

## Stupid Shame

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### Contumelics

More than a quarter of a century ago, I was discussing with Barbara Hardy in Birkbeck how we might distribute some funding that had become available for student scholarships. I suggested various ways in which we might evaluate the students' work, but was brought up short when Barbara said: 'Why give all the money to the clever ones? They get everything anyway.' Without quite realising it, I have continued to wonder from that moment until this: what might be wrong with those whom Nietzsche called *die Erkennenden* (Nietzsche 2003, 3), the knowers, the know-hopers, those in the know, inheriting the earth?

There are a few categories that recur stubbornly in contumelics, the name I have just made up for the study of the long history of human mockery and insult. There is sexual insult, encompassing the mocking of the cuckold and the deviant. This often overlaps with the mockery of physical disability or deformity. In previous eras, religious insult would have been much more potent, sometimes overlapping with racial insult, the power of which has been magnified by contemporary deprecation. These categories often combine and overlap, a particularly telling one being *bugger*, which derives from Bulgar, a name given to a set of heretics believed to come from Bulgaria in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, who were suspected of engaging in forbidden sexual practices. Heresy and sexual perversion were closely associated, the association of religious with sexual irregularity surviving in the idea of the 'missionary position' (Fudge 2013, 64-70).

But perhaps the most universal and pervasive category of insult is the mockery of the unintelligent or mentally incapable, whether the stupid or the mad, these two categories often, and so mysteriously, associated. The impulse to cognitive insult seems so inveterate that words designed specifically to be technical or without value-judgements quickly become derogatory, such as *moron*, which met with the approval of the American Association for the Study of the Feeble-Minded in 1910 precisely because at that time it did not have negative overtones but which has since become the most vehement of jeers. In this respect, it follows *idiot*, which in Greek and Latin was a term simply denoting a private individual, and anticipates the fate of *retard* which was in use among educational psychologists from around 1909 but by 1960s had passed out of scientific and into popular use (Taylor 1974, 202).

Perhaps, indeed, the accusation of stupidity is to be regarded as a meta-insult. For the words for stupidity or madness are words which usually indicate a person who is reduced to the condition of an object or category, a signified rather than one capable itself of signifying, and in the use of the word actually perform that debasement. To be

the target of what is rather percipiently called ‘abuse’ is actually simply to be a utensil, or object of use, as opposed to being a user of language. Epistemic insult therefore puts its object outside the company of language users, though the pain of the insult depends of course upon the target appreciating perfectly well the import of what they are being called.

It is very common for stupidity to be conceived as a kind of insensibility, that is imagined to reduce the non-knower or slow learner to some dense, dull, impenetrable and uniformly unresponsive state of matter. Wood and excrement (*shit-for-brains*) are favoured items, but so, a little surprisingly, is air (but what these states of matter have in common is that they lack sharpness, distinction or individuality). So we have *blockhead*, *clot (clod)*, *numbskull*, and stupidity as being *slow*, *dull*, *dim*, *obtuse*, and so on. To be blockish, dense, or dull-witted, a dolt or a clodpoll, is a form of existence as debased and undifferentiated as mud. It is to be thick as a brick or two short planks, or, as Falstaff says of Poin, ‘His wit’s as thick as Tewkesbury mustard. There’s no more conceit in him than is in a mallet’ (Shakespeare 2017, 271). Not to know is no longer, or not even yet, to be *homo sapiens*. To be stupid is to be stunned or senseless, not only without knowledge but for that reason without the knowledge of feeling, this one of the most habitual forms of stupid insensitivity that human beings can display. The play of the word ‘sense’ between sensible and intelligible allows one to think of being witless as being without being, without the capacity to feel anything at all. John Donne says in his ‘True Character of the Duncie’ that

He hath a soule drownd in a lumpe of Flesh, or is a piece of earth that *Prometheus* put not half his proportion of Fire into, a thing that hath neither edge of desire, nor feeling of affection in it, The most dangerous creature for confirming an *Atheist*, who would straight swear, his soul were nothing but the bare temperature of his body. (Donne 1652, 67)

