

REITH LECTURES 1993: Representations of an Intellectual

Edward Said

Lecture 1: Representations of the Intellectual

TRANSMISSION: 23 June 1993 - BBC Radio 4

What I care about as an intellectual is what I say before an audience or to a constituency, and what my representations are about is not only how I articulate them, but what I represent, as someone whose main concern is to try to advance the cause of freedom and justice. I say or write these things because, after much reflection, they are what I believe; and I also want to persuade others of this view.

There is, therefore, this quite complicated mix between the private and the public worlds: my own history, values, writings and positions as they derive from my experiences, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, how these enter into the social world where people debate issues, care about policies such as war, peace, human freedoms and justice and make decisions.

There is no such thing as a private intellectual, since the moment you set down words and then publish them you have entered the public world. Nor is there only a public intellectual, someone who exists just as a figurehead or spokesperson or symbol of a cause, movement, or position. There is always the personal inflection and the private sensibility, and those give meaning to what is being said or written. Least of all should an intellectual be there to make his or her audiences feel good: the whole point is to be embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant.

Are intellectuals a very large or an extremely small and highly selective group of people? Two of the most famous 20th century descriptions of intellectuals are fundamentally opposed on that point. Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist, activist, journalist and brilliant political philosopher, who was imprisoned by Mussolini between 1926 and 1937, wrote in his Prison Notebooks that “all men are intellectuals, one could say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals”. Those who do have that function in society, Gramsci tries to show, can be divided into two types: traditional intellectuals, such as teachers, priests and administrators, who continue to do the same thing from generation to generation; and, second, organic intellectuals, whom Gramsci saw as directly connected to classes or enterprises that used intellectuals to organise interests, gain more power, get more control.

Today’s advertising or public relations expert, who devises techniques for winning a detergent or airline company a larger share of the market, would be considered an organic intellectual, according to Gramsci. Such an expert in a democratic society tries to gain the consent of potential customers, win approval, marshal consumer or voter opinion. Gramsci believed that these organic intellectuals were actively involved in society; that is they constantly struggle to change minds and expand markets. Unlike teachers and priests, who seem more or less to remain in place, doing the same kind of work year in year out, organic intellectuals are always on the move, on the make.

At the other extreme there is Julien Benda, an early 20th century Frenchman of letters. His celebrated definition of intellectuals is that they are a tiny band of super-gifted and morally endowed philosopher-kings who constitute the conscience of mankind. While it is true that Benda's treatise, *La Trahison des Clercs - The Betrayal of the Intellectuals* - has lived in posterity more as a blistering attack on intellectuals who abandon their calling and compromise their principles, rather than as a systematic analysis of intellectual life, Benda does in fact cite a small number of names and major characteristics of those whom he considers real intellectuals. Socrates and Jesus are frequently mentioned, as are more recent examples like Spinoza and Voltaire and Ernest Renan. Real intellectuals constitute a clerisy, Benda says, "those whose activity is essentially not the pursuit of practical aims, all those who seek their joy in the practice of an art or a science or metaphysical speculation, in short in the possession of non-material advantages, and hence in a certain manner say: 'My kingdom is not of this world'."

Benda's examples, however, make it quite clear that he does not endorse the notion of totally disengaged, other-worldly, ivory-towered thinkers, intensely private and devoted to abstruse, perhaps even occult, subjects. Real intellectuals are never more themselves when, moved by metaphysical passion and disinterested principles of justice and truth; they denounce corruption, defend the weak, defy imperfect or oppressive authority.

The trouble with today's lot, according to Benda, is that they have conceded their moral authority to what in a prescient phrase he calls, "the organisation of collective passions, such as sectarianism, mass sentiment, nationalist belligerence, class interests". Benda was writing in 1927, well before the age of the mass media, but he sensed how important it was for governments to have as their servants those intellectuals who could be called on not to lead but to consolidate the government's policy, to spew out propaganda against official enemies, to devise euphemisms or, on a larger scale, whole systems of Orwellian Newspeak in order to disguise the truth of what was occurring in the name of institutional expediency or national honour.

