

CALL FOR A NEW KIND OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Dorthe Jørgensen

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In his New Year speech of January 1, 2002, the Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen differentiated between *experts* and *arbiters of taste*. Of the experts he said that they should be satisfied to occupy themselves with what he called ‘factual knowledge,’ for if they start telling people what to think, they themselves become arbiters of taste. ‘Arbiters of taste’ was the Prime Minister’s name for the intellectuals, as his use of the word was aimed at experts who meddle in matters that do not concern them, which is precisely how Jean-Paul Sartre once described the function of an intellectual. Whereas Sartre praised experts who are *also* intellectuals, the Prime Minister had only derision and contempt for them in his New Year speech. He explained this attitude later in the year, by saying that the so-called ‘arbiters of taste’ are left-wingers and are thus in conflict with the role intended for them as experts.

In his next New Year speech, which was delivered on January 1, 2003, the Prime Minister was, however, no longer of the opinion that people know for themselves what to think. Neither did he actually stick to that opinion on the previous occasion, for in his first New Year speech he, himself, told people what to think about the so-called ‘arbiters of taste,’ that is, the experts whose thinking is not technocratic, but intellectual. In his second New Year speech, the Prime Minister also distanced himself from the so-called ‘medieval thinking’ of the imams, thus once again telling people what to think – in this case, about the Muslim leaders. Furthermore, he used this speech to tell people how to behave: they should give each other more time by turning off their cell phones.

The Prime Minister’s two New Year speeches point up two circumstances of vital importance to this conference. Firstly, that the neoliberals, who the Danish Prime Minister represents, adhere to a *technocratic* way of thinking. It is instrumental and utilitarian, and they measure everything – instead of measuring only some things – with a ruler calibrated in terms of the practical and the pragmatic. It is due more to this mode of thought than to the alleged left-wing

sympathies of the so-called ‘arbiters of taste’ that the neoliberals harbor such an aversion to the intellectuals. This was quite apparent from the Prime Minister’s first New Year speech, and from the ensuing debate.

Secondly, the Prime Minister’s two New Year speeches show that neoliberalism itself holds a potential for *demagogy*, as the utilitarian ideology of his everyday policies was already apparent in his first New Year speech. In that speech, he was not satisfied simply to extol the experts who think as he does. He also denigrated experts who think differently, and he did so in a particular way. The Prime Minister attempted to create an alliance with the people, as he presented the so-called ‘arbiters of taste’ as being patronizing and himself as being more amenable. It was this populist maneuver that he also employed in his second New Year speech.

The Prime Minister’s first New Year speech gave rise to a heated debate, not least because he subsequently abolished a number of councils and committees that he disliked, after which he appointed many others that were more to his taste. This widespread debate is surely the reason why he dampened his ideology and accentuated his populism the following New Year. Despite the debate, the Prime Minister’s denigration of the so-called ‘arbiters of taste’ enjoyed a certain degree of popular success. However, that was hardly due to any actual aversion to intellectuals harbored by the Danish population. The reason was rather that many people feel that the well-educated no longer express broad views and deep insight, but are rather characterized by narrow and instrumental expertise. Therefore, the experts are no longer significantly different from the population at large – we are all becoming more specialized – and that undermines the authority of the experts. The population’s expectations of an expert are probably diametrically opposed to those of the Prime Minister. There is much to indicate that people want not only knowledge, but also interpretation.

One often gets the impression that the Danish population is characterized by an unsatisfied spiritual need, but according to the Prime Minister this is something with which the experts should not interfere. On the contrary, they should leave it to people to decide for themselves what to believe and what to think. However, this notion conflicts with the fact that many people consume vast amounts of advice and guidance of all kinds, from psychological counseling, to books on nutrition, to courses in philosophy. They consume with gusto the wealth of books and lectures marketed by intellectual academics. Furthermore, it has always been a task for intellectuals to advise people on precisely the kind of issues that the Prime Minister considers they should avoid. He arrogantly ignores a vital historical tradition, when he – who has failed to impress by virtue of philosophical acuity – is apparently of the opinion that he alone is qualified to advise and guide the

Danish population on the greater issues of life.

