Editorial

Scott McCracken

On 18 February 2004, the French weekly *Les Inrockuptibles* published a petition signed by 8,000 members of the 'intellectual professions' - teachers, researchers and lawyers, actors, theatre directors, artists, psychoanalysts and students - against the Gaullist administration's 'war on intelligence'.[1] Signatories included Jacques Derrida, Etienne Balibar and Alain Touraine. If more evidence were needed of the difference between the intellectual culture of France and that of the Anglophone world this was it. A concerted and political campaign in favour of intellectual workers seems unimaginable in Britain or the United States. Nor was the campaign the voice of an elite, two weeks later *Les Inrockuptibles* claimed 70,000 signatures and, despite the petition's denunciation of both Left and Right, it quickly won the support of the Communist and Socialist parties as well as number of minor parties on the Left. As befits a society that still has an active revolutionary tradition, the campaign was a product of the professional classes as organised labour, bringing together workers in scientific laboratories and universities, and protests against the regulation of psychotherapy, the judicial system and the entertainment industry. Yet if the militancy was startling, the diagnosis was familiar:

1. Nicolas Weill, 'Le gouvernement accusé de mener une "guerre à l'intelligence"', *Le Monde*, 18/02/04.

> A politics of impoverishment and destabilisation of all those spaces that are considered unproductive in the short term, or useless or dissident, of all the invisible work of the intelligence, of all those places where society thinks itself, dreams itself, invents itself, cares for itself, judges itself, repairs itself.[2]

2. 'Appel contre la guerre à l'intelligence', *Les Inrockuptibles*, 18/02/04.

Such spaces are increasingly under threat in a globalised system - or rather, globalisation is the excuse for closing down such spaces, which have always been viewed with suspicion by instrumentalist views of the world. In an echo of Andrew Gamble's analysis of the deterioration of the public domain in this issue, the petition condemns a simplifying tendency in public discourse, a reduction of complexity into binary oppositions of arguments for or against (*Les Inrockuptibles*, 18/02/04). And it is clear from where the threat comes:

> This war on intelligence is without precedent in the history of the nation. It is the end of a French exception: a simple look at some of our European neighbours, post-Thatcherite England or Berlusconi's Italy, permits us however to see what happens to schools, hospitals, universities, theatres, publishing houses, as a consequence of those policies which, carried out

> in the name of economic sense and budgetary rigour, have an exorbitant human, social and cultural cost and irreversible consequences (*Les Inrockuptibles*, 18/02/04).

If this is an example of elitism, then it is one that holds that the 'production and diffusion of knowledges is as indispensable to us as the air we breath' (*Les Inrockuptibles*, 18/02/04).

It is easy perhaps to get carried away with the invigorating rhetoric of French political discourse, the calls to: 'participate in struggles and mobilisations' and 'to address a solid and unified protest to the government coming from all the sectors under attack from this anti-intellectualism of the state'. And perhaps too easy to forget - despite the rhetoric - the institutionalised elitism of French society, a key factor in the protests of 1968 against the education system, and one which has still not been properly addressed. There is a danger too of engaging in what a former of editor of this journal described to me when I first proposed this issue, as 'Golden Ageism': the illusion that a better environment for intellectual work once existed in an earlier time or another place. Yet all of the articles in this issue are wary of these dangers. Their concern is rather the politics of intellectual work in an age when some of the larger concepts used to describe it - postmodernism, neo-liberalism, globalisation, Empire - have become too easy a shorthand for the complexity of the current conjuncture.

Recent issues of *new formations* have intervened in key debates in cultural politics ranging from the legacy of Fanon to the position of modern African art. Issue 52, *Cultures and Economies*, edited by Mandy Mercks, addressed the re-recognition of the importance of economics in cultural studies. The aim of this issue is to take some time - time not devoted to short-term objectives and outcomes - to think about the labour of thinking itself. The first three articles discuss the state of the academy. In Britain, universities have been subject to an unprecedented regime of regulation and central control. As the French petition recognises, Thatcherism's project of deregulating capital was matched by a move to rein in the semi-autonomous parts of the public sector: schools, universities, the legal and medical professions. New Labour has continued and in some cases intensified that project, recently turning on the BBC, which is now threatened by the new body for regulating the privately owned broadcasting media 'Ofcom'.

In an opening salvo, Phil Cohen analyses the market pressures on academic life and the student experience, tracing the metamorphosis of the radical protests of the 1960s into a culture of deregulated knowledge, the aim of which is to service the immediate demands of the job market. Cohen offers the first of a series of alternatives, tracing an intellectual legacy that goes back to the mendicant friars of the middle ages - a peripatetic tradition that proposes an anti-systemic approach to knowledge and suggests a productive form of interdisciplinarity rather than the two alternatives currently on offer: either hermetically sealed

disciplines and an 'ivory tower' approach to knowledge; or a pick and mix approach to education.

Peter Scott has a similar diagnosis: identifying the pressures of the market and the importance of higher education as a form of social distinction in the context of the fluidity of contemporary societies. He argues that this leaves the Left with a 'cruel dilemma', welcoming the expansion of higher education, but wary of the market-driven imperatives that have replaced the social democratic assumptions that underpinned its support. Yet, Scott is optimistic about the positive effects of mass higher education which, despite the coercive mechanisms introduced to manage change and the current political atmosphere of anti-intellectualism (nothing new on the British Left), point towards new and more open knowledge systems. There is, he argues, the possibility of a democratic rather than a market solution.

