

Introduction

On 25 June 1945, a man named Emile Bercher visited Antony Babel, the Rector of the University of Geneva. Bercher, who was the director of a major advertising agency, had an idea that he wanted to explore. It was this meeting that would lead to the inaugural conference of what would become the *Rencontres Internationales de Genève*, an annual gathering of intellectuals, writers, artists, politicians, and scientists, convened around an issue of major public significance. The first ‘Encounter’, organized by the University (whose Senate had warmly embraced the idea), took place in September 1946. With the end of the Second World War, the organizing committee, partly prompted by Bercher himself, decided that Europeans and others should be brought together for debate and discussion about what constitutes ‘the European Spirit’.¹

Among the extremely distinguished list of speakers were Julien Benda, who opened the conference on 2 September, and Karl Jaspers, who gave the final presentation on 13 September.² Both Benda and Jaspers had published, that same year, 1946, new editions of works that they had initially written in the 1920s. Benda revisited his 1927 text (*The Treason of the Intellectuals* (*La trahison des clercs*), adding in the

¹ For the history of how this meeting came about, see Bruno Ackermann, ‘Les Rencontres Internationales de Genève, 1946’, *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte*, 39 (1989), available at: <https://www.e-periodica.ch/cntmng?pid=szg-006:1989:39::87> (accessed 23 November 2017).

² All the lectures given at the conference are available at: http://palimpsestes.fr/textes_philo/jaspers/rencontres.pdf (accessed 23 November 2017).

1946 edition a substantial new opening chapter. Jaspers re-published his 1923 text *The Idea of the University* (*Die Idee der Universität*). In its 1946 edition, this book became a key mechanism in the necessary and essential rehabilitation of the German University after its disastrous Nazification during the previous decade.

Two texts, then, each of them addressing the intellectual and the institutions given over to the functions of thought, constitute the frame through which the inaugural *Rencontre* considered the proper relation of the intellect to the polity. Both Benda and Jaspers – like the other participants – were profoundly aware that this was an extremely serious issue, of genuine international significance. At the root of the debates is a simple but potentially devastating question: what is the proper relation of the intellectual to a polity? How do we regulate the competing forces, values, and political claims of consciousness with those of material history? This was a key question for the participants in Geneva in 1946; and it remains a fundamental issue in our own time. It is at the centre of this book.



Benda took the opportunity to refer to his own celebrated work during his Geneva presentation. He rehearsed his argument of 1927, that a certain ‘intellectual nationalism’ had ‘contaminated’ the best thinkers of the time, corrupting the purity of their thinking and leading them into a betrayal of their calling to the ‘clerisy’. The intellectual, for Benda, should be devoted to abstract thought, explicit in its disavowal of practicality. ‘Passions’ or practical commitments were the enemy of such pure thinking. He visited shame upon those who, as intellectuals, had become compliant servants of the very passions that they should be contesting. ‘Shame on the treason of the intellectuals’, he said, publicizing the new edition of his work.³ Such passions usually involved a political commitment.

The most significant and dangerous passion, as Benda saw it in 1927, was that of nationalism; and he took the view that subsequent events – the war of 1939–45 – were ample empirical evidence of what

³ See Julien Benda’s paper from *Rencontres Internationales de Genève*, 2–13 September 1946, 15, 26 (translation mine), available at: http://palimpsestes.fr/textes_philo/jaspers/rencontres.pdf (accessed 23 November 2017).

goes wrong when the intellectual is perverted from the duty towards reason by becoming complicit with a nationalist mentality. When he came to extend his argument in 1946, he retained the view that the intellectual must remain committed primarily to abstract reason. However, the significant modification that he made concerned the relation of the intellectual to democracy, in a move that seemed to re-open the door to political commitment by the intellectual. In the wake of the disaster of Nazism, Benda argued that ‘the only political system that the intellectual can adopt while remaining faithful to herself or himself is democracy’. The reason for this concession is that democracy is opposed to the imposition of any kind of stable and fixed order, for it is committed to individual freedom. ‘With its sovereign values of individual liberty, justice and truth’, he wrote, democracy ‘is not practical’.⁴

