

AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM CONTRA *BILDUNG*: ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM AND THE NEOLIBERAL ASSAULT ON THE LIBERAL ARTS

POPULISMO AUTORITÁRIO CONTRA *BILDUNG*: O ANTI-INTELLECTUALISMO E O ASSALTO NEOLIBERAL CONTRA AS ARTES LIBERAIS

Jeremiah Morelock*

ABSTRACT: A synergistic movement is taking place in American society combining authoritarian populism, the neoliberal transformation of the university, and anti-intellectualism. In the first part of this paper, I pin my notion of intellectualism (and hence anti-intellectualism) to a specific frame of reference, namely the German notion of *Bildung* as it is discussed in writings of Nietzsche and Adorno, which I associate loosely with the traditional American liberal arts model of higher education. In the second part of the paper, I outline the neoliberal assault on the liberal arts, rooting my analysis in Wendy Brown's work, which is influenced by Foucault. In the third part of the paper, I describe the relationship of this anti-intellectualism to the rise of populism and the threat of authoritarianism in the United States. In the final section I tie the discussion into the general analysis of Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of fascist tendencies in liberal-democracies, emphasizing the continued relevance of their ideas to contemporary developments in education and beyond.

Keywords: Liberal arts; Neoliberalism; Intellectuals; Populism; Authoritarianism.

RESUMO: Um movimento sinérgico está ocorrendo na sociedade norte-americana combinando populismo autoritário, transformação neoliberal da universidade e anti-intelectualismo. Na primeira parte deste artigo, proponho minha noção de intelectualismo (e, portanto, de anti-intelectualismo) a partir de um quadro específico de referência, especialmente a noção alemã de *Bildung* (tal como discutida nos escritos de Nietzsche e Adorno) que eu associo livremente com o tradicional modelo de artes liberais norte-americano de ensino superior. Na segunda parte deste texto, destaco o assalto neoliberal sobre as artes liberais, fundamentando minha análise no trabalho de Wendy Brown, que é influenciada por Foucault. Na terceira parte do texto, descrevo a relação do anti-intelectualismo com a ascensão do populismo e a ameaça do autoritarismo nos Estados Unidos. Na seção final, relaciono a discussão com a análise geral de Horkheimer e Adorno sobre as tendências fascistas nas democracias liberais, enfatizando a contínua

* Department of Sociology – Boston College (United States). Contact: morelocj@bc.edu

relevância de suas ideias para os desenvolvimentos contemporâneos na educação e além.

Palavras-chave: Artes liberais; Neoliberalismo; Intelectuais; Populismo; Autoritarismo.

The United States recently voted into presidency an authoritarian populist who speaks at the reading level of an elementary school student. This is not a fluke occurrence. Rather it is a bold reflection of large cultural trends. In this paper I argue that a synergistic movement is taking place in American society combining authoritarian populism, the neoliberal transformation of the university, and anti-intellectualism. In identifying far-right populism as authoritarian, and identifying neoliberalism as problematic, I mark myself obviously on the political Left. Yet I want to emphasize at the outset that I see the both the political Right and Left as culpable in these developments. The synergistic movement I identify is multi-faceted and takes influence from across both sides of the binary political spectrum, albeit not in symmetrical ways. A rivalry between religious, scientific, artistic, and pragmatic values intersects with the partisan binary.¹ Whereas anti-intellectualism

¹ When it comes to anti-intellectualism in America and its expression in higher education, the binary of left vs. right politics is of course relevant. However, there is another contest of positions that cannot be reduced to the typical political binary, and might be better conceptualized as intersecting with it. I humbly offer here a rough suggested preliminary typology: This contest is not between two sides, but rather between four. First, there is science, objectivity, rationality, etc. This is essentially the vestiges of Enlightenment thought, only in a more circumscribed, less idealistic way. This side believes in using facts, evidence, and reason to back assertions, and supports using improvements in the sciences as guide for what we assume to be true, and correspondingly what is taught in schools. Second, there are advocates of art and interpretation. This camp has much in common with the Romanticism of the past. The goal here is to sidestep if not outright reject the question of objective truth, and instead to embrace diversity of opinions and experiences without judgment. The art wing does not counter any of the other wings with different specific criteria for assessing truth, rather the artists seek a different kind of relation to knowledge and reality altogether – one of openness, expression, exaltation, and interpretation. The third camp is oriented around ethnicity, which may include race, religion, and traditional practices. This camp is oriented around loyalty to community and heritage. Held beliefs are simultaneously traditional emblems. In cases of cultural difference, loyalty to one's own is the guiding principle, and so ethnocentrism and hostility to outsiders is a persistent temptation. The fourth camp is marked by the lack of adherence to any of the three aforementioned epistemologies. It is a naïve realist position, focused on practical utility and "common sense." In other words, it is basically an orientation against measuring truth according to scientific experts, giving it away to the whims of

has been a thread throughout American history – ebbing and flowing according to fashions and political trends – the present situation is particularly hostile to the intellect. Recent decades have displayed the ascendance of pragmatic values across the political spectrum, both inside and outside of the academy.²

