

## **‘The stupid party’: Intellectual repute as a category of ideological analysis**

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**ABSTRACT** *This article contends that the notion that some ideologies, usually on the left, are inherently more sophisticated than others has run through the politics of the Anglo-Saxon world over the past two centuries. The famous insult ‘the stupid party’, almost without exception applied to conservatives, points to the opposing archetypes of the stupid backwoods conservative and the sophisticated metropolitan progressive. In allusion to Veblen’s concept of repute, the persistent attribution of intelligence and sophistication to some ideologies, and their denial to others, is named ‘intellectual repute’. The article concludes by speculating that notions of intellectual respectability point to the influence of classes which base their self-image and their claims to class power on claims to superior intelligence: repute is, following Veblen, an artefact of class. The phenomenon of intellectual repute therefore speaks of the influence and class character of the intelligentsia.*

The notion that some political ideologies are more naturally than others the home of intelligent, free-thinking, broad-minded, and culturally sophisticated people runs through our politics. This article argues that the feeling, and sometimes the articulate thought, that conservatives are ‘the stupid party’ is deeply imbricated in modern politics, as is the obverse idea that the political left is the natural home of intelligence, and it contends that these notions go back to the beginning of the period in which the defining oppositions between conservative and progressive, or right and left, became not merely intelligible but unavoidable and even necessary. The archetype, a term I shall use without Jungian intent, of the stupid conservative, like the opposite figure of the progressive intellectual, permeates our politics. The archetype of ‘the stupid party’—this convenient and clichéd epithet, a familiar and well-worn piece of mental furniture, a conventional image, a habitual attribution—is often alluded to, though seldom analyzed. It is the departure point for the speculations that follow.

Students of ideologies should have names for the attributes they study, however intangible and at times indistinct those attributes and associated archetypes, opinions,

prejudices, and feelings may be: this paper gives the name ‘intellectual repute’ to the notion that some political ideologies are more intellectually respectable than others, and are hence more naturally professed by intelligent and sophisticated people. It goes on to argue that intellectual repute can be an informative classificatory and analytical device, and concludes with some speculations as to its class implications. Political actors themselves find the attribution and the denial of intellectual repute polemically useful, as the familiar and even predictable epithet ‘the stupid party’ suggests, and that very polemical power is evidence that intellectual repute is close to the core of the way that political actors think—and feel—about such slippery notions as ‘right’ and ‘left’.

The term ‘repute’ is used in conscious allusion to Thorstein Veblen. Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* saw ‘pecuniary repute’, his phrase for bourgeois respectability, as an artefact of class, which is to say of power and wealth.<sup>1</sup> Cultural and political behavior is felt (and that is usually the apposite verb) to be reputable or respectable (Veblen used the terms interchangeably, but the former more frequently) if it is associated with power and wealth. Such behavior is emulated and conspicuously disported (some more Veblenite words) by those who only aspire to power and wealth, and who may have only a vague notion that some behaviors look better and are more highly rewarded than others. Different societies create different respectabilities: some, as Veblen saw, construct martial repute, a respectability based upon exploit and honor, along with what might be called hereditary and religious reputes; bourgeois respectability—‘pecuniary repute’—was for Veblen the repute characteristic of capitalist society.

A society’s characteristic form of respectability says much about it, its leading classes, and possible sources of legitimacy within it. In a society where superior intellectual qualities are one of the few remaining possible sources of legitimacy, it is natural that intellectual repute should be powerful, and that intellectual repute and its associated characteristics should be claimed by aspirants to power. If respectability is a manifestation of class power—hardly an adventurous hypothesis—then the existence of persistent notions of intellectual respectability is evidence for the existence as a class of the intelligentsia, or what some have called the ‘New Class’. The existence of intellectual repute is evidence that that class is not without a kind of power, or at any rate influence, and it quite obviously is not without access to the public purse. The intellectuals no less than anyone else evince ideological attitudes for cultural and emulative reasons as much as for strictly interested, let alone logical ones, and, as I shall argue, most intellectuals feel leftist ideological attitudes to be in some ineffable way more respectable than conservative ones. I conclude by speculating that the persistence of archetypes of intellectual repute speaks of the class position of the intelligentsia.

### **‘The stupid party’: A brief history of a suggestive epithet**

Ideologies, as sets of ideas, language and symbols that operate in the political realm, make various claims about themselves: the most obvious is a truth claim, the claim that ‘our theory explains the universe’, or at least some part thereof. And ideologies make claims to intellectual status, as distinguished from claims to

analytic truth: some claim to be inherently smarter, more knowledgeable, more cosmopolitan, and more sophisticated than others. Though claims to intelligence and to the truths that intelligence should be able to identify are linked, they are not the same and the analyst should make the distinction. No one, of course, claims that ‘my ideas are stupid, but I believe them anyway’, though many, especially on the right, will say ‘my ideas may not be fancy, but they are down-home, old-time plainspoken commonsense and good people accept them’. Leftists, by contrast, frequently claim superior knowledge, intellectual competence, and cultural sophistication, and these claims are often based upon the universally explanatory power of revered texts correctly interpreted (the Marxian corpus, in particular, comes to mind), a practice often reinforced by signifying terminology (as in the multifarious variants of Marxian language). Rightist and conservative ideologies by contrast are less likely to appeal to such intellectualized kinds of theory, and more likely to appeal to established morality, to patriotism, to other group loyalties, to familiar customs, or even to plain old anti-intellectual ‘commonsense’. This latter appeal is a direct invocation of intellectual disrepute, and is often combined with an attack on the unpatriotic, unmanly, overly fancy, or theoretical character imputed to the sophisticated leftist. Such appeals to an anti-intellectual, hard-headed, straightforwardly commonsensical and ostentatiously plain-speaking kind of intellectual disrepute have often, as I shall argue, been politically useful to conservative politicians, a fact that points to the central place in the Anglo-Saxon political imagination of archetypes of intellectual repute.