What this signals is not any kind of attack upon the ‘impracticality’ or despair at an implied naïve lack of realism in the desire for democracy, but instead a realization that democracy is a political system that cannot be programmed in advance, and therefore cannot be imposed as a politically constraining form of order upon a people. The great new enemy in the 1946 text is ‘order’ as such. When ‘order’ becomes a political ideal, the threat of war (as an ultimate form of disorder) will be held always before the people, the better to invoke fear, to acquire and retain their obedience. The demand for social order is inevitably linked, therefore, to precisely the same war mentality that governed nationalist thinking and its perversion of the intellectual from her or his task. Democracy, by contrast and by its very definition, cannot share in the demand for this kind of order. Worst of all is the moment when politics becomes itself governed by the demand for ‘organization’, for this will inevitably entail an ideology of ‘efficiency’ that will disfigure any and all individual liberties. The intellectual who commits, therefore, to any political form – with the sole exception of messy and disorganized democracy – betrays her or his calling.

Benda’s specific proposals to the 1946 Geneva conference – where

⁴ Julien Benda, *La trahison des clercs* (Grasset, Paris, 1975), 81. Translations throughout are mine; and I have translated ‘clerc’ as ‘intellectual’ here as elsewhere. Benda’s use of ‘clerc’ connotes the clerisy, those who have a calling or vocation in religious terms. I have retained the idea of such a ‘call’; but have preferred ‘intellectual’, a term that (when Benda wrote in 1927) was of relatively recent date.

Jaspers sat in his audience – included the demand that education should be reformed, and that there should be a unifying European language (which he thought should be French, given that ‘everyone’ acknowledged its intrinsic rationality).⁵ With respect to education reform, specifically, he insisted that science should assume an absolute priority over literature, on the grounds that science is universal (because it is abstract and not conditioned by particularized interests) whereas literature is merely local (because it is conditioned by the specifics of its occasion, and expressed in a particular national language). Literature is therefore, for Benda, much more prone to the passions, and thus much more likely to drive the intellectual astray, to perversely contaminate intellectual duty. The essence of intellectual duty, he argued, is to ‘confer sovereignty on the universal’.⁶ Anything that deviates from this is a betrayal of the proper function of the intellectual.

This is an argument that, at least in some respects, is eminently recognizable in our time in at least two important particulars. First, it has become almost a conventional truism that the laboratory sciences are eminently more worthwhile than the literary arts. In the contemporary moment, however, the reasoning for this is entirely different from that which governed Benda’s thinking. Science is valued not for its abstractions, but rather because of its utilitarian practicality. It will contribute, it is thought, to economic growth; and this has become the central legitimizing argument for government or public support for its activities. While we will claim to value so-called ‘blue skies’ research, this remains much less ‘legitimate’ than science that leads immediately and directly to instrumentally useful outcomes; and the key outcome is always economic growth and profit somewhere in the general economy. Literature and the arts, by contrast, are seen as merely ephemeral, concerned with the life of the mind and emotions, and of little practical use. This remains the case even when artists point to the massive – if ostensibly peripheral – contributions that they make to economic activities. In other words, it is the very practicality of science that we are encouraged to validate today, whereas, for Benda, science was shaped precisely by its refusal to accommodate itself to the ‘practical’ lest it be hijacked from its pure pursuit of rational results.

⁵ Jaspers presented his lecture in German and received several ovations.

⁶ Benda, *Rencontres Internationales de Genève*, 31.

Yet more fundamental, however, is the second trait that is recognizably extant in our time from Benda's lecture. The contemporary moment bears witness to a sense that the intellectual should acknowledge the limitations of her or his calling. In attending to 'the universal' and 'the abstract' our contemporary intellectual should not meddle in the affairs of the world, but should operate only within the confines of the academy itself. Thinking should be constrained and conditioned by its institutionalization in the University, as the key proper – but isolated – domain for thinking. It is as if the very activity of thinking should be sequestered away from practical everyday life. Although we do not acknowledge it in explicit terms, our contemporary culture prefers to leave the intellectual in the fabled 'ivory tower'.

