Appreciating and Elaborating on Raphael Sassower’s Review of *Mad Hazard*

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I appreciate Raphael Sassower's (2022) efforts to make sense of my memoir—Mad Hazard: A Life in Social Theory (2022a)—and hope in this response to make a little more sense out of the issues he raises. He does a good job of capturing the leitmotifs of the intertwining of intellectual interests and professional struggle that run through the text, though hopefully there was more to it than that subtheme. Much of it was, indeed, concerned with the sixties and post-sixties, a trying but thrilling time in the philosophy of science, in social theory, and shortly in the sociology of science, which became STS.

The Antinomies of Academic Life

The curse “may you live in interesting times” is a curse, from the point of view of making one’s way in the world, surviving academically, deciding who your interlocutors are, finding out that they don’t care to debate, all mixed with the inevitable self-doubt, the verdicts of the status system, and the problems of inclusion and exclusion. In interesting times there are no clear paths. Or at least no clear paths for most people. Matteo Bortolini has written a magnificent biography of Robert Bellah (2020) which describes the life of someone anointed, who was almost magically protected from harm, or bad jobs, or from being rejected or ignored. But Bellah too had his challenges. They were nevertheless quite different ones—his spectacular rejection by the Institute for Advanced Study, for example. I wanted to tell the same kind of story from the other side—the side most of us are on whether we want to be or not—of the unanointed.

Elsewhere I have discussed Michael Oakeshott and others’ use of antinomies (Turner 2018; Turner and Mazur 2023), a term I take to mean, in the sense that they use it, conflicting choices where one cannot simply choose one or another but where, for practical rather than theoretical reasons, choosing one requires you to nevertheless respect and concede something to the other. Oakeshott gives many examples, but they are found in Weber and many others as well. In Oakeshott’s On Human Conduct (1975) it is, roughly, between the state which is a set of neutral rules and the state which has a goal. Without a goal, or at least some payoff for the participants, there is no point to rules for the state; but without some semblance of rules, it is impossible, in a practical sense, to pursue state goals.

For me, the many conflicts Sassower identifies in the text have precisely this character. In practice, one can never pursue the life of the mind in a pure sense, because one needs to support oneself, and today that normally means submitting to the system of academic life, which is riven with issues of status, which determine how you can live, who you can speak to, and where you can speak. Nor can one pursue academic status without having some ideas, some at least minimal life of the mind. Navigating this and other antinomies, between value commitment and objectivity, for example, is the task of intellectual life, at least in the present and under present institutional conditions. Every act, every paper, every thought, is in at least a small sense a choice which involves these antinomies.
Dealing with the Dead

One can engage the big questions, and like Machiavelli apologize to the classical thinkers one is engaged with when one of their books falls from the shelf, and ignore the present drama of debate with one’s peers mixed in with rivalries and professional politics. Or one can get daily updates from Phil Archives, Researchgate, and Academia.edu on what’s happening now, and focus entirely on that. As one of my former colleagues said, nothing older than five years is relevant in the philosophy of cognitive science. But that is a conviction with a cost, even in cognitive science: there is plenty to learn from Vygotsky and Luria, for example, and even a lively professional community that extracts these lessons. Much of what puzzles Sassower involves this antinomy between present consciousness and orientation to the big classical questions, and I have certainly been caught up in it, and written a lot about it (2014, 2021a).

I think there are tactical reasons for dealing with the dead, among them that they can’t change their mind and that attaching to them gives your own work a longer shelf-life, because scholars learning about them also have to encounter you, but also because people claim allegiances to them for reasons that you can engage. There is also a huge strategic benefit: deeply encountering a great thinker or great text is a life-changing process with great potential for one’s own growth. And there is a sense of doing justice to someone others have chosen to forget. Nevertheless, there is both a strategic and tactical cost: you will miss something from the present, and you can’t actually have a dialogue with them, but only with the “them” you invent, a point made by Collingwood ([1939]1970, 174). But the big cost is professional: you are not part of church of what’s happening now.

