

INTELLECTUALISM AND CREATIVITY IN THE USSR

Lecture delivered in the Wheeler Auditorium, University of California, Berkeley, on April 23, 1959

I. Intellectualism and Politics: American Schools of Thought.

Intellectualism and creativity are not a unity, but a duality. The duality, which invests each of the parts with its opposite, is especially prevalent in Russia, where intellectualism is not an intellectual, but a political question.

I do not mean the kind of politics that is being played on both sides of the Iron Curtain with Boris Pasternak's DR. ZHIVAGO, where one side (Russia) dismisses the work summarily and howls that the name of the author is but the proper name of a snake; and the other side (America) is willing to forget the apologia Pasternak pens for the Russian ruling class just because he does slander the Russian Revolution, and the very period which inspired him, Essenin, Blok and Mayakovsky to what creative heights they had as poets.

This type of politics, in which Pasternak's Epilogue also indulges, despite all the heat it creates, sheds very little light on either Russian society or its literature. Nor does it illuminate the question either of intellectualism or creativity.

When I said that, in Russia, intellectualism is not an intellectual, but a political question, I meant one related to production, relations of men to one another at the point of production which affects all else in society - its politics, its intellectual life, its arts, its science - and its wars. When you know that source of life, there is no reason why the Russian intellectual need appear as an enigma. That the various schools of thought in America choose to transform the question into an enigma is due to no hidden statistics on the part of the Russian ruling bureaucracy. Not in this instance. Ever since the 1936 Stalin Constitution enthroned the intelligentsia as a group apart from workers and peasants, whom these latter must respect and obey, especially obey, it has been clear who the ruling class in Russia is. By 1939, Molotov spelled out the exact size of both the intelligentsia "in general", which he said comprised 10% of the population, and the "most advanced" part of it, the real rulers, to be a mere 2.05%.

That the American intellectual has chosen to create a mystery where none exists is outside of any lack of available knowledge. For one thing, the American schools of thought seek an intellectual continuity where none exists - in the intellectuals of the 19th century and during the period of the Russian Revolution of 1917. There, the intellectuals identified themselves with the masses' struggles for freedom from Tsarist tyranny. It was this struggle, which, directly or indirectly, stimulated the great Russian writers of that period.

With the rise of the Stalin era, on the other hand, the Russian intellectuals attained their present status by diligently serving and becoming part of the totalitarian bureaucracy.

Even where the American intellectual (Prof. Counts in his "The Challenge of Soviet Education", is an outstanding example) sees that there has been a fundamental transformation of the Russian intelligentsia, he still harks back to the Stenka Razin revolt. The phenomenon that is in urgent need of analysis, however, is not the 17th, but the 20th century.

A second school of thought exemplified by Prof. Stuart Ramsay Tompkins, goes so far as to subtitle his book on the Russian Intelligentsia: Makers of the Revolutionary State. After claiming the intelligentsia has no counterpart in the West, Prof. Tompkins continues: "It seems to have been first applied in the '60s, perhaps beginning with Turgenev. The intelligentsia were a group of fanatical, devoted and intolerant people, fed constantly from below by the rising youth." In that group of "fanatical, devoted and intolerant people" he includes everyone from Chernyshevsky to Stalin!

At the same time, the Harvard University study of Continuity and Change in Russian and Soviet Thought reaches out for so broad a scope that it covers everything from the Greek Orthodox Church to Russia's present competition with the U. S. in the underdeveloped countries. I do not know how far a knowledge of the Greek Orthodox Church will help one in understanding the present-day intellectual, but I do know that the generous doses of analysis of "repentant intellectuals" who are supposed to be the living proof of the Russian saying, "Bez Viny Vinovatye," that is to say, "guilty without guilt," will get you exactly nowhere.

The Russian intellectual's guiltless hands have been quite bloody ever since the gory Moscow Trials of 1937! (I note, in passing, that Pasternak has his hero conveniently die in 1929.) It is true that the Epilogue continues through the present day, and does contain a criticism of the "unexampled cruelty of the Yezhov period," but then it also hears "the unheard music of happiness" in the postwar period - from the Vorkuta forced labor camps, no doubt.

