

Intellectuals, Professionals and Museums
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Intellectual noise and professional redundancy.

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‘...the desire to be moved not by profit or reward but by love of and interest in the larger picture, in making connections across lines and barriers, in refusing to be tied down to a speciality, in caring for ideas and values despite the restrictions of a profession.’

(Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*)¹

The term ‘intellectual’ as it was used at the beginning of the twentieth century, had attached to it a cluster of fairly specific characteristics that defined the activities of ‘the intelligentsia’. Central to the activity of the intellectual was the belief that those with access to ‘knowledge’ had a responsibility to use their understanding for the purpose of addressing social and global concerns. This particular attribute has been linked to the era of the Enlightenment, which Zygmunt Bauman reasons to be because, ‘It was in this era that the power/knowledge syndrome...had been set.’² Modernity’s identification with the power/knowledge equation, and the social responsibility that came with it, became the force behind intellectual activity. In this sense, it was a call to the ‘men of knowledge’ to move beyond their specialist fields and participate actively to influence the social and political debates of the day. In early modernity the intelligentsia were not just to be found in the old universities but were made up of a mixture of writers, artists, journalists, scientists and prominent public figures. As Bauman points out ‘The category of intellectual was a widely open invitation to join in a certain practice’ (LI, pp 2), that is, the ‘intellectual’ was not so much a person, as a way of thinking and behaving. It is this correlation between power or authority and the responsibility of knowledge that is still to be found at the heart of current debate concerning the need for, or indeed, the existence of, intellectuals.

There has been much speculation in recent decades over the demise of the intellectual, and/or the cessation of intellectual invention. It would seem that intellectuals no longer have anything to

¹ Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*, (Vintage: London, 1994) pp 57. References hereafter are given as RI in the text.

² Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters*, (Polity Press: Cambridge, 1987) pp 2. References hereafter are given as LI in the text.

say and they can no longer answer urgent global concerns. This intellectual crisis can be seen in the almost panic stricken headline of a 1979 edition of the *Washington Post*, 'The Cupboard of Ideas is Bare' and in the article itself, in which prominent thinkers admitted they were unable to answer the country's current policy problems. According to the *Washington Post* 'Talks with noted intellectuals in Cambridge, Mass., and New York, in fact, not only confirmed that the mainstream of ideas has split into dozens of rivulets, but that some have dried up altogether.'³ This intellectual crisis appears to be still unresolved as we enter the twenty-first century, with questions being asked as to the whereabouts of the intellectuals. The problem, I would argue, with this search to find the intelligentsia is that it continues to look toward to same institutions that produced the intellectuals of old, that is, universities and cultural institutions, in the hope of finding the next generation of thinkers. In this respect there is an assumption that the new intelligentsia will emerge from the professional classes. As for the question 'who are the intellectuals?' Bauman makes it clear that there can be not objective answer, he says 'It makes no sense to compose a list of professions whose members are intellectuals or draw a line in a professional hierarchy above which the intellectuals are located' (LI, pp 2), this is because being an intellectual is not the same as being a professional, it is fundamentally a creative *activity*. Therefore, it would seem that the problem of locating contemporary intellectuals lies in the fact that intellectual activity has shifted its site of operation. Indeed, there would appear to be good reasons why this should be so, and it is some of these reasons that I intend to explore in this essay.

In order to begin this exploration, into the reasons for the shift in location of intellectual activity, I would argue, that it is first necessary to speak about the processes and dynamics behind the activity of intellectual inventions itself. I believe, that by understanding the specific dynamic

³ *Washington Post*, May 20, 1979.

qualities of intellectual activity, it is possible to demonstrate, how current cultural and political practices exclude intellectual development from the institutions that have traditionally fostered it. The links between physical dynamics and intellectual activity is an area of growing interest to Modern Sciences. Physicists such as Ilya Prigogine, who won the Nobel Prize in 1977 for his work on non-equilibrium systems, along with his co-writer Isabelle Stengers, have shown how within naturally occurring random flux, ordered structures may spontaneously emerge⁴. These structures represent a higher level of order than that of the surrounding 'chaotic' flow. Termed 'dissipative structures', they are open systems, exchanging energy and matter with their environment. Also, as opposed to closed systems they are excluded from the progress of entropy that the surrounding environment is subject to and create their own pocket of negative entropy (negentropy). In other words, although the environment in which a dissipative structure is situated may be running towards a state of inertia, the structure itself is, in effect, reversing the process and increasing energy and movement, albeit locally. What has proved to be of great interest about dissipative structures is the way in which their self-regulation also relates to communications systems, that is, the transmission of information.

