

REITH LECTURES 1993: Representations of an Intellectual

Edward Said

Lecture 4: Professionals and Amateurs

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Some years ago the versatile and ingenious French intellectual Régis Debray wrote a penetrating account of French cultural life entitled *Teachers, Writers, Celebrities: The Intellectuals of Modern France*. Debray himself had once been a seriously committed left-wing activist who had taught at the University of Havana shortly after the Cuban Revolution of 1958; some years later, he was given a 30-year prison term by the Bolivian authorities because of his association with Che Guevara. Yet he only served three years of his sentence and after his return to France, Debray became a semi-academic political analyst and, later still, an adviser to President Mitterrand. Debray's thesis in his book is that between 1880 and 1930 Parisian intellectuals were principally connected to the Sorbonne; they were secular refugees from both church and Bonapartism, where in laboratories, libraries and classrooms the intellectual, protected as a professor, could make important advances in knowledge.

After 1930, the Sorbonne slowly lost its authority to new publishing houses like the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, where, according to Debray, "the spiritual family", comprising the intelligentsia and their editors, was given a more hospitable roof over its head. Until roughly 1960, such writers as Sartre, De Beauvoir, Camus, Mauriac, Gide and Malraux were in effect the intelligentsia who had superseded the professoriate, superseded them because of their free-ranging work, their credo of freedom and their discourse that was "midway between the ecclesiastical solemnity that went before it and the shrillness of the advertising that came after".

Around 1968, intellectuals largely deserted their publishers' fold; instead they flocked to the mass media - as journalists, talkshow guests and hosts, advisers, managers and so on. Not only did they now have a huge mass audience, but also their entire life's work as intellectuals depended on their viewers, on acclaim or oblivion as given by those "others" who had become a faceless, consuming audience out there. Debray says: "By extending the reception area, the mass media have reduced the sources of intellectual legitimacy, surrounding the professional intelligentsia, the classic source of legitimacy, with wider concentric circles that are less demanding and therefore more easily won over."

What Debray describes is almost entirely a local French situation, the result of a struggle between secular, imperial and ecclesiastical forces in that society since Napoleon. It is therefore most unlikely to duplicate the picture he provides for France in other societies. In Britain, for example, the major universities before World War Two could hardly be characterised in Debray's terms, since even Oxford and Cambridge dons were not principally known in the public domain as intellectuals in the French sense; and, although British publishing houses were powerful and influential between the two world wars, they and their authors did not constitute the spiritual family Debray speaks about in France. Nevertheless, the general point is a

valid one: groups of individuals are aligned with institutions and derive power and authority from those institutions. As the institutions either rise or fall in ascendancy, so too do their organic intellectuals who work inside them.

And yet the question remains as to whether there is or can be anything like an independent, autonomously functioning intellectual: one who is not beholden to, and therefore constrained by, his or her affiliations with universities that pay salaries, political parties that demand loyalty to a party line, think-tanks that while they offer freedom to do research, perhaps more subtly compromise judgement and restrain the critical voice. As Debray suggests, once an intellectual circle is widened beyond a like group of intellectuals - in other words, if instead of depending on other intellectuals for debate and judgement and one starts instead to worry about pleasing an audience or an employer - something in the intellectual's vocation is, if not abrogated, then certainly inhibited.

We come back once again to the main theme of these lectures: the representation of the intellectual. When we think of an individual intellectual - the individual is my principal concern here - do we accentuate the individuality of the person in drawing his or her portrait, or do we rather make our focus the group or class of which the individual is a member. The answer to this question obviously affects our expectations of the intellectual's address to us. Is what we hear or read an independent view, or does it represent a government, an organised political cause, a lobbying group? 19th century representations of the intellectual tended to stress individuality - the fact that very often the intellectual is, like Turgenev's Bazarov or James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, a solitary, somehow aloof figure who does not conform to society at all and is consequently a rebel completely outside established opinion. With the increased number of 20th century men and women who belong to a general group called "intellectuals" or the "intelligentsia" - the managers, professors, journalists, computer or government experts, lobbyists, pundits, syndicated columnists, consultants who are paid for their opinions - one is impelled to wonder whether the individual intellectual as an independent voice can exist at all.