There is a philosophical issue here too. He notes my preference for trying to understand the problem-situation of past thinkers. This is an invention too, of course; something one must always be cognizant of, and can overcome only, and only partially, by doing more history. He questions why I think this is alien to the kind of ideological history I claimed was increasingly dominant. The kind of history of ideas I have in mind is concerned with changing “the systematic corrective repair and redress of the epistemological, ontological, and pedagogical status quo” (Hunter 2016, 1380).

Partly this is aimed at asserting the importance and correctness of neglected minority scholars, which is meritorious as history. But partly it is an extreme form of presentism which consists in awarding points to past authors depending on the extent to which they agree with the present opinions on these subjects that the author wants to promote, in which the narrative is determined by the present opinions in question. Typically, though not necessarily, this involves substituting the present day authors problems for the problems of the historical figure, and also of excluding the “wrong” sources of the historical figure’s thought. This is the main historiographical conflict in this area today (cf. Turner 2022b).

The problem with “redress,” and for that matter with epistemic justice, is that there is no non-epistemic standard by which to judge whether a wrong has taken place. Redress is needed if something has been lost that matters. But this is going to be a matter of epistemic perspective. It is not limited to the excluded. The issue of whether something is being considered seriously enough exists in every interaction and is inseparable from and intrinsic to our epistemic navigation of the world. To choose to be epistemically just is still to make
an epistemic choice, from a “perspective” or, as I would prefer to put it, background of prior epistemic experiences. There is no view from nowhere to be had. Nevertheless, there are real issues here. We can still ask whether we are misled, on our own terms, by the professional bubbles we occupy, and to what extent are these bubbles created for us. And we may conclude that we need to get out more often. This is old fashioned reflexivity, aided by historical knowledge.

Social Means for Intellectual Ends

Sociology, as it happens, is a place where we can see historically how exclusion, bubble creation, and so forth worked. *The Impossible Science* (Turner and Turner, 1990) was precisely about the use of force to make sociology a science through social means—exclusion, bullying, and so forth, to create an artificial elite with certain intellectual preferences that could not be questioned. Of course, we need a perspective here, too: the partisans of what was then called mainstream sociology saw this bullying as a noble effort, justified by the stupidity and resistance of their detractors. The memoir describes my own experiences with this conflict, the special awfulness it created for people in that field, and the pointlessness of addressing it intellectually with people who had the power to ignore and exclude. The means of exclusion and bullying were “social” and the social was bound to the intellectual.

But there is an antinomy here as well. Using social means for intellectual ends is inseparable from intellectual life: No one can “include” everything. A clique may be needed for protection and growth. Open discussion often leads nowhere. Not every criticism can be attended to. And these facts get organized by social means. Hierarchy, power, status, and so forth are part of the academic world we live in, and this has its effects on who is taken seriously. If one is in a clique, one must pay one’s dues in the form of attention and respect. If one is excluded, but wants to engage, one is put in the position of having no option but to appear to be, or to be, a bomb thrower, who lobs unwelcomed criticism over the walls the clique erects. But this is also, in a sense, not a bad thing: intellectual bomb-throwing is not the same as symmetrical intellectual engagement, but also potentially productive in showing the blind spots and errors of the echo chamber the clique constructs, and perhaps even by forcing a response.

In my sporadic attempts to deal with cognitive science, dating from graduate school, I found keeping up impossible. In part, this was because it was a clique, and perhaps a necessary one, at first. For much of my career, there was a community which shared preprints, and my former colleague’s point was quite literally true. Any paper that was published was already out of date. By the time one ruminated on and responded to it, the discussion among the insiders, who met frequently at conferences and engaged each other in debate, had long moved on. But as I explained in the book, this was not true for a whole array of neglected topics and figures, where there was plenty of intellectual value, despite the lack of fashion.

Where one is located in the academic system matters: if one is outside the networks that are fashionable, one is more or less condemned to being a day late and a dollar short in whatever one does in relation to them. Outside the networks, you have the privilege, or curse, of doing “slow science” on the topics you decide are worth discussing or are simply interesting
to learn about. And sometimes these eventually come into fashion. But you can also be a critic, despite not having full access. And you are more likely to have access to the history of the views one critiques than the last word or prejudices of insiders.

