

# High Culture, Low Politics

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My theme at its most general is the relation between culture and power; at its most specific, the relation between a particular type of culture, so-called high culture, and two types of power, namely governmental power, and the related but more diffuse power prevailing in society at large.

So-called 'high' politics are often (and better) called statesmanship, and are typically, though not invariably, international in scope. By the 'low' politics of my title I mean, not democracy specifically, but what politicians engage in at the domestic level, where popularity matters most. Democratic or not, most politics are performed pretty low, and are justified only because they are preferable to despotism,<sup>1</sup> which in its pure form signifies the absence of politics. Yet most real-life despotisms concede something to the political spirit, since they profit from their subjects' consent, endeavour to cultivate it, and are foolish if they think to dispense with it entirely. In politics proper, however, consent (like consensus)<sup>2</sup> must be sought; in fact, wherever avowed and conflicting interests prefer to resolve matters through

<sup>1</sup> See Bernard Crick, *In Defence of Politics*, 1962 (London: Continuum, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Consent and consensus, though they overlap, are not identical. Consent means tacitly or overtly according to someone or something else a right of command, and thus acknowledging one's duty of obedience to a superior *authority*. Consensus, on the other hand, is sought and achieved (or not) between political *equals*. It involves tacit or overt agreement as to the tolerability of given political arrangements, or the desirability of a course of collective action from within them, and the recognition that agreement is preferable to unconditional self-assertion. It does not require one to dissemble or renounce one's interests, only to constrain one's pursuit of them, with the object (as often as not) of safeguarding the most important rather than staking all of them on the hazard of force. Each may *consent* to an authority individually; but he is more likely to do so, and the arrangement is more likely to hold, when the desirability of everyone's doing so is a matter of *consensus*. Consensus is typically arrived at by a less explicit process than consent, being more a matter of the 'invisible hand', the aggregate result of very many spontaneous acts of mutual accommodation. Cf. also note 4 below.

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negotiation and agreement rather than through force, there we have something like politics. The conditions for consent will usually be ascertained through representative institutions. Their business is to transmit public opinion to the rulers, if those are separate from the representatives, or to act on it, where the representatives are themselves the rulers.

Despite not being democracies, nor (occasionally) even having any electoral mechanisms, some states—Hong Kong under British rule, say, some traditional non-European monarchies—nevertheless have institutions officially designated as representative. Here the representatives may claim, or be required, to represent the views of all subjects, and can in principle do so. This is not to say that they will. But they could certainly not do so if they were held narrowly accountable to an agency with its own interests to advance: to a political party, say, or even (obviously) to the whole electorate where the franchise is restricted.

In democracies, however, where the rulers are drawn from the representatives, and where both are accountable to an electorate based on universal suffrage, the ineluctable dynamics of mass persuasion and explicit consent make it necessary for the politicians to appeal to the majority's tastes and values and to dissemble their own, should those differ. Alternatively, they may be obliged to appeal to the tastes and values of some minority which holds the balance of power (the religious parties in Israel, for example) or is otherwise thought, like the British mass media, to wield disproportionate influence over electoral outcomes ('it was the *Sun* wot won it').

No doubt politicians and their publics can sometimes honestly agree on matters of taste and value. This is more likely under a restricted franchise, since, perhaps paradoxically, even in a mass democracy the political class is itself mostly drawn from a restricted category, namely (and incredible though it may seem) an educational élite. Between it and its constituency there may be a cultural gap which can be bridged only by hypocrisy and pretence. Politicians are an educational élite because political skills require, if not the very highest level of education and intelligence, then certainly one well above the average.<sup>3</sup> But the condition of their

<sup>3</sup> It goes without saying that very high intelligence and education may inhibit a person's political effectiveness, since the latter often requires a certain ethical and intellectual coarseness, unscrupulousness and even self-delusion. See Michael Oakeshott, 'The Claims of Politics' (1939) in *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*, Timothy Fuller (ed.) (New Haven:

exercising those skills is that they should be seen, or at least profess, to support the values, tastes, beliefs and aspirations of their constituents, which, though by no means homogeneous, by definition tend towards the average. This would be fine if those things—culture, in short, and particularly the element in it of value—did not vary between educational classes. But if the variation in core values between educational or any other classes were so wide as to be unbridgeable, then any society in that situation would be ungovernable, or governable only by force.<sup>4</sup>

Now, it will be agreed either that this cultural gap is a bad thing, or that democracy is, so far as it necessitates the systematic pretence that no such gap exists. For not only is it bad for our rulers to be forced to pretend to believe things which they do not, but, once their dishonesty is detected, their rule loses whatever democratic legitimacy it possessed, and so too does democracy. The obvious answer, that we are still free to elect rulers who will be genuinely representative of us, founders upon the facts—if facts they be—that electorates expect political competence in their rulers (and will punish incompetence), that political competence is not equally distributed but depends upon above-average education, and that above-average education may foster values which not only differ from the average person's but are sometimes also hostile to them. Nobody, not even the average voter, wants a government of honest populist bunglers and half-wits, however nearly their values accord with his own. Unless his situation is desperate, he no more wants to

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Yale University Press, 1993). Matthew Arnold, on the other hand, saw high culture as a positive brake on political crudity, one reinforced not only by its deliberate self-distancing from day-to-day politics, but also by its indirect link to them through the process of 'establishment'. See my 'Arnold's Cultural Politics', in Robert Grant, *The Politics of Sex and Other Essays* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 127–30.

<sup>4</sup> 'What maintains a great number of citizens under the same government is much less the reasoned will to live united than the instinctive and in a way involuntary accord resulting from similarity of sentiments and resemblance of opinions.'

'I shall never agree that men form a society by the sole fact that they recognize the same head and obey the same laws; there is a society only when men consider a great number of objects under the same aspect; when on a great number of subjects they have the same opinions; when, finally, the same facts give rise in them to the same opinions and the same thoughts.' (Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, tr. and ed. H.C. Mansfield and D. Winthrop [Chicago UP: Chicago, 2000], 358 [I, 2, x].)

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be governed by people as ignorant (of government) as himself, than he wants to teach himself or doctor himself if he can find people better qualified to do it.

