

(Post)Modernizing Contemporary Intellectual Culture¹

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The article constitutes the concluding part of a broader investigation into the intellectual culture of contemporary (primarily Western, but ever more global) societies. The main focus is on the three general tendencies of contemporary intellectual culture, namely, the inversion of reason and emotion in cultural production, the rise of nationalism, and the gradual spread of cultural liberalism as a sympathetic openness to foreign ways of life (ideas, values, customs, orders, etc.).

Keywords: contemporary intellectual culture, inversion of reason and emotion, nationalism, cultural liberalism.

In¹ the preceding installments of the article series², I presented an overview of the *general* tendencies of contemporary culture that create conditions for the emergence of its intellectual proclivities. I then focused on the *intellectual* life of today, in particular, what might be called the intellectual *avant-garde* of this age, also known as postmodernism. Consequently, I diverted my attention to the general intellectual traits of the *whole* age – specifically, a turn to anthropology in the sciences and the widespread adoption of relativistic modes of thought in matters of value and knowledge. This article concludes the series with a discussion of three additional traits: the inversion of reason and emotion, the rise of nationalism, and the proliferation of cultural liberalism.

The Inversion of Reason and Emotion

Another important phenomenon of contemporary intellectual culture is the *aestheticization of thinking*. This may be said to be a direct consequence of relativism. What does one go by when accepting or rejecting another person's thoughts, reflections, and statements? Clearly, not some 'universal' logic or 'universally' accepted facts – there are no such things and there cannot be in the relativistic world(s). One goes by one's *taste*, everywhere and in everything, even when thinking or reflecting. We no longer rely on 'truth' when we praise, reprehend, commend, or criticize each other's words these days (since 'truth' is now but a disguise of ideological or antiquated minds); instead, we simply *aesthetically react* to the words, enjoying or loathing them depending on whether what we hear makes us feel good or bad. It is not hard to see or argue that

1 End. Start in vol. 10, no. 1.

2 See Aivaras Stepukonis, "(Post)Modernizing Contemporary Intellectual Culture," 2022–2023.

“aestheticism seems to have invaded everywhere, now threatening to subordinate independent orders, such as the ethical or political, to its own standards and forms.”³ The ethical and political orders are mentioned by Scaff only as examples. The avalanche of aesthetics, I dare say, has tumbled upon all the manifestations of thinking and speaking without exception. “Aesthetic indifference to ‘substance’ and an overriding concern with the perfection of ‘form,’” says Scaff,

encourage a kind of action and judgment oriented toward impression, rhythm, tempo, gesture, symbolization – in a word, toward style. Imitating and borrowing from the model of art, our public life thus comes to be defined in terms of its visual imagery, manipulation of feelings, calculation of audience effects, deployment of managerial styles – in sum, the mastery of a certain kind of method and technique.⁴

The principle of “it’s not what you say, it’s how you say it” reflects the rhetoricity of our age.

Another consequence of the aestheticization of thinking for intellectuals is the pursuit of certain fashions and, most importantly, the need for them. Recently, it has been “fashionable” to quote Hegel and Heidegger in the ranks of Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophers, who had been hostile to continental philosophy until then, and to bring up the names of Marx and Freud among feminists. A few decades ago, the world noisily admired existentialism, and Jean Paul Satre competed with Elvis Presley

3 Lawrence A. Scaff, *Fleeing the Iron Cage: Culture, Politics, and Modernity in the Thought of Max Weber*, p. 221.

4 *Ibid.*

for popularity, boasting his image on the covers of the most famous magazines. Now it is passé. But why? Is it because existentialism was wrong? Is it because the problems of existentialism are no longer relevant? Not at all. Simply put, the “prime time” of existentialism had passed, new winds were blowing, and new fashions were catching on.