Based on the science of non-equilibrium physics, Information Theory, was originally a quantitative mathematical theory concerned with problems, such as: can the number of signals in a message be reduced and still transmit quantity of information? Perhaps the most important aspect of Information Theory, in relation to ideas of intellectual activity, is its theory of 'redundancy'. This concept, is explained by William Paulson: 'In the mathematical theory of information, redundancy is a ratio denoting, in effect, the portion of a message given over to repetition of what is already found somewhere else in the message.'⁵ In practical terms,

⁴ Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order out of Chaos: Man's new dialogue with nature*, (Bantam: NY, London, 1984).

⁵ William Paulson, *The Noise of Culture: literary texts in a world of information*, (Cornell Uni: Ithaca, London, 1988), pp 58. References hereafter are given as NC in the text.

redundancy, or repetition of information, is the simplest form of communication because it contains a low ratio of new signals. Higher ratios of new signals, that is, new information, would create a more complex transmission and as result may lead to increased levels of 'noise', or distortion and uncertainty in the message. In other words, communication that contains high levels of repeated information stands less chance of being changed during transmission. On the other hand, high levels of new information, creates a high risk of 'noise' and with it the possibility of re-interpretations of the original message. It is this difference, between the transmission of low order reductive messages and complex 'noisy' messages that has become the focus of interest for Cognitive Psychologists and those working in the field of intellectual invention. For research has shown that human cognitive processes self-organize thoughts from both redundant information and new 'noisy' information. The ratio of repetitive information compared to new and uncertain information, relates to the amount to which the mind will re-structure or 'invent' the message. Paulson describes this as '..speculative noise that also belongs to and marks the intellectual situation.', where noise '..does not itself constitute invention, but it creates the space in which invention is possible:' 'In this space potentially significant deviations can be selected.....and placed in contexts where they can take on new meaning.' (NC, pp 159)

It is this ability to interpret and invent meaning from complex information that constitutes intellectual activity. In this sense, the intellectual must engage in a discourse, which is highly autonomous, or independent of mainstream discourse, in order to risk 'noise' in the hope of bringing together new configurations and new ideas. In contrast to intellectual discourse, Paulson, with reference to the work of the philosopher Judith Schlanger, identifies a type of discourse that actually denies participation in intellectual activity, he defines it as 'a discourse that aims simply to reproduce or give voice to a part of culture without attempting to invent anything new.' (NC, pp 163). This type of discourse may also be described as that which repeats

and transmits knowledge without adding to it. This form of discourse would appear to be prevalent in present day cultural practices and I intend to examine this in more detail, later in the essay, when exploring the subject of professional discourse.

Information Theory and Cognitive Theory come together to demonstrate that the structure of discourse has the ability to allow or deny intellectual invention. For a discourse to remain open to invention is must avoid repetitive description and find new ways of representing meaning. As such, this kind of discourse must risk the ‘noise’ of new metaphors, which can offer a possibility for re-animating redundant and inert ideas, as well as, integrate completely new elements into what is already known. However, what Information Theory has also taught us about intellectual processes, is that redundancy, as well as noise, is a necessary element of intellectual discourse. For ultimately the work of the intellectual is the dissemination of ideas and this can only be achieved through some consensus of meaning. Redundant messages have their uses in that they have consensually accepted meanings. The ratio between new and old discourse is vital in the establishment of relationships between the intellectual and his/her intended audience. Audience, in this sense, can be thought of in broad terms, as both popular publics and specialized communities, each audience having its own structure of consensually accepted knowledge or cognitive domain. In order for the intellectual to communicate with these audiences it is important that their discourse does not vary too radically from the already established, redundant, knowledge. Paulson believes this is fundamental to the intellectual process, for, as he explains ‘If an intellectual statement is completely different from what has preceded it, if it seems altogether foreign to its context, it risks being labelled as deviant and rejected by the members of the relevant cognitive community.’ (CN, pp 157) In this way, the process of intellectual invention requires a precarious balancing act between mainstream and radical ideas. The reason that a

cognitive community may reject new ideas is that they constitute too much ‘noise’ in the system and, as such, the ideas may appear as unimaginable, or even, irrational.

