

Intellectual Freedom and Unpredictability

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I'm quite certain that most of those working in the human sciences, and, especially, readers of this journal, will need no convincing about the threats to intellectual freedom within today's university – funding cuts, restructurings, growing demands for “real world” performance, research assessment exercises, the obsession with winning external grants, and the like. Neither motivated nor equipped to offer another hard lesson in these gloomy realities, I'll submit instead some brief reflections on the terms under consideration and on some associated issues by way of optics that are important to me – utopia, the ultra-Left, and the world-system in transition.

Our problem, in a nutshell, is that the quite peculiar “mutation” that was set in motion by the contestations of the 1960s, where universities came to be less dominated by money and power, to express a certain independence of culture, and to be somewhat detached from problems of national unity and progress, is winding up – albeit at different rates in different places (Miyoshi, 2005). Clearly, many of us continue to be able to do pretty much as we will, in terms of research and teaching, but there's an expanding sense of threat, and a near universal demand that we frame what we do in an atrocious language that can't help but seep beneath the rhetorical surface and into our working lives.

A common protective, strategic response has been to appeal to something like the human science's role as “critic and conscience of society”. This is a “useful fiction”, but there's something irritating about it, just as there's something irritating about both of the terms – intellectual and freedom – in

play, here. In the case of “intellectual”, my ultra-Leftist hackles rise immediately, because of the naively romantic or Leninist associations the designation carries. The only acceptable definition, in my estimation, is a more modestly Gramscian one, where intellectuals are more widely understood, as those producing and circulating knowledge and having *functions* attached to the organization of particular social groups. With “freedom”, it’s another sort of annoyance altogether, because freedom is so universally and unthinkingly worshipped today, so promiscuous, and so thoroughly polluted by a triumphant liberal sensibility that’s set against a ridiculously imagined totalitarian alternative. The concept, as well, rides roughshod over equality every time. To table thump, once more, the only satisfactory conception of freedom is one in line with Castoriadis’s (2005) notion of autonomy, which has both individual and collective-societal significance, as lucid self-creation and self-limitation, the world and self as not given from the outside once and for all, but as our own work, and, therefore, as such, criticisable and alterable.

We hear a fair bit about the demise or new treason of the intellectual, the abasement of the university, and the end of utopia (see, for instance, Jacoby, 2000; 2005), and, on one level, I agree with these commentaries. This time of transformation and trouble, is best captured, I think, by Arrighi’s (2010) notion of “systemic chaos” – disorganization and transition at the levels of the world-economy, the international system of states, and the geoculture. Together with the troubling aspects of this chaos are more promising, progressive symptoms, I’d suggest – in particular, a certain wearing out, from the end of the 1990s, of the moment of resurgent liberalism.

In the face of this, and trying to hold to my ultra-Leftist commitments, I think that my first task, in terms of intellectual freedom, is to avoid two equally unfortunate ideal-typical polarities of academic being today: on the one hand, a miserabilist “generational lamentation” (Mann, 1995) about the fate of critical thought, the university, utopia, and society at large – the sort of position occupied by Castoriadis in his later years, articulated as a social and anthropological folding back into heteronomy; on the other hand, an accommodation to the current “ascetics of knowledge production” in the neo-liberal university – already in place “positional values”, submission to legitimate knowledges and academic value fetishes, celebrations of the academic author’s “productivity, popularity, and visibility” (Nickel, 2015: 91). A second, more positive task would entail an unbending aspiration for autonomy in our own work, and especially an attempt to recognize and approach the new, or, as Castoriadis would’ve framed it, to view being as creation. A third task concerns my obligations to students. We have in front of us a quite exciting cohort of young people, shaped importantly by co-ordinates such as anti-globalization

and Occupy. They are often enthusiastic about critical theory, and they have an urgent stake in the world-systemic difficulties we tend to think and write about – escalating debt, disheartening job prospects, an inaccessible housing market. We still have the freedom of being one relay point in their intellectual formation, and of being able to convey the traditions from which they cannot avoid thinking, as well as the privilege of learning freely from the unpredictable ways they wrestle with this material.

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