Entire paradigms of interpretation are taken over from aesthetics. For sociologists who use the theater model, society is a massive play, its members are actors performing their roles, and the network of social relations itself is a show full of life stories, intrigues, vicissitudes of fate, heroic moments, and happy and tragic twists. The social sciences and humanities turn to game theory, which Ludwig Wittgenstein used creatively in the first half of the twentieth century to tackle complex problems of language and philosophy. Game theory was also utilized by Ernst Cassirer in exploring symbolic forms of culture⁵ and by Hans-Georg Gadamer in developing the hermeneutical principle of understanding and interpreting art⁶. Of course, game theory was developed as early as the 18th century by German philosophers Immanuel Kant, who discussed imagination, music, poetry, and visual art⁷, and Friedrich Schiller, who raised concerns about the aesthetic education of mankind while also exploring the essence of art⁸.

5 See Ernst Cassirer, *Die Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, 1923.

6 See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 1960.

7 See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 2000.

8 See Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind*, 1954.

Meanwhile, in the arts (how ironic!) the opposite occurred: true aesthetic values were overshadowed by the *intellectualization of taste*. From now on, in the arts, especially in the visual arts, ‘what matters is the idea.’ What avant-garde art seeks is neither beauty nor grandeur, nor a conscious ‘anti-aesthetic’ ugliness. Far from it, it now acts as a “terrain for independent philosophical speculation.”⁹ Sculpture, painting, and photography become “lab” experimentation with colors, shapes, spaces, and lighting, experimentation that is either based on a certain aesthetic *theory* or serves to create such a theory. Art is increasingly reminiscent of a kind of ‘object-signification,’ the ‘semiotics of objects’ or a ‘language,’ the signs of which make physical objects and their properties. Exhibitions of installation art – a relatively recent innovation in artistic expression – are organized *in order to* reveal to the viewer the sorest political, social, feminist, ecological, and other ills of humanity, with full texts attached to or, if needed, embedded into the exhibits that literally must be read to get the idea. The intellectualization of taste is ultimately the same as the ideologization of art. That is to say, art is (ab)used to capture and convey non-aesthetic information (proofs, arguments, beliefs, warnings, lessons, etc.).

The Rise of Nationalism

Another glaring feature of our age is dubbed by historians and political scientists as nationalism. In the words of James Huffman,

The concept [of nationalism] is inherently complex, even elusive. The effort to define it is hampered by the significant differences in the varieties of nationalism from era to era and from place to place. Clarity also is rendered difficult by the many varieties of nationalism that appear within identical eras and locales. The issue revolves around cultural definitions of the national self, the political activities of the state, and the intellectual debates of academic elites. Nationalism may be located in military, intellectual, economic, or literary guises. Sometimes it springs from fear, often from pride, frequently from a need for political cohesion, and at times from rank ignorance.¹⁰

I am, however, more keen to address what Vydūnas used to call the process of raising national awareness and what might be called – with a special reference to Marxist class terminology – the ‘transformation of national awareness into national self-awareness.’ So when I say nationalism, I don’t mean wars between nations fueled by nationalist passions; fights over state borders; quotas and subsidies to protect local farmers; disputes over exclusive rights to cultural heritage; and so on. It’s something else.

Never before has the map of the nations of the world been as variegated as it is today, neither two thousand years before Christ, nor in the times of *Pax Romana*, nor in the Middle Ages, nor after the First World War. The number of members in the United Nations has approached two hundred. Of course, this number is far from encompassing all the tribes of the Earth and is not very

9 Suzi Gablik, *Progress in Art*, p. 8.

10 James L. Huffman, “Introduction,” p. viii.

big in itself. However, if we keep in mind that all these nations managed to transcend a purely factual state and developed a 'self-awareness of identity,' came to feel the 'dignity of selfhood,' and even boast an 'individual vocation,' we must acknowledge we confront a wonderful phenomenon: along with the *objective* multi-nationality of the world (the latter is as old as the actual history of mankind), we also face the *subjective* multi-nationality of the world.

Instead of devoting itself to the *spontaneous* course of history, an individual nation begins to take an interest in itself, to ask itself what it is, to explore its past, to question its "personal" destiny, and unconsciously plan an individual future. A nation that has mastered the powers of self-reflection experiences itself for the first time as a "subject." A Japanese person, for example, suddenly realizes that one of the characteristics of being Japanese is the constant self-inquiry about "what it *means* to be Japanese."¹¹ I have called this phenomenon wonderful for a reason: along with the growing multi-nationality of the world, a new type of international communication is emerging that is very different from the method of *one-sided* anthropological descriptions entrenched in the West. Today, nations themselves eagerly, sometimes even a little annoyingly, talk about their cultural and historical features. They actively promote their own *spiritual self-portraits* to cultural researchers. This is a completely new opportunity, one of a kind in the course of history, to gain direct anthropological experience.

