

IN DEFENCE OF INTELLECTUAL CULTURE

Andrew Wernick

We don't want no education
We don't want no thought control
Hey! teacher, leave us kids alone
All in all you're just another brick in the wall

Pink Floyd

In my response to Ben Agger's essay on *Dialectical Sensibility* (*CJPST*, Vol. 1, nos. 2 & 3) I had hoped to bring into the open some important unresolved issues concerning the place of intellectuality and intellectual culture in a long-range transformative perspective. Unfortunately, his reply to my criticisms of populist intellectualism contains fewer arguments than symptoms: I clearly hit a raw nerve. Impatient with what he takes to be the underlying basis of my position, he foregoes a careful examination of my actual words and rushes straight into a denunciation of the sins they are supposed to connote — positivism, Leninism (which for Agger means Stalinism) and a blind defence of the ivory tower. Before commenting directly, then, on the matters at issue, it is necessary to clear up some misunderstandings.

Agger assumes that a defence of objectivity as an epistemological norm (and realism as an ontological norm) is tantamount to (a) a claim that the proponent of such a stance actually or potentially possesses absolute knowledge, (b) a claim by objectivists that they — or intellectuals in general — ought to rule, and (c) a denial of reflexivity. Assumptions (a) and (b) are *non sequiturs* and should not therefore have been ascribed. As for (c), no sophisticated objectivist in the social sciences — Marxist or otherwise — would deny that the subject, categories and process of knowledge are inextricably part of the object of knowledge itself. To put it provocatively: if I want to know myself, I — even as a verb — am also an object.

Agger's conflation of epistemological, ideological and political propositions also prevents him from correctly deciphering my political standpoint. He assumes that an insistence on instrumental rationality means thinking "about strategy only in terms of the mechanics of class struggle and not *also* in

ANDREW WERNICK

terms of the necessary emancipatory individuation of this class struggle on the level of lived experience." To the contrary, it is precisely because of my affinity for Agger's Marcusean interest in the requirements of a new radical sensibility that I thought it worthwhile to debate with him in the first place. Need it be pointed out that Gramsci, to whom Agger makes frequent appeal, was the perfect embodiment of a revolutionary strategist who combined a rational, even Leninist, approach to politics with a full appreciation of the need to effect an ideological and cultural transformation on the widest possible scale. With Agger, let me add, I am all for broadening, even universalising, the social basis and democratic mode of the directing political intelligence (although, with Gramsci, I assume that such direction is necessary). On the relation between cultural and class struggle, it would be foolish for any veteran of the sixties to urge the subordination of the former to the latter. On this score, I suspect that Agger — with the paramount importance he places on the spontaneous consciousness of blue- and white-collar workers — is actually more orthodox in his Marxism than I am.

My views on the Frankfurt School are similarly misinterpreted. Against my suggestion that the Frankfurt School was ultimately "successful in the practical goal it set itself," Agger counters: "To think that a single soul was rescued from the aura of the death camps by reading Adorno shows pitiable naivete." It would indeed; the works to which we were both referring (*Minima Moralia* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) were not available to the German public until after the War. My actual argument referred to the importance of critical theory in the rapid ideological development of the West German student movement in the early sixties.

Agger's systematic distortion of my position is not merely irritating; it also reveals flaws in his own methodology. Despite frequent use of the term dialectical, he seems to find it inconceivable that one who defends the values of objectivity, reason, intellectuality and so on, might nevertheless share his own objections to Leninist substitutionism, high cultural elitism and technocratic manipulation — and, from the same utopian, democratic and communitarian perspective. Moreover, one of the first principles of an "epistemological democracy," I would have thought, is that every authentically held point of view has its moment of truth. Far from adopting such an ecumenical approach, however, Agger wants to banish some viewpoints (e.g., anti-anti-intellectualism) from his republic altogether. Paradoxically, this *ex cathedra* excommunication is pronounced in the name of anti-authoritarianism.

In addition to all these misinterpretations, there are of course a number of issues on which we genuinely disagree. Here, I want simply to state a number of propositions that will make my own "proclivities" more explicit.

