

ON FRENCH (SORBONNE) INTELLECTUAL
STYLE

Some observations

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The following are merely some short notes inspired by participation in a colloquium organised at the Sorbonne (Université de Paris V, Sciences Sociales). Exactly which colloquium is not very important since the following nine points have a considerably broader experiential basis; only that one particular colloquium brought these points so clearly into focus. The points must be taken for what they are: some immediate impressions put down on paper by a foreigner, for a long time an observer of the anthropology of intellectual life, and certainly not only in France. The points refer to the style of presentation, and to the content, and are as follows.

(1) I am struck by the lack of structure in the presentations. I am among those who find it very useful when somebody who gives a talk or a lecture starts by saying: "I have five points to make, but the basic thesis I want to explore is the following: ----" I take a statement of that kind as some kind of contract with a listener. The person is announcing his merchandise in advance, if the listener doesn't like it, there is still time to leave, the listener knows what he is in for. On the other hand, he who does that remarkably audacious thing of announcing that he has something sufficiently worthwhile to warrant the attention of not only one but several listeners, for fifteen minutes, forty-five minutes, a hundred minutes, has to deliver the goods he has announced. In addition, the listener knows at any point in the talk où en sommes nous , and is consequently much more in a position to judge what happens. The speaker makes himself more accountable.

Of course, the structure may not have to be so explicit and so pre-announced as indicated here. But some structure there should be, like the paragraphs on a printed page, or in a newspaper. The impression I get from French intellectual style is much more a continuous, uninterrupted flow of words where one sentence is swallowed by the next like a chain of snakes devouring each other. The metaphor is deliberate: sometimes I get the feeling that the chain in fact is a circle.

There is actually another point in this connection: when the structure is clear I get the feeling that he who talks has done

his job, that there has been some minimum of preparation although, of course, not necessarily just before the talk starts, or the same day for that matter. The preparation may also be built into the person as training, as skill. This impression may be totally misleading: the person can be bluffing. The unstructured talk may be much better than a talk with an improvised, superficial, even fallacious structure. Nevertheless, I would stand by the point that any real meaningful message conveyed is not only in the flow of words, but also the structure of their organisation. Lack of structure reduces communicative efficiency considerably.

(2) I am struck by the lack of concrete examples. The words pass by, they are at a high level of abstraction and generality. The French is of course impeccable, there is euphony. But examples are useful, for at least three reasons. Contact is established between the words and reality; one is no longer only in the space of more or less well connected words, but oscillating between that space and reality. A double communication is taking place which pedagogically is rather important. Second, he who talks has a chance to show in detail what is meant by the words emitted and the postulated relations. He can say, "here you have this one, there is that one, here is the relation that I just talked about". In other words, he can come fairly close to testing his theory. Third, if this is done there is the feeling that the speaker has done his job, or at least tried to do so. It is not a question of demanding statistical tests, or anything like that, only of checking whether the words stand for something concrete and not only for themselves.

Of course, there is no obligation to do this. One may also perfectly well insist that it is very important to explore, in a purely verbal way, how words can be meaningfully chained together. The problem is what is meant by "meaning" and sooner or later, at some point or another, that cannot remain a relation between word and concept, sentence and content - it must also refer to some object, material or non-material, some state of affairs, concrete or not. When many speakers, one after the other, talk as if there is no such need at all, one starts suspecting that the lack of

exemplification is conscious, is considered a virtue, and for that reason is part of the local intellectual style.

(3) I am struck by the lack of precision. Of course this point is related to the two preceding points: without clear structure in the presentation, and without reference to examples, there can still be precision by making the words very precise through definitions, discarding misleading interpretations and so on. But if not even this intellectual exercise is carried out, and words are either left hanging in the air or associated with rather imprecise, often common-sense connotations, so full of different meanings that they convey next to nothing, one again is left with the suspicion that the purpose is not to convey precise meaning. The purpose may be to convey fluency, command of language in general, the language of the discipline and the language of the topic in particular, making verbal constructions that are relatively nebulous, conveying a general meaning, hoping that the listener/viewer may find something. Or, not even that - why should he find something when I do not?

(4) I am struck by the lack of theory. By that I simply mean two things: that some concrete stands are taken, something is held to be either true or false or more or less valid, and that something is then explained in the light of some general principle, axiom or some other statement of the same kind. There is some kind of logical interconnection between premises and conclusions. The interconnection is made transparent. Outsiders are invited to enter the theoretical construction and inspect it not only by admiring from outside but by exploring it from the inside. "But you could also have drawn another conclusion"; "why do you use those premises when other premises equally well would account for the phenomenon" would be the typical reactions of a critical or exploratory nature. If no such structure is presented, however, no such commentary can follow because there is nothing clear to react to. Needless to say, this point is related to the three preceding points, but takes them one step further. A theory is more than simply being precise, and a theory does not necessarily include examples, although that would root the construction more firmly on and in the ground. A theory is a logical structure - and hence one more way of making oneself accountable.

