

Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain

Review Number:

555

Publish date:

Tuesday, 31 October, 2006

Author:

Stefan Collini

ISBN:

9780199291052

Date of Publication:

2006

Price:

£25.00

Pages:

231pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

Dan LeMahieu

There is an old joke that doing intellectual history is like nailing jelly to the door. The field deals with abstractions that resist clear definition. Rudimentary notions of historical causality prove difficult to establish. Selecting representative figures depends upon contested assumptions about cultural hierarchy. In his new book, Stefan Collini provides his own variant of intellectual history when he addresses the nature, role, and significance of intellectuals in twentieth-century Britain. Acutely aware of the ambiguities of his subject, Collini provides a unifying thesis that valiantly attempts to unite the complexities of several generations of intellectuals reflecting upon themselves and their influence on society. Whether he succeeds in this ambitious undertaking very much depends upon how one evaluates his method of argument, his approach to intellectual history, and his provocative rhetorical style.

Collini's method of argument is to assert a strong claim, provide extensive evidence and analysis that heavily qualifies or sometimes directly contradicts the claim, and then imply that the original claim still stands. Sometimes, of course, the qualifications and contradictions can be resolved into various 'paradoxes', a favorite term of Collini. But at other times, especially in the treatment of specific individuals, the method allows the author to slate figures while at the same time appearing to give them their due. Collini has strong opinions, which to his credit his own research often undermines; the tension between these two opposing forces often make this book frustrating to read. An argument emerges, gets lost in discursive detail, then emerges again, curiously unaffected.

The title of the book is *Absent Minds*. Absence customarily means 'not present; not existing'.

The question of intellectuals was posed and answered in various ways in twentieth-century Britain. This book attempts to chart some of that variety, but one cluster of responses tended, and still tends, to dominate discussion, namely the claim that in Britain intellectuals have been peculiarly unimportant or even non-existent (p. 3).

Note that there are two versions of 'absent minds': one (weaker, which the sentence implies to be more predominant) in which they are present but unimportant; and the other (stronger, but more marginal) in which they are 'non-existent'. This version is particularly difficult to document.

Since the claim about the absence of intellectuals in Britain is a long-standing and widely-held cultural conviction, it cannot be tracked down to a set of definitive statements, still less to a single locus classicus (p. 3).

In its strongest form, the 'absence thesis' is at once everywhere and nowhere. It is an opinion that no one opines.

But even in its weaker form, it proves difficult to nail this jelly to the door. Here to avoid obvious difficulties Collini must qualify his definition of the term 'intellectual'. He does not mean them in 'the sociological sense' or those who can be classified as intellectuals by occupation. Nor does he deal with them in the 'subjective sense' or those individuals interested in ideas for their own sake. Collini's 'absent minds' proves to be about intellectuals in the 'cultural sense', that is those 'who deploy an acknowledged intellectual position or achievement in addressing a broader, non-specialist public' (p. 47). Yet, having provided these useful distinctions, Collini begins to backtrack.

To the extent that this [the 'question of intellectuals'] involves attending to earlier statements about these issues which may not have discriminated at all precisely the sense or senses of the term being used, the following chapters necessarily trench on past discussions of all three senses and of the various approximations and compounds that preceded them. But where I am speaking in my own voice and using the word to characterize the role played by particular individuals, 'intellectuals' are being spoken of in this book in the (now dominant) cultural sense of the term (p. 51).

At once opaque and tautological, these sentences capture Collini's elusive style of argument. Even in its weakest form, it turns out, the 'absence thesis' does not form 'a smooth progression or cumulation' (p. 85). Victorian public intellectuals played a prominent role in national debates (p. 75). If 'non-political' definitions of the term intellectual predominated early in the twentieth century, many figures involved themselves in the 'cultural sense'. The 1920s and especially the 1930s proved a heyday for public intellectuals, although, as Collini remarks casually, 'this book deliberately frustrates discussion about the period' (p. 86). Only in the 1950s and 1960s does the 'absence thesis' emerge, particularly among certain New Left partisans. But here again numerous counter-cases muddy the waters. The Now-You-See-It, Now-You-Don't quality of the 'absence thesis' makes its refutation all the easier. Collini slays a phantom dragon.