EXCHANGE

1. Leadership and Vanguard

A combined, many-sided and integrated development of all human activities is the emancipatory ideal; but the higher the collective level, the more a certain degree of individual specialisation is inevitable and even desirable. On a social scale, consciousness (like all human faculties) develops unevenly. Even if the historical causes of inequality were transcended, social, cultural and psychological asymmetries would still predispose the consciousnesses of some individuals and milieus to be relatively advanced. But consciousness, in this context, should not be identified with only one of its forms and levels; the law of uneven anthropological development applies to practical as well as theoretical consciousness, to qualities such as wisdom and ethical sensitivity as well as to socio-historical reflexivity, political intelligence, intersubjective skills, imaginative capacity and specific expertise in particular branches of technical or theoretical knowledge. Some of these capacities are complementary, but being advanced in one respect by no means guarantees being advanced in others. In short, there are as many vanguards as there are types of praxis. There is no single, overall vanguard, nor — in view of the immense complexity of human activities and faculties — can there be. In principle, given a multiplicity of independently established status hierarchies and with the removal of social obstacles to individual growth, the goal of inter-personal status equality would be compatible with the actuality of asymmetry and unevenness in collective cultural development.

The problem of status, however, must be distinguished from that of leadership, which is more intractable. Surmounting evolutionary problems and even day-to-day problem-solving would be impossible if the rational authority of those with the greatest scientific, technological, political or ideological grasp were never respected. But leadership, which confers power can not be regarded as a simple extension of the spontaneous division of labour. Under the circumstances, there can be no permanent resolution of the familiar contradiction at the heart of progressive political theory between the principles of democracy and rational leadership. The extent to which the latter function can be collectivised to the point where it is exercised by the policy as a whole can only be a matter for experiment by future generations. In practice, we must, as Mao puts it, “grasp both ends.”

In view of the human capacity for self-deception, leadership can only be granted, not unilaterally assumed; and even so, the conferral of authority may be misguided. Self-appointed leaders (Gautama, Socrates and Jesus are ironic exceptions) are rarely the genuine article. Political struggles require direction and coordination; but whatever the instrumental exigencies, unobtrusive leadership (by individuals and collectivities) is always the least offensive. Lao Tzu, characterising “the best of all rulers,” notes that

ANDREW WERNICK

When his task is accomplished and his work done
The people will all say: 'It happened naturally'.

Tao Te Ching

The *Tao Te Ching* is feudal and quietist, but *mutatis mutandis* there is a message here also for activists in a democracy.

2. On Intellectual Improvement

Human differences in developed mental capacity — in the powers of reason and reflection — are, among all the natural distinctions, the most invidious. A discussion of raising the collective intellectual level will therefore always seem arrogant and undemocratic. On the other hand, to treat the oedipally charged *ressentiment* of the intellectually dominated and frustrated as a regulative ideal converts this necessary egalitarian unease into a veritable taboo on the topic. Such single-minded anti-élitism creates a blind spot in the transformative critique.

North Americans, so it is said, on the average watch six hours of network TV per day and spend four hours per year reading serious literature. The figure of the intellectual (especially when fused with that of the Bohemian) has replaced the Jew as the main target of mass psychological hostility in advanced capitalism. More is at fault here than the self-distantiation of intellectual workers from the masses. The mind-body split that two centuries of social critics have detected to be at the psychotic centre of Western culture in the bourgeois epoch manifests itself not only in sexual repression (which we now understand) and in the extrusion of certain forms of intellectual practice from direct intercourse with "the real world" (which is less true of North America than of "older" regions like Europe) — but also in the repression of intellectuality and of the gratifications associated with it in the daily life experiences of the masses. Anti-intellectualism — i.e., prejudice towards ideas and those who bear them — is a self-negating expression of instinctual frustration, an unlovely element in the psychology of the oppressed.