11 *Ibid.*, p. ix.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that often, contemporary nation-states feel obliged to prove their farthest past, measured in light years (if they can). They try to justify their place in the world by connections with alleged ancestors, drawing and branching out intricate genealogical trees. All this, according to Eric Hobsbawno, is based on *invented* traditions, turned into a historical foundation that is lacking¹². Huffman gives the national movements of the twentieth century a metaphorical expression: "Its wellsprings have been anything but natural; indeed, nationalism might be compared to a traditional Japanese garden, intentionally devised and carefully nurtured to make it *appear* as if it were natural."¹³ As a consequence, claims to national uniqueness and exclusivity must be constantly checked, history must be explored, and cultural origins must be traced, explaining how it truly was and, thus, is. Even if this work turns out to be a little hard, it should not deter us from achieving great results in this area. It can also make us friends, interlocutors, and co-thinkers in the process who want to share their experiences of belonging to a particular civilization.

Cultural Liberalism: let the other speak

The social and cultural tendencies of thought discussed so far distinguish our period from the past and give it a historical identity. However, there is a feature of today that is extremely important and special, as it ena-

12 See Eric Hobsbawno, *The Invention of Tradition*, p. 14.

13 James L. Huffman, "Introduction," p. xii.

bles a relationship with the past, its achievements and merits, that is qualitatively new. Drawing on the Gassetian definition of political liberalism, I would call this feature “cultural liberalism,” but before that let me quote Gasset himself: “Liberalism is that principle of political rights, according to which the public authority, in spite of being all-powerful, limits itself and attempts, even at its own expense, to leave room in the State over which it rules for those to live who neither think nor feel as it does, that is to say as do the stronger, the majority.”¹⁴ Now let us expand the boundaries of the state to cover the whole world and let us replace government, rule, and political power with the spiritual elite of humanity (artists, philosophers, scientists, writers, poets, publicists, social activists, educators, etc.) and instill in them the sentiment of favor and tolerance for those who think and feel differently, and we will have cultural liberalism – hospitality for *non-local* worldviews, behaviors, and self-expressions.

I dare say that never before in the history of mankind has cultural liberalism had so many fans and confessors from so many nations, otherwise quite different or even hostile to each other, as now. Cultural liberalism manifests itself both diachronically and synchronically. Diachronically, in the sense of refraining from dogmatic, single-minded, *ex cathedra* statements about what “must” belong to the “past” and what to the “present.” Once again, the avant-garde of an epoch must not be equated with the epoch itself, nor must the distinctive features of an epoch be identified with the

totality of the features of the epoch. For example, Gellner’s bitter phrase *‘Relativismus über Alles’* aptly captures the essence of postmodernism. However, his conclusion that “provincialists-absolutists,” i.e., people who still sincerely believe in the humanistic ideals of the Enlightenment, “are no longer among us, at least in reputable academic positions, and openly [...]”¹⁵ – this conclusion seems unwarranted. Granted, the intellectual fashions that have dominated one decade or another cannot be denied – relativism is one of them. In general, however, an impressive variety of intellectual approaches and their ardent proponents can be found in “reputable academic positions” in our time: phenomenologists, analytical philosophers, realists, idealists, Thomists, Kantians, admirers of antiquity, advocates of scholasticism, positivists, postmodernists, etc. And this is the merit of cultural liberalism. It is not like the doors of philosophy departments are wide open to sworn postmodernists or militant feminists in every university. They, like most other recruits in academia, are enervated by the vagueness or even gloom of tomorrow’s prospects. They also have to prove their belonging to the “present.”

The synchronicity of cultural liberalism, in turn, testifies to the openness of contemporary thinking, which has specific geographical, ethnic, and cultural roots, to the values, customs, and concepts of other contemporary ethnic cultural systems. It is, first and foremost, a subtle sensitivity to cultural otherness that prevents one from dividing the world into “civilizations”

¹⁴ José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, p. 83.