Today, intellectuals – who are 'distinguished' from the everyday precisely by the qualities of their thinking – allegedly represent only the particular vested interests, values, and norms of an 'elite', those who do not share in the commons. Thus, any meddling by the intellectuals in our everyday politics is intrinsically a betrayal of the wishes or interests of 'ordinary' people. For many, the intrusion of the intellectual into the public sphere, especially the political public sphere, is dangerous and a threat to the everyday norms that govern our polities. Some politicians encourage that belief, preferring to keep any critical intellectual thinking carefully secreted away from the realm in which they prefer to retain the privileges of their own control. Given the fact that, almost by definition, the intellectual devotes herself or himself to the life of the mind, he or she should have no substantive say in the everyday practical conditions of non-intellectual life. Perhaps needless to say, this view is contested.

Edward Said offers a series of descriptions of the intellectual today that are relevant to these arguments. The intellectual, he argues, can be distinguished from the bureaucrat precisely because the intellectual is, in fact, personally committed to and engaged in everyday practical activity: intellectuals really believe in the arguments they make, and commit their very existential being to those beliefs. 'They cannot be mistaken for an anonymous functionary or careful bureaucrat' who has no actual personal commitment to their statements or actions. This makes intellectuals dangerous to those who will try to retain their own existing privileges by formalizing those privileges into a bland and abstract 'official' or bureaucratic inevitable norm.

The intellectual breaks with regulation (if not ‘order’ as in Benda) in this account. A particular characteristic of the intellectual is that he or she represents views that official culture – the polity – tends to elide, for whatever reasons. The intellectual has a specific talent: she or he ‘is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for a public’. The talent by definition must be made public. Intellectuals must engage the polity, in this respect. The effect, however, is never itself reassuringly ordered. On the contrary, the intellectual is someone ‘whose place it is publically to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them)’. Insofar as the intellectual refuses – as in Benda – to be co-opted for order, ‘the whole point is to be embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant’.⁷

Such a stance is one that is increasingly at odds with the governance and presiding ideologies that shape our contemporary University institutions. The more such institutions are converted into commercial enterprises, with consumers instead of students, the less acceptable is it for academic staff to be ‘embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant’. Such a stance will not play well in the demand that we ‘provide’ a pleasant and comfortable ‘student experience’, and will not play out well – at least *prima facie* – in the National Student Survey, which assesses essentially how ‘agreeable’ a degree programme is for its purchasers/students. This official survey ‘gathers opinions from students about their experience of their courses’, from which it proceeds, without any logical explanation, to derive claims regarding ‘the quality of higher education in the UK’.⁸ Doubtless the provision of luxury accommodation, say, makes it agreeable to return to one’s room after a lecture; but it says nothing about what has gone on, intellectually, at any moment in the preparation of the student or teacher for that lecture, nor anything about the quality of education that occurs in relation to the lecture. The real question that the intellectual would ask here is about the relation between that luxury accommodation and, say, the increasing number of homeless people sleeping in the streets around the institu-

⁷ Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (Vintage, London, 1994), 10.

⁸ See the website of the National Student Survey at: www.thestudentsurvey.com/about.php (accessed 23 November 2017).

tion. The National Student Survey, in fact, is part of the marketization of the sector, determinedly committing institutions to the ideology of market-fundamentalist commerce and co-opting students to that end.

As the managers of our institutions become increasingly focused on the 'delivery' of a 'product' that will yield consumer satisfaction, they also increasingly require that academic staff conform to the University's brand. By no stretch of the imagination can this be called an intellectual commitment to anything other than to an ideology of market fundamentalism. It is an evisceration of the intellectual, and one that *requires* the betrayal of the calling. The institution no longer welcomes the kind of intellectual who is 'embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant', preferring instead the individual who will subsume the requirements of thinking to the demands of monetization. We have entered a new state in the betrayal of the intellectuals.