Finally, the U. S. Senate, in its document, "Tensions in the Soviet Union", sees tensions, not between the intelligentsia and the great masses, but within the intelligentsia. The honorable senators will wait a long time indeed if they put their hopes of revolt in what they call "the upheaval of a few scientists in charge of extraordinary weapons."

Nevertheless, the illusion has been reinforced by the publicity around the Nobel prize-winner, Pasternak. The disclaimers from Pasternak himself, which were obviously forced, further strengthened the illusion.

But the book belies the fact.

"Do not trust the artist," D. H. Lawrence writes in his Essays on American Literature, "Trust the Tale."

And the tale of DR. ZHIVAGO does end with a whitewash, first of World War II as "a breath of fresh air, a purifying storm, a breath of deliverance," and then of 1948 or 1950. He cannot make up his mind

whether he wishes "the portents of freedom" to signify the whole postwar period, or whether he dares make the year of Stalin's death that symbol, so he says, in a deliberately careless way, "Five or ten years later" - it is five "or" ten years from the year specified as 1945; "One quiet summer evening, Pudorov and Gordon were again together, sitting at an open window above Moscow...

"Although victory had not brought the relief and freedom that were expected at the end of the war, nevertheless the portents of freedom filled the air throughout the postwar period, and they alone defined its historical significance.

"To the two old friends, as they sat by the window, it seemed that this freedom of the soul was already there, as if that very evening ~~the future had tangibly moved into the streets below them~~, that they themselves had entered it and were now part of it. Thinking of this holy city" (Lubyanka included, I suppose) "Thinking of this holy city and of the entire earth, of the still-living protagonists of this story, and their children, they were filled with tenderness and peace, and they were enveloped by the unheard music of happiness..."

"Unheard music of happiness" indeed - from where, the Vorkuta forced labor camps, or from East Germany - those truly signified "the portents of freedom" but no "music of happiness," heard or unheard, filled the air as the totalitarian machine rolled in to crush "the portents of freedom."

II. Creativity is Suffocated

The transformation that the intellectual has undergone has nothing to do with "happiness", heard or unheard, (although, no doubt the fact that Pasternak invented this happiness in the Epilogue which is not present in the tale itself tore him, as an artist, to pieces) nor with national boundaries, for that matter. It is rooted in changes in production that we have witnessed here ever since the Depression, and the recurrent crises that led us to war, and now are heading to the edge of total extinction.

In the case of the Russian intellectual, it began in 1928 with the initiation of the First Five Year Plan, and reached its climax with the legitimization of the "classless intelligentsia" as the ruling class in 1936. As a consequence of the identity between the intellectuals and the tyrannical State Plan - along with the Constitution-creativity is suffocated.

What is generally called "the political consequences of non-conformism" are the natural by-products of the intelligentsia's acceptance of their role as the elite. Of course, it is a straight-jacket for the intellectual as well, but it is one of his own making.

Because the Russian intelligentsia is ranged against the genuine creativity which, historically, has stemmed from the common man's struggle to be free, thus releasing also the creative powers of the intellectual, intellectual and intellectualism are not synonymous with creativity, either in their strictly literary works, or the ideology they seek to foist on the Russian masses.

III. Art and The Two Opposites: Marxism and Communism

The greatest lie of all is the one the Russian intellectual seeks to pass off as truth - that he stands on Marxist theory. Pasternak's attack on Marxism is from the same false ground of identifying these two opposites: 1) Marxism, a theory of liberation, and 2) Communism, the theory and practice of enslavement.

It is high time to separate these two irreconcilable opposites.

Marx was concerned with the freedom of humanity and with the inevitable waste of human life which is the absolute general law of the constant growth of machinery and the constant degradation of the laborer. Russia is concerned with the mainspring of capitalism; paying the worker a minimum and extracting from him the maximum. They dub this "The Plan." Marx called it the Law of Value and Surplus Value, "the fatal formula of wage slavery."