Tories and conservatives have worn the epithet of ‘the stupid party’ for the better part of two centuries, and at times they have done so proudly. That very persistence suggests that the phrase points to something felt to be essential to their nature. John Stuart Mill is often said to have coined the phrase ‘the stupid party’. Mill wrote in his *Considerations on Representative Government* of 1861 that though neither Whigs nor Tories were much actuated by principle, it was the Tories who were ‘by the law of their existence the stupidest party’.<sup>2</sup> In his *Autobiography*, Mill wrote of an episode when he was MP for Westminster, and the Tory Sir John Pakington quoted the passage at him: Mill took evident pleasure in recounting his reply that while not all conservatives were stupid, most of the stupid were conservative.<sup>3</sup> But though the notion that conservatism reflected mental torpor—and radicalism intellectual agility—runs through Mill’s writings from his earliest essays and letters forward, credit for the phrase ‘the stupid party’ should really go to Lord Palmerston.

In 1826, members of the Tory party, to which Palmerston then still belonged, opposed his re-election to Parliament for the University of Cambridge because he favored Catholic emancipation, and was therefore held to be insufficiently ‘Protestant’ a defender of the settlement of 1688. Alluding to the fact that it had been the Tory hero William Pitt the Younger who had first proposed parliamentary reform and Catholic emancipation, Palmerston anticipated Mill’s complaint that the Tories were ignorant of their own principles: ‘the stupid old Tory party, who bawl out the memory and praises of Pitt . . . are opposing all the measures and principles which he held most important’.<sup>4</sup> Lord Palmerston and John Stuart Mill were contemporaries

who did not agree on much else, but they both alleged that a resistance to new ideas and to intellectual activity generally was in some way endemic to, and even characteristic of, an ideology that was just beginning to be called conservatism.

The idea that conservatives are, to put it gently, not intellectuals has a certain facile credibility: almost by definition, proposals for change are programmatic and therefore rational. Those from Bentham to Blair who have made proposals for change necessarily discuss society as it might be and not as it is; they must therefore argue from inference, and inference implies an appeal to reason. Opponents of change are easy to portray as opposed to reason itself; many do in fact follow Burke in being deeply suspicious of the power of ‘the sort of reason which banishes the affections’ to prescribe social arrangements.<sup>5</sup> It is an obvious argumentative tactic, under the polemical imperatives of real politics, to allege that those who are skeptical of certain kinds or uses of reason find reason itself to be uncongenial, and this allegation turns easily into an accusation of stupidity. The converse attribution, that of intelligence to the partisan of change—and hence to the employer of reason—is just as logically obvious and polemically convenient.

The imputation of intelligence and of its associated characteristics of enlightenment, broad-mindedness, knowledge and sophistication to some ideologies and not to others is itself therefore a powerful tool of ideological advocacy. Neither Mill nor Palmerston wished to see the ‘stupid old Tory party’ in power, even if Palmerston might have hoped at one time to see the advent of an intelligent new Tory party. Similar imputations can be heard today: when New Labour arrived in office boasting of its inclusive tolerance and its intellectual openness, and charging its Tory opponents with intolerance, a key part of that charge was an imputation of narrow-mindedness and hence of intellectual rigidity. These parallel assertions are all the more powerful because they elide easily with assertions of competence and incompetence, and there are always specific successes or failures to which such assertions can be attached. The fact that various adjacent attributions of open-mindedness, intelligence, sophistication and competence are felt to reinforce one another is a key part of their polemical usefulness: such characteristics are felt to be the natural attributes of a modern and progressive party, and so their mention among the core characteristics of New Labour was felt—above all by that party itself—to be a clinching argument in its favor. Categories that are polemically powerful are also, as a function of that power, analytically useful and even necessary: the source of argument-winning eristic and motivational power is almost necessarily located in some feature of an ideology that is felt to be vital by those it addresses. In the days of Palmerston and Mill, the adherents of Whig and Radical ideologies felt strongly that they were more sophisticated than their Tory opponents; the same applies to their successors on the left and center-left today.

### **Intelligence and belonging**

Clifford Geertz has described ideologies as sets of symbols by which political groups recognize one another:<sup>6</sup> members of the left often signify mutual belonging

by implying a shared intelligence, by dropping the name of a textual authority, or by deploying thick, intellectually laden, heavily allusive terminology ('imperialist' comes to mind, as does the recondite verbiage of gender theory) at once to signal allies that 'we' really understand what is going on and to exclude and stigmatize opponents who do not know or do not accept the ideological implications of the language in use. The use of such heavily laden terminology designates as respectable, and thus inside the group in question, those able to participate in the discussion, while simultaneously excluding those outside the cognoscenti. Now as in the past, the left frequently signifies alterity by pointing to the imagined idiocy of their opponents in 'the stupid party': look at a *Guardian* cartoon of George W. Bush as a chimpanzee.

*Pace* Mill, I do not, of course, argue that conservatives *are* necessarily or even predominantly stupid, nor that progressives are generally intelligent. Nor is it argued that these attributions have been historically invariant: where once the Leninist variety of Marxism had great intellectual repute, and its claim to embody the spirit of rational progress was taken seriously by intelligent people even when it organized famines, filled the Gulag and cooperated with the Nazis, a generation or two of opportunistic vulgarities from brutal apparatchiks brought that particular kind of Marxism into intellectual disrepute. On the other side of the ledger, there have been more than a few highly intelligent conservatives in history, from the Duke of Wellington ('a powerful but unsophisticated intelligence', was Mill's condescending verdict on the man who had chased Napoleon and each of his Marshals from the battlefields of Western Europe;<sup>7</sup> the Iron Duke disparaged back at the 'scribbling set'<sup>8</sup>) to numerous more recent figures, including Margaret Thatcher, whose intellectual appetites offered no protection from the unappeasable loathing of most of the 'scribbling set'. Conversely, the vulgar Marxist is a well-known animal. But the sophisticated conservative must either be written off as a hopeless reactionary or a literary eccentric (like a T.S. Eliot, an Evelyn Waugh, or perhaps even a William F. Buckley) whose political views are of limited importance and can be forgiven as a kind of personal eccentricity, or, if he or she is of undeniable political relevance, the intellectual conservative (from Metternich to Henry Kissinger to Thatcher) has to be explained as somehow morally or humanly deficient. The vulgar Marxist, by contrast, will imagine himself to be intelligent, and will imagine his Marxism to be the proof of it; the occasional inarticulate leftist (John Prescott, perhaps) is explained away as an authentic proletarian.

