

A TRAVEL GUIDE FOR FUTURE THINKERS

For, as he claimed, another important difference between tourist and traveler is that the former accepts his own civilization without question; not so the traveler, who compares it with others, and rejects those elements he finds not to his liking.

Paul Bowles, The Sheltering Sky

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Clemente Orozco, *Los dioses del mundo moderno* (Hannover, 1932)

The terms 'intellectual' and 'academic' are often used interchangeably to refer to people who write, think, and teach for a living. With the basic aims of higher education in mind, to educate the populace and to promote

the expansion of human knowledge, this is a well-founded conflation. Who else but intellectuals, individuals who hone and develop the ability to sort through information and make informed choices based on their observations and ideas, should be placed in charge of academies, institutions of advanced learning that are dedicated to the preservation of human knowledge. However, the conflation of these two concepts is the result of an extended process of restoration of educational models that guided ancient cultures such as the Greeks, the Persians, and the Babylonians. This process unfolded after a long, dark age in the Near Eastern and Western world during which representatives of the Christian church sanctioned the ways in which individuals were to think about the cosmos under the threat of torture, death, and eternal damnation. The development of the scientific method in the seventeenth century as a primary means to explore and explain natural phenomena displaced the primacy of religious exegeses of weather, world history, or even human relationships. This not new, but restored configuration, which substituted religious indoctrination with empirical and creative scholarship in the arts and sciences, was the project of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. The Enlightenment demanded the removal of priests as educators and reinstalled in their place, the thinkers and scientists, intellectual academics.

Up until recently, the arts, or the humanities, and the sciences were unified in this constellation of learning rooted in rational thought, deductive reasoning, collaboration, and creativity. Today, the academy still speaks of the arts and sciences as a partnership, grouping together the wide variety of disciplines that fall under the title “arts and science” apart from business schools, or (ironically) from education and teacher training programs, and also from fine arts institutions. However, this merging of the arts and sciences is only a vestige of the Enlightenment and its various predecessors that did not draw a distinction between scientific and other intellectual work. Leonardo Da Vinci and his oeuvre serve as an early example. Benjamin Franklin referred to his experiments with lightning and electricity as “philosophical amusements.” D’Alembert, one of the principal writers of the *Encyclopédie*, was a mathematician and music theorist. The divide between the sciences and the humanities in institutions of higher learning has grown exponentially in line with the corporatization of the university system. From questions of funding and institutional support, to matters of prestige and what is deemed meaningful production, the humanities and the sciences are disciplines in opposition,

perhaps loosely bridged by the ambiguous endeavors of the social sciences. In this current constellation, scientists are not bound by the label of academic or intellectual, instead they are known primarily as researchers who carry out their work under the auspices of a home institution and in the name of the greater pursuits of the scientific community. They are, etymologically speaking, the knowers and the seekers within the greater academy that produce palpable, material results that readily translate to profit and capital growth.

Scholars in the humanities must trace themselves to different etymological roots. Intellectuals, from *intellegere*, build understanding through their critiques of art, literature, music, and culture. This type of work, which, by nature, is solitary and protracted, is less materially productive than scientific work, which relies on collaboration and is geared towards results. In a world that measures progress in terms of scientific development and technological production, the silent, meditative ponderings and frequently obscure writing that results from intellectual work in the humanities, has come to be viewed as a suspicious and unprofitable non-activity. As the separation between the arts and the sciences has widened, the position of the humanities scholar has become more precarious.

In response to the call for profitable, material production as the desired outcome for academic endeavors, the intellectual in the humanities has had to forge out a niche within the academy that affords a modicum of sustainability. As a result, scholarship in the humanities continuously divides itself into a neat system of intricate specializations geared towards the preservation, archiving, and development of specific fields of microstudy divided along national, linguistic, and disciplinary lines. Interdisciplinarity (what is known as collaboration in the sciences) inevitably occurs in this organization, but it rarely goes any deeper than comparison or contrast. The result is a humanities that suffers from tunnel vision and threats of irrelevancy, difficulties adjusting to the rapidly-changing times and desperate attempts to create new fields to contend with the messiness of a world in which the distinctions between borders, boundaries, nationality, and identity have become increasingly blurry. And this is not because study in the humanities tradition is inherently incompatible, irrelevant, or unnecessary in today's digital world. However, since it is easier, more palatable, and less risky to maintain the system—the institutionalized canon of organizations,

divisions, and methodologies—than to undergo an overhaul of education and scholarship, scholars in the humanities choose to create new categories and divisions on top of older ones, a dense, tangled web that reifies the status quo at the expense of intellectual responsibility.