The best solution to this problem is for élites to be allowed, if they wish, to differ from the majority in their aesthetic tastes and preferences, so long as they retain a community of ethical values with them. If ethical values are the cultural component least dependent on educational attainments,<sup>5</sup> then it is possible after all to imagine an educationally diverse and indeed stratified society which is nevertheless still unified by shared, deeply-held beliefs. And it can be imagined, because it has actually existed. Some of us remember it, much of it survives, and that which survives is what still holds us together. Further, both we and the law habitually regard individuals as equally responsible for their actions at any intellectual level above the grossly subnormal. In so doing we accord them a basic, initial, but equal minimum of ethical respect. That minimum, and the disposition to accord it to everyone, in itself constitutes a shared value and a social bond. And everyday experience does seem to confirm that people's moral status and capacities are independent of their educational and intellectual accomplishments. You do not require intelligence in order to be good, though goodness demands that you exercise what intelligence you have. And it is certain that intelligence alone never made anyone good, though it has often been of the greatest assistance to the wicked in carrying out their designs, as in the case of Shakespeare's Iago, and in persuading so many twentieth-century intellectuals that their designs were virtuous, despite the tens of millions of corpses which those left in their wake.

What I have been driving at so far is that culture and power, though distinct, are mutually dependent and not finally separable. But it will be as well to clear up some possible misapprehensions. It is commonly thought by liberals that 'power' is necessarily malign. Doubtless we are influenced by Lord Acton's dictum that all power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Some left-wing thinkers, such as Michel Foucault, have professed to detect the operations of this malignant power everywhere, and especially where it seems to be least in evidence and maximally diffused, namely, in liberal societies.

<sup>5</sup> I mean on academic education. No one will deny that ethical competence (or goodness), whatever part nature plays in it, is also hugely dependent on moral education.

But the fact of the matter is this. In a way, Foucault was right: power *is* everywhere. Every social order, *qua* order, involves power of some kind. If Hobbes is right, the thing most to be feared is the *lack* of order, viz. anarchy, or lawless power. And lawless power can be constrained only by a greater. Power can be oppressive, true; but it is also what delivers us from oppression and protects us against it. You do not, if you are sensible, sit down to reason with gangsters, or appeal to their better nature. (They would not be gangsters if they had one.) You call in the SWAT team, and either swat them on the spot like flies, or haul them before the courts, establish their guilt, and then swat them less drastically at leisure. Hedge official power about with legal formalities and liberal safeguards as you please (and as you should, except in emergencies), it is still power.

In matters of social organization power is ineliminable, just like sovereignty. Voluntarily to renounce it here is simply to bestow it elsewhere, and thus still to be party to, and responsible for, whatever is done with it—which is fine, but only if what is done is good. Whether power is benign or malign depends upon who exercises it, whom they exercise it upon, whether or not they do so legitimately, and the manner in which, and end to which, it is exercised. Either in states or between individuals, naked, unaccountable power is bad, and just for that reason needs to be contained. Anything that can contain it, whilst remaining accountable itself, is ‘good’ power. But even ‘good’ power is power, and to deal with ‘bad’ power it may need, particularly in emergencies, to be concentrated.

Overall, to be perceived and accepted as legitimate, power requires consent and more, which is to say, cultural endorsement (or consensus). It may therefore be said that in conferring legitimacy culture is itself a form of power, though this of course raises further problems, such as how cultural power, like any other, is to be made accountable, or at least constrained. All I have space to say here is that once culture has poured itself into stable institutions which are seen as representative of it, in taking their shape it has already subordinated itself to their moderating influence, which is to say, to its own inner tendency towards permanence. If you doubt this, consider which of the following better satisfies our deepest instincts in the matter of justice: so-called summary justice, or the rule of law?

It is plausible to say that the legitimacy of a social order and of the power which maintains it depends on the endorsement of the common culture, which the resulting government exists to express and to protect. In fact, in the case of a democracy one could say as

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much and hope for instant agreement: universal franchise, common culture, general legitimacy, end of story. But what of so-called high culture? How does it fit into the political landscape, especially when that is democratic?

A democracy does not have to be liberal, and might not be were it not, as in our case, the heir of a pre-existing liberal tradition. But our democracy *is* liberal, and even if it accords no special privileges to high culture (partly because high culture is already perceived, and sometimes resented, as a kind of privilege) it will continue to tolerate it and people's pursuit of it, just as it tolerates almost everything else.

But one of the things about high culture is that, in the eyes of its most vociferous proponents, it is not content merely to be tolerated. It claims some kind of official recognition, status and even influence. It is not 'just a matter of taste', any more than taste is. There are those, writes the poet Wordsworth in his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*,<sup>6</sup> 'who speak of what they do not understand; who talk of poetry as of a matter of amusement and idle pleasure; who will converse with us as gravely about a *taste* for poetry, as they express it, as if it were a thing as indifferent as a taste for rope-dancing, or Frontignac, or sherry.'

For Wordsworth, Poetry is a placeholder for what would now be meant by 'high culture', even though high culture then was less self-consciously 'high' than now. That is because, although Wordsworth complains about a rash of fashionable novels and 'stupid German tragedies', there were fewer alternatives to it. If culture—books, music and the rest—was what you wanted, high culture was largely what you got. (This was partly owing to the prohibitive cost of print, so that only the rich, who were then generally speaking the best educated, could easily afford books and journals. A Jane Austen novel cost a guinea (£1.05), the modern equivalent being about 100 times that sum. Most fiction readers will have had recourse to circulating libraries.) And Poetry (with which Wordsworth brackets imaginative fiction generally) is emphatically a serious business: it is, he goes on, 'the most philosophic of all writing ... its object is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion ... Poetry is the image of man and nature ... The Poet writes under one restriction only, namely, the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human Being possessed of that information which may be

<sup>6</sup> 2nd edition, 1800.

expected from him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer or a natural philosopher, but as a Man.'

