

Philip S. Gorski

An Intellectual Life Well-Lived

(doi: 10.2383/74864)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, maggio-agosto 2013

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

An Intellectual Life Well-Lived

by Philip S. Gorski

doi: 10.2383/74864

There is a famous passage in the *Nichomachean Ethics* that I think about more and more as I grow older. It goes roughly like this: you don't know whether a person has lived happily until after they die. I remember being very puzzled by it at first. It runs very much against the moral imaginary of the present age, because we tend to think of happiness as a succession of positive emotional states. For Aristotle, however, the human person was part matter and part form. And the human soul was a union of that matter and form. And the form of the soul was the shape of a life. And the shape of a life is the story of that life. And this is why we cannot know whether our story was a happy one until the last chapter is written. Nor is it even for us to decide whether it was a happy one. It is for those who live on to decide. And so here, we are.

I, for one, think that Bob's life was a happy one in this sense. To be sure, it was not free of great tragedy and deep suffering. But no truly happy life ever is. To have lived happily – to have lived well – is not to have evaded pain or discomfort but to have responded skillfully to the “demands of the day” as they present themselves. By this I mean both the demands of the everyday and also of the historical moment. To respond skillfully is not to mechanically follow some unbending rule but to supply react to the competing imperatives of those moments.

It always seemed to me that Bob did this with great virtuosity, both in private and public life. But the truth is that I knew him more as a scholar than as a person, more through his written voice than his embodied one. So let me dwell for a few moments on his intellectual excellences. One of the obvious challenges of the

academic life in our age is to find some balance between narrow specialization and undisciplined dilettantism. (Though between the two it is surely the former overspecialization that is the greater danger right now.) Somehow, Bob managed to roam widely over many eras and cultures, but also to burrow deeply down in each place he visited, and this in a journey that took him from early modern Japan to contemporary American to Ancient China, to name just a few of the stops on his lifelong itinerary, all the while showing the proper respect to the deep learning of the scholarly guides who helped him along his way. Not easily done.

Another challenge of the intellectual life is balancing scholarly seriousness and public engagement. One of the reasons why a young person chooses to become a social scientist in the first place – one of the honorable reasons anyway – is that they believe that the knowledge they gather might somehow contribute to the human good. But the only way to do this – short of becoming a technocrat or *consigliere* – is reach a broader public. And this is easier said than done. It is, amongst other things, a problem of translation, from the language of the specialist to that of the citizen. In this, too, Bob excelled. Consider *Habits of the Heart*. It is very easy to read, deceptively easy to read, so easy to read one imagines it must have been easy to write. But that is surely not the case. And those who succeed at it should expect resentment rather than admiration from their peers.

A third challenge for American intellectuals is to steer a middle course between cosmopolitanism and patriotism, between one's loyalties to the whole of an abstract humanity and that particular piece of it we just so happen to have been born into. For most American intellectuals today, the cosmopolitan pole exerts the more powerful attraction by far, and the patriotic can simply repel, colonized as it is right now by boastful and raucous voices. Surely, no one would or could dispute Bob's cosmopolitan credentials. In his salad days, at a time of domestic complacency that is almost unimaginable today, Bob set off for Japan. Not France or England or Germany. Japan! But I would like to insist that Bob was also an American patriot of a heterodox sort. Not of the flag-pin wearing, self-totemizing or invasion-supporting, nation-worshipping kind, of course. Rather, a patriot of the better angels and higher ideals kind, for whom the American project was an unfinished and democratic one rather than an imperial *fait accompli*. No one who has read the public sociology of his middle years – the work that begins with the civil religion essay and winds up with *The Good Society* – can possibly doubt this.

The fourth and final challenge I wish to highlight is balancing faith and reason. For many modern intellectuals, even for the great Max Weber, this has appeared as a choice, not a balance. In a youthful letter to his wife, Weber pledged himself to a life “without illusion.” For Weber, this meant a life without religion,

though he was wise enough to realize that this, too, was a sort of faith. But Bob refused this dichotomy. In an age when the relationship of religion and rationality is reduced to pop-culture slogans and dueling bumper stickers, in which some fish sport crosses and others sprout legs, Bob sought to weave together the religious narratives of the Axial Age with the scientific stories of cosmic and organic evolution.

Whether many of our generation will achieve such excellences in our own lives, or whether we will become specialists without spirit, and cosmopolitans without commitment, I am not certain. As Bob would say, I am hopeful but not optimistic.

Gorski, *An Intellectual Life Well-Lived*

An Intellectual Life Well-Lived

Philip Gorski is Professor of Sociology and Religious Studies at Yale. He studied under Robert Bellah from 1988-1996. He is currently completing a book on American civil religion.