

The Danger of Intellectuals

Daniel Mathews

February 26, 2007

The world has a terrible, tragic history of suppression of intellectuals. As it turns out, the world has a terrible, tragic history of pretty much everything. But as the saying goes, the point of history is to change it.

This suppression is probably because intellectuals are dangerous. But in what sense is this true? One may argue that intellectuals can destabilise order and spread chaos. It is an interesting question.

Let us deal with chaos first, which is much less interesting. There are not many intellectuals who advocate chaos. They exist: the terrorist anarchists, for instance, such as Emile Henry. (Such intellectuals tend not, however, to live long. Henry was dead at 22.) The prominent anarchist Bakunin sometimes makes remarks that give this impression — seeing in chaos and in spontaneous uprising the potential for the flowering of creativity and the germ of a new and better society — but this does not seem to be an advocacy of chaos per se. One might also point to the futurist movement of the early 20th century. Religious fundamentalists, apologists for aggressive war and the like, I do not count as intellectuals. The details are unimportant however: essentially nobody advocates chaos.

Intellectuals can destabilise regimes, but not by themselves. They can inspire and encourage social movements. They can wake the populace from its slumber and help them understand some of the facts of the world. They can press for reform or revolution. And if they tend toward a more thoroughgoing inclination, then the solutions they advocate, and the social processes they set in action, can lead to some sort of disorder — even if that disorder spells the end of a hated social order, and even if that disorder is the prequel to a better system. The most intense such social process — a social revolution — is often fraught with violence. When shocking, embarrassing facts or truths become known to the general population, they can be destabilising — because nobody will tolerate such the continuance of the system that permits them to occur. It seems that in almost every powerful institution — I have here in mind the largest States and corporations, historically and today — there exist such facts: some of them are just better suppressed than others.

It's clear that states and corporate institutions distort their presentation of politically active intellectuals — as we all know, the mainstream media constantly feeds us misinformation. In particular the mainstream media and other

ideological institutions will portray any threat to the established order — however cruel, corrupt, repressive, undemocratic or unequal that order might be — as overly violent, overly naive, overly subversive, overly dangerous, misguided, overzealous or even maniacal. The ideological stereotypes are clear: the radical intellectual becomes a dangerous communist or anarchist; the progressive intellectual becomes an overoptimistic and unrealistic do-gooder; the activist ‘turns violent’ and becomes a rioter; the rally is reported on if and only if it involves violence; the activist who maintains a comfortable lifestyle is a sanctimonious hypocrite; the activist who doesn’t is a crazy stoned hippie; the marchers in the street are misguided naive fools being manipulated. And, above all, those who challenge authority from outside the system — whether by criticising state or corporate policies, or who challenge its legitimacy, or who expose corrupt practices — are portrayed as a threat.

And they are a threat to the system: to the state, to the corporation, to whatever form of authority is being challenged. The intellectual is a threat; a social movement is a threat; a radical political party is a threat; a protest is a threat. Importantly, *an informed and aroused populace is a threat*; a *good example* is a threat. And these institutions, particularly the State, has a great number of techniques in its arsenal, to deal with the threat, historically used very effectively.

The State is proactive and diligent — in fact, paranoid — in its measures against the threat of change. Most of it is written out of history, but it is well documented. Of course the State has the monopoly on violence and will resort to it if required; and not necessarily as a last resort. One recalls that, for instance, one of the US military’s considerations in withdrawing from Vietnam was the need for troops at home to quell civil unrest: the State’s own population, that is, being regarded as the enemy. State infiltration and monitoring of activist groups is well-known and prolific — nowadays, there is monitoring of everything. Police use of provocateurs in crowds at protests to generate violence has a long history. Humiliating protest movements by banning their marches, placing bureaucratic obstacles in their way or herding them into protest pens is a common tactic. Radicals or progressives will get airtime proportionate to their conservatism. They will be drowned out by the ‘smart’-looking conservative apologists in suits in the official presentation; their language so similar to the official culture that it goes without saying, and the progressives so scruffy, uncommon and given so little time that they sound bizarre, outlandish, even mad. In the presentation, ‘good’ will be separated from ‘bad’ protesters, and all airtime to the ‘bad’ — it still speaks volumes about the prevailing intellectual culture, that a newsreader can blithely announce ‘attacks against police’ simultaneously as footage shows bloodied noses from batons and innocents fleeing from tear gas.

But most importantly for the present discussion are the intellectual techniques used. Everything faintly radical becomes tarnished as ‘dangerous’ and ‘subversive’. The ideological types used may be ‘communist’ or ‘anarchist’, ‘anti-globalization’ or, very occasionally, ‘anti-capitalist’. All of these are self-evidently bad: communists being associated with the oppressiveness of soviet Russia; anarchists advocating chaos by definition; globalization self-evidently

being a good thing; capitalism is a little less obviously angelic, and hence, less often applied. Still, since there is no longer any major example of a non-capitalist economic system in existence, being anti-capitalist feels like being against old age.