This is a tremendously important question, I think, and it must be looked into with a combination of realism and idealism, certainly not cynicism. A cynic, Oscar Wilde said, is someone who knows the price of everything but the value of nothing. To accuse all intellectuals of being sellouts just because they earn their living working in a university or for a newspaper is a coarse and, finally, meaningless charge. Thus it would be far too indiscriminately cynical to say that the world is so corrupt that everyone ultimately succumbs to Mammon. On the other hand, it is scarcely less serious to hold up the individual intellectual as a perfect ideal, a sort of shining knight who is so pure and so noble as to deflect any suspicion of material interest. No-one can pass such a test, not even Joyce's Dedalus, who is so pure and fiercely ideal as in the end to be incapacitated and, worse, silent. The fact is that the intellectual ought neither to be so uncontroversial and safe a figure as to be just a friendly technician, nor - going in the opposite direction - should the intellectual try to be a full-time Cassandra, as unpleasant in being right as she was and as unheard as well. Every human being is held in by society, no matter how free and open the society, no matter how bohemian the individual. In any case, the intellectual is supposed to be heard from, and in practice ought to be stirring up debate and, if possible, controversy. But the alternatives are not total quiescence or total rebelliousness.

During the waning days of the Reagan administration, a disaffected left-wing American intellectual called Russell Jacoby published a book that generated a great deal of discussion, much of it approving. It was called *The Last Intellectuals*, and argued the unimpeachable thesis that in the United States “the non-academic intellectual” had completely disappeared, leaving no one in that place except a bunch of timid and jargon-ridden university dons, to whom no one in the society paid any attention. Jacoby’s model for the intellectual of yore was comprised of a few names that lived mostly in Greenwich Village (the local equivalent of the Latin Quarter) earlier this century and were known by the general name of the New York intellectuals. Most of them were Jewish, left-wing (but anti-Communist), and managed to live by their pens. Figures of the earlier generation included men and women like Edmund Wilson, Jane Jacobs, Lewis Mumford, Dwight MacDonal; their later counterparts were Philip Rahv, Alfred Kazin, Irving Howe (who died only a few weeks ago), Susan Sontag, Daniel Bell, William Barrett, Lionel Trilling. According to Jacoby the likes of such people have been diminished by various post-war social and political forces: the flight to the suburbs (Jacoby’s point being that the intellectual is an urban creature); the irresponsibilities of the Beat Generation, who pioneered the idea of dropping out and fleeing from their appointed station in life; the expansion of the university; and the drift to the campus of the former American left.

The result is that today’s intellectual is most likely to be a closeted literature professor, with a secure income and no interest in dealing with the world outside the classroom. Such individuals, Jacoby alleges, write an esoteric and barbaric prose that is meant mainly for academic advancement and not for social change. Meanwhile, the ascendancy of what has been called the neo-conservative movement - intellectuals who had become prominent during the Reagan period but who were in many cases former left-wing, independent intellectuals, like Irving Kristol and Sidney Hook - brought with it a whole host of new journals advancing an openly reactionary, or at least conservative, social agenda. Jacoby mentions the extreme right-wing quarterly *The New Criterion* in particular. These new forces, says Jacoby, were and still are much more assiduous at courting young writers, potential intellectual leaders who can take over from the older ranks. Whereas the *New York Review of Books*, one of the most prestigious liberal journals in America, had once pioneered daring ideas as expressed by new and radical writers, it had now acquired “a deplorable record”, resembling in its ageing Anglophilia “Oxford teas rather than New York delis”.

Jacoby keeps coming back to his idea of an intellectual whom he describes as an “incorrigibly independent soul answering to no one”. “All that we have now,” he says, “is a missing generation, which has been replaced by buttoned up, impossible to understand classroom technicians, hired by committee, anxious to please various patrons and agencies, bristling with academic credentials and a social authority that does not promote debate but establishes reputations and intimidates non-experts”. This is a very gloomy picture, but is it an accurate one? Is what Jacoby says about the reason for the disappearance of intellectuals true, or can we offer in fact a more accurate diagnosis? In the first place I think it is wrong to be invidious about the university, or even about the United States. There was a brief period in France shortly after the Second World War when a handful of prominent independent intellectuals like Sartre, Camus, Aron, De Beauvoir seemed to represent the classic idea - not necessarily the reality - of intellectuals descended from their great (but alas often

mythical) 19th century prototypes like Renan and Humboldt. But what Jacoby doesn't talk about is that intellectual work in the 20th century has been centrally concerned not just with public debate and elevated polemic of the sort advocated by Julien Benda, the early 20th century Frenchman of letters, and exemplified perhaps by Bertrand Russell and a few bohemian New York intellectuals, but also with criticism and disenchantment, with exposure of false prophets and debunking of ancient traditions and hallowed names.