Poetry gives pleasure, to be sure, but it is pleasure of a very exalted kind, the consequence, not the goal, of its operation. Poetry as Wordsworth conceives of it is not mere entertainment, aesthetic titillation, relaxation or escape. It appeals to men not in their narrowly vocational capacities, but as whole persons. It speaks, that is, to the complete human condition, and for that reason is the vehicle of truth: not the partial, material truths of science (which Wordsworth is far from despising), but ultimate truth, 'the image of man and nature'. For this reason it is best couched in the unadorned language of 'common life'.

All this has several unsurprising consequences. One, that poetry (as I have said, effectively a metonym for high culture) has ethical force. It addresses the whole man, his humanity, to which his ethical being is central, and the truths it embodies are not only imaginative but moral. Secondly, and for the same reason, it is universal in its reference, because humanity is everywhere much the same. To adapt an expression from Wordsworth's own 'Tintern Abbey', it 'sees into the heart of things'. It addresses, as it bodies forth, not only the whole man, but all men. In short, no matter what the social composition may be of its main contemporary audience (to wit, the reading classes), it is ideally classless. Thirdly, it is not only a repository of human truth, it is by the same token an agent of individual culture or moral and intellectual education, what the Germans (their stupid tragedies apart) were then beginning to call *Bildung*. Finally and consequently, it is the prototype of liberal education, that is to say, of that education which initiates one into experience simply for its own sake. Wordsworth himself thought little of formal education (he could afford to, having plenty of it), and, after a brilliantly auspicious start at Cambridge, eventually graduated with only a pass degree. Like Rousseau, he thought nature the best teacher, and the only one dedicated to the whole person. Nevertheless, when in 1854 John Henry Newman, the great Victorian champion of the university, claimed for liberal education that 'it does not make physicians, or surgeons, or engineers, soldiers, or bankers, or merchants, but it makes *men*',<sup>7</sup> he was recalling Wordsworth's distinction, just

<sup>7</sup> From *My Campaign in Ireland*, quoted in H. Tristram (ed.), *The Idea of a Liberal Education: a Selection from the Works of Newman* (London: Harrap, 1952), 32. (Full text: *My Campaign in Ireland*, W.P. Neville (ed.) [Aberdeen: A. King & Co., 1896], 315.)

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quoted, between professional knowledge and the more general, holistic understanding required of the reader of poetry. There is a similar passage in the opening chapter of Rousseau's *Emile*.

There are many reasons for the internal fragmentation of high culture—the split, among others, between traditionalist and avant-gardist—that occurred in the twentieth century and persists today. The external demarcation between high-, middle- and lowbrow cultures dates only from the early 1900s. Its origins, however, lie back in the Continental culture wars of the previous century, whose opening shots were fired as early as 1830, in Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir*. The campaign was subsequently carried forward by Robert Schumann in Germany and Gustave Flaubert in France against the increasing cultural influence, as they saw it, of the bourgeois 'Philistines' (originally German student slang for townspeople). Had the bourgeois been content simply and discreetly to enrich both himself and us, he would have presented no problem. But, like all others with substantial economic interests to defend, he demands political representation (which is to say, power). And again like everyone else who can afford it, he demands a share of the common cultural space in which to display, and to contemplate, his self-image. Why he finds himself resented may be not so much over any fundamental difference of values with the rest of society, nor even others' envy, but simply because both political power and cultural space are finite, so that, however deprived he was before, the more there is for him the less there is for us. Like any other rising class, the bourgeois puts the rest of us in the shade, including those, such as the working class, who have yet to stake their claims. The split within high culture seems to be an internalization of this originally outwardly-directed struggle, with traditionalism being cast in the unenviable role of the hated 'bourgeois'.<sup>8</sup>

But I shall come back to that. For the moment let us assume that high culture is more or less homogeneous. Perhaps there have always been splits in it, especially in France, where, since the seventeenth century, it was so heavily bound by neoclassical conventions as perpetually to lay itself open to violent, scandalous and eventually successful internal challenges (in 1829–30 de Vigny's translation of *Othello* and Hugo's *Hernani* both caused

<sup>8</sup> Under 'Philistine' the *OED* cites *Quarterly Review*, April 1899, 438: '“Philistinism”, after all, stands for two great habits, decency and order.' Yet this traditionalist Tory journal was anything but Philistine itself, being resolutely high-minded and intellectual.



riots). The vision of high culture and liberal education that we derive from Newman and Matthew Arnold, however, is one of internal consistency and a serene, almost complacent unanimity. The object of liberal education is to initiate us into high culture, and the assumption is that the product, an educated or cultivated person—or in Newman's incautious phrase, a gentleman—will be more or less standardized. In Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), Culture speaks with a single voice, sometimes even in the inverted commas of direct speech. It tells us what and how we should think. And what is more, it speaks with an authority which is its own, and not that of government. It follows that it may criticize the government, and that in doing so it may, like an unofficial opposition, even benefit the government, by telling it truths it would be unlikely to hear from its own supporters or even their rivals.<sup>9</sup>

I said earlier that culture generally may be regarded as a form of power, since, through consent, it is what confers political legitimacy. What power, if any, may *high* culture be supposed to possess? And, should it have any, is this power conferred by high culture's actual content, is it a by-product of the competencies necessary to acquire high culture, or is it simply a function of the social status possessed willy-nilly by cultivated or educated people?

Let us start at the beginning. High culture is inconceivable without literacy. Further, where there is no penalty for excessive literacy, as there was in the Nazi concentration camps and in Pol Pot's Cambodia, where wearing spectacles was a death sentence, literacy is advantageous to its owner more or less proportionately to the degree in which it is possessed. If you are literate you can get a better paid job, and you are also better equipped to do battle with the bureaucracy inseparable from the workings of a modern society. So even very modest levels of culture, so long as they involve literacy, are advantageous compared with their lack. And advantage in the sense I intend means power: not necessarily political power, but the ability to get more of what you want, be it material, cultural, good or bad.

<sup>9</sup> It was for this reason that dissidents enjoyed a precarious, capricious semi-toleration (within limits) during the latter days of Eastern European communism. The authorities desperately needed the external critical perspective on current problems that the dissidents, but neither themselves nor Marxism (in which they had ceased to believe), could supply.

