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9 Celebrity intellectuals

It's better to think for oneself and to assess ideas on their own merits than to worry about whether they came from a famous intellectual or an unknown.

When I was much younger, I had illusions about people with good ideas. If I read a book that I thought expressed courageous and perceptive views, I generally assumed that the author was a “good” person—concerned, committed, and socially sensitive in various ways. As a result of numerous encounters over the years, I’ve had to toss out this belief.

A productive academic, “Freddo Carruthers,” was a long-time champion of the ideas of Jürgen Habermas, who is noted for his support for the ideal of free speech. Carruthers on occasion wrote books and articles based on the ideas of his research students, without giving the students a chance to see his writing before it was published. Carruthers believed in the Ideal Speech Situation but, when it came to promoting his career, did not practise it with his students.

Another academic was widely known as an advocate of democratic communication. He was also known to female students as an incorrigible harasser. They called him a sleazebag and took care not to go into his office alone, since they might be pinned to the wall and groped.

Another communication scholar was widely known for his prolific contributions. Not so widely known was his love for young female students, who he used to bed down in his office

through his declining years. He was also known to blackmail students, giving bad marks to those who refused his demands.

Paulo Freire was a well-known figure in the field of “critical pedagogy.” He was widely respected and received substantial funding from various government organisations. Blanca Facundo, a supporter of critical pedagogy, wrote a critique of Freire’s approach based on years of practical experience with the methods. This critique was well received by grassroots practitioners.¹ Freire responded with a personal attack on Facundo. Freire’s followers ignored the critique and continued their largely uncritical support of the master.

Then there are the violent ones. One widely respected US left-wing figure often beat his partner. But when she spoke out about it, no one seemed to want to know. Louis Althusser, a famous French left-wing intellectual, killed his wife.²

All this is nothing new. Many renowned intellectuals and activists have had feet of clay. Karl Marx, champion of the working class, tried to maintain a bourgeois lifestyle by borrowing from friends. He was notorious for his authoritarian behaviour in personal relations and socialist politics.³

Michael Bakunin, one of the greatest figures in anarchism, was vehemently opposed to all governments. At the same time, he plotted incessantly, created all sorts of secret cells and had grandiose ideas of capturing power.⁴

The flaws and foibles of left-wing intellectuals have been catalogued at length by Max Nomad, who seems to have made a

1. Blanca Facundo, *An Evaluation of Freire-Inspired Programs in the United States and Puerto Rico* (Puerto Rico: Latino Institute, 1984); <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/dissent/documents/Facundo/>.

2. Geraldine Finn, “Women and the ideology of science,” *Our Generation*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Winter 1982, pp. 40-50.

3. Jerrold Seigel, *Marx’s Fate: The Shape of a Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

4. Alfred P. Mendel, *Michael Bakunin: Roots of Apocalypse* (New York: Praeger, 1981). This is only one interpretation of Bakunin’s psychodynamics.

career out of puncturing illusions about those who see themselves as saviours of the workers.⁵

These examples are of male intellectuals, but females are not exempt. Marlene Dixon was a left-winger whose writings and activism were highly resented by male academics. In her book *Things Which Are Done in Secret* she wrote powerfully about the machinations used to get rid of her and others at McGill University.⁶ Later she became head of a Marxist-Leninist organisation. It had lofty ideals of gender and ethnic equality as part of revolutionary struggle. Dissident party members, on the other hand, portrayed Dixon as an abusive autocrat and alcoholic, enjoying privileges not permitted to the rank and file.⁷

But does it matter? What difference does it make whether great ideas come from flawed humans?

One answer is that it makes little or no difference. The key thing is the ideas themselves, not who came up with them. It is certainly true that ideas often can be used without being contaminated by where they came from. In the same way, it is possible to enjoy Wagner's music or Picasso's paintings without being affected by the politics or sexual life of Wagner or Picasso.

Another answer is that it does matter. Knowing the origins of ideas can help in assessing the ideas themselves. For example, a close analysis of the social context of early Marxism provides clues to limitations in Marxist theory itself, especially the privileged role it gives to intellectuals.⁸ A study of the social influences on Darwin's thought—Malthus's ideas of a competi-

5. Max Nomad, *Rebels and Renegades* (New York: Macmillan, 1932); Max Nomad, *Aspects of Revolt* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1959).

6. Marlene Dixon, *Things Which Are Done in Secret* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1976).

7. Peter Siegel, Nancy Strohl, Laura Ingram, David Roche and Jean Taylor, "Leninism as cult: the Democratic Workers Party," *Socialist Review*, Vol. 17, No. 6, November-December 1987, pp. 59-85.

8. Alvin W. Gouldner, *Against Fragmentation: The Origins of Marxism and the Sociology of Intellectuals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

tive struggle for survival were influential—provides insight into biases in evolutionary theory.⁹

To determine social influences on ideas can be a challenging task. There is no guarantee of finding anything in particular or anything at all. Even so, the behaviour of thinkers provides a basis for beginning an investigation. If communication scholars are plagiarists or sexual harassers, this does not automatically mean that communication theories are flawed. But if there are gross discrepancies between theory and behaviour, it is worthwhile finding out how they are justified or tolerated.

There is another way in which it matters that great ideas come from flawed individuals. It relates to the cult of celebrities.

Richard Schickel points out that the celebrity is a twentieth-century phenomenon, created especially by movies and television. He describes a culture of celebrity, in which people strive to be well known, even if this is only because they have appeared on the screen. The culture of celebrity, he argues, is undermining many traditional practices. For example, politicians are sold on the media in terms of image rather than policies.¹⁰

David Marshall argues that there is a system of celebrity which continues even though individuals come and go. The system depends on an interaction between celebrities and their audiences. The celebrity system is related to capitalism in that personality is made into a commodity.¹¹

The cult of celebrities is making increasing inroads into scholarly circles. While many academics personally detest publicity about their work, some are gaining a public profile. At

9. Robert M. Young, "The historiographic and ideological contexts of the nineteenth-century debate on man's place in nature," in Mikuláš Teich and Robert M. Young (eds.), *Changing Perspectives in the History of Science: Essays in Honour of Joseph Needham* (London: Heinemann, 1973), pp. 344-438.