Consistent with the fact that voices on the Right and Left of the political spectrum call out the academy as a locus of privilege and hence oppression, there are also voices on the Right and the Left who defend higher education, and argue that its recent woes are due to large trends coming from the other respective side of the political spectrum. On the left side, we have writers such as Giroux (2014) and Brown (2015), who identify neoliberalism – in policy and in rhetoric – as the culprit. We also have the advocates of scientific knowledge identifying religious fundamentalism as a major threat. From a more conservative angle, we have a collection of admirers and unwitting followers of Bloom (1987), who identifies “openness,” as the culprit. Yet others leaning more conservative blame a university culture of runaway political correctness, encouraged by the hegemony of Leftism among faculty (FUREDI, 2016). Effectively then, we have four different varieties of the accused.

Of course accusation does not necessarily translate to guilt, and the relative validity or strength of the aforementioned trends is certainly debatable. Individual minds do not tend to blame all four at once; the forces at fault are generally associated with the other side of the political spectrum. Yet I am not entirely agnostic on the issue. In the current exposition I will lean primarily on the critique of

interpretation, or specifically adhering to ethnic priorities and assumptions; and toward unquestioning belief in one’s own ready-to-hand impressions about things. This is not a phenomenological orientation so much as a rigid prioritization of “self-evident” propositions without digging deeper, ignoring the question of what influences might have fed into them. With the exception on the naïve realist position, which is by necessity anti-intellectual, all of the camps have the potential to turn against the intellect, but not the inherent quality of doing so. None of the types are inherently of the political right or left. As with most typologies, in reality people do not tend to fall completely within any one category. Rather, individuals and movements straddle types in different degrees.

² The relationship between the academy and the intellect is itself a complex and contested issue. For simplicity’s sake, in the present exposition I will mostly leave this issue out.

neoliberalism.³ Yet with such a wide swath of identified anti-intellectual/academic forces in society, it is at least worth considering that what is happening might be understood as not so much of partisan character as an extra-political meta-movement manifesting in a constellation of forms. In Horkheimer and Adorno's (2002) terms, this is the Enlightenment turning its destructive powers upon itself. It is moreover a general pulling back from the explicit cultivation of excellence in the human mind. A rigidly pragmatic paradigm – albeit a constant thread in American history – is moving toward a newfound hegemony, and intellectualism stands directly in opposition. Hence the intellect is under siege.

In the first part of this paper, I will pin my notion of intellectualism (and hence anti-intellectualism) to a specific frame of reference, namely the German notion of *Bildung* as it is discussed in writings of Nietzsche and Adorno, which I associate loosely with the traditional American liberal arts model of higher education. In the second part of the paper, I will outline the neoliberal assault on the liberal arts, rooting my analysis in Wendy Brown's (2015) work *Undoing the Demos*, which in turn is influenced by Foucault's (2008) lectures on neoliberalism in *The Birth of Biopolitics*. In the third part of the paper, I will describe the relationship of this anti-intellectualism to the rise of populism and the threat of authoritarianism in the United States. In the final section I will tie the discussion into the general analysis of Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of fascism in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, emphasizing its continued relevance to contemporary developments in education and beyond.

