

CROSSROADS

An interdisciplinary journal for the study
of history, philosophy, religion and classics

VOLUME II ISSUE I 2007

ISSN: 1833-878X

Pages 74-78

Luiz Costa Lima

The Intellectual and the Professional

ABSTRACT

This short paper is based on a daily experience. Watching TV news, one observes, and not only in Brazil, a wide gap between professional interviews and so-called cultural journalism. While the first kind, concerning political and/or economical matters, is generally well done, with precise questions and replies, the cultural journalism is progressively disappearing. From this experience, this paper tries to develop the outcome for professional expertise and the parallel decline of the humanities scholar able to reflect with precision but also with the necessary breadth. The 'cultural journalism' becomes a sort of remainder, a disappearing species in a technical world.

BIOGRAPHY

Luiz Costa Lima is a full professor of Comparative Literature, at Pontifícia Universidade Católica, in Rio de Janeiro. He has taught at the University of Minnesota (1984-6), and has been a visiting professor at Stanford University, Johns Hopkins University, Montréal, Paris VIII, Universidad Iberoamericana (Mexico). He has also been a researcher at the Zenter für literarische Forschung (Berlin). In 1992, he received the *Humboldt Preis* for his work as a foreign researcher in Humanities. His books are originally published in Portuguese. Three of them are translated into English: *Control of the imaginary: Reason and imagination in modern times*, University of Minnesota Press, Minn, 1988, *The Dark side of reason: Fictionality and power*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1992, *The Limits of voice: Montaigne, Schlegel, Kafka*, Stanford University Press, Stanford,

1996. His most recent book, *História. Ficção: Literatura*, won a prize for the best theoretical book on literature published in Brazil during 2006.

THE INTELLECTUAL AND THE PROFESSIONAL

I express my acknowledgement for the kind invitation to take part in this round table, especially because without it I'd probably never had a chance to approach this theme. I only regret the short time at my disposal.ⁱ

I'll try to build my argument taking into account two different points of take-off. The first one was shown in a recent interview with Jürgen Habermas.ⁱⁱ The well-known German philosopher and sociologist confronts the traditionally modern condition of intellectuals and their position inside the mediatic world, in which we have to live today. Since the Enlightenment, one could say that the proper intellectual sphere belonged to a 'political culture of contradiction'. This provoked a specific environment, characterized by tensions and divergences, publicly displayed, whose finality would be to break a homogeneous opinion, in order to stimulate further debates and discussions, and, when possible, more comprehensive views.

This 'culture of contradiction' became famous in association with Voltaire's and Diderot's names, passing through Émile Zola, at the end of nineteenth century, which opened the protest against the so-called Dreyfus trial, up to Jean-Paul Sartre in the twentieth century. Sartre's interventions against French politics in Algeria or the Cuban embargo are probably still remembered today. Most notably, I'd take as a remarkable example Hannah Arendt's position during the trial opened by the Israel government against Adolf Eichmann, a recognized war criminal. Although Arendt was, since her days under Nazism, an active Zionist and, later, a known Jewish political thinker, she was absolutely contrary to the trial itself and the publicity generated around it by Israel, because it would promote, as she said in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 'the banality of evil'.ⁱⁱⁱ In court, Eichmann's crimes were transformed into a theater and the audience exposed to 'a spectacle as sensational as the Nuremberg Trials'. This theater began to lose its connection with 'piety and terror' by becoming like a branch of some Hollywood studio. The reason for this metamorphosis is easy to understand. While the Aristotelian *catharsis* is one of the most difficult parts of his *Poetics*, the Hollywood solution is agreeable to everyone.

Arendt's case interests me for two reasons: (a) taking a position which seemed contradictory to her own trajectory, Arendt was pressing the reader to give up a passive attitude and to think over the whole affair - justice versus publicity; (b) it is effectively a decisive moment because it discloses the punctual instant in which Western intellectuals have had to face the media. In other words, instead of taking refuge in their supposed expertise, intellectuals have had to activate their 'political culture of contradiction'. Independently from my own argument, I am not questioning if Arendt was right in doing what she did and her attitude was certainly strongly criticized by the Israeli government and around the world. Rather, what interests me is the significance of maintaining the intellectual tradition in a transformed world. Especially because the 'banality of evil' has since become assimilated into our everyday life. We are up to date with the tsunamis. However, the mediatic style of its presentation stresses a fear of the world and not cares for the world.

At this point, let us get back to Habermas: without referring to particular cases, like Arendt, Habermas observes that the increasing influence of the media affects the traditional position held by intellectuals. The media provokes an 'iconic turn', a sort of parody of the famous 'linguistic turn'; that is, 'TV invites its partakers to represent themselves'. Instead of developing discussions and raising alternatives to some crucial question, the intellectual becomes a *performer, a new kind of performer*. The intellectual's ability in using rhetorical devices is transformed into a way of self-representation. So, instead of arguments with which one can agree or disagree, the intellectual becomes an expert in funny/witty phrases, to be repeated again and again in various places in a global world. For an example of this, let us return to the fate of Arendt. I am concerned with the use of the phrase 'banality of evil'. As Matthew Lamb has observed,^{iv} this phrase is widely used in public discussion but without any indication that its employment implies some understanding or appraisal of the context in which it was originally coined or the theoretical use Arendt has made of it. 'Banality of evil' is the higher modern contribution to the catalogue of our western *topoi*. People apply the phrase with the same ado as they say 'good morning'. Arendt's attempts at activating a 'culture of contradiction' have been hindered by robot-like receivers.