But it is not simply in enunciating an overall thesis that Collini's argument lacks clarity. He devotes a number of chapters to specific figures 'whose writings about intellectuals were particularly influential and whose performance, or lack of it, in the role were particularly expressive of the tensions at work in the "paradoxes of denial"' (p. 12). Some of these figures, such as R. G. Collingwood, he seems to like; others meet a less charitable fate, as in the chapter entitled 'Nothing to Say: A. J. P. Taylor'. Like 'Absent Minds', 'Nothing to Say' seems to embody a number of meanings, both asserted and contradicted, often within the same paragraph. The chapter begins with Taylor's famous dissent at the 'Congress of Intellectuals' in 1948,

where, despite his powerful left-wing convictions, he refused to engage in Communist propaganda and eloquently defended freedom of speech. Collini also charts Taylor's intense commitment to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which 'suggests something of the energy and capacity he could bring to an activity when he cared passionately about something outside himself' (p. 382). But then, a few pages later, we learn that 'there wasn't something he indisputably 'stood for' other than being clever, knowledgeable, heterodox, fluent, amusing...for being, in short, A.J.P. Taylor' (p. 389). What one hand gives, the other takes away.

'Nothing to Say' might also refer to Taylor's 'insistence that history yielded no inferences or moral for the present as well as precious little pattern in the past' (p. 386). What Collini means by 'moral' (lessons?) or 'pattern' (grand narratives?) cannot be discerned, but his accusation becomes clearer further down the page: 'the question about Taylor as in intellectual must remain whether he had anything to say which touched, in important ways, the general concerns of his publics'. But then, in the same paragraph, Collini acknowledges that Taylor 'did help people in the present to place themselves in a tradition or a development which offered to alter their self-understanding' (p. 386). Or, a few sentences later, that Taylor 'did offer his readers and listeners, and eventually viewers, a perspective on the world, a perspective based on a deep grounding in the political and diplomatic history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe' (p. 387). Or that 'among the striking virtues of his numerous substantial works of history was a capacity to identify a narrative or analytical thread which brought together causes and accidents, ideas and personalities, in some persuasive way' (p. 389). Still, the title stands. The accusation remains intact. A. J. P. Taylor had 'Nothing to Say.'

Collini approaches intellectual history in a manner all his own. He admits that his method owes 'more to literary criticism than to political science or sociology' (p. 8), and argues that his topic requires 'literary tactics that are varied and discrepant, even at times frankly opportunistic ... All this makes for a deliberate unevenness of treatment' (p. 9). Largely unaffected by forty years of postmodern literary theory, Collini engages in clever readings of idiosyncratically-selected texts combined with decisive judgments about their value, in some ways reminiscent of Leslie Stephen in works such as the *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876). Then too, these readings frequently tease out various inconsistencies, ironies, and tensions, not unlike the New Critics of the mid-twentieth century. Collini's interpretations often prove original, as one should expect. For example, he devotes an entire chapter to Julien Benda's *La Trahison des clercs* where, after dispensing with the question of its relevance to a book about British intellectuals, he shows how and why the book's thesis appealed in contradictory ways to subsequent generations. The title could apply to intellectuals who intervened in politics and to those who eschewed such engagement. It also expressed the 'double fantasy' for intellectuals of divorce from the world and involvement in it without contamination (p. 297).

Yet, this approach can also be oddly unhistorical. With only intermittent attention to historical context, Collini often engages in polemics against his subjects as if they were his contemporaries, perhaps even his rivals. He reads their writings carefully and passes judgment upon them with only passing regard for the complex social and cultural forces which shaped them. As often noticed, Collini criticizes the New Left and the New Right with equal fervor. What he does not address in sufficient detail are the much tougher questions about how, for example, the social, political, and cultural context of the 1950s and 1960s shaped the New Left's views of both foreign and domestic intellectuals and why, partly in response to these concerns and others, the New Right felt compelled in the 1970s to formulate countervailing ideas of their own. Instead, Collini provides a series of often-dismissive interpretations about selected texts of both groups, dishing them with the chapter title: 'New Left, New Right, Old Story.' This approach to intellectual history often makes for lively reading, but it also exposes a surprising naiveté about the differences that separate one period of time from another. Historians often struggle with bridging these differences while still remaining *fair* to their subjects. Too often Collini treats the foreign country of the past like the stereotypical English tourist of old; he does not like it.

There is also the matter of chronology. Collini often reminds his readers that his book is 'neither a narrative history nor a comprehensive survey' (p. 64). Collini divides his book into five parts connected by either theme or approach. Partly as a result, the book often jumps around in a manner that conventional historians

may find disconcerting. The New Left is discussed in Chapter Eight. Seven chapters later appears an excellent discussion of George Orwell. Chapter Five discusses the inter-war debate over 'Highbrows and Other Aliens'. The discussion of T.S. Eliot is reserved for Chapter Thirteen, 167 pages later. Inevitably, perhaps, repetition ensues. 'As I discussed earlier' and its variants appear constantly, sometimes a number of times within the same paragraph. A helpful point about how the Dreyfus Affair affected British intellectuals shows up repeatedly, though special credit must be given for the phrase 'Dreyfus-envy,' used only twice. The loss of narrative flow means, perhaps deliberately, that certain elements of Collini's story become submerged, contributing to the sense that this book resembles more a collection of essays than a coherent historical analysis.