BILDUNG – HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT

Bildung is a central concept in the history of German education. As a complex concept with a varied history, it has no direct equivalent in the English language. However, its earliest origins stem back to ancient Greece, which is

³ While I find the arguments that neoliberalism is culpable to be convincing, I do not mean to imply through this choice that the other culprits are necessarily fictitious. In the space of this one journal article, some investigations simply have to be paid less attention.

ancestor to both Germany and the United States (NORDENBO, 2002). Further, the landscape of educational philosophy in the United States is necessarily influenced by prominent Continental – including German – thinkers, even if the association is indirect. American pragmatist and philosopher of education John Dewey, for example, was influenced by Kant and Hegel;⁴ while German Wilhelm von Humboldt, whose casting of the concept of *Bildung* remains the dominant conception of it to this day, was influenced by Kant and Fichte.⁵ In a substantive sense too, the traditional American model of liberal arts education is very much consonant with von Humboldt's (1960) educational vision.⁶

To distill *Bildung* down into a brief definition, it might be thought of as a model state to be achieved by learners through cultivating their own wide intellectual capacities. These wide capacities craft their minds to be capable of autonomy. This is not an individualistic or atomistic vision of autonomy; it is a socially embedded one. Through dedicated mentorship, the individual learns to become an autonomous, reflective and contributing member of society. While *Bildung* is often translated directly to refer to education, it can also be understood to refer to culture, and in an important sense, it refers to both of these things. In visions of *Bildung*, education extends beyond the educational institution, and is intimately connected with becoming a cultured citizen. In other words, education is

⁴ Løvlie and Standish (2002, p. 321) note: "Anyone acquainted with John Dewey's work will know that he was deeply inspired by Hegel in his student days and very well read in German philosophy in general. How did he transform this German heritage? His aversion to dichotomies of every sort is well known. His philosophy repeats the idea of the basic interrelatedness between self and world found in Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* and throughout Hegel's philosophy. He was averse to talking in terms of a self-propelled 'I' that acts according to its individual preferences, and against this fused something like Kant's moral agent with Hegel's embedded self to arrive at a conception of the individual as having an innate social awareness directed towards collaboration with others. German philosophy contributed to his idea of democracy as a form of life, an idea that he worked out given the premises of the existence of a liberal state, a growing industrial society and the great melting pot that was America. Dewey's education for democracy transformed Kant's liberalism and Hegel's communitarianism under conditions quite different from those of Germany. Thus, the time span of a hundred years did not sever the threads linking these ideas to classical *Bildung* but wove them into the new fabric called pragmatism."

⁵ Dewey has been identified as carrying a similar message as von Humboldt into American education. See (LØVLIE; STANDISH, 2002).

⁶ More on this below, in the section on the American liberal arts.

tioned intimately to the way of life of the community, which is composed of knowledgeable free-thinkers. Seeking *Bildung* is a way of life. It is given special focus within educational institutions, but it extends well beyond them.

Themes of *Bildung* are intrinsic elements of Nietzsche's philosophy throughout his corpus (BAUER, 1999). Regarding formal education in particular, perhaps Nietzsche's (2015) most direct and sustained statement is contained in a set of early lectures that he gave in 1869, which he compiled as an unfinished text titled *On the Future of our Educational Institutions*. In this series he lambasts the sterility of formal education, and how students maintain an instrumental relationship to the knowledge they acquire. Instead of taking in information and being transformed by it, students come to school to amass knowledge like currency. Students enter higher education with a common arrogant attitude that they do not need to wrestle with ideas from great minds of history and the collective wisdom contained one's native culture as it has developed over time (the "mother tongue"). Instead, they assume that they already know the truth, or at least can easily ascertain it by virtue of their innate intelligence and superiority. Nietzsche finds this attitude deplorable, and believes these arrogant types need to humble themselves before brilliant mentors and to wrestle dedicatedly with the complexities of ideas handed down within one's culture. Unfortunately, this is not what happens when students enter institutions of higher learning; they encounter rigid conformist guidance from mediocre mentors. They are pressed into an established mold, and learn to accept it, rather than to grapple with it and transform their inner selves. Mediocrity is the result, and in the process, true geniuses are weeded out. Instead of nurturing the best minds of a people, higher education has no place for them, and so either consumes them or refuses to take them in.

In Nietzsche's time, he was concerned that the quality of higher education was degrading. He attributes this degradation to two tendencies:

The first is the drive for the greatest possible *expansion* and *dissemination* of education; the other is the drive for the *narrowing* and *weakening* of education. For various reasons, education is

supposed to reach the widest possible circle – such is the demand of the first tendency. But then the second tendency expects education to give up its own highest, noblest, loftiest claims and content itself with serving some other form of life, for instance, the state. (NIETZSCHE, 2015, p. 15)

Regarding the first drive, education is maximized in the interests of its utility, and individuals learn because it will bring them greater material fortune. This pragmatic, self-interested view of education is on the bare level of survival concerns, rather than higher aspirations to full self-development and intellectual exploration. In the second drive, scholars become overly specialized so as to no longer speak to larger human concerns, and inquiry is tied to state imperatives – such as priming people for military service – rather than being for its own sake.

