

THE ROLE OF THE ACADEMIC IN THE SOUTH SEAS

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It should be remarked at the outset that the role (or roles) of the academic in the South Seas differs in no fundamental way from that of academics in any other part of the world. It is the same as that of the academic in Europe, in the Far East, in the South American sub-continent, etc., etc. The main reasons for this fact are historical in nature. Because education as a social institution is a historical movement, i.e., it has a well-known beginning and a well-known subsequent history up to the present period, what the role of the academic is must be referred to that history and especially to the earliest period of that tradition. Incidentally, this also means that unhistorical views of education, and *ad hoc* and 'spur-of-the-moment' theories of education that deluge the field now, must not be entertained no matter how plausible and attractive they might sound. All such theories, on analysis, appear to be most harmful to education immediately, and to society ultimately. Rejection of such views therefore is an important part of the academic's work.

There are two sides or parts to the academic's role: an official part and an unofficial, or social, part. I shall devote most of my remarks to commenting on the unofficial role.

THE OFFICIAL ROLE

The official role of the academic is to be actively engaged in *inquiry*. In pursuing inquiry, in whatever field of his choice and competence, the academic is only concerned with *facts* in that field or subject and the *relation* between these facts and other facts that are of relevance to this study (we must note that relations are also facts). Thus the academic, in his official work, promotes the study of fields or subjects and "pushes back the frontiers of knowledge", as the phrase goes. We must not, however, be persuaded into believing that we will, if inquiry continues indefinitely in a particular field, be able to know everything there is to know in regard to that field or subject. This we will never be able to do. It is a fact, however, that we sometimes leave a field of study as if we have found out all there is to it, and make investigations in a different field. This simply means that our curiosity has become satiated and our interest is no longer aroused; we have found out enough to serve our purposes.

Strictly speaking, the only question for the academic is: *What is the case?* The distinction between *something is the case* and *something is to be done* is important here, because it sums up neatly the difference between the academic's and the non-academic's standpoints. Thus the academic is interested in theory: What is the case? Whereas the non-academic, e.g., the politician, is concerned with policy: What is to be done? Put differently, the academic *qua* academic does not take it that things are in need of rearrangement, but is interested only in how they work. On the other hand, however, the non-academic, e.g., the theologian, takes a supra-scientific attitude to things and sets out to *improve* them.

Thus the academic *investigates* situations whilst the non-academic *does* things. This is a fundamental distinction and it should be emphasised that whenever the academic becomes more and more involved in doing (or acting), he is being so simply as a human being and not as academic (or scientist), since as an academic he would concentrate only on observation, recording and drawing conclusions from those observations, though people may *use* his findings in the implementation of their own policies. But it must be borne in mind that too much involvement in action, in doing, in people's interests, deeply affects the academic's efficiency and ardour for independent thinking and investigation.

The academic's interest in how things work I call the *scientific* interest. the non-academic's interest in doing things I call the *theological* (or mythological) interest.

Now, we usually speak of the scientist's 'disinterested' concern with things, but this does not mean that he is not interested in his subject-matter. It simply means that he has, as investigator, no vested interests in his own findings, but only in how things, in his particular field of study, behave. How the findings are *used* by people and in what manner, does not fall within the compass of his work as scientist.

Of course, one could study how knowledge can be, and is, applied by people but there again the methods and procedure so far as investigation of fields and questions goes would be exactly the same as with any other study, i.e., the question of how we *apply* scientific findings is, itself, also a *theoretical* one. Thus the academic or scientist is at once an impassioned and disinterested - in the sense explained - investigator of his material.

The modern thinker who exemplifies most clearly a combination of the scientific and theological, or non-scientific, interest is, of course, Marx. His discovery that history is characterised fully by strife between warring groups representing specific interests is indeed the scientific part of his theory and represents an important contribution to science. But his theory of the classless

society, something not to be known but to be established, goes directly opposite to his said discovery of the true nature of society, since a classless society would no longer be a historical but an ahistorical one. In fact, the very notion of a classless society is a confused one: it is a society (by definition the scene of ceaseless struggle between opposing interests) which will not be historical in the understood sense and yet within it history will still work itself out. The classless society then represents the theological or non-scientific part of Marx's work and holds no value whatsoever for the scientist and the academic.

