

Beyond Lamentations: Comments on Justin Cruickshank's Public Intellectuals, Education and the Need for Dissatisfaction

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Justin Cruickshank's reply to my last response takes us from the strict examination of the overlapping and distinguishing characteristics of Popper's and Rorty's thoughts and writings to a range of topics from public intellectuals, higher education, and democracy. He provides wise accounts of the British experience, including governmental "reforms" and the rise of the extreme nationalist Right. The mention of neoliberal ideology deserves a moment's notice because of its impact on government policies in the so-called free world.

On Neoliberal Ideology

As Philip Mirowski (2011) brilliantly explains, neoliberal ideology underlies everything that happens in the US from military expenditures to policies guiding science and technology R&D. As an (non-Marxist) economist, his critique of contemporary American technoscience is scathing and sadly factually accurate. What sets him apart from many other critics is the manner by which he uses the neoliberal rhetoric against its proponents, showing how the great "return on investments" is really not there for academic institutions (his distinction between "upstream" and "downstream" revenue flows).

Elizabeth Popp Berman (2012, 2014) follows in his footsteps and argues not only for the ideological principles that guide this way of thinking—claiming that anything resembling government activity is necessarily inefficient and should be outsourced to private industry—but that neoliberal thinking has infected and permeated every facet of contemporary debates in converting all arguments into those of rational economizing. This is an American trajectory that saw its policy inception in the Reagan Administration. Its British counterpart under the Thatcher Administration was equally potent; both were drawing on post-WWII sentiments and the cloud of the Cold War which suggested strong anti-Communist fears of anything having to do with state or centralized planning. Though these two versions differ, they inform each other and are strong enough influences whose ghosts are very much alive and whose practical impact is felt throughout our political economies.

Neoliberalism has become an easy target for those of us who enjoy our academic freedom—we don't need to be market-driven researchers—and believe in social safety nets for the least privileged—as a matter of public policy. But of course neoliberalism is a complex set of ideas, some reducible to the caricatured presentations of enlightened academics, others more nuanced and problematic. As a set of ideals about efficiency and the calculus of costs vs. benefits, neoliberalism is no better or worse than other "isms." But when presented exclusively in economic terms while not acknowledging or dismissing the moral hazards associated with its principles, it's of course deceptive and bankrupt.

One can argue that just as the ideals of socialism/communism were hijacked by the Soviets to disastrous ends, so has neoliberalism been hijacked by the US to similar

disastrous ends (with the latest Great Recession as a painful reminder for the growing number of poor people) and to a lesser degree by the UK and some other European countries. The point, of course, is not so much the ideological justification for state policies but the exercise of authority by the State (and specific state agencies) in complete disregard of democratic principles. In here, once again, we can mention the duo of Popper and Rorty in complete agreement (despite the great differences in how they philosophically get there) on the importance of democratic ideals.

We can decry the laziness of contemporary policy makers who still rely on outdated ideologies; we can mock them for not realizing that all around them planning goes on—from military budgets and urban developments to energy policies and environmental designs—and collaboration is actually highly prized—from Open-Source practitioners all the way to entrepreneurs developing electric-cars (Tesla, US). We can lament the “state of the union” (American and European) or the “state of thinking” in institutions of higher education. But instead of lamentation, a therapeutic exercise that at times fails to accomplish full cathartic outcomes and that is found in many institutionalized religions, perhaps a critically constructive approach may be more fruitful. So, where does one go from here?

Dissatisfaction, Lamentation and a Call to Action

To begin with, I’m always struck by the deep level of “dissatisfaction” exhibited by students and faculty members, professional academics and everyone on the so-called Left. There is a tone of lamentation in their critical musings, a certain level of disappointment, and even a frustration with a vision of what could or should have been the case. There is a deep emotional charge to their critical notations, one that cannot be easily appeased by a rational argument or the exercise of logical symbols. Perhaps this is why the so-called Analytic School limited itself to logical puzzles the frameworks of which were so precise they couldn’t “paint outside the lines” even if they wanted to do so. Perhaps this is why so-called Continental philosophers are more in tune with their social and moral environments and therefore speak out about political and economic inequalities and justice. But in order for the critique to work itself out, one must have an idealized version of whatever is being addressed. This ideal, perhaps an Ideal Type in Weber’s sense, provides a hermeneutic role for the critique, since ontologically it has never existed.

So, in order to be honest about one’s critique, my first recommendation is to set upfront the ideal against which current circumstances are judged to be adequate or inadequate. This first move, of course, might challenge the critic to explain why this rather than that ideal was chosen, and on what grounds. If we adhere to this first move, so to speak, our critiques stand a chance to be more focused if not more useful.