For Adorno ([1959] 2006, 1993), higher education was degraded in much the same way that the culture industry was degradation. Instead of fostering *Bildung*, it provided a cheapened, commodified version of education that encouraged both conformity and alienation from traditional culture. Rather than learning to think critically, students gathered information like commodities. If *Bildung* involved a full connection of the individual to learning and culture in a process of self-development, Adorno identified what went on in the modern university as only a pseudo-version of this process, or what he deemed *Halbbildung*.⁷ Students have a relationship to information, but it does not reach them in a meaningful way, and so ceases to be internally transformative. Knowledge is granted with only instrumental use-value. Adorno identifies a growing tendency for education to focus on practical preparation for employment, rather than to be aimed at bettering humanity through exploring big questions.

Because of the instrumental and conformist relation to knowledge that students participate in with *Halbbildung*, education serves to promote the same degrading tendencies that plague the larger culture in modern society: unthinking conformity, disconnectedness, self-interest, and fixation on the instrumental and practical. These personality traits make society specifically vulnerable to – if not

⁷ *Halbbildung* has been translated as “half-education,” “half-culture” and “pseudo-culture.”

primed for – fascism. In his essay “Education after Auschwitz” Adorno (1998) insists that preventing another holocaust is paramount for education to address, and to serve this end, students need to be facilitated to developing autonomy in their thinking rather than conformity, as well as to be encouraged to be critical of their culture and social institutions rather than just amassing facts about them (Adorno, 1983).

THE NEOLIBERAL ASSAULT ON THE LIBERAL ARTS

Wendy Brown’s (2015) analysis of neoliberalism’s impact on higher education is derived from Foucault’s theory of neoliberalism as it is mapped out in his book of lectures called *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008). The essential points of Foucault’s theory of neoliberalism, as they apply for Brown, are twofold. First, economic rationality is transposed into ever more spheres of life – enter “homo oeconomicus.” Second, people come to view themselves as independent entrepreneurs, seeking to expand their own value on the marketplace – their “human capital.” Brown takes Foucault’s theory and insists that tendencies toward “homo oeconomicus” battle contradictory tendencies toward what she calls “homo politicus,” the latter indicating civic-minded, participatory citizenry, which in the West extends back to ancient Greece as essential to democracy. In the era of neoliberalism, “homo oeconomicus” comes into being for the first time, and extensions of neoliberalism into ever wider spheres of life degrade and subvert the potential for “homo politicus” to continue existing. In other words, neoliberalism subverts the social foundations of democracy. In relation to higher education, Brown focuses on the tenuous place of the liberal arts in the United States, especially in terms on their original reason for existence.

The term “liberal arts” harkens back to ancient Greece, where the class of people who were not slaves were expected to learn a variety of subjects that were “worthy of free men,” or *liberalis* in Latin. Free citizens (non-slaves) were expected to be educated in certain ways – especially in grammar, logic and rhetoric, but also

in music, arithmetic, geometry and astronomy – to be able to be good participants in civic life (CASTLE, 1961). The institution of college that developed in connection with the church in 13th century England was ancestor to the American liberal arts college of today. In these universities, members of the clergy would study the same seven areas honored in ancient Greece (WAGNER, 1983). Hence scholarly activity was embedded within an institution devoted to moral and spiritual issues, rather than toward training in practical skills to enhance private earning capacity. The tradition of combining education with spiritual practice was brought from England to the early American colonies by Protestants who came to be famously referred to as the “Puritans.” When the first colleges were set up in these colonies, students there studied “scriptural texts and commentaries, but also history and natural philosophy – a tripartite division of knowledge corresponding roughly to today’s triumvirate of humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences” (DELBANCO, 2012, pp. 40-41). Over time colleges became more numerous and open to more people, as well as less centered on religion *per se* yet still devoted to the development of the ‘whole person’ including their participation in public life (DELBANCO, 2012).