What does this mean in everyday practice in a University? Put simply, a degree programme now increasingly has to justify its existence not through the importance of the field or the intellectual values it embraces, but rather in terms of how much financial profit it will make. It must be 'popular' enough to bring in fees and research grants. As we have seen, for an obvious example, if a French literature department does not bring in whatever a finance director has determined as the 'appropriate' or satisfactory number of students and income, then we should simply close it down. This is not just crude; it is utterly simplistic, and based on utterly false presuppositions.

Why does an individual 'choose' to study French, say – or law, or medicine, or Chinese, or ancient archaeology, or physics, and so on? Individuals are not born with a predisposition to choose these fields. Instead, really existing material and historical circumstances predetermine and circumscribe the choices we make. People 'make their own history', Marx rightly argued, urging us non-controversially (and without anything specifically 'Marxist') towards a responsibility for our actions; 'but', he goes on, 'they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under given conditions directly encountered and inherited from the past'.⁹ The degree programmes that we have exist because the

⁹ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1978), 9.

polity in general has decided that these are worthwhile fields of study, thereby legitimizing them and rendering them available on our menu. It is when the general polity makes the decision to degrade French language and literature, say, that we diminish the attractiveness and popularity, and thus also the availability, of that particular field.

When senior management in a University ‘manage’ the institution’s intellectual activity by falling back on ostensibly rational economic determinations like this, they are fundamentally avoiding their intellectual responsibilities towards history and towards their societies. The political culture in general – of which the University’s managers constitute a ‘leading’ element – is largely responsible for predetermining, circumscribing, and even limiting the kinds of degree programmes that are deemed to be valid, valuable, and worth including in a University’s activities. It is simplistic to the point of falsification to claim that there is a ‘free market’ in disciplines, where completely autonomous and atomized discrete individuals make ‘rational free choices’. When it is put like this, it becomes clear that this entire approach is based in the logic and ideology of ‘rational choice market fundamentalism’. Whatever one’s view of this political ideology, it cannot be denied that it is a fundamentalist ideology. To adopt it – or to hide behind it, as our institutions increasingly do – is a further betrayal of the intellectual. The choice and value of intellectual pursuits is being determined by money. It is as if one becomes a lawyer or doctor, say, primarily in order to become rich, instead of pursuing justice or saving lives, or as if such wealth is what determines these vocations as worthwhile. What makes this awful is that this is precisely the reasoning that our contemporary political culture – and our institution – encourages our next generation of students to take towards their studies.



I noted that the inaugural Geneva *Rencontre* was the idea of Emile Bercher.

If an Emile Bercher today were to approach a University with an idea for an annual extremely prestigious and high-profile international conference, we can rest assured that – completely unlike Geneva in 1946 – the resulting event would be one that was covered in advertising and in boastful sponsorship. We can be equally sure that our contemporary institution would see the event as a business opportunity, or

as something that would add to the prestige of the University's brand, thus attracting more 'custom'. The intellectual content of the event would have a much lower priority than in the 1946 Geneva case.

Certainly, Bercher in 1946, himself an advertising executive, saw the commercial possibilities that the *Rencontres* would provide. He had seen how Lucerne had benefited enormously by hosting an annual 'International Music Week', which attracted the world's best orchestras and conductors, with the attendant commercial stimulus that that gave to the city.¹⁰ At the same time, he was also taken explicitly by the fact that the event in Lucerne contributed to the general everyday life of the city, quite beyond any particular commercial interest. As Bruno Ackermann explains, Bercher's initiative had a double aim: 'to re-stimulate in Geneva a cultural and artistic life of the highest order, and to spread the renown of the city and its University far and wide'.¹¹

In our time, 'renown' is measured in financial terms. This, in fact, is one of the key ways in which we can understand our new treason of the intellectuals. There is less a perversion of the intellect by nation (though, as we will see, that certainly exists), and more a perversion of thought through its institutional financialization. To put this in crude and raw terms, thought counts for little in our institutions unless and until it is monetized. As Nigel Thrift, former Vice Chancellor (VC) of Warwick, puts it, 'Whether people like it or not, Universities are now economies, and to try and make out that they are something else I think just will not work.' He goes on to argue that 'simply because of their size and the turnover they become economic entities in their own right'. Thrift then asserts what he calls the inevitable logical corollary: 'Governments look for growth and Universities become framed as major export industries, susceptible to government and corporate influence'.¹² Benda would feel thoroughly vindicated; Said would be appalled. It is one thing to be 'susceptible' to influence; it is a betrayal to comply, and to insist that this is simply a matter of real fact ('whether people like it or not'), beyond dispute.