In order to maintain relevancy within the confines of academia, which has increasingly become a conglomerate of profit-seeking institutions, the humanities fields have had to gear themselves towards marketability, a focus on production, and concrete results, all of which poses a problem when the work created by scholars in the humanities is often measured in intangibles such as thinking, discussion, or writing. The value of this work is then measured and quantified in book sales. Due to the demand for results, there has been a great increase in the quantity of publications and a staggering loss of quality and depth. The pressure on continuous publication as the step towards job stability, which in the academy is tenure and promotion, leaves a long trail of undeveloped work whose only function is to ensure the survival of floundering publishing houses with highly specialized markets. Quantity and speed, not necessarily, or not often, quality, leaves little time for anything but going through the motions and this has not only affected the quality of scholarship produced by academics in the humanities, but it has also distracted and discouraged scholars from pursuing work that goes out of field, that touches upon “unpopular,” “unsexy,” “inappropriate,” or “inopportune” topics including the maintenance of a critical eye on the sciences and the development of technology.

Critiques of scientific history, or histories of science, or philosophical reflections on the sciences do exist, but many of them come in retrospect, or too late. While this can be explained by the fact that scientific development tends to move more quickly than thinking and critique, which require meditation and distance, exaggeration and audacity, this explanation ignores the more complex process at work. This process of separation and division between the humanities fields has been a diversion and a distraction from the greater division between the arts and sciences. In a world in which technology, progress, and production—the fruits of scientific research—are favored over the work of sustained and engaged critique, it is more convenient for the humanities to be taken up with other concerns, blocked off from a view into the world of science. One consequence of this historical process in which science and its productive power have come to be viewed as primary in opposition to

work in the humanities has been the marginalization of philosophers, literary scholars, readers, and thinkers who carry out accessible and relevant cultural, political, and social criticism. It has meant the loss of a viable tradition of critical theory and in its place the implementation of prescriptive systems, or applied methodologies which simulate the scientific method and its focus on producing testable results.

The unfortunate outcome of this postmodern conundrum, that the humanities, a branch of knowledge charged with the observation, analysis, and critique of the aesthetic and cultural production of humanity, chooses to perpetuate a system that does not creatively, openly, or courageously confront the new realities posed by the unstoppable march of technological advancement and the cracking open of the meaning of global, world, or even human, is the loss of a sense of balance in academia, the ramifications of which cannot be properly described in financial terms, but can perhaps be quantified in the loss of culture, of nature, of humanity in our everyday lives. And it is in the face of this loss that the terms intellectual and academic begin to look incompatible in the context of the humanities. One can be either academic or intellectual, but to be both at once is a tricky feat. Since the word intellectual, often paired with the word “public,” implies a politically and socially engaged thinker and cultural critic unconcerned and perhaps freed from the confines of an institutional career, the obsessive archive, the bibliography, and the crutch of the footnote, he or she would by definition exist outside of the academy. Yet, this intellectual freedom cannot be found in a journalistic career, or a consulting firm, or any other institution that contracts “public intellectuals” any more than within the university, because what have the press, the mass media, and the publication industry become but the voices of some funding institution or another, bought and sold.