The notion that higher education can be used as a basis for priming citizens for thoughtful democratic participation undergirds the history of American liberal arts proper as well. John Dewey was a significant influence on the development of the liberal arts in 20th century America, and was an outspoken believer in the importance of liberal education in a democratic society. Consistent with the early Greek conception of *Bildung* that was maintained in von Humboldt’s neo-humanist theory of *Bildung*, Dewey held an ideal for education concerning a harmony of individual freedom with integration in community life. In *Democracy and Education* (DEWEY, 1916, p. 116), he states:

Since education is a social process, and there are many kinds of societies, a criterion for educational criticism and construction implies a *particular* social ideal. The two points selected by which to measure the worth of a form of social life are the extent in which the interests of a group are shared by all its members, and the fullness and freedom with which it interacts with other groups. An

undesirable society, in other words, is one which internally and externally sets up barriers to free intercourse and communication of experience. A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder.

To this end, liberal arts education should include a general well of knowledge of history, science, art, and so on. Of course, when the “liberal arts” curriculum began, the sharp divisions between different academic disciplines did not exist. Hence, the “interdisciplinary” nature of the liberal arts stems back to the time before disciplines fragmented. The liberal arts education was the original form in which college and university education developed in the United States. Today, the notion that a liberal arts education helps citizens meaningfully participate in democratic life is rarely taken seriously (BROWN, 2015; DELBANCO, 2012; DERESIEWICZ, 2014).

The liberal arts model of higher education is under attack from two directions. First, along with the rest of the economy, the management of higher education is under the gun of finance capital. Colleges and universities are under increased pressure to cater to would-be investors, doing whatever they can to climb the competitive rankings. This concern becomes ubiquitous, and the preoccupation with ranking maximization extends throughout university culture. Students as well are increasingly guided to maximize their human capital, to compete on the job market (BROWN, 2008).

In the academic job market, competition is fierce, and hence the successful academic tends to be one who learns how to ‘play the game’ and climb to the top through attaching whatever they can to their CV (literally and figuratively) that signifies value on the academic job market. Specialization, professionalization, and skill-building are top priorities. Job candidates are selected largely according to this rationality as well: colleges and universities want hires that will help them climb the rankings and attract would-be investors. Publication volume, impact factors of

professional journals, having research that might secure funding (money for the school), and so on, are high on the list of priorities for any hiring committee that wants their department to stay competitive. Having famous scholars (who publish often) raises a department's market value. Correspondingly, famous scholars who publish often are drawn to working at the more prestigious research universities, especially of course those in the Ivy League. Not only is working at a top ranked university a personal honor and a boon to one's career in general, but top ranked universities also tend to be the ones with the most resources to offer faculty, and who allow professors to teach less and focus more on their own work – their real passion. Ironically, this means that students at the top ranked schools may be getting inferior educations to students at smaller liberal arts colleges, being as professors at top research universities generally place less value on mentoring.

Second, in the general culture, as neoliberal rationality extends throughout, the notion of personal development or enrichment as a civic virtue independent of payoff on the job market seems quaint. Students are not encouraged by their parents to seek out higher education for personal enrichment. Rather, they are told to do it to increase their earning capacity. As mentioned, the job market – academic and nonacademic – is competitive, and the Great Recession left a large boot-print on the collective psyche: the threat of being left behind in the job market, being marked as unemployable, looms large. Hence it is not that students are entering college looking for personal enrichment and find the job market rammed down their throats instead (though presumably this must happen sometimes); rather students are entering college with the express intent of building their human capital to compete on the job market. Increasingly, not just research universities but also liberal arts colleges now, are gearing their curriculums more toward job training, and less toward general education for personal enrichment and civic participation (BROWN, 2015; DELBANCO, 2012; DERESIEWICZ, 2014).

Giroux (2014) frames this overall trend in higher education as the erosion of education as a Habermasian “public sphere.” In Habermas' (1991) theory, the public sphere is specifically important as a social basis of political democracy, and

the independence from state and market is an intrinsic element in the capacity for free deliberation and hence public will-formation to take place. In Giroux's analysis, the threat against the public sphere in education is exacerbated by the decline in the institution on tenure. He frames tenured faculty as existing in a kind of protected zone, without pressure from the state or the market to gear their academic work in any particular direction. Hence their inquiry can be free. To the extent that tenure constitutes a specific public sphere within academia (we might call this a sphere within a sphere, or a "subsphere"), its decline further undermines the social buttressing of American democracy.