No philosopher ever had a grander vision of man than had Marx, and yet none was so firmly based on the first necessity of living: labor and production. His contention was that so long as you have exploitative production, where machine is master of man instead of man of machine, that is how long you would have capitalism, no matter what name you gave the system. Under such conditions of labor, your sensitivity, be that of man in general, or the artist in particular, is limited:

"Religion, the family, the state, law, morals, science, art are only particular forms of production and subordinate to its universal law." (Private Property and Communism, which appears for the first time in English as an Appendix to my work, MARXISM AND FREEDOM)

Now "the universal law", which, in economic terms, is called the Law of Value and Surplus Value, is, in human terms, called ALIENATION OF LABOR. That alienation of labor applies not only to the factory, which is of course at the root of all other alienations, but also in the labor of the intellectual which suffers as well from the division between mental and manual labor which characterizes class societies.

From the start, Marx separated himself from the vulgar Communists of his day who thought all problems would be solved with the abolition of private property. Marx insisted that the basic contradictions of capitalism cannot be overcome until what is most degrading of all, and the source of all other contradictions, alienated labor is overcome:

"In the alienation of the object of labor is only crystallized the alienation, the estrangement in the very activity of labor."

This is the essence of all that is perverse in capitalism. To this must now be added that which is most perverse under state capitalism that passes itself off as Communism includes the status of the intelligentsia. This, too, Marx had foreseen when he said that vulgar Communism "completely negates the personality of man... The cultivation of the five senses is the work of the whole history of the world to date. Sensitivity, preoccupied with crude practical necessity, is only limited sensitivity... To such absolute poverty has human essence had to be reduced in order to give birth to its inner wealth!"

Pasternak seems ignorant of the Humanism of Marxism not because he is a novelist rather than a historian, but because he suffers from the pragmatism so familiar to us in this country - that "success is that which succeeds." And didn't Communism succeed while Marxism is nowhere in power? But, as even Pasternak recognizes in another place, there is the "power of unarmed truth." And "the power of unarmed truth" called Marxism is that is is a philosophy of human activity, a theory of liberation.

The Russian intellectual is certainly not the repository of creativity. First of all it must be made clear beyond the peradventure of any doubt that even if Oistrakh plays the violin "creatively", and the Meisseyev Ballet dances "divinely", one cannot shunt aside ten millions in forced labor camps.

The truly breath-taking creativity lies, not in the music or the dance, but in the slave labor revolt in Vorkuta which killed once and for all the myth of totalitarian invincibility. And thereby created "The Thaw" also for the intelligentsia, including its novelists.

Secondly, music (composition as well as interpretative playing) and the dance aside, the arts - especially literature - have been quite barren for about three full decades.

DR. ZHIVAGO is not the oasis in the desert of Russian literature that it is played up to be in the West, not because Pasternak is not a Marxist, but because he is not a great artist. A talented one, yes, but not great. Moreover, his greatest period of creativity was precisely as a lyric poet in the period of the Russian Revolution and civil war that he now chooses to slander, but which by clearing away all the old rubbish, did create for him new forms in which to express himself.

Pasternak, in making a bid to enter the literary greats of the 19th century, referred to his early poems as "mere trifles", while DR. ZHIVAGO he classed as his great work. But there are very few places in DR. ZHIVAGO that arise above those early lyrical heights - and a great many places that don't come up to it.

The West's attempt to treat it as if it were in a class with Tolstoy's WAR AND PEACE shows us the myopic vision of our own intellectuals. Not a single character, including that of Dr. Zhivago, comes to full life. (I dare anyone to tell me what Zhivago even looks like. I know Dr. Zhivago has a "snub nose", but what else does the reader know about this hero's looks or depths of thoughts. Words there are aplenty, but nothing in depth of thought or character.

The novel reads like a journalistic report where it should be creative, and creative about inanimate subjects where it should reflect objective reality. That is why it so often sounds spurious - as if he is trying to put something over on us. He has certainly put something over on himself when he wrote that Epilogue.

Pasternak not only fails to approach Tolstoy's sheer apprehension of the world, but he has not his infinite talent for moral indignation. Pasternak preaches and holds forth, all right, but the whole of life seems a disconnected series of incidents that quite often put you to sleep.

Certainly there is none of the perception of objective reality that marks a truly great creative work. It not only does not compare to Tolstoy, but even on the different level of what he referred to as "mere trifles" - his, Blok's, Mayakovsky's lyricism of the early '20s - there is none of that very solid perception of the new in the present work.