Of course, these are almost without exception utter misrepresentations — most intellectuals advocate nothing of the sort — and what they do advocate is written out of history. So the libertarian, non-Marxist wing of communist thought only appears in academic treatises; the vast majority of anarchist intellectuals, who advocate, in fact, a highly developed and often overly intricate system for society are unheard of; the obvious positions of protestors against the ravages of *corporate* or *neoliberal* globalization are little heard. Ideas about non-capitalist economic systems — and not Soviet-style planning either — have usually come from precisely the same intellectuals. Whoever knows about the Spanish anarchist economic system, Yugoslavia's market socialism, or other experiments? Their absence from the approved intellectual scene reinforces the apparent madness, or impenetrability, of their contemporary successors. Any potential good examples of other systems have been nipped in the bud, economically strangled, overthrown, or crushed militarily. Indeed, this helps to explain much of the madness of the last 60 years.

The upshot is that the State, and other powerful institutions, tend to be even less legitimate than we think they are; and powerful institutional forces within society lead the prevailing intellectual culture to a position which reflexively associates danger to any challenging of that legitimacy, so that we are more fearful than we should be.

As it turns out, intellectuals in the West are possibly the people with the most freedom to act to engage in criticism, or expose illegitimacy, ever to have existed in the history of the world. We live in democratic nations; basic civil liberties are established — though of course the State and conservative forces are always trying to roll them back. We have freedom of speech and assembly, even if sometimes only on paper — but for example, in the US the first constitutional amendment has proved its worth many times over. We have relative wealth, and free time to engage in research and criticism. It is therefore crucial for the maintenance of the present social order that we be dissuaded from doing so. Demoralisation, the atomisation of society, consumerism, encouraging a philosophy of apathy and futility, and maintenance of the prevailing intellectual culture all combine to stigmatise engaging in that activity. Part of that intellectual culture is to shy away from anything which is confrontational, and to associate radical ideas with danger. Of course there is a kernel of truth in these cultural assumptions — confrontation is not fun to most people; radical movements tend to get crushed by the state and pilloried in the media; radical politics can be co-opted by extremists or ideological zealots; it's not so fun to discuss the problems of the world when you can talk about shopping or clothes or your iPod. But they are not reasons to turn away — they are reasons why good, honest, principled people should try to do something, if they can find an effective way to do it.

Sadly, the present state of the world may well lead us to the conclusion that,

presumptively, all authority is illegitimate until proven otherwise. Sadly, it may lead us to the conclusion that we cannot believe anything any authority figure tells us, unless we can confirm it for ourselves. Sadly, with these assumptions, if one wants to effect a better state of the world, one may need to embarrass and confront those authorities which we find wanting. This sort of skepticism is the starting point for the independent, freethinking intellectual. It is also politically an anarchist position - precisely the sort of principled, non-violent anarchist position that has been written out of history, and ideologically massaged into terrorism. But it is not necessarily a cynical position. It may just be a realistic assessment of where we are, and is perfectly compatible with discerning a generally positive trend in history and optimism about human nature: it is not people of their own accord, but people acting as part of an institution, which engage in the horrible activities we see — and working within the system contributes to the general demoralisation. After all, anarchism is the most optimistic political philosophy.

As a result of prevailing conditions, perceptions are distorted. We have false perceptions of the spectrum of potential political thought, with principled positions and relevant facts being written out of history and prevailing doctrine: notably the libertarian left, which has vanished from perception; and various State practices and atrocities, which are well brushed over. We have false perceptions about the assessment of danger, through misrepresentation, misreporting and ideological labelling, and more generally through the ideological climate. We have false perceptions about the legitimacy of authority, being uninformed of its practices, and through the ideological climate which reflexively reinforces the State and its maintenance of order. We have false perceptions about the efficacy of doing anything, to the extent we are influenced by the misrepresentations of activism in prevailing ideological culture, and its philosophy of apathy and futility and demoralisation.

The danger of intellectuals is not producing chaos, intentionally or as a side-effect. These are long bows to draw, and almost without exception contrary to the explicit beliefs and strategies which intellectuals advocate. Violence and chaos have at least as much to do with traditional State policies of subversion of social movements, outright repression, and the misrepresentations of the prevailing ideological culture, as they have to do with violent tendencies within social movements themselves — intellectuals, if anything, playing a peacemaking role in the process.

The real danger of intellectuals, it seems, is correcting the false perceptions prevalent in society. With their knowledge and understanding of history and lesser-known facts, they can challenge authority and reveal truths. They can recount or provide inspiring examples of courage and action. The spread of such knowledge, and the capacity to act upon it, with a proper assessment of the risks and prospects, is the real danger to established order.

For there is nothing more terrifying to an established social order than an informed, conscious, aroused population that has lost all its respect for authority — and will challenge that authority with scrupulous honesty, with its own unrelenting moral authority, and without compromise.

That is not chaos. That is democracy. That is justice. That is how we make a better world.