Second, if one follows my first recommendation to state explicitly and clearly what ideal is used as the backdrop for one’s critique, then one may have an easier time explaining why one chooses Popper and Rorty, for example, rather than Popper and Peirce. The second recommendation, then, is that one’s choice should be explained in terms of other choices one could have made but chose not to make. In the case of Cruickshank’s choice

of Popper and Rorty it becomes clear, as the series of commentaries have shown so far, that though metaphysics and methodology of science were mentioned at the start, the actual concern drifted quickly to democracy and education. Had Cruickshank chosen to pair Popper with Peirce, for example, I doubt we would have covered so much more fruitful intellectual ground as we have in these past few months. The second recommendation, then, is not simply to make an idealized choice and explain what it is as the background for any further discussion, but also explain what alternative choices could have been made and why they were not made.

Third, once the first two recommendations are followed, any number of critical trajectories can be chosen. Not quite randomly (and irrationally) as some might fear, but much more playfully contingent. This, of course, follows much more in the footsteps of Rorty rather than Popper. But fear not that no Popperian can be provocatively playful and wind up treating multiple topics as far afield from the “proper” methodology of science as one can imagine. Popper’s students and disciples come to mind here, from Paul Feyerabend the “anarchist” of “anything goes” (1975), to Joseph Agassi the critical rationalist who writes as much about education (2014) and psychiatry (1983) as he does about democracy in the nationalistically-troubled state of Israel (1999). And this, I would suggest, would fit right into the original design of *Social Epistemology* by its founding *enfant terrible*, Steve Fuller, who endorses provocation as a means to an end—a way of getting our cognitive juices flowing in order to take seriously questions and problems (very Popperian) worthy of debate (2009); see also his views on Creationism and Intelligent Design (2007).

Fourth, if the first three recommendations sound too pedantic or strictly pedagogical, let me add a fourth that may transcend or anchor them. I came to realize years ago that science—however broadly construed—was worthy of studying and dedicating one’s intellectual career to because it was one of the most important, if not *the* most important category and practice of contemporary culture (economics and religion come second, and entertainment, including sports, comes third). Because of the cultural primacy of science (and despite its continuous challenge by “climate-change deniers”) it’s worthy of study. But I never believed I should remain beholden to the tribe. Instead, the understanding of science could shed light on other fields and disciplines, other social practices, from economics to medicine and beyond. It was epistemologically informative but never a sufficient ground for completing one’s quest.

If *science* became the *scientific community*, and if the *scientific community* became the *scientific enterprise*, then one could learn much from these transformations about power and authority, about legitimacy and corruption, about social framing and economic trappings (Sassower 2014). One could also learn about *contextualizing* (yes, postmodernism is right here) the scientific enterprise in terms other than its own declarations for a fruitful critique. The issue, then, is how the study of X informs the study of Y; it’s also about how parallel blind-spots emerge under close scrutiny of either X and/or Y, so that, for example, one can always find *technophobes* alongside *technophiles* (change the “techno” prefix and you can see this with capitalism or any other cultural phenomenon). That is, there always critics on the one hand of the debate and apologists on the other, no matter the subject-matter (Sassower 2013). The fourth

recommendation is not to remain beholden to the area of study that intrigued you first. Intellectual wandering (and wondering, too) is the luxury intellectual-academics should embrace so as to leave their “comfort zones,” as Cruickshank emphasizes, and embrace the fundamental uncertainties of our human condition.

Finally, when adopting the last recommendation, young and old intellectuals—whether located in or outside the academy—should take risks. Fuller demands this of tenured professors (2009); I’d broaden the net to cover all of them, tenured and not, full and part-time, no matter the price. Perhaps this is an idealized view of intellectual integrity; perhaps this is delusional as well because some cannot afford to be fired from their poorly-paid positions. But just as we expect workers in industry to have the courage of whistleblowing as a democratic demonstration of fighting oppression and deceit, so we should expect the same behavior from intellectual workers in the so-called marketplace of ideas.

As events unfold on various political stages around the world, from the American sell-out of democratic elections to the very rich all the way to the European Union’s shift to nationalist tendencies (by some of its member states), from the Russian violation of international law with impunity to the potential redrawing of Middle-Eastern borders, academic intellectuals must contribute their expertise and amateur proposals (the way Edward Said did from his Columbian perch of privilege, 1994). If they have learned nothing in their respective sub-disciplines that could be fruitful as an application or extrapolation, one may reasonably judge their own efforts as narcissistic (rather than wasteful or meaningless). If the academy fosters narcissist behavior, let’s critically challenge this poor service for its practitioners and the public alike. The call, then, is to action rather than lamentation.

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