Confining people's intellectual development to the unreflective level at which advanced capitalism requires the majority to operate, and focussing their hostility on ideas or individuals that disrupt the general torpor, is of obvious benefit to the business, military and political elites who really rule. But it is not only a capitalist problem. The repressive state-socialist regimes of the East also foster a climate of opinion antagonistic to intellectuals and independent thought. There, the effect is achieved through overt ideological controls. In advanced capitalism, mass stupefaction and ideological intolerance, which is characteristic of an alienated work process, is served and

EXCHANGE

reinforced by a commoditised culture industry. Mass media programming colonises audiences both for advertisers and for the merchandisers of popular entertainment. Reawakening the community's dormant powers of reflection is a necessary moment in the long-range project of achieving collective self-determination. Conversely, catering to anti-intellectualism represents a capitulation to present and future authoritarianisms.

3. On the Social Division of Labour

The peculiar passion of those who insist on the necessity of abolishing the division of labour is the desire to dethrone intellectual practice from its privileged social position, and to break the domination of those whose monopoly over intellectual tasks excludes the majority from effective day-to-day decision-making power. The aim is unimpeachable, but the issue — even in the abstract — is more complicated than first appears.

Above all, it is important to distinguish between the problems of domination, status, functional differentiation, individual specialisation and social mobility. It is one thing to abolish the coercive power exercised by one social group (or type of practice) over another, and quite a different thing to abolish differentiated social activities as such, or the subcultures and idiolects that crystallise around them. And the question posed by Durkheim concerning the relative merits of specialisation and generalism is another issue again. To subsume these quite separate problems under one umbrella — the division of labour: should it be abolished? — eliminates all the ground between blind defence of the status quo and abstract negation. Marx's discussion of the question in the *1844 Manuscripts* and in the *German Ideology* leaves a confused impression precisely because he does not make the necessary distinctions. Hence his conception of communism, for all its stress on the omni-sided unfolding of individual human potential, is still susceptible to regressive utopian longings. In the language of fantasy, abolishing the division of labour means abolishing the boundary between ego and other, and in the language of political theory it means primitive communism and a return to tribal unity. This does not imply that the dream (the promise of happiness) should be suppressed in the name of an impoverished reality; but rather that as we experimentally attempt to deconstruct coercive elements of human association, we should not let the unconscious, unreflected, dictate our political drives.

4. The Future of Academia

Among the functions of the capitalist university today are: the allocation of individuals into the upper reaches of the occupational hierarchy;

ANDREW WERNICK

reproduction of the cultural values and class outlooks appropriate to professional and managerial destinations; and mobilisation of knowledge production in the service of “private” industry and the state. To those at the bottom of the class structure, education is indeed “just another brick in the wall”: a barrier to social mobility, a propaganda machine for the institutions and interests which subordinate them, and a mandarinat which stamps them as inferior cultural products. Under the circumstances, the pretensions of higher education to represent higher spiritual values (the disinterested pursuit of truth, etc.) is pious rhetoric.

So what is to be done? Tear down the wall and, following Illich, de-school society? The conclusion, especially when applied to post-secondary institutions, is unwarranted. First, because it is implausible to suppose that a high technology civilisation can dispense with organised centres of scientific education and research; while less immediately utilitarian, the same is true of the cultural and social knowledge (imperfectly) produced and transmitted by the social sciences and humanities. In this context, the democratic imperative points not to academia’s self-liquidation but to the need for universal access to university resources, and for more socially accountable forms of academic self-management. Secondly, the fact that the university’s charter functions are vitiated in practice does not invalidate them in principle.

The problem is that the university’s positive functions in the (re)production of short- and long-range intellectual use-values, are subverted by the class context and alienated mode in which the whole educational system is set. In this respect, the forces of capitalism and bureaucracy oppress even the relatively privileged intellectual workers within the academy itself — and not just because of guilt occasioned by blatant academic complicity in the evils of the world. Besides the general lack of cultural support for intellectual work, the invasion of pedagogy by market categories (curriculum planning as a Nielsen ratings game) and the reification of work relations, as the “community of scholars” becomes a corporate enterprise, serve to undermine universities as authentic intellectual centres, and to alienate the everyday activity of all those who work in them.

Far from there being, therefore, an irreconcilable gulf between the human interests of academia and the not-yet community it ideally serves, there is ultimately a convergence in the common need for academic and intellectual reconstruction (and for the broader changes that would make that possible). The bricks are a building as well as a wall: for those of us whose legitimate vocation it is to live in that building, the problem is how to make it into a place of human habitation.

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