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On Being an Intellectual

By James McAuley, Editor of *QUADRANT*, with whose permission we republish from the Summer 1959-60 number of that Australian Quarterly Review.

"Why write, if this too easy activity of pushing a pen across paper is not given a certain bull-fighting risk and we do not approach dangerous, agile, and two-horned subjects?" Thus Ortega y Gasset parenthesizes in approaching a "subtle, delicate and compromising subject" in his book *On Love*. I have long meditated another "subtle, delicate and compromising subject": the nature and role of the intellectuals — a 'two-horned' topic because of the ambiguity of the concept of the intellectual and because of the dilemmas one can be impaled upon. No one who tries to tell the truth on this subject can expect to pass unscathed; for he is touching a class of persons who combine interior conflicts and self-reproach with an astonishing measure of complacent arrogance and skill in gang-warfare if subjected to criticism—one of the ways in which they resemble a priesthood.

It is frequently remarked that to be an intellectual is something other than being a man of intelligence; intellectuals sometimes are and sometimes are not men of intelligence—they do not necessarily possess a quick shrewd judgment in affairs or a freely-moving unprejudiced mind, they are not always particularly *bright*.

An intellectual is also not the same thing as a professional engaged in one of the brain-trades: many an eminent lawyer or scientist or scholar hardly qualifies as an intellectual nor would wish to be called one; and some intellectuals are not men of a learned profession.

What, then, is the specific character of the intellectual? It is that of a person interested in the more general or philosophical aspects of problems: one who takes seriously the fundamental questions, the basic principles of different world-views. This, in a purely descriptive sense, is what distinguishes the intellectual, whether we use the word in an honourable or a pejorative sense.

In the most honourable sense, the intellectual is he whose delight it is to *know*. He works not just for useful results but so that at the end of his six days' labour he shall reach the Sabbath of the mind in which the truth is contemplated. This is that "Archimedean point" which Jakob Burckhardt longed for in his *Reflections on History*: to contemplate the truth—in his case, historical truth—not as a partisan, or as enslaved by passions and fears, but in a free and disinterested way. "Any man," he said, "with an inkling of what that meant would completely forget fortune and misfortune, and would spend his life in the quest of that wisdom."

But clearly this tradition of contemplation as the noblest activity of man was already losing its hold in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when 'the intellectuals' first clearly

emerged as a specifically modern social phenomenon. The spirit and modes of operation of this modern type cannot be described simply in terms of a vocation to disinterested inquiry.

One of the most interesting examples is the rise of the Russian intelligentsia after the Petrine reforms. By the middle of the nineteenth century it had become a definite caste, which, because of the peculiar Russian conditions, was alienated from the rest of society in an extreme degree. This caste was the bearer of a messianic mission. It took over from the Russian Church the notion of the Christian people as a mystical body whose salvation was the purpose of the whole cosmic drama. But these notions were translated into new terms: public service to the people, in defiance of Tsar and God, and their redemption through enlightenment and progress—this was the secular mystique animating the order of intellectuals. Victor Frank has summed this up very justly:*

"It is easy to laugh at all this. But with all its faults, with all its political naïveté, with all its silliness, the pre-revolutionary Russian intelligentsia was one of the most humane, one of the morally purest heresies of our times. In a one-sided and neurotic sort of way it was the conscience of its nation. Though mostly agnostic or atheistic, it had all the faults and virtues of a militant monastic order. . . . When the great trials came, many of its members were to win a martyr's crown."

Under the different social conditions of Western Europe, these messianic tendencies and this quasi-religious devotion to 'the people', although present, never reached such extreme development. The intellectuals were not so drastically alienated from the rest of society: they could frequently gain respect and dignity as professional men, access to the bureaucracy was not denied them, the academies were less hostile, and their political activity was not necessarily conspiratorial. Nevertheless, there is enough in common for the Russian example, through its very exaggerations, to light up features of our Western experience. After all the Russian development was an imitation of what had happened in Europe.

For the modern intellectuals have everywhere been to some extent an alienated class, 'displaced persons' not at home in the social order. Social and personal insecurity and anxiety seem to play a large part. What they have been chiefly interested in is the idea of social transformation. They are for the most part the children of the Enlightenment, the

* "The Russian Radical Tradition," *Soviet Survey*, July-September, 1959.

