



Chapter 1

Comrades and Colons

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Perhaps my finest contribution to the general welfare of humanity as a public intellectual involved the correct handling of the colon. I was a member at the time of a far-left political group in Oxford—a fact which seemed to occasion a number of rather strange clickings and whirrings whenever I picked up the phone, and involved an extraordinary number of visits to my local telegraph pole by workmen apparently repairing the line. One of the senior members of the group was a shop steward at what was then the largest automobile plant in the south of England, and had a long career of industrial militancy. The company would have dearly loved to dismiss him, and finally seized the chance to do so when he parked his car illegally for 30 seconds or so outside their gates. For some years he had been writing a history of the workers' fight for better conditions at the plant, a piece of work which constituted a precious addition to the annals of the English labour and socialist movements. But he was handier with a megaphone than he was with the intricacies of English grammar, and finally handed the manuscript over to me to knock into syntactical shape. I spent a number of lonely evenings embroiled in the revolutionary struggle to turn commas into colons, introduce some elementary paragraphing into a seamless text, and find synonyms for “bosses” and “shameful betrayal”. We had to fight hard to find the book a publisher, but were finally successful.

While engaged on this world-historical literary task in the evenings, I was teaching Oxford English undergraduates during the day about the heroic couplet in Alexander Pope and the influence of Schopenhauer on Conrad. I was doing this partly because I had earlier passed up the opportunity to become what I suppose one might call a full-time public intellectual. Just as I was finishing an entirely useless piece of doctoral research at Cambridge in the mid-1960s, the then Labour government in Britain set up what was known at the time as the University of the Air, and which was soon to alter this rather ethereal title to the more sober “Open University”. The university offers degrees to so-called “mature” students who for one reason or another have missed out on a college education, and teaches them partly through radio and

television. I was unofficially offered a job there, but I was offered an Oxford Fellowship at the same time; and though I already felt at the tender age of 23 that I had had enough of the ivory tower to last me a lifetime, the more politically attractive alternative of the Open University was also much more precarious. It was a fiercely contentious project at the time, closely identified with the left, and there was a general feeling that the Conservatives would wind it up when they returned to office. Since Oxford colleges are about as unlikely to pack up as the sun, I ignominiously opted for the safer bet over the more exciting one. The Open University did not in the event pack up, and I went on to do a good deal of work for it when I wasn't talking about Schopenhauer.

What is the difference between an academic and an intellectual? In one sense, the two terms are almost antithetical. Academics, for example, tend to restrict their labours to surreally narrow fields. I once came across a doctoral thesis in Cambridge entitled "Some aspects of the vaginal system of the flea". ("Some aspects" is appealingly English in its modest self-effacement: nothing too brash, ambitious or distastefully transatlantic.) Intellectuals, on the other hand, tend to shift promiscuously from one subject area to another. Quite how would one label Jürgen Habermas, Julia Kristeva or the late Edward Said? But the versatility of the intellectual, which may involve a certain generic and stylistic versatility as well, doesn't exist for its own sake. Intellectuals need to be fluent in more than one academic discourse if they are to be *public* intellectuals—which is to say, if they want to bring ideas to bear on the political culture as a whole. The intellectual range, in other words, is determined by the social function—for the word "intellectual" denotes a social function rather than a personal characteristic. It doesn't mean "very clever". There are dim intellectuals just as there are bright shop stewards.

So there are three distinct categories at stake here: academics, intellectuals, and public intellectuals. One might claim that Walter Pater was an intellectual, but not exactly a public intellectual in the manner of John Ruskin, John Stuart Mill, Bertrand Russell, Susan Sontag or Umberto Eco. Not all intellectuals appear on television, and the fact that it had not yet been invented is not the only reason why we would not associate the name of Walter Pater with it. The three categories aren't always mutually exclusive. Medics who specialise in the effects of radiation may be academics, but when they campaign against nuclear power plants they are behaving as public intellectuals. Moral philosophers who are drafted in by governments to advise on social ethics are academics-turned-public intellectuals.

Public intellectuals are at their most useful when they find some way of bringing their particular academic expertise to bear on a matter of public importance. Some would claim that they are least useful when they exploit the fact that they have published on Verlaine or flea's

vaginas to pontificate about ethnic difference or global warming. Why exactly should we regard Jean-Paul Sartre's comments on Stalinism as necessarily more attention worthy than anyone else's? Because he was an intellectual, and therefore exceptionally intelligent? But I have just suggested that exceptional intelligence is not a *sine qua non* of being an intellectual, as it most definitely is not of being an academic. Why should what poets and novelists have to say about free speech be more worth listening to than what hairdressers have to say about it? I think that there is, in fact, a point in paying special heed to such literary voices on such questions, even though what some of them say may well prove less persuasive than the opinions of hairdressers. For writers are compelled by their trade to have a particular concern with such issues, and are understandably more likely to be scandalised and impassioned when such civil liberties are brutally denied. They also tend to have well-recognised names and are handy with a pen, which is perhaps another reason why they should lend their support to public campaigns.

What is less obviously true, I think, is the proposition that artists, critics and humanities types in general speak from a certain privileged position when it comes to, say, torture and genocide, and have a particular responsibility to intervene in such affairs. One can, to be sure, see the logic of such a case, since it might be thought that a lifetime brooding upon questions of human value equips one to be a more relevant political commentator in such circumstances than a lifetime spent brooding upon algebraic topology or the mating habits of the mongoose. Even so, it carries the rather offensive implication that algebraic topologists are less sensitive and rousable to moral outrage than people who pass their time reading Goethe; and we happen to know from experience that plenty of people who pass their time reading Goethe have about as much moral sensitivity as a drainpipe.