If there is a powerful set of fantasy desires involved in the idea of possessing knowledge and wisdom, there is a countervailing set of dreads and amusements furnished by the idea of the stupid, and its embodiment in the one-supposed-not-to-know. Indeed, not knowing is more than ignorance. It is seen as witlessness, irrationality, and so comes close to a kind of madness, even to a kind of unbeing. ‘Stupid’ could actually mean paralysed in the seventeenth century. In fact the unvarying stupidity of the ways in which the stupor or daze of ignorance is conceived, or unable to be conceived as a form of human existence, is remarkable and telling: the imagination of stupidity is as thrombotic as what it imagines or, in fact, fails to. The ‘logic’ involved seems to be that only intelligence gives the possibility both of being distinct from the material world and being distinguishable from other beings. To have identity is to be able to be the same (*idem*) as yourself from moment to moment; to be an idiot originally meant to be set apart, as a private individual, but its root is *id*, *it*, as though the idiot were no more than a kind of emptily-iterated itness, rather than genuine ex-isting. To be foolish is therefore to be ultimately indistinguishable from the world in general, in a reversal of the Freudian formula: *wo ich war, soll es werden*.

Perhaps it is the attribution which is really the mark of our dullness about unknowing, or different modes of knowing, since states of unknowing (infancy, for example, or dementia) can often be accompanied by considerable sprightliness, painfully agitated states of confusion, or other kinds of sound and fury. In fact, as we will see through this chapter, knowledge does not always seem quite to know what it is about in its attributions of stupidity.

## Cunning

The two opposite states of matter that signify the stupid, the dense and the vacant, are mediated through the imagination of the human body, and especially the sexual organs, and the female sexual organs in particular. Folly and its many derivatives is from Latin *follis*, a bag, bellows and, by transference, the stomach. So stupidity is both empty and full, an alternation that is often played out in the play between ‘male’ and ‘female’ genital forms. A fool is a *lobcock*, meaning a limp or hopeless penis, or a *mouth*, from the gaping of the fool, or a *Tom-cony*. But at the same time, ‘A stiff prick hath no conscience’, as an American proverb has it (Cary 1916, 51).

Sexual insults often imply the reduction of a human being to a sexual organ, or action, which may be regarded as equivalent to the reduction to a merely animal and therefore quasi-material condition. You might think that *clever-dick* would mean almost the same as *dick-head*, though they are of course opposites – not quite though, since *clever-dick* is used ironically to mean a know-all, or somebody who is not as clever as they wish to seem. In this, it resembles the word *wittol*, a modification of late Middle English *cokewold* by the addition of *wete-*, wit, which originally meant a cuckold who knows but complacently, and for some reason, infuriatingly, tolerates his condition. A little collection of contradictory proverbs from the early seventeenth century makes the logic clear: ‘P. No greater shame to a man, then to bee a Cuckolde. C. Yes, to be a Wittoll’ (Breton 1616, sig. A8<sup>r</sup>). From this, the word *witall* was generalised to mean a fool, or half-wit, with the *-old* suffix being re-understood as *-all*.

Somewhat surprisingly, the use of *dick* to mean penis is not recorded in print in this sense until 1891 (Farmer and Henley 1890-1904, 2.280), though it seems scarcely credible that it should not have been in use, for example in military and school contexts, for much longer. Part of the complication of *dick* is the influence of *dickens*, as in *what the dickens*, to mean devil, which may account for the admiring *up to dick*, which means fly, alert, or up to the mark (and may have exerted some force on *tricky-dicky*, used to refer to Richard Nixon). Also in the phonosemantic neighbourhood is *dick* as slang for dictionary, so that to *swallow the dick* means to use long words without knowing their meaning, though perhaps with the insinuation of a more corporeal sense of dick (Farmer and Henley 1890-1904, 2.281). The intrigue of word and thing is often at work in bodily idiot-objects. It is true that *dicky-dido* means idiot, through sing-song pseudo-anagram, and gets transferred in the rugby song ‘The Mayor of Bayswater’ to the female organ, with its chorus (to the tune of the Welsh song ‘The Ash Grove’) ‘the hairs on her dicky-dido hang down to her knees’.

The links between the penis and stupidity (*prick, plonker, pillock* ex. *pillcock*), though routine, are nevertheless mild and even sometimes rather affectionate or admiring. As many have observed, *cunt*, by contrast, has gone from being a rather quaint and cosy word in English (we are about to see that *quaint* is in fact at certain points cutely interchangeable with *cunt*) to being the most powerful and demeaning insult. *Cunt* tends to connote disgust and debasement, but that debasement seem to have a particularly powerful association with the attribution of stupidity, the stupidity of being reduced to an object. The something that is nothing of the fool (sometimes, when they have been fooled, known as a *bubble*) is the nothing that is something of the cunt (or its name).