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All forms of useful knowledge, like all forms of useful skill, are advantageous, because others without them will pay one to employ them on their behalf. Furthermore, they confer prestige—which is to say, status, which is also to say, power, if only of the kind just mentioned—in proportion to their difficulty. A really good motor mechanic or computer technician is not only sought after, but admired, even by his educational superiors, and perhaps particularly by them, since he forces them to recognize that education is not everything, and that on his own patch he is much *their* superior. A Philistine who sees no point in useless knowledge will nevertheless respect the learning of a doctor or a lawyer, and even the latter's cultural acquisitions, because he knows that a due, sincere, uncalculating deference will secure his services more willingly.

And it seems that even useless or gratuitous knowledge, such as we associate with liberal education, may have practically advantageous side-effects. The labour of acquiring it will have involved the prior acquisition of unambiguously useful skills, beginning with literacy and numeracy and so on upwards. Purely academic disciplines may equip their learners with abilities employable in practical pursuits. It has been observed at least since the twelfth century that a liberal education enables a man to turn his hand to almost anything if he wishes (though he may not). In the purely practical sense, philosophy is about the most useless thing on earth; as Wittgenstein said, it 'leaves everything as it is'. Yet a degree in it is highly prized in the graduate job market, whereas a degree in media studies will get you nowhere, least of all in the media. The same is true of classics as of philosophy, though this is nowadays because the subject is difficult, and therefore an index of intellectual competence, rather than for the splendid reasons reputedly given by the Dean of Christ Church, Oxford, Thomas Gaisford, in a Christmas sermon in the 1830s, to the effect that 'the study of Greek literature ... not only elevates above the vulgar herd but leads not infrequently to positions of considerable emolument'.<sup>10</sup>

Adapted specifically to aesthetics, the Dean's words have been to all outward appearances empirically justified at enormous length by the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his book of 1979, *Distinction*. In a deliberate, ironical echo of Kant, this work is

<sup>10</sup> Sources are various and purely anecdotal, as a web search will confirm.

subtitled *A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*.<sup>11</sup> Since even without his statistics the fact is obvious, Bourdieu shows without difficulty that, apart from the odd (and significant) hiccup, there are more or less straightforward correlations between socio-economic class, educational level and aesthetic preferences.<sup>12</sup> The thesis resembles but also amplifies that of our old friends and Marxist stalwarts Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, in their *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976),<sup>13</sup> a text still given pride of place in countless first-year undergraduate courses.

Bowles and Gintis's supposedly world-shattering discovery was this, that education is a means by which the class system, and inequality generally, reproduces itself. In other words—and totally unsurprisingly—if you are educated middle-class parents your children are more than likely to turn out educated and middle-class too. (As they also are if, though uneducated yourselves, you still value education—from which the 'class' status follows—from the outside.)<sup>14</sup> Without referring at all to Bowles and Gintis—presumably he hadn't read them—Bourdieu goes a stage further, by adding the aesthetic dimension.

Veblen had theorized a relation between taste and class a full 80 years earlier, in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), but more impressionistically. Bourdieu's point is backed, not only by the data from thousands of questionnaires, by copiously-quoted interviews, magazine articles and advertisements, but also by minute, acutely sensitive observations of the everyday social surface and its symbolic strategies and manoeuvrings. Some insights are almost worthy of Proust, whom Bourdieu often cites (as he does Erving Goffman, author of the 1959 classic *The Presentation of Self in*

<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu, op. cit., tr. R. Nice (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).

<sup>12</sup> As there are almost bound to be, in an integrated politico-educational system as self-consciously, designedly and unapologetically élitist as the French.

<sup>13</sup> New York: Basic Books, 1976.

<sup>14</sup> The dying Cockney shipping magnate in Kipling's dramatic monologue 'The Mary Gloster'—a preposterous piece, but perceptive for all that—has sent his son to 'Harrer [Harrow] an' Trinity College' (Cambridge, of course) more out of social ambition than for educational reasons. Unfortunately, whichever, education or class, is to blame, the poor boy, now 40, has been turned out a homosexual aesthete: 'For you muddled with books and pictures, an' china an' etchin's and fans, / And your rooms at College was beastly—more like a whore's than a man's.' The poem appeared in 1894, a year before before the Wilde scandal.

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*Everyday Life*). Not only is taste a class and status marker (as we all knew), but that is its primary function and *raison d'être*. Taste opens the path to privilege and influence (if one is not already on it), and once those are attained, it then legitimizes both one's possession of them and the system which underwrites them.

One cannot but be impressed by Bourdieu's industry and ingenuity (and, ironically, his excellent taste). Much of what he says is undoubtedly true, at least as regards some taste and some people. However, to judge by the current literature, he has not attracted any serious criticism. This raises important questions about the current state of sociology, and even about the discipline itself.

The fact is that Bourdieu's account is full of holes, which he either plugs with the unthinking axioms of his profession or doesn't even notice. As with Bowles and Gintis, Marxists generally, and Durkheimians too, it is the big picture, the macroscopic view, which counts. In this perspective, agency resides with collectivities rather than with individuals. Ultimately it is classes (and other groups) which act, not their members.

Now it is true that an individual's motivation does not spring from nowhere or simply out of his own head. We are socially constituted selves, whose range of possible actions, intentions, beliefs, values and the rest are culturally bounded, so that, within a given, historic society, there are some things it is impossible that we should think, and other things that we are quite likely to think. But one would imagine that, in attempting to explain a social tendency, one might at least begin by asking the individuals concerned what *they* had supposed they were doing. The simple reason for doing so is that, unless they are acting in deliberate concert, the collective 'agent', such as a social class, which they go to compose, is speechless. A class cannot be asked anything, nor supply any reasons for its apparent 'behaviour'. Hardly surprising, you might say, since it is primarily a 'construct' of the sociological imagination. At all events, the fact that it cannot give an account of itself only makes it easier to impute motives to it from outside.

