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WHAT ONCE WAS

Nathan Glazer—Merit Before Meritocracy

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The perambulating path of this son of humble Jewish immigrants into America's intellectual and political elites points to how much we have overcome—and lost—over the past century.

The death of Nathan Glazer in January, a month before his 96th birthday, has been rightly noted as the end of an era in American political and intellectual life. Nat Glazer was the last exemplar of what historian Christopher Lasch would refer to as a “social type”: the New York intellectuals, the sons and daughters of impoverished, almost exclusively Jewish immigrants who took advantage of the city’s public education system and then thrived in the cultural and political ferment that from the 1930’s into the 1960’s made New York the leading metropolis of the free world. As Glazer once noted, the Marxist polemics that he and his fellow students at City College engaged in afforded them unique insights into, and unanticipated opportunities to interpret, Soviet communism to the rest of America during the Cold War.

Over time, postwar economic growth and political change resulted in the relative decline of New York and the emergence of Washington as the center of power and even glamor in American life. Nevertheless, Glazer and his fellow New York intellectuals, relocated either to major universities around the country or to Washington think tanks, continued to exert remarkable influence over both domestic and foreign affairs. The improbability of all this was driven home to me in the mid-1980’s, when I was living in Washington. While hosting some friends from South Texas (where they were deeply enmeshed in local Democratic politics), I asked a neoconservative colleague working in the Reagan White House to arrange a VIP tour. My Texas friends were delighted but also quite baffled to hear that their Reaganite tour guide was a former socialist. (I didn’t have the heart to tell them that my friend had been not just any socialist, but a Shachtmanite!)

But I am getting ahead of my story. Not all New York intellectuals were neoconservatives. Nor for that matter were all neoconservatives New York intellectuals. And of course, since 9/11 and the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, neoconservatism has been identified almost exclusively with a particular foreign policy perspective advanced by a younger generation of intellectuals and policy entrepreneurs, not with critiques of Great Society domestic programs that originally defined the term. As for Nathan Glazer, over the years he explicitly declined many

opportunities to identify himself as any kind of neoconservative. Indeed, in 1972 he voted for George McGovern for president, and in 1980 for Jimmy Carter.

Yet Nathan Glazer's passing is much more than an occasion to reflect on shifting political currents and alliances in twentieth century America. In fact, Nat Glazer was not a very political person. Still, his life and career do shed light on important developments in our political life and institutions over the past several decades, especially the role our cultural and intellectual elites have come to play in contemporary politics. This then points to critical changes in the institution where Glazer ultimately found a home and made his career—the university. And however much the emerging scandal over rigged admissions raises troubling questions about higher education's priorities, the ensuing outrage should also remind us how central the university and its meritocratic values have become in twenty-first century America.

Anyone who ever met Nat Glazer appreciated that he was not easily summed up by any label. Without doubt, he was one of a kind. As others have noted, he was remarkable for his even-handed, fair-minded analyses of controversial issues on which he was nevertheless invariably prepared to take a stance. Some have emphasized his willingness to “change his mind.” But this misses the point, for Glazer came from a milieu in which one did not simply change one's mind. Rather, one *changed one's position*. The phrase reflects embeddedness in a dense network of personal and intellectual relationships that would be powerfully impacted by any such reconsidered pronouncement on the issues of the day—a bit like the movement of tectonic plates beneath the earth's surface that may result in earthquakes.

Yet unlike many New York intellectuals, Glazer did not take himself quite that seriously; he never quite regarded his positions of such world-historical significance. To be sure, the range of his interests—the Rosenberg spy case, the Jewish experience in America, urban planning and transportation, welfare and social policy, the continuing plight of African Americans, ethnicity and religion in the United States as well as overseas, immigration, affirmative action and multiculturalism, and modern architecture—could be downright intimidating. But then at times his passions, such as his eagerness to observe first-hand the installation artist Christo's wrapping of the Reichstag in Berlin, could seem frivolous—at least to a younger version of myself.