For Benda, real intellectuals are supposed to risk being burnt at the stake, ostracised, or crucified. They are symbolic personages, marked by their unyielding distance from practical concerns. As such, therefore, they cannot be many in number, nor routinely developed. They have to be thoroughgoing individuals, they have to have a powerful personality; and, above all, they have to be in a state of almost permanent opposition to the status quo: for all these reasons, Benda's intellectuals are, perforce, a small, highly visible group of men - never women, it seems - whose stentorian voices and indelicate imprecations are hurled at humankind from on high. Benda never suggests how it is that these men know the truth, or whether their blinding insights into eternal principles might, like those of Don Quixote, be little more than private fantasies. But there is no doubt, in my mind at least, that the image of a real intellectual as generally conceived by Benda remains an attractive and compelling one. Benda was spiritually shaped by the Dreyfus Affair and World War One, both of them rigorous tests for intellectuals, who could either choose to speak up courageously against an act of anti-Semitic military injustice and nationalist fervour, or sheepishly go along with the herd, refusing to defend the unfairly condemned Jewish officer Alfred Dreyfus, chanting jingoist slogans in order to stir up war fever against everything German.

After World War Two, Benda republished his book, this time adding a series of attacks against intellectuals who collaborated with the Nazis as well as against those who were uncritically enthusiastic about the Communists. But deep in the combative rhetoric of Benda's basically very conservative work is to be found this figure of the intellectual as a being set apart, someone able to speak the truth to power, a crusty, eloquent, fantastically courageous and angry individual for whom no worldly power is too big and imposing to be criticised and pointedly taken to task.

Gramsci's social analysis of the intellectual as a person who fulfils a particular set of functions in the society is much closer to the reality than anything Benda gives us, particularly in the late 20th century when so many new professions - broadcasters, academics, computer analysts, sports and media lawyers, management consultants, policy experts, government advisers, authors of specialised market reports, and indeed the whole field of modern mass journalism itself - all these have vindicated Gramsci's vision.

Today, everyone who works in any field connected either with the production or distribution of knowledge is an intellectual in Gramsci's sense. In most industrialised Western societies, the ratio between so-called knowledge industries and those having to do with actual physical production has increased steeply in favour of the knowledge industries. The American sociologist Alvin Gouldner said several years ago of intellectuals that they were the new class, and that intellectual managers had now pretty much replaced the old monied and propertied classes. Yet Gouldner also said that as part of their ascendancy intellectuals were no longer people who addressed a wide public; instead they had become members of what he called a culture of critical discourse.

Each intellectual, the book editor and the author, the military strategist and the international lawyer, speaks and deals in a language that has become specialised and usable by other members of the same field, specialised experts addressing other specialised experts in a lingua franca largely unintelligible to unspecialised people. And the proliferation of intellectuals has extended even into the very large number of fields in which intellectuals - possibly following on Gramsci's pioneering suggestions in *The Prison Note Book*, which almost for the first time saw intellectuals and not social classes as pivotal to the workings of modern society - intellectuals have become the object of study. Just put the words 'of' and 'and' next to the word 'intellectuals', and almost immediately an entire library of studies about intellectuals, that is quite daunting in its range and minutely focused in its detail, rises before our eyes.

There are thousands of different sociologies of intellectuals, as well as endless accounts of intellectuals in nationalism and power and tradition and revolution and on and on. Each region of the world has produced its intellectuals, and each of those formations is debated and argued over with fiery passion. There has been no major revolution in modern history without intellectuals. Conversely, there's been no major counterrevolutionary movement without intellectuals. Intellectuals have been the fathers and mothers of movements, and of course sons and daughters, even nephews and nieces.