In economics the principle of unintended consequences is familiar, and has been since the satirist Bernard Mandeville first drew attention to it in the early eighteenth century. Its satirical potential derives from the fact that people refuse to recognize the demonstrable fact that their actions often produce effects precisely

contrary to those they intended.<sup>15</sup> For them, motives are trumps, even when (as some say of foreign aid) the outcome injures those whom it was meant to benefit. What matters here, though, is that although individual actions flow from ascertainable intentions, the collective result, which may well bear the outward marks of purpose or design, in fact has none. It is precisely that, the irrelevance of the actors' intentions, which makes economics a genuine science, rather than a highly speculative, abstract, homogenizing kind of psychology. Explaining unintended social phenomena as the consequences of a hidden intention on the part of some notional macro-individual (such as a class) is really a kind of superstition, a secular analogue of natural theology.

To see unintended social phenomena as expressions of direct agency is clearly a metaphor, tolerable or even interesting in fiction, but utterly misleading in science. And Bourdieu's key categories turn out to be tendentious metaphors, promiscuously extending economic concepts to the cultural field and in so doing automatically skewing the interpretation in a given direction, so that the conclusions are predetermined by the method and terminology. Those conclusions seem to me plainly to fly in the face of immediate, readily ascertainable facts, which, despite the vast bulk and sweep of Bourdieu's book, never come up even for mention.

Bourdieu's leading quasi-economic concepts are 'social capital', 'cultural capital', 'symbolic capital', 'symbolic profit', 'consumption' and 'appropriation'. I do not propose to analyse these terms, partly because, with the exception of the last (appropriation), their meaning is fairly clear, as is their metaphorical status. People once found it merely amusing that welfare economists had to translate a familiar notion, 'job satisfaction', into the expression 'psychic income' in order to fit it into their cost-benefit calculations. Bourdieu's peculiar perversity, however, should emerge from the following rather brilliant passage, which I have abridged. The subject is the differing patterns of cultural 'consumption' of the

<sup>15</sup> This, according to Mandeville, is as true of bad intentions as of good. The subtitle of his *The Fable of the Bees* (1723) is 'Private Vices, Publick Benefits'. Whether bad motives produce good outcomes or 'good' motives bad ones, either way the virtuous cannot but be outraged. Mandeville was indicted for immorality in 1725 by a Grand Jury of Middlesex, while in France, in 1740, his book was burnt by the public hangman.

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so-called 'dominated' and 'dominant' 'fractions' of the high-cultural class, that is, the paid-up (but underpaid) intelligentsia and the rich but educated bourgeois:

For certified or apprentice intellectuals, activities such as theatre-going, visits to exhibitions or 'art' cinemas, performed with a frequency and regularity which take away any 'extraordinary' quality, are in a sense governed by the pursuit of maximum 'cultural profit' for minimum economic cost, which implies renunciation of all ostentatious expense and all gratifications other than those given by symbolic appropriation of the work. ('You go to the theatre to see the play, not to show off your wardrobe,' as one of them said.) They expect the symbolic profit of their practice from the work itself, from its rarity and from their discourse about it (after the show, over a drink, or in their lectures, their articles or their books), through which they will endeavour to appropriate part of its distinctive value. By contrast, for the dominant fractions a 'night out' at the theatre is an occasion for conspicuous spending. They 'dress up to go out' (which costs both time and money), they buy the most expensive seats in the most expensive theatres ... Choosing a theatre is like choosing the right shop, marked with all the signs of 'quality' and guaranteeing no 'unpleasant surprises' or 'lapses of taste'; a playwright who knows his job ... in short a goldsmith or jeweller, a past master in the 'art of construction', who has 'the tricks of the dramatist's art' at his fingertips ...<sup>16</sup>

And so on. The passage, like the entire book, is liberally sprinkled with inverted commas, some marking a novel or figurative usage, some ironically repeating a class cliché, and some being genuine quotations from upmarket newspaper reviews.

Bourdieu's point is that both publics, the one overtly and the other covertly, are seeking some kind of status-conferring or otherwise egoistic advantage from the cultural event they have paid to attend. This point seems not only clear, but also compelling, in the case of the moneyed 'bourgeois', especially since Bourdieu's depiction, though ironical, seems free of the ponderous, sneering, self-congratulatory malice once so popular in French intellectual circles. The point is equally clear, but much less compelling, in the other case, that of the comparatively impoverished intellectuals who have been to see (or rather, have 'consumed') a slightly different, more demanding kind of artistic product: Beckett or

<sup>16</sup> *Distinction*, 270.

Pinter, let us say, rather than Peter Shaffer. These people have sacrificed good money, which they can ill afford, for a particular artistic experience, But in Bourdieu's eyes that does not show (as you might think, and as they do think) their preference for artistic over material values, it merely shows that they have used a material asset to purchase a spiritual one, and that both assets represent a given quota of satisfaction or utility. In other words, aesthetic values are really no more than a sublimation of, or substitute for, material values (which include status).

Bourdieu alleges elsewhere that status, 'materialistic' though it may be, can and does attach directly, not only to aesthetic values, but also to the very *indifference* to material considerations which the financial sacrifice necessary to obtain them implies. Status attaches also to the anti-materialism of liberal education. Why the bourgeoisie support liberal education and also seek it for themselves and their offspring is, according to Bourdieu, because it elevates them above the mere wealth which enables them to purchase it, and, through the system of certification bestowed by the autonomous institutions which provide such education, supplies both them and those excluded from it with objective evidence of that same, independent cultural merit on their part. Bourdieu's manner is not notably cynical, but the overall effect is to reduce everything to the same dead level of competitive acquisition and comparative advantage.

There is nothing wrong with the things literally designated by the economic expressions 'capital', or 'profit', or even 'consumption' and 'appropriation'. But what Bourdieu calls 'cultural capital', 'symbolic profit' and the rest are not even comparable with their non-metaphorical equivalents. There is something grotesque in the idea that the prior knowledge and understanding with which one approaches a work of art are a kind of 'capital', that experiencing it is a kind of 'consumption', that experiencing it and then discussing it afterwards amounts to a 'symbolic profit' on the said cultural 'capital' (as also on the real economic cost), and that appreciating it is a form of 'symbolic appropriation'.

