

Public Intellectuals, Education and the Need for Dissatisfaction: Comments on Raphael Sassower's Discussion of Popper, Rorty and Democracy

Justin Cruickshank, University of Birmingham, UK

Raphael's Sassower's reply to my last response opened the debate on the sociology and politics of knowledge into the important area of public intellectuals and the broadening of the dialogic community to include laypeople in the attempt to reduce hierarchies. In this piece, I will say something about the social conditions of knowledge production and dissemination with regard to the media and education.

For Popper and Rorty there was a straightforward divide between a rational and progressive recognition of fallibilism or contingency of beliefs and a dogmatic — and thus irrational — adherence to beliefs taken to be certain. For Rorty any form of metaphysics was dogmatic whereas for Popper metaphysical commitments could be held either rationally because they were recognised as fallible or irrationally if they were adhered to dogmatically. Any form of tradition was dogmatic for Rorty because all beliefs had to be held ironically. For Popper tradition could be rational if it was based on problem-solving, with this meaning that problem-solving entailed conventions but those conventions had little sticking power and could be changed rapidly — problems trumped the origin of ideas in conventions. Metaphysics — or at least some metaphysics — and tradition in the original sense were seen as fundamentally monologic because they were authoritarian. By contrast, any recognition of fallibilism or contingency was seen as dialogic because ideas would develop through self-criticism and critical dialogue with others. It is not the case, to cite Trigg's (1973) rather problematic dualism, that reasons come before commitments here, because with both, dialogue and criticism are motivated by an ethical commitment to individuals' taking responsibility to improve themselves and improve the community by replacing specious certainty and harm with openness to change and a desire to reduce suffering.

Now if a public intellectual sought to embody this there is the problem that they could not just be famous name X talking on particular topic Y, because this would run the risk of them becoming a celebrity academic who was listened to because of their putative *authority* (as a celebrity). In order to be a public intellectual who engaged in a way that demonstrated the style of thinking which they thought to be more important, or as important, as the substantive issue, a lot of time or print space would be needed. The problem though is that as time and print space are money such an outcome is highly unlikely, at least in the mainstream media. Popper could have located a 'problem' and explored the currently best approach to it, lambasting any hint of induction found on the way, but finding an outlet would have been a problem that may not be solvable in the current climate. As Herman and Chomsky (1995) argue, when opinions are sought they have to conform to the pre-existing terms of reference of a debate, which privileges elites because it operates on the basis of not challenging the prevailing hierarchies and assumptions that support the status quo. To engage in questioning that presumed the basis of the existing debate to be flawed and which sought another debate would be impossible in the confines of the contemporary mass media. Instead, where academics do appear in the media, their role is to dispense brief comments to a pseudo-dialogue in which presenters quiz an expert for technical 'factoids', or solicit contrary views, expressed as

self contained normative factoids, from two experts, in a tiny amount of time. In these pseudo-debates the disciplines that tend to appear outside scientific matters are economics, business, history, political science and international relations / security. This is not to say these disciplines are inherently conservative but it is to say that a goodly number of academics in these disciplines are amenable to a dialogue whereby experts efficiently dispense factoids with no challenge to the terms of reference of the dialogue.

For both Popper and Rorty education was of central importance in creating a citizenry able to understand and criticise social, economic, political and moral matters. With an educational system and culture that valued ideas and rational dialogue there would be an appropriate *interlocutor* audience for public intellectuals, assuming they could find an outlet. The current neo-liberal changes in higher education undermine the development of a dialogic citizenry though. This is not to say that higher education was unproblematic in the past in terms of the reproduction of hierarchies (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990), but it is to say that one of the problems with higher education today is the emphasis on the monologic consumer of knowledge in the market.