The so-called lips of the vulva make for the idea of a kind of mindless speech emanating from the female genitals, as for example in the belief whispered humbly among early Christians that the priestess at the Delphic oracle delivered her prophecies from her privy parts, an idea elaborated into the fantasy that animates Denis Diderot's *Les Bijoux indiscrets* of a magic ring that could set those lips incontinently babbling beyond the will of their owners. The idea that the vagina might just be a vacant, if voluble receptacle gives rise to comic exchanges of head and genitals, as in the following dumb-blonde joke: 'How do you brainwash a blonde? Give her a douche and shake her upside down' (Thomas 1997, 282).

There is, however, an intriguing suggestion of knowingness knitted into the history of this word. It is often rendered *quaint* in earlier uses attested from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a development of Anglo-Norman *coint*, derived from Latin *cognitus*, knowing, which meant ingenious, skilled and so also gracious, courteous or refined, especially in speech. A quaint speaker might therefore be defined as one from whose lips the word cunt would be most unlikely to fall. Chaucer makes the relation between the two words perfectly clear in *The Miller's Tale*, by actually rhyming the word *queynt* with itself when describing the dalliance between the clerk Nicholas and Alison, the carpenter's wife, as though to signal the two registers of discourse, sensible and sensuous, learned and libidinal, that the word inhabits:

this hende Nicholas  
 Fil with this yonge wyf to rage and pleye,  
 Whil that her housbonde was at Oseneye,  
 As clerkes ben ful subtile and ful queynte;  
 And prively he caughte hire by the queynte. (Chaucer 2008, 69)

In less approving uses, *quaint* meant cunning, scheming, or full of guile. It therefore resembles the word *canny*, the German equivalent to which, *heimlich*, caught Freud's attention because of its weird inversiveness, which allows it to mean both familiar and suspiciously strange:

among its different shades of meaning the word '*heimlich*' exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, '*unheimlich*'. What is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*... on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight... everything is *unheimlich*

that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light. (Freud 1953-74, 17.223-4)

The links with French *con*, fool, idiot, and also *conning*, in the sense of learning and cognition, also seem to be salient. The link in sound if not in derivation between the cunt and cunning is attested to in a line from the Middle English *Proverbs of Hendyng*, attested in ten manuscripts from the later 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards, which is in fact the first recorded appearance of *cunt* in English: ‘3eve þi cunte to cunnig and crave affetir wedding [Give your cunt to cleverness and keep demands for after the wedding]’ (Varnhagen 1881, 190).

Stupidity and knowingness therefore appear to be compounded with questions of presence and absence, both logical and physiological. Freud reflects on some of these matters in his short essay ‘Medusa’s Head’ (1922), which suggests that the decapitated head of the Medusa simultaneously expresses the fear of castration and protects against it, since the Medusa’s snaky hair acts as a kind of exorbitant, exhibitionist compensation for the ablated penis:

The hair upon Medusa’s head is frequently represented in works of art in the form of snakes, and these once again are derived from the castration complex. It is a remarkable fact that, however frightening they may be in themselves, they nevertheless serve actually as a mitigation of the horror, for they replace the penis, the absence of which is the cause of the horror. This is a confirmation of the technical rule according to which a multiplication of penis symbols signifies castration. (Freud 1953-74, 18.273)

Thus the cunt has, or is, cunning, the complication of the more-than-meets-the-eye (or, *a fortiori*, less). For Freud, discussing the mythical form of the female genitals in the Medusa’s head, this is a matter of number, as signalled in his extraordinary offhand remark that ‘a multiplication of penis symbols signifies castration’ (Freud 1953-74, 18.273), an articulation of the principle that, in phallic matters, more is definitely less. The now-you-see-it play of exposure and concealment in the Medusa’s head corresponds to the play of verbal muting and exclaiming in the many euphemisms under which the word cunt has been half-secreted. This perhaps includes Chaucer’s *queynt*, which some have seen as the beginnings of a slight squeamishness about the word cunt in polite or courtly usage (Briggs 2009, 36), and extending through the many sanitised versions of the once-common street-name ‘Gropecunt Lane’, perhaps originally, given its clustering in clerical cities like Oxford, Norwich and York, ‘academic slang’ (Briggs 2009, 29), which lurks underneath many instances in English towns of ‘Grape Lane’ and ‘Grove Passage’ (Briggs 2009, 28, 31). It is there too in the not-quite-there ribaldry of cunning stunts, cupid stunts and ‘the C-word’, the word that lets you see only by hearsay, or the seesaw of C-saying. Seeing, knowing and saying here form a kind of substitutive manifold. The history of the word cunt percolates ideas of knowing and unknowing, wisdom and folly, visibility and concealment, saying and unsayability.

