

Treachery of the Intelligentsia

In previous blogs (see [FBBB051](#) and [FBBB077](#)) I attacked the movement described in Julien Benda's 1927 book *La Trahison des Clercs* (translated by Richard Aldington as *The Betrayal of [it should be 'by'] the Intellectuals*), which attacked treachery by European intelligentsia towards the values in which they were reared. It is otherwise known as fouling one's own nest. In particular the intellectual value betrayed is disinterested scholarship—nowadays shockingly undermined by the thought-police monstrosity known as political correctness.

One such treacherous intellectual was E M Forster, as shown in his 1920 book *Notes on the English Character*¹. Forster's charge against the English is that of hypocrisy. For me the most interesting part of Forster's thesis comes at the end, when his impatience with English falsity breaks through.

I hope and believe myself that in the next twenty years we shall see a great change, and that the national character will alter into something that is less unique but more loveable. The supremacy of the middle classes is probably ending. What new element the working classes will introduce one cannot say, but at all events they will not have been educated at public school.

Outrage! This is indeed the *trahison des clercs*. Because the highly educated Forster is frustrated over the rejection of his sexual inclinations he will disown his class, and his privileged education. He will select as a long-term lover a man from the working class. One sympathises, but wishes he had been wiser. Culturally, as everyone knows, the post-war rise of the working class in England has been an unmitigated disaster.

In her book *A House Unlocked*, about her family home Golsoncott, Penelope Lively confirmed what I have long thought to be the strange English paradox of modern times whereby the higher class rejects its patrimony. Why does it do this? Is it out of guilt, or obtuseness, or a failure to understand the truths of humanity - or what?

I myself spring from the lower class. That only made me resolve to climb higher, which to an extent I managed to do. But I was confounded to find that as, inch by inch, I contrived to rise, so the scenario gradually changed. It began to matter less and less whether one spoke with the right accent, proffered the correct courtesies, or convinced people that one deserved the rank of a gentleman. Indeed the very concept of being a gentleman began to disappear. The last remnant surfaced when I heard a policeman refer in court to a dirty ragged tramp as 'this gentleman'. But perhaps he had in mind (though I doubt it) that old phrase a 'gentleman of the road'.

In her book Lively regrets the class system. I, on the other hand, applaud it and regret its obsolescence. I do not think it suits human nature to pretend we are all equal, when manifestly we are not. In my view it is not seemly that a distinguished professor, say, should be deprived of his servant so that he is obliged to fend for himself in such matters as shopping and washing up. That is not one of our culture's triumphs I fancy.

Lively tells us convincingly just how she differed from her Grandmother on questions of class. I myself would side with her Grandmother. I would like to have lived in the days when the gong in the hall summoned people for meals, and bells ringing below stairs hurried obedient domestics to serve their betters as they were expected and accustomed to do. The

¹ Reprinted in *Abinger Harvest* (Edward Arnold, 1936).

usual counter is that you wouldn't think that if you yourself were the domestic. That is facile and, to me, unconvincing. If I were the domestic, I would have the equipment and outlook of a domestic. If it were really myself, with the qualities I have, there would be a chance of escape to higher things. That chance is what matters.

When Lively was a young woman at Golsoncott with the idealism of youth she wished to align herself with the poor. It bothered her that many English people were living below the poverty line while she and her upper middle class relatives were comfortably off. But the poor, said Christ, are always with us. There will always be people who lack the ability to cope with life. One should sympathize with them, and help them; but their plight ought not to dictate our social arrangements. If it does, we have got it wrong and much harm will result. As I believe it has.

Although George Orwell was himself an Etonian of the left he had a secure understanding of *la trahison des clercs*. This is shown in the following extended extract from his 1941 essay 'England Your England'

It should be noted that there is now no intelligentsia that is not in some sense 'left. Perhaps the last right-wing intellectual was T. E. Lawrence. Since about 1930 everyone describable as an 'intellectual' has lived in a state of chronic discontent with the existing order. Necessarily so, because society as it was constituted had no room for him. In an Empire that was simply stagnant, neither being developed nor falling to pieces, and in an England ruled by people whose chief asset was their stupidity, to be 'clever' was to be suspect. If you had the kind of brain that could understand the poems of T. S. Eliot or the theories of Karl Marx, the higher-ups would see to it that you were kept out of any important job. The intellectuals could find a function for themselves only in the literary reviews and the left-wing political parties.