¹⁰ A useful chronology is provided on the website of the Lucerne Festival: <https://www.lucernefestival.ch/fr/le-festival/historique> (accessed 23 November 2017).

¹¹ Ackermann, 'Les Rencontres Internationales', 65 (translation mine).

¹² See Nigel Thrift's lecture 'The University of Life', available at: <https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/newsandevents/events/distinguishedlecture/nigelthrift/> (accessed 23 November 2017). The passage cited comes at 11'30".

Such an attitude was far removed from the consciousness of Jaspers when he spoke in Geneva. Jaspers, too, had a book to publicize, although – unlike Benda – he made no reference to the new edition of *The Idea of the University* at all in his presentation. Jaspers listened attentively to Benda, and in his response to the presentation he pointed out that you cannot find an idea, identity, or spirit of Europe on the rationality of science (and thus on its absolute priority over literature, say), on the simple logical grounds that scientific reason is not specific to Europe. In fact, he argues, there is a danger in ‘wanting to give oneself an idea of a Europe’ that would see Europe as ‘separate’ and distinguished from the rest of the world. In short, he is indicating to Benda that, in the critique of a nationalistic passion that perverts the intellectual from her or his task, Benda is simply substituting ‘Europe’ for the individual nation state. Such an attitude is apparent – although Jaspers is diplomatically politic enough not to draw explicit attention to it – in Benda’s ostensibly ‘reasonable’ suggestion that the language of Europe should be French. As he put it in a letter to his former student Hannah Arendt, a few days after the conference, ‘some of the speakers [he clearly had Benda in mind] developed something resembling a European nationalism’.¹³

Notwithstanding what might have been an irritation at Benda’s valorization of the French language as a supposedly obvious choice for a trans-European language, Jaspers argued that ‘communication’ is absolutely crucial to the intellectual in her or his activities. In 1946 Geneva, Jaspers himself was – as also in his re-issued *Idea of the University* – ‘communicating’ to the world for the first time since 1938, when the Nazi authorities in Germany had banned him from publishing his work or thoughts. The political background is important here. In January 1937, the Nazis passed the ‘German Civil Servants’ Law’, requiring ‘that not only civil servants but also their spouses were required to be “citizens” (Reichsbürger[sic]), as opposed to “subjects” (Staatsbürger)’.¹⁴ Gertrud Jaspers was Jewish, and was thus barred from being a ‘citizen’. The Rector of Heidelberg University, Ernst Kriek, obeyed the law

¹³ Karl Jaspers, letter of 18 September 1946, in *Hannah Arendt – Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926–1969*, ed. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber (Harcourt Brace, New York, 1992), 57.

¹⁴ Steven P. Remy, *The Heidelberg Myth: The Nazification and Denazification of a German University* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002), 80.

of the land and, accordingly, fired Jaspers. Because his fame made such an act controversial, the dismissal was subsequently changed formally to ‘retirement’, conveniently enough ‘on health grounds’ (Jaspers did indeed have life-long health problems).

A year later, the Nazis effectively isolated Jaspers completely with the publication ban. He was thus deprived of communication with his peers, and he found himself excluded from official intellectual activity – especially, of course, from the life of the University. The couple managed to survive the war years, though Gertrud only narrowly escaped with her life, for she was scheduled to be deported from Heidelberg in April 1945. She was saved by the arrival of the US army in Heidelberg right at the start of that month.

When the Americans arrived in Heidelberg, they compiled a ‘White List’ comprising individuals ‘whose character, professional standing, experience and political reliability’ made them suited to leadership positions, especially in higher education.¹⁵ Jaspers was on this list; and it was under the aegis of the dismantling of Nazi ideology that he re-published his *Idea of the University*. Now, in 1946, that idea was one that had to clarify that the Nazi politicization of the institution was utterly incompatible with intellectual activity, that it had been a fundamental betrayal of the intellectuals.