Recent years have seen efforts such as Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* (1995) to 'reclaim' or revalue the word cunt, emphasising world-begetting fecundity over violence. Reclamation of this kind seems to involve the fantasy of lifting the word up into benignly daylight knowability, unstreaked by hostility and fear. But to detoxify cunt is to remove from it all its powers of intoxication, positive or negative. Even in its purged and happy-clappy modalities, it remains the essential body-word, suspended between sensible and intelligible, pure being and pure knowing. It is a word that seems rankly soaked with corporeality, ready to swallow itself up in pure sensation, and yet still a sign, that keeps bodily being just about at bay, as something knowable and nameable. In one sense the cunt is the name for a pure, bestial know-nothing, the nothingness of the body, in that it is identified with a corporeal vacancy, a space scooped out of flesh that is both a secret hollow in the body and the hollowness of the body as such. At the same time, the cunt is the unknown, the concealed, the unspoken, the ineffably intricate. The female genital is the absence of the organ that produces a suspension of knowledge, for it cannot, and must not be known. But it is a nescience that is yet a knowing, and a showing of an unknowing, that, in its very withdrawal, seems to demand to be both shown and made known.

The point of all this philological circumstance is to suggest two things. The first is that the attribution of stupidity is one of the most powerful forms in which human sociability cements itself. Human beings are held together, not by ideas of identity, because us-and-them thematics are the business-as-usual of all species and conspecifics. It is not who you are that matters, or even who you know: it is what is known of what you know. Human beings are held together by the second natures of their knowledge, that is, shared ideas that they have about their ideas, and, more generally, by the turbulent torrent of fears, dreads, fantasies, projections and identifications that attach to the imago, or phantasmal ideal of knowledge and the knower, what Lacan calls the *sujet-supposé-savoir*, the 'subject-supposed-to-know' (Lacan 1998, 232). Human beings become and try to remain human through the process of *recognition*, taken not as the confirmation of what you are, but more literally the reverberation or echolalia of the social cogito, what we suppose each other to know, and the *sujets-supposés-savoir* we suppose each other to be (*suppose* being practically the same word as *subject*). That is why we so often use words with a noetic cast like *recognition* and *acknowledgement* to describe solidarity-effects. I have been calling this array of affects relating to knowledge *epistemopathy* for some time, too long, frankly, to be able to give up now. Where epistemology concerns itself with what we can know about knowledge, epistemopathy is concerned with what we feel about knowledge. My eagerly unawaited book *The Madness of Knowledge*, of which these paragraphs may serve as an inoculating dose, offers a sketch of the kinds of thing the shadow-discipline of epistemopathy might get up to.

Standing in an institution like University College London, and participating in this symbolic action of suppositious knowledge-concentration and -propagation, we are, needless to say, situated at the very *omphalos* of these lines of epistemopathic force. But perhaps in another sense, it is not the supposed knowledge-in-common of our

likes, but the assumed stupidity of our imagined unfellows that is the black hole around which these lines swirl. The imagination and deployment of the idea of stupidity or the unknowing is part of the densely-woven fabric of epistemophoric affinities, acknowledgements, approaches, abjurings and antagonisms that make up social life.

But the history of stupidity-mockery suggests something else, namely the strange and delinquent potency of shame. When you shame somebody, you take a huge risk, because, unless you see to it that they actually die of shame, which is possible, but strongly contraindicated, since the purpose of the shaming people is to keep them on display in their emblematically-shamed condition, you inevitably start to teach them how to live in shame. Shaming people is like bombing cities. You can certainly annihilate people by bombing cities, but you cannot defeat them, for a reason that was wisely articulated by the head of the US Air Force operations ahead of the ‘Shock and Awe’ campaign of Iraq in 2003. For you can only completely defeat an enemy if you only partially defeat them, that is, leave enough of the fabric of their communications and self-government intact for them to form a collective agreement to give in (there is, as far as I know, no anthropology of the intricate human action of surrendering, or if there is, I would certainly like to know about it).