Always dispassionate, Nat's views were often unpredictable. I recall a conversation about Pat Buchanan in which it became clear that he, unlike his many neoconservative friends and colleagues, did not consider the conservative journalist an anti-Semite. That was Nat: always willing to give the other side, or sides, of the argument their due and never indulging in personal animosities or emotional vendettas. He simply assumed that in a pluralist society there would be inevitable—and sharp—differences among the many groups and perspectives competing for attention and dominance. This posture did not mean that he would agree with such views, merely that he would take them into consideration as he sifted and resifted through his own evaluations in light of what seemed necessary for the broader public good (though I cannot recall or

envision him ever invoking such an abstract, high-minded notion).

Such qualities did not mean that Nat Glazer was the easiest person to talk to. While he was invariably responsive and helpful to students, colleagues, and friends, there was about him an air of distraction. He was not evasive, but he could be difficult to pin down. He evinced a certain benign aloofness: not arrogance but preoccupation with his own thoughts, which were definitely his but not just about him. Perhaps the best descriptor is “semi-detached,” like much working-class housing in Britain—just the kind of feature that would attract his almost childlike enthusiasm and curiosity.

What those of us fortunate enough to have known Nat Glazer will miss most is what Sandra Fails, his live-in caretaker during his declining years, called his “zest for life.” Whether for my wife’s savory Brussel sprouts, served with a chicken dish of his own making on the occasion of his 95th birthday; for a recently unearthed book about Ezra Pound; for fretting about a brilliant former student having difficulty finding his niche in life; for Amor Towles’s novel, *A Gentleman in Moscow*; or for an article about India from an old issue of *The New Yorker* that he was emailing about to family and friends the week before he died; that zest was contagious.

One of my fondest memories is of Nat savoring a snifter of Belgian beer with a meal at the lively Kirkland Tap and Trotter bar and restaurant around the corner from where he lived, served by a young woman whose tattoos, piercings, and inappropriate familiarity did not faze him in the least. Another is of Nat enjoying a summer dinner on the terrace of a restaurant in nearby Union Square, ground zero for Boston’s real estate developers as well as young techies. Surveying the scene and then looking squarely at me and my wife, he matter of factly concluded, “All the young people I know are so old!”

Now I risk indulging in fond remembrances and nostalgia, the last thing Nat would countenance. I can hear him asking in his gently insistent, scratchy-voiced way, “What does it all mean?” Indeed, his passing should alert us to troubling changes in our cultural, intellectual, and political life. But what I have in mind transcends Americans’ disagreements over the current occupant of the White House. So here is a brief look at Nathan Glazer’s story more or less from the beginning.

Nat would have been the first to say that he was a lucky man. Born in 1923 to a struggling, Yiddish-speaking immigrant couple, he was the youngest of seven children, none of whom were expected to attend college or pursue a profession, but rather to begin working at an early age and contribute to family finances. His oldest sibling, Sam, drove a bakery delivery truck for most of his working life. Nat escaped this fate simply because, as he once wrote, he was the youngest: “I showed no sign of being the brightest; indeed, some evidence indicates that I was not.”

Indeed, young Nat flubbed an interview that might have earned him a scholarship to Columbia. But he did attend City College, where he met other children of immigrants, especially young Jews caught up in the left sectarian politics of the era. They were of course reacting to the Depression and the rise of fascism in Europe, even in America.

But as Glazer later wrote, he and his comrades were socialists not so much by reflection or conviction but by descent. He traced the moderate socialist views of his youth to the influence of his father, who consistently voted for Norman Thomas and was staunchly anticommunist, growing out of his experiences in the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). With his characteristic appreciation of the serendipitous, Glazer once speculated that if his father had been a furrier, his union would have been dominated by communists, toward whom his father—and by extension Nat—would have likely been sympathetic!

In that era, young people from such humble backgrounds, even those attending college, had modest or ill-defined ambitions. As Glazer emphasized, none of his peers at City College anticipated careers as professors or even as writers. After more than a decade of economic depression and hardship, as he once put it, “Who dreamed of any job except a government clerk?” Still, Glazer’s goals were apparently more ill-defined than most. Unlike Seymour Martin Lipset, whom he got to know on the subway on their way to City College, Glazer did not turn to sociology in the hope that it would lead (as Lipset later wrote) to “steady work” as a social worker. Neither Glazer nor Lipset anticipated that sociology would lead to wildly successful academic careers that would bring them together as colleagues first at Berkeley and then later at Harvard.