The content students learn in college, the guidance they are given by faculty in college, and the reasons they choose to enter college, have moved from self-betterment and civic participation into the question of private utility and practical payoff. As mentioned above, students bring neoliberal rationality into higher education with them, and encounter more of it from the mentors they find there. The trend, at least, is in this direction. This situation is of course located within a larger culture that is undergoing continuous colonization by neoliberal rationality. A 'show me the money' mentality proliferates among those who do not enter higher education as well, of course. And students choose to continue or not with education from within families, neighborhoods, media cultures, and so on, that are also inundated with neoliberal rationality. They enter occupations that are similarly saturated. In all of these domains, 'practical' considerations rise to dominance, and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake becomes associated with arrogance, pretentiousness, self-indulgence, and superfluity. The neoliberal attack on the liberal arts is one wing of a wholesale assault on intellectualism.

THE POPULIST ASSAULT ON INTELLECTUALISM

The transformation inside the academy is part of a larger transformation that subsumes the academy. The current anti-intellectual trend is not an isolated occurrence in American history, however. Intellectualism has remained a more or

less contested value for hundreds of years. As Hofstadter (1963) has famously shown, anti-intellectualism is ingrained in American culture, and has taken different forms over time, surfacing and resurfacing in different domains; now religion, now politics, now education.

Of course, this does not mean that the severity of anti-intellectual sentiment is always the same. Certain eras and contexts have witnessed larger flourishing of it. When populism is on the rise, the intellectual is frequently a scapegoat, or at least a target of animosity. The logic behind this is somewhat unavoidable. Intellectualism unavoidably contains an elitist element. This happens on at least three fronts. First, the intellectual is in a position of ostensible personal superiority over those who are less educated. Second, higher education tends to be a ladder toward higher earning capacity. Third, higher education leads to careers that involve greater power in society. To some degree then, the accusation that intellectualism and its associated educational institutions are bastions of elitism is impossible to refute. When “the people” start to mobilize against “the elites” – and this is a condensed definition of a populist movement (MÜLLER, 2016) – the intelligentsia is bound to come under moral fire. In addition, the rejection of the intellect tears away the accountability of political leaders to appeal to reason, as well as of “the people” to check their convictions against evidence and analysis. This provides a foothold for extremist demagogues to be taken more seriously, as well as susceptibility among “the people” to follow charismatic leaders.

Populism has coincided with anti-intellectualism in a variety of instances. In the quintessential case for the Western mind, German Nazi ideology contained much anti-intellectual sentiment (MOSSE, 1966), as intellectualism was associated with Judaism and Marxism.⁸ In the United States, the McCarthyist era found a great deal of anti-intellectual sentiment. Marxism and intellectualism were associated together in the assault (HOFSTADTER, 1963; JACOBY, 2008). Today, the populism of the far right in the United States includes a pitting of religion against science, as in the widely discussed issue of teaching creation vs. evolution

⁸ The famous Nazi book burnings carried an explicit anti-intellectual message.

in schools. In this case, scientific knowledge is refuted as tainted, manipulated, and so on. Evolution is rejected on the basis that it is ‘just a theory.’⁹ The right-wing rejection of science extends as well into climate science, where unanimity in the scientific community that global warming is real and has human causes is cast aside under the assumption that data must be falsely interpreted in order to serve a Left-wing political agenda. Indeed, scientific argument holds little weight with the far right in America, as Christianity is often pitted against it, as is ‘common sense,’ or in other words unexamined folk assumptions and traditional culture.

The pitting of religion and tradition against scientific knowledge is buttressed by the populist conviction that the political left has taken over higher education, the media, and a variety of professional enclaves. The scientific community is one such enclave, claimed to be under the hegemony of Leftist ideology. Hence, scientific expertise is considered to be fully enmeshed with a cultural takeover that involves snobbery and manipulation, and must be resisted through ignorance.¹⁰

Yet the political left is also replete with voices against established knowledge. Examples abound: the postmodern revolt against positivism brought a fervent embracing of cultural relativism which eliminates the privileging of any knowledges over others,¹¹ the rejection of the Western intellectual ‘canon’ on the grounds of its Eurocentrism (BLOOM, 1987), and the hostility toward the professional class on the grounds of the continued dominance of white men within so much of it, as well as the fundamental inegalitarianism – economic and otherwise – of the existence of a professional class in a society structured around a

⁹ The rejection of anything that is ‘just a theory’ is not isolated to this case. In the humanities and social sciences much theory has fallen out of fashion for positivists as well as interpretivists. In turn, the labor of studying theory in depth is often avoided, and the importance of theory as an intellectual tool – for directing inquiry and contextualizing knowledge – is often ignored.

