

The Ugly Intellectual

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THE PROBLEM of the intellectual in the modern Western society is now a familiar one. We are indebted to Benda, Schumpeter, Hayek, de Jouvenel and others for penetrating analyses of its nature and origins, but its solution remains elusive.

There is in our midst a large and growing body of men whose trade is that of ideas, who command an immense and expanding market, and whose activities are calculated to undermine the distinctive virtues of the free society. Their stock in trade is social criticism, for which their rewards are fame, influence and material wealth. The outstanding effect of their social criticism is social turmoil. The more turmoil there is, the more does their criticism appear to be apt and needed, and the more do their rewards grow.

Their aims are, consciously or unconsciously, totalitarian. They assail the system of liberty under law, limited government, "the government of laws, not of men," because the solution of social prob-

lems under these systems appears to be left in large measure to "the blind forces of nature." This, in their view, is a supine acceptance of impotence in face of blind forces, which at the same time has the demerit of dispensing with the need for their services as the mentors of society. Hence, in their eyes every solution must be consciously contrived, planned or designed. This also has the merit of maximizing the apparent need for their services.

By an instinct admirably attuned to the destruction of the free society, they increasingly advocate and promote what they call liberty in morals and manners. Here they appear to give the lie to the accusation of totalitarian tendencies, and they are adept at calling in aid their Mill and their Milton when the behavior which they champion is challenged. The instinct is a sure one because the free society relies little on restraints of law or political power but much on restraints of conscience, custom, taste, socially acceptable manners, sensitive

consideration for the susceptibilities of others, and the like. To throw off these latter restraints is to undermine the pillars of the free society as surely as by a frontal attack on liberty itself. For men will not live for long with unlimited license of speech, of sexual behavior, of personal deportment. First, turmoil arises. Then comes disgust. Then comes iron-fisted restraint. As usual one can find a parallel with the case of the rise to power of the Nazis, who made great play with the sexual license of Weimar Berlin, mild though it was by the standards of 1972. Thus in the end, though by indirection, our modern traders in ideas prove to be promoters of totalitarianism in this field as in others.

Their substantive ideas embody large elements of myth and superstition; and except in the case of Marxists and quasi-Marxists (who are a small minority among them), these ideas are mostly rooted in pre-liberal notions which persisted half-submerged during the liberal era. Their myths and superstitions are the most potent cause of their grip on the public mind. Thus, capitalism enslaved the working class; the improvement of the workers' lot in the past century has been the product of countervailing forces to capitalism; free trade was a device for the oppression of poor countries or of late industrializers; profit arises at the expense of workers or consumers; there is a norm for wages and prices which is "fair" or "just"; America was at one time despoiled by "robber barons"; violence in the early days of American trade unions came from the employers, who hired Pinkerton's men to put down brutally the peaceful and innocent workers; the rich generally are responsible for the poverty of the poor; the rich countries are responsible as countries for the poverty of the poor countries; the poor countries are caught in a vicious circle of poverty from which they cannot break out

without the aid of gifts from the rich countries; the rich countries fix low prices for the products of the poor countries; the terms of trade of the primary producing countries must inevitably deteriorate; the development of the mineral resources of a country by foreign capital and enterprise is a form of robbery; trade unions raise wages generally; unemployment is caused by governments or business interests; only governments can solve the problem of unemployment; only governments can solve the problems of poverty; prices are determined by sellers; rising prices can be prevented only by repression of the freedom of sellers; wants which are influenced by sellers' persuasions are not genuine wants; the private enterprise system leads inevitably to the domination of giant monopolies; Keynes dragged economics into the twentieth century; Keynes is to Smith (or to Ricardo, or Mill, or Marshall, according to taste) as Einstein is to Newton; and so on and so on and so on. The distinguishing mark of these notions is their natural appeal to the man-in-the-street, that is to say to the uninformed, undisciplined, un-analytical mind.

Their power and influence are engineered by, and rest upon, the flattery of the masses. This is itself a fundamental reason why what they propagate has to consist of myth and superstition. Yet at the same time they despise the masses. There is nothing surprising in this. It is indeed naturally to be expected, for the masses are envisaged as mere instruments. Thus, to Hitler the Germans as a race were supermen, but as individuals they were underlings to be despised, and ultimately to be destroyed if they could not enable his fantasies to come true. So, too, our modern intellectuals find all virtue in the masses as a group, but react angrily against the freedom which enables the masses to elevate themselves as individuals.

Though their power and influence rest upon the flattery of the masses, their market for ideas is not among the masses. It is among the literate public. The masses do not accept ideas directly, only indirectly. The appeal must therefore be to the literate public, from whom ideas proceed to the masses as slogans, headlines, political war cries, and the like. But the fact that the appeal is to the literate public does not contradict the assertion that the content of the appeal is attuned to the uninformed, undisciplined, and unanalytical mind of the man-in-the-street.