10. Richard Schickel, *Common Fame: The Culture of Celebrity* (London: Pavilion Books, 1985).

11. P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

the highest level, a few become media stars, such as Carl Sagan and David Suzuki. Others become well known in particular circles. Nobel Prize winners become public figures. Suddenly their opinions become newsworthy, even when their views have little to do with their prize-winning research.

Rather than reading about ideas, it is increasingly commonplace to read about the person who is associated with the ideas—a “personal profile.” If an idea is not associated with a prominent thinker, it is more easily dismissed.

The cult of celebrity operates within academia itself. The latest intellectual fashions are typically associated with individuals, whether it is Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault or Donna Haraway.

None of this is all that new. The striving for fame has been a tremendous driving force for centuries.¹² Technologies for mass communication, which gave rise to the modern celebrity, have been around for decades. Celebrity intellectuals are not new. They are just becoming more prevalent.

One consequence of this is that people are attracted to ideas because of the prominent intellectual who is associated with them. This is a mild version of what happens with various gurus and prophets. The followers have faith in their leader rather than thinking for themselves.

The other side of this dynamic is that if a person is shown to be flawed—a harasser, a plagiariser or just a snob—then this can serve to undermine the ideas they espouse. In other words, debates over ideas are pursued by attacking and defending the people associated with them.

Being a celebrity gives one a degree of power, and along with this comes various dangers. The first and most immediate risk for a famous person is to believe that one’s fame is truly deserved on the basis of one’s person rather than being due to the audience or historical circumstances. It is far easier to

12. Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

recognise that some other successful person was simply the “right person in the right place at the right time” than it is to see one’s own success in the same light.

Associated with this is a tendency towards arrogance and exclusivity. This can result in:

- not answering queries except from those who are prominent themselves (though, admittedly, some well-known figures are totally overwhelmed by requests);
- expecting special treatment in accommodation, travel and meetings;
- charging high fees when not needed financially;
- claiming credit for the work of assistants.

Another hazard is to encourage others to believe in one’s ideas rather than to think for themselves. Most celebrities depend on many followers being uncritical, since otherwise they would not be followers. If people thought for themselves, they would be unlikely to depend so much on a few prominent figures for wisdom—and most celebrities would no longer be put on such a pedestal.

The next step is to attack others who disagree. This can be done by the celebrity or by followers. Sometimes this is an open attack. More commonly in intellectual circles, it takes the form of denying publication to those who are out of fashion. This is not a sin peculiar to celebrities. There are numerous cases in which scholars have taken the ideas of subordinates without acknowledgment, blocked appointments and spread rumours, all with the aim of getting ahead and squashing competitors.

A final problem for celebrities is that they can avoid responsibility for their failings. Usually this happens because friends and supporters, who are most likely to know about the failings, keep quiet because they do not want to fall out of favour or to give ammunition to critics.¹³

13. These problems are also occupational hazards for gurus, who have similarities to celebrities. See Anthony Storr, *Feet of Clay: A Study of Gurus* (London: HarperCollins, 1996).

On the other hand, celebrities can be subject to unscrupulous attacks by jealous critics who hope to bring them down. Even trivial actions of celebrities can trigger exaggerated praise or criticism.

The power that celebrities wield is limited, because they are constantly at the mercy of those who make them into celebrities: editors, journalists and especially followers. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile doing what one can to limit celebrity power and its associated corruptions.

There are a few techniques that prominent intellectuals can use to defuse any cult of personality. One is to submit some of their writings under pseudonyms. Some famous authors—such as Doris Lessing—have tried this and found that their books are rejected when submitted under another name.

Much of the problem, though, is in the followers who look for salvation or illumination from individuals rather than common ideas and collective action. Much intellectual work examines the ideas of great thinkers rather than tracing the history of social processes.

Celebrity intellectuals gain power by being given credit for certain ideas. To challenge this power, one possible goal is to eliminate any power associated with credit for ideas. This sounds impossible in present-day society. Intellectuals publish articles and books and use this achievement to obtain degrees, appointments, promotions and research grants. To eliminate power from ideas, it would be necessary to move to an egalitarian society. In such a society, brilliant thinkers would still be listened to carefully, encouraged and recognised, but they would have no extra formal power as a result of their contributions to intellectual life. They might have fame but no associated power.

An alternative goal, perhaps more achievable, is to encourage everyone to think for themselves.¹⁴ This goal is often stated by educational administrators, but in practice students are more

14. *The Revolutionary Pleasure of Thinking for Yourself* (Tucson, AZ: See Sharp Press, 1992).

commonly encouraged to think like their teachers. Those who question standard ideas are usually discouraged.

There are several things an individual can do to break the habit of idolising a few thinkers.

- Get a friend to give you material with the author's name removed. Focus on the ideas without worrying about who thought them up and expressed them.

- Look for the weaknesses and omissions in the most popular ideas. Look for useful aspects of unfashionable and rejected ideas.

- If the author is famous, be especially critical. If the author is unknown or stigmatised, be especially open to useful contributions. Try to counteract the tendency to judge ideas by their origins, while still taking account of the influence of origins.

- Make a special effort to give credit to "unknowns" who have similar (or better) ideas than celebrity intellectuals.

- Remember that social change comes from the actions of many people, not just ideas from a few individuals.