In this environment, a former master of dialogue is transformed into a new kind of buffoon or, what is more probable, he retires him or herself from the public sphere and is satisfied to be recognized as an expert in some precise, ideally narrow field, on which he or she must be consulted, increasing his or her prestige and... income.

The alternative for intellectuals become to either compete with professional performers, accomplishing a kind of 'reality show', or to talk about a restrictive area. That is, to appear as an expert that pronounces a professional view, nowadays usually about questions of market, ecology or military interventions of the great potencies.

Unfortunately, I have not time enough to discuss the consequences of this mediatic effect on humanities professors. Briefly, I'd say that he or she is tempted to try to adapt his or her behaviour in classrooms to the performer's model. To discuss a subject, showing the different views on it, seems a little boring and presents a financial risk for the institutions. The professor's duty is to show an easy and agreeable *résumé* of a certain state of affairs. The practice of serious and hard discussion is given up. Likewise, the public sphere is left to politicians and all kinds of showmen. The other choice, to talk about only the question on which the professor is an expert, has equally disturbing consequences. If we visualise, for instance, a professor of comparative literature or philosophy, the trend is to talk about a certain national literature or, rather, of a certain intellectual period, if not of a specific writer or philosopher, with no space assigned to asking about what the devil 'literature' could be? Or what is 'fiction'? Or 'philosophy'? Or why is it possible to discuss if a certain text is a 'novel' or if it rather belongs to historiography? The attempt to establish borders among discourses or genres is mistaken as essentialism, a sort of sin from which we must be far removed, very far removed indeed. In short, theoretical discussions are rejected and dismissed. They are old-fashioned and unable to increase the levels of audience.

In some countries and continents, like Latin America, this was always the fate of theoretical discussions. In the international field, however, the same rejection of theoretical discussions is also apparent. It does not matter what one's opinion on Kenneth Burke or de Man's ideas as well as Peter Szondi or Wolfgang Iser's theories are. The fact is that if one is interested in more recent ideas or theories, one will discover that one is faced with a void or an abyss. It is clear what the reason for this void is: theories are not 'proper' for performers and... professionals.

I am afraid I have developed the first point of take-off for too long. Let us consider the second one in a shorter space of time. In a text written by a theoretical physicist and published in an unspecialised journal, *The New York Review of Books*,^v Freeman Dyson discusses the present state of theoretical physics. According to him, the great question in physics today is whether or not the scientists must resign themselves to a dual theory, general relativity for larger objects (such as planets and stars) and quantum mechanics for small ones. Dyson emphasises that both theories imply mathematical contradictions, since each one denies the other. Contrary to the common expectation, he opposes the proponents of a third, encompassing theory, because, he says, it is not mathematically cogent to do so.

It is the critical situation in which he sees a hard science like physics that concerns me. Dyson's position is not similar to someone who would say: 'I am an expert in this area, I choose this theory and am not interested in contradictions; as time goes by, and at a certain moment, a new genius will appear to solve our domestic problems.' Instead of this conformist position, which would be quite similar to our colleagues who would recognize the performer/professional alternative, Dyson proposes a dual compromise: 'Theoretical science may be divided roughly into two parts, analytic and synthetic. Analytic science reduces complicated phenomena to their simpler components' parts. Synthetic science builds up complicated structures from their simpler parts. Analytic science works downward to find the fundamental equations. Synthetic science works upward to find new and unexpected solutions. . . . Good science requires a balance between analytic and synthetic tools.'

Regarding the reactivation of this 'culture of contradiction' in the humanities studies, in particular, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht introduces a potentially useful notion in *Production of Presence*. He claims that the main purpose of his book is the 'complexification of concepts', in which 'good academic teaching is a staging of complexity'.^{vi} He balances this with the usual interpretative or hermeneutic practice of identifying and attributing meaning to cultural objects, a sort of 'dual-compromise', which bears some similarity to our understanding of Freeman Dyson's physics model.

It may seem strange that we adopt physics as a model example for a quite different discipline like the humanities. I am not insinuating that we must literally follow its steps. I am simply stating that, instead of following our actual alternative, that is, trying to be incorporated as a performer, by the media or looking to become a professional, it may be more productive for the humanities to consider opening up a different view from the one adopted by those interested in reducing complicated problems to operational solutions and those who, on the contrary, are ready to invest in the opposite direction, which means converting simpler components into more complicated structures. In this way, it would be complete non-sense to *privilege only* the downward or the upward way. All intellectual activities, not only the scientific undertaking, suppose downward and upward researches, that is, operational and theoretical investments. It is true that this consideration is allied to a previous one: practical and operational ways, or refined and theoretical ways, must be exercised by *intellectuals* and not only by *professionals*. This means that they must be exercised by agents interested in contributing to a 'political culture of contradiction' instead of being addressed toward audiences, whose previous positions are then simply

reinforced. In a different terminology, a 'political culture of contradiction' means a dialogic engagement. Without it, we will be contributing not only to an anomic but to a robotistic society.

REFERENCES

ⁱ Paper presented to XVIII Congress of International Comparative Literature Association entitled "Beyond binarisms: beyond binarisms, discontinuities and displacements in comparative literature," Rio de Janeiro, July 29 to August 4, 2007.

ⁱⁱ Jürgen Habermas, "Terra instável" (Unstable earth), interview in the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* São Paulo, April 1, 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (London, Faber and Faber, 1963, revised in 1965).

^{iv} Personal correspondence.

^v Freeman Dyson, "The world on a string," *The New York Review of Books* May, 13, 2004.

^{vi} Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford University Press, 2004).