Sassower asks, rather plaintively, “What happened to the Socratic-Popperian spirit of ongoing dialogue, conjectures and refutations, critical rationalism, and courageous disagreements?” This is a good question. The sixties were very much about killing the fathers. Kuhn and Feyerabend were killing off Logical Positivism, and Popper was distinguishing his own thought from theirs. Similarly for sociology: the Parsons-Merton hegemony was the target. The people on the top would have asked the same thing and insisted that they were the ones who embodied ongoing dialogue and so forth. But they also would have formed a club that set limits on it, always in the name of quality, but always conveniently in ways that preserved their status and kept others out. Their message would have been “shut up while we have our dialogue.” But it turned into a revolutionary rather than a dialogical moment, in part because the sociological establishment went out of its way to squelch its opponents. In sociology, the old guard chose to burn down the house of theory they had controlled. In philosophy, the hysterical reaction to Richard Rorty had a similar animus.

**Dialogue as Ideal and Practice**

As an ideal, ongoing dialogue is great. In practice, it is involved with status-seeking, exclusion, deafness to outsiders, and patron-client relations, such as the relation Bellah had with Parsons, which required a sacrificio dell’intelletto. In these circumstances, you need something more than faith that the spirit of ongoing dialogue will land upon you. If the only options available are to lob grenades from outside or listen to the others speak and politely applaud, you must choose. In any case antagonism is a great motor of thought and intellectual development. If you spend time in the archives of celebrity academics, you find plenty of antagonism. And the controversies of the sixties, especially the Kuhn-Popper debates, were events that forced people to think seriously about where they stood. One way of being a Popperian is to recognize this, and to have some faith that in the long run something like progress comes out of this kind of contestation. For many reasons, present academic life sorely tests this faith.

One example that Sassower notes is the issue of social ontology, which I was critical of. This is an interesting case, for many reasons. It is an idea with deep roots, it crosses disciplines, from sociology, law, political theory, and psychology to the new philosophy of the topic, and its rise can be traced. There were meetings of the like-minded, a journal, a mutual dialogue created, and critics excluded. It had a nice institutional base in Helsinki. But it was not an especially elite led movement. The elite figures who could be counted as progenitors, such as Wilfrid Sellars, were gone before the movement started. But others joined in and made it into a conventional topic. Searle blessed it, and others did as well. Methodological individualism was unfashionable and politically suspect. And it presented the people who already had some grasp of the issues with a problem: should one take it seriously, and how? I did respond to it out of a sense of duty: this was something that needed to be addressed because it was being taken seriously, and because I liked and respected some of the people working on it. But I could never overcome the sense that this movement was no more than a time-filler with a bad premise that wasn’t being debated. Like “normativity,” which I
discussed at length (2010) it was a case of doing covert social science without paying attention to the vast history and literature on the problem.

I think the proliferation of these historically blind, blinkered groups is a result of a more general problem. The conformity inducing demands of the peer-review system, the tendency to muffle debate, the tendency to affirm the validity of “standpoints” and place them beyond debate make a preference for safe communities of the like-minded into a rational response for the individual. But it is not a good model for intellectual life generally, which needs the forces of antagonism to drive debate and contestation. And in many ways, the more open antagonism the better—as long as it serves intellectual conflict rather than status games.

These are thus institutional as well as intellectual questions: how does one sustain lively exchange and fundamental criticism? What worries me is the blanding of intellectual life, together with the loss of opportunities for younger scholars to engage with big questions. I fear that the adjunctivization of universities, what is being called the high-schoolization of instruction, and the proliferation of appointments for professors “of instruction” placed on a treadmill of teaching obligations, will gradually squeeze the life out of the social sciences and humanities. I see too many good minds saying “it is not worth it.” What these fields once offered students was a sense of intellectual excitement and the challenge to choose sides and to think about the implications of their choices. People had passion, however misplaced, behind their disagreements, and there was something to disagree about. I see very little of that today. And the enrollments reflect it.

Cheerleading for the politically correct causes is, in the end, boring. To be sure there are other issues: students need a job and a future, and today that seems to mean a technical education, which in turn leads to the instrumentalization of the university as a human capital building project. This too is an antinomy: universities have always been job training sites as well as homes for the intellect, and there has been a (sometimes) productive tension between the two. I have whined about this, and written about it, in many other places (2019a, b), so I will not repeat my lamentations here.