For Jaspers, as for Benda, a specific explicit politicization of the institutions of the intellectual raises serious issues. Jaspers had the example of Heidegger, whose Rectorship in Freiburg showed his complicity with those who engendered a betrayal of some fundamentals of academic and of University life. Heidegger stated in his Rector’s Address in 1933 that ‘the much-lauded “academic freedom” will be expelled from the German university’.¹⁶ Jaspers felt the effect of this fully.

However, it did not follow, for Jaspers, that the intellectual – and by extension the University – should divorce itself entirely from the

¹⁵ 27 October 1944, Appendix A to Directive No. 8 in *Dokumente der Deutschlandpolitik 3 September 1939 bis 8 Mai 1945*, ed. Herbert Elzer (R. Oldenbourg Verlag, Munich, 2003), 883. See also Henric L. Wuerneling, *The White List and Zero Hour in Germany 1945* (Herbig, Munich, 2015).

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, ‘The self-assertion of the German university’, 1933 (German title ‘Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität’), available at: <http://la.utexas.edu/users/hcleaver/330T/350kPEEHeideggerSelf-Assertion.pdf> (accessed 23 November 2017).

practical in the kind of extremist position of Benda. He made it clear, in Geneva as in his re-issued book – that the intellect was fully immersed in the world of practice. Indeed, in that same letter to Arendt of 18 September 1946, he noted that in Geneva ‘all the reasonable people had the world in mind’. This engagement with the world formed the cornerstone of a philosophy in which Jaspers noted that there is no intrinsic logic that dictates that reason will serve only that which is good. Reason can equally be deployed in the service of evil and bad ends. Something else is needed if the intellectual, engaged in the world, is to find a role that will essentially lead to her or his legislating for the good.

In a straightforward way, that is the question governing this entire book. The fundamental gambit is that, in principle, participants in a polity are involved in the search for the good society. Views as to what constitutes the goodness of such a society will differ; and so we have it as axiomatic that we must explore different hypotheses regarding the good society. This will, of necessity, involve us in the kind of communication that was so important for Jaspers. In our institutions, this entails the full development and extension as far as is possible of academic freedom. The point of academic freedom, however, is that it cannot remain ‘merely’ academic: if the intellectual is in and of the world, academic freedom must be the cornerstone of all human freedoms. By this, I do not mean to privilege the thinking that goes on in Universities, but rather simply to render to thinking – wherever it is carried out – its due.

Freedom of thought is thus yet more fundamental than freedom of speech.¹⁷ If we are to pursue whatever it is that we can agree to call ‘the good’, then thought must be completely unconstrained to make possible that search or research. Further, if we are to ‘agree’ to identify some state of affairs as the good, then two things follow, again axiomatically. First, this ‘agreement’ requires that communication among participants be central to a good society: agreement can be founded only on the possibility and even the desirable necessity of disagreement. Secondly, ‘the good’ cannot be fixed or eternal and unchanging: if it is subject to agreement through discussion, then such agreements

¹⁷ For a detailed argument relevant to this, see Timothy Garton Ash, *Free Speech* (Atlantic Books, London, 2016), 283ff.

must be forever provisional, and open to change and new discussion from both new and existing participants. ‘The good’ in this sense is historical: it is not always and everywhere the same. To subscribe to an idea of the good (or ‘the true’) as being identifiable and definitive is to be a fundamentalist of some kind; and fundamentalism means the end of discussion and of communication. The claim of any one party to an absolute truth is a claim that defies any possibility of further dialogue, much less egalitarian dialogue. It bans argument and demands obedience, servitude, and compliance. In this respect, it is inimical to freedom in every fundamental, academic and otherwise.

