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The treason of the intellectuals & “The Undoing of Thought”

by Roger Kimball

On the abandonment of Enlightenment intellectualism, and the emergence of a new form of Volksgeist.

When hatred of culture becomes itself a part of culture, the life of the mind loses all meaning.
—Alain Finkielkraut, The Undoing of Thought

Today we are trying to spread knowledge everywhere. Who knows if in centuries to come there will not be universities for re-establishing our former ignorance?
—Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-1799)

In 1927, the French essayist Julien Benda published his famous attack on the intellectual corruption of the age, La Trahison des clercs. I said “famous,” but perhaps “once famous” would have been more accurate. For today, in the United States anyway, only the title of the book, not its argument, enjoys much currency. “La trahison des clercs”: it is one of those memorable phrases that bristles with hints and associations without stating anything definite. Benda tells us that he uses the term “clerc” in “the medieval sense,” i.e., to mean “scribe,” someone we would now call a member of the intelligentsia. Academics and journalists, pundits, moralists, and pontificators of all varieties are in this sense clercs. The English translation, The Treason of the Intellectuals, sums it up neatly.

The “treason” in question was the betrayal by the “clerks” of their vocation as intellectuals. From the time of the pre-Socratics, intellectuals, considered in their role as intellectuals, had been a breed apart. In Benda’s terms, they were understood to be “all those whose activity essentially is not the pursuit of practical aims, all those who seek their joy in the practice of an art or a science or a metaphysical speculation, in short in the possession of non-material advantages.” Thanks to such men, Benda wrote, “humanity did evil for two thousand years, but honored good. This contradiction was an honor to the human species, and formed the rift whereby civilization slipped into the world.”
According to Benda, however, this situation was changing. More and more, intellectuals were abandoning their attachment to the traditional panoply of philosophical and scholarly ideals. One clear sign of the change was the attack on the Enlightenment ideal of universal humanity and the concomitant glorification of various particularisms. The attack on the universal went forward in social and political life as well as in the refined precincts of epistemology and metaphysics: “Those who for centuries had exhorted men, at least theoretically, to deaden the feeling of their differences … have now come to praise them, according to where the sermon is given, for their ‘fidelity to the French soul,’ ‘the immutability of their German consciousness,’ for the ‘fervor of their Italian hearts.’” In short, intellectuals began to immerse themselves in the unsettlingly practical and material world of political passions: precisely those passions, Benda observed, “owing to which men rise up against other men, the chief of which are racial passions, class passions and national passions.” The “rift” into which civilization had been wont to slip narrowed and threatened to close altogether.

Writing at a moment when ethnic and nationalistic hatreds were beginning to tear Europe asunder, Benda’s diagnosis assumed the lineaments of a prophecy—a prophecy that continues to have deep resonance today. “Our age is indeed the age of the intellectual organization of political hatreds,” he wrote near the beginning of the book. “It will be one of its chief claims to notice in the moral history of humanity.” There was no need to add that its place in moral history would be as a cautionary tale. In little more than a decade, Benda’s prediction that, because of the “great betrayal” of the intellectuals, humanity was “heading for the greatest and most perfect war ever seen in the world,” would achieve a terrifying corroboration.

J ulien Benda was not so naïve as to believe that intellectuals as a class had ever entirely abstained from political involvement, or, indeed, from involvement in the realm of practical affairs. Nor did he believe that intellectuals, as citizens, necessarily should abstain from political commitment or practical affairs. The “treason” or betrayal he sought to publish concerned the way that intellectuals had lately allowed political commitment to insinuate itself into their understanding of the intellectual vocation as such. Increasingly, Benda claimed, politics was “mingled with their work as artists, as men of learning, as philosophers.” The ideal of disinterestedness, the universality of truth: such guiding principles were contemptuously deployed as masks when they were not jettisoned altogether. It was in this sense that he castigated the “desire to abase the values of knowledge before the values of action.”