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bearers of the modern ideologies, sectaries of the Religion of Progress, a priesthood of dissent—but the dissent is rooted in a secular dogmatism. Agnostic, sceptical and ‘uncommitted’ phases mingle with and change over into militant and dogmatic ones. A great number of the Australian university intellectuals who gravitated to Communism did so by an interesting path: positivism had laid waste all possible assumptions and beliefs, leaving a void in which they felt the need, not so much of Marxist philosophy, as of *redemptive action upon society in the name of Progress*. It was this new principle and finality that they sought; but they could not have found it if the Party had not been there with its core of dogma. This was the *prestige* of the Party which bewitched them. Those who did not make this transition—floated around as a fellow-traveller, or a philosophical anarchist (as, at a certain stage, I described myself). But what controlled the whole field was the question of a secular gnosis: to that we were all oriented; our free critical activities were really dance-routines to the tunes of ideological pipers. The fact that many of us danced in diverse incoherent snatches instead of performing to the strict choreography of Stalin is not decisive. The eccentrics, the dissenters even from the orthodoxy of dissent, might re-explore Nietzsche, or Stirner, or Sorel, or the anarchism lighted up by the Spanish Civil War (as I did—along with exploring the literary esoterisms of Blake, Mallarmé, Rilke, George and so on). Never mind, we were all ‘enlightened’; we all belonged somehow to the order of illuminati. Even our confessions of not-knowing and uncertainty were somehow superior to the mere ignorance and confusion of those who were not intellectuals.

This brings into view one of the ambiguities which interests me to the point of fascination. ‘Liberal intellectuals’ present two appearances, both true. They seem to be much given to scepticism and indecisiveness; they have undermined certainty in knowledge, and generated a distrust of the very instrument of knowledge, the intellect; they have relativized all values, denied the rationality of all ends of action; they oppose all conformism and cling to sovereign individualism. Yet they also appear to be dogmatists, arrogant with esoteric certainties, and full of party spirit for causes whose rightness one cannot question without becoming a traitor to humanity and progress.

When Hume philosophized himself into an abyss of scepticism he said to himself that one must nevertheless live as a sensible man of the world. When the modern liberal intellectual has philosophized himself into a void he frequently finds that one must nevertheless cut a figure as a ‘progressive’: the structure of ideological compulsion remains curiously intact as a canon of respectability while everything else is destroyed. One must act ‘as if’ its tenets were true, its aims rational. The mind is a blank sheet; but hold it to the light and the watermark shows: it is the guild-sign of Progressivism. Hold it to the fire, and the secret instructions appear, for the invisible writing has not been expunged.

This type of liberal intellectual has abounded so much in our time as to have become the standard type one expects to encounter; it has appropriated the terms ‘liberal’ and ‘intellectual’ almost exclusively to itself, so that others are unwilling to claim either label. Yet the liberalism is questionable when one considers the disquieting lack of resistance to totalitarianism; and the intellectuality is also open to serious challenge. It is as if the mind were under a spell, disconnected from reality and swayed by certain psychological mechanisms along certain pre-ordained paths, which could easily be suicidal.

In a society in which tension and anxiety seem to be exacting an increasing toll in mental illness, even while material welfare and public education (those supposed cures of all social ills) are also increasing, one would expect the intellectuals, as an exposed group, to be particularly liable to neurotic reactions. The group attracts to itself a large number of the personally maladjusted. Elton Mayo remarked on this in relation to students: †

“Certain subjects seem to possess a fatal attraction for those unhappy individuals—philosophy, literature, sociology, law, economics, and—God save us all—government. . . . Argument, however rational, that is unrelated to a developing point of contact with the external world remains—however logical—a confusion of indeterminate possibilities. Some of these persons—able, unhappy, rebellious—rank as scholars.”

The fact is that a great number of intellectuals are engaged in a predominantly emotional activity, even though it is ideas that are manipulated in the process. There are several common psychological mechanisms involved. (How does one know this? Not just by olympian observation: these are things one knows first in oneself and recognises in others).

Firstly, there is the substitution of fashion-thinking for reality-thinking. The intellectual too often graduates to acceptance in the group by donning the current uniform of opinions without having strictly earned the right to those opinions by a genuine consideration of the problem and the contending views. He knows which are the O.K. books and the O.K. propositions; and for him to subject his mind to the impact of unfashionable views requires a degree of toughness and resolution which most of us develop only slowly, if at all. The verbal rituals that intellectual groups develop are full of devices for rendering opposing views socially ‘impossible’. How many of us who in the thirties discovered we were ‘socialists’ ever acquired this label by due process of intellectual inquiry? Everyone ‘knew’ that ‘capitalism’ was out and ‘socialism’ in. The sudden bursting

† *The Social Problems of an Industrial Civilization*, 1949, p. 22.

of the socialist bubble after the British fiasco and the triumph of liberal economics in Europe merely showed how little realistic inquiry had ever gone into this immense delusion.