On Politics and Progress

Sassower comments on politics, and my own comments on progressivism and emancipation, and these deserve a response.¹ A recent philosophy of social science book presented most of its contributors as assuming that emancipation was the proper goal of social science (Ruzzene and Nagatsu 2019): this has become a right-thinking mantra. He notes that I commented that I had failed to sign up for the emancipation brigade. He also complains that I elide the distinction between progressivism and communism. I can say that these are issues of intense and continuing interest to me, and they are issues a reflexive social science also should be taking seriously. I once worked on the topic of the Pittsburgh Survey, an explicitly “progressive” project. It led me to larger questions about the nature of expertise, the politics of elite movements. They deserve some explanation here.

¹ For my own thoughts on political theory, see Turner and Mazur (2023).
The Pittsburgh Surveyors included the elite of the reform movement, which came to be called “Progressive” along with the political party of the same name, better known as the Bull Moose party. They had a model: they were the experts, they would educate the people, and they would thereby capture the energy of populism and recruit it to the cause, and produce “democratic” reform by majority vote. The education part was spectacularly successful: the people of Pittsburgh saw an amazing display and exhibition of the distribution of disease, poverty, and so forth, and the Progressives then captured the Mayor’s office. At the next election they were turned out. Expert rule and actual democracy didn’t mix. But the progressives didn’t give up. They indeed had big successes with prohibition, based on their expertise: the anti-alcohol crusade, complete with alcohol science, teaching in the schools, parades of experts who blamed everything on booze, and plenty of statistical research to support it. I recommend Last Call: the Rise and Fall of Prohibition (Okrent 2010) to anyone with an interest in expertise: the similarities between the anti-alcohol crusade and present day expertise-driven crusades are eerie.

The progressives also had success in in the area of workman’s compensation, which had the agreement of business and labor. But prohibition was a disaster which ended as the Pittsburgh mayorality did. This proved to be good for social science, in the sense that it motivated the Rockefeller Philanthropies to reject the claims of special “social work knowledge” that supported prohibition in favor of “realistic” social research. The Pittsburgh surveyors erred by failing to understand the lives and motives of their mostly immigrant subjects, who, from their expert point of view, did everything wrong. The activists wanted to act: they knew what was good for people, and they thought the problem was publicity—the publicity that would persuade people to behave correctly by shaming them, and lead to the people supporting them politically. Sound familiar?

My comment, which Sassower finds so appalling, was this: “the very means by which progress was supposed to be achieved concentrated this power and made it more remote. This was the lesson of communism that was impossible to ignore.” It is a lesson that is impossible to ignore. A defining feature of the assertion of expert power is that it requires deference to doctrines and methods that are not part of the common demotic understanding, and to the people who expound and enforce them. The progressives and communists were right to focus on “publicity,” propaganda, and re-education to produce this deference. It didn’t come naturally out of common sense or visible benefits. And notions of emancipation, however vague, produced by academics, don’t either: they have to be imposed on the unwilling, who suffer from false consciousness and need to be led to emancipation by the enlightened. And this requires power that is in this sense “remote,” and it also remote in the sense that the people who exercise this power are also no longer democratically accountable, precisely because of the claim of expertise or knowledge asymmetry, which defines the people who they should be accountable to as inferiors without the capacity to judge.

I made the same point about populism: the populists wanted a lean state without officious and powerful administrators (2021b). But the things they wanted the state to do required a big state with administrators with wide discretionary powers. This is an inherent problem with reformism, whether it is populist, communist or “progressive.” Simple reforms don’t require much beyond changes in the law. But these movements want more. The intrusive reformist state requires much more power and more flexible power—and thus more
expertise, or claimed expertise. The Communists solved this problem by party rule, and party discipline. They claimed to be the vanguard of the people. The party was remote. So were the experts of progressivism. They were superior and thought of themselves as educating backward people in the right way to live. In both cases they thought that they were experts and had science—historical materialism and expert planning in the case of Communism—behind them. Thus communism can be understood, as indeed it understood itself, as a form of epistocracy, but truly democratic in its aims, and progressivism as the aspiration to epistocracy with a vaguely democratic face, typically of the form “if they only weren’t so misled, they would agree with us, so we should act on their behalf as though they did, and eventually they will be grateful.”