In its crassest but perhaps also most powerful form, this desire led to that familiar phenomenon Benda dubbed “the cult of success.” It is summed up, he writes, in “the teaching that says that when a will is successful that fact alone gives it a moral value, whereas the will which fails is for that reason alone deserving of contempt.” In itself, this idea is hardly novel, as history from the Greek sophists on down reminds us. In Plato’s Gorgias, for instance, the sophist Callicles expresses his contempt for Socrates’ devotion to philosophy: “I feel toward philosophers very much as I do toward those who lisp and play the child.” Callicles taunts Socrates with the idea that “the more
powerful, the better, and the stronger” are simply different words for the same thing. Successfully pursued, he insists, “luxury and intemperance … are virtue and happiness, and all the rest is tinsel.” How contemporary Callicles sounds!

In Benda’s formula, this boils down to the conviction that “politics decides morality.” To be sure, the cynicism that Callicles espoused is perennial: like the poor, it will be always with us. What Benda found novel was the accreditation of such cynicism by intellectuals. “It is true indeed that these new ‘clerks’ declare that they do not know what is meant by justice, truth, and other ‘metaphysical fogs,’ that for them the true is determined by the useful, the just by circumstances,” he noted. “All these things were taught by Callicles, but with this difference; he revolted all the important thinkers of his time.”

In other words, the real treason of the intellectuals was not that they countenanced Callicles but that they championed him. To appreciate the force of Benda’s thesis one need only think of that most influential modern Callicles, Friedrich Nietzsche. His doctrine of “the will to power,” his contempt for the “slave morality” of Christianity, his plea for an ethic “beyond good and evil,” his infatuation with violence—all epitomize the disastrous “pragmatism” that marks the intellectual’s “treason.” The real problem was not the unattainability but the disintegration of ideals, an event that Nietzsche hailed as the “transvaluation of all values.” “Formerly,” Benda observed, “leaders of States practiced realism, but did not honor it; … With them morality was violated but moral notions remained intact, and that is why, in spite of all their violence, they did not disturb civilization.”

Benda understood that the stakes were high: the treason of the intellectuals signaled not simply the corruption of a bunch of scribblers but a fundamental betrayal of culture. By embracing the ethic of Callicles, intellectuals had, Benda reckoned, precipitated “one of the most remarkable turning points in the moral history of the human species. It is impossible,” he continued,

to exaggerate the importance of a movement whereby those who for twenty centuries taught Man that the criterion of the morality of an act is its disinterestedness, that good is a decree of his reason insofar as it is universal, that his will is only moral if it seeks its law outside its objects, should begin to teach him that the moral act is the act whereby he secures his existence against an environment which disputes it, that his will is moral insofar as it is a will “to power,” that the part of his soul which determines what is good is its “will to live” wherein it is most “hostile to all reason,” that the morality of an act is measured by its adaptation to its end, and that the only morality is the morality of circumstances. The educators of the human mind now take sides with Callicles against Socrates, a revolution which I dare to say seems to me more important than all political upheavals.

The Treason of the Intellectuals is an energetic hodgepodge of a book. The philosopher Jean-François Revel recently described it as “one of the fussiest pleas on behalf of the necessary independence of intellectuals.” Certainly it is rich, quirky, erudite, digressive, and polemical: more an exclamation than an analysis. Partisan in its claims for disinterestedness, it is ruthless in its defense of intellectual high-mindedness. Yet given the horrific events that unfolded in the decades following its publication, Benda’s unremitting attack on the politicization of the intellect and ethnic separatism cannot but strike us as prescient. And given the continuing echo in our own
time of the problems he anatomized, the relevance of his observations to our situation can hardly be doubted. From the savage flowering of ethnic hatreds in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union to the mendacious demands for political correctness and multiculturalism on college campuses across America and Europe, the treason of the intellectuals continues to play out its unedifying drama. Benda spoke of “a cataclysm in the moral notions of those who educate the world.” That cataclysm is erupting in every corner of cultural life today.