Thus there is a danger that the figure or image of the intellectual might disappear in a mass of details; that the intellectual might become only another profession perhaps, or

another important class of people, perhaps only a social trend. What I shall be saying in these lectures takes for granted these late 20th century realities originally suggested by Gramsci, but I also want to insist that intellectuals are individuals with a specific public role in society that cannot be reduced simply to being a faceless professional, a competent member of a class just going about her or his business.

The central fact for me is, I think, that the intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public, in public. And this role has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues who are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug.

The intellectual does so on the basis of universal principles; that all human beings are entitled to expect decent standards of behaviour concerning freedom and justice from worldly powers or nations, and that deliberate or inadvertent violations of those standards need to be testified against courageously.

So in the end, it is the intellectual as a representative figure that matters: someone who visibly represents a standpoint of some kind, and someone who makes articulate representations to his or her public despite all sorts of barriers. My argument is that intellectuals are individuals with a vocation for the art of representing, whether that is talking, writing, teaching, appearing on television; and that vocation is important to the extent that it is publicly recognisable and involves both commitment and risk, boldness and vulnerability.

When one reads Jean-Paul Sartre or Bertrand Russell what mattered was that visible presence (which is what made an impression) that was of Russell or Sartre, and not of some anonymous functionary or careful bureaucrat.

In the outpouring of studies about intellectuals, there has been far too much defining of the intellectual and not enough stock taken of the image, the signature, the actual intervention and performance - all of which taken together constitute the very lifeblood of every real intellectual.

Isaiah Berlin has said of the 19th-century Russian writer that, partly under the influence of German romanticism, audiences were “made conscious that he was on a public stage, testifying”. Something of that quality still adheres to the public role of the modern intellectual as I see it. That is why when we remember an intellectual like Sartre, we recall the personal mannerisms, the sense of an important personal stake, the sheer effort, risk, will to say things about colonialism, or about commitment or about social conflict that infuriated his opponents and galvanised his friends. When we read about Sartre’s involvement with Simone de Beauvoir, his dispute with Camus, his remarkable association with Jean Genet, we “situate” him - the word is Sartre’s - in his circumstances. In these circumstances, and to some extent because of them, Sartre was Sartre; just as it was Sartre who opposed France in Algeria and Vietnam.

It is in modern public life seen as a novel or drama and not as a business or as the raw material for sociological monograph that we can most readily see and understand how it is that intellectuals are representative, not just of some subterranean or large social movement, but of a quite peculiar, even abrasive, style of life and social performance that is uniquely theirs. And where better to find that role first set forth than in certain unusual 19th and early 20th century novels - Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* - in which the representation of social reality is profoundly influenced, even decisively changed, by the sudden appearance of a new actor, the modern young intellectual.

Turgenev's portrait of provincial Russia in the 1860s is idyllic and uneventful: young men of property inherit habits of life from their parents, they marry and have children, and life more or less moves on. This is the case until an anarchic, and yet highly concentrated figure, Bazarov, erupts into their lives. The first thing we notice about Bazarov is that he has severed his ties with his own parents and seems less a son than a sort of self-produced character, challenging routine, assailing mediocrity and clichés, asserting new scientific and unsentimental values that appear to be rational and progressive. Turgenev said that he refused to dip Bazarov in syrup; he was meant to be "coarse, heartless, ruthlessly dry and brusque". Bazarov makes fun of the Kirsanov family; when the middle-aged father plays Schubert, Bazarov laughs loudly at him. Bazarov propounds the ideas of German materialist science: nature for him is not a temple, it is a workshop. When he falls in love with Anna, she is attracted to him, but also terrified. To her, his untrammelled, often anarchical intellectual energy suggests chaos. Being with him, she says at one point, is like teetering at the edge of an abyss.

He appears, he challenges, and, just as abruptly, he dies, infected by a sick peasant whom he had been treating. What we remember of Bazarov is the sheer unremitting force of his questing and deeply confrontational intellect, and although Turgenev claimed actually to have believed he was his most sympathetic character, even he was mystified and to some extent stopped by Bazarov's heedless intellectual force as well as by his readers' quite bewilderingly turbulent reactions. In the end, *Fathers and Sons* cannot accommodate Bazarov to the narrative; whereas his friends, the Kirsanov family, and even his pathetic old parents, go on with their lives, his peremptoriness and defiance as an intellectual lift him out of the story, un-accommodated to it and somehow not fit for domestication.