These archetypes are congruent with the related trope of the leftist as a well-meaning but unworldly idealist, while the conservative becomes a mean-spirited realist. The unworldliness of the leftist is a result not of stupidity but of moral purity, while the intelligence or knowledge of the empirically sound rightist merely calls his ethics into question. The archetype of the stupid conservative and the congruent attribution of intellectual repute to the progressive is one reason why undeniably intelligent American 'neo-conservative' (an over-used, and much misused, term) intellectuals from Irving Kristol to Paul Wolfowitz and Condoleezza Rice attract so much abuse: the intelligent, programmatic, articulate

conservative is felt to be unnatural, and even willfully perverse. The rightist intellectual is almost necessarily a sell-out, a mercenary, and a traitor to his (or her) proper calling and class.

Notions of intellectual repute are sufficiently ingrained in popular culture that the ex-Manchester *Guardian*—the newspaper of the chattering, if no longer the industrious, classes—can sell itself against the *Daily Telegraph* and even against the *The Times* as the paper of enlightened and sophisticated people ('unfashionably intelligent', say the adverts); the Toronto *Globe and Mail*, the Canadian answer to the *Guardian*, has sold itself with the slogan 'read up'. It is the claim—and the effectiveness of the claim—to superior intellectual qualities that constitutes intellectual repute, rather than those qualities themselves, and the marketing executives of these papers are clearly of the opinion that it is a claim that will appeal to a significant market sector. Attributions of intellectual repute and disrepute are often inexplicit, in the sense that they are as often presumed as directly stated. They come out more frequently in slogans and partisan rhetoric than in reasoned argument. The intellectual repute of progressivism and the intellectual disrepute of conservatism have a kind of 'always already' presence in modern political discourse, and so are as likely to appear in the place of a clinching expostulation, a rhetorical imputation, or an advertising slogan, as in that of an explicit premise or reasoned conclusion. When we hear of 'the stupid party', we know who is designated.

### **'The stupid party': A thought reflex in modern politics**

If the explicit attribution of intellectual repute to the left and of disrepute to the right is rooted—at least in British politics—in the period of Mill and Palmerston, it is a pattern that persists on both sides of the Atlantic today. The expression 'the stupid party' has become a journalistic cliché, and is now applied to the Republican Party as much as to the Tories. The archetype this expression captures is readily recognizable by journalists and by their public; it therefore flows easily and unreflectively into a multiplicity of keyboards and onto to a corresponding number of screens, broadsheets and airwaves. If ideologies are conceived of as thought practices, here we have a thought reflex.

A LexisNexis news archive service search of the two years prior to 13 December 2002 found 118 non-duplicate articles using the phrase 'the stupid party' (see Table 1). Fifty three were extraneous descriptions of unsatisfactory celebrations or chance adjacencies of words. Included in this extraneous category were articles missing the definite article (the software produced results with both the definite and the indefinite article; 'a stupid party' was counted as non-archetypal), or offering no explicit clue (no close contextual mention of a party name) as to political connection. Of the remaining 65 uses of the phrase 'the stupid party', with the definite article and with a clear reference to a political party, 34 referred to the American Republican party and 29 to the British Tories.

Two news stories referred to the U.S. Democratic Party as 'the stupid party', and both seemed ironic, though of course a researcher who expected that the phrase could

**Table 1.** News archive search for ‘the stupid party’

Classification	Count	Percentage of non-extraneous
Right (Tory/Republican)	63	97
Left (Labour/Democrat)	2	3
Extraneous	53	–
Total	118	–

only apply to rightists could fall into the methodological trap of imagining every piece of contrary data to be ironic: in order to avoid this pitfall, these two instances are separated. The conclusion is that 63 of 65, or 97%, of news stories that use the phrase ‘the stupid party’ in an archetypal and directly attributed political fashion use it to name a conservative party. ‘The stupid party’ as a description for conservative parties is, in other words, a journalistic cliché, and like all clichés it is interesting to the student of ideological thought practices precisely because it is so recognizable and so familiar that it can be a cliché. The cliché expresses what is thought and felt to be natural and already known, which is to say that it expresses what has been decontested, and what is therefore expressed reflexively rather than reflectively. The journalist in need of a quick ‘hook’—in the journalistic jargon—for the story of the minute finds it readily available.

Of the articles in this sample, many refer to Republicans or Tories as ‘the stupid party’ in a sardonic way: the U.S. elections of November 2002 produced an unexpected Republican victory, and many comments resembled that of the conservative *Weekly Standard* (‘Democrats: are they going to become the stupid party?’), a rhetorical question whose verb implied that they were not now so considered) and the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* (‘For so many years the Republicans were considered the stupid party’).<sup>9</sup> Comments of this type refer to a conventional stereotype of Republican stupidity, implicitly portraying the Democrats as only contingently stupid; they thereby reinforce the idea that it is the more conservative party that is, or has been thought to be, the natural and non-contingent home of stupidity. That the Democrats should appear stupid (or Tories and Republicans intelligent) is therefore thought arresting, novel and worthy of note. The journalist in need of a catchy headline could thus appeal to this well-known archetype in order to contrast it with a putatively paradoxical reality. That the constructed paradox worked, or was felt by numerous journalists and their editors to work, of course points to the existence of the archetype without which the implied paradox could not exist. When faced with an event such as the British general election of 2001, in which the Conservatives were losers, the epithet ‘the stupid party’ was repeated just as automatically, but the element of paradox was dropped: it was now implied that it was the natural idiocy of the Tories that had led to defeat. The constant factor is the attribution of stupidity to conservatives. With the possible exception of the two articles mentioned above, none of the studied articles said or implied that the Democrats,

the Liberals, the Labour Party, or any other left-leaning party was the natural home of stupidity; none said that Tories or Republicans had a natural or historic tendency to express intelligence.