In 1988, the young French philosopher and cultural critic Alain Finkielkraut took up where Benda left off, producing a brief but searching inventory of our contemporary cataclysms. Entitled La Défaite de la pensée ("The ‘Defeat’ or ‘Undoing’ of Thought"), his essay is in part an updated taxonomy of intellectual betrayals. In this sense, the book is a trahison des clercs for the post-Communist world, a world dominated as much by the leveling imperatives of pop culture as by resurgent nationalism and ethnic separatism. Beginning with Benda, Finkielkraut catalogues several prominent strategies that contemporary intellectuals have employed to retreat from the universal. A frequent point of reference is the eighteenth-century German Romantic philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder. “From the beginning, or to be more precise, from the time of Plato until that of Voltaire,” he writes, “human diversity had come before the tribunal of universal values; with Herder the eternal values were condemned by the court of diversity.”

Finkielkraut focuses especially on Herder’s definitively anti-Enlightenment idea of the Volksgeist or “national spirit.” Quoting the French historian Joseph Renan, he describes the idea as “the most dangerous explosive of modern times.” “Nothing,” he writes, “can stop a state that has become prey to the Volksgeist.” It is one of Finkielkraut’s leitmotifs that today’s multiculturalists are in many respects Herder’s (generally unwitting) heirs. True, Herder’s emphasis on history and language did much to temper the tendency to abstraction that one finds in some expressions of the Enlightenment. Ernst Cassirer even remarked that “Herder’s achievement is one of the greatest intellectual triumphs of the philosophy of the Enlightenment.” Nevertheless, the multiculturalists’ obsession with “diversity” and ethnic origins is in many ways a contemporary redaction of Herder’s elevation of racial particularism over the universalizing mandate of reason. Finkielkraut opposes this just as the mature Goethe once took issue with Herder’s adoration of the Volksgeist. Finkielkraut concedes that we all “relate to a particular tradition” and are “shaped by our national identity.” But, unlike the multiculturalists, he soberly insists that “this reality merit[s] some recognition, not idolatry.” In Goethe’s words, “A generalized tolerance will be best achieved if we leave undisturbed whatever it is which constitutes the special character of particular individuals and peoples, whilst at the same time we retain the conviction that the distinctive worth of anything with true merit lies in its belonging to all humanity.”

The Undoing of Thought resembles The Treason of the Intellectuals stylistically as well as thematically. Both books are sometimes breathless congeries of sources and aperçus. And Finkielkraut, like Benda (and, indeed, like Montaigne), tends to proceed more by collage than by demonstration. But he does not simply recapitulate Benda’s argument. The geography of intellectual betrayal has
changed dramatically in the last sixty-odd years. In 1927, intellectuals still had something definite
to betray. In today’s “postmodernist” world, the terrain is far mushier: the claims of tradition are
much attenuated and betrayal is often only a matter of acquiescence. Finkielkraut’s distinctive
contribution is to have taken the measure of the cultural swamp that surrounds us, to have
delineated the links joining the politicization of the intellect and its current forms of debasement.

In the broadest terms, The Undoing of Thought is a brief for the principles of the Enlightenment.
Among other things, this means that it is a brief for the idea that mankind is united by a common
humanity that transcends ethnic, racial, and sexual divisions. The humanizing “reason” that
Enlightenment champions is a universal reason, sharable, in principle, by all. Such ideals have not
fared well in the twentieth century: Herder’s progeny have labored hard to discredit them.
Granted, the belief that there is “Jewish thinking” or “Soviet science” or “Aryan art” is no longer
as widespread as it once was. But the dispersal of these particular chimeras has provided no
inoculation against kindred fabrications: “African knowledge,” “female language,” “Eurocentric
science”: these are among today’s talismanic fetishes.

