The Traditions of Intellectual Life: Their Conditions of Existence and Growth in Contemporary Societies

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THE modern outlook – the outlook of independent curiosity, openness to experience, disciplined inquiry and analysis, reasoned judgment and the appreciation of originality – is the common property of the modern intellectual in all countries. It is contained, in the most diverse ways, in all intellectual activities – in art, science, scholarship and systematic thought. It is the possession or the aspiration of the intellectuals everywhere in the contemporary world.

The modern outlook has grown up with the development of modern European civilization. From Europe it has spread in nearly every direction – into Russia, into the Americas, to Africa, to South Asia and around Asia to all the countries of Southeast Asia and to China and Japan.

The modern outlook grew up under special European conditions of a stable but loosening Christian conception of the world. One condition was the approximate unity of the intellectual classes within each national society, through their association with Church and State and through their share in a unitary cultural tradition formed around a classical humanism in a Christian reinterpretation. Another condition was the high status of intellectual activity, connected with its association with Church and State and the auxiliary and interconnected institutions of universities, aristocracy, gentry and landownership.

Modern intellectual life was born in the polity of absolutism which in the course of modern history turned occasionally towards varying brightnesses of enlightenment, towards monarchy with limited powers, republican liberalism and democracy in different mixtures. It came into being in societies which were markedly hierarchical in structure. Most were peasant societies, feudal or bureaucratic in their government. It thrived in these, as it did in mercantile patrician republics and in constitutional monarchies.

The modern intellectual outlook, in its early centuries, was the work mainly of amateurs. It was a passion, a hobby, an avocation to most of the great creators of modern intellectual traditions. It was not a profession, and there was relatively little institutional provision for creative intellectual exertion.
The modern outlook has been protean in its form and in its content. It has assimilated the discipline of the universities, it has adapted itself to the professional practice of art and literature. It has added new subject matters and changed the distribution of its interest. It has reached into politics and acquired diverse substances in that contact with the various streams of political action.

Modern intellectual life has, in its career of more than four centuries, grown steadily, consolidating and refining itself, expanding its resources, deepening and ramifying its penetration, enriching its traditions and therewith giving new opportunities for their transformation by the oncoming generations of creative talent. The problem which it now faces, on a world-wide scale, is whether it can live under conditions in which it has never had to live before.

The new conditions in which modern intellectual life must be carried on arise from changes within the pattern of intellectual life itself and from changes in its political, economic, organizational and cultural environments. Some of these changes have taken place within the societies in which intellectual life has already reached a high level of creativity. Others arise from the extension of the practice of intellectual life into areas of the world to which it is new, in which it is not a native growth, and where, unlike Europe, it has not emerged from the internal evolution of indigenous intellectual traditions.

Within the continuous flow of the tradition of modern intellectual activity, there has been a pronounced expansion of the systematically cumulative mode of intellectual work, and closely associated with that expansion, has gone an increased density of scientific and scholarly activity. A larger proportion of a tremendously enlarged intellectual class now is engaged in forms of intellectual production which require a deliberate and specific articulation of their own work with what has just gone before. The greatly heightened application of our best talents to science and, to a lesser degree, to scholarship – and the nature of scientific and scholarly progress and of our methods of training in research – have led conjointly to a gigantic multiplication of the amount of scholarly and scientific literature in every field which the members of the intellectual community must read and to which they must contribute. The point has long since been passed when a single person in the course of his lifetime could know the best works of the past and present in every field; we are already at the point where the individual can scarcely read all that is relevant to his field of interest within his own discipline; if he also wishes at the same time to maintain contact with the highest points of intellectual production of the past as well, he must be very selective indeed. These necessities restrict the range of the intellectual's attention, narrow his interests and loosen his attachment to the larger intellectual community and its traditions. Alternatively, they condemn an intellectual to a degree of dilettantism which is hardly compatible in most instances with cre-