Thus, young Nat wandered from major to major—from history, to economics, to public administration—until he finally settled on sociology. But even then, he lacked direction. A critical juncture was his meeting Seymour Melman, an older student who had graduated from City College a few years before. Melman eventually taught economics at Columbia and became a prominent anti-nuclear activist and critic of America’s “permanent war economy.”

But when they met, Melman was a Zionist activist who connected Glazer to Zellig Harris, a young academic at the University of Pennsylvania, where he was soon to establish the first modern linguistics department in the United States. Harris subsequently gained world renown as a structural linguist, and political fame of a sort as the teacher of Noam Chomsky.

Harris was also the leader of a self-styled vanguard of intellectual Zionists whose vision for Palestine was not a Jewish state but some kind of binational socialist federation of Arabs and Jews. The group was a chapter of Avukah (The Torch), the youth affiliate of the Zionist Organization of America. And before long, young Glazer was working on *Avukah Student Action*, the organization’s national newspaper. It was the first of many writing and editorial positions he was to hold during his long life.

While still an undergraduate at City College, Glazer divided his time between New York and Philadelphia. On the train ride back and forth, he got to know another member of the group, Ruth Slotkin, who became his first wife, mother of his three daughters, and a respected chronicler (as Ruth Gay) of Jewish life in Germany and America. Unlike their own families’ homes, Nat and many of the other students in Avukah “found the Harris household. . . .very attractive. . . .comfortable, a lot of people

would come to eat.” And there were “a lot of books.” But this new milieu entailed much more. Harris’s Zionist activities put him in contact with Louis D. Brandeis and Albert Einstein, with whom the linguist’s wife, Bruria Kaufman, a theoretical physicist, worked at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton.

Glazer got drawn into Harris’s academic research and by 1944 had earned a master’s degree in linguistics from Penn, around the same time that he received his bachelor’s degree from City College. These were heady circles for a youth of his humble origins. Still, one does not get the sense that he was a wunderkind as much as a young man not sure of what he wanted, spreading himself a bit thin and exploring his options. He was certainly no careerist.

But then, it was not clear in those days what kind of career was to be had. At some point, Glazer’s aspirations had presumably advanced beyond a government clerkship. But when he was offered a fellowship to pursue a doctorate in anthropology at Penn, he was dissuaded from accepting it by a different mentor (not Harris) who apparently suggested that as a Jew he would have a difficult time pursuing an academic career.

“And so I returned to New York to look for a job,” Glazer later wrote. And in those days and in those circles, the guy to turn to, as Nat once explained to me, was “Dan Bell, who knew everyone!” Then an editor at the socialist but staunchly anticommunist *New Leader*, Bell would become Glazer’s life-long friend, future colleague at the Harvard sociology department, fellow editor of *The Public Interest*, and neighbor in the Francis Avenue neighborhood of Cambridge. Bell connected Glazer to the German émigré social scientist Max Horkheimer, who had just been hired by the American Jewish Committee to research anti-Semitism. But he was Horkheimer’s research assistant for only a short time, and soon moved, almost literally, across the hall to work at an AJC publication, *The Contemporary Jewish Record*.

As the war in Europe and then in the Pacific ended, there was a push to revamp *CJR*. In November 1945, it got relaunched as *Commentary*, with Glazer as an editorial assistant. He was tasked with his own recurring feature, “The Study of Man,” which afforded him a platform to review and comment on the burgeoning social science literature that sought to make sense of the postwar world. So, at the age of 22 Nathan Glazer found himself present at the creation of arguably the most consequential opinion journal in America during the second half of the twentieth century.

During this same period, Glazer was also a part-time graduate student in sociology at Columbia, where for a tuition of \$12.50 per credit he enrolled in three-credit lecture courses that met late afternoons or evenings for two hours a week. These were attended by many individuals who never obtained advanced degrees or pursued careers in sociology, but who nevertheless got to hear lectures by the likes of Paul Lazarsfeld, Robert Merton, and C. Wright Mills. Glazer had applied for a fellowship and been turned down. But there was apparently no great shame in that, since graduate programs in that era—at least sociology at Columbia—were so loosely structured.