Then, too, one finds a stunning array of anti-Enlightenment phantasmagoria congregated under
the banner of “anti-positivism.” The idea that history is a “myth,” that the truths of science are
merely “fictions” dressed up in forbidding clothes, that reason and language are powerless to
discover the truth—more, that truth itself is a deceitful ideological construct: these and other
absurdities are now part of the standard intellectual diet of Western intellectuals. The Frankfurt
School Marxists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno gave an exemplary but by no means
uncharacteristic demonstration of one strain of this brand of anti-rational animus in the mid-1940s.
Safely ensconced in Los Angeles, these refugees from Hitler’s Reich published an influential essay
on the concept of Enlightenment. Among much else, they assured readers that “Enlightenment is
totalitarian.” Never mind that at that very moment the Nazi war machine—what one might be
forgiven for calling real totalitarianism—was busy liquidating millions of people in order to fulfill
another set of anti-Enlightenment fantasies inspired by devotion to the Volksgeist.

The diatribe that Horkheimer and Adorno mounted against the concept of Enlightenment reminds
us of an important peculiarity about the history of Enlightenment: namely, that it is a movement of
thought that began as a reaction against tradition and has now emerged as one of tradition’s most
important safeguards. Historically, the Enlightenment arose as a deeply anti-clerical and, perforce,
anti-traditional movement. Its goal, in Kant’s famous phrase, was to release man from his “self-
imposed immaturity.” The chief enemy of Enlightenment was “superstition,” an omnibus term
that included all manner of religious, philosophical, and moral ideas. But as the sociologist
Edward Shils has noted, although the Enlightenment was in important respects “antithetical to
tradition” in its origins, its success was due in large part “to the fact that it was promulgated and
pursued in a society in which substantive traditions were rather strong.” “It was successful against
because the enemies were strong enough to resist its complete victory over them. Living on a soil of substantive traditionality, the ideas of the Enlightenment advanced without undoing themselves. As long as respect for authority on the one side and self-confidence in those exercising authority on the other persisted, the Enlightenment’s ideal of emancipation through the exercise of reason went forward. It did not ravage society as it would have done had society lost all legitimacy.

It is this mature form of Enlightenment, championing reason but respectful of tradition, that Finkielkraut holds up as an ideal. What Finkielkraut calls “the undoing of thought” flows from the widespread disintegration of a faith. At the center of that faith is the assumption that the life of thought is “the higher life” and that culture—what the Germans call Bildung—is its end or goal. The process of disintegration has lately become an explicit attack on culture. This is not simply to say that there are many anti-intellectual elements in society: that has always been the case. “Non-thought,” in Finkielkraut’s phrase, has always co-existed with the life of the mind. The innovation of contemporary culture is to have obliterated the distinction between the two. “It is,” he writes, “the first time in European history that non-thought has donned the same label and enjoyed the same status as thought itself, and the first time that those who, in the name of ‘high culture,’ dare to call this non-thought by its name, are dismissed as racists and reactionaries.” The attack is perpetrated not from outside, by uncomprehending barbarians, but chiefly from inside, by a new class of barbarians, the self-made barbarians of the intelligentsia. This is the undoing of thought. This is the new “treason of the intellectuals.”

There are many sides to this phenomenon. What Finkielkraut has given us is not a systematic dissection but a kind of pathologist’s scrapbook. He reminds us, for example, that the multiculturalists’ demand for “diversity” requires the eclipse of the individual in favor of the group. “Their most extraordinary feat,” he observes, “is to have put forward as the ultimate individual liberty the unconditional primacy of the collective.” Western rationalism and individualism are rejected in the name of a more “authentic” cult. One example: Finkielkraut quotes a champion of multiculturalism who maintains that “to help immigrants means first of all respecting them for what they are, respecting whatever they aspire to in their national life, in their distinctive culture and in their attachment to their spiritual and religious roots.” Would this, Finkielkraut asks, include “respecting” those religious codes which demanded that the barren woman be cast out and the adulteress be punished with death? What about those cultures in which the testimony of one man counts for that of two women? In which female circumcision is practiced? In which slavery flourishes? In which mixed marriages are forbidden and polygamy encouraged? Multiculturalism, as Finkielkraut points out, requires that we respect such practices. To criticize them is to be dismissed as “racist” and “ethnocentric.” In this secular age, “cultural identity” steps in where the transcendent once was: “Fanaticism is indefensible when it appeals to heaven, but beyond reproach when it is grounded in antiquity and cultural distinctiveness.”

