



The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

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Algeria, Vietnam, Iraq and the Conscience of the Intellectual

By Lawrence S. Wittner

"History," the French philosopher Julien Benda once remarked, "is made from shreds of justice that the intellectual has torn from the politician." This contention may overestimate the power of the former and underestimate the power of the latter. But it does point to a tension between intellectuals and government officials that has existed at crucial historical junctures--for example, in late nineteenth century France (where the term "intellectual" was first coined in connection with the Dreyfus affair) and in the late twentieth century Soviet Union (where intellectuals provided the major source of dissent).

This tension is well-illustrated by David Schalk's excellent study, *War and the Ivory Tower*, an examination of intellectual *engagement* during France's war in Algeria (1954 to 1962) and America's war in Vietnam (1964 to 1975). Originally published in 1991 and reissued in 2005, this book has new prefaces by Benjamin Stora (a French historian, born in Algeria) and George Herring (a U.S. diplomatic historian), as well as a new introduction by Schalk (a specialist on European intellectual history).

Schalk defines intellectuals by what he calls "their more abstract and distantiated social role which sharply contrasts with almost all others in a modern society. Their function involves a certain kind of creativity, usually through the written word and dealing with ideas in some fashion, often applying ideas in an ethical way that may question the legitimacy of the established authorities." Thus, "a significant percentage of the professoriate and some journalists" can be classified as intellectuals, as can "a substantial portion of the artistic community . . . who theorize in print about their creativity." In his view, "there was, and perhaps remains, a symbiotic relationship between the intellectual and *engagement*," a French term meaning "critical dissent."

Schalk argues convincingly that there were remarkable similarities between the Algerian and Vietnam wars. These include: the use of torture; the looming precedent of the Nuremberg trials; anti-colonial revolt; the undermining of democracy; the murky style of diplomacy; the racist views of Western troops; the unjustified optimism and arrogance of military and political leaders; the forced relocation of civilian populations; and the transformation of the two nations' countryside into vast "free fire zones," in which the military sought to destroy everything that moved.

There were also important differences, he notes, among them the relative absence of Marxism within Algeria's National Liberation Front (FLN); the large French settler population in Algeria; and the presence in France of some 300,000 Algerian workers, whose monthly remittances to the FLN and its government in exile paid a significant portion of the costs of the Algerian independence struggle.

Albert Camus has often been cited as an example of French intellectual resistance to the Algerian war. But, as Schalk reveals, Camus was conflicted about the struggle in Algeria, and at times fell silent about it. "A far more relevant model," Schalk notes, is provided by the French Catholic intelligentsia, especially the left-leaning intellectuals gathered around the monthly *Esprit*. From 1954 and 1962, that journal published 211 articles on the Algerian war, 42 of them by its co-director (and later director) Jean-Marie Domenach. The responsibility of intellectuals, argued Domenach, was to show that "between the frivolous word and the recourse to arms there exists a path"--the path, he eventually concluded, of nonviolent resistance and peaceful protest. The French Left, he believed, had to be awakened from its paralyzing sense of impotence so that it would no longer "cultivate a despair that is the secret weapon of tyranny."

As Schalk notes, *Esprit's* prominence in resistance to the war did not mean that the French Catholic intelligentsia solidly opposed French policy. Indeed, some conservative Catholic intellectuals were keen supporters of France's war in Algeria. Denouncing conscientious objectors, Monseigneur Jean Rodhain declared in 1960, contemptuously, that if they would not fight for France, they should "go and live in another country."

Jean-Paul Sartre and writers connected with his journal, *Les Temps modernes*, also played key roles in the resistance to the Algerian war. Once the full significance of that conflict became apparent to Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and their associates, they dealt with it extensively in that journal. Schalk remarks that, as "the guiding spirit" behind *Les Temps modernes*, "Sartre channeled much of his amazing energy and intellectual power into the struggle to end the war." His articles dealt "unsparingly with issues of collective guilt and thus the historical parallel with the Nazi years, torture, war crimes, and the danger of fascism." He also published a report on the first clandestine congress of the Young Resistance, a group of draft resisters, with the mission of helping deserters and those who refused induction to leave France and locate employment elsewhere.