It was also around this time that Daniel Bell introduced Glazer to David Riesman, who

was then heading up an undergraduate social sciences program at the University of Chicago. Bell was teaching in that program, and Glazer had a notion that he might be interested in doing so, too. But Riesman had other plans for him. Familiar with Glazer's writing in *Commentary*, Riesman recruited him to work on a research project about post-war angst in America that culminated in 1950 with the publication of *The Lonely Crowd*. With his name listed on the cover along with Riesman's and Reuel Denney's, Nathan Glazer was at the age of twenty-seven coauthor of a book that was not only an immediate success, but eventually one of the all-time best-selling social science studies in American history. Yet it would be another decade before he obtained his doctorate in sociology from Columbia.

In 1954, when Glazer moved on from *Commentary*, it was not to a teaching or research post at a university, but to the publisher Doubleday. He was recruited there by the young Jason Epstein, who was just then launching Anchor Books, the first attempt in the United States to publish quality paperbacks—like Penguin Books in the United Kingdom. Needless to say, Epstein was prescient, and went on to further success and renown at Vintage Books and Random House.

But the story about Epstein that Nat most liked to tell—and retell—involved a different publishing venture. In the middle of the 1961-62 New York newspaper strike, it was Epstein's business acumen that helped launch the highbrow political, literary magazine that had long been an ambition of Epstein's wife Barbara, along with editor Robert Silvers, writer Elizabeth Hardwick, and her husband, poet Robert Lowell. Knowing first hand how desperate publishers were during the strike to publicize their titles, Epstein recognized that their advertising dollars—not a grant from a foundation or wealthy patron—could provide the financing needed to launch the critical first issue of *The New York Review of Books*. The rest is publishing history!

While at Doubleday, Glazer was commissioned by historian Daniel Boorstin to give a series of lectures at the University of Chicago on Judaism in America, a topic that his involvement with Zionism and *Commentary* well prepared him for. This was the genesis of his 1957 book, *American Judaism*. Around this time, Glazer participated in a Ford Foundation-funded project on the history and influence of communism in America. During the late 1950's he also began teaching full-time, one-year stints at various colleges and universities: UC-Berkeley, Bennington, and Smith (where he met Sulochana Raghavan, his second and surviving wife). He still did not have a doctorate. But with the help of his old City College friend Marty Lipset, who was then teaching at Columbia, Glazer managed to maintain his ties to the sociology department there. In 1961 his book from the Ford project, *The Social Basis of American Communism*, was published. The following year it was submitted as his doctoral thesis—making him, as he later wrote, “at the age of 39, a full-fledged sociologist, if I wanted to be one.”

It was during this same period that Glazer was taken with the improbable idea to “become an expert on Japan.” After an informal conversation with a program officer at the Ford Foundation, he was told to submit a letter about what he planned to study there. He did so, explaining that he “wanted to learn about Tokyo by living in Tokyo,

the way I had learned about New York by living in New York.” The foundation’s

response? “I was given a substantial grant and first-class airfare without having to trouble anyone for letters of recommendation,” he later recounted, “at a time when I held no academic position in the United States, and without having to arrange any academic affiliation in Japan.” This was all very felicitous, especially since Glazer knew no Japanese. As he rightly concluded, “How gloriously free and easy were the foundations in 1961!”

Upon his return from a chastening year in Japan, Glazer spent a year (1962-63) in Washington at the Housing and Home Finance Agency, predecessor to the soon-to-be-established Department of Housing and Urban Development. He held a vaguely defined post that afforded him ample opportunity to observe and participate in early deliberations on the impending war on poverty. His perch had been secured with the help of his friend and collaborator, Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Moynihan had already arrived in Washington with the new Kennedy administration and held an appointment at the Department of Labor, from which was eventually to issue his controversial but prophetic report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*.