To a large extent, the abdication of reason demanded by multiculturalism has been the result of
what we might call the subjection of culture to anthropology. Finkielkraut speaks in this context of a “cheerful confusion which raises everyday anthropological practices to the pinnacle of the human race’s greatest achievements.” This process began in the nineteenth century, but it has been greatly accelerated in our own age. One thinks, for example, of the tireless campaigning of that great anthropological leveler, Claude Lévi-Strauss. Lévi-Strauss is assuredly a brilliant writer, but he has also been an extraordinarily baneful influence. Already in the early 1950s, when he was pontificating for UNESCO, he was urging all and sundry to “fight against ranking cultural differences hierarchically.” In La Pensée sauvage (1961), he warned against the “false antinomy between logical and prelogical mentality” and was careful in his descriptions of natives to refer to “so-called primitive thought.” “So-called” indeed. In a famous article on race and history, Lévi-Strauss maintained that the barbarian was not the opposite of the civilized man but “first of all the man who believes there is such a thing as barbarism.” That of course is good to know. It helps one to appreciate Lévi-Strauss’s claim, in Tristes Tropiques (1955), that the “true purpose of civilization” is to produce “inertia.” As one ruminates on the proposition that cultures should not be ranked hierarchically, it is also well to consider what Lévi-Strauss coyly refers to as “the positive forms of cannibalism.” For Lévi-Strauss, cannibalism has been unfairly stigmatized in the “so-called” civilized West. In fact, he explains, cannibalism was “often observed with great discretion, the vital mouthful being made up of a small quantity of organic matter mixed, on occasion, with other forms of food.” What, merely a “vital mouthful”? Not to worry! Only an ignoramus who believed that there were important distinctions, qualitative distinctions, between the barbarian and the civilized man could possibly think of objecting.

Of course, the attack on distinctions that Finkielkraut castigates takes place not only among cultures but also within a given culture. Here again, the anthropological imperative has played a major role. “Under the equalizing eye of social science,” he writes, hierarchies are abolished, and all the criteria of taste are exposed as arbitrary. From now on no rigid division separates masterpieces from run-of-the mill works. The same fundamental structure, the same general and elemental traits are common to the “great” novels (whose excellence will henceforth be demystified by the accompanying quotation marks) and plebian types of narrative activity.

For confirmation of this, one need only glance at the pronouncements of our critics. Whether working in the academy or other cultural institutions, they bring us the same news: there is “no such thing” as intrinsic merit, “quality” is an only ideological construction, aesthetic value is a distillation of social power, etc., etc.

In describing this process of leveling, Finkielkraut distinguishes between those who wish to obliterate distinctions in the name of politics and those who do so out of a kind of narcissism. The multiculturalists wave the standard of radical politics and say (in the words of a nineteenth-century Russian populist slogan that Finkielkraut quotes): “A pair of boots is worth more than Shakespeare.” Those whom Finkielkraut calls “postmodernists,” waving the standard of radical chic, declare that Shakespeare is no better than the latest fashion—no better, say, than the newest
item offered by Calvin Klein. The litany that Finkielkraut recites is familiar:

A comic which combines exciting intrigue and some pretty pictures is just as good as a Nabokov novel. What little Lolitas read is as good as Lolita. An effective publicity slogan counts for as much as a poem by Apollinaire or Francis Ponge… . The footballer and the choreographer, the painter and the couturier, the writer and the ad-man, the musician and the rock-and-roller, are all the same: creators. We must scrap the prejudice which restricts that title to certain people and regards others as sub-cultural.

