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“Taking a Shit in Peace”: Players and Workers in the New Academy

“...the mark of a good man is to work hard to achieve the good.”

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1166a15

It is a question that plagued the first academic and it plagues us still: should we engage, in our practice as academics, in public life? As Plato explains in his Seventh Letter, as a young man he had fully expected to embark on a political career. He took one look at government and “was disgusted and withdrew [him]self from the prevailing wickedness” (1973: 113). Any temptation to reconsider was overcome when the good citizens of Athens condemned his teacher Socrates, “the best man then living”—a crime against philosophy so grave that Plato concluded “it was difficult to take part in public life and retain one’s integrity.” And so he built his Academy on the outskirts of Athens, its back to the city, where philosophy could proceed without “growing dizzy at the spectacle of universal confusion” that comprised public life (1973: 114). And ever since this originary moment, the category “academic” has been defined at least partially by disengagement and abstention from public life and politics.

That being said, even Plato could not resist the allure of the cave. In 367 BCE, he left the Academy and travelled to Syracuse, where laid the prospect of a unity of philosophy and political power, which by now Plato had come to see as the only hope for justice in the world. Dionysius II had ascended to power and Plato had reason to believe the young man had a philosophic nature and an appetite for learning, and could be inclined to justice through education. For Plato, ignoring this opportunity would amount to disobeying the claims of reason and justice, a betrayal of philosophy itself. As he writes in the Seventh Letter: “what chiefly influenced me was fear of losing my self-respect and turning out in my own eyes to be a creature of mere words reluctant to embark on any action” (1973: 114). And so he went, and it was an utter failure: the result of Plato’s efforts was that Dionysius simply became more proficient in his despotism and treachery: “as things have turned out,” Plato reports, “some evil

spirit has attacked us, bringing with it contempt for law and religion and, worst of all, the recklessness of ignorance” (1973: 128).¹

Ever since, academics have worried over their relationship to public life, the relationship between scholarship and politics, the life of the mind and the life of the city. This worry plagues academics regardless of their particular specialty or orientation. The scientist worries that political “values” will taint the objectivity of the “facts” she produces; the philosopher worries that too much pragmatism dulls the radical edge of theory; the postcolonialist worries about appropriating the voice of the other, and abusing the institutional power of the page and lectern; the ironist worries whether engagement will undermine his capacity for self-reflexivity (but finds this worry itself a comfort); the public policy scholar worries about going to bed an expert and waking up a technocrat; and the Marxist and the feminist and the environmentalist worry that their “praxis” is never quite engaged enough. Some tell themselves the comfort lie about contributing to a better world through their teaching; others tell themselves the one about how “accessible” their writing is, and how their book is sure to find a “broader,” and maybe even a “popular,” readership.² The word “impact” is used. Once in a while, at a party with the neighbours, a friend takes pity and explains that we have written a book on the media and democracy in Canada, and someone says “Oh, I love non-fiction!” and we become quite uncomfortable. Meanwhile, the “public intellectual” is never really sure if being called that signals admiration or derision (it is, after all, a term we academics often use to describe someone who is not really “one of us”). And the central, non-negotiable condition of our practice—“academic freedom”—persists despite a decidedly ambiguous relationship to its object: at once liberating us to engage critically in serving the public good and immunizing us against any requirement or even responsibility to do so. As academics, we wear our citizenship but uneasily.

This is not to say we are without political appetites and energies, or that some of us—many of us even—do not struggle and succeed in orienting our practice as academics towards making a public contribution to fixing up the place. And I am not suggesting either that disinterested, useless, theoretical inquiry, which demands abstention and distance from pragmatic and present demands, is not a worthwhile basis for academic practice. I think each of these dispositions is defensible, and both have a place in the contemporary academy. I am concerned more with a third category of academic: not the academic as politically-engaged critic or the academic as disengaged scholar, but the academic as player. Here—just as Dionysius’s appetite for philosophy was satisfied by the cheap counterfeit of despotism—the academic’s appetite for political engagement and publicity goes horribly wrong.