During this period in the early 1960’s, Glazer and Moynihan collaborated on the book for which they would both become most widely known, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Ethnic Groups of New York*, published in 1963. It was primarily Glazer’s idea, and it was he who recruited Moynihan to the project. Approaching middle age and still without a secure academic post, Glazer sought out not another sociologist or even another Jewish intellectual, but a fellow New Yorker who had recently managed to complete a doctorate in international diplomacy from Tufts, but was, in truth, a haphazardly educated, ambitious policy entrepreneur who had worked for New York governor Averell Harriman.

In the fall of 1963, after his year in Washington, Glazer secured his first regular teaching post, in the department of sociology at UC-Berkeley. Three years later, Moynihan became a tenured professor of education and urban policy at Harvard and director of the Harvard-MIT Joint Center for Urban Studies. And three years after that, Glazer moved to Harvard, where he spent the rest of his career.

Such mobility into the very highest levels of academia is striking but not difficult to understand. In the 1950’s and 1960’s, higher education was a booming growth industry. Urban and race issues were prominent on the national agenda, and knowledgeable analysts like Glazer and Moynihan were in demand. Today, by contrast, it would be difficult to imagine a Moynihan or a Glazer so readily installed at Harvard. I say this only partly on account of the changed political tenor in Cambridge. Just as important would be the diminished luster, in the 21st-century academic marketplace, of resumé’s like theirs.

Far from the conventional pedigrees of elite academics, Moynihan and Glazer’s credentials were earned in the rough-and-tumble of New York political and intellectual life at a particularly critical juncture in the nation’s history. During the

Depression and then World War II, the city was already the epicenter of American commerce, finance, journalism, publishing, theatre, and the arts. With America's emergence from the war as *the* global power, the subsequent arrival of the new United Nations headquarters at Turtle Bay, and even the ascendance of commercial television networks headquartered in Manhattan, New York's preeminence was secured not just nationally but internationally. And as Glazer made clear on several occasions, it was in and around such worldly, profane venues, not at the city's educational institutions, that what he called "the shaping part" of his education occurred.

Mid-century New York was home not only to refugee scholars such as Lewis Coser, Max Horkheimer, Leo Lowenthal, Erich Fromm, and Hannah Arendt, but also to gifted American editors and writers such as the peripatetic Paul Goodman; Jane Jacobs at *Architectural Forum*; Will Herberg at the International Ladies Garment Workers Union; and many more. Every Friday afternoon, there was an informal seminar at the office of the *New Leader*, where these or other free-floating intellectuals would show up. Meanwhile at *Commentary*, as Glazer later reported, "the pressure was remarkably low. There seemed to be time for work on the magazine, attendance at Columbia courses, my own writing, and even chess games beginning at lunch that sometimes lasted through a good part of the afternoon."

This extraordinary milieu can be explained, in part, by the social turmoil and fluidity resulting from the Depression, the rise of Nazi Germany, and war in Europe. New York was the port of entry for refugee intellectuals and academics as early as the mid-1930's. More arrived as war approached, erupted, and widened with U.S. entry. Then the war's end meant still more refugees as well as the return of hundreds of thousands of young veterans whose "education" had been jump-started by their wartime experiences.

Young Glazer was exempted from military service for health reasons. But Irving Kristol, another City College socialist who became his colleague at *Commentary* and eventually at *The Public Interest*, served overseas in the Army during World War II. I recall a talk Kristol gave in the late 1980's explaining how his wartime experiences had finally disabused him of any leftist leanings as he came to realize that the Italian-Americans in his unit "would turn socialism into a racket."

Clearly, Kristol was not the only veteran whose wartime service upended certain assumptions about their fellow Americans. Even after the war and into the 1960's, the military draft meant that most young men were compelled to live and work with individuals from backgrounds starkly different from their own. Today, of course, such broadening (and levelling) experiences are harder to find—and easier to avoid. However well-intentioned, a year of post-graduate volunteer service with a secular or religious charitable enterprise doesn't have the same impact. Neither, regrettably, do two years with Teach for America; or even two years with the Peace Corps in Gambia. Participation in such public service programs just ain't the same as having to submit to the authority of a drill sergeant from Alabama.