¹⁵ Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, p. 50.

(i.e., self) and “savages” (i.e., others). Lévi-Strauss wittily observes that “[t]his attitude of mind, which excludes ‘savages’ (or any people one may choose to regard as savages) from human kind, is precisely the attitude most strikingly characteristic of those same savages.”¹⁶ Therefore, “[t]he barbarian is, first and foremost, the man who believes in barbarism.”¹⁷ The ancient Indians, the Greeks, the Jews, and the Chinese, especially their upper classes, viewed themselves as a civilized nation, and the surrounding world as savages. The Brahmins called ‘others’ ‘mleccha,’ for the Greeks they were ‘barbarians,’ and for the select Jewish nation, ‘goyas.’ Nakamura tells us how he once found the phrase “barbarian wine”¹⁸ in Chinese on a bottle of Western wine while dining in a San Francisco pub. Inasmuch as these great civilizations of the past presumptuously asserted themselves against their neighbors, despised people of other nationalities, considered foreigners a lower race, inasmuch as ‘humanity’ ended for them along the “borders of the tribe, the linguistic group, or even, in some instances, [...] the village,”¹⁹ they were *barbaric civilizations*. Given the historical data, a ‘barbaric civilization’ is not an oxymoron! In contrast, the researcher, inspired by cultural liberalism, tends to assume that “[i]n actual fact, there are no peoples still in their childhood; all are adult, even those who have not kept a diary of their childhood

and adolescence,”²⁰ that is to say, who have behaved differently than some Western and Eastern cultures.

Along with cultural liberalism, we have approached the last ‘vector’ of contemporary thinking, the critique and overcoming of ethnocentrism. One of the most influential forms of ethnocentrism is Eurocentrism. It is the “assumption that Europe (or, by extension, the West) possesses a history and historiography superior to those of non-European (non-Western) peoples.”²¹ Antonio de Baets, who is the author of this definition, goes on to distinguish several planes on which Eurocentrism manifests itself: (a) ontological, based on the supposition “they do not have a history”; (b) epistemological, based on the supposition “we cannot know their history”; (c) utilitarian or axiological, based on the supposition “their history is irrelevant or useless”; (d) didactic, based on the supposition “their history is too difficult and embarrassing”²² to learn from it. The two main ancestors of Western culture, the Hellenes and the Hebrews, cherished the old traditions of the historical genre. This abundance of past-oriented writing has led the West to make a hasty conclusion about the historical distinctiveness of its tribes. Despite this, ethnological research and cultural liberalism have ultimately curbed the Western intellectual’s propensity for civilizational chauvinism. Anthropologists nowadays assess the historical accomplishments of other nations much more cautiously and, hence, more prudently.

16 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race and History*, pp. 11–12.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

18 Hajime Nakamura, *Parallel Developments: A Comparative History of Ideas*, p. 22.

19 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race and History*, p. 12.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

21 Antoon de Baets, “Eurocentrism in the Writing and Teaching of History,” p. 298.

22 *Ibid.*

Concluding Remarks

For a causal and analytical exploration of contemporary intellectual culture to be successful, one needs to distinguish the general conditions for the emergence of culture from culture itself as relatively separate objects of investigation; also, the avant-garde components from the more conventional components of culture as equally defining and sustaining it.

The general conditions that nurture contemporary culture's intellectual proclivities include increased geographical mobility, the ensuing relativization of views and values, the rise of mass culture, hedonism, and a preoccupation with gender questions.

The avant-garde component of contemporary intellectual culture, also known as postmodernism, is driven by rebellion

against three fundamental orders: ontologically independent objects; established social (i.e., economic, political, cultural, religious, etc.) relations; and the very structure of human perception.

The more conventional components of contemporary intellectual culture, which have a much greater impact on culture as a whole than the avant-garde component, include a turn to anthropology in the sciences as the primary source of motivation and validation for research; the prevalence of relativistic modes of thinking in matters of value (axiological relativism) and knowledge (epistemic relativism); the inversion of reason and emotion in cultural production; the rise of nationalism; and the gradual spread of cultural liberalism as a sympathetic openness to foreign ways of life (ideas, values, customs, orders, etc.).

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