

Intellectuals and "the oppressed"

Colin Waugh

'Prepare to meet the King of Terrors,' cried
To prayerless Want, his plunderer ferret-eyed:
'I am the King of Terrors,' Want replied.

Ebenezer Elliott (1781-1849) - the "Corn Law rhymer" (1)

"What the masses need is general education, theory which gives them the chance of making a system out of the detail acquired from experience and which helps to forge a deadly weapon against our enemies."

Rosa Luxemburg (2)

What can the relation be between "intellectuals" (including FHE lecturers) and "the oppressed", and what do Frank Furedi, Don Carroll and Respect say about this? (By "the oppressed" here I mean people who lack access both to land and to employment and who, as a result, are constantly under the threat of not having enough to eat.)

The main idea of Furedi's *Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone?* (3) is that, in countries like the UK or US, a "cultural elite" uses political correctness and "dumbing down" to interfere with the production of intellectuals and to stop those who already exist commenting on major issues. Furedi treats this as the main problem the world faces.

You might expect the former Marxist Furedi to locate his points within a class perspective. He might, for example, have argued that those in power use political correctness to restrain expressions of prejudice so that its practice - and hence the division of the working class along lines of colour, gender etc and its immobilisation as a progressive force - can go on all the more. But in fact he writes in an ostensibly class-neutral manner. One effect of this is that he does not investigate past discussion by socialists of "the intellectuals", and therefore ignores the crucial exchange of ideas about this that took place around 1900, starting within the German SPD, at that time by far the largest leftwing party in the world.

On paper at least, the main participants in that discussion would all have accepted the following ideas. After human societies began to produce surpluses, a "division of labour" developed between people who did the thinking and those

who did manual work, with the former coming eventually to live off and control the surplus. From then on, whatever the specific mode of production, those who specialise in thinking - "the intellectuals" - have remained either members or direct agents of the ruling class. Under a social order based on the equal liability of all to labour - that is, socialism as the SPD understood it - this "division of labour" would necessarily cease to exist, and everyone would be both a producer, a thinker and a decision-maker. The working class, as organised in Germany by the SPD, would bring socialism into existence. Both as a prerequisite for this and in the process, working class activists would acquire a conscious understanding of why socialism is necessary and of how to bring it about.

Disagreement arose, however, because some of those involved maintained that the economic forces impelling workers to fight against employers would, with the experience of such fights, be sufficient to generate this conscious understanding, whereas the SPD's main theoretician, Karl Kautsky, argued that, on the contrary, workers could acquire this only from "intellectuals" (4).

A socialist now might pick out one of the strands in Kautsky's reasoning, apply it in an over-simple manner to the modern world, and end up with Furedi's standpoint. This would involve supposing that the reason why we do not have socialism today is that capitalism has debased the standard of its intellectuals. There are two main reasons why this idea - and hence Furedi's view itself - is mistaken.

First, while "intellectuals" as universities and the like produce them under capitalism can point out ways in which capitalism is irrational, and can form Utopian visions of life "under socialism", they cannot bring a conscious understanding of socialism to workers. This is because they cannot arrive at such an understanding themselves except through their contacts with the one group of people who understand capitalist exploitation from the receiving end, namely workers. The university-educated bourgeois radical Karl Marx was able to arrive at such a conception because, both directly and through his collaborator Frederick Engels, he had spent time in discussion with workers, discussion to which he brought a capacity for abstract thought acquired through his own education. The concept of socialism was co-produced by intellectuals and working class people in dialogue and constitutes a

fusion of both sides' contributions. To the extent that Kautsky's formulation failed to reflect this, it was flawed.

Secondly, even if Kautsky's formulation had been entirely correct at the time, it has become inadequate since, because the line between intellectuals and workers has been blurred. Thus in the UK, more and more people with degrees from traditional universities have been and are being turned into waged employees, and more and more people from working class backgrounds have been and are being educated to degree level. It is not sufficient now for socialists merely to say that working class people should have access to higher education full-stop, without addressing the content of that education, how it is conducted and who controls it, to what ends and in which class interests.