Bourdieu's fundamental, systematic error is to reduce quality to quantity, and intrinsic values to instrumental ones. The economy is a fact, and it is amenable to study, but everything is wrong with so-called 'economism', viz. the application of utilitarian or cost-benefit calculation to categorically different social phenomena such as art and liberal education. You can apply straightforward economics to the art *market*, as you can to vocational education. A painting is a unique object, and *can* be 'appropriated', so that if I

possess it, you don't, and *vice versa*. As, but only as, a material object, it has a material value, and can be bought and sold. And it is equally not silly to see a vocational skill as a marketable commodity. The main point of (quite literally) 'investing' in a vocational education is the consequent saleability of the skill. When the skill becomes obsolete (say because of new technology), it either disappears from the market altogether or (like hand-weaving) reappears in an aestheticized form, as a craft (it can also disappear from the market but survive as a hobby).

But the value of the artistic experience embodied in the physical artwork (if it *is* a physical object, unlike a piece of music or the contents of a book) is intrinsic. The experience is neither a physical object, nor a quantity, nor saleable, nor consequently subject to ownership. Any number of cognitively-attuned people can share it. If I enjoy it, that does not leave less of it for you, so I cannot be said in any sense to have either 'consumed' or 'appropriated' it. Nor is the experience—that is to say, the work in its 'ideal' or non-physical character—necessarily cheapened by diffusion. One of Bourdieu's claims, derived in part from the 1920s defender of Modernist élitism, José Ortega y Gasset, is that the value of high culture depends upon its inaccessibility or scarcity, especially in a democratic age. Yet many artworks in the conventional high-cultural canon have universal appeal, and are often popular in origin (Dickens, Verdi). A single art form can vary between national cultures in respect of its audience's social composition. In Italy, opera has always been popular across the entire class spectrum; here it has traditionally been an élite interest, but has become hugely more popular since the establishment of subsidized provincial opera companies, so that lately (and astonishingly) more people were regularly attending operas—and spending less money on doing so—than were attending football matches.

Even more recently, however, we have seen successful attempts, in the form of so-called 'director's opera' and avant-garde 'concept' productions, to make opera inaccessible again, largely by vandalizing it, so that no normal person, let alone any educated person who loves and understands the original works, wants or can bear to see it. This feat is usually accomplished by some kind of 'deconstructionist' inversion of the original setting and stage directions. An architectural equivalent is Daniel Libeskind's proposed Spiral extension to the Victoria and Albert Museum, which, to judge by the published 'artist's impressions', will (if it is ever built, being currently 'on hold') resemble nothing so much as an old-style fairground Crazy House, with floors and walls all very amusingly



cock-eyed, but unfortunately cock-eyed on the outside too. I say equivalent to deconstructionist opera, but perhaps I mean worse than it, because unlike with an opera we cannot choose whether or not to expose ourselves to it, except by avoiding South Kensington.

To return, however: no doubt high culture and its trappings *can* be converted into commodities, that is, deliberately affected, or even embraced, for whatever status-conferring properties they may chance to possess. Nietzsche characterized the German professoriate of his time—who were of course, at least in the formal sense, genuinely educated people—as just such ‘culture philistines’.<sup>17</sup> Again, there are some who go to Glyndebourne primarily to be seen, though I am not sure that is quite the same thing. And you will find in American suburbia a superficially similar but in truth far different and much more admirable character, the ‘culture vulture’, invariably female and often of great intelligence, whose genuinely aesthetic instincts, for lack of a proper education and local support (such as conversation with like-minded people), have merely found no orderly outlet and are therefore all over the place. The only male culture vulture I ever encountered was a young Glasgow taxi driver. I was idly whistling Boccherini’s well-known minuet (the one used in *The Ladykillers* and the Cushionflor advertisement) in the back of his cab when he identified it and went on to tell me that because he liked (he actually said *loved*) classical music he had been beaten up by his father and brothers for being a poof (his word, and he wasn’t). It was recently discovered that classical music, especially Mozart, when played over the Tannoy in shopping precincts and the like, repels youthful loiterers, vandals and hooligans to such a degree that they avoid such places. We should not forget that there are those in the other, so-called excluded, classes who would also like high culture to be as inaccessible as possible, only to themselves. To them too it is a badge of status, but a status which they would rather die than claim.

There seems no reason to share Bourdieu’s blanket scepticism about high culture. Some people may flaunt or counterfeit a taste for it, but that does not mean that all do, or that its sole purpose is display, or that it has a purpose at all, that is, is a means to some ulterior end, rather than being an end in itself. If high culture’s scarcity were part of its value, then surely no one possessing it would wish to see it more widely diffused, or be at pains to impart it—often informally and without reward—to as many as show

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, I, 2.

themselves receptive. There is an interesting historic contrast here with vocational skills, which the professions, the guilds and the trade unions have always sought, through controlling entry, to keep as scarce as possible, though admittedly as often to keep up standards as to keep up pay. With liberal education, pay (appropriately) has never been an issue, having always been understood as little more than the means to a barely respectable subsistence. The only limits to recruitment here are natural ones: the availability of suitably qualified teachers and of sufficiently adept students.

In sum, why should we not accept the essential disinterestedness, intrinsic value or 'in-itselfness' of high culture, and come to that, the disinterestedness of much popular culture too? Why should we not believe Bourdieu's intellectual informant, who said 'You go to the theatre to see the play, not to show off your wardrobe' (or, he implied, to show off anything else, or to benefit in any other fashion than simply by 'seeing the play')?<sup>18</sup> Disinterestedness, according to Kant, is the defining characteristic of contemplation, the pure aesthetic apprehension of an object, purged of all appetitive or self-regarding elements. It is the foundation of Kant's aesthetics, and Bourdieu's chief implicit target (which is finally made explicit in his Postscript). But it is too easy a target, which means that Kant is wrong, or no more than half-right. There are different sorts of disinterestedness, and to embrace or to eschew one is not necessarily to do the same to the other (or others). If genuine disinterestedness signified nothing more than Kant's thin, pure, contemplative vision—which, like his ethics, must by