A number of the articles in this sample refer to one another, but that fact does not invalidate the results: on the contrary, it reinforces them. An article that gets cited in multiple venues has struck a chord with the journalistic public. If the *Deutsche Presse-Agentur* and the *San Francisco Chronicle* of 13 November 2002, just after the Congressional elections, pick up that week's *Weekly Standard* editorial asking 'Democrats: are they going to become the stupid party?' this fact is additional evidence that the original editorial was, in the opinion of the editors picking up the story, a recognizable exemplar of what serious people were saying.<sup>10</sup> That some of the instances counted by this study are such echo-chamber repetitions of ideas already expressed reinforces the argument that these ideas were present, ready to be thought, and ready to be thought expressive of the mood of the moment. This sample of two years' worth of journalistic output is a study of the articulation of a cliché, and of course clichés are just as significant to the historian of ideologies as original ideas: a cliché is evidence for existing, decontested, and repeatedly articulated structures of belief—an intellectual reflex—while the originality of an idea only implies its previous non-existence, and hence its relative causal irrelevance to current power.

### **The intellectual disrepute of the right, and its political uses**

When rightists make intellectual claims, these are likely to be appeals to the plain common sense of the ordinary citizen as against the high-flown, overly sophisticated theories of impractical ivory tower professors or scheming metropolitan officials. Such imprecations can be powerful, as any number of American politicians, from Adlai Stevenson to Al Gore, could attest: Stevenson, the Democratic Presidential nominee in 1952 and 1956, was portrayed by his opponents as a pointy-headed eastern liberal, notwithstanding that he came from Springfield, Illinois, the city of Lincoln, just down road from the iconic middle American city of Peoria, and notwithstanding that he was nominated with the support of the emphatically non-pointy-headed Cook County machine of Chicago Mayor Richard Daley. More recently, Gore was of course reduced to camouflaging his detailed knowledge of issues in an attempt to appear a regular guy from Tennessee, thus feeding a well-deserved image of inauthenticity. Anti-intellectual populism is not unique to America: the British phrase 'too clever by half' has been applied to politicians from the Tory Cabinet minister Iain MacLeod to Harold Wilson, and it always means not 'one of us' (to appropriate the title of Hugo Young's biography of Margaret Thatcher). 'Too clever by half' is never intended as a compliment: 'in an Englishman's mouth [it] means a very severe censure', in the words of a prominent and not entirely hostile observer of English anti-intellectualism.<sup>11</sup>

As well as attributing cultural or intellectual elitism to their opponents, rightists have often gone so far as to claim intellectual disrepute for themselves: Republicans

'often call themselves the "stupid party"', as the Republican paper the *Washington Times* observed recently.<sup>12</sup> When in 2001 George W. Bush taunted the American press corps with the charge that they preferred eating 'brie and cheese' in Georgetown to hamburgers in Crawford, Texas, he was completely on-message: intellectual repute implies a claim to cultural sophistication, and that claim of cultural superiority was an easy target for the populist politician who wanted to emphasize that he shared the values of the common people, and so did not know that brie is a cheese. Republicans have been claiming to represent the common sense of ordinary people against the impractical (and sometimes even un-American) theories of left-wing opponents for generations. It was an obvious claim to use against Stevenson, as it had been twenty years earlier against the 'brains trust' of the Roosevelt administration, and before that against the internationalist foreign policy of the former Princeton historian Woodrow Wilson.

The Republican claim of intellectual disrepute can be traced back to Abraham Lincoln's carefully constructed image as a simple country boy, born in the proverbial log cabin, and thence to the Republicans' 'know-nothing' forebears. The epithet 'know-nothing' was originally applied to the nativist secret societies among the forerunners of the Republican Party in the 1840s: members were instructed to respond to questions about those organizations with the answer that they knew nothing.<sup>13</sup> But the phrase rapidly adopted another, intellectually disreputable, meaning, and the Republicans have continued for a century and half to place intellectual disrepute, and its associated anti-foreign, anti-elitist, anti-liberal, and anti-eastern establishment resentments at the center of their appeals to Midwestern, Southern, working class and rural voters. Attempts to construct a 'liberal Republicanism', a combination of Lincoln's egalitarianism with intellectual sophistication, failed in Horace Greeley's disastrous campaign of 1872, and such people were the direct object of Theodore Roosevelt's favorite derogatory epithet, 'mugwump', which meant an impractical and over-privileged eastern aristocrat. The attribution of intellectual repute and of associated anti-eastern and anti-upper class stereotypes to his opponents, and the coincident claim for himself of straight-talking, all-American, masculine honesty was effective even in the hands of a Harvard-educated, history-writing, eastern aristocrat like Theodore Roosevelt.

More recent Republicans have appealed with equal success to the archetypes of intellectual (dis)repute: Ronald Reagan, for instance, built a political career on being underestimated. It has recently emerged that his radio speeches, found to be compellingly well-phrased by large numbers of Americans, were written and edited in longhand by Reagan alone, though during his political career he had been quite happy to have it believed that aides had written them for him.<sup>14</sup> That the establishment press should have so eagerly propagated this useful myth is a further illustration of the power of prejudices of intellectual repute. The left has often accused its opponents of being idiots, and American right has had particular success in turning this accusation around. The implication, in a country with populist traditions that go back beyond the Whisky rebellion and the Democratic Republicans of Jefferson and Jackson all the way to Nat Bacon—in other words,

with populist traditions older than the Republic itself—that Reagan was a man of the people, and not some pointy-headed theorizing intellectual, served Republican purposes well. The image, a generation earlier, of the genial, golf-playing, but intellectually challenged Eisenhower had been equally effective, however ridiculous such a picture of the victor of Normandy and the Ardennes might have been to a clear-minded observer.