To the extent that there is a class dimension to Furedi's argument as he himself presents it, this consists solely in the claim that political correctness and "dumbing down" prevent working class people as individuals from acquiring valid higher education. In other words, he assumes that higher education is valid until these factors start to affect it. Therefore socialists who embrace Furedi's contentions without modification necessarily fall foul both of the flaw in Kautsky's original formulation and of developments since.

Nevertheless, we must be in favour of high quality teaching and learning in HE, and must oppose moves to represent as easy material which is both demanding in terms of concentration, prior learning etc, and challenging to existing assumptions. Further, we should defend the research activity of elite academics to the extent that it constitutes valid exploration of the world, even though their background may be privileged and their views reactionary. In order to do this **effectively**, we need to recognise that the main threat to this research is not the extension of HE to wider circles, but **commodification** and the influence of private funding, especially over science. However, Furedi puts forward no strategy by which working class and/or socialist organisations could resist these forces, let alone criteria by which people without specialist knowledge could distinguish valid aspects of elite research from those which are false.

Here, as **elsewhere**, it is hard to see how he could have reached the positions he advocates without having lost faith in the **capacity** of working class people to make a better world. And in fact he substitutes for this a Utopian notion: that the **Enlightenment**, portrayed as a golden age of innovative thinkers fearlessly making public their ideas in the interests of all, could be revived. But this is ahistorical. We need to defend and revive the legacy of Enlightenment thought, and especially of secular rationalism, against religious fundamentalism and other anti-democratic pressures, but we cannot do so by ignoring the real relation of 18th century intellectuals to the struggles of the capitalist class against the landed aristocracy, nor can we simply embrace their pre-dialectical materialism.

On an up-to-date definition of "working class" - one that encompasses "middle class" employees like FHE lecturers - the conception of the working class as the uniquely valid agent of social change is the one principle which offers a positive way forward. We need to convince grassroots practitioners in every field that they could run things better - both ethically and technically - than they are run under capital-

ism. That is why we aspire to organise basic grade practitioners across FHE, and why we advocate, as a dimension of that organisation, teaching and learning which foster generic competence in working class students. It is within this framework that we tackle issues about the role of "intellectuals".

In his articles for *PSE* and elsewhere, Don Carroll has argued that people in a range of jobs, including that of FE lecturer, should become "knowledge workers" - autonomous, creative problem solvers - and that therefore the key questions are, on the one hand, how to roll back management models which hamper this, and, on the other, how to reverse the tendency for workers to see themselves as victims, and encourage them to take the opportunities this rollback would open up.

Although this emphasis on the need for individuals to be independent occurs also in Furedi's book, Don has no truck with the project of reviving elitism in education. On the contrary, he thinks that everybody should be under an obligation to become as competent and pro-active as possible, with colleges being changed so they promote this. (If anything, he perhaps underestimates the continuing necessity for specialised academic research.) In addition, whereas the sociology professor Furedi seems to lack any sense that political correctness and "dumbing down" may reflect underlying social or economic developments, Don grounds his thesis in a real change in the way in which, for one sector of the economy and its workforce - silicon valley-type product designers - production is organised. Nevertheless, there are problems with his approach.

Don argues that there should be less "management" (in the sense of supervision) and more "managing" (workers solving problems on their own initiative).

The problem with saying that self-management by individual workers offers a general way forward is that the autonomy of specific groups of workers now (for example software designers) is only possible because of the concentration of production (for example, the mining operations, transport infrastructure and factories needed to produce silicon chips) into units which are less and less amenable to individual control. Or, in financial terms, there may well be more and more small shareholders, but bigger and bigger proportions of shares are owned by smaller and smaller proportions of the world's population. This means that in reality we face a choice between, on the one hand, advocating the democratisation both of technical planning and of financial control (that is, socialist revolution) or, on the other, acquiescing in the way things are going now.

The first of these options is only open to people who think that the working class retains the potential to overthrow capitalism. Suppose, however, that you think that working class struggle for state power is off the agenda for good, but at the same time recognise the exploitative nature and damaging side-effects of capitalism. You might then take refuge in the idea that things would be better if as many workers as possible were to be directly exploited only by themselves, as some self-employed field service engineers or design consultants arguably are now.