Connected with this tyranny of fashion is the compulsively oppositional character of many groups, who are committed, not accidentally, but essentially, to saying 'No' and '*ohne mich*' to the constitutive propositions of the community. It is not a fact that the dissenting minority always happens to be right. A good deal of the shine has worn off the sex freedom and new education of the twenties, the popular-fronting and pacifism of the thirties, the pro-Stalinism and Socialism of the forties. The oppositional drive is not a matter of superior wisdom but an emotional *need*. To be against whatever is 'conventional' or 'reactionary' or 'conformist' is a reassuring guarantee that one is intellectually respectable—which only illustrates the great strength of the pressure to conformism that operates within the minority group.

One of the most potent and obscure mechanisms is the guilt mechanism. One can distinguish between a sensitive but healthy and realistic conscience and a neurotic scrupulosity, or anxiety-guilt not adjusted to reality. The effect of the latter is to paralyse the normal and necessary defence of important values. Because Australian aborigines suffer legal and social discrimination and sometimes injustice, we shall concentrate wholly on protest and breast-beating on this score and resign our right to oppose Communist slave-labour and genocide. Because of the abuses that occurred under imperialism and capitalism we must say there is an equal plague on both houses rendering us unfit to oppose totalitarianism. The Communists regard the manipulation of this guilt-mechanism of the Western intellectuals as the primary weapon in the psychological warfare they direct against this group. The immediate answer of the Communists in Australia to the Hungarian scandal was predictable: they launched a full-blast campaign on aboriginal wrongs in Western Australia. The longer-range programme has been to nullify and bury the Hungarian massacre by concentrating on the guilt and anxiety feelings aroused by colonial problems, race relations in general, and above all nuclear armaments. How successful they have been may be measured by the number of persons who, three years after Hungary, and in the year of Tibet, can be made to confuse peace with the Communist political-warfare term with the same spelling.

At least one other mechanism should be mentioned: perfectionist demands as an excuse for not doing anything worthwhile. False or inappropriate or impossible goals are set up, not as real and attainable objectives, but as a reason for being absent from the good work that can be done. Charitable work, for instance, is bourgeois sentimentality: what is needed is nothing less than a complete reconstitution of society so that charity will be unnecessary, and we must not be diverted from this great aim into actually doing something for someone. H-bomb hysteria frequently exhibits this mechanism. Unilateral disarmament by ourselves is made the exclusive aim, not because there is any chance of this happening, *but precisely because there is no chance*; one is then absolved in a state of superior righteousness from all realistic consideration of the problems.

Common to all these non-rational 'interferences', which convert what is supposed to be an intellectual life into an emotional ritual, is something very disturbing: an impaired

reality-sense, and a compulsive drive either to absent oneself from the defence of civilization or actually to attack the essential values involved in that defence. This is the *trahison des clercs*, mid-twentieth century style, and it requires further analysis.

The fact that there are honourable exceptions is no excuse for turning away from the critical problem: why has the record of the liberal intellectuals been so unsatisfactory when there was need of the defence of civilization against totalitarianism?

At least, it is felt, the record is good against Hitler. But is it? Let us not argue now about the strange contradictions of the 'anti-fascism' of the thirties, clamouring for disarmament, and showing its democratic bona fides by accepting '*la main tendue*' of Communist totalitarianism. Look at the record in Germany itself. Erich Meissner raised the painful question: ‡

"The alarming aspect of our present situation is that the power of resistance and defiance seems to be steadily weakening. There are no indisputable lines of defence. . . . The popular instinct is quite right when it concentrates on the question: Why was Hitler insufficiently resisted?"

"This is, indeed, the crucial problem, but it is in its wider aspects a European problem. Why was there that astounding impotence in the German academic world? Why did the Universities, the centres of learning and culture, collapse and surrender to the invading enemy at the time when unknown parsons, deserted by the Church authorities, began to rally their congregations and put up resistance? The answer is: Humanism, culture, and refinement, all the achievements of modern secularism which were at hand, provided neither courage nor inspiration—the Sword of the Stoics was not in the hands of the intellectual leaders. In the hour of danger it was the much despised Church and not the University where the spirit of man found refuge."

A good deal could be said about the 'liberal' erosion of values which made the breakthrough of Nazism in Germany possible and a judgment on Europe as a whole. But let us turn to the case of Communism, where the liberal intellectuals know that their record is far worse. Why this sorry complicity and connivance between self-proclaimed liberals and the Communist perpetrators of every crime against humanity?

Large parts of the heritage of liberal-progressive Enlightenment are also shared by the Communists. The difference is that the Communists really mean it, are more logical, consequential and determined. They are prepared to use brutal and unscrupulous means from which the liberals shrink, though liberal moral scepticism makes it difficult to justify this shrinking as anything more than squeamishness. Hence the Communists despise the liberals as people who like to play with progressive 'ideals' but are too cowardly to will the means to attain them. But the Communists also realize that this common stock of 'modern' and 'progressive' ideas gives them a vast field in which their propaganda can resonate if skilfully used, and a great deal of conscious and half-conscious fellow-travelling can be encouraged. When Stalin rang the bell, half or more of the Western liberal democratic intellectuals salivated.