In this respect, the Republicans are the American ‘country party’, in the early eighteenth century sense of that phrase. As J.G.A. Pocock has famously argued, there are significant continuities between the Tory country rhetoric of Augustan England and that of American libertarian republicanism. Both emphasize the plain-spoken masculine honesty of the country folk as against the effete dishonesty of the central government, of its metropolitan context, and of the sharp manipulators imagined to rule there. It is a rhetoric that is now the property of libertarian, rural and (with some element of tension) evangelical Republicans.<sup>15</sup> The appeal is of course familiar to observers of the Thatcher and post-Thatcher Tories, and it is evident in their chosen existential ‘other’, a metropolitan liberal elite said to be foreign to ordinary British values.

Intellectual repute and its associated archetypes often cut in both directions, and though it is customarily the conservative who is painted as unsophisticated and untutored, the latter has often been able effectively to counter-spin that omnipresent archetype, thus presenting the leftist as out-of-touch with prosaic reality, and the conservative as the embodiment of commonsense. That these patterns have persisted in recognizable ways for so long shows that partisan archetypes of intellectual repute have existed for as long as have parties. That parallel versions of the archetypes of the stupid conservative and the overly intellectual progressive have been successfully invoked from both right and left argues that those archetypes name something felt on both sides of the spectrum to be important to what politics is about.

### **Intellectual repute: The respectability of the intelligentsia**

Given that there is a powerful and persistent set of archetypes opposing the stupid conservative to the intelligent progressive, and given that these notions have persisted over the centuries and have been invoked from both sides of the political spectrum—the phenomenon of intellectual repute is no mere one-way insult—it is worth asking what material and class implications these notions have. For Veblen, as for Marx or indeed any other sociologist, respectabilities are expressions of class. It would be passing strange if political actors on both sides of the Anglo-Saxon spectrum could persistently have appealed to an idea without that idea having some material and class basis. When the Tories were portrayed (and portrayed themselves) as unsophisticated but tax-paying country bumpkins, and the Whigs were caricatured as corrupt, tax-eating, court-centered urban sophisticates, the material implications of intellectual repute pointed to an urban/rural conflict whose class dimension, such as it was, opposed the partly urban land-owning and commercial upper aristocracy to the land-owning but rural and largely non-commercial lower aristocracy. Today, intellectual

repute is still attributed to classes associated with the state or (as it ambitiously calls itself) the ‘public’ sector, while intellectual disrepute is attributed to the prosaic, profit-seeking bourgeois private sector: the attribution of intellectual repute to the class associated (both imaginatively and materially) with the central government remains constant, although commerce is no longer associated with intellectual status. Attributions of intellectual repute change, which is one reason why they are interesting.

It is symbolically convenient that the cliché ‘the stupid party’ is most often associated with the name of Mill, the emblematic secular, state-employed, metropolitan intellectual (if it be allowed that the East India Company was in effect an arm of the state). Mill’s disdain for those who did not deploy his formidable intellectual resources is inherited today by those who occupy a similar class and economic position, and who continue to impute intellectual disrepute to their opponents: disdain for the political right is an attitude emblematic of the intelligentsia, which both thinks and feels conservatism—opposition to the schemes of the intelligentsia—to be essentially stupid. It is no accident that the state-centric and often state employed (directly or indirectly, often via the educational sector) intelligentsia should attribute an inherent lack of its own valued and defining qualities of intelligence, sophistication and knowledge to those suspicious of a large and active state, which is to say, to the intelligentsia’s conservative bourgeois class opponents.

The notion that intellectuals, technicians, state employees, managers, or some subset of those groups can constitute a ‘New Class’ with an organic relation to the state has a history that is both contentious and distinguished. Given that the idea is associated with Trotskyites and neo-conservatives, two groups which do not command universal approbation, it is an idea that can attract particularly vituperative denials. The term ‘the New Class’ is of course normally associated with the book of that name by the Yugoslav dissident Milovan Djilas, who held that the communist elite had become such a class, although he gave intellectuals no great role within it.<sup>16</sup> Others, from the literary critic Lionel Trilling to the unconventional American Marxist Alvin W. Gouldner, have argued that intellectuals have an autonomous role within American society, and that their behavior can be analyzed as that of a class.<sup>17</sup> That those who make their living with their brains constitute a large group in contemporary Anglo-Saxon societies is obvious, as is the fact that many are employed by the state or state-supported sectors: it is hardly innovative to analyze such a recognizable group with a common source of employment and evident ideological patterns through the lens of class.

Though it is not within the scope of a short article comprehensively to resume the literature on ‘the New Class’ or the intelligentsia, let alone on the social functions of intellectuals (I shall use the terms interchangeably), it is reasonable to assume that the large state sectors of modern Western democracies have created groups whose material and social interests are rooted in the spending and the ideologies of those states. It is a matter of common observation that most of the intelligentsia is in some way or other funded by the state, through the educational sector, the civil service, or the vast range of organizations that exist to influence or

are in part funded by the state or its employees. The socialist economist Joseph Schumpeter proposed, as a piece of friendly advice to social democrats, that those employed by the state could form an important part of the social base of a leftist party.<sup>18</sup> Large parts of the intelligentsia are employed by the state, or aspire to influence it, and largely coincident parts support leftist parties, as Schumpeter foresaw. The intelligentsia therefore has an interest in a large state sector.

Many members of the intelligentsia would be offended to be told that loyalty to the state was characteristic of their ideology; many intellectuals imagine themselves to be anti-government, 'transgressive', 'alternative', 'radical', 'left', 'subversive', 'subaltern', 'insurgent', or 'oppositional'. The available—and growing—variety of adversarial verbiage demonstrates that oppositionality is one of the most dearly, and most self-consciously, held of the attitudes of today's intelligentsia. Many members of the intelligentsia, even those who in fact have no current relation to the state, or who feel radically alienated from the government of the day (as for instance most British intellectuals did under Mrs. Thatcher), in fact spend their time and their energies agitating or planning for a change of government, a change of political attitudes, or even a change of regime, in the holistic, Straussian sense of that term. But there is a difference between the state, as a complex of interrelated institutions ultimately, largely or significantly funded by tax money, and the government, meaning either the small number of individuals who sit on the Treasury Bench, or the larger groups that actively in Parliament or directly in the civil service obey those on the Treasury Bench: an imaginative or material link to the state is in no way incompatible with hatred of the government of the day.