Shaming often involves saying to somebody ‘You should be ashamed of yourself’. But being shamed is not at all the same as being ashamed. Shaming is a transitive operation, performed by a subject upon an object, an operation that produces the subject-object polarity that permits it to operate in the so-called first place. But the aim of shaming is to produce a particular form of objectified subjectivity, in which one is not merely given shame, but induced to give oneself to it. You can be pronounced guilty, by some external authority, indeed, this is the only form that guilt can take: but nobody can pronounce you ashamed, except, in your heart of hearts, where the acoustics are so bad (Beckett 1973, 113), yourself. Being ashamed is the most intimate possible self-relation of self-alienation and the most bottomlessly complex kind of reflexivity that can arise in humans, whose name, which implicates them in humus, the earth, and humility, suggests that it may even be at the heart of human self-definition. As I once saw cause to remark, you cannot live in shame, but until you have been shamed, you’ve never lived (Connor 2000).

Shame can also be lifted into a kind of principle, even a sort of self-sustaining shamelessness. Being ashamed can come surprisingly close to being avenged. This is illustrable from the history of religion, which has been a continuous struggle of the forces of social cohesion (*re-ligare* is to bind up, making religion close kin to college, from *col-ligare*, to bind together) against forms of radicalism which often deploy aggressive forms of shameful self-abasement. Political radicalism is a parochial version of world-despising zeal, which derives from Greek ζήλος, *zelos*, jealousy or rivalry, and often translates Latin *aemulatio*. The competition amounts to the effort to outdo God in his assumed regret at having made the catastrophic blunder of Creation (Sloterdijk 2009, 23-4). Hermits, mystics, ascetics and holy fools all deploy and brandish their shame unashamedly and maddeningly against temporal power.

Religions have been absorbed in a centuries-long attempt to quell and civilise those who turn their shame into an existential armature, if not armament, sleeping in middens, licking lepers' sores, wearing dead dogs round their necks and so forth. (I have to say that sentence carefully: the first part was misheard by someone who wondered what could be so degrading about 'sleeping in mittens'.) Henri Bergson describes laughter as the response to the spectacle of an organic being reduced to matter or mechanism, making all laughter in essence laughter at stupidity: it is less often noted that he saw the purpose of this not merely as the celebration of *élan vital* but also as a social disciplining into flexibility, since '[s]ociety will therefore be suspicious of all *inelasticity* of character, of mind and even of body, because it is the possible sign of a slumbering activity as well as of an activity with separatist tendencies' (Bergson 1911, 19).

Among the gratifications on offer in our admirably-variegated contemporary sexual service industry is 'humiliation'. The many forms which this can take involve being mocked, degraded, insulted, pelted with mud, being subjected to blackmail and financial extortion, being treated as an animal, for example in 'pony-play', which may involve having to pull carriages in harness: even, in an impressively nifty metalibidinal manoeuvre, having one's predilection for such indoor ceremonies of abasement publicly exposed. One might easily see all this as defence of and through the pleasure principle, a deployment of eros to get your retaliation in first against the dread of every kind of weakness or psychic wound. But it may be possible, and possibly more perceptive, to see in such forms of performable and so survivable exposure a primary arena of the erotic itself, rather than an experience calling forth a merely auxiliary erotism.

### **We Are the Ruling Class**

In his decretal *Cum inter nonnullos* of 12<sup>th</sup> November 1323, Pope John XXII began his attempt to dissolve the legal fiction established by Nicholas III in 1279 regarding the ownership of property by the Franciscan order, a principle which, by distinguishing between ownership and use, allowed Franciscans the use of property that was in fact held by the Church. John's argument was that the Franciscans not only did, in principle and in actual fact, own property, lots of it, they should, following the precedent of Christ and his apostles, be permitted to do so. This was another of the many episodes of hectic, heretical set-to between institutional religion and zeal. One of the things that annoyed Papal officials most about the Franciscans, apart from having to provide banking services for their growing wealth, was their exhibitionist insistence on wearing clothing of such nose-offending noxiousness that it actually threatened to bring religion into disrepute.. The intervention of the philosopher William of Ockham, plying a politicised version of his famous nominalist razor, led him to conclude that John XXII was himself a stubborn and inveterate heretic (Nold 2003, 140-77; Brunner 2014).



In academic life, we participate in something like the genial imposture with which John XXII tried unsuccessfully to deal. In our meekly Franciscan self-understanding, we in the universities, and especially in the humanities, believe ourselves to be on the outside of power and privilege, and therefore the better able to deploy our knowledge on the side of the weak, the embattled and the displaced, and to speak truth on their behalf to power. But this view depends on a weak, sentimental, and increasingly superannuated understanding of the place and power of knowledge. We might remember that by 1342, the Franciscans, formed around the principle of apostolic poverty had been declared ‘Custodians of the Holy Land’, a title the order retains to this day.