THE UNOFFICIAL ROLE

The academic's unofficial role issues more in social settings than in purely academic ones, i.e., in the academic's actual confrontation with people or society. But what he is really up against in society are subjectivist notions which appear in the form of false doctrines; and the academic's unofficial role can be said to be an incessant struggle against these false doctrines. The academic, at any rate, cannot acquiesce in these doctrines for he takes the view that these are merely a 'respectable' cover-up for wishes and human interests and are concerned with the non-scientific question, What are we to do? Let me briefly comment on some of these doctrines. These false doctrines are actually different formulations of the same notion or related notions.

- (a) **Mythologism.** We can say that the whole rationale of mythologies is the attempt to see things in terms of human interests and social organisation. This fact is being brought out by the structuralist school of anthropologists' study of myths, but I cannot say that they are exploding mythology as a false view of the universe. However, the case against mythologism was involved in the emergence of science and philosophy in Ionia about six centuries before Christ. This objection to mythologism as an explanation of how things behave took the form of criticism of occultism, i.e., the postulation of a higher order of things which is responsible for the ordinary events in the world.

Historically, then, the objection to mythologism formed the starting point of the scientific movement, and the beginning of objectivity, i.e., of looking at things with the screening blinkers of human interests removed. And moreover, in science we are concerned with logical questions and the logical status of things and, logically, human interests are not more important than any other interests. They are on exactly the same logical footing as any other interests. But the irony of the situation is that mythologism is back into education and science and is commanding the central position in the field in the concept of *relevance*. For what is relevant education or relevant science but education and science which are pertinent and responsive to human interests?

- (b) **Meliorism – Salvationism.** This is a traditionally theological doctrine – that man must somehow be *saved* – and the sentiment of helping our fellow men and saving them has always been strong in us. Throughout history we find people offering solutions to world problems and ways of saving mankind. But the facts are clear: there is *no panacea* for human problems. So, what does the term ‘saving mankind’ mean in such a context?

It does not mean that we should give up investigating and trying to solve our problems. By all means, no! As human beings we cannot but apply ourselves with all our energy to removing our problems. What we should give up is the hope that we will ever create a problem-free world; we resign ourselves to the unwelcome fact that problems are our eternal companion. The interesting change, however, has taken place in science itself which, at one time (during Galileo and after), seemed to be dislodging theology and salvationism from inquiry. Now it has made a curious about-face, especially in the so-called ‘applied’ sciences, and completely modified its position, taking up a salvationist attitude and, in my opinion, this amounts to a loss of face and abandonment of disinterestedness. And the academic must therefore guard himself against this doctrine while pursuing his work.

- (c) **Utilitarianism.** This is the doctrine that men pursue things which bring about happiness and pleasure, in a word, things that are ‘useful’. However, Bentham, the founder of the modern utilitarian doctrine, in the course of his investigations, observed that some things are demanded irrespective of their ‘use’. And this he simply could not explain, but it weakens his whole position.

There are quite a number of difficulties with regard to this doctrine. Usually when we say something is ‘useful’, we mean that it brings about something else, something that we want. Yet different people want different things. On this basis, therefore, we cannot arrive at an agreed meaning of usefulness, i.e., we cannot have an objective standard of usefulness, we cannot measure it or make the notion the basis of a scientific study. Alternatively put, we cannot bring our wants to a common market and ultimately decide issues on a qualitative basis. Thus the most we can say about usefulness is that it has *effects*. But this is a general characteristic of things and thus to support usefulness is logically to support anything whatsoever, which is as good as supporting nothing at all.

The other characteristic of useful things is that anything at all, an act, a thing, a study, etc., is also potentially harmful. We usually express

this fact by saying that things are *adaptable*. The potentiality for 'usefulness' is directly proportional to the potentiality for 'destructiveness'. The realisation of these potentialities lies with our use of — i.e., our disposition or relation to — things. A case in point is nuclear energy. The notion of usefulness then is logically vacuous because it is an attempt to take a general characteristic of things (call it adaptability) and through it impute to things what is not really there.