A University and its intellectuals should welcome this state of affairs, for it ensures that the University is utterly enmeshed in the public sphere while, at the same time, indicating that that sphere resists hierarchization of its compositional elements. People will be free if and only if they are equally free. As Jaspers then puts it, ‘Given that a person is free if and only if other individuals are also equally free, it follows that we should reject any freedom that isolates the individual and avoids the need for communication’. He adds that ‘real freedom believes only in holding life in common, as when a man evolves along with the surrounding world’.¹⁸

It follows from this that any thinking that determinedly hierarchizes the social world, that denies the search for freedoms, that avoids the principles of egalitarian communication while preferring ‘instruction’, constitutes a betrayal of (and sometimes by) the intellectual. This suggests that, among the most basic of the requirements for honouring the human capacity for thinking itself is a democratic impulse. The intellectual, thus, has a responsibility towards government, but does not have the right to govern others. There can be no ‘philosopher-king’ because, in a genuine democratic polity, there is no king.

Are the hypotheses advanced here ‘true’? This is another major concern for the intellectual, especially in an age in which formulations such as the ‘post-truth’ or ‘post-fact’ world have gained currency. The problem here is that truth, like freedom and like ‘the good’, is subject to history. I do not mean to suggest that truth is relativistic in any sense; rather, what constitutes ‘the true’ depends to a great extent on

¹⁸ Karl Jaspers’s paper from *Rencontres Internationales de Genève*, 2–13 September 1946, 376, 377 (translation mine), available at: http://palimpsestes.fr/textes_philo/jaspers/rencontres.pdf (accessed 23 November 2017).

the condition of our knowledge, and that condition is one that must always be changing. It must always be changing because of the primacy of communication, which determines that the truth can never be finalized. Truth is inimical to such fundamentalism; and, indeed, any fundamentalism must be based on the irrationality of unfounded faith. It has nothing to do with the thinking individual. When someone tells us that 'there is no alternative', that 'this is the reality of the world', we should realize that this individual is trying to arrest the possibility of thinking. They are betraying the intellectual and, in doing so, are also trying to arrest history. Given that our current historical condition is one of massive world inequalities, they are simply protecting their own interested privileges and trying to silence any criticism of them.



Democracies and silence do not sit easily together, and are in fact deeply antithetical to each other. Benda called on Montesquieu to support this claim. According to Montesquieu's 1734 text *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence*, when you cannot hear the noise of dispute in a polity, then you can be sure that liberty is absent from that State. Governments that are concerned for the extension of freedoms are noisy, 'always agitated', and such a government 'could not sustain itself unless it is capable of being corrected under its own laws'.¹⁹

Benda alludes approvingly to this in his 1946 edition of *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, where he is at pains to stress that his interests are in democracy and justice. After the historical disasters of the years between 1927 and 1946, he now clearly sees that nationalism was but a symptom of a deeper betrayal of the intellectual: the betrayal of justice and the disavowal of democracy. Part of the impetus behind Benda's thought, even in 1927, derived from his attitude to the Dreyfus Affair, that utter travesty of justice whose motivation lay in a combination

¹⁹ See Benda, *La trahison des clercs*, 42. Benda misquotes Montesquieu. The original text says that 'as a general rule, any time you see everyone tranquil in a state that calls itself a republic, you can rest assured that there is no liberty there'. Benda has, instead, what looks like a made-up misremembered phrase, 'When in a State you don't perceive the sound of any conflict you can be sure that there is no liberty there.' See Montesquieu, *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence*, new edn (Copenhagen, 1761), 79, 84 (translation mine).

of prejudicial racism (in its established form as anti-Semitism) and the desire to protect the privileges of specific officers as well as the privileges of 'office' itself. The protecting of official privilege, or 'rule by the offices', is, as Arendt points out, the proper and literal definition of bureaucracy. It is also, as Arendt describes it, a dreadful mode of governance. In her account, bureaucracy is 'unhappily the rule of nobody and for this very reason perhaps the least human and most cruel form of rulership'.²⁰ It was precisely this form of cruelty from which Jaspers, her teacher, suffered under the prejudices of Nazism.