What renders this view of knowledge, and the bearers of it, anachronistic is the rise of what I am going to call an epistemocracy. I cannot claim authorship of this word, which has occasionally been used to describe a system of government by experts rather than by the people. This arrangement, recommended by Plato and others, tends to become very attractive to intellectuals when the people decline to vote for things that intellectuals or groups taking themselves to be more expertly informed think they should or wish they would. This view has been encouraged by recent political developments, which, as David Runciman has suggested, has produced among members of the intellectual elite (a group with which almost half the UK population, those voting to remain in the UK, seem bizarrely to identify) the return of misgivings about the inherent weakness of democracy (Runciman 2016). Runciman reports that, following the Brexit vote, the almost universal response in Cambridge (where he and I both teach, and where the vote to remain was stronger than anywhere else except Gibraltar and Haringey where I live in London), was vicious mockery of those who had voted in this unaccountable and self-harming fashion. Vengeful thoughts and mutterings were abroad; on TV Jeremy Paxman quoted with chortling relish H.L. Mencken’s maxim that ‘Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard’ (Mencken 1916, 19). I remember it very much as Runciman reports it and also remember moronically joining in the booby-baiting game. The response to the election of Trump and the result of the EU referendum in Britain may be regarded as less a matter of romantic resistance, than of putting down an insurgency.

However, the epistemocracy whose stirrings and growth I think I can make out is a different kind of thing, in that it implies not just government by experts, but the sedimentation and propagation of forms of expertise more generally, and implies the growing authority of the principle of knowledge rather than of a specific class of knowers. This is what might be called *distributed or dissensive epistemocracy*, involving knowledge-deployment, if not exactly from below, then perhaps in more directions and dimensions than from the top down. It is my version of what has been called by many the ‘knowledge society’, a phrase coined by Peter Drucker as early as 1969.

In the political dispensation that I am calling an epistemocracy, high-level knowledge workers are for the time being the ruling class, even if many of us also confusingly feel

like members of an anonymously and humiliatingly grinding cognitariat. This contradiction is in fact a distinctive feature of an epistemocracy, and was percipiently pointed out by Drucker, who wrote that ‘The knowledge worker is both the true “capitalist” in the knowledge society and dependent on his job’ (Drucker 1969, 259). It is not an accident that most university graduates, 25% of whom in the UK now graduate with the kind of first-class degree that would a couple of decades ago have seen them shunted into a safely-tenured academic occupation, struggle to understand why they are not rewarded with the positions of admired and index-linked intellectual autonomy which they have been induced to expect. A little more historical understanding might in fact instruct them that it is not at all uncommon for members of a ruling class to feel both privileged and precarious, otherwise what was the Tower of London for?

What Drucker pointed to with brilliant prescience in 1969 was the most powerful structural tension of an epistemocracy: the fact that it is necessary for maximum social and economic efficiency to educate future knowledge workers for rapid adaptability, which in fact means educating them far beyond the levels of specific technical knacks and knowhows required for currently-existing occupations. Knowledge workers must be trained as rapid-response units rather than infantry, able to adapt to volatile needs and conditions through retraining, like pluripotent stem cells capable of being reassigned to any required biological function. No society in the world today can hope to approach prosperity if it does not somehow find the resources for rapid and widespread education and training; but such social projects of education can only succeed politically if ways can be found to manage the crises of frustrated aspiration they tend to produce. If knowledge workers are special forces, it can, as we know, be very difficult to integrate such persons into salaryman society. In order to perform the function of educating citizens for participation in a knowledge society, liberally-conceived universities must work covertly or simply unknown to themselves to constrain their own declared aim of producing limitless numbers of maximally self-aware, questioning and intellectually autonomous citizens. In many rapidly-developing economies, the tensions which can be produced by a rapid expansion of knowledge and intellectual adaptability are often contained by focussing investment (a word which, in an epistemocracy, will always have a hummingly affective as well as an economic signification), in narrowly technical areas like law, medicine, management and engineering, or at least in narrowly technical understandings of those subjects. In the declining economies of the North, more complex solutions to the problem of the mass production of unrealisable intellectual aspirations and self-understandings have had to be sought.