A short treatise could be written about Collini's rhetorical style. A masterful, if long-winded, polemicist, he employs tricks familiar to the successful debater. Not all these devices can be noted here, but some stand out. For example, he demonstrates the ability to anticipate the moves of his critics and to encompass their objections into his presentation. This tactic of pre-emption applies particularly to the extraordinary 'Introduction' to his book. Collini knows full well that in a very long work about a relatively narrow topic he often makes 'arbitrary or indefensibly idiosyncratic' choices of which intellectuals to discuss (p. 11). He notes that Keynes and Wittgenstein make only a fleeting appearance. More important, however, is another exclusion.

[This book] is not an exercise in 'recovery' in the currently fashionable sense. The voices to which it attends were among those most widely heard at the time, and, given my theme, necessarily so. For that reason, few of the figures discussed are women, even fewer were anything but highly educated, most were comparatively successful by conventional standards (p. 11).

Fashionable reviewers who dare to argue that Virginia Woolf deserves much more attention, or that any number of influential feminists after the 1960s 'widely heard at the time' ought to have made the cut, shall not affect Collini.

The book makes no pretence to being comprehensive, and I shall be more than unusually unmoved by readers and reviewers who complain that this or that important figure is absent from its pages (p. 8).

But there is another anticipatory comment that merits attention. Collini bases his book mainly on published sources. He feels no obligation 'to cite secondary literature except in cases of explicit indebtedness or criticism' and cannot imagine his audience fretting over 'the conscientiousness of my reading' (p. 11). As he tells us earlier:

Indeed, it is quite possible that I have now read more articles and essays on the subject of 'intellectuals in Britain' than anyone, alive or dead, has, thus far, ever done (p. 8).

As often observed, Collini writes with a self-assurance and superiority that infuse his judgments about the cultural authority of British intellectuals not unlike himself. Yet perhaps there is a dimension of uncertainty here worthy of notice.

Collini also proves eager to cast stones. Eschewing sociological analysis himself (pp. 8, 50), he criticizes similar work by the social theorist Edward Shils for lacking statistics, variables, and correlations (p. 148). He questions Pierre Bourdieu's use of capitalistic metaphors to describe intellectual activity (p. 57), but later writes: 'As we have seen, intellectual capital needs to be constantly reinvested; a strategy of pure

expenditure soon exhausts one's credit' (p. 486). When discussing the BBC after the Second World War, he seems to approve of the Reithian disgust of treating intellectuals just like any other minority (p. 447), but then argues in his conclusion largely the same point (p. 487). Connoisseurs of Collini's rhetorical style will particularly savour one element of his analysis of Perry Anderson's work.

The sneer has a legitimate place in polemic, of course, but perhaps one is not being too priggishly resistant to its playful use by remarking that it is carrying a little too much explanatory weight here (p. 178).

Without irony, Collini calls T. S. Eliot 'Mr Facing-Both-Ways' (p. 304) and accuses a number of thinkers, including George Orwell, of 'tendentiousness' (p. 354). His harsh analysis of Edward Said's Reith Lectures includes so many of the criticisms that he acknowledges reviewers might level at his own book that the section hints at self-reflexivity (pp. 427–32).

Then in the brief 'Epilogue' the tone shifts as a different persona replaces the aggressive, tough-minded polemicist. He reflects upon the role his book might play in future historiography. Perhaps he will open a whole new field of inquiry. Yes, criticisms may be wounding, but 'it will not require any implausibly Olympian detachment or wilful pollyannaism to regard such critiques as a sign of one kind of success'. For, you see, the book has really been about removing a 'deeply entrenched cultural prejudice' (p. 502). Collini has a dream. He dreams that one day intellectuals will be perceived as 'ordinary' and that 'perhaps it's time to stop thinking of intellectuals as Other People, and to try not to fall so easily into the related tabloid habits of demonizing and pedestalling' (p. 505). Yet a concern persists, an anxiety that haunts the book and, at the end of the day, finally becomes explicit; 'It is undeniable that any extended demolition of a view which, in its simplest form, is almost self-evidently false risks appearing a somewhat sterile exercise' (p. 502).

Other reviews:

The Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/absent-minds-intellectuals-in-britain-by-stefan-collini-477222.html> [2]

The Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/absent-minds-intellectuals-in-britain-by-stefan-collini-468214.html> [3]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/555>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2991>

[2] <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/absent-minds-intellectuals-in-britain-by-stefan-collini-477222.html>

[3] <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/absent-minds-intellectuals-in-britain-by-stefan-collini-468214.html>