Establishment of a relationship between the wider community and the intellectual has to exist for the intellectual to function. Intellectual ideas cannot survive in isolation. In this sense the intellectual’s role involves feeding off the knowledge of the wider community, in what has been described by the French philosopher Michel Serres, as a parasitic process. Serres chooses ‘Le Parasite’ to describe intellectual activity for very specific reasons. The word in French has more than one meaning, two of which are: an organism that lives in or off another, and the static or noise that interrupts and distorts electronic communications. For Serres, what makes the abstract character of the parasite so significant to the understanding of the dynamic processes involved in intellectual activity, is that, the parasite interrupts the flow of information ‘upstream’ and discharges it ‘downstream’ in a distorted and less well defined form.⁶ In this sense the function of the intellectual is to take the ‘big ideas’, work with them and apply them to ‘lower level’ organizations, such as, social and cultural issues. The work of the intellectual is to create bifurcations within the information flow, which may or may not lead to wider changes in the community’s pattern of thought. However, the parasite by nature has to feed in or on the body of the other and so, the intellectual can not risk too great an interruption in the flow of knowledge, for the community that sustains him will reject him. Paulson refers to the dynamics within dissipative structures to explain this, ‘... a cognitive community constitutes a self-regulating system, one that continues its activity by producing differences and then integrating into its organization those differences that it finds acceptable.’ (CN, pp 157). The necessity, of what might seem an overly conservative reaction to difference and change, lies in the nature of dissipative structures generally. Ilya Prigogine observed of these open dynamic structures, that

⁶ Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans L.Schehr (John Hopkins: Baltimore, 1982).

greater turbulence could be tolerated at the fringes of the system but that by the time the rogue movements had entered the system fully, their activity had been dampened down significantly. Prigogine concluded from this, that the dynamic structure of the system was self-regulating the intensity of internal change. In this sense, too much turbulence, too quickly, would breakdown the dissipative structure as a whole. This is exactly what Paulson and others see mirrored in the dynamics of a cognitive community, whether it is a small, specialized group or indeed a whole culture.

From these dynamical descriptions of intellectual activity, it is possible to see that the role of the intellectual within a society is to produce difference, which in turn produces the dynamic power that keeps the social structure stable. Without this dynamic power the system would progress towards maximum entropy and dissipate; small differences constitute pockets of negative entropy, keeping the system far-from-equilibrium and preventing inertia. Put in simple terms, this suggests, that a society needs intellectual activity in order to maintain a stable but moving dynamic. If this is indeed so, than why do we find ourselves, in the current political and social climate, wondering where all of the intellectuals have gone?

Part of the reason for the apparent disappearance of the intellectual can be seen to be due to changes within cultural practices. Since the end of the Second World War, social and political forces have shifted the operational site and the function of the classic intellectual. Edward Said notes three major forces in the disappearance of the intellectual from public view. Firstly, the movement of the educated out of the urban centres and into the comfort of the suburbs, meant that many of those with the potential for intellectual activity were cushioned from harsh realities of urban inequality, which may have prompted a sense of social responsibility. Secondly, the Beat Generation, although undoubtedly driven by a sense of global and social responsibility,

pioneered the idea of ‘dropping out’ from the social system, and their appointed public roles in it, as such, they lost their authority to speak for those still inside the system. Thirdly, the expansion of universities allowed the political opposition to closet themselves away in the ‘unreality’ of campus life. (RI, pp 53) For Said, these shifts in the location of the intellectual were the first steps away from the idea of the ‘classic’ intellectual. In other words, away from the thinker who saw the ‘bigger picture’ and was driven by social conscience to risk voicing opposition and offering alternative theories.