The archetype of the player has been evocatively rendered by the American journalist Garret Keizer (2006), in a recent article entitled, “Crap shoot: Everyone loses when politics is a game.” As Keizer describes him, the player is someone for whom the world is the scene of a game, in which getting “a piece of the action” is the key to winning. The attitude of the player derives not from his power or wealth but “from the sense that he moves at a faster pace, on a different plane, and according to a different set of rules than those that govern an ordinary human being” (2006: 32). The figure of the player has circulated in popular culture for some time now—at least since Robert Altman’s excellent 1992 film by the same name—but it seems to have made the jump from Hollywood to the academy: it is a designation we bestow or deny

with increasing frequency. Last year, at an academic conference at a hotel (players love hotels), a person I did not recognize entered the room and seemed to cause quite a stir. I leaned over to ask a colleague who the person was. “Him?” she replied, “He’s a player.” And I knew exactly what she meant. To understand the player one must understand his opposite: the worker. The distinction between a player and a worker has little to do with a person’s position in the world, and everything to do with her disposition towards it. As Keizer explains:

I am talking less about a person’s station in life than about his approach to it. For the true worker, the pleasure is in the work. The pleasure of the player, on the other hand, is in “having it made” ... having it made means having it handed over by the person who made it.... The player may profess admiration for good “workmanship” but he tends to despise and abhor the work itself. (2006: 35)

The worker is a materialist in the truest sense: he engages with the world in all its hardness and all its muck. The player is the opposite of a materialist: he aspires to transcendence. For him, getting a piece of the action is “a means of reducing the claims of the material: the weight, the drag, the inertia of mortal life,” a means of satisfying the player’s deepest need, the “need to be transcendental and exceptional” (2006: 32).

Described in this way, the ethic of the player seems to capture an emerging spirit in the contemporary Canadian academy. Too many of us carry out our academic practice in the manner of the player: players in our institutions; players in our fields; players on the research scene. Our egos are only partly responsible for this. The bulk of the blame rests on the climate generated by the past two decades of institutional restructuring in our profession: the exaggeration of success in competition for external research funds as a mark of scholarly distinction; chronic underfunding of graduate education, which leads us to believe the best we can do for our students is to fabricate projects that will win the funding that puts food on their tables, and to “train” them to become players themselves one day; the diminishing value placed on individual scholarship alongside proliferating opportunities and incentives for “team” research that have us, in the manner of players, developing strategies, making sure we are on the right team and worrying about our profile on the team or whether we should perhaps be captain of a team of our own; and, last but not least, the bogus “star” system produced and by the Canada Research Chairs program and the various university-level analogues it has inspired (for a player, the only thing better than being a player is being a star). And all this vouchsafed by a monstrous abstraction, the “knowledge society,” which has provided a vocabulary by which the ongoing colonization of the university by technology and the market can be made plausible to us.

Symptoms of the culture of the player in the academy are not hard to find. As Keizer writes: “the player’s relationship to the material world is primarily escapist. He would like to get out of it” (2006: 34). What the player seeks to escape is the burden of work. Players do not serve on administrative committees, at least not any that actually involve work. And when academics refer to their teaching responsibilities as a “load,” and to their classes as something from which they expect “release”—as if teaching were their punishment rather than their vocation—they speak the language of the player. As Keizer points out:

None of this is to suggest that the player is lazy. At a certain echelon, the player is as busy at his chosen occupation as an electron or an angel. In other words, he doesn't "go to work" like a worker; he goes to work like a player. He labors with a frenzy, the competitiveness, the relentless drive to score the point to beat the clock that characterizes high-action contact sports. (2006: 35)

For work, the player substitutes business. In this respect, the player resembles the "research man" described by Martin Heidegger (whose own trip to Freiburg was considerably more disastrous than Plato's to Syracuse) in his 1938 essay, "The Age of the World Picture":

The decisive development of the modern character of science as ongoing activity also forms men of a different stamp. The scholar disappears. He is succeeded by the research man who is engaged in research projects. These, rather than the cultivation of erudition, lend to his work its atmosphere of incisiveness. The research man no longer needs a library at home. Moreover, he is constantly on the move. He negotiates at meetings and collects information at congresses. He contracts for commissions with publishers. The latter now determine with him which books must be written. The research worker necessarily presses forward of himself into the sphere of the technologist in the essential sense. Only in this way is he capable of acting effectively, and only thus, after the manner of his age is he real. (1977: 125)

Heidegger calls what the research man does "work," but it is clear in this passage that he has the player nailed. The closest a player ever gets to working is networking, or working the room. The culmination of the culture of the player is a sort of false consciousness, wherein most of us believe and act as though we are players because we cannot bear to think we are not. This is the tragedy of the worker who has lost faith in the integrity of her own native practice: "they can't see that they're not players. They can't see because the game is all about making them believe that they are players, and because the real players have gotten very good at the game. Finally, they can't see because it would be almost too sad to bear if they could" (Keizer 2006: 33).