The intellectuals have always dealt with the matters that the Prime Minister wishes to reserve for himself, though the use of the word 'intellectual' inherited from the twentieth century gives another impression. The phrase 'the intellectuals' was first taken into use in a political context (in 1898); therefore, it was primarily political commitment that was expected of intellectuals in the twentieth century. But ever since the days of Antiquity some persons have had a view of the world hallmarked by a need to penetrate the veil of our immediate experiences. It is of greater relevance to define the intellectual in terms of this view, rather than in terms of a desire to formulate social criticism. Such people as Socrates and his descendants have played widely varying roles during the course of history, but generally they have strived to safeguard fundamental values of their societies. They have articulated the spiritual needs of their contemporaries and functioned as spiritual guides, and they did not play this part because they were fired by criticism, but thanks to their search for meaning. Depending on the circumstances, however, this search did at times result in social criticism.

An intellectual has the ability to observe the principle and long-term aspects of particular things and individual events, and she is capable of treating symbols in a way that surpasses the constraints imposed by specialization. That is why intellectuals are constantly looking beyond what is immediately given, and the latter is why they will always be metaphysicians. But an intellectual is not a metaphysician in the sense of one who subscribes to a philosophical or religious system, because the effect of her search is to question everything she encounters. An intellectual is rather a metaphysician considered as a bearer and presenter of a shared human and ahistorical need for meaning and context, that is, she strives not only for *knowledge*, but also for *wisdom*. This is at least the case if we let the word 'knowledge' signify the factual knowledge of something specific and finite, which is possessed not least by experts, whereas we let the word 'wisdom' allude to insight in broader contexts, as represented by priests, poets, and philosophers throughout history.

It is hardly coincidental that the kind of society developed in recent years is always referred to as the *knowledge* society, but has never been called a society of *wisdom*. The society in question is based on the intelligentsia considered as the highly educated people, who perform specialized tasks in the fields of teaching, technology, and administration. This intelligentsia was brought into the world by modernization, and the politicians expect nothing but knowledge from it. For example, the Danish educational system was recently altered in such a way that the intelligentsia is increasingly schooled in instrumental rationality. The result of this trend is that the large and rapidly

growing section of the public constituted by the intelligentsia is becoming the bearer of a *technocratic* rather than an *intellectual* mind-set. We can already observe how many of the well-educated measure everything – and not just some things – with a ruler calibrated in terms of the practical and the pragmatic. Not least our neoliberal politicians belong to this category.

The technocratization of the intelligentsia is alarming, not only because it eliminates the respect for what does not have a purpose outside itself, but has it in itself, as is, for instance, the case with art. It is also problematic because of what was mentioned above, namely that the technocratic way of thinking contains its own potential for demagoguery. Usually technocrats and demagogues are not considered to be associated with each other. Most of us probably think that their closest connection consists in the fact that technocratic politicians frustrate the population, thus paving the way for demagogues. But our neoliberal politicians now demonstrate how technocrats themselves can come out of the closet as demagogues. For although the Danish neoliberals have claimed over the past year that their policies are simply practical and pragmatic, they are now launching what they call a ‘cultural struggle’ that ostensibly deals with ‘values.’

The neoliberal politicians are thus moved by a spiritual revival, however not because they have relinquished their pragmatic, utilitarian thinking. On the contrary, this revival is the hitherto most extreme expression of utilitarianism, because the neoliberal endeavor to take a stance on values is hardly the result of any higher insight. It is rather a product of public management. Public management is, of course, a question of ‘giving people what people want.’ To this end, the politicians institute surveys of people’s sympathies and antipathies, their wishes, etc. These surveys are intended to enable the politicians to target their policies, so that they deliver what the majority prefers. The end result is a policy based *not* on an analysis (in any deeper sense of the word) of what people’s desires express, and a policy that gives *no* consideration to the desires of the minorities. Instead, it opportunistically confirms trend-setting popular sentiments in their most obvious forms. Thus, if a survey indicates popular spiritual frustration, the politicians do not seek the source of that frustration. They attempt, instead, to satisfy the diagnosed ‘value starvation’ as quickly as possible. They feed people with *spiritual fast food*, and they do this in the hope of improving their control of them.

