

## Afterword: The Downsizing of Intellectual Authority

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As the articles in this issue indicate, there is little agreement about the current state of intellectual life, still less about the role of the intellectual and the status of ideas. Such disagreements can often be a precursor to the development of a creative dynamic of debate. They can also serve as a testimony to a climate of intellectual disorientation and malaise. The problem with the contemporary debate is not that individuals hold such intensely polarised views. Throughout history some of the most productive controversies involved the clash of highly polarised opinions. The problem is that often the protagonists appear to have virtually nothing in common, and lack even a common vocabulary through which they engage with one another.

One possible reason for the state of confused deliberation on the role of the intellectual is that there appears to be so little at stake. After all the status of the intellectual is inseparable from significance that society attributes to ideas. Recently the cultural theorist Terry Eagleton has characterised our era as one where 'ideas no longer matter' (2004). Of course ideas do matter. Politicians and think tanks continually parade for the public their latest 'big idea'. People are continually encouraged to 'brain storm' or to 'think outside of the box' or engage in 'blue sky thinking'. But such exhortations do not represent the affirmation of Ideas with a capital 'I' but their very opposite. With its emphasis on clever formulations, soundbites and novelty, today's project of constructing ideas has little in common with the process of the theoretical elaboration of human experience into categories that develop both understanding and meaning. The pragmatic turn in the conceptualisation of ideas does mean that they do not really matter, or at least not very much.

Of course the pragmatic orientation towards ideas does not mean that people no longer think or no longer have interesting things to say. Interesting books continue to be written and there is an educated and curious public that is continually in search of intellectual stimulation. That is why some observers are able to perceive the state of contemporary intellectual life in such positive terms. From this perspective it is possible to claim that:

Externally, after all, the life of the mind has seldom seemed healthier in America than it does right now. Magazines, newspaper sections, and Web sites dedicated to the doings of scholars, publishers, and writers have proliferated in the last ten years or so. In college and university towns across America, traditional and cutting-edge forms of cultural life flourish side by side. Readings, debates, and poetry slams draw hundreds. Even after college, intellectual life goes on. (Grafton 2001)

If one wants, it is possible to make similar optimistic accounts of intellectual culture in Britain and western Europe.

Unfortunately the optimistic account of contemporary intellectual culture fails to ask the question of what consequences ideas have for public debate, political discussion and for guiding our life. It confuses the consumption of ideas with prevailing attitudes towards the status of ideas and by implication towards the role of the intellectual. Whilst the consumption of culture is mediated through the celebration of 'ideas' and books, the pursuit of knowledge is regarded with intense ambiguity. Contemporary society is often uncomfortable with the pursuit of knowledge. It is often distrustful of those who claim to know. There is widespread suspicion of scientific authority and people who attempt to extend the boundaries of scientific knowledge are frequently accused of 'playing God'. Such accusations are not only levelled at individuals involved in genetic research or genetic therapies, but also at those attempting to develop our understanding of nanotechnology and of human health in general. Social scientists who seek Knowledge with a capital 'K' are often disparaged for their attachment to 'metanarratives', with the same intensity that is generally directed at genetic research. In the past it was often said that a 'little knowledge is a dangerous thing'. Today, society is confronted with a strong undercurrent of opinion that suggests that 'too much knowledge threatens human survival'.

The co-existence of an insatiable appetite for knowledge and an intense suspicion of its further development is one of the strange

paradoxes of western culture today. The constant demand for scientific evidence exists alongside apprehensions about what the scientist is up to in the laboratory. The massive investment in education, universities and private research has not led to the flourishing of a public scientific, cultural or intellectual discourse. The public's unease with the development of knowledge does not mean that it has ceased to be curious about how the world works. There is an enormous public appetite for popular science books. Historical biographies often make the bestseller list. Television programmes devoted to historical and scientific themes can always secure a substantial audience of curious individuals. Many people really want to learn about the world. But in a world where the pursuit of knowledge lacks powerful cultural affirmation, people's relation to it acquires a passive character. Yes people buy popular science books – but they rarely get together to discuss and debate the issues they contain. Many individuals have sought to exploit the opportunities provided by the Internet to pursue their ideas or to learn about subjects that interest them. But this welcome development is as much driven by suspicion of official sources of knowledge as the impulse for exploring new ideas.

