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Influential Intellectuals

"New York Intellectuals—Up From Revolution" by Nathan Glazer, in *The New York Times Book Review* (Feb. 26, 1984), P.O. Box 508, Hackensack, N.J. 07602.

From the 1930s to the 1950s, a small band of intellectuals in New York City hotly debated questions that nobody else cared about in obscure magazines that nobody else read. Today, some of those writers, while not household names, informally advise presidents and enjoy the status of minor media celebrities.

Glazer, a Harvard sociologist, is an alumnus of the New York world populated by the likes of philosopher William Barrett, novelist Mary McCarthy, and literary critic Irving Howe. He explains what happened.

Revolutionary eras often spawn intellectuals (not academics but literary folk with a political bent), and the Great Depression appeared to be such a time. The New Yorkers avidly pursued not the politics of who gets what, Glazer notes, but the politics of theory (e.g., was Marxism or Leninism to blame for the end of democracy in the Soviet Union?).

Brilliant though they were, these intellectuals would have soon faded into obscurity, says Glazer, except for two accidents of history.

First, the Cold War began after World War II. "Their experiences, right there in New York . . . struggling [with American Communists] over control of magazines or unions or conferences . . . had taught them how different Communists, and Communism, were," says Glazer. As liberals in good standing, they also represented a "respectable" anti-communist alternative to McCarthyism. (In 1952, Henry Kissinger, then a Harvard graduate student, invited William Barrett to visit the school to serve as living proof of this possibility.)

The second accident was the postwar growth of higher education and the acceptance of modernist writers whom the New Yorkers had long championed—Joyce, Kafka, Proust. Suddenly, old literary essays from the *Partisan Review* were campus classics. By the late 1960s, most of the New Yorkers had won professorships around the country.

That ended New York's virtual monopoly on intellectuals. In any event, says Glazer, the old New York intellectual style of making bold judgments "without knowing quite enough" was doomed. Across the land, activist intellectuals are more specialized and less preoccupied with theory, but no less passionate about their politics.

Longevity, Yes

"When We Are Old" by Sir Peter Medawar, in *The Atlantic* (Mar. 1984), Box 2547, Boulder, Colo. 80322.

As modern medicine makes ever-longer human lives possible, doubts about longevity's allure have grown. Medawar, the 1960 recipient of the Nobel Prize in medicine, says the skeptics have it all wrong.

The possibility of a dramatic breakthrough makes research seem, to

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some, unnatural or even impious. (For example, if "antioxidant" food preservatives can be adapted for human use, 20 years might be added to the average life span.) Medawar, however, doubts that anybody would want to carry that view to its logical conclusion: The "natural" human life span is about 25 to 30 years. Indeed, he notes, virtually all advances in hygiene and medicine, from washing one's hands to the invention of bandages, lengthen life.

A few critics contend that it is selfish to try to delay death and that any years thus won would be empty [see *WQ*, Summer 1983, p. 26]. But Medawar dismisses this view as "spiritless": "A person who is loved and in good health has reason enough to want to live a few years longer than might seem to be his due." Grandparents have every reason to want to see their grandchildren grow up; aging gardeners long for the incomparable joys of another spring.

Medawar is not worried by the social problems that might accompany a larger elderly population—greater numbers of invalids, more costly health and retirement programs, the development of a gerontocracy. Longevity would increase only over the course of decades, leaving plenty of time to make the necessary adjustments.

Medawar worries that unnecessary fears will deter us from pursuing life-extending research. As an antidote, he proposes that a small group of volunteers be the first to try life artificially prolonged to 100. "If senile dementia is their fate, they will have warned us off."

Children's Rights

"What's Wrong with Children's Rights?" by Jan H. Blits, in *This World* (Winter 1984), Circulation Services, 125 West 24th St., New York, N.Y. 10011.

Today's advocates of "children's rights" are demanding recognition for a variety of new rights: rights to adequate nutrition, legal counsel, even parental love. But Blits, a University of Delaware philosopher, argues that the reformers are driven as much by a desire for a new egalitarian society as by a real concern for children.

Citing the work of French historian Philippe Ariès [see "The Sentimental Revolution," *WQ*, Autumn 1982], Columbia University's Maxine Greene and other champions of children's rights contend that the very idea of childhood is an invention of 16th-century Europe. If childhood is no more than a social convention, then there are no "natural" differences that justify children's unequal rights before the law.

Greene and her colleagues also challenge the liberal tradition of natural human rights as elaborated in the 18th century by philosophers John Locke and Michel de Montesquieu. According to Locke, certain basic rights—the Declaration of Independence's "inalienable" rights to "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness"—spring from human nature itself and make all humans equal. But the children's rights proponents, like Marxists and existentialists, deny the existence of a fixed human nature. They view man as "simply the product of constantly changing social conditions," Blits explains. Rights thus become "as