Jean Paul Sartre

In the fall of 1960, Sartre and others created a sensation by circulating what became known as the Manifesto of the 121, the "Declaration on the Right of Insubordination in the Algerian War." Banned by the government and consequently unpublished (e.g. the pages of *Les Temps modernes* where it was to appear remained conspicuously blank), it sharply denounced the Algerian war, noting that "French militarism . . . has managed to restore torture and to make it once again practically an institution in Europe." The signers declared that they "respect and deem justified the refusal to take up arms against the Algerian people," as well as the "conduct of Frenchmen who . . . supply aid and protection to Algerians who are oppressed in the name of the French people." They concluded that "the cause of the Algerian people, who are contributing in a decisive manner to destroying the colonial system, is the cause of all free men."

The most dramatic and controversial act of resistance by French intellectuals was organized by Francis Jeansen, a philosopher and former protégé of Sartre's. In a powerful statement published in *Esprit* in May 1957, he pointed to French war crimes in Algeria, observing that "this *politique* is ours, these horrors are imputable to us." In Jeansen's view, the terrible responsibility borne by the French for their disgraceful behavior in Algeria necessitated extraordinary action. Consequently, he and his students began transporting suitcases filled with money from Algerian workers in France across the border to Swiss banks. From there the money was funneled toward the purchase of weapons for the Algerian independence struggle. Although some of Jeansen's associates were arrested and tried, he was never caught by the French secret police, despite the fact that he surfaced briefly in Paris for a clandestine press conference.

These activities, led by prominent French intellectuals, fed into accelerating displays of public resistance. A silent protest against the war took place in Paris in June 1957. Banned by the government, it nevertheless drew some 500 to 600 people, including Sartre and Francois Mauriac; 49 of them were arrested for this "crime." In December 1961, 50,000 people turned out for a march in Paris to protest terrorism by the OAS, the secret armed organization to block Algerian

independence. This march also was banned by the government and was broken up by police, with more than a hundred participants hospitalized as a result of police brutality. In February 1962, when the authorities finally granted legal authorization for a peace demonstration, a crowd of half a million surged through Paris.



1960 Paris demonstration opposing the Algerian War

As this account suggests, resistance to the war occurred against the backdrop of significant verbal and physical assault. Addressing French veterans' groups, Robert LaCoste, France's Resident Minister in Algeria, accused "the exhibitionists of the heart and the intellect who have mounted the campaign against torture" of being "responsible for the resurgence of terrorism. . . . I present them to you for your scorn." *Esprit's* increasingly critical stand led to arrests, fines, and seizures of issues of the journal by the government. On two occasions, the OAS bombed the headquarters of *Esprit* with plastic explosives. Sartre's apartment and the offices of *Les Temps modernes* were also bombed with plastic explosives, and pro-war militants marched through the streets of Paris calling for his assassination.

Despite the obstacles erected by the government and colonialist fanatics, however, by the end of the war French intellectuals were in a state of revolt, with the vast majority of them denouncing France's role in Algeria.

Similarly, notes Schalk, among American intellectuals--and particularly those affiliated with elite educational institutions and those who constituted the country's most famous novelists, essayists, artists, and poets--opposition to the U.S. war effort in Vietnam became "overwhelming." In October 1969, for example, the Harvard faculty voted 255 to 81 against U.S. military involvement in Vietnam, and 391 to 16 in support of the upcoming Moratorium Day against the war. An endless stream of antiwar petitions appeared in the *New York Times* and elsewhere, signed by faculty at top universities and by other intellectual luminaries.