- (d) **Progressivism.** Here is yet another false doctrine that needs the attention of the academic whether he is working in the South Pacific or in a different part of the world, for progressivism is very powerful and needs to be exposed. The two seminal influences here are Hegel and Darwin, but almost every major thinker or scientist after them has contributed to the advance of the doctrine and it is made more alive today by the supporting influence of the other false doctrines.

First of all, we must note that the notion of progress involves the concept of a *goal* of that progress. It is therefore related to that other false doctrine *teleology*, the conception of things and history as having a *purpose*. But, like the proponent of teleology who cannot state what the purpose of history is, let alone prove it, so the proponent of progressivism cannot state what the goal of history is. However, it is usually implied that the goal and purpose of history are above history, i.e., they are non-historical. The logical question, Of what sense are these non-historical goals and purposes of history? never receives examination. The most that can be gathered from the defenders of progressivism is that *later is better* or *more complex is higher*, which yields us a whole bunch of new and complex questions.

When, however, we look at things and at history, what we find is progress of *specific things*, of a distinct class of things but never progress of things in general. In other words, we find, at any given period, both progress and retrogress going on at the same time. We find, that is, clear advance in some fields and, at the same time, positive decline in others. In fact, so far as general culture is concerned, the modern period is marked with rapid decline in *all* departments. Here again is an area where the academic's critical influence is very much needed.

- (e) **Moral education.** I believe this is a misnomer, because what is really meant by this term is *indoctrination* and not the development of independent thinking. Because this type of 'education' is given to students at schools, the teacher assists the socialisation process by passing on norms and facilitating the acquisition of habits in an un-

critical way. Education then appears as the *preserver* instead of the *examiner* of custom.

True education consists in the development of criticism, of a critical approach to things and problems. Criticism and a critical attitude, especially towards governments that fund institutions such as the USP, is often discouraged by such an institution. Any educational institution which does this does not merit even the name. For this is the whole purpose of the existence of a university. Moral education makes people gullible, demanding that they swallow things — they know not what — and all this is bolstered by a vicious reward-punishment ethic that only results in distorting issues further.

The academic's unofficial role is always to fight against these non-educational, nay, anti-educational, attitudes; to create the right and free atmosphere for himself and his students so that they need not swallow prescriptions and commands but can lay bare what is involved in those commands and crack open taboos (for what are taboos but covered up demands and commands?); and to create an atmosphere which will allow the academic and his students examine these situations, to formulate their hypotheses and, of course, test them. In other words, they should be able to address the question: On what consideration are we to obey this particular command or pursue that particular end? The analysis and answering of that question would be true education.

CONCLUSION

I shall close by emphasising the following points:

- (a) The academic — as academic — can only exist in the South Seas, or anywhere else, through struggling against ignorance and superstition in the form of false doctrines, a few of which we have merely touched upon.
- (b) At any given period true academics are very few in number, but that number is enough to carry the living flame of objectivity forward and pass it on to the next period. For the mass of men are usually interested in things and situations, not for what they really are, but for what they can get out of them.
- (c) The academic's work can only advance if he regards his work as only one of a number of *competing* interests or forces in the social arena.

This means that he does not subscribe to the unitary view of society and takes his place in society as a member of a distinct movement — the *finding out* cult.

- (d) The academic must resist all attempts by society to make instruments of him for social welfare purposes, but must regard himself as arbiter of culture, as critic of society. He must be, in Nietzsche's phrase, a 'physician of culture'. He must above all refuse to take a subordinate role in the scheme of things. He must fight for his rights to pursue his interest — the objective investigation of fields. But the sorry plight of the academic today has been, in fact, facilitated by academics themselves, by their fears of the powers that be, fear of unpopularity, fear to criticise democracy, fear of becoming alienated from the sources of subsistence, and, yes, fear of disinterestedness itself.