

Retreat of the Intellectuals

In much of the West, thinkers are losing authority

By their own poignant admission, French intellectuals have become an endangered species. Even worse, some of them contend that the life of the mind is in peril. Little by little, one of them warns, "thinking is giving way to a terrible, and pathetic, confrontation between the fanatic and the zombie." Such overwrought rhetoric surely exaggerates the true state of affairs. But in France, where even concierges love to argue about abstract ideas, the suggestion that the intelligentsia may be on the ropes has sparked a spirited national discussion over the past few months. The debate reveals a subtle but important shift in the role of professional thinkers—not only in France, but throughout the West.

What the French press has christened the "affair of the intellectuals" was kicked off late last spring by the simultaneous publication of shrill tracts by two of France's best-known younger thinkers. Bernard-Henri Lévy, the 40-year-old standard-bearer of the so-called "new philosophy," argued in his "Eulogy of the Intellectuals" that cultural relativism and a widespread disillusionment with all brands of ideology have undermined the intellectual's traditional role as society's conscience. Alain Finkielkraut, 38, a leading member of the Left Bank establishment, contended in "The Defeat of Thought," that his colleagues have abandoned the traditional Western values of reason and truth in favor of a post-modernist obscurantism in which "a pair of boots is just as important as the works of Shakespeare."

Sense of guilt: Lévy argues that the "great 19th-century structures" like Hegelianism and Marxism have been demolished and replaced by a kind of "new-style antitotalitarian inquisition." The current high-brow consensus equates the death of a Welsh miner in a pit accident with the death of a prisoner in the gulag. The belief in a "hierarchy of values," Lévy claims, has disappeared along with the "recognition of the value of general culture,"

which has given way to a cult of specialization. Finkielkraut traces much of the current disarray in intellectual circles to an acute sense of guilt over the role the West played in the colonial era. The taste makers of the modern mind, he argues, are terrified of being charged with racism. As a result, they blindly approve the "uniqueness" of backward societies, even when their practices are barbaric by Western standards. Finkielkraut urges his peers to abandon a relativistic view of the Third World that is both patronizing and degrading and to return to the values that



BETTMANN ARCHIVE

No more laurels: Homage to the bust of Voltaire

form the mainstream of Western culture.

Both books were lavishly praised by French conservatives, who regarded them, not quite accurately, as evidence of renewed intellectual support for old-fashioned patriotic values. But centrist thinkers like Jean-François Revel pointed out that, even if intellectuals have lost some of their prestige as political gadflies, artistic and academic life in France is just as lively now as ever. Jack Lang, the Socialist ex-minister of culture, dismissed Finkielkraut's tract as a "caricature" of contemporary French culture. The argument bub-

bled up again late last spring after the publication of a French translation of "The Closing of the American Mind," by Chicago philosopher Allan Bloom. The American best seller made most of the same points as Lévy and Finkielkraut and suggested that creeping paralysis of the intellect was as widespread in the United States as in Europe.

These things matter in France—and in Italy and Spain as well. In all the Latin European countries intellectuals have long played prominent roles in public affairs and politics. But intellectual influence has eroded in recent years—at least in part because some intellectuals have backed disastrous causes. From the 1930s to the mid-1970s, the elite of activist intellectuals in Europe was overwhelmingly leftist, and in many cases unabashedly Stalinist. Jean-Paul Sartre, a lifelong fellow-traveler, came to typify the "committed" left-wing intellectual. But Sartre died in 1980, Russian economic failures and violations of human rights finally discredited the Soviet Union as a model state, and Communist parties throughout Europe lost both votes and their hold over the intelligentsia.

Big audiences: Meantime, television steadily expanded its influence in France, as everywhere else. Intellectuals like Lévy, who glittered on talk shows, gained big audiences. The timid and the stutterers went relatively unnoticed, no matter how brilliant. To some extent, the higher academic world reacted to the vulgarization of culture by withdrawing from the fray. Structuralism, the modish interdisciplinary approach of the 1960s and 1970s, was simply incomprehensible except to initiates. Poststructuralists such as the literary critic Jacques Derrida or the psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan wrote so densely and obscurely that even their own students often failed to catch their meaning.

In the end, the reason for the theorists' waning influence has been just what Lévy and Finkielkraut—and indeed, Bloom—say it is. All of the linchpin assumptions of Western culture have come under attack in this century. Anthropology and the social sciences have indeed questioned the universality of values like reason, law and justice, the very values past intellectuals have struggled to maintain. Popular culture does tend to equate Mozart and the Rolling Stones by making them equally available. It is a tough time for intellectuals to talk pertinently and persuasively about public issues. But nothing will ever stop them trying. The very fact that Lévy and Finkielkraut have launched broadside attacks on the fundamental values of the day proves that intellectuals are still very much alive and vocal, especially in France.

SCOTT SULLIVAN

B.H.L. Eloge de Intellectuals