Our traditional ideologies—conservatism, liberalism, and socialism—in their procrustean forms all date to the nineteenth century, the era of the Gladstonian capitalist 'night watchman' state, and inherit their dogmatic ideas about the social place of the state and the relations of various classes to it from that period. The Gladstonian state spent under 10% of national income. In an era in which state sectors spend between about 35% (in the United States) and 50% (in the other Anglo-American countries) of national income, it is hardly possible that class interests should not form around the state.<sup>19</sup> Even the most orthodox of Marxists have spoken of 'strong state capitalism'.<sup>20</sup> Those accustomed to theorizing about the influence of the military-industrial complex, which has in Britain and the U.S. in the past 50 years consumed between 3 and 10% of national income, should in all consistency be open to the idea that interest groups will necessarily form around the state, and the interests of those groups will not be identical to those of society at large.

Evidence for the class power of the state-centric intelligentsia is easy to find: the intelligentsia in league with the state sector has even succeeded in modifying and significantly attenuating the nature of unconditionally alienable property and the related notion of freedom of contract—those central capitalist institutions—neither of which are now considered effective answers to intelligentsia demands for the regulation of business in the name of any number of social causes, from environmental preservation to racial inclusiveness to gender equality. Neither of those venerable artefacts of capitalism, unconditional property rights and freedom

of contract, have stood against the extension of an agenda of ‘rights’ into the realm of what was once considered private business: neither are considered legally or morally effective answers to what some on the right call the grievance industry. The discourse of ‘rights’ was of course originally designed to restrict the operation of the state, but now often serves the opposite purpose. The intelligentsia has taken control of a discourse that once served purely capitalist purposes, but that it now uses to justify state power: that fact is itself evidence of class power.

Veblen’s epigone C. Wright Mills, a radical Texan and analyst of corporate power and American ideology writing in the 1950s, wrote that were the institutions of the school, the family and the church not to meet the military-corporate ‘power elite’s’ needs, they would be changed.<sup>21</sup> Within two decades of Mills’ *The Power Elite*, however, it was the corporate and military citadels of bourgeois power that had been rearranged, and reduced in size and status, in accordance with the intelligentsia’s demands. Mills wrote near probably the last moment when it was possible to pretend that the intelligentsia was an oppositional class, however dear to its heart that particular pose remains. One may make any number of arguments about the desirability of the intelligentsia’s reforming projects, but they have to a large degree been translated into policy, and their implementation is evidence of power. There are, in other words, arguments to be made for the existence of the intelligentsia as a class, and it is a class not without power. The fact that a left-wing version of intellectual repute exists and is widely emulated, in the Veblenite sense of the notions of emulation and repute, may not in itself prove that a state-centric intelligentsia exists and has class characteristics, but it is further evidence for an already tenable case.

Given that intellectual superiority is the basis of the claim to legitimacy advanced by the ‘New Class’—a class whose power rests not upon formal (and hence honest, avowed and self-avowed) ownership of the means of production but rather upon the skills required to operate, to manage, to direct and even to construct (socially and materially) the means of production and the ideological environment that organizes them—those (self-)defining intellectual claims, along with their cognate ideological attitudes, will evoke emulation. By a similar logic, the intelligentsia will impute a lack of its valued and self-attributed defining attribute to its opponents. Just as the prejudices of the middle class will impute a lack of bourgeois respectability to other classes, those of the aristocracy a lack of nobility, martial repute or honor, and those of a worker a lack of industry (an interesting reflection of the emulation of bourgeois values), the class prejudices of the intelligentsia impute to its opponents a lack of intelligence, which is to say a lack of intellectual respectability. The bourgeois is accused of narrow-minded vulgarity; the bourgeois politician, from Calvin Coolidge to George W. Bush, is accused of being an idiot.

### **Competing classes, competing reputes**

Veblen’s *Leisure Class* was published in 1899, just as modern disciplinary boundaries were ossifying: no modern economist could write, let alone publish,

200-odd pages of anthropological speculation innocent of numbers and entirely unsupported by scholarly apparatus. But however unmethodical his method, however complete his dependence upon *aperçu*, Veblen put together a suggestive set of insights based upon his own powerfully jaundiced observations of gilded-age America. Veblen is best known for the phrase ‘conspicuous consumption’, a phrase that denotes consumption not for direct utility but for social function—consumption that is ‘useful’ only in the sense that it enhances the social status of the consumer.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, it is possible to speak of conspicuous opinion, in the sense that attitudes, including directly ideological attitudes, are held and conspicuously disported because they are felt to be reputable, which is to say because they are associated with power or with the possibility of power, and because their display associates the possessor with power and status. Though Veblen is commonly remembered for his discussion of the conspicuous emulation of reputable behavior in the context of consumer consumption and sartorial fashion, he also applied his ideas to cultural attitudes and to political ideologies.<sup>23</sup> Attitudes, like consumer goods, can be acquired in order to be disported, however hidden, disingenuous or even subliminal the motive for their acquisition may be. It is of course in the nature of such attitudinizing that it usually occurs in the semi-conscious realm of feeling rather than in that of articulate thought: the latter would be too self-evidently manipulative to work as desired.

Members of the intelligentsia base their identities upon their intellectual qualities; such people will naturally resist sociological explanations of their attitudes and opinions. But intellectuals as much as—or perhaps more than—anyone else are required to possess and to display conspicuous opinions on any number of politically related topics. That characteristic intellectual attitudes should be anti-capitalist and anti-bourgeois is a straightforward matter of class interest. That such attitudes should come to seem *de rigueur*, almost as a matter of etiquette or decency, would also be explained by a Veblenite sociologist as a matter of class identity and emulative repute, or in other words, as a matter of the conspicuous display of attitudes and aptitudes associated with class power. It is hardly surprising that conservative attitudes—attitudes that transgress the decencies of class solidarity—should be labeled by the intelligentsia as lacking the essential self-celebrated quality of the intellectual, intelligence. As Schumpeter observed, anti-capitalist attitudes are ‘almost a requirement of the etiquette of discussion . . . any other attitude is voted not only foolish but anti-social’.<sup>24</sup> It is no accident that related notions of intellectual and cultural repute and disrepute are close to the surface of most modern politics, nor is it accidental that the resonant figure of ‘the stupid party’ should persistently and effectively be applied to the intelligentsia’s conservative bourgeois political and class opponents.