The state of democracy - never a 'finished system' capable of withering as well as growing - is the subject of Andrew Gamble's article on public intellectuals. Gamble defines the crisis of democracy as one where the key institutions that constitute a public domain cannot fulfil their function. Competitive pressures on journalists mean that the media operates against the public interest, encouraging populism and panic rather than informed debate. Reductions in academic freedom limit the role of academics as public intellectuals. In contrast to the narrow expert in a specialised field of knowledge, Gamble identifies Bernard Crick and Stuart Hall as examples of intellectuals who move between the academic and the public, civic and political spheres. It is this traffic that makes the organic intellectuals a genuine democracy need.

A lack of informed public debate is also at the root of Deborah Cameron's identification of a gap between rhetoric and reality in the 'knowledge economy'. Cameron argues for a distinction between intellectual work and knowledge work. So-called knowledge work has been ill defined and its meaning has spread to include functions in the service sectors that differ little from Taylorisation. Taking call-centres as a case study, Cameron argues that much of what is described as education or training for the knowledge economy is actually the opposite of intellectual work - the imposition of a tighter grid of control on work both in the service sector and within institutions of education.

Cameron's piece suggests that the question of intellectual work cannot be disaggregated from the larger context of the dominant culture of overwork that has become the norm in Anglo-American capitalism. Scott McCracken proposes that rethinking intellectual work means rethinking the nature of work and the division of labour itself, a process for which Walter Benjamin's concept of *Müßiggang* or idleness offers a productive starting point.

In contrast to idleness, activism is the focus of Stephen Shapiro's article on the relationship between radical theory and political practice. Shapiro argues that the anti-systemic potential of queer theory was rooted in the political protests generated by the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. Decoupling the

link between the academy and the street emptied out that radical potential. Prestige in the academy for queer theorists led to a waning of their power to critique American society and left them ill-prepared to engage with the anti-capitalist protests of the 1990s. Shapiro advocates a re-establishment of the links between critical theory and political activism.

The speed with which the connections between political engagement and intellectual work can be forgotten is the subject of Keya Ganguly's timely return to the work of Raymond Williams. The market mode of theory as a kind of sweet counter from which intellectuals can pick and mix is countered by Ganguly's critique of the kinds of misunderstandings of Williams that both forget and deny his contribution to how we think now. This is, as she points out, not only bad intellectual history, but at odds with Williams own generous engagement with his critics during his lifetime.

In a further exploration of intellectual states, Jani Scandura examines not forgetting, but insomnia. The power of film has meant its effect on the mind has often been treated with suspicion. Hollywood was described as a 'dream factory' from its earliest days. Scandura traces the history of film's relationship to sleep, suggesting that insomnia rather than dreaming is the more productive concept to work with when trying to understand the medium.

The issue concludes with an important new contribution from Jacqueline Rose. Rose's work has never been confined to the narrow discourses of the academy. In this essay she moves from the uses of the word 'evil' in the current international crisis to its avoidance by the perpetrators of crimes under the apartheid regime in South Africa. Returning to Arendt's 'banality of evil' Rose analyses the ethics of representation in J.M. Coetzee's most recent work, including his extraordinary new novel, *Elizabeth Costello*, as a way back into the politics of the present, messy conjuncture. As much as anything, Rose's essay is an example of the kind of intellectual work we need. In contrast to the tendency to look for simple alternatives identified by Gamble, it refuses to give simple answers to complex problems. Controversial, it provokes debate rather than closing it down. It stands in opposition to the tendency recognised by Cohen for the academy to evade the public and political spheres.

The success of the 'war on intelligence' in Britain and the United States has, as Jenny Bourne Taylor has suggested, been partly because the work ethic has been so crucial to the identity of the intellectual left in terms of its sense of its own relevance and effectiveness. The success of the British Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)[3] or the US academic star system as disciplinary devices to be incorporated by a whole generation of intellectuals who might have been expected to stand more firmly against them. Instead, because of the breakdown of any meaningful collective action in that generation, it has made its own work projects stand in place of these wider political meanings.[4]

If that is the case, then this issue will only have succeeded if it starts a

3. The RAE is a peculiarly British form of academic audit where certain kinds of research 'outputs', articles, books etc. are calibrated and valued to decide future funding. For more on its consequences see Cohen, Scott and Gamble in this issue.

4. The ideas in this paragraph are taken from an email to me on 6 June 2004 from Jenny Bourne Taylor that was part of a discussion of this issue within the Editorial Board of *new formations*.

process that recognises the public and political intellectual work that needs to be done outside as well as inside the academy so that, indeed, the 'production and diffusion of knowledges becomes as indispensable to us as the air we breathe'.

This issue is dedicated to the memory of Edward Said who lent his name to new formations *from the journal's inception in 1987 and remained a member of its Editorial Advisory until his death. He leaves a body of intellectual work that will continue to resonate in the pages of* new formations *and elsewhere.*