The most influential of these petitions--inspired by the Manifesto of the 121--was the "Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority," which appeared in the October 12, 1967, issue of the *New York Review of Books*. Signed by Philip Berrigan, Noam Chomsky, Paul Goodman, Denise Levertov, Dwight Macdonald, Herbert Marcuse, Linus Pauling, Susan Sontag, and others, the "Call" argued that the kinds of actions taken by U.S. troops in Vietnam--the destruction of villages, the internment of civilian populations in concentration camps, and summary executions of civilians--were those that America and its World War II allies "declared to be crimes against humanity . . . and for which Germans were sentenced at Nuremberg." Everyone "must choose the course of resistance dictated by his conscience and circumstances," they argued, but resistance to military service in Vietnam is "courageous and justified." Addressing "all men of good will," they asked them to join "in this confrontation with immoral authority. . . . Now is the time to resist."

The *New York Review*, the nation's leading intellectual journal, devoted enormous attention to the Vietnam War, publishing 262 articles on the subject between 1964 and 1975. The most famous of them, Schalk notes, was Noam Chomsky's "The Responsibility of Intellectuals," which appeared in February 1967. In numerous ways, it set the tone for the "Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority," and represented the shift of American intellectuals from educational efforts to calls for extralegal action. "It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies," Chomsky wrote. But he contrasted this obligation with the practices of establishment intellectuals, who lied and dissembled to serve power. The moral was clear: in the circumstances of the Vietnam War, the only appropriate response was resistance.

In later writings, Chomsky admitted that he felt "uncomfortable about proposing draft refusal publicly, since it is a rather cheap proposal from someone my age." But he did advocate tax resistance, "both because it symbolizes a refusal to make a voluntary contribution to the war machine and also because it indicates a willingness . . . to take illegal measures to oppose an indecent government." In addition, Chomsky participated in antiwar demonstrations and was arrested during the October 1967 march on the Pentagon. Like almost all other American and French intellectuals, though, Chomsky consistently rejected violent protest. He wrote: "Continued mass actions, patient explanation, principled resistance can be boring, depressing. But those who program the B-52 attacks and the 'pacification' exercises are not bored, and as long as they continue in their work, so must we."

Other prominent U.S. intellectuals also became *engagé*, including Hans Morgenthau, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Hardwick, Joseph Heller, Mary McCarthy, Norman Mailer, Muriel Rukeyser, Eric Bentley, Ann Sexton, William Styron, Anais Nin, Henry Steele Commager, and Robert Penn Warren. Draft counseling, teach-ins against the war, and antiwar commencement ceremonies preoccupied some of America's most illustrious minds. "For many intellectuals," observes Schalk, "the Vietnam episode lay in a special category. It stood outside the normal realm of debate." As Martin Bernal put it, in another article in the *New York Review*, the Vietnam War could be categorized with "Nazi concentration camps." Reflecting their bitterness, Susan Sontag wrote in 1967: "America has become a criminal, sinister country--swollen with priggishness, numbed by affluence, bemused by the monstrous conceit that she has the mandate to dispose of the destiny of the world, of life itself, in terms of her own interests and jargon."

The powerful, of course, were enraged by the *engagement* of the intellectuals. Officials in the Johnson and Nixon administrations denounced them, launched investigations of them, placed them on "enemies" lists, attempted to disrupt their activities, and prosecuted them. In 1968, Benjamin Spock, William Sloane Coffin Jr., Mitchell Goodman, Marcus Raskin, and Michael Ferber were indicted for counseling, aiding, and abetting draft registrants to "fail, refuse, and evade" service in the U.S. armed forces; among the "overt acts" cited in the indictment was the "Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority." Father Daniel Berrigan, after indictment for the destruction of draft records, declared himself a "fugitive from injustice" and went underground, from which he somehow granted interviews and made public appearances. Other prominent intellectual critics of the war, such as Staughton Lynd, had their academic employment challenged or terminated.