It is also at this point, that it could be said, that intellectual activity changed its function from that of the ‘legislator’. Bauman, like Said, emphasises the changes in intellectual activity and also places the time of this shift around the middle of the twentieth century. According to Bauman, before this time intellectual activity followed the ‘Modern strategy’, which is that of a ‘legislator’. The role of the legislator was to ‘arbitrate in controversies of opinions’ (RI, pp 4) and in the process give authority to certain select opinions. This authority to arbitrate and, in effect, speak for others, was legitimised by the intellectual’s superior knowledge. Bauman believes that this role was replaced in the latter half of the century by the ‘Post-Modern strategy’, which defines the function of the intellectual as that of an ‘interpreter’. This new function of intellectual activity contrasts the earlier role, in that, ‘Instead of being orientated towards selecting the best social order, this strategy is aimed at facilitating communication between autonomous participants.’ (RI, pp 5). Bauman goes on to explain that the objectives of this new role ‘..is concerned with preventing the distortion of meaning in the process of communication.’ (RI, pp 5). I would argue, that this shift in emphasis towards ‘facilitating communication’ is the single most important factor in what appears to be the decline in intellectual activity.

Based on the Information theorists' definition of intellectual activity, the function of intellectual communication should be the production of a discourse that sets up a relationship between redundant messages and 'noisy' new ones. Therefore, the idea that intellectual activity should aim at the prevention of distortion in communication, or a noiseless transmission, can only be viewed as a paradox. However, in practical terms, what the shift in objective does is privilege those individuals whose role within society is to repeat knowledge without adding to it. When viewed from this perspective it becomes clear that the earlier version of intellectual activity is no longer valued by contemporary society. Instead, the professional and the expert have replaced the intellectual. Therefore the risk and personal commitment put into play by the classic intellectual is devalued by the drive for optimum performance, signified by professionalization. Said describes professionalism as, 'something you do for a living', that involves '...not rocking the boat, not straying outside accepted paradigms or limits, making yourself marketable and above all presentable, hence uncontroversial and unpolitical..' (RI, pp 55) This imagine of professional conduct is one in which knowledge is transmitted at its optimal level of performativity, without distortion. It is in effect the uncritical reiteration of the dominant social and political paradigm. The goal of optimal performativity is to supply the skills needed in a free market economy. According to Jean-Francois Lyotard, these skills fulfil two basic needs: firstly, they create competition, by putting 'specialists' up for sale on the world market, where all professionals speak the same language and are therefore interchangeable. Secondly, they help to generate 'internal cohesion', in the sense that professionals become the 'players' whose actions maintain 'reality'.⁷

The spread of professionalization across all cultural institutions can be seen as an indication of a wide political agenda, which aims to maintain its own social dynamic. It does this in the same

⁷ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A report on knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. (Manchester Uni: Manchester, 2004) pp 48. References hereafter are given as TPC in the text.

way as a dissipative structure, that is, by reducing the risk of large fluctuations and turbulence entering the system. Current political policies, which value professionalism above intellectual activity, are reducing the risk of social instability by regulating the amount of noise or additional information that enters cultural discourse. However, one possible problem arising from this suppression of radical change is that, in the long term, it slows down the momentum of the whole system, pushing it towards high levels of redundancy and entropy. Eric White describes this process in relation to Information Theory but, I would argue, his description reflects equally the current socio-political situation and, in particular, the value placed on professionalism and the elimination of noise as a means of perfecting the functioning of the system:

‘.....the exclusion of noise amounts to the exclusion of genuine information...[]...The system endlessly reiterates, endlessly ratifies itself. But such a system, however self-coherent [internally cohesive] or optimally efficient [performative], is nevertheless doomed to entropic degradation.’⁸

However, it is perhaps too soon to be talking in terms of the ‘doomed entropic degradation’ of western capitalist policies but, I believe, there is still value in looking at the consequences of the heavy professionalization of knowledge-based institutions. Many of the justifications for professionalizing the education system and currently, cultural institutions, such as museums and art galleries, are based on policies of social inclusion. At first glance the idea of social inclusion seems a very worthy cause, where access to culture and knowledge is offered to all sections of society. In this sense, social inclusion demonstrates a ‘politically-correct’ stance, where widening participation for all ages, classes and ethnic groups, replaces elite access, and can be thought of as democratisation of knowledge. Frank Furedi points out in his comments about the policy of social inclusion, that is it now a ‘..barely contested consensus...that access and social inclusion

⁸ Eric Charles White, ‘Negentropy, Noise, and Emancipatory Thought’ in *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science*, ed. N. Katherine Hayles, (Uni of Chicago Press: Chicago & London, 1991) pp 267.