<sup>18</sup> In his *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), Terry Eagleton suggests, Bourdieu-fashion, that the supposed intrinsic value of aesthetic experience, high culture, etc., to one who finds such things valuable is precisely their instrumental value in advertising to himself and others that he is socio-economically *able to afford* disinterestedness. But reasoning this tortuous (exemplifying Ricoeur's 'hermeneutics of suspicion', whereby nothing can ever be what it appears to be, let alone innocent) either leads to the madhouse, or, as here, itself invites suspicion, in that it too clearly has an instrumental value for its author (that is, both advertises his perspicacity and serves his prior agenda), and is thus far from disinterested (*tu quoque*, in short). See my 'Fetishizing the Unseen', on Marxism as itself a specimen of 'false consciousness', in Robert Grant, *Imagined Meanings: Essays on Politics, Ideology and Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), 100–102.

definition exclude pleasure,<sup>19</sup> partiality and sympathy, those normal components of our response at least to representational art—then it could be dismissed, leaving Bourdieu to claim, as he does, that everything else can only be disguised self-interest. But disinterestedness covers more than that. We take pleasure in the good (or in good people), we are partial to and sympathize with it (or them), and so we should. But our deriving a benefit (pleasure, satisfaction) from doing so is not necessarily the reason why we do, any more than the supposed or even real social advantages conferred by high culture or a liberal education are the reason we pursue them.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Although Kant actually says that aesthetic judgment *does* involve ‘pleasure’, that this is pleasure only in a highly abstract, formalist and attenuated sense (a kind of rational satisfaction) can be seen from the following, from *The Critique of Judgment*, I, §§12–13:

‘The consciousness of mere formal finality in the play of the cognitive faculties of the Subject attending a representation whereby an object is given, is the pleasure itself, because it involves a determining ground of the Subject’s activity in respect of the quickening of its cognitive powers .... This pleasure is also in no way practical, neither resembling that from the pathological ground of agreeableness nor that from the intellectual ground of the represented good ...’

‘Every interest vitiates the judgment of taste and robs it of its impartiality. This is especially so where instead of, like the interest of reason, making finality take the lead of the feeling of pleasure, it grounds it upon this feeling .... Taste that requires an added element of *charm* and *emotion* for its delight, not to speak of adopting this as the measure of its approval, has not yet emerged from barbarism ...’

‘A judgment of taste which is uninfluenced by charm or emotion (though these may be associated with the delight in the beautiful), and whose determining ground, therefore, is simply finality of form, is a *pure judgment of taste*.’ (Kant, op. cit., tr. J.C. Meredith [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952], 64–5).

It is not obvious how the Subject’s pleasure in ‘the quickening of its cognitive powers’ in the act of aesthetic judgment is necessarily any more ‘disinterested’ or less ‘pathological’ than the pleasures afforded by ‘charm’ and ‘emotion’.

<sup>20</sup> In Britain, at the time of writing, it seems that high culture and liberal education, or the outward appearance of them, are actually socially disadvantageous, being perceived, at least in ‘official’ spheres, as too ‘posh’. To exaggerate only slightly, the only way a young person who (say) uses Received Pronunciation is nowadays likely to gain employment as a TV news reporter is by being black or brown, his supposed ‘ethnic’ disadvantage evidently being deemed to outweigh or atone for his ‘poshness’.

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All those things we do for their own sake, as can be seen from the fact that we continue to do them even when they entail heavy political *disadvantage*, as was the case in Eastern Europe under Communism. There, although for reasons of national display musical performance (say) was cultivated assiduously enough, high culture in its creative aspect, and all genuine liberal education, were confined to the unofficial or even underground spheres, attracting severe penalties if discovered, and all this despite the provision of *ersatz* official versions of each. Here there was both a total divorce between culture and power (which made the power even more illegitimate than its origins had made it), and a notable continuity of high and common culture (which was also repressed). So much for the Marxist analysis, according to which culture is in the hands of the dominant class and is used by it to legitimize its rule. But culture cannot be ‘used’ in this way without degenerating into propaganda and kitsch. Only when it is autonomous can it confer legitimacy, or withhold it, as the real culture did.

Bourdieu is most plausible in his account of specifically Modernist culture; as I have said, one of his major witnesses is Ortega y Gasset. In his brilliant essay ‘The Dehumanization of Art’ (1925), Ortega explains the new radical Modernist aesthetic as a reaction to nineteenth century realism and sentimentalism, which he sees as foreshadowing the dominance of the democratic masses, so that the Modernists’ formalism, anti-humanism and quasi-abstract aestheticism are really a kind of aristocratizing dissent, a means, Ortega explicitly says, whereby the illustrious can recognize each other and collectively distinguish themselves from the vulgar.<sup>21</sup> No one will deny that some remarkable works did in fact come out of this movement, but all the same it sounds exactly like the jockeying for position (together with that position’s further legitimizing function) that according to Bourdieu underlies all cultural differences. And here is the moment to note that Bourdieu’s structuralist ancestry leads him to concentrate on formal differences alone—that is, precisely *distinctions*—and entirely to ignore the actual substance or content of the cultural phenomena he deals with. In principle, if the function of cultural differences is simply to act as status indicators (and all that follows

<sup>21</sup> ‘The new art ... helps the élite to recognize themselves and one another in the drab mass of society and to learn their mission which consists in being few and holding their own against the many.’ José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1968), 7.

politically from that), it hardly matters what they are so long as they are visible. Why, from the purely functional standpoint, should high-cultural artefacts not actually be uglier and even stupider, that is, *worse*, than those of a supposedly 'lower' kind?

Of course, some Modernists, notably certain Expressionists, have actively cultivated ugliness,<sup>22</sup> and in any case it has always been an important weapon in the satirist's armoury. But in general, if the point of the high-cultural aesthetic is to legitimize the dominance of the class which embraces it, then it needs to have some at least superficial appeal to the dominated classes, since it is they whom works exemplifying it are meant to impress. At the same time, it must not too closely resemble the kind of things the dominated classes like and produce for themselves, or have produced for them, because then the difference is lost. What I am suggesting is that *if* Bourdieu is right about the legitimizing function of high culture—concerning which I remain agnostic—then, in order to exercise this function, it has to be recognizably *good*, independently of its function, that is, of the political uses to which, allegedly, it may also be put. In short, its value must be genuine, not merely class-determined. It must be exactly what its defenders claim it is, a good and an end in itself; one, moreover, capable of eliciting some degree of positive acknowledgment from a substantial number of those who for one reason or another remain outside it.<sup>23</sup> And the

<sup>22</sup> Deliberate ugliness, notably in architecture (e.g. that of the Brutalist movement), is an act of symbolic coercion. It is an assertion of *power* and *will*, not of *legitimacy*; intended not to flatter, seduce, or secure spontaneous consent, but to threaten. And it is not so much a *political* phenomenon (in the sense previously employed here), as the collective self-expression of a politically unaccountable bureaucratic and/or corporate élite. Here, as so often throughout history, the artist puts himself willingly into the service of despotism, because his masters give him a freer hand than the public would. (So long, that is, as he does not abuse his freedom by producing things that the public might actually *like*.)