¹⁰ Of course it is not the case that Christianity is inherently hostile to the intellect, nor is it the case that the belief in science in opposition to religion is always informed by thoughtful consideration. In early America the Puritans included a strong emphasis on religious study, and atheism can come in the form of an unreflective not-looking-past the immediate physical present. Or in other words, the devout belief in pure scientific reason can be part of what Marcuse (1968) would call “one-dimensional thinking,” that immediately present facts are all that Being contains (there is no essence, only existence).

¹¹ A related phenomenon is the rejection of Western medicine and hence the science and scientists behind it, as well as the medical experts who practice it.

knowledge economy. More conservative voices consider this leftist rejection of expertise part of hegemonic ‘political correctness’ in the academy¹² and blame it (and the “coddled” nature of the millennial generation) for an elimination of offensive/dissenting opinion, and hence of reasoned debate in higher education, which contributes to a degradation of intellectual standards (FUREDÍ, 2006; FUREDÍ, 2016).

LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) famously lay out their thesis that liberal-democratic societies are prone to turning to fascism. The mechanisms by which this takes place are multiple, but for the sake of brevity and comprehensibility I will explain three general paths. First, there is the fact that tools and strategies originally used for liberation can come to be forces of oppression. In the case of the Enlightenment, science and reason were liberating forces from domination by tradition and the Church; yet over time society become increasingly constrained by the hegemony of scientific and instrumental rationality.

To illustrate this dynamic Horkheimer and Adorno refer to a scene from the works of the ancient Greek writer Homer. In the scene, protagonist Odysseus leads a ship of crewmen through an encounter with Sirens (irresistible and lethal female figures whose beautiful singing voices seduce men, overtaking them and resulting in their deaths). Odysseus’ solution to the overwhelming power of the Sirens is to have his crewmen tie him to the mast of their ship. Thus, he escapes from the external powers and preserves his autonomy in the face of them by way of volunteering up his autonomy. He preserves his power by giving it up. In much the same way, Enlightenment rationality has acted as a liberating force as Euro-America exited the Middle Ages; yet the medium of this liberation is one that has committed the West to a cultural impoverishment that banishes all but the most instrumental aspects of life. No longer dominated by the church of God, we are

¹² The humanities are especially targeted with this accusation.

now dominated by the church of Scientific Reason. Hence our historical move toward greater freedom is simultaneously a move toward greater oppression.

Giroux (2014) identifies the neoliberal university as part of a general motion toward authoritarianism in America along these lines. Closing off the personal relationship to one's education along with the possibility of rich qualitative diversity in educational pursuits and the development of critical faculties, amounts to a new authoritarianism in the educational sphere, and hence forms a component of a new authoritarianism in the larger society. In Marcuse's (1968) terms, the emaciation of education and the war on the intellect are instrumental in the "closing of the universe of discourse," leading to a one-dimensional society that is inherently authoritarian in its tight limits on human thought and consequent action.

Second, the destruction of substantive values and critical capacities paves the way for authoritarianism in another way as well: preemptively neutralizing resistance. People become apathetic and lose their capacity for empathy. They decouple from moral sensibilities other than the imperative to observe reality as it is and follow rational procedures. Without connection to other people, without organic commitment to community, people are primed to accept domination and genocide as it happens. There is no basis from which to have a sense of moral revulsion against it. It is in this second sense that Adorno later declared the need for education to encourage critical consciousness so as to prevent another Auschwitz.

Adorno's writings on education were produced about a century after Nietzsche's early writings. They disagree in certain respects. For example, Nietzsche wanted education to foster genius, and perhaps ideally to be accessible only to the superior few; Adorno did not hold specific reverence for genius or a 'higher' type of person, nor did he want education to be distributed selectively according to a system of stratification. Yet in terms of their criticisms of formal education and how it seemed to be developing, they are very closely aligned (BAUER, 1999). And then almost half a century later, critics such as Brown echo similar laments with influence from Foucault.