1969 San Francisco Anti-War Demonstration

Schalk places this chronicle of escalating *engagement* in France and the United States within three stages: a pedagogical stage, in which intellectuals critiqued official justifications for their country's wars; a moral stage, in which they challenged the ethical basis of their country's behavior; and a counter-legal stage, in which they promoted civil disobedience. This model proposed by Schalk nicely fits the trend of resistance in both countries.

Schalk has written a masterly work, which has stood up extraordinarily well in the years from its initial publication to this new edition. His careful style, thorough research, and judicious conclusions make this an excellent study of intellectual *engagement*. Its relevance goes beyond the crises of conscience in France and the United States over their governments' brutal wars in the Third World to the role of intellectuals in modern society.

In this broader framework, Schalk speculates on whether intellectual *engagement* is a phenomenon solely of the past, and concludes that it probably is not. But "to elicit a profound moral reaction from its intellectual elites," he maintains, "a government in power has to do something stupid and evil enough." Furthermore, "the external historical situation . . . must not appear totally hopeless and impermeable to change."

George Herring, in his preface to the book, takes up this issue and applies it to American intellectuals and the current U.S. war in Iraq. "The insurgency that began in Iraq after the . . . spring 2003 U.S. invasion bears a marked resemblance to the wars in Algeria and Vietnam," he observes. "The Abu Ghraib scandal calls forth memories of French torture in Algeria and the notorious tiger cages at Con Son in South Vietnam. Indeed, the sometimes-bewildered looks on the faces of American soldiers in Iraqi cities are reminiscent of the expressions of those who fought earlier wars in Algeria and Vietnam." And, yet, he notes, intellectual dissent has been relatively muted. "Where is the outrage against government lies and blundering? Where is the call to resist illegitimate authority?"

Of course, these are rhetorical questions, pointing to the limited revolt against the Iraq war within the ranks of American intellectuals. To be sure, Chomsky and Howard Zinn once again are in the forefront of antiwar dissent, and they are joined by other prominent intellectuals. And the Iraq war is certainly unpopular among members of the intelligentsia, as it is among large sections of the general public. But the great wave of protest and, especially, resistance that characterized U.S. intellectual life in the late 1960s and early 1970s has not been replicated in the past few years. Why?

One reason may be a sense of futility. With the administration of George W. Bush in power, there is a widespread assumption that the fanatical ideologues that staff the U.S. government are impermeable to reason and that only the disastrous consequences of their own folly will lead to a change of policy. Another, related reason may be the narrowing scope for intellectual dissent in the U.S. mass communications media, which have grown increasingly brazen in their promotion of rightwing, nationalist, anti-intellectual propaganda. While critical thought is alive and well outside the mass media, above all in myriad electronic publications as well as in music, art, film and other cultural spheres, it is as if two exclusive realms of communication exist and rarely intersect, with critics excluded above all from radio and TV as well as mainstream print media.

Yet another reason might lie closer to home: Without a draft that will draw young men involuntarily into the war, many students, young intellectuals and would-be intellectuals on the nation's college and university campuses have no immediate fear that the Iraq war will touch them directly. In these circumstances, it is relatively easy for them (and for their parents) to avoid the issue of the war or to condemn the Bush administration within their own ranks, rather than to face personal risks through acts of resistance, including non-violent civil disobedience.

Even so, there are signs of a gathering storm, opening the possibility that large numbers of intellectuals, now restive, will once again lead the way in fearlessly exposing the lies and mendacity of the powerful, as they did so effectively during the Algerian and Vietnam wars. And if they do plunge once more into public debate and resistance, they will surely build upon the exemplary stance of their predecessors, chronicled so brilliantly in *War and the Ivory Tower*.

Years ago, with his characteristic pessimism, Chomsky wondered gloomily what would happen to historical consciousness of the Vietnam War "as the custodians of history set to work." But, as David Schalk shows us, a sensitive and forthright historian can illuminate the darkened terrain of the past and of the present.

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This is an expanded version of a review that originally was published by the History News Network. Posted at Japan Focus February 21, 2006.