western and crime film, on the other by the destructive critique of the 'new satire'. Almost the only common theme is the strong response to

the process of creation.

The links are not clear, and there are many fascinating questions. Why does the response to classical music and theatre seem to be declining, that to painting, film, folksong to be increasing? Is it true to say that there is a stronger feeling for the contemporary, the professional, the individual rather than the traditional, the amateur, the social? Does the strong contemporary interest come from recruits to the intelligentsia, those who are upward-mobile and have no strong roots in the traditional high culture? Is the statement of social criticism more in tune with the attitudes of this group than the enunciation of social solutions? There are no easy answers.

A more important question, perhaps, for present purposes is one relating not to the audience but to the artists: are the new artists responding to the demand of a new market, represented by the growing professional intelligentsia? I think not. It seems more likely that both producers and consumers grow out of a common social situation. The artists are assimilated to the intelligentsia, and have little difficulty in finding a common language. This is the language of innovation (the statement and resolution of new problems), of individuality, of detachment, of personal response and responsibility. The contrast between the writers and painters of the pre-war and post-war years is obvious: it is also a contrast of audiences and milieus.

I have made two main points in this article: that the professional intelligentsia are a significant and growing stratum of society, and that it seems to me that the dominant theme of their culture and style of life is the assertion of their individuality against society, of their minority status.

Are they, then, likely to be a politically significant grouping? Is the community of culture likely to emerge as a community of political action and belief?

Conscious action requires social involvement, and the way of life of the intelligentsia does not seem to point in this direction. It can be argued that they are salaried workers, and that this will become a part of their consciousness. But this seems to me to be a mechanical approach—they are certainly concerned with incomes, but they do not feel their exploitation.

More plausible is the argument that, despite their individual involvement in the whole of their work, they are isolated, alienated from the sources of power; that they

can see the possibilities which exist in their environment, but cannot realise these; that this frustration will emerge as politics. This supposes political consciousness of a high order; I would like to think that this might happen, but I just don't know.

NOTES

- 1 For the 'power elite' concept in an Australian environment, see S Encel: *Is There an Australian Power Elite?* (MUALP Club, 1961) and the same writer's essay, 'Power', in P Coleman (ed), *Australian Civilisation* (Cheshire, 1962). For a critical view, see H Wolfsohn in *Dissent*, Vol 4, No. 2.
- 2 Or, if we accept C P Fitzgerald's analysis, of modern China as well.
- 3 I recognise the strength of Vincent Buckley's contrary argument in his essay, 'Intellectuals' (Coleman, op cit), but cannot accept it without considerable qualification.
- 4 I would argue that this is also the most valuable aspect objectively (ie, from the point of view of society)—that is, that it is essential that there should be an independent, self-activating, critical intelligentsia. But that is another issue.
- 5 It is interesting to speculate whether the social origin of recruits to the intelligentsia has any relation to the sort of professional training they undertake. My guess is that working-class recruits tend to go into salaried jobs; minority-group recruits into independent professional jobs.
- 6 An exception is the mass circulation women's magazines; why?
- 7 A common observation of Western European intellectuals is that their Australian *confreres* drink a great deal; perhaps this is why Australian intellectuals seem to get along well with their Russian counterparts.
- 8 Australian intellectuals do not have the contempt for sport which seems to characterise European intellectuals. A physicist friend in Sydney University (of New Zealand origin) once commented to me that the conversation in the Gents at the University Staff Club was just the same as that at the local pub—the next day's races.
- 9 An exception to this generalisation is Donald Horne's attempt (in Coleman, op cit) to erect the businessman as a contemporary hero for intellectuals, but that seems to be a sport, perhaps even an anachronism. (Emile Mercer once drew two punters serenading a bookie: 'Ned Kelly was born in a ramshackle town . . .')
- 10 Compare on this Vincent Buckley's article in *Prospect*, No. 2, 1964.