You may know that Lenin did not care for Mayakovsky. With a modesty none of the vulgar rulers now can show, Lenin said that, since he had no competence in the field of poetry, no one need follow his "lead", but that he preferred Pushkin to Mayakovsky. One day, however, he came into a metallurgical conference, waving one of Mayakovsky's poems, saying that he captured in a single image what was wrong with the new state that was undergoing bureaucratic deformations. (The "thaw" has recently produced a new edition of Mayakovsky, but I do not know whether it has reached this country.) The particular poem of Mayakovsky's that earned his praise related how Mayakovsky was frustrated in his attempts to see the head of the Writers' Union - the equivalent of the one who presently had rejected DR. ZHIVAGO - because that man was constantly in conference. So one day Mayakovsky brushes madly past the secretary who is trying to keep him out of the conference room, and storms into it. He is horrified at what he sees - just the head of the man chairing the meeting. When he inquires what has happened, he is told that "the Comrade had to attend another conference, and so we kept the head here, and sent his body off to attend the other meeting."

Can someone point to any such condemnation of the present regime in Pasternak's work?

Quite the contrary. The slander of the Russian Revolution and the whitewash of the present regime go hand in hand to prove the real "villain" in the suffocation of creativity. For the willingness of the artist to live in luxury and glory in his specialized status has done more even than the political commissars to stifle creativity. Somewhere, in dealing with what he calls the "beautiful soul", the great German philosopher Hegel, condemns the intellectuals of his day for "luxuriating in a state of self-hypnotised inactivity". That, to a "T", fits the intellectuals of our day. In the narrowness of his vision and self-centeredness, Pasternak is typical of the single-tracked mind of the Russian intellectual who has most recently reorganized the field of education. Don't forget, too, that the social physiognomy of the Russian intellectual is as clearly recognizable there, as say, the "man in the gray flannel suit" is here.

Russian totalitarians, and its intellectuals meeting in all seriousness at an MVD Conference on "The Decisions of the 20th Party Congress on Strengthening of Socialist (!) Legality and the Tasks of Soviet Corrective Labor Institute". It should be a surprise to no one that in a country where forced labor is called a "corrective labor", and prison sentences are euphemistically rendered as "re-education," that the predominant theme of these intellectuals - these "advanced souls" we are told numbered 400 - was further punishment for those who refused to be re-educated into pliant tools of state capitalist barbarism.

Needless to say, liberation for the ten million in forced labor camps was never mentioned by a single intellectual, and not a single soul of the ten millions in forced labor camps was invited to speak for himself.

Anyone who thinks this can never happen in America should take a second look at the South. And I do not mean only at the Fsubuses and the "Confederate Underground" - but at our American Nobel prize-winner, William Faulkner. If Faulkner can state that he is ready to spill Negro blood "to preserve the Southern way of life", how far from barbarism is our culture?

As for the scientists: Just as the Von Brauns did not leave the Nazis until after they were defeated, so the Russian scientists will not leave their Administration - any more than there will be any show of independence of any scientists here.

But there is a break here from intellectuals looking only at intellectuals for the answer, as witness Dr. William Pickering who has stated that all they, as scientists, can do is invent missiles and anti-missiles and infinitum, but that it doesn't really matter who fires that first ICBM, for civilization is then "only one-half hour away from total annihilation."

Here, again, Marx, over 100 years ago, foresaw the impasse that modern science would reach in a society where mental and manual are forced apart, even as work and life are:

"To have one basis for society and another for science is a priori, a lie."

You cannot go on living a lie and have the arts and sciences flourish as part of total human development. This, it seems to me is what the eminent scientist, Dr. Pickering, is saying when he is appealing for "a new unifying principle from the heart and mind of man."

The most creative act, the only one that will get us out of the impasse that science in a class society has reached is the creation of a new truly human social order. This cannot be brought in behind the backs of the people, least of all by intellectuals who have accepted for themselves the role of the elite.

Marx foresaw this movement of history, not because he was a prophet, but because he made the human being the subject of all development, and saw that in no other way can mankind be free and a new society emerge. There is still no other way.

THE STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM IS THE FOUNT OF ALL CREATIVITY.