Besides, being an intellectual is not at all inconsistent with being an academic or a pianist, for that matter. The Canadian pianist Glenn Gould was a recording artist on contract to large corporations for the whole of his performing life: this did not prevent him from being an iconoclastic reinterpreter of and commentator on classical music with tremendous influence on the way performance is realised and judged. By the same token, academic intellectuals - historians, for example - have totally reshaped thought about the writing of history, the stability of traditions, the role of language in society. One thinks of Eric Hobsbawm and E P Thompson in England, or Hayden White in America. Their work has had wide diffusion beyond the academy, although it mostly was born and nurtured inside it.

As for the United States being especially guilty of denaturing intellectual life, one would have to dispute that since everywhere one looks today, even in France, the intellectual is no longer a bohemian or café philosopher, but has become a quite different figure representing many different kinds of concerns, making his or her representations in a seriously altered way. As I have been saying throughout these lectures, the intellectual is less a sort of statue like icon than an individual vocation, an energy, a stubborn force engaging as a committed and recognisable voice in language and in society with a whole slew of issues, all of them having to do in the end with a combination of enlightenment and emancipational freedom.

The particular threat to the intellectual today, whether in the West or the non-Western world, is not the academy, nor the suburbs, nor the appalling commercialism of journalism and publishing houses. Rather the danger comes from an attitude that I shall be calling professionalism; that is, thinking of your work as an intellectual as something you do for a living, between the hours of nine and five with one eye on the clock, and another cocked at what is considered to be proper, professional behaviour - not rocking the boat, not straying outside the accepted paradigms or limits, making yourself marketable and above all presentable, hence uncontroversial and unpolitical and "objective".

Let us go back to Sartre for a moment. At the very time that he seems to be advocating the idea that man - no mention of woman - is free to choose his own destiny, he also says that the situation (one of Sartre's favourite words) may prevent the full exercise of such freedom. And yet, Sartre adds, it is wrong to say that milieu and situation unilaterally determine the writer or intellectual. Rather there's a constant back and forth between them. In his credo as an intellectual, published in 1947, *What is Literature*, Sartre uses the word 'writer' rather than 'intellectual', but it is clear that he is speaking about the role of the intellectual in society as in the following all-male passage: "Whatever game he may want to play, the intellectual must play it on the basis of the representation which others have of him. He may want to modify the character that one attributes to the man of letters or intellectual in a given society, but

in order to change it he must first slip into it. Hence the public intervenes with its customs, its vision of the world, and its conception of society and of literature within that society. It surrounds the writer, it hems him in, and its imperious or sly demands, its refusals and its flights are the given facts on whose basis a work can be constructed”.

Sartre is not saying that the intellectual is a kind of withdrawn philosopher-king whom one ought to idealise and venerate as such. On the contrary - and this is something that contemporary lamenters over the disappearance of intellectuals tend to miss - the intellectual is constantly subject not only to the demands of his or her society, but also to quite substantial modifications in the status of intellectuals as members of a distinct group. In assuming that the intellectual ought to have sovereignty or a kind of unrestricted authority over moral and mental life in a society, critics of the contemporary scene simply refuse to see how much energy has been poured into resisting, even attacking authority of late. This has resulted in radical changes in the intellectual's self-representation.

Today's society still hems in and surrounds the writer, sometimes with prizes and rewards, often with denigrations or ridiculings of intellectual work altogether; still more often was saying that the true intellectual ought to be only an expert professional in his or her field. I don't recall Sartre ever saying that the intellectual should remain outside the university necessarily. He did say that the intellectual is never more an intellectual than when surrounded, cajoled, hemmed in, hectored by society to be one thing or another because only then, and on that basis, can intellectual work be constructed. When he refused the Nobel Prize in 1964, he was acting precisely according to his principles.