The mentality of the English left-wing intelligentsia can be studied in half a dozen weekly and monthly papers. The immediately striking thing about all these papers is their generally negative, querulous attitude, their complete lack at all times of any constructive suggestion. There is little in them except the irresponsible carping of people who have never been and never expect to be in a position of power. Another marked characteristic is the emotional shallowness of people who live in a world of ideas and have little contact with physical reality. Many intellectuals of the Left were flabbily pacifist up to 1935, shrieked for war against Germany in the years 1935-9, and then promptly cooled off when the war started. It is broadly though not precisely true that the people who were most 'anti-Fascist' during the Spanish Civil War are most defeatist now. And underlying this is the really important fact about so many of the English intelligentsia—their severance from the common culture of the country.

In intention, at any rate, the English intelligentsia are Europeanized. They take their cookery from Paris and their opinions from Moscow. In the general patriotism of the country they form a sort of island of dissident thought. England is perhaps the only great country whose intellectuals are ashamed of their own nationality. In left-wing circles it is always felt that there is something slightly disgraceful in being an Englishman and that it is a duty to snigger at every English institution, from horse racing to suet puddings. It is a strange fact, but it is unquestionably true that almost any English intellectual would feel more ashamed of standing to attention during 'God save the King' than of stealing from a poor box. All through the critical years many left-wingers were chipping away at English morale, trying to spread an outlook that was sometimes squashily pacifist, sometimes violently pro-Russian, but always anti-British. It is questionable how much effect this had, but it certainly had some. If the English people suffered for several years a real weakening of morale, so that the Fascist nations judged that they were 'decadent' and that it was safe to plunge into war, the intellectual sabotage from the Left was partly responsible. Both the *New Statesman* and the *News Chronicle* cried out against the Munich settlement, but even they had done something

to make it possible. Ten years of systematic Blimp-baiting affected even the Blimps themselves and made it harder than it had been before to get intelligent young men to enter the armed forces. Given the stagnation of the Empire, the military middle class must have decayed in any case, but the spread of a shallow Leftism hastened the process.

It is clear that the special position of the English intellectuals during the past ten years, as purely *negative* creatures, mere anti-Blimps, was a by-product of ruling-class stupidity. Society could not use them, and they had not got it in them to see that devotion to one's country implies 'for better, for worse'. Both Blimps and highbrows took for granted, as though it were a law of nature, the divorce between patriotism and intelligence. If you were a patriot you read *Blackwood's Magazine* and publicly thanked God that you were 'not brainy'. If you were an intellectual you sniggered at the Union Jack and regarded physical courage as barbarous. It is obvious that this preposterous convention cannot continue. The Bloomsbury highbrow, with his mechanical snigger, is as out-of-date as the cavalry colonel. A modern nation cannot afford either of them. Patriotism and intelligence will have to come together again. It is the fact that we are fighting a war, and a very peculiar kind of war, that may make this possible.'

This is sound, though Orwell oversteps the mark in saying society could not use intellectuals. He also proved too optimistic in forecasting that patriotism and intelligence would have to come together. Today there are as many people as ever there were who are like those of whom W. S. Gilbert wrote in the *Mikado*, saying 'they never would be missed-

The idiot who praises, with enthusiastic tone,
All centuries but this, and every country but his own.'

ADDENDUM

1. Digby Anderson said 'intellectuals love to hate their own' (*The Spectator* 29 July 2006, p. 34).
 2. Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) noticed the 'peculiar Western self-hatred that is nothing short of pathological . . . It has lost the capacity for self-love. All that it sees in its history is the despicable and the destructive'. (Quoted by Digby Anderson, *The Spectator* 29 July 2006, p. 34, from Ratzinger's essay 'The Spiritual Roots of Europe'.)
- See also [2004.063](#) and [2004.089](#).