But let’s focus on the university. If a distinction were to be made between academic and intellectual in this setting, it could be summed up in the metaphor of tourist versus traveler. Academic tourists placed in opposition to intellectual travelers, observers versus experiencers. And this distinction, an unnecessary and harmful one, has become a choice one must make as a matter of course upon receiving a degree in higher education. Will you be an academic or an intellectual? Here is an unscientific breakdown of the two categories:

An academic is a scholar who is professionally housed in a department to teach and produce institutionally acceptable scholarship within the confines of a specified field as a part of a business agreement. In the university system this agreement is spelled out in salary negotiations, tenure requirements, and course loads. The academic teaches classes and he publishes, picking from topics within his field of specialization, and perhaps he gradually branches out to other areas within the broader, more general, but still limited discipline. The functional and ultimately successful academic, the extreme and rare case being the crossover “star professor”/ cultural personality often seen on TV and heard on the radio, is an intellectual tourist who produces snapshots of work created by others, and repackages these mementos in scrapbook-like dissertations, which he follows up with either obscure, unreadable texts or popular culture books written in pseudo-academic language.

On the other hand, the intellectual, a mythical traveler, the alter ego of the academic, picks up information and inspiration as she goes. The intellectual produces work according to the twists and turns on her chosen path in line with the experiences she collects along the way and she erases disciplinary boundaries. In this sense, the work of the intellectual is the idealized work of the young academic, the pre-academic, the elusive, and perhaps impossible, non-corporate academic. Whereas the model academic, the tourist preferred by academic institutions, learns to justify his ideas with the words of others through quotations and footnotes that verify and validate his thoughts as a protective measure for himself as well as for his teachers and his bosses, the intellectual, she is more daring, she produces work that is creative and reflective. Her work often lacks the institutional “edge,” which is to say that it is not written in a language deemed institutionally acceptable. But her work loses this edge due to her pursuit of honest expression and a commitment towards praxis. However, the life of this idealized intellectual inevitably faces problems on par with the mediocrity, complacency, and complicity of the academic. Because of her rejection of institutional protocols, she often gets caught up in the battle against the institution, losing sight of anything else. Or, because she does not have a direct connection to the academy, she is simply disregarded, which often presents challenges to economic as well as spiritual survival.

Is the above breakdown too general? Maybe so. Is it useful? Perhaps, but only inasmuch as it provides insight into the alienation suffered by humanities

scholars within and without the academy. Yet the reality is that many humanities scholars find themselves caught within this metaphor of intellectual traveler and academic tourist. And as the humanities disciplines continue to lose importance and primacy in the academy and in the world, resulting in a shortage of jobs for recently graduated scholars, and a lack of opportunities elsewhere, these scholars become both academics detached from their intellectual freedom and intellectuals removed from the benefits of institutional security. The rise of this paradoxical, stagnant academic-intellectual has bred the downfall of critical thinking and, as a result, an inability to cope creatively with our rapidly changing world.

The tension between the disappearing safety of academic tourism and the perils of intellectual travel on a personal and institutional level become apparent in the early stages of a career in the humanities. It is no secret that the pursuit of a higher education degree in literature or some related field and a subsequent career as an intellectual comes at high price whether that be an inability to survive at one extreme, or absolute complicity with the institutional powers at the other. So why do people still take this path? It often begins with a simple aptitude for reading and writing, an innocent and even admirable desire to think critically about the world that human beings have created. Here is one version of the story, perhaps it will sound familiar:

You finished your four years of college and you did well, graduating with a liberal arts degree, perhaps even a double or triple major. Now, you are faced with the realities of adulthood and the need for material survival. In other words, you need to find a job. Inspired by a transcendent reading experience, or encouraged by a college professor who praises your hermeneutic abilities, or because you want to be a writer, you decide that you wish to pursue a career as a humanities scholar. This will be satisfying and rewarding. You aspire to do work worthy of the pieces that inspire you and that engages with the world around you. You wish to be creative and daring in your work as well as in your teaching. Energized by these intentions, you apply and are accepted into some doctoral program geared towards the study of a national literature, or perhaps comparative literature, or even philosophy. You enter with a somewhat vague notion of your interests and the subjects you wish to examine in an extended piece of writing, the dissertation, and you work around these topics through your initial coursework.