1. The literate public is not for the most part possessed of intellectual discrimination. Literacy in itself does not enable men to think, to analyze, or to distinguish error from truth when, as often happens, they look something like each other.

2. Many men of high intelligence among the literate public, such as numerous natural scientists, linguists, even historians and lawyers, have no taste for the kind of thinking necessary in economics, if not in the other social sciences, and are as easy victims as the man-in-the-street to naive error, myth and superstition.

3. Though the market is among the literate public, the appeal must be to the mass mind; for to estrange, even to ignore, the masses would in our day effectively thwart the pursuit of power and influence.

4. The flattery of the masses is necessary to ingratiate oneself with the literate public, for it appears to display the compassion for the "underprivileged" which establishes one's bona fides with the literate public even better than with the masses themselves (who still tend to retain a little of the common sense which the literate public has lost).

Our modern intellectuals have garnered so much power and influence that they are in large measure the Establishment. They dominate the press, television, radio,

literary journals and other organs of opinion, and the great foundations; and they hold many strategic positions in the academic world. They show little diffidence about repressing opinions contrary to theirs or maneuvering against those who hold such opinions, of which type of action the most reprehensible examples are usually to be found in the academic world. Yet they pretend not to be of the Establishment, and their pretense is so splendidly successful that the great majority of the public are deceived. Thus they can enjoy power, influence and wealth, and yet at the same time appear to be outsiders, humblers of the mighty, and critics of the Establishment on behalf of the common man. Their ideas largely determine the course of events, but they always appear to have the right to criticize the course that events take. They enjoy not only the luxury of power without responsibility, but also the more delightful luxury of being able to assail the errors that their own power produces.

What are the causes of this phenomenon? Do they lie in the character of the typical retailer of ideas? If so, we must expect to be confronted at all times with the problem of his power and influence. But we must also expect to find him at his baleful work in societies of the past. Or do the causes lie in the special character of our society? If so, we shall expect to find this phenomenon only in our own society and in societies which in some relevant respect are similar to our own. Or are the causes rooted both in the nature of retailers of ideas and in that of our society, so that the phenomenon arises from their combination?

Without doubt it is possible to find traits which are natural to dealers in ideas and which appear to go some way to explain the phenomenon before us. But if so the fact that the vast majority of intellectuals are

dealers in other people's ideas is immaterial. So, too, are we others who claim that we propagate better ideas than the intellectuals whose work I have described. On the one hand original thinkers among us are not abundant; on the other hand original thinkers are not entirely unknown among them. The difference is in the quality of ideas, not in the fact that some are secondhand and some are not. Of course there are dealers and dealers. Some trade only in good merchandise which they carefully select, whose provenance they know, and whose qualities they understand. Others trade in anything that will sell, are woefully ignorant of its provenance, and are either careless of its quality or are unqualified to judge it. The intellectuals with whom we are here concerned are of the latter type, and the question before us is why they are dominant in our society.

The traits which are relevant here are at least the following:

1. An undisciplined facility for the use of words, and an unschooled interest in the causes of social phenomena.

2. A desire for fame, influence and admiration. This is to be found among all dealers in ideas, good or bad, because it is natural to them. I have dealt with this elsewhere in the following terms:

An intellectual by nature tends to seek fame, influence and admiration. A shoemaker may seek wealth or the satisfaction of craftsmanship or both. The process of creation or craftsmanship may produce satisfaction for the poet, dramatist or novelist whose works are not read. But the dealer in ideas must communicate them to others or fail. There are few men for whom fame and admiration are not delightful. For the intellectual they develop so naturally out of the success in communication which he is bound so seek, that they become the aim and indication of success itself.¹

3. A readiness to accept, if not to seek, power without responsibility. Even if the intellectual takes great care in the selection of his ideas and in the testing of their provenance and quality, he can in the nature of things have no responsibility for their practical application. By definition an intellectual does not have to meet a payroll.

4. A tendency to succumb to a feeling of superiority over other men. For the intellectual, to expound the truth as he sees it, to explain the causes of things, to guide the conduct of affairs, these are the most important activities of man; and those for whom ideas offer no excitement or allure therefore display evidence of inferiority.

These traits, if not checked or modified, are clearly likely to produce the phenomenon of the ugly intellectual. If they are not to do so, they must be checked or modified by a natural modesty, a capacity for critical self-examination, a readiness to resist the magic of words, a sharp eye for the inconvenient facts which destroy a theory. Accordingly it may appear that the answer to our question is to be found in the nature of intellectuals. For it is obvious that the distribution of the traits listed in the above paragraphs is naturally more widespread among the human beings who become intellectuals than that of the countertraits listed here. Hence the domination of the ugly intellectual is a natural phenomenon, and we must learn to live with it.