One of the ways of negotiating this transition has been found in the impressively sustained assault on the traditional liberal idea of the universal, unaligned, humanist intellectual, an assault mounted since the 1960s both from the right and left, though, it would surely have to be conceded, much more energetically, ingeniously and effectively from the left. This allows for the annealing of the otherwise unpredictable energies of wastefully free-floating ‘critical intelligence’ into an evangelical zeal-

machine of collective social reform, in which everyone is accorded the right and the duty of being on an imaginary clamatory outside demanding expurgation of a number of mutable yet at any given time universally-acknowledged ills of social inequality or exclusion, like the issues of social injustice against which what looks like the most right-wing Conservative government for 40 years has committed itself, among them race, faith, gender, disability, sexual orientation, National Living Wage and workers' rights, regional disparities, intergenerational fairness, mental health, domestic violence and abuse, school and technical education reform, and migration. The State thereby comes to consist of its own obediently bureaucratized gadflies. It is not that one should object to such commitments; it is precisely the opposite, in that, like the extirpation of sin, they cannot be objected to.

To make knowledge over into an instrument of critique turns out to be an unexpectedly helpful first step in instrumentalising critique itself in socially-salvific projects. We are seeing that the result is a kind of authoritarian liberalism that can do the work done more crudely in theocratic, post-totalitarian or more frankly gangsterist societies by anti-liberal authoritarianism. One of the signal aims and advantages of this form of generalised, socially-solidary auto-critique is the systematic exclusion of self-exclusion, the outlawing of outlawry, or the decathecting of the decathexis which, as is hinted at by the history of hermits and holy fools glanced at earlier, can otherwise be such a troublesome by-product both of religious instruction and of higher education.

Campaigns against social sin are, however, like all such homeostatic arrangements, a temporary abatement of turbulence and very possibly short-lived. The maintenance of zeal, for example, requires belief that one is part of an embattled minority, whether within a society or within a world in which one is under siege from the outside, and so tends to run out of jism as it is generalised, and the booted-and-spurred sectarian settles down into the cardiganed Anglican. On the other side, once it gets under way, zeal is notably zealous in forming new occasions and opportunities for itself. So it is very likely that we will see other structural tensions arising from the move to an economy that is increasingly organised around and replicated through knowledge.

In fact I foresee many different kinds of difficulty in managing the increasingly intense and irascible coalescence of knowledge and feeling I am calling epistemopathy. Knowledge used to be conceived as a means of moderating passions of rage, terror and longing; an epistemocracy can be expected to make knowledge their venue and vehicle. In a society driven by ever more immediate mediations, what we feel about what know, or our feelings about what we believe others do or do not know, comes more and more to stand in the place of knowledge itself. (Whatever that may be exactly: a much larger argument would be needed, though I think it is available, to demonstrate that such substitutions and placeholders are always necessary since it is so very hard to know quite what knowledge is or feels like). An antique way of understanding this situation was to see the mass media as involved in the effort to mechanise the emotional responses of the masses, who can be inflamed and opiated as required by the coolly-calculating powers of 'the system'. The liberal response to this prospect is, of course, education, taking the form known, for example, in my neck of the disciplinary woods,

as ‘close reading’, that would supply a lucid understanding of and means of critically regulating the convulsive reflexes of ideology. But, despite our efforts to revive the idea of the Hidden Persuaders, in the form of the dreaded ‘algorithms’, along with the excited revival of conspiratorial comic-book concepts from the 1970s like the ‘élite’ and the ‘Establishment’, it is clear that in an epistemocracy, knowledge and the theatricalisation of knowledge in the educational process must be increasingly assimilated to collectively-mediated passions, as their intensifier and accelerator. Because an epistemocracy depends upon, or at least results in, not just the increase in knowledge, but also the hugely-enlarged production and circulation of ideas, images and fantasies about knowledge itself, the traditional idea (itself ever more obviously phantasmal) that rationality should be regarded as the opposite pole to feeling will need to give way to a world in which knowledge is subject to ever denser affect-saturation, the intelligible increasingly a mode of the sensible. One symptom of this drenching of knowledge with feeling, from which no email inbox can now be immune, is the remarkable naturalisation of knowledge-psychosis, which had previously been limited to the victims of the ‘influencing-machine’ delusion like James Tilly Matthews and Daniel Paul Schreber, whose madness consisted of the systematic thinking-through of the process whereby their thoughts were being systematically controlled.