What are the strands in the heritage of modern enlighten-

‡ *Confusion of Faces*, 1946, p. 43.

ment which entangled the main body of liberal intellectuals so strangely with the movement that would pitilessly destroy them? What is the ideological source of that tenacity of delusion about Communist reality which even now persists and re-asserts itself, though with subtler rationalizations and precautions?

Liberalism arose as an historical movement, militantly and dogmatically committed to 'humanism,' that is, to the view of man as an autonomous being, a sovereign mind and will, not a creature of God. The reverence, devotion, lordship, privileges and power of which Humanity has deprived itself in order to project them upon God must now be recalled to Humanity. This was already present in deism and pantheism: it was stated in the boldest terms in that atheist humanism which Marx regarded as the first principle of Communism. The fundamental word is the serpent's ideology: 'you shall be as gods'. Man shall decide, shall rule, shall reveal, shall determine the categories of good and evil—not God, whether He be dead or alive. Not Christus Pantocrator, who shall divinize men by incorporation with Himself: but Humanitas Pantocrator, who shall divinize all the human units by incorporation in the perfected collectivity on earth.

Hence the decisive option is for secularism. Within this secularist cosmos an enlightened élite will form the vanguard of progress, perfecting man and society by a combination of physical science and industry with the new science invented for the purpose, namely, 'social science', whose application will be 'social engineering'. A rational scheme of society can now be framed by the enlightened élite and organized kindly by democratic processes (liberalism) or with surgical severity (Communism).

In any case, the traditional values and the traditional order of Western civilization have to be liquidated. Man's end lies within this world not in eternity. Man has no created nature with an objective moral law. Man will make and re-make his nature, and assign laws to it at will. Objective morality is replaced by some kind of relativism. We are effectively 'beyond good and evil' as moral absolutes.

Each of the traditional orders constituting European society is marked down for liquidation: the monarchy, the nobility, the clergy, the merchants, the craftsmen, the peasantry. Society will consist of bureaucrats, intellectuals, and proletarian workers.

The orientation is urban-industrial; it favours state control and centralization; 'planning' is preferred to free enterprise. Property, traditionally regarded as a natural right and the basis of civic liberty, is to be voided of the reality of ownership or completely abolished. Egalitarianism, traditionally regarded as destructive of freedom, is the theoretical ideal which is used to undermine the traditional social hierarchy and enlist the support of the masses, even though in the end new privileged élites inevitably emerge. Social utility must prevail: for example, the new education will cease to be intellectually oriented and will be a pragmatist and social-adjustment affair. Women will also be emancipated from their traditional roles and masculinized in the name of feminism. 'Bourgeois' or 'puritanical' ideals of sexual morality and family life are especially under attack as the stronghold of reaction: marriage is a mere tenancy-at-will, terminable if no longer satisfactory or a better bargain can be made. Children should be liberated from paren-

tal authority and brought up institutionally by experts. Finally—for we must end somewhere—history is deified as the bringer of progress, success is treated as justification, what is later is better, and man's business is to ride the 'wave of history'.

No wonder so many liberals felt an uneasy admiration for the Communists, and accepted the Communist claim that they were the vanguard of Progress, a continuation by a resolute and militant force of the line of advance liberalism had already pioneered. 'Forward from liberalism' seemed a logical step, and if many did not take it they felt that they were 'soft' and respected the 'steel-hard' cadres of the Party. One has to take into account also the concealed power-worship of many intellectuals; nor, unfortunately, can one ignore the amount of opportunism, calculation of material advantage, and predisposition to the apparently winning side exhibited by individuals.

The high point of this strange but deep-seated collusion is now past. Salutary experience has cast some cold water on these 'advanced ideas'; and the true face of Communism cannot be completely hidden, even from the keen-sighted critical mind of a liberal intellectual.

The Age of Ideology, 1750-1950 (?), may be almost over, though one cannot be too sure. But the delusional framework of that period still lurks behind our disintegrated, hesitant liberalism that would fain settle for peace, comfort, co-existence and neutralism. In parts of the Western world there are signs of a resurgence of a genuine realist intellectuality, determined to break the delusional grip of a pseudo-rational secular gnosis. But if this reviving realism is to be something more dynamic and creative than a stoic conservatism, eaten at the heart by hopelessness and making a stand merely for honour's sake, it must pass beyond the sphere of natural values. The heart of culture is the divine *cultus*, and until this ceases to be thought of as a private and peripheral irrelevance or intrusion, and becomes central, the new springtime of history will be postponed.

We are to an acute degree in the Deuteronomic situation: a choice has been set before us, of life or death, of a blessing or a curse. We may choose which we will and it will be given us.

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