Like Italian suits and fast cars, ideologies are produced, consumed, and conspicuously disported for social as well as strictly utilitarian reasons, which is to say that opinions are held and displayed, and acquired in order to be displayed, because they are associated with power and because they enhance the status of the consumer. Ideologies are disported because they are thought to sound good and they are thought to sound good because they express the kinds of attitudes that

respected people are supposed to evince, and not only because they may be convincing descriptions of reality or useful tools for the advancement of interests. Ideological positions are emulated, which is to say copied from people of status, and conspicuously displayed because they sound respectable, which is to say that they sound progressive and sophisticated: what has changed since Veblen is the fact that in many circles, particularly among what are called the ‘chattering classes’<sup>25</sup>—those classes that make their living in the educational, artistic, cultural, journalistic and non-military state sectors—it is leftwing attitudes that are felt to be sophisticated and hence respectable, whereas a hundred years ago it was conservatism that Veblen described as ‘decorous’.<sup>26</sup> The respectability of leftist ideologies speaks of a class whose interests construct and are served by the phenomenon of intellectual repute.

A Veblenite analyst of early twenty-first century Anglo-Saxon societies would observe plenty of people emulating what Veblen called pecuniary repute—conspicuously displaying wealth and its secondary characteristics—from within a bespoke suit or from behind the wheel of a Mercedes. But such an analyst would also have to see numerous individuals emulating intellectual repute from behind a ginger beard or from within a tweed skirt, and numerous others emulating a closely related species of intellectual and cultural repute from within a black turtleneck, from a seat in a fashionable café, from the wine-bar of an art gallery or from behind a copy of *Prospect* or the *New Left Review*. The free thinking, self-consciously alienated, artistically sensitive bohemian is one of the more predictable self-constructions presented on today’s smorgasbord of prefabricated, and hence recognizable and reputable, social identities. Allied to the intellectual respectability of the intellectual rebel, there can be no missing the kind of blatantly, and even quite stupidly, adversarial cultural respectability—the advertised membership of a group with its own status codes—that is emulated from underneath green hair or from behind intentionally ugly and shocking tattoos or piercings: even rebels who rebel in common with all the others must imagine themselves to be great freethinkers. One might speculate that there may be some psychic function in the obvious contradiction between the bureaucratic, profoundly secure, and avowedly rationalistic environment of the intelligentsia, and the romantically adversarial and even antinomian<sup>27</sup> nature of the cultural values celebrated by that class, with its defining need for an adversary to shock and its constant search for boundaries to transgress. What Gertrude Himmelfarb called ‘the herd of independent minds’ has rituals and respectabilities of its own, and that variety of repute must be seen by a Veblenite as an articulation of class power and a reflection of status.

A modern Veblen could of course find either variety of emulation, the pecuniary or the intellectual/cultural, each within its own trademark environments, from the City to the Faculty Club to the New Labour think tank to the punk bar. The two emulations coexist, however uneasily, and even at times acrimoniously. Numerous individuals negotiate a life based upon a self-construction somewhere between the two. But the Veblenite could not deny that each emulation reflected material, economic, institutional, and ultimately class dynamics. Trilling pointed to the

MARK F. PROUDMAN

existence of an adversarial intelligentsia and to the paradox of its position, despising power, being courted by the wealthy and powerful, and wishing simultaneously to wield power:

Given the legend of the free spirit at war with the bourgeoisie, it isn't possible to be wholly grave as we note, say, the passion that contemporary wealth feels for contemporary painting . . . Yet around the adversary culture there has formed what I have called a class. . . It is not without power, and we can say of it, as we can say of any other class with a degree of power, that it seeks to aggrandize and perpetuate itself. And, as with any other class, the relation it has to the autonomy of its members makes a relevant question, and the more, of course, by the part that is played in the history of its ideology by the ideal of autonomy. There is reason to believe that the relation is ambiguous.<sup>28</sup>

Status, power, influence and success become associated with the defining characteristics of powerful classes. Veblen would see in the fondness of wealth for abstract art a form of conspicuous consumption bespeaking pecuniary repute. But the consumers of culture—and especially of high culture now that it is completely divorced from any attempt to represent or to provide pleasure—express not merely their wealth but their erudition, and the latter attribute is displayed more consciously and with less bad conscience. Even and perhaps especially for the possessors of great wealth, respectability has become associated with intelligence and sophistication. Veblen was primarily concerned with the consumers of high culture; if we ask instead after the respectabilities of the producing class—a group now numerous and influential enough to constitute at least a strata of a class, as Trilling, who knew it intimately, observed—its qualities of cultural and intellectual sophistication command emulation among those who only wish to appear cultured, but who nevertheless feel a need so to appear. The need itself speaks of class status.

