

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CULTURAL ELITES: CHANGES IN THE CONDITIONS OF PRODUCTION

My series on Trumpian Motion concluded with the question “What happened to the cultural elites?”; meaning why did they not do a better job of resisting the conditions that produced Trump and the ugly Republican party. Of course there is no single answer, but there are several contributing explanations. It’s worth examining these partial explanations, if for no other reason than the hope that open discussion might lead to changes.

I use the term cultural elites in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu as explained in David Swartz’ book *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. Swartz says Bourdieu believed that culture is largely created by cultural producers such as artists, writers, academics, intellectuals; movie and TV writers, actors and producers; and both social scientists and physical scientists. I assume today Bourdieu would include technologists, especially computer tech workers who design and produce web sites, games, and platforms and much else. The products of these workers shape our interactions with the world and society, and provide a structure through which we understand ourselves and our roles in society.

In the US we don’t have a separate category for intellectuals. We have experts, who have mastered a chunk of knowledge and are able to use it to advance that knowledge and to offer specific guidance where their knowledge is relevant. And we have pundits, who aren’t experts but who have great confidence in their ability to explain things to the rest of us. They too are cultural producers and maybe even

cultural elites, people like Tom Friedman, and David Brooks and others I won't mention; they aren't all old, you know. There are plenty of these people scattered across the political and ideological spectrum.

In a section discussing the relationship between workers and intellectuals, based in large part on a book on French intellectuals Bourdieu wrote in the late 1980s, Swartz offers an idea that seems relevant to the issue of why cultural elites did not forcefully resist the rise of neoliberalism.

Finally, Bourdieu points to changes in the conditions of intellectual production as a source of ambiguity in political attitudes and behaviors among highly educated workers. He notes a significant decline in the numbers of French intellectuals working as self-employed artisans or entrepreneurs and their increasing integration as salaried employees within large bureaucratic organizations where they no longer claim full control over the means of their intellectual production. P. 239, cites omitted.

This change might encourage more aggressive efforts against the dominant culture, because cultural producers might rebel against their dominated status. But this seems more likely:

These new wage earners of research, [Bourdieu] charges, become more attentive to the norms of "bureaucratic reliability" than act as guardians of the "critical detachment from authority" afforded by the relative autonomy of the university. Moreover, their intellectual products bear the imprint of the "standardized norms of mass production" rather than those of the book or scientific article or the charismatic quality traditionally attached to the independent intellectual. P. 239-40,

cites omitted.

This seems like a good partial explanation of the failure of cultural elites to respond to neoliberalism. It also partially explains a point Mike Konczal raised in his article *Why Are There No Good Conservative Critiques of Trump's Unified Government?* And, it helps explain the rise of Trumpism as discussed here.

The trend Bourdieu describes is obvious in the US; in fact integration of research workers into the ranks of salaried workers seems even stronger than Swartz' description. The trend is perhaps worse here because colleges and universities have become so infused with neoliberal business practices, primarily the use of adjuncts (the gig economy for teachers) who have little stability, little opportunity for sustained research, little protection from the gatekeepers of orthodoxy, and much less "critical distance from authority".

Nevertheless, I think (hope) there is still a large amount of independence in academia, especially among tenured faculty. That independence is centered around expertise in fields of study, where depth of knowledge in small areas is paramount. Many of those areas of study are far too specialized for the general public, and for policy-making.

Much of academic study is intermediated for the public and for policy-making by and through think tanks and similar groups. Of course, those organizations do some interesting research, but most of the worker's time and energy is spent extracting useful ideas from the bowels of journals and academic books and rewriting it so that the rest of us can understand and maybe act on it.

These organizations are dependent on their rich donors, and don't tolerate much from workers that conflicts with the interests of their donors. As an example, Barry Lynn was at New America Foundation, a prominent democratic think tank for years. He wrote often on the problems

of monopoly and lack of competition in the US economy. Then he wrote an article critical of Google, one of the big sponsors of New America, and was driven out. He and a few of his associates started Open Markets Institute with funding from George Soros, another wealthy donor with his own agenda.

Charles and David Koch tried to take over the Cato Institute, which they funded, and which claims to be a libertarian think tank. This effort which was not completely successful, causing a lot of distress on the conservative side. Not much critical detachment from authority there.

Perhaps we should read this as an example of another phenomenon Bourdieu describes, the attempt to exchange cultural capital for economic capital. There is nothing inherently wrong with this of course. For example, in the university setting, getting tenure should involve both teaching and research. Competition for status and other resources in one's field should be driven by these skills, and so should be a net gain. Good teachers and researchers should be rewarded with tenure and a steady income to support further study and teaching.

3It isn't obvious that this will happen in the think tank world. Further it's hard to imagine how the kind of competition we see in academic fields would work in the private sector, where there are powerful forces at work to limit the scope of intellectual activity and control access to influence.

There are similar patterns in other areas of cultural production: journalism, movies, TV, magazines, book publishing, and large parts of the music industry. Consolidation and business failures have increased the control of the few over cultural production. Where once there were many outlets for culture producers, today there are fewer, and most of them are more rigidly ideological.

It's easy to see how people can lose their

independence in these settings. They see themselves as brain workers, employees responding to the cues of their work environment, trying to do good work and advance themselves in a bureaucratic system. Institutional pressures dominate independent thinking critical of existing authority. It isn't necessary to attribute bad motives to them to despair at the outcome.