Though this explanation has cogency, it is obviously incomplete, if not inadequate. Consider the priests and preachers who were the purveyors of ideas in the traditional societies which preceded ours. It was common enough for many of them to be spellbound by words, puffed up with pride, blind to ideas contrary to their own, eager for power and influence, ready purveyors of myth and superstition—in short possessed of the characteristics of our ugly

intellectual. Yet by far the great majority served, not criticized, the non-intellectual Establishments of their time. Not turmoil, but order and submission, was their aim. Holding property, as does the modern intellectual, they defended the institution of property, whereas the modern intellectual tends to assail it. Of course from time to time there were among them stirrers up of trouble, but these are conspicuous in the history books precisely because they arose so infrequently.

Or consider the nineteenth century popularizers of classical economics or the run-of-the-mill exponents of the tenets of the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution. Not many of them were as mediocre in quality as our ugly intellectual, but some were. Yet they too were on the side of order (the order of freedom, of course, not of tradition or despotism), not of turmoil. Clearly the answer to our question must at least in part be found in the nature of our society.

We are told by Schumpeter that "Capitalism creates, educates and subsidizes a vested interest in social unrest."² Hence capitalism is in this way—not in the way expounded by Marx—its own destroyer. Is this true? Is it perhaps the fact that capitalism is an economy of change, always destroying the old and creating the new, always changing men's ways and breaking up established interests, that produces the intellectual's opportunity to stir up social unrest? Perhaps yes. But it does not do so inevitably. The essence of the free economy is a combination of change and stability. Of course it produces far more change than traditional economies, but it also provides far more stability. Sudden disaster and the complete reversal of fortune are precapitalist, not capitalist, phenomena.

Is it perhaps the fact that capitalism goes hand in hand with liberalism (in the original sense) which gives rise to the

vested interest in social unrest? Under liberalism criticism is free, and as Schumpeter further tells us, "criticism of persons and current events will, in a situation in which nothing is sacrosanct, fatally issue in criticism of classes and institutions."³ Here we come nearer to the bone. Yet I believe that liberalism, like capitalism, can be free from these suicidal tendencies. It is possible for freedom of criticism to go hand in hand with, indeed to be enhanced by, a general satisfaction with society's basic institutions. This is in fact an exact description of what prevailed in Britain from perhaps 1688 or the early eighteenth century to the 1880's, and in the United States from its beginnings to 1932.

The vested interest in social unrest arises more clearly from democracy than from capitalism or liberalism. Democracy is a breeding ground for the ugly intellectual in two ways:

First, it spreads education of a kind to the masses and vastly expands the literate public. But the education that it spreads discards the special excellence of the education which elites give themselves, and the mind of the literate public itself is largely shaped by this inferior brand of education. Hence the market for intellectuals deteriorates in quality. Furthermore, as the intellectual class expands, the natural disparity in distribution between the traits listed above becomes wider. Therefore the proportion of mediocrities and turmoil-seekers within the intellectual class becomes greater.

Secondly, and more important, democracy differs from other political systems in one remarkable manner. Kings and emperors who effectively rule, both rule and take a position at the head of the established order. In bourgeois societies the bourgeois both rule and take a contented position in the established order. But King Demos is in a strange situation. He is king

but he is at the bottom of the heap. Because he is king he must be flattered by inferior intellectuals, just as ruling kings and emperors were flattered. But because he is at the bottom of the heap, he is discontented. Hence the flattery sets out to stimulate and promote social unrest. Thus, it seems, the ugly intellectual is a disease of democracy.

Yet even this persuasive contention falls short of complete conviction. Swiss democracy gives it the lie. So, too, in large measure did the experience of the United States before the poison of the *New Deal* got into its bones. There are circumstances in which King Demos is not discontented, and then the intellectual does not find the promotion of social unrest rewarding.

It is disconcerting to be unable to pinpoint with certainty the source of the power

of the ugly intellectual, for without it one cannot find a clear prescription for a remedy. The conclusion becomes even more depressing insofar as there is indeed evidence that his power is a concomitant of capitalism, liberalism or democracy. And when one looks around and sees the strength of his grip upon our society, one may be strongly tempted to conclude that it is unshakable. But this would be an error. Our inability to find a clear explanation for the phenomenon before us is due at least in part to the fact that no one knows exactly why and how ideas rise or why or how they fall. Whatever else we do to defeat the ugly intellectual, we are bound to continue patiently to expose his errors, myths and superstitions for what they are. It may be that we can do little else. It may also be that little else is needed.

¹"The Ideological War Against Western Society," Rockford College, 1970, p. 29.

²*Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942), p. 146.

³*Op. cit.*, p. 151.