It is frequently argued that in the so-called postmodern era, where the fundamental tenets of the Enlightenment have been called into question, the role of the critical intellectual has been severely compromised. Since many of the ideals associated with the exercise of intellectual authority – the search for knowledge, the application of reason – have become targets of scepticism, the work of the intellectual has lost some of its cultural appeal. The decline of belief in the power of reasoning has significantly weakened the status of the intellectual. An all-embracing view of the world, which was said to influence the outlook of the classical intellectual, has given way to the conviction that such a broad outlook is beyond the capacity of the human imagination.

As a result, the intellectual has been assigned a role that is far more limited than was the case in the past. Even those who retain a positive point of reference towards the critical intellectual appear to believe that it can only survive in a seriously modified form. 'While the contexts for their emergence may have been narrowed, and the range of possibilities thereby reduced, the traditions that constitute the intellectual are more than just a fading memory,' writes Eyerman. But despite the attempt to reassure that the traditions associated with the intellectual are 'more than just a fading memory', Eyerman ends up with a fairly modest and pessimistic vision of the future of intellectual work. 'Although its meaning has been almost entirely altered by what has been called the postmodern condition, the

concept of the intellectual still provides a living resource which is likely to be called upon as a rallying cry for coming generations of dissidents' (Eyerman 1994: 199–200).

The belief that the 'postmodern condition' has fundamentally transformed the terrain of intellectual activity has had a powerful impact on the way thinkers think about themselves and their activities. Unlike the Enlightenment intellectual who acclaimed the vision of universalism, today's thinkers are much more likely to celebrate a particularistic identity. Today we have English intellectuals, black intellectuals, feminist, gay and Jewish intellectuals. As a result, intellectual authority does not rest on the ability to represent the truth but on the capacity to affirm the identity of a particular group or specialism. The shift from a universalist to a particularistic focus should not be seen as merely a variation in scale. It involves a fundamental redefinition of intellectual ambition from the attempt to go beyond particular experience to the desire to affirm it (see Furedi 1992: ch.8). Such affirmation is dominated by an intensely conservative imperative that is hostile to the critical questioning of society.

### **The Conformist Intellectual**

A profound mood of new conservatism shapes deliberations on the role of the intellectual. There has never been a period since the beginning of modernity when people working with ideas were so complacent about their role. This atmosphere of conformism is particularly evident amongst professional academics. Any suggestion that intellectual life faces exhaustion, or is in any sense inferior to what existed in previous times, is perfunctorily dismissed as a despicable attempt to return to some elitist inspired mythical age. According to one such account, 'for intellectuals, there is certainly no need to despair', since 'the life that goes on in the university, the pedagogy we conduct amid the ruins, is different from, livelier and more rigorous than, what the various legends of the truth's decline and the intellectual's demise have led us to believe'. The author of these words even has a few crumbs of comfort to offer to those concerned with the marginalisation of the Enlightenment tradition. 'For those who get it, the values of the Enlightenment still furnish the patches of brightness by which we choose our way', he writes (Michael 2000: 174–5). Finding 'patches of brightness' in order to avoid engaging with the retreat of the intellectual seems to be the dominant response to the problem.