In the UK the rise in fees coupled to an explicit Government policy of making students customers, set in a culture where all pre-university education is based on seeing packets of knowledge just as a means to get a qualification, results in university education often being regarded as nothing more than the purchase of degree accompanied by some repetition of 'key facts'. As customers purchasing degree programmes need information the National Student Survey measures customer satisfaction and universities are legally obliged to publish this information on their webpages. As Mary Beard (2012) argued though, a proper education should create dissatisfaction with students being moved out of their intellectual and normative 'comfort zone' and encouraged to tackle material that is challenging. So, in place of satisfied customers monologically demanding easy to digest factoids from 'enthusiastic' (read: entertaining and thus easy to listen to) staff, who then dispense good grades for repetition, students should be aspiring Popperians or Rortians, driven by an enthusiasm for new ideas and challenging orthodoxies.

As for staff, in the build up to the measurement of research 'performance' in the Research Excellence Framework, academics are encouraged to maximise productivity and the potential for their work to fare well in citation measures, which can lead to more original work being replaced by puzzle-solving in a dialogue defined by a few 'key thinkers'. Further, in some subjects like economics and business, departments have lists of 'approved' journals with research thus having to conform to the intellectual conventions of those journals. The REF is not only based on academic 'outputs' though but on 'impact' with academics being encouraged to do research to benefit the economy or the security of the nation; or to reach a mass audience if, for example, presenting a history documentary. In other words, universities are facing pressures which potentially undermine the development of a dialogic culture, with students being turned into customers and student / customer evaluation being based on the misconceived notion of being satisfied with existing ideas and values remaining comfortably unchallenged; and academics driven to see teaching and research in instrumental terms.

Before being tempted to replace Popper and Rorty with the hermeneutics of suspicion to argue that a homogenous discourse shaped students, academics and citizens, it is worthwhile to note a few points. Popper and Rorty would hold that no system can claim to embody the supposedly post-ideological and technocratic end of history, where instrumentally rational problem-solving marks the acme of progress, when history is a story of contingencies. However, in this case, even they may have been surprised by the speed at which a problem occurred, with the Government's own accountants holding that the new ideologically fit for purpose sustainably excellent fee regime cannot meet university funding costs and cannot be privatised because any investor would see this as a conjecture which failed immediately (McGettigan 2013). Furthermore, students have challenged the ideologically driven and pseudo-scientific nature of their economics degrees and set up the Post-Crash Economics Society at Manchester University. In Popperian terms, World Three has to engage with problems and not become an hermetic domain of ideologically pure mathematical models detached from empirical problems (although arguably Popper failed to realise this when he celebrated economics as the most mature social science). There are also more broad-ranging student protest groups, although in the UK these have not been as successful as the 2012 protests in Quebec. In terms of the presence of disciplines in the public domain, philosophy and sociology may not squeeze out those speaking acceptance to power on the main media, but there are popular publications such as *Philosophy Now* and *Discover Society* which bring a more nuanced, informed and critical perspective to events and prevailing ideas.

At the time of writing, anti European Union and far right parties have made electoral gains in the European elections, with attacks and prejudice against immigrants increasing, all of which presses home the need for a more progressive and dialogic concept of democracy and of individual responsibility. One way of trying to realise this would be to follow Rorty and to argue for the importance of the humanities with literature helping reduce 'socially acceptable sadisms' by expanding people's range of understanding. Investigative journalism would also be important to challenge the status quo. So, for example, journalists could uncover the human story of exploitation that shows whilst the richest one percent continue to get richer, poorer immigrants are often ruthlessly exploited by 'job agencies' and gangmasters. In other words, it is important for people to become ethically dissatisfied with the status quo and to be motivated to engage in a social and political dialogue which rejects the prevailing terms of reference that define problems and their solutions in a neo-liberal fashion. For this to occur what is most important is the development of a public of critics, i.e. a democracy of publically engaged citizens. Public intellectuals would probably function best in a more dialogically democratic society but their role in the development of that society may well be limited.

Contact details: j.cruickshank@bham.ac.uk

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