One thing is clear: America's wartime mobilization helped generate demand for higher education from returning veterans. One outcome was the GI Bill, which both responded to and further fueled that demand. And then a few years later the children of those veterans began knocking on the doors of colleges and universities in unprecedented numbers. While leftist intellectuals like Michael Harrington complained that the post-war expansion of higher education co-opted the avant-garde, it also facilitated the academic careers of Glazer, Moynihan, and other talented writers and intellectuals.

Among these was Glazer's mentor and *Lonely Crowd* co-author, David Riesman, who with a law degree and a peripatetic career that included no formal social science training was nevertheless appointed professor of social relations at Harvard in 1958. Even as late as 1973, it was possible for Riesman's student and co-author, Christopher Jencks, to be granted tenure in the Harvard sociology department on the basis of writing and research conducted without a doctorate.

Those days are now long gone. Today the growth boom is over, and the enterprise of higher education is more formalized, structured, and professionalized. Universities have greater resources, but they are also more bureaucratically demanding. Many of these changes came about in service to meritocratic goals, which—ironically—would have benefitted Glazer and his City College peers. Aside from the obvious anti-Semitism, they also faced obstacles posed by their genuinely humble (today, we would say “disadvantaged”) origins. For those of us who knew them as mentors and senior colleagues, it is easy to overlook or ignore those origins. Yet Glazer did not recall his father ever speaking anything other than Yiddish. His parents were literate enough to write letters to relatives back in Poland, but there were only a few books in their home. Lipset's family was intermittently on home-relief. And Daniel Bell grew up in even more desperate circumstances on the Lower East Side.

But if Glazer and his peers would have benefitted from the opportunities offered by today's meritocratic university, one cannot help but wonder about the quality of education they would receive, compared to what they secured for themselves in mid-century New York.

Today's university administrators understand that they are competing for good students, not just with academic offerings, but also with amenities such as high-speed internet connectivity, gourmet cafeteria food, apartments with kitchens, professional athletic facilities, and a full range of medical, counseling, and psychiatric services. Ironically, this leads to a milieu where undergraduates are encouraged to “think globally,” but have fewer and fewer reasons to leave campus. And when they are induced to leave, it is typically for a highly programmed but not very rigorous semester abroad, during which they spend most of their time socializing with other Americans and (if they are lucky) with foreign students who speak English.

To be sure, there are also the inevitable “service” programs where students venture forth to “engage with” and “assist” populations that are “disadvantaged” and

“underserved.” But these, too, tend to occur in a bubble of oversight and guidance that is not easy to escape. If by chance an adventurous undergraduate seeks to venture forth and investigate some genuine social or political issue or controversy, he or she must negotiate a vigilant bureaucracy dedicated to averting the ever-present danger that a student’s curiosity might result in a violation of the rights of those with whom they wish to talk.¹

Then, of course, students have their own rights. Indeed, the right of undergraduates to privacy extends to their medical and academic records, to which their parents are not permitted access. To be sure, parents invariably pay the bills. But under the perverse logic now permeating higher education, the students, not the parents, are the “customers.” And the customers must be served, which necessarily means that the authority and judgment of educators get circumscribed. Until recently, the point of undergraduate education was to teach the young what they need to know in order to make intelligent choices about their lives. Done properly, this meant according educators the discretion and authority to preside over the varied opportunities for the formal and informal learning necessary to accommodate the diverse and complicated paths from adolescence to adulthood. Today, however, higher education increasingly directs students down paths that are ever more rule-bound, bureaucratized, and narrow. The only ground left upon which faculty can exercise authority is that of career counselor and trainer. And this role is reinforced by the preoccupation of students—and their parents—with planning ahead to retire the debt accumulated to pay for the various “educational services” they have been persuaded to consume.

At the graduate level, the trends are similar. For Glazer and company, their passion for politics and social science burned somewhere between avocation and vocation. Today, graduate education in these fields is a career ladder, pure and simple. It is almost unthinkable that someone could or would climb such a ladder on a part-time basis. This means no more itinerant writers and intellectuals wandering in and out of lectures. A master’s degree in these fields has become a mere rung on the way to the doctorate, which typically requires a full-time commitment for at least five years, in return for which carefully selected candidates can expect tuition-waivers and stipends for living expenses, as well as teaching responsibilities. Not all of these developments are ill-advised. Yet no one is expected to enjoy this experience, and it cannot be an accident that one’s chosen academic field is typically referred to as “the discipline.”