At the beginning, work in the humanities feels like hunting and gathering, collecting, mining for data, sorting through ideas. The earliest years make scholarly work seem so open, at times terrifyingly so, and you are consistently advised to narrow your focus and to make choices about your specialty, to choose your field. Eventually, after slogging through departmental requirements and the hurdle of exams geared towards taming even the wildest of imaginations, you pick your general area of research in resignation, out of exhaustion, due to necessity, and in line with what is in demand on the job market. You are encouraged to cast an increasingly microscopic eye towards your reading, your writing, and your research. In doing so, you isolate yourself from larger, broader, unmanageable concerns, and you enter into a limited conversation with a small group of scholars with interests similar to your own.

Soon enough, you go on tour to present your research, reading papers at conferences, sometimes reading only to the few people on the self-appointed panels, or even to the walls themselves. At some point you find yourself abroad in a place relevant to your research and, hopefully, you are funded by some grant or scholarship. At first, this aspect of your work presents itself as something of a vacation, a combination of play and exploration underwritten by your scholarly intentions, justified in their institutional approbation. Traveling and its promise in the future seem to reinvigorate your interests in your work and academic life in general. You go to museums, perform archival research, take photos, and conduct interviews. Taking your work seriously, you inevitably ask questions that border on exploitation; you treat cultures, languages, and literature as specimens to be examined under a microscope. All in a good day's work you view the people in these places as subjects and you may even find yourself having to fill out paperwork about the legal ramifications of carrying out research that involves human subjects. It is likely that between the legal paperwork, the footnotes, and the dusty archives you finally begin to feel like the intellectual tourist that you have become. What started as a wide-open journey inspired by a work of art or literature has become a hybrid sociology project that has taken you away from reading, writing, and thinking all together. You compile data and synthesize information. You find your niche and contribute to your field by strengthening its boundaries.

For many scholars, all of this fits into their understanding of work in the humanities and its broader function. But for you this feels all wrong. You

did not realize that getting a doctorate degree requires the relinquishment of intellectual freedom as the prerequisite for job security, institutional support, and general stability. You did not set out to become an academic tourist locked into some area of research that can only be breached by the acceptable protocols of so-called interdisciplinarity. Can you take this safe road and reserve your most radical creative work for a tenure-protected future? Will you lose sight of your original ideas, your passions, your creativity? You are drawn to the path of the intellectual traveler who casts off the safety net of academic standards, rules, and regulations and journeys to the edges of self-defined intellectual limitations. But this road is perilous, the way back is tortuous, and may never reconnect with the safe, secure tour-bus reality of the profession that originally beckoned to you. Besides, you need a job, you need to survive and being a traveler is expensive economically as well as physically and intellectually.

The profession itself, its twists and turns, its hurdles presented as steps on a ladder, begin to give you *déjà vu* as you realize you have entered a closed circle, an institutional mechanism that holds you hostage to the academic-intellectual machine of which you are another product. It all feels like an antiquated process, analog, rusty, machinery that produces something no longer in demand on a regular schedule of convocations and peer-reviewed publications and replications of the work of others into your own and the insistence of this replication process in the work of your students. After all the classes, the bureaucratic functions and committees, and the rush to get things published, you lose the drive to push limits or explore the boundaries that you had once hoped to trespass.

And in the end, whether you are an academic comfortably tenured, or a wearied intellectual broken by the constant struggle for survival, you will have to ask yourself what it would have been to step outside of the intellectual tour bus for longer than the time it took to snap a few photos, quote a few lines, string together a few pithy observations. What if you stopped weaving a protective web around your so-called home within the institution, or your work, or your field, or your interests? Would it unravel and reveal hidden passages to more reflective and creative scholarship? Would you disregard the standard formats and protocols in your writing and research in favor of expanding intellectual openness? And in the classroom, how would you reflect

and impart this critical openness? Would this be dangerous and out of line? Would it cost you your job? Would the potential individual losses be worth it if they were to clear a space for the thinker, an integrated scholar who dares to question and reject those parts of her culture, society, and institutions that bind her creativity and freedom, allowing for her survival and also for her success? How would this success be measured? Is there a place in the academy for this type of traveler?

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