This is a Utopia, not a solution. There is the appearance - and even partly the reality - of a resurgent petty bourgeoisie now, not because production as a whole is returning to arti-

san-type modes of organisation, but because of the opposite: unprecedented consolidation of capital. People who were once miners or steelworkers, for example, are window cleaners or the like now because mergers, take-overs, new management techniques, technological change and the relocation of production to low-wage areas have led to their expulsion from those jobs. The same consolidation is also leading to the re-appearance of Victorian style factories, where subcontractors use sweated labour to make components the production of which has been outsourced to them by big manufacturers because it would cost them more to automate it. Every supposedly "autonomous" "knowledge-worker" designing software in Seattle, Cambridge etc depends on hundreds of young women in southeast Asia being worked till their eyes fail. Likewise, in UK FE, a group of freelance consultants can go round colleges advocating new approaches to teaching because incorporation led to one in three lecturers being driven out of their jobs, to the destruction of the space in which those who remained could develop their own approaches, and eventually to the out-sourcing of curriculum and staff development to quangos.

The "knowledge workers" idea, then, like Furedi's desire to end political correctness and "dumbing down", makes sense only in a context which its author is unwilling to supply, namely that of working class and socialist theory, collective self-organisation and action. If, as we should, FHE lecturers organise themselves to be pro-active and autonomous in building and rank and file movement in their unions and in developing a valid concept and practice of teaching and learning, this would entail that we appropriate "knowledge" that the employers and their agents do not want us to have, and which they must sooner or later try to strip from us. Hence, in seeking to become knowledge workers we would necessarily, in the end, be organising against them, and to suggest otherwise is misleading. Unless placed in this context, the knowledge workers idea is a return to the kind of petty bourgeois Utopia advocated by people like Proudhon in the mid 1800s, and as such its advocacy represents a failure to learn from discussion of that at the time, just as Furedi's approach involves a failure to learn from discussion in the SPD.

Up to now we have been looking at two views of "intellectuals", neither of which say anything explicitly about "the oppressed". We now turn to look at a view of "the oppressed" which is silent about "intellectuals".

The political party Respect has been brought into existence from the anti-war movement mainly by the Socialist Workers Party. It seeks to act in solidarity with a range of other groups, campaigns and individuals involved in struggles against "globalisation". These groups include the Muslim Association of Britain, which is linked to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas in Palestine. It says of itself: "We campaign for peace, equality and social justice" and "We want a world in which the democratic demands of the people are carried out" (5). Obviously the words "the people" are important here, because to choose them instead of "the workers" implies turning away from the idea that the working class alone is capable of leading other groups, including self-employed individuals, small business people and "the oppressed", in struggles for justice, democracy, socialism and so on. In other words, it reflects a position similar to that

underlying the approaches adopted by Don and by Frank Furedi.

Respect is partly a tie-up between two groups of intellectuals: on the one hand, the leading figures in the SWP, and, on the other, the university lecturers and similar people who are prominent in the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots. I will attempt to show that in their approach to organising wider circles, the first of these groups risks failing to learn from one of the main modern models for politicising "the oppressed", that of the Brazilian literacy educator Paulo Freire.

Freire's concept of literacy development as "conscientisation" hinges on a dialogue between, on the one hand, intellectuals (for example, priests, teachers, agronomists etc) and, on the other, poor peasants or urbanised slum-dwellers. While describing the structure of this dialogue in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first published in 1970, Freire quoted in a footnote the words of Mao Tse Tung in an interview: "... we must teach the masses clearly what we have received from them confusedly", and added: "This affirmation contains an entire dialogical theory of how to construct the programme content of education . . ." (6). At one level, the idea Freire expressed here is correct, and in line with the way in which, as maintained above, the modern conception of socialism emerged from a dialogue between people skilled in abstract reasoning and working class activists. In another book, Freire also expressed this idea in the following terms: "... when we consider adult literacy learning or education in general as an act of knowing, we are advocating a synthesis between the educator's maximally systematised knowing and the learner's minimally systematised knowing - a synthesis achieved in dialogue" (7).