This is even more explicitly the case with Joyce's young Stephen Dedalus, whose entire early career is a see-saw between the blandishments of institutions like the church, the profession of teaching, Irish nationalism and his slowly emerging and stubborn selfhood as an intellectual whose motto is the Luciferian *Non serviam*, "I will not serve". Seamus Deane makes an excellent observation about Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*: it is, he says, "the first novel in the English language in which a passion for thinking is fully presented". Neither the protagonists of Dickens, nor Thackeray, nor Austen, nor Hardy, nor even George Eliot are young men and women whose major concern is the life of the mind in society, whereas for young Dedalus "thinking is a mode of experiencing the world."

Deane is quite correct in saying that before Dedalus the intellectual vocation had only "grotesque embodiments" in English fiction. Yet, in part because Stephen is a young

provincial, the product of a colonial environment, he must develop a resistant intellectual consciousness before he can become an artist.

By the end of the novel, Stephen is no less critical and withdrawn from family and Fenians as he is from any ideological scheme whose effect would be to reduce his individuality and his often very unpleasant personality. Like Turgenev, Joyce pointedly enacts the incompatibility between the young intellectual and the sequential flow of human life. What begins as a conventional story of a young man growing up in a family, then moving on to school and university, decomposes into a series of elliptical jottings from Stephen's notebook. The intellectual will not be accommodated to domesticity or to humdrum routine. In the novel's most famous speech, Stephen expresses what is, in effect, the intellectual's creed of freedom, although the melodramatic overstatement in Stephen's declaration is Joyce's way of undercutting the young man's pomposity: "I will tell you what I will do and what I will not do. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use - silence, exile, cunning."

Yet, not even in *Ulysses*, do we see Stephen as more than an obstinate and contrary young man. What is most striking in his credo is his affirmation of intellectual freedom. This is a major issue in the intellectual's performance, I believe, since being a curmudgeon and a thoroughgoing wet blanket are hardly enough as goals. No: the purpose of the intellectual's activity is to advance human freedom and knowledge. This is still true, I believe, despite the often repeated charge that those grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment are pronounced as no longer having any currency in the era of post-modernism.

In *Sentimental Education*, Flaubert represents more disappointment at, and therefore a more merciless critique of, intellectuals than anyone. Set in the Parisian upheavals of 1848-51, a period described as the revolution of the intellectuals, Flaubert's novel is a wide-ranging panorama of bohemian and political life in "the capital of the 19th century", at the centre of which stand the two young provincials, Frederic Moreau and Charles Deslauriers, whose exploits as young men about town express Flaubert's rage at their inability to maintain a steady course as intellectuals. Much of Flaubert's scorn for them comes from what is perhaps his exaggerated expectation of what they should have been. The result is the most brilliant representation of the intellectual adrift: the two start out as potential legal scholars, critics, historians, essayists, philosophers, social theorists with public welfare as their goal, but end up, in the case of Moreau "with his intellectual ambitions . . . dwindled. Years went by and he endured the idleness of his mind and the inertia of his heart"; in the case of Deslauriers, becoming "director of colonisation in Algeria, secretary to a pasha, manager of a newspaper and an advertising agent; . . . at present he was employed as solicitor to an industrial company".

The failures of 1848 are for Flaubert the failures of his generation. Prophetically, the fates of Frederic and Deslauriers are portrayed as the result of their own lack of focussed will and also as the toll exacted by modern society, with its endless distractions, its whirl of pleasures, and above all, the emergence of journalism, advertising, instant celebrity, and a sphere of constant circulation, in which all ideas

are marketable, all values transmutable, all professions reduced to the pursuit of easy money and quick success.