Following Foucault, many contributors are positively delighted that the Enlightenment standards are now discredited. Andrew Ross is pleased that cultural life is no longer dominated by a universalist outlook. For Ross, 'the withering away of the universal intellectual' represents a positive step forward. He reserves his scorn for those who still yearn for the intellectual culture of a previous era, and denounces what he calls the 'reactionary consensus of left and right, each unswervingly loyal to their respective narratives of decline'. Ross dismisses charges of 'post-sixties fragmentation and academification from unreconstructed voices on the left, and warnings of doom and moral degeneracy from the Cassandras on the right' (Ross 1989: 211, 229). According to this Panglossian view, all is well – the only flies in the ointment are the twisted critics of the professionalisation of academic life.

The assumption that classical intellectual authority is no longer sustainable informs today's conformist cultural outlook. 'For those who take seriously the diagnosis that public life in Western democracies is no longer of a kind that permits claims to general intellectual authority, declinism, of whatever political coloring, is too plainly a posture rather than an answer', argues the editor of a collection of articles on 'the public intellectual' (Small 2002: 5). Serious concern with the malaise of intellectual life often invites the smug response that all is well in academia. The questioning of contemporary intellectual and pedagogic practices is frequently dismissed as a lament for a golden age. This complacent defence of the *status quo* is virtually unprecedented in the intellectual history of modernity. In the nineteenth century, even the most conservative section of the intelligentsia was critical of the prevailing cultural climate, and every brand of intellectuals sought to alter, improve, transform and even overthrow the world that confronted them. The contrast between this tradition of intellectual ferment, and the complacent attitudes displayed today, highlights the distinct features of intellectual life in the early twenty-first century.

It is very tempting to blame governments and politicians for the intellectual malaise that pervades society. However, it is important to recall that governments and officials have rarely been an intellectual's friend. Indeed, the intellectual life of a society often flourished in spite of the philistinism of the powers that be. From eighteenth century onwards the most creative moments in societies were the product of intellectual currents that were oppositional and critical of the prevailing order. So instead of blaming officialdom and politicians, we may need to look somewhere else.

Since the French Revolution, the battle between intellectual and anti-intellectual trends have tended to mirror the political conflict between left and right. The conservative imagination was dismissive of the intellectuals' addiction to ideas and their apparent detachment from real life. From Burke onwards, such ideas-driven were represented as dangerous fanatics, who were prepared to impose their utopian schemes on society. The view that the intellectual's interests contradicted those of the people was systematically promoted by traditionalists. During the Cold War, McCarthyism forcefully developed this sentiment and transformed the intellectual into an object of suspicion – someone who was not quite American.

The distinguishing feature of our times is that anti-intellectualism is no longer the monopoly of the right. Today, anti-intellectual themes have been internalised by all sections of society. Most significant of all, often even intellectuals are confused about the role of ideas and feel uncomfortable about their own status as intellectual. So whereas in the past the notion that ideas are potentially dangerous was usually associated with the right, today this sentiment is most forcibly advanced by postmodernist and left-wing critiques of the Enlightenment.

It is understandable that with the decline of ideology and the legacy of failed social experiments there is a tendency to be weary of so-called big ideas. Unfortunately, the experience of disappointment has led many towards the path of permanent scepticism and a cynical orientation towards ideas. It is this climate of disappointment that has fostered hostility to so-called metanarratives and helped consolidate a mood of relativism. Relativism rejects truths in favour of perspective and in so doing contributes to the devaluation of ideas. Once the status of ideas is confined to little truths, the pursuit of knowledge can easily lose its passion and immediacy. So the current climate of relativism not only trivialises the role of ideas but it also diminishes the spirit of intellectual experimentation (This point is developed in Furedi 2004).

Of course, it is unthinkable that thinkers have given up the search for the truth. And as the numerous interesting books and publications testify, intellectuals are no less clever than in the past. What has happened, however, is that the contemporary disorientation towards the status of ideas has forced intellectuals as a group on the defensive. That is why so many thinkers are even reluctant to think of themselves as intellectuals. Sadly the nineteenth-century conservative critique of the intellectual has been internalised by men and women who are in the business of developing ideas. The immediate challenge facing intellectuals in the twenty-first century is to rid themselves of this terrible legacy.

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