The upshot is not only that Shakespeare is downgraded, but also that the bootmaker is elevated. “It is not just that high culture must be demystified; sport, fashion and leisure now lay claim to high cultural status.” A grotesque fantasy? Anyone who thinks so should take a moment to recall the major exhibition called “High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture” that the Museum of Modern Art mounted a few years ago: it might have been called “Krazy Kat Meets Picasso.” Few events can have so consummately summed up the corrosive trivialization of culture now perpetrated by those entrusted with preserving it. Among other things, that exhibition demonstrated the extent to which the apotheosis of popular culture undermines the very possibility of appreciating high art on its own terms. When the distinction between culture and entertainment is obliterated, high art is orphaned, exiled from the only context in which its distinctive meaning can manifest itself: Picasso becomes a kind of cartoon. This, more than any elitism or obscurity, is the real threat to culture today. As Hannah Arendt once observed, “there are many great authors of the past who have survived centuries of oblivion and neglect, but it is still an open question whether they will be able to survive an entertaining version of what they have to say.”

And this brings us to the question of freedom. Finkielkraut notes that the rhetoric of postmodernism is in some ways similar to the rhetoric of Enlightenment. Both look forward to releasing man from his “self-imposed immaturity.” But there is this difference: Enlightenment looks to culture as a repository of values that transcend the self, postmodernism looks to the fleeting desires of the isolated self as the only legitimate source of value. For the postmodernist, then, “culture is no longer seen as a means of emancipation, but as one of the elitist obstacles to this.” The products of culture are valuable only as a source of amusement or distraction. In order to realize the freedom that postmodernism promises, culture must be transformed into a field of arbitrary “options.” “The post-modern individual,” Finkielkraut writes, “is a free and easy bundle of fleeting and contingent appetites. He has forgotten that liberty involves more than the ability to change one’s chains, and that culture itself is more than a satiated whim.”

What Finkielkraut has understood with admirable clarity is that modern attacks on elitism represent not the extension but the destruction of culture. “Democracy,” he writes, “once implied access to culture for everybody. From now on it is going to mean everyone’s right to the culture of his choice.” This may sound marvelous—it is after all the slogan one hears shouted in academic and cultural institutions across the country—but the result is precisely the opposite of what was intended. “‘All cultures are equally legitimate and everything is cultural,’ is the common cry of
affluent society’s spoiled children and of the detractors of the West.” The irony, alas, is that by removing standards and declaring that “anything goes,” one does not get more culture, one gets more and more debased imitations of culture. This fraud is the dirty secret that our cultural commissars refuse to acknowledge.

There is another, perhaps even darker, result of the undoing of thought. The disintegration of faith in reason and common humanity leads not only to a destruction of standards, but also involves a crisis of courage. “A careless indifference to grand causes,” Finkielkraut warns, “has its counterpart in abdication in the face of force.” As the impassioned proponents of “diversity” meet the postmodern apostles of acquiescence, fanaticism mixes with apathy to challenge the commitment required to preserve freedom. Communism may have been effectively discredited. But “what is dying along with it … is not the totalitarian cast of mind, but the idea of a world common to all men.” Julien Benda took his epigraph for La Trahison des clercs from the nineteenth-century French philosopher Charles Renouvier: Le monde souffre du manque de foi en une vérité transcendante: “The world suffers from lack of faith in a transcendent truth.” Without some such faith, we are powerless against the depredations of intellectuals who have embraced the nihilism of Callicles as their truth.

1 The Treason of the Intellectuals, by Julien Benda, translated by Richard Aldington, was first published in 1928. This translation is still in print from Norton.

2 La Défaite de la pensée, by Alain Finkielkraut; Gallimard, 162 pages, 72 FF. It is available in English, in a translation by Dennis O’Keeffe, as The Undoing of Thought (The Claridge Press [London], 133 pages, £6.95 paper).

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