So the question of whether there is a direct link of *this* kind between the humanities and politics—one which might then enable the literary academic to make an “organic” transition to public intellectual—is, I think, still an open one. What is surely not in doubt, however, is that such a connection is not essential for that transition to be successful. It is not essential because in addition to the three categories I have listed there is a fourth one as well, which is that of the citizen. To draw on one's political expertise to speak to a mass rally against the Iraq war is to act as a public intellectual; simply to march in the demonstration is to behave as a citizen. (I myself occupy yet a third category, having more than once spoken in public against the Iraq war without any political expertise on the subject; but then ignorance has never deterred me from anything.)

Even intellectuals, in short, are people as well, hard though it occasionally is to credit. To find a way of placing one's specific talents at the service of a social or political cause is no doubt the ideal or

prototypical way for academics to turn themselves into actors in the public arena, even if it involves nothing more grandiose than correcting a working-class militant's spelling. But you can also simply be an academic *and* an actor in the public arena, since it is not likely that more internal relations between politics and what you do in the classroom will crop up all that often. Most of my own activity in political groups has been donkeywork, just like any other members. (It is, however, notable that all members of the political groups I myself have been associated with have been regarded as intellectuals, whatever their background and education. All comrades are expected to attain a certain level of theoretical proficiency. The distinction between worker and intellectual in society at large is overcome within such organisations.) It does not happen all that often, however, that the struggle to keep open a playgroup that the local council is trying to close down urgently needs to sort out the precise relation between Lukács's aesthetics and his epistemology. There is little enough organic relationship between Sartre's notion of the *etre-pour-soi* and his views on Algeria, just as there is no very obvious oblique relation between Habermas's opinion of Nietzsche and his current war-mongering championship of NATO.

One should not, in other words, expect theory and practice to dance a harmonious minuet hand-in-hand throughout history. The relations between them, rather, alter along with that history. There are times (one thinks of the early, enthralling years of the Soviet republic) when theory has to hobble very hard indeed to catch up with a political practice which appears to be shifting from day to day. There are other times, as I was once advised on coming to teach at a US university in the southern states, when if you speak about communism on the campus the students will flock to your classes, whereas if you mention it downtown they will shoot you through the head. What has changed in this respect since the 1960s and 1970s is not that in those halcyon days they were all Althusserians downtown as well. It is rather that, in Europe at least, there existed a political culture beyond the campus with which radical ideas seemed in a general way to resonate, which is not to say that they were necessarily embraced with open arms. This naturally makes it harder for politically conscious academics and graduate students *as such* to find today some public correlative of their theoretical interests; but it does not make it harder to engage with politics simply as citizens, other than in the sense that such forms of engagement have become in general less easy to discover.

One of my own such occasional outlets has been working in the theatre. If literary academics seek to turn their hand to so-called creative writing, they should always choose theatre rather than poetry or the novel because it gets them out of the house. It is a different mode of cultural production altogether, one which in its practical, collective, revisionary, experimental character resembles the scientific laboratory rather more

than it does the scholar's study. It is also a suitably chastening experience for intellectuals, since actors have far more respect for the director or lighting designer or even the costume designer than they do for the playwright. One's role for the most part is to sit meekly at the back of the theatre or rehearsal room and watch one's precious creation being estranged before one's eyes. It is also a matter of chasing around the country on the heels of the tour, trying to smuggle in bits of the script which have unaccountably dropped off, or rewriting on the hoof a handful of lines which didn't go down too well in Galway the evening before. If I myself have been able to break out of the cloisters in this way, however, it is largely because I live in Ireland, a country which can boast almost more theatre groups than statues of the Sacred Heart, and in which there is a longstanding liaison between theatre and politics. The theatre groups for which I have worked have been mostly based in the north of the island, and thus with a close relation to political issues.

I mention this not simply as a matter of autobiography, however, but to make a more general point, one which is at once simple-minded and materialist. How far one can be active as a public intellectual depends on one's time and place. It is not something which, in some access of epistemological idealism, we can legislate into existence for ourselves. It is not simply a question of trying harder. In the end, political intellectuals are bred by political movements. It was the fact that Weimar Germany had a flourishing working-class movement, furnished with its own theatres, newspapers and cultural activities, which helped to make possible writers like Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin, just as it was Bolshevism which threw up the Futurists, Formalists and Constructivists. All of these currents sought to redefine the relations between the critic or theorist and practical politics; and all of them could promote that project because of the political history to which they belonged. Students and academics who want to make a difference to the world may well feel frustrated that such a history is not, at the moment, ours; but they should not feel guilty about it. That such a history is not ours is largely the responsibility of our political antagonists.

Some years ago, I was associated with a worker writers' movement in Britain, and went down to Bristol to speak at a workshop of working-class men and women who were trying to write their life histories. I was speaking to them about the idea of autobiography, trying to keep my remarks as lucid as possible, when an almost-blind woman in her eighties interrupted me in her rich West Country burr to ask rather brusquely: "What kind of language is that you're talking?" I was just on the point of apologising for any unintentional obscurantism, and for being so remote from my audience, when she added: "Because I'd like to learn it". She went on to publish a magnificent history of her life, to which I added a brief introduction. There are, as the old cliché has it, times when it all seems worthwhile. . .