Where does social science come into this? Were the reform movements that called themselves “social science” that preceded academic social science, organized as the American Social Science Association, really “science,” or were they also just elite projects of reform, which were based on some good data and a lot of moralizing. Were they any different from the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, which was a very large and effective organization that promoted the same reforms? Later sociologists, famously Joe Gusfield, looked down on some of these organizations, such as the more broad based and more middle class WCTU, as motivated by status politics and cultural anxiety (Gusfield 1963).

I don’t think there is a neat line between these categories. Status politics, the aspiration to expert rule, knowledge asymmetries, interest politics, corporate greed, academic subservience to state and corporate funders, snobbery, shaming and moralizing, alliances with social movements and much more are part of the mix in these “expert” movements. The beginning of wisdom for American social science followed their failures, and flowed from the recognition that perhaps we did not understand what we were reforming. In economics, for example, many of the thinkers of the Labor Statistics movement of the late nineteenth century promoted co-operative production, consumption, and lending as the solution to the labor question. They learned to their surprise that workers weren’t interested, and preferred unions or to be their own bosses, and undertook to explain this fact theoretically. This was the starting point of the career of Franklin Giddings, who turned from economics to sociology. Sociologists like Robert E. Park followed the topics of the reformers and tried to understand why people behaved in the ways the reformers condemned: this was the realistic study that the Rockefeller philanthropies came around to after their initial failures in supporting reform “experts.”

**Trust and Expertise**

I argued, in *American Sociology* (2013), that current sociology had reverted to the older, pre-academic, model of data-based reformism, and abandoned the hard-won, and difficult to practice, neutrality of people like Park and Giddings, and my own hero, Charles Johnson (cf. Turner 2023). With this reversion something else was lost: the kind of contestation out of which knowledge grows. The social sciences, especially sociology and anthropology, became ideologically monochromatic (Klein and Stern 2005), and moralistic (Smith 2014). Taboos proliferated. So did *ad hominem* dismissiveness in the name of “positionality.” One can
celebrate this as victory in the marketplace of ideas, as Sassower suggests I should. Or one can try to analyze why it happened, and what the alternatives were and are.

These kinds of considerations return us to the puzzles of expertise. Trust in experts stands on two legs: the belief that they possess superior knowledge and the belief that they are acting honestly in light of it. But there is an inner contradiction between the pretense of disinterested apolitical knowledge and the hard realities of institutional and social movement politics, which makes for an ongoing tension between the two legs. We have seen this over and over again with the pandemic. And we have seen it papered over with the term “science.” The older form of academic openness and neutrality, which was of course an aspiration that was only partly realized or realizable, provided a kind of resolution of this tension by guaranteeing academic freedom and carrying out its discourse based on the merit of the disciplinary arguments, as distinct from the identity based political ones. It was the “That Noble Dream,” as Peter Novick called it in his history of the American history profession (1988). But it was fragile, contested, and now has turned into something else. I have commented on this change elsewhere, in relation to sociology, along with others (Leroux et al. 2023).

My preference is to think of these issues on a higher or more general level, but in an STS way. As I said at the outset, one is central. The reality is the life of the mind and expertise is not free: inquirers need to be supported, whether it is the Athenian gentlemen in Aristotle supported by their slaves, or the infectious disease researchers supported by Anthony Fauci. This is part of what we can think of as a fundamental antinomy: pure thought depends on impure money; institutions have an interest in knowledge, but only an instrumental one. To get supported one needs to instrumentalize oneself. Even if it is only to serve your university employer by bringing it prestige; there is a sacrificio dell’intellecto. More generally, intellectual means and social means are inseparable for the reasons I gave earlier. In a sense, the sense Sassower has emphasized in this review, the book is, at least in part, about how one person, in one extended historical moment, managed this antinomy, and what he thought about what he had to do in order to survive. It could not have been a story about how he resolved it. There is no resolution.

References