It may be objected that these changes are necessary, because the social sciences today are much more methodologically rigorous and quantitatively sophisticated than in Glazer’s day. “Big data” is now the order of the day. This is true, but it is also true that this increase in scientific rigor has been accompanied by a troubling decrease in attention paid to the full range of normative assumptions and choices informing social science research, other than ritual accommodation to the political fads of the moment. Moreover, competition for academic teaching positions is now sufficiently intense that doctoral candidates are encouraged, and in some cases required, to go on the job market with not just a completed doctoral thesis but published articles in peer-reviewed journals, which effectively reinforces these narrow professional norms.

In such cloistered environments, the fundamental distinction between politics and moralism gets blurred—even in political science departments. As an about-to-be-minted Ph.D from Stanford recently declared in a presentation for a teaching post in my department, “I don’t like to talk to politicians because they don’t tell the truth”! (This candidate did not get the job, I am pleased to report.) Undoubtedly more typical is the tendency among many young political scientists today to regard elected officials and politicians as powerful individuals to be debunked, demystified, and deconstructed.

The obverse tendency is to view those deemed bereft of power or influence as victims and/or heroes, rather than as self-interested political actors. For example, I recall having dinner with a group of University of Oregon graduate students who had been interviewing farmworkers seeking to unionize. My dinner companions elaborated at length on the unenviable plight of these workers, but could tell me nothing about the political tactics, strategies, or goals of their unionization efforts.

To be sure, there is a political valence to my criticism here. But the point would not be much different if contemporary social science were dominated by conservatives. Given the basic dynamics of today’s meritocratic university, conservative social scientists would be (and typically are) equally obtuse about how their professional aspirations and norms limit their ability—and inclination—to understand and analyze social, cultural, and political realities in contemporary America. The rise of the Tea Party and the subsequent success of Donald Trump suggest that conservative academics, as well as their confreres in journalism and at think tanks, are just as inept as their liberal adversaries at assessing the challenges confronting many Americans.

It is critical here to point out the significant difference between the way our universities present themselves to the wider society and the way academics tend to behave among themselves. In much of what emanates from our universities, the dominant tone is one of aloofness and arrogance. But within the academy, the day-to-day, lived reality is one of timidity, risk-avoidance, and conformity to a general will that gets defined and enforced by whatever putatively marginalized group appears capable of seizing the attention of skittish administrators.

Yet the onus for this scenario cannot be placed exclusively on higher education. Over the last several decades, critical changes in our nation’s cultural and political life have also been at work. One of these was signaled in the late 1980’s when Irving Kristol moved *The Public Interest* from New York to Washington—a city that he had yet to set foot in when at the age of 33 he moved to London to become coeditor of *Encounter* magazine.

Today, an internship in Washington is virtually a required stop on the itinerary for just about any undergraduate interested in politics and public policy. Universities have encouraged this trend by setting up their own programs in the nation’s capital. (I myself helped UCLA set up its first undergraduate residential program in Washington in 1990.) But beyond such endeavors, the vast majority of young people in Washington

today are recent graduates busily making their way in the world and helping (along with limitless supplies of caffeine and the absence of skyscrapers) to make the nation's capital feel like one big, sprawling post-graduate campus.

What this image suggests is that today's ambitious, well-educated youth have escaped the bubble of the contemporary university only to find refuge in the bubble of today's political class. The United States has always had political elites, needless to say. At its founding the nation was blessed with a particularly wise, far-seeing elite, now blithely reduced to the status of "privileged white males." The founders were that, to be sure. But they also represented diverse economic, cultural, religious, and regional interests.

Whatever their shortcomings and failings, the founders knew their own local terrain and were reasonably reliable guides to whose interests they were representing—and whose they were neglecting. But in recent decades a confluence of factors—economic growth and affluence, modern warfare, increasing levels of education, and the rights revolution—have not only eroded Americans' ties to their local communities but also undermined the prerogatives of local and state governments. Another factor is the media, transformed by deregulation and a series of technological revolutions. Today the media are less professional and more ubiquitous than ever, making them a highly problematic "fourth branch of government," whose role in the 2020 presidential campaign promises to be no more constructive than it was in 2016.