<sup>23</sup> Unlike his surly brother Fafner, the giant Fasolt in *Das Rheingold* is moved by the goddess Freia's youthful beauty, and genuinely appreciates the gods' world of aesthetic delight which he and Freia jointly sustain, by their physical labour and immortality-conferring apples respectively. In part-contrast, the demigod Loge sarcastically consoles the Rhinemaidens for the loss of their gold—his sarcasm being aimed not at them, but at the gods—by telling them to rejoice vicariously instead in the splendour of the gods' new fortress Valhalla, whose construction (by the giants) the gold has paid for. One need not be Marxist to agree with G.B. Shaw's view that the giants, at least in part, 'represent' the working class and the gods the

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same of course goes for liberal education, through which high culture is largely mediated. Might one not invert Bowles and Gintis and say that maybe *class* is a means by which *education* perpetuates itself? Liberal education is not the ideology of the bourgeois, but, like high culture, an independent good. The relation between those things and class is probably no more than this: one characteristic of the so-called bourgeois class is that more of its members recognize them as being intrinsically valuable, and therefore respect them and try to secure as much of them as they can. If doing so *also* confers wealth, power and status—which is doubtful, since a lack of culture seems to confer even more of those worldly advantages—then so be it. The side-effects of an activity are not to be confused with its goal. Nobody would claim that people pursued liberal education and high culture under the Communists *in order to* get themselves persecuted.

I come finally to the role of high culture in relation specifically to government, and particularly to that of the contemporary avant-garde. Arnold saw culture (that is, high culture) as ‘the best that has been known and thought in the world’. At the same time, he saw the State, at least ideally, as the embodiment of the national ‘best self’. One might say he saw the State as being in some way ‘above’ politics, like a constitutional monarchy or a non-executive presidency. But he is under no illusions about government. Unlike Plato, he does not think that ‘the best’ should rule, because he thinks that the urgencies of day-to-day politics, the inevitable fudges and compromises, and the mechanics of acquiring and retaining power, have an intellectually and morally coarsening effect, as they undoubtedly do. Culture’s role, without being subversive, is essentially critical. The more like ‘the best’ it looks—and the easiest way to look like ‘the best’ is to be it—the greater will be its prestige, and the more politicians and governments will seek its implicit approval and feel themselves constrained by its example. If social esteem attaches to it, then that is a good thing, because it only increases the politicians’ incentive not to lapse too far from its standards, that is, not to look Philistine. I am reminded of George Orwell’s unexpected defence of

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bourgeoisie. At all events, the point is that aesthetic value does not have to be narrowly class-bound or relativistic, and that if it were, it could not function as Bourdieu claims it does. (Which is not necessarily to agree with Bourdieu that it does so function.)

snobbery, which he says has been much underrated as a control upon certain kinds of undesirable behaviour.<sup>24</sup>

All that sounds utterly utopian, now that tabloid editors no longer seek admission, as they once did, to the best clubs, but instead actively flaunt their yobbish credentials, while ministers of the Crown suck up to loutish footballers and pop musicians, only to get roundly and deservedly insulted for their pains. (They have not understood the point of yob culture, which is to set itself up in opposition to all authority except its own, a fact which makes courting its approval pointless.) But what of the official endorsement given to the contemporary avant-garde, which, if only structurally, may be thought to fall into the high-cultural category?

The examples I have already given of contemporary avant-gardism, 'director's opera' and the Victoria and Albert extension, are not necessarily typical of it. Avant-gardists such as Boulez and Schnittke, whatever you think of them, are undoubtedly serious artists, and they have their British counterparts. Our governments may bestow knighthoods on Peter Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle, but I have not detected any attempt yet to appropriate them for political purposes. And needless to say, governments have no time for traditional high culture, which is perceived as élitist, though its products in fact enjoy a far wider audience than the avant-garde's. The avant-garde with which governments across Europe seek to ingratiate themselves is not the serious avant-garde, but the 'transgressive', publicity-seeking kind whose criterion of artistic excellence or validity is a work's capacity to *épater le bourgeois*, though of course this easily-shocked personage is a pure fantasy-figure, invented almost entirely for the purpose of making the artist look 'daring'. This is why architecture is so often the chosen medium for shocking the public, since it is by its nature a public art. Despite his costly education at two highly élite institutions, our Prime Minister shows no signs of ever having read a serious book, listened to a serious piece of music, or looked at a serious picture; nor of ever intending to do those things once he has the leisure. That in itself is no crime, or if it is his immediate predecessors were also guilty of it. But at least they did not think it added to their government's lustre to cultivate the young lions of BritArt, whose works show no evidence of artistic skill, and whose sole *raison d'être*, like that of yob culture, appears to lie in gestures

<sup>24</sup> 'Snobbishness, like hypocrisy, is a check upon behaviour whose value from a social point of view has been underrated', ('Raffles and Miss Blandish', 1944, final sentence).

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of repudiation. No government ever increased its authority by identifying itself with, or seeking the approval of, the enemies of all authority. All that does is bring government further into disrepute, which is a bad thing, both for government and for its subjects.

Here is my advice to all democratic governments. It is of course utterly useless, maximally unlikely to be heeded, and itself a gesture of repudiation. But all is not lost if it strikes a chord in your memory:

Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.<sup>25</sup>

And here is some superfluous advice for the aspiring young British artist: if there be any money on offer, and if there be any notoriety to be gained, think first on these same things, and then spit on them.

<sup>25</sup> Philippians 4, 8 (Authorized Version).