(5) I am struck by the lack of audacity. By that I simply mean the capacity to say something new and original. It does not necessarily have to be controversial in any political/ideological/religious sense, but it should be intellectually controversial. If not, the likelihood is that nothing much has actually been said, that nobody has stuck their neck out at all. Of course, the risk in sticking one's neck out is that the head may be cut off, which is disagreeable. But it seems to me that this is the risk intellectuals have to take: announcing a stand, not necessarily stating that they themselves believe one hundred percent in it but that they are at least offering it for discussion, inviting the pros and the contras. By that way not only the public, but also oneself gets heated up a little bit and chances are that new ideas come forth more easily. It may be a little like exploring the property of materials in a laboratory, by heating them, seeing what kind of reactions take place - physics/chemistry at ordinary temperatures yielding but ordinary insights.

To this it may be objected that the task is not to be audacious but to say something empirically tenable and/or theoretically valid. This can of course be done by repeating truisms. But it cannot be done by saying something neither tenable nor untenable, neither valid nor invalid but simply a flow of words with a lot of concepts chained after each other with nothing hard to bite into.

(6) I am struck by the tendency to issue commentary on other intellectuals. Instead of relating to the real world, at least through examples or some kind of reference, one relates to the verbal constructions of other intellectuals, usually comparing his/her concepts with one's own, usually by pointing out where they differ and why one's own concepts as superior. That game is easily combined with intellectual gossip about relations between intellectuals rather than or in addition to relations between the concepts. In general this is the aspect which is absent when instead of giving lectures, colloquia etc. for intellectuals, a talk is given to people in general: no reference is made to other books, or other intellectuals. People simply do not know and/or are not interested. They may, however, be extremely interested in structure, examples, precision, theory and audacity; but certainly

not in intellectual tribal commentary. This, incidentally, is one reason why contact with ordinary people is so important for intellectuals, otherwise they may get into the habit of mistaking the world of intellectuals and books for the real world, contenting themselves with running commentary on what happens in that paper world. Since that is the world they are in fact inhabiting, their own university combined with possible travels to other places of academic learning or discussion, such habits make life rather easy. Consequently, one would expect particularly older generations of intellectuals to be increasingly commentary-oriented as the contact surface with the real world diminishes and the experiences on which their work, when it was still original and fresh, was once based wane, wither away, through obsolescence. The result is gossip.

(7) I am struck by the tendency to take disciplinary borders seriously. A very commonly heard expression is, "from a sociological point of view", "from a theological point of view", "from a juridical point of view". These words mark borders in intellectual territory and when repeated sufficiently often they take on an existence of their own, becoming a part of reality. It is easily forgotten that problems have their own logic - not respecting such disciplinary borders - and that the task of the intellectual might be to transcend them, rather than repeating them, however useful administratively such disciplinary perspectives may be.

(8) I am struck by the tendency of discussants to emphasise where they disagree. In a highly individualist culture agreement seems to be tantamount to relinquishing individuality. A firm "Je ne suis pas d'accord" serves the important function of setting one apart, at least from the speaker. The follow-up may or may not include a more positive assertion as to in what direction one's own individuality is leaning.

(9) I am struck by the lack of humour. Everything is said in a very serious manner; the seriousness also being reflected in the tired, often bored expression of the note-taking listeners - but mostly void of any expression at all. There is a prevailing funereal mood, certainly not a festive one, certainly no joy at making or communicating discoveries. There may be some mirth when

commentary on others takes on a "provocative" form with listeners enjoying the struggle among giants. But that is it.

I let this do as an indication of the impressions. Are they hostile? Yes, a little bit. I sit with a feeling of something unreleased, unborn and/or something coming to an end. But saying so, I perfectly well know that my own remarks are characterised by:

- (1) a relatively clear structure, maybe too clear
- (2) a total lack of concrete examples (as they would be too personal)
- (3) not a lack of precision, I hope
- (4) a total lack of theory - there is no effort here to explain
- (5) neither audacity, nor lack of audacity: the cost to me is nil, I have no ambitions in that system but I doubt that those who have would have been free to express themselves like this
- (6) there is no commentary on other intellectuals, I stick to the subject
- (7) no disciplinary borders have been indicated
- (8) no particular disagreement with anybody except with those in this style, and they are many: I think it is counter-productive
- (9) hopefully not totally devoid of some implicit humour - for the reader to judge. Examples would have made it more humorous, not less.