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Intellectuals and their Publics: perspectives from the Social Sciences

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Ashgate hb 282pp

ISBN 978-0-7546-7540-2

published February 2009

For those many academics who still feel their profession as a calling, the role and meaning of the intellectual must stand and walk always beside them as an ideal, a reproach, a fulfilment, a gripping story-book of object-and-subject lessons, parables about how, in the excellent phrase, "to speak truth to power", even if the power in question is only that of the latest managerial fatuity.

When Edward Said gave his 1993 Reith lectures *Representations of the Intellectual* – one of his best pieces of work – he was at pains to emphasise the keen actuality of each individual thinker's day-to-day politics and experience. He declared roundly that the intellectual had best remain secular, for all gods will fail you in the end, that what counts is keeping yourself "alert and solid", that scepticism must not harden into Pyrrhonism, that your ultimate allegiances can only be determined by great labour.

The admirable book to hand may be used as an extended, inevitably academic (in a slightly too thick-textured way) commentary on the premises of Said's plain-spoken principles. Ashgate, as usual, has made a handsome, compact volume (there must be 200,000 words here, including all-encompassing bibliographies) out of a multinational research venture which is, one is glad to see, a product of the European Commission.

Inevitably, perhaps, many of the sixteen lengthy essays start out from or make much of the question as to whether intellectuals are on the decline as part of civilisation's going to the dogs. The American dogmatist, Richard Posner, in a truly awful book, recently returned a loud and self-satisfied 'yes' to the question, but these contributors are pretty convincing in their detailed conclusion that the class of intellectuals, always hard of definition, is still going strong.

They have of course to grapple with the invincible self-righteousness of the French, who after all invented the term. In an admirable piece of special pleading, John Torpey returns de Tocqueville to the Pantheon, while Anson Rabinbach, in pursuit of Tzvetan Todorov's caustic criticism of the French left's 'philo-communism', which largely in the wake of Sartre's colossal vanity took so long to renounce, exemplarily insists on the intellectual duty to face up to the existential worst: Buchenwald, Gulag, Hiroshima, Sarajevo, Baghdad.

The deep style of French intellectual life might indeed have been treated more theoretically somewhere rather than simply be counted for its contributions to *Le Monde*, as one rather laborious essay does, for these are mostly political sociologists. This means that they cannot immunise themselves against banality (the editors voice the generalisation that "Over the years, new groups of intellectuals have entered the public arena while older ones have disappeared"), nor is their ear sharply attuned to the dreadful jargon of the trade. Stefan Müller-Doohm, in a well thought-out comparison of two definitive figures, Theodor Adorno and Jürgen Habermas, allows himself to approve Habermas' discovery of "the agonal positionality of the intellectual style of thought". You read this, and you just want to hand the poor chap his countryman Nietzsche's remarks on style, or Said on "late style", or Collingwood on thought as literature.

Nonetheless, this is a serious book on serious ground. William Outhwaite, in a very short essay, ends with his enticing A and B lists of European intellectuals. This is a compulsive game to play, and by implication played throughout the volume. For intellectual is an ostensive concept. We find out what it means by pointing to instances.

This is where the collective might have turned from sociology to ethics. Such a move would entail a transformation of subject method, and about time too. Take for example Stefan Auer's intelligent and pertinent contrast of the duo Jan Patocka and Václav Havel with Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Slavoj Žižek. Morally speaking, the first two win hands down. Each was in time of great national danger a prudent humanist and a brave hero. Each of the other two was morally and horribly in the wrong, Merleau Ponty, Proustian asthmatic, speaking up for the cleansing necessity of violence and terror, Žižek, Jackanapes and mischief-maker, cutting an elderly caper on Robespierre's behalf and in derision of wet old liberalism.

Well! everybody admires Havel, just as they do Said, Max Weber, Alva and Gunnar Myidal, Edward Thompson (curiously missing here), Pierre Bourdieu, Denis Healey, Dorothy Hodgkin ... the list stretches out to the crack of doom. The deep question, however, is how (the phrase is Perry Anderson's) these "lines of force for transformation" can come through from past to present.

The answer to this, which the book to hand cannot give but the contributors to which know to be crucial, will only be found in a new kind of biographical history in which the key relationship is that between the nature and style of a thinker's thought in action, and his or her attitude towards the ends of life, or as Havel styled things, "living in truth".