Running through all of the story thus far is a fundamental aspect of the betrayal of the intellectual: prejudice, pre-judging. Prejudice – with its attendant conformity – is at the root of all conventional behaviour. It is anathema to the intellectual. Said advances the character of Bazarov, from Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, as a model of the intellectual, a character seemingly constitutionally unable to conform to the norms of his society. Bazarov is a figure characterized by 'the sheer unremitting force of his questioning and deeply confrontational intellect'.²¹ He is unconventional – in the strict sense that he refuses to be bound by convention, by what makes an existing community cohere. The values and norms that make his society are insistently called into question; and it is this that Said sees as the first kind of intellectual.

The intellectual, then, can be 'unpleasant', in Said's terms. However, is it any more 'pleasant' to live and think in conformity with a social order that is racist, prejudicial, shaped by the demand that thinking and thinkers should be sequestered away from everyday living? The topic of this book is certainly discomfiting, even discomfiting. The questions that I raise, however, are fundamental, and they call for an active response.



In his letter to Arendt after the Geneva conference, Jaspers argued that philosophy – and, by extension, thinking itself – 'has to be concrete

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (Schocken Books, New York, 2003), 31; and cf. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd edn, introduced by Margaret Canovan (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998), 40, where Arendt relates it directly to tyranny. See also her extended and detailed observations regarding the relation between bureaucracy and totalitarian government in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951; Penguin, London, 2017), 319–40.

²¹ Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 12.

and practical'. Even though he claimed that his 'intellectual possibilities are so limited', he stated definitively that 'it's always better to do what you can than to do nothing at all'.²² By way of a sustained and detailed response to what had gone on in Geneva, Arendt dedicated her *Sechs Essays*, published in Germany in 1948, to Jaspers. In her dedicatory note, she paid tribute to her teacher, and revealed a good deal of what had come out of their conversations together.

The first key observation that she makes indicates the worldliness of her philosophy. As an intellectual, she is immersed in the world and history. 'None of the following essays was ... written without awareness of the facts of our time.' She has also learned to be resistant to accepting the seeming inevitability of contemporary conditions: 'I have not accepted the world created by those facts as necessary and indestructible.' For Arendt, thinking has a responsibility to realize that the world, and our polity within it, need not be as it currently is. The way that she puts this is extremely telling, in this present context. She has learned explicitly from Jaspers, she says, 'to find my way around in reality without selling my soul to it'. That is to say, notwithstanding the discomfort that comes from being an intellectual, it is indeed possible to sustain the dignity and value of intellectual activity without falling into supine complicity with contemporary norms. The Faustian metaphor hints, at least surreptitiously and perhaps even without Arendt herself noting it, at the fact that compliance with those norms is too often embraced for financial profit, or the commercialization of intellect itself. Finally, she notes that, given these first principles, 'one has to live and think in the open and not in one's own little shell, no matter how comfortably furnished it is'.²³

The real point of intellectual work is to contest necessity, but to do so in a manner that acknowledges failure, and acknowledges equally that the work is never finalized. We face the demand, as Jaspers had it, to 'try again' in the face of what he called his intellectual inadequacy. Beckett would extend this, famously, in *Worstward Ho*, whose narrator tells himself to 'Try again. Fail again. Better again. Or better worse. Fail

²² Jaspers, letter to Hannah Arendt, 18 September 1946, in *Hannah Arendt – Karl Jaspers Correspondence*, 58.

²³ Hannah Arendt, 'Dedication to Karl Jaspers', repr. in Arendt, *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (Schocken Books, New York, 1994), 213.

worse again.’²⁴ There must be a certain humility if the intellectual is to respect the dignity of thought, for the individual intellectual is not and never can be the only thinker in any given situation. Perhaps the greatest lesson that Arendt learns from Jaspers – and this will be key to all that follows in this book – is ‘the realization of the fact that all human beings are rational but that no human being’s rationality is infallible’.²⁵

These observations yield us a good place from which to explore the conditions that have led to the new treason of the intellectuals in our time; and also, through the exploration of that betrayal and its consequence in crisis, how we can recover from such betrayals and bear witness to the survival not just of the intellectual but also of her or his worldly social and political environment.

²⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (John Calder, London, 1983), 8.

²⁵ Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 213–14.