This is significant in a couple of ways. The sense that educational institutions are under threat by dehumanizing forces is not a novel one. People have been noting tendencies in this direction for generations. Certain historical conditions may be new – such as neoliberalism – but this does not mean the damage they cast is hitherto unheard of. This should be concerning as well as comforting. On the one hand, it indicates that these problems are longstanding, and perhaps endemic to modern institutions of education, as Adorno attested. The repeated outcries indicate that the problems have never been solved. On the other hand, the repeated outcries against the degradation of liberal education attest that education still maintains value elements that have not been destroyed, and are still discernible enough to mobilize some people to speak in favor of their protection. Evidently the ideal of a broad education for autonomy and civic participation – whether in the form of the American liberal arts ideal or the German ideal of *Bildung* – is a more robust notion than Nietzsche and Adorno ascertained. Also, thinkers of the past still have something to say about our present-day predicament. Adorno and Foucault are both known to have been influenced by Nietzsche; the family resemblance is not altogether uncharacteristic. However, it is worth continuing to bring their ideas into conversation with one another regarding present-day topics. On a more alarming note, Horkheimer and Adorno developed the ideas outlined above in the process of insightfully theorizing the roots of fascism in Germany and in general. To the extent that American culture today bears many similar burdens to the Weimar culture of the 1920s, there is all the more reason to protect the university's capacity to function foremost as a public sphere rather than simply a training ground for higher earning capacity.

As for the third general path: social disconnection, lack of substantive values, and a thoroughly commodified culture leave people empty and longing for a more vibrant relation to life and to one another, even if only subconsciously or semiconsciously. They also have much anger and resentment from living in a culture which does not feed their whole person. Society becomes increasingly unstable and the sense of looming danger and disaster grows. When a charismatic

authoritarian leader comes along promising protection and belonging, it can be very compelling to a fearful, alienated and demoralized population.

REFERENCES

ADORNO, Theodor W. **Theorie der Halbbildung**. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006.

ADORNO, Theodor W. "Theory of pseudo-culture (1959)." **Telos**, n. 95, 1993, p. 15-38.

ADORNO, Theodor W. Education after Auschwitz. In: ADORNO, Theodor. **Critical models: interventions and catchwords**. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. p. 191-204.

ADORNO, Theodor; BECKER, Hellmut. "Education for autonomy." **Telos**, n. 56 1983, p. 103-110.

BAUER, Karin. **Adorno's Nietzschean narratives: critiques of ideology, readings of Wagner**. New York: SUNY Press, 1999.

BLOOM, Allan. **Closing of the American mind**. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.

BROWN, Wendy. **Undoing the demos: neoliberalism's stealth revolution**. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015.

CASTLE, Edgar Bradshaw. **Ancient education and today**. London: Penguin, 1961.

DERESIEWICZ, William. **Excellent sheep: the miseducation of the American elite and the way to a meaningful life**. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014.

DELBANCO, Andrew. **College: what it was, is, and should be**. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.

DEWEY, John. **Democracy and education**. New York: Macmillan, 1916.

FOUCAULT, Michel, DAVIDSON, Arnold; BURCHELL, Graham. **The birth of biopolitics: lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979**. New York: Macmillan, 2008.

FUREDÌ, Frank. **Where have all the intellectuals gone?: confronting 21st century philistinism.** Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006.

FUREDÌ, Frank. **What's happened to the university?: a sociological exploration of its infantilisation.** New York: Taylor & Francis, 2016.

GIROUX, Henry A. **Neoliberalism's war on higher education.** Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014.

HOFSTADTER, Richard. **Anti-intellectualism in American life.** New York: Vintage, 1963.

HABERMAS, Jürgen. **The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society.** Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991.

HORKHEIMER, Max; ADORNO, Theodor W. **Dialectic of enlightenment.** Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002.

JACOBY, Susan. **The age of American unreason.** New York: Vintage, 2008.

LØVLIE, Lars; STANDISH, Paul. "Introduction: *Bildung* and the idea of a liberal education." **Journal of Philosophy of Education**, v. 36, no. 3, 2002, p. 317-340.

MARCUSE, Herbert. **One-dimensional man: the ideology of advanced industrial society.** London: Sphere Books, 1968.

MOSSE, George Lachmann. **Nazi culture: intellectual, cultural and social life in the Third Reich.** Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966.

MÜLLER, Jan-Werner. **What is populism?.** University of Philadelphia, 2016.

NIETZSCHE, Friedrich. **Anti-education: on the future of our educational institutions.** New York Review of Books, 2015.

NORDENBO, Sven Erik. "Bildung and the Thinking of Bildung." **Journal of Philosophy of Education**, v. 36, no. 3, 2002, p. 341-352.

VON HUMBOLDT, Wilhelm. **Theorie der Bildung des Menschen.** In: **Werke in fünf Bänden.** Darmstadt: WBG, 1960.

WAGNER, David Leslie. **The seven liberal arts in the Middle Ages.** Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983.

Recebido em: 21/11/2017

Aprovado em: 15/12/2017