What are these pressures in the 1990s? And how do they fit what I have been calling professionalism? What I want to discuss are four pressures which I believe challenge the intellectual's ingenuity and will. None of them is unique to only one society. Despite their pervasiveness, each of them can be countered by what I shall call amateurism, the desire to be moved not by profit or reward but by love for and unquenchable interest in the larger picture, in making connections across lines and barriers, in refusing to be tied down to a speciality, in caring for ideas and values despite the restrictions of a profession.

Specialisation is the first of these pressures. The higher one goes in the education system today, the more one is limited to a relatively narrow area of knowledge. Now no one can have anything against competence as such, but when it involves losing sight of anything outside one's immediate field - say early Victorian love poetry - and the sacrifice of one's general culture to a set of authorities and canonical ideas, then competence of that sort is not worth the price paid for it.

In the study of literature, for example, which is my particular interest, specialisation has meant an increasing technical formalism, and less and less of a historical sense of what real experiences actually went into the making of a work of literature. Specialisation loses you sight of the raw effort of constructing either art or knowledge; as a result you cannot view knowledge and art as choices and decisions, commitments and alignments, rather than impersonal theories or methodologies. To be a specialist in literature too often also means shutting out history, or music, or

politics. In the end, as a fully specialised literary expert, you become tame and accepting of whatever the so-called leaders in the field will allow. Specialisation also kills your sense of excitement and discovery, both of which are irreducibly present in the intellectual's makeup. In the final analysis, giving up to specialisation is, I have always felt, laziness: doing what others tell you is always done because that is your speciality, after all.

If specialisation is a kind of general instrumental pressure present in all systems of education everywhere, expertise and the cult of the certified expert are more particular pressures in the post-war world. To be an expert you have to be certified by the proper authorities; they instruct you in speaking the right language, citing the right authorities, holding down the right territory. This is especially true when sensitive and/or profitable areas of knowledge are at stake. There has been a great deal of discussion recently of something called "political correctness", an insidious phrase applied to academic humanists who, it is frequently said, do not really think independently but rather according to norms established by a cabal of leftists; these norms are supposed to be overly sensitive to racism, sexism and the like, instead of allowing people to debate in what is supposed to be an "open" manner.

The truth is that the campaign against political correctness has been conducted by various conservatives and other champions of family values. Although some of the things they say have some merit - especially when they pick up on the sheer mindlessness of unthinking cant - their campaign totally overlooks the amazing conformity and political correctness where, for example, military, national security, foreign and economic policy have been concerned. During the immediate post-war years, for example, so far as the Soviet Union was concerned you were required to accept unquestioningly the premises of the Cold War, the total evil of the Soviet Union, and so on and so forth. For an even longer period of time, roughly from the mid-1940s until the mid-1970s, the official American idea held that freedom in the Third World meant simply freedom from Communism: it reigned virtually unchallenged; and with it went the notion - endlessly elaborated by legions of sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists and economists - that "development" was non-ideological, derived from the West and involved economic take-off, modernisation, anti-Communism and a devotion among some political leaders to formal alliances with the United States.

For the United States and some of its Western associates, like Britain and France, these views about defence and security often became dogma. This resulted in imperial policies, in which counter-insurgency and an implacable opposition to native nationalism (always seen as tending towards Communism and the Soviet Union) brought immense disasters in the form of costly wars (such as the one in Vietnam), indirect support for invasions and massacres (like those undertaken by allies of the West, such as Indonesia, El Salvador and Israel) and client regimes with grotesquely distorted economies. To disagree with all this meant, in effect, interfering with a controlled market for expertise tailored to further the national effort.