should be at the heart of the missions of cultural institutions.’⁹ It is as a direct result of this policy, that museums are now required to act more like community centres, where artworks are not chosen for their historical merit but because the public ‘like them’. Furedi argues that the policy of social inclusion is kept in place in two ways: firstly, through private and state funding that has as its main criteria for investment quantitative assessment, that is, ‘access targets’ and ‘bums on seats’. This criterion devalues quality-of-content and replaces it with quantity-of-content, which inevitably must appeal to the lowest common denominator. It is this aspect of the policy of social inclusion that has led to accusations of ‘dumbing down’ knowledge. Secondly, social inclusion is kept in place by professionalization. It is now the professional, not the intellectual, that holds authority in cultural institutions and as such they keep the ideology of democracy in place by reiterating and transmitting, without distortion, the political language of social inclusion.

Using the professional as an interpreter in the process of democratising knowledge, can also be seen as a continuation of the damping down effect, discussed earlier. For, although social inclusion appears to be allowing equal access to knowledge and therefore the possibility for new ideas to be generated, the actual effect of democratising knowledge is the elimination of ‘intellectual discovery’. The professional transmission of established facts, without the noise of critical uncertainty, encourages passivity in the recipient. In this situation, Furedi argues, that the audience becomes a ‘consumer’ of culture, who receives a service and, as a customer, is merely flattered into thinking they are part of a shared social experience. From this perspective social inclusion not only creates stability by high production of redundancy but also offers a ‘feel good factor’. The constant repetition of unquestioning affirmations has a therapeutic affect; feelings of alienation and cultural exclusion become seen as psychological dysfunctions, which can be

⁹ Frank Furedi, *Where have all the intellectuals gone?: confronting 21st century philistinism*, Chapter 5: ‘The culture of flattery’ (Continuum: London & NY, 2004) pp 114. References hereafter are given as GONE in the text.

rectified by repeated validation. Furedi goes as far as to say, that social inclusion creates the 'illusion of participation' based on a 'pseudo-democratic ethos' (GONE, pp 131).

By exploring the dynamic role of the intellectual in society it is possible to show that intellectual activity aims at the production of noise in established information. In other words, they generate alternative ideologies from those of the mainstream. In this sense, in a cultural system noise constitutes renewal just as is the case in physical and cognitive systems. However, renewal brings with it the risk of radical change. Therefore, the decline of the intellectual in contemporary western culture may be attributed to social engineering, which aims to eliminate large fluctuations in the wider social dynamic and so devalues and discourages the generation of 'big ideas'. It is possible that this situation is a particular phase in capitalist expansion, for the larger the dissipative system the more likely it is to breakdown from loss of internal cohesion, caused by large unpredictable dynamic movements. In this way, it makes sense to keep the system as a whole damped down and near-to-equilibrium.

The problem for the modern intellectual, if he/she still exists, is how to deal with the impingements of social inclusion and global marketization. Edward Said believes the answer lies in 'amateurism', which he sees as offering the antidote to professionalism. For Said, amateurism is an activity fuelled by 'care and affection' rather than profit. Because the amateur stands, to a degree, outside the global market they have the possibility of becoming, in Said's words:

'someone who considers that to be a thinking and concerned member of society one is entitled to raise moral issues at the heart of even the most technical and professionalized activity, as it involves one's country, its power, its mode of interacting with its citizens as well as with other societies.'(RI, pp 61)

Although I agree with the general principle put forward here, I have a slight concern, that Said's 'amateur' sounds very much like the nineteenth century 'gentleman amateur', which may weaken his argument by tingeing it with a sense of nostalgia.

As for the original question of 'where are all the intellectuals?', I think this essay has gone a small way in demonstrating how current political policy has either dampened down intellectual activity or eliminated it altogether from its usual sites of operation. I would like to add to this, an interpretation that suggests that the question being asked should not be 'where' are the intellectuals but, in fact, 'who can hear' the intellectuals. For, as Information Theory elegantly shows, the production of noise in communication may lead to a cognitive jump onto a higher level of order, in which the noise becomes new information. However, if intellectual activity is suppressed, this kind of cognitive jump is unlikely to happen and as result of this, communication remains at a low level of order and noise remains just that, an incomprehensible and irritating racket.

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