Chapter 4

Intellectuals as Subjects of Action in the Age of New Humanism

There has been no major revolution in modern history without intellectuals; conversely there has been no major counter-revolutionary movement without intellectuals

—Edward Said, Representations 8

Few intellectuals have done more within the last four decades to offer a politics of worldliness designed to confront the crisis of democracy under the reign of neoliberalism, neocolonialism, and the emerging fundamentalisms throughout the world than Said, one of the most widely known, influential, and controversial public intellectuals of the latter part of the twentieth century

—Henry Giroux, “Democracy's Promise” 22

This chapter primarily examines Said’s formulations on the role and responsibilities of intellectuals mainly against the backdrop of his Representations and Humanism. Examining the politics of worldliness, the chapter proceeds to analyze the notions of nationalism and humanism in Said’s works and connects them to his notions on intellectuals. In an age that announces the “death of the subject” and “the end of history,” Said attempts to recapture a space for the intellectual to represent humanity, truth, and history. Privileging “criticism” always before “solidarity,” Said in a self-reflexive mode demonstrates the constitution of his intellectual subjectivity and specifically elaborates the new role of intellectuals as human subjects of action. The chapter concludes by arguing that Said’s retrieval of
New Humanism ultimately reproduces this new human subject of action in the form of a representative intellectual.

Julien Benda and Antonio Gramsci

As is known, intellectuals are often criticized for being detached from the everyday concerns of their fellow human beings. Although they are capable of playing significant, and in some cases, decisive roles in the modern world, most intellectual interventions in the present day are carried out from a position of relative autonomy. The image of the intellectual as an independent and relatively autonomous person has exerted a powerful influence in twentieth-century critical thought. Julien Benda was one of the principal advocates of this position. He even idealized and sublimated the detached status of the intellectual who espoused the importance of universal principles such as justice and truth.

A remarkable and stern exhortation to abandon this so-called position of intellectual independence is found in Antonio Gramsci, when he says that individualism “is merely brutish apoliticism, [and] sectarianism is apoliticism” (148). For Gramsci, the concept of autonomy was deficient in substance. He connected autonomy with idealist philosophy and construed it as “the expression of that social utopia” (8). But Adorno was less prepared to reject any concept of autonomy altogether, because the “notion of the free expression of opinion, indeed, that of intellectual freedom itself in bourgeois society” always has “its own dialectic” (*Prisms* 20).

And, recently, Pierre Bourdieu has suggested, “The intellectual is constituted by intervening in the political field in the name of autonomy and of the specific values of a field of cultural production which has attained a high degree of independence with respect to various powers” (129).

This dichotomy between autonomy and commitment is well demonstrated in the polarized discourses of Julien Benda and Antonio Gramsci, and in the seeming tensions between Gramsci’s rejection of the concept of autonomy and Adorno’s qualified place for it. However, Said borrows ideas from these various antagonistic positions in order to formulate his own ideas on the role of intellectuals.

Julien Benda conceives of intellectuals as a small group of “morally endowed philosopher kings who constitute the conscience of mankind” (43). With Benda, Said laments the increasing sectarianism and national belligerence to which intellectuals surrender their moral authority. “Real intellectuals, according to Benda’s definition, are supposed to risk being burned at stake, ostracized, or crucified. They are symbolic personages marked by