This public management-based seduction of the population is a demagogic consequence of *social technocratization*, and the future will surely offer much more of that ilk. To raise the level of the debate, the intellectuals should take part in it and thus deflate the demagoguery, but they have great difficulty with this, not least because they have emasculated themselves. The intellectuals have for

decades subscribed to the postmodern theory of ‘the death of the great narratives’ and ‘the end of metaphysics,’ thereby excising the essence of intellectuality from within themselves. With the postmodern doctrine of everything being relative (that is, everything except relativism itself) the intellectuals have rejected the aspiration to wisdom that characterizes an intellectual. They have paralyzed themselves by reducing themselves to the level of technocrats of knowledge whose thinking is pragmatic, and to that of opinion makers who represent a new, quasi-intellectual demagoguery.

If the intellectuals are to counteract the populism of which the neoliberals are now availing themselves, they must renounce their postmodernist attitude. They should not do this merely to fall back into the role of the left-wing critics with whom we are familiar from the twentieth century, and to whom criticism became an end in itself. Neither should they do it, only conservatively to resurrect ‘the great narratives,’ to which people obviously have a different attitude today than they had a hundred years ago. The intellectuals should relinquish the postmodernist attitude so as to heighten their own and other people’s attentiveness to human impressions and experiences. Political life not only needs criticism, and people not only need narratives, but both need assistance in deciphering and reflecting the actual impressions and experiences of real people. And such deciphering and reflection demands more than simple knowledge and opinions; it also demands the quest for wisdom that defines an intellectual.

If the intellectuals fail to embrace this task, we risk losing a vital part of the foundations of modern culture, that is, our intellectual freedom. As Immanuel Kant explained, we must of course differentiate between the way in which we apply reason in our vocations and the way in which we apply it in public debate. For instance, a priest must not cast doubt upon the sanctity of the sacraments during divine service. However, this does not mean that a modern priest has no intellectual freedom, as compared, for instance, to a modern author. On the contrary, participating in public debate she can criticize the church, which no medieval priest could do. And the modern priest can even do this not simply as a private person, but also as a priest – provided that she refrains from doing so during the divine service, but does so, for instance, in the press.

To put it another way: no office may restrict a person’s right to think for herself and to give public expression to her thoughts. In whatever capacity an expert is employed, that expert has the right – and, according to Kant, the duty – to express herself as more than an expert who is obliged by her institution. This idea is a cornerstone of the bourgeois public sphere, on which our modern society is founded. But this also means that experts shall not merely gather knowledge. They must

also be free intellectuals, whose interest is not simply limited to their own specialities, and who perhaps even criticize the institutions and the society of which those institutions are a part. It is therefore thought-provoking that nowadays experts are being schooled in technocratic thinking, and that the politicians expect the experts to restrict themselves to the gathering of knowledge and to representing their institutions. It is an indication that the very foundations of modern society are crumbling.

If we permit this trend to continue, one result will be that the office held by an individual could in the future impose limitations on that individual's freedom to participate in public debate. Another result will be that the public debate becomes censored through the systematic impugning of particular terms and groups of people. Yet another result will be that through the application of public management the politicians will replace the debating democracy with a technocracy of autocratic dimensions. Society will be systematically purged of everything other than technocratic knowledge and subjective opinions. The paradox is, however, that a society without wisdom is hardly what most people desire; it is rather a technocratic elite's dream coming true.

The intellectuals will do themselves and society a favor by allying themselves with those who are now being courted by populists and neoliberals, but in contrast to the politicians they should not do this in a populist way. The intellectuals should instead work towards *a new kind of enlightenment* that, in contrast to the former, will not merely satisfy itself with deflating myths, demolishing the narratives, and leaving people to their own devices in dealing with their concomitant disorientation. That is, an enlightenment that is open to the sparks of insight generated by the experiences of real people. For if we simply take the myths away, we open the door to populism, which has never been so naïve as to believe that human beings can live without narratives. If something is taken away, something else must be given in its place. The intellectuals must offer intelligent, but comprehensible, interpretations of people's impressions of the world in which they live; and they must give people the tools to make such interpretations, in a qualified way, for themselves.

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