Bazarov, Dedalus and Moreau are extremes, of course, but they do serve the purpose, which is something panoramic realistic novels of the 19th century can do uniquely well, of showing us intellectuals in action, beset with numerous difficulties and temptations, either maintaining or betraying their calling, not as a fixed task to be learnt once and for all from a how-to-do-it manual, but as a concrete experience constantly threatened by modern life itself. The intellectual's representations, his or her articulations of a cause or idea to society, are not meant primarily to fortify ego or celebrate status. Nor are they principally intended for service within powerful bureaucracies and generous employers. Intellectual representations are the activity itself, dependent on a kind of consciousness that is sceptical, engaged, unremittingly devoted to rational investigation and moral judgement; and this puts the individual on record and on the line. Knowing how to use language well, and knowing when to intervene in language are two essential features of intellectual action.

But what does the intellectual represent today? One of the best and most honest statements of the answer to this question was given I think by the American sociologist C Wright Mills, a fiercely independent intellectual with an impassioned social vision and a remarkable capacity for communicating his ideas in a straightforward and compelling prose. He wrote in 1944 that independent intellectuals were faced either with a kind of despondent sense of powerlessness at their marginality, or with a choice of joining the ranks of institutions, corporations or governments as members of a relatively small group of insiders who made important decisions on their own and irresponsibly. To become the "hired" agent of an information industry is no solution either, since to achieve a relationship with audiences like Tom Paine's with his, would therefore be impossible. In sum, "the means of effective communication", which is the intellectuals' currency, is thus being expropriated, leaving the independent thinker with one major task. Here is how Mills puts it:

"The independent artist and intellectual are among the few remaining personalities equipped to resist and to fight the stereotyping and consequent death of genuinely living things. Fresh perception now involves the capacity to continually unmask and to smash the stereotypes of vision and intellect with which modern communication - that is, modern systems of representation - swamp us. These worlds of mass-art and mass-thought are increasingly geared to the demands of politics. That is why it is in politics that intellectual solidarity and effort must be centred. If the thinker does not relate himself to the value of truth in political struggle, he cannot responsibly cope with the whole of live experience."

This passage deserves emphasis, so full of important signposts is it. Politics is everywhere; there can be no escape into the realms of pure art and thought or, for that matter, into the realm of disinterested objectivity or transcendental theory.

Intellectuals are of their time, herded along by the mass politics of representations embodied by the information or media industry, capable of resisting those only by disputing the images, official narratives, justifications of power circulated by an

increasingly powerful media - and not only media, but whole trends of thought that maintain the status quo, keep things within an acceptable and sanctioned perspective on actuality - by providing what Mills calls unmaskings or alternative versions in which, to the best of one's ability, the intellectual tries to tell the truth. This is far from an easy task: the intellectual always stands between loneliness and alignment.

C Wright Mills's main point is the opposition between the mass and the individual. There is an inherent discrepancy between the powers of large organisations, from governments to corporations, and the relative weakness, not just of individuals, but of human beings considered to have subaltern status, minorities, small peoples and states, inferior or lesser cultures and races. There is no question in my mind that the intellectual belongs on the same side with the weak and unrepresented - Robin Hood, some are likely to say. Yet it's not that simple a role, and therefore cannot be easily dismissed as just so much romantic idealism. At bottom, the intellectual in my sense of the word is neither a pacifier nor a consensus-builder, but someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do. Not just passively unwilling, but actively willing to say so in public.

This is not always a matter of being a critic of government policy, but rather of thinking of the intellectual vocation as maintaining a state of constant alertness, of a perpetual willingness not to let half-truths or received ideas steer one along. This involves a steady realism and almost athletic rational energy; and a complicated struggle to balance the problem of one's own selfhood against the demands of publishing and speaking out in the public sphere is what makes it an everlasting effort - constitutively unfinished and necessarily imperfect. Yet its invigorations and complexities are, for me at least, the richer for it, even though it doesn't make one particularly popular.