This model, though valuable, contains at least two serious weaknesses. First, it underestimates the extent to which the view of the world held by "oppressed" people may contain reactionary elements alongside authentic perceptions. (Freire tends to attribute the presence of these elements to direct indoctrination by ruling elites rather than try to account for it historically or sociologically.) And secondly, it fails to specify what role, if any, is to be played in the dialogue by academic knowledge possessed by the educators. But for the dialogue to be complete, the educators should, in learning from "the oppressed" feed what they have learnt back into a critique of their own academic knowledge, and in the process of doing this, they should also help to equip "the oppressed" with a capacity to make such critiques for themselves, because otherwise, having learned to read, the latter will at once be at risk of being misled by the false side of that dominant knowledge. To think otherwise is fatally to underestimate its power.

Freire allowed this flaw to creep into his model because, although he based himself on Marx's early writings, he based himself also on liberation theology. According to this latter ideology, intellectuals who work with "the oppressed" undergo a form of "class suicide" or "Easter experience" in which they metaphorically die to the values of their own class in order to be reborn with those of "the oppressed". (This idea is powerfully communicated in the film *Motorcycle Journeys*, where the young Che Guevara is shown swimming across a river that divides the patients in a leper colony from the staff.) However, this if this had been in czarist Russia it would have had more in common with the Narodniks' strategy of "going

to the people" than with the Bolshevik one of organising and patient persuading the working class.

This flaw in Freire's model implies that the control exercised over knowledge by mainstream intellectuals - those who have not gone over to the oppressed - must remain unchallenged at the level of ideological struggle. And this in turn, in any situation where there is also a struggle for political power, must lead, as it did in China under Mao Tse Tung and in Cambodia under Pol Pot, to one section of intellectuals organising the destruction of the other, accompanied by the suppression both of workers and "the oppressed".

In Freire's case, this problem arose against his better judgement, in the sense that his writings consistently stress that failure to engage critically with theory reduces every attempted action to a reaction against what those in power do. But with Respect, there seems to have been, rather, a decision to put theory to one side, on the grounds that this will open the way to action.

The relation between theory and practice is necessarily dialectical. Thought cannot be theory unless there is practice which it theorises, and activity cannot be practice unless there is theory which it implements. Further, if people engage in activity - whether that of paid employment or of political organisation - they must either theorise that activity for themselves or be constrained, knowingly or otherwise, by the ideas of previous participants as taken up and reshaped by those who have the time and capacity to think. It follows from this that one of the main things socialists have to do, including where possible through colleges and universities, is to help wider and wider circles of working class people develop a capacity for theorisation, thereby starting to reverse here and now, within class society, the "division of labour" which goes back to the origins of that society. Leftwing organisations which fail to address this cannot avoid reproducing eventually that division of labour within their own ranks.

It is more vital now than at any time since the industrial revolution that socialists help people develop a capacity to theorise. For much of the period between 1918 and the 1980s it was clear that most of those being drawn or driven off the land would eventually become factory workers or the dependents of factory workers. In short, "the oppressed" were mostly on their way into a relatively homogeneous industrial working class. This clarity has gone. On top of this, especially in the countries where industry was formerly concentrated, the situation is further confused by the apparent - and also partly real - resurgence of a petty bourgeoisie. All classes are being restructured. It is therefore more important than ever that socialists equip themselves and others with the theoretical capacity to see how the essential underlying relation - that of a minority who own the means of production to a majority who do not - remains the same - in other words, that they try constantly to produce themselves and others, whatever their class background and however volatile their current class position, as class conscious thinkers and organisers. The more we learn about the strengths and weaknesses of earlier thinking, the better we shall be able to do this.

Notes:

1. David Wright (ed), *The Penguin Book of English Romantic Verse* (Penguin Books, 1976) p206.
2. Quoted in J.P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg* (Abridged Edition), (Oxford University Press, 1966) p266.
3. Frank Furedi, *Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone? Confronting 21st Century Philistinism* (Continuum, 2005)
4. Quoted in V.I. Lenin, *What's To Be Done?* (1902).
5. "What We Stand For" in Respect Sheffield Newsletter, December 2005,
6. Paulo Freire, trans Myra Bergman Ramos, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Penguin Books, 1972) p66.
7. Paulo Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom* (Penguin Books, 1974) p36.

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For further information, contact the Secretary:

**Dr John Hewitt, 33 Hillyfields, DUNSTABLE, Beds LU6 3NS;
john.hewitt22@virgin.net**

CAFAS website: www.cafas.org.uk