The coming epistemocracy – unless perhaps it has already substantially arrived – suggests two contrasting, though not completely incompatible outcomes. One is that intellectual deficit will become a more and more serious source of social injury. The identification of the human exclusively and self-approvingly as the sapient will prepare a hell on earth for those stigmatised as the stupid. We can expect power to continue to leak away from the rich, the male, the white, and possibly even the beautiful (always the last unearned advantage to come under investigation), and to accrue steadily and in spades to the smart, and if they have good skin, so much the better. The incurious kowtowing to knowhow in an epistemocracy may make it harder than ever to appreciate how long the list is of things that are worse than ignorance (cowardice, malice, pride, selfishness, treachery, indolence, unkindness, rage, cruelty, addiction, and so on) and how considerable and precious too the back-catalogue of abandoned human graces and virtues that need have no necessary relation to intelligence, though it would be intelligent of us to honour and foster them (endurance, courage, resilience, loyalty, fairness, adventure, cheerfulness, tenderness, friendliness, forgetfulness, devotion, generosity, vivacity, joy, love, sentimentality, hesitation, humour, mercy, care). To this end, it may be important for us to try to become more intelligent about unintelligence; not least because, if the power to shame is toxically potent, the condition of shame, though the most exquisitely painful form of vulnerability, may also harbour surprising, and dangerous powers of insurgence, which will make us collectively more vulnerable to militant withdrawals of consent.

For the other danger of epistemocracy is not so much intellectual deficit, as defection, and the door it opens gapingly wide for intensified conflict, as knowledge becomes a battleground, not just as a resource to be fought over, but also as a vehicle to be fought through and with. An epistemocracy may mean the splitting of knowledge into

different, defecting tribes and dialects, each determined to stockpile resources, authority and advantage. Epistemocracy may intensify the polarities of the smart and the stupid: but it may also multiply and complicate them. The principle that knowledge is power has been taken to mean, either that knowledge is a means for ‘Power’, meaning established or state powers of various kinds, to assert its dominion, or that it is a means whereby the power that can be heroically stood up to. But it is important to recognise that, with knowledge increasing on all sides, knowledge is power everywhere and for everybody who has it. The sinking feeling that Bruno Latour reported on noticing how adept opponents of anthropogenic climate change had become in deploying the hermeneutics of suspicion is an indication of how fissile and fractious a knowledge society can become (Latour 2004, 226-7). The growing tensions and conflicts over intellectual property rights, for example, as they concern drug patents, software and the ownership of music and other cultural productions are already far too complex and involve too many competing interest groups to be reduced romantically to a struggle between corporations and the commons (Haunss 2013).

In the absence of a willingness sometimes to sacrifice truth for peace, it is hard to see what will intervene to prevent the escalation of the epistemic rivalry and spite that had already, even before the election of Trump and the British vote to leave Europe, become a feature of recent election campaigns. In many other nations across the world, the traditional political divisions – between religious and secular, urban and rural, rich and poor, male and female, old and young – are coming to be expressed in, or simply transformed into, epistemic antagonisms, and not just between the educated and uneducated, but between the differently educated, and those for whom knowledge means dramatically and unnegotiably opposed things. The Enlightenment ambition of replacing querulous *doxa* with tranquil *logos* will have to be given up in the face of the multiplication of every conceivable kind of doctrinal adherence and doxological authority. The growth of knowledge is likely to take place not just through increasing what individuals know and know how to do. It will also increase the opportunities and desires for making known, in the sense both of disclosing and of producing. The UNESCO report *Towards Knowledge Societies* (2005) urges us to distinguish mere information from genuine knowledge, the latter understood as information made meaningful by acts of human interpretation and as such ‘a public good, available to each and every individual’ (UNESCO 2005, 18). One can be quite certain that there is no shortage of interpretation by human beings or human meaning-making among Daesh, which, like any group of militant zealots, handsomely meets all the requirements for a knowledge society.

We are nowadays surprised and dismayed when politics is made idiotic, by being conducted by people who seem to be idiots, or act in idiotic ways. We might recall that sacred foolishness can under certain circumstances constitute an alternative community built on epistemic dissidence rather than epistemic conformity. John Saward suggests that:

Going into the desert expresses a longing to ‘unlearn’ the sensibility of the age, to be remade in body, mind, and spirit, to become truly and without

compromise a new humanity in Christ... [The holy fool's] vocation would seem to be to recall his brethren to their vocation to be unconformed to the world's wisdom. (Saward 1980, 16, 17)

This might teach us that, insofar as every idiocy in fact has the capacity to be politogenic, and so able to form a polity, there can assuredly be a political idiocy, that is increasingly sure it knows what it is doing.

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