For "expertise" in the end has rather little, strictly speaking, to do with knowledge. Some of the material brought to bear on the Vietnamese war by Noam Chomsky is far greater in scope and accuracy than similar writing by certified experts. But whereas Chomsky moved beyond the ritually patriotic notions - that included the idea that

“we” were coming to the aid of our allies, or that “we” were defending freedom against a Moscow - or Peking-inspired takeover - and took on the real motives that governed US behaviour, the certified experts, who wanted to be asked back to consult or speak at the State Department or work for the Rand Corporation, which was a research company originally established by the Department of Defense, they never strayed into that territory at all. Chomsky has told the story of how when as a linguist he has been invited by mathematicians to speak about his theories, then he is usually met with respectful interest, despite his relative ignorance of mathematical lingo. Yet when he tries to represent US foreign policy from an adversarial standpoint the recognised experts on foreign policy try to prevent his speaking, on the basis of his lack of certification as a foreign policy expert. There is little refutation offered as arguments; just the statement that he stands outside acceptable debate or consensus. The third pressure of professionalism is the inevitable drift towards power and authority in its adherents, towards the requirements and prerogatives of power, towards being directly employed by it. In the United States, the extent to how much the agenda of the national security mentality set priorities in academic research during the period when the US was competing with the Soviet Union for world hegemony is quite staggering. A similar situation obtained in the Soviet Union, but in the West no one had any illusions about free inquiry there. We are only just beginning to wake up to what it meant that the American Departments of State and Defense provided the largest amount of money of any single donor for university research in science and technology.

But it was also the case that during the same period university social science and even humanities departments were funded by the government for the same general agenda. Something like this occurs in all societies, of course, but it was noteworthy in the US, however, because in the case of some of the anti-guerrilla research carried out in support of policy in the Third World - South-East Asia, Latin America and the Middle East principal among them - the research was applied directly in covert activities, sabotage and even outright war.

Nor has this been all. Centralising powers in American civil society, such as the Republican or Democratic parties, industry or special interest lobbies like those created or maintained by the gun-manufacturing, oil, and tobacco corporations, large foundations like those established by the Rockefellers, the Fords or the Mellons, all employ academic experts to carry out research and study programmes that further commercial as well as political agendas. This, of course, is part of what is considered normal behaviour in a free market, and occurs throughout Europe and the Far East as well. There are grants and fellowships to be had from think-tanks, plus sabbatical leaves and publishing subventions, as well as professional advancement and recognition.

Everything about the system is above board and, as I have said, is acceptable according to the standards of competition and market response that govern behaviour under advanced capitalism in a liberal and democratic society. But in spending a lot of time worrying about the restrictions on thought and intellectual freedom under totalitarian systems of government, we have not been as fastidious in considering the threats to the individual intellectual of a system that rewards intellectual conformity, as well as willing participation in goals that have been set not by science but by the government; accordingly, research and accreditation are controlled in order to get and

keep a larger share of the market.

In other words, the space for individual and subjective intellectual representation, for asking questions and challenging the wisdom of a war or an immense social programme that awards contracts and endows prizes, has shrunk dramatically from what it was a hundred years ago, when Stephen Dedalus could say that as an intellectual his duty was not to serve power at all. Now I do not want to suggest as some have - rather sentimentally, I think - that we should recover a time when universities were not so big, and the opportunities they now offer were not so lavish. To my mind the Western university still offers the intellectual a quasi-utopian space in which reflection and research can go on, albeit under new constraints and pressures.

Therefore, the problem for the intellectual is to try to deal with the impingements of modern professionalisation as I have been discussing them, not by pretending that they are not there or denying their influence, but by representing a different set of values and prerogatives. These I shall collect under the name of amateurism, literally, an activity that is fuelled by care and affection rather than by profit, and selfish, narrow specialisation.

An amateur is what today the intellectual ought to be, someone who considers that to be a thinking and concerned member of a society one is entitled to raise moral issues at the heart of even the most technical and professionalised activity as it involve one's country, its power, its mode of interacting with its citizens as well as with other societies. In addition, the intellectual's spirit as an amateur can enter and transform the merely professional routine most of us go through into something much more lively and radical; instead of doing what one is supposed to do one can ask why one does it, who benefits from it, how can it reconnect with a personal project and original thought.

Every intellectual has an audience and a constituency. The issue is whether that audience is there to be satisfied, and hence a client to be kept happy, or whether it is there to be challenged, and hence stirred into outright opposition, or mobilised into greater democratic participation in the society. But in either case, there is no getting around authority and power, and no getting around the intellectual's relationship to them. How does the intellectual address authority: as a professional supplicant, or as its unrewarded, amateurish conscience?