As power and influence have been amassed in Washington, routine political discourse has shifted from unobtrusive jockeying back and forth over narrow interests to noisy debates over public goals and purposes, resulting in the lion's share of attention and resources going to those best able to articulate broad policy objectives. In 1979, James Q. Wilson observed presciently that "what counts now are ideas more than interests." Yet Wilson did not say that interests had disappeared, much less that the ideas in question were necessarily valid or coherent. One consequence of these developments has been the increased visibility of think tanks, which today seem to do less "thinking" and more "messaging." More to the point, those who think they have ideas do not seem to believe they have interests. And those with interests pretend they have ideas.

What's missing from this tableau are intellectual entrepreneurs accustomed to surviving in the marketplace. Washington today is not the kind of place where a Jason Epstein would identify a business opportunity as a way to finance a high-brow publication, and wind up making money on the deal, as he did with *New York Review*. Nor would an Irving Kristol start a publication like *The Public Interest*, run it out of his one-room office at the publishing house employing him, and never pay its senior editors (Kristol, Bell, and Glazer) a dime for their work. On the other hand, contemporary Washington is the kind of place where political and public policy entrepreneurs seek out hedge fund billionaires to support journals and organizations that everyone knows will lose money.

The point is not to denigrate the ethos of Washington today compared to New York in its heyday. After all, the latter was ground zero for "the organization man" and "other-

directedness.” Then, too, the left-sectarian milieu from which Nathan Glazer emerged was typically mired in petty in-fighting and self-important rivalries. As Glazer pointed out on more than one occasion, he and his peers were strikingly insular, and out of touch not only with much of America but even with their own Jewish heritage and institutions. There was also what he charitably described as “the old New York style of pronouncing judgments on a basis of less than adequate knowledge in politics and literature.” Indeed, whenever I come across some of the essays on McCarthyism written by Bell, Lipset, and others, I cringe at their shallow understanding of their fellow Americans in postwar America.

Yet despite these limitations and shortcomings, the legacy of the New York intellectuals hardly seems threatened by any of their would-be successors. Indeed, it is not clear who could fairly and accurately be designated in that role. It would certainly be hard to find such individuals among the ranks of social scientists at today’s universities. Strikingly, the work of a few young writers and analysts, many of them from immigrant backgrounds, exhibits an intellectual vitality, engagement, and rigor reminiscent of Glazer and company. Yet most aspiring young people today, including those from immigrant backgrounds, seem totally absorbed in the latest iteration of identity politics. America is a big country, so the entrepreneurialism, bravado, and intellectual creativity of Nathan Glazer and company may well be brewing out there somewhere. But it does not seem evident in Washington or New York, much less in the groves of academe.

In closing, I am mindful that the achievements of Nathan Glazer and his fellow New York intellectuals will not likely impress the disadvantaged youth now aspiring to climb the ladder of achievement and success in higher education. Presented with the idea that minority youth in particular might benefit from the story recounted here, both they and their mentors in the social sciences will likely ask: What could we possibly learn from the experiences of these old, now deceased Jewish men? A lot, I believe, if only we were able to summon the patience and goodwill to listen to one another.

Finally, I also wonder whether Nat Glazer would agree with my assessment of our contemporary situation. As I have already hinted, his perspective was rather Tolstoian: Everyone’s point of view gets considered, everyone gets their due. And the process never quite reaches closure—witness his changed positions on affirmative action and multiculturalism. Nat was ever the optimist, albeit with modest, realistic expectations. I suspect he would find my perspective a bit too gloomy. But then he would mull on it, reconsider it, and weigh it against subsequent evidence. And therein lies his legacy for us all in these dispiriting times.

¹Recognizing the drawbacks to their over-programmed lives, some college-bound youth and their families are opting for gap years between secondary and higher education. But now ever-entrepreneurial university administrators are seeking to organize and formalize these experiences as well. See Melissa Korn, “Colleges Widen Gap-Year Opportunities,” *Wall Street Journal* (December 26, 2018)

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