Central to the intelligentsia's rituals is what Gouldner refers to as a 'Culture of Critical Discourse' [capitals in original], by which he means a culture in which certain types of language, and associated ideas and formats, perform a social and class function as well as a purely communicative and intellectual one.<sup>29</sup> Geertz conceives of political ideologies as symbols important in the construction of social identity; in a similar manner, Gouldner points to critical discourse as a socially functional set of signals by which members of the intelligentsia recognize one another—and at the same time recognize who is not 'one of us'. Classes and sub-class professional and status groups have always had such sets of signals, signals by which in- and out-groups are recognized. As Veblen pointed out, the aristocracy long employed derivative and even obsolete military skills such as riding, shooting and fencing in this way;<sup>30</sup> a classical education and the related ability to pass smart remarks in ancient languages once had a social function of the kind; dress, artistic taste, and most notoriously accent and diction also performed in this way. The social functions once performed by horsemanship and a crack accent are now filled in some circles by Gouldner's culture of critical discourse; as with the former, it takes time and training to acquire fluency in the latter. Just as it is impossible to fake

a good seat on a horse, it is difficult to construct a critical discourse without having spent considerable time in the bosom of the requisite class, absorbing its speech and learning to emulate its values, even if it does take less arduous training to deconstruct tropes of gender than to construct iambic pentameter in Latin. Just as class membership and ideological adhesion was once signaled by advertent allusions to Cicero, it can now be disported by a well-placed reference to a polysyllabic Parisian. By contrast, a clean cut Texan who uses Anglo-Saxon words and speaks with a southern accent about an interventionist God is transgressing the culture of critical discourse, is therefore offensive to the class values of the intelligentsia, and is duly held up to ridicule; a self-proclaimed 'hairy leftist' from Cambridge can get away with avowed Christianity because he expresses himself in the right kind of discourse and surrounds himself with intellectually reputable political, social and cultural attitudes. As they always have, class prejudices become bound up with regional and national stereotypes, and are the stronger for it.

### **Intellectual repute: A useful category of ideological analysis**

I may seem to have come a long way from Lord Palmerston's 'stupid old Tory Party' to the group rituals and class position of the post-modernistic intelligentsia. But, as has been shown, the notion that some ideologies are inherently more intelligent and more appropriate to members of 'the chattering classes' than others has run through our politics over a period of centuries. One can demonstrate empirically the prevalence of the cliché of 'the stupid party', and related archetypes have been repeatedly invoked from both sides of the political spectrum. While its causes and consequences among the deeper preconceptions of our politics must necessarily be a matter of conjecture, to be speculatively recovered by means more akin to those of literary criticism than of empirical political science, it would be curious indeed to hold that the existence of such a persistently resonant figure as the block-headed backwoods Tory—or his obverse, the intellectually supple progressive—did not speak of any deeply rooted thought habits.

It is evident that parts of the intellectual left over the past couple of centuries, from John Stuart Mill to Harold Laski to the contemporary feminist, multicultural and homosexual movements, have been able to implement large parts of their programs and to place members of their movements in positions of state power. Their power has had, as a consistent Veblenite would expect, consequences in the realm of intellectual and cultural repute. It is now considered in many circles, and powerful circles at that, as indecent to challenge the intelligentsia's views on its central concerns, from multiculturalism to Europe to the iniquities of George W. Bush, as it once would have been to question the bourgeoisie's notions of gender. One need not accept all of the variegated theorizing about the 'New Class' to see that the intellectuals have been able to construct respectabilities of their own.

Those of us likely to sit around a university seminar table, to attend a Hampstead dinner party, to grace the pages of a policy journal, or to read the *Journal of Political Ideologies* will be familiar with manifestations of intellectual repute: we witness on

a regular basis the emulation of reputable attitudes, which is to say of attitudes that are evinced because they are thought proper, appropriate and natural to an intellectual. Support for, say, the Liberal Democrats is more reputable than for the Tories; an underarm copy of the *Guardian* more respectable than a *Telegraph*; a discourse on tropes of masculinity more reputable than a discussion of the tactical employment of the armored division in some battle of yore. Who has not heard an earnest young person deploying a bit too much polysyllabic verbiage, or witnessed an older academic who is just a little too enthusiastic about the latest intellectual fad?

A class that bases its claim to power on its ostensible intelligence will find the idea that its ideologies and its ideas—its most precious creations—are driven by considerations of fashion analogous to those that in Veblen's day dictated the number of birds on a woman's hat or the amount of starch in a man's collar inherently offensive; it is nevertheless the case that ideological positions are evinced for social, bureaucratic and status-oriented reasons among others. We all talk in order to be heard, write in order to be read, and disport in order to be observed. One need not share Veblen's relentlessly cynical view of human behavior in order to see that ideologies, like other cultural attitudes, are acquired and displayed for reputable as well as logical reasons.

These speculations, and any account of semi-conscious status preoccupations can only be speculation, have attempted to sketch what might be called a theory of the chattering classes. The clichés, the archetypes, the mental and even affective fixtures—the thought reflexes, as it were—of those classes are important to the ways in which we think and feel about politics. We need names for the characteristics that are commonly and credibly attributed to ideologies, and one of the more common, more reflexive and also more suggestive of such attributions has been that of intellectual repute. In gallivanting at times rather cavalierly over several centuries' worth of customary names and familiar figures, I have tried to show that the attribution and denial of intellectual respectability to ideologies and to cognate cultural attitudes works in coherent ways. In analyzing an ideology, we should ask among many other questions whether it is intellectually reputable.

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## THE STUPID PARTY

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18. Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1950), p. 310.
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20. Ernest Mandel, *Power and Money: A Marxist Theory of Bureaucracy* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 153.
21. C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 5–6.
22. Veblen, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, pp. 52–75, and *passim*. Citations of Veblen are wont to include the term 'passim' because he returns constantly to further examples and implications of his favourite terms.
23. Veblen, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, esp. pp. 145–150.
24. Schumpeter, *op. cit.*, Ref. 18, p. 63.
25. I have not been able to find a useful genealogy for this oft-used, and likely over-used, expression. It sounds Shavian. That it is the chattering classes themselves which make such conspicuous use of the expression indicates that they feel that it says something intelligible about a recognizable social agent.
26. Veblen, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, p.146.
27. The original antinomians of course believed that the Mosaic Law was unnecessary to the elect. Today's antinomians carry this to the point of parody: they believe that no law is necessary to anyone. The term was a favourite description of the intelligentsia's cultural attitudes of one of that class's most acerbic internal critics, Daniel Bell, in his classic *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (London: Heinemann, 1976), *passim*.
28. Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1967. [1965]), pp. 14–15.
29. Gouldner, *op. cit.*, Ref. 17, pp. 58–59.
30. Veblen, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, pp. 138–154.