Another symptom of the culture of the player in the contemporary academy is the current fashion for interdisciplinary research. To be sure, the separation of education into specialist disciplines and the transformation of knowledge into expertise were definitive of the "research" culture Heidegger identified with the technological multiversity. When scholars assume the attitude of the worker, interdisciplinary scholarship and education can cut hard against the cult of expertise and can yield knowledge denied by the market imperatives of specialization. For the player, however, interdisciplinarity holds a somewhat different attraction and is mobilized toward a different end. Just as players in the rest of world forsake the weight of religion for the lightness of spirituality, nimble academic players loose the chains of their disciplines for the airy charms of interdisciplinarity. Academic players profess faith in the opportunity-rich but constraint-poor church of interdisciplinarity in much the same way Keizer describes the player's favourite dinner-party disclaimer:

"I'm very spiritual but I am not religious at all." I'm a player, in other words. Religion is too much work. Religion is potluck suppers, for Christ's sake—disciplines and dogmas and, most trying of all, pews full of other people. Spirituality is light on its feet. (2006: 36)

The problem is not interdisciplinarity per se, but the player's cynical approach to it. As practised by the player, interdisciplinarity is to scholarship what spirituality is to religion: a stylish but affordable option in the academic markets of the New Age.

The question of "other people" suggests another characteristic of the player. Players need teams, but they don't like to work with others. The player's relationship to the team is entirely instrumental: the team is for him, not the other way around; only a loser thinks the team actually matters. This differs dramatically from the approach of the worker, who works with others where the player only uses them. As Keizer writes:

Perhaps the greatest contrast between the player and the worker consists on their differing attitudes toward "the others." Exclusion is contained in the very definition of the player... The worker, on the other hand, invites participation. Many hands make light work. At his most militant, the worker insists on participation. That is because the worker senses that justice is only possible, and work bearable, when everybody works. (2006: 35)

The problem is not collaborative or interdisciplinary scholarship, but its instrumentalization in the current economy of academic opportunity.

Consider the contrast between the "research man" and Keizer's image of the quintessential worker:

Watch a plumber undo a drain trap, muckle onto that son of a bitch and break it down, and you have the image of the worker at war. The plumber is not interested in leaving his name on the pipes or in changing the gravitational direction of water. The plumber is interested in taking a shit in peace. In the case of his particular vocation, that greatly depends on helping his neighbour do the same thing. He accepts the contract. He depresses the flush handle and watches the whirlpool with a face like God's on the seventh day of creation. He sees that it is good. He says so with the most exalted verb in his vocabulary: "It works." (2006: 37-38)

The good news is that workers still outnumber players in the contemporary academy, though their influence wanes and the winds of innovation do not favour them. Their approach to being in the world as academics suggests they understand what they do, not as playing a game, but as work. They work in precisely the sense in which Hannah Arendt distinguished work from labour: labour is what we must do to survive; work is what we do to make a world in which something beyond labour—something like citizenship—might happen. Through work, we produce "the most intensely worldly of all tangible things," the sort of things that "give the human artifice the stability without which it could never be a reliable home for men" (1958: 167).³ It is work that makes it possible for us to "take a shit in peace." Work is not a means of escaping or transcending the world but, on the contrary, a means of living in it. The structure of opportunities in the contemporary academic economy might favour the player, but it is as workers that academics will find the solution to their problem of how to engage with the world.

Truth be told, there is a player and a worker in every one of us. Which of these comes to the fore depends heavily on the material incentives and affordances of the institutions that structure the field of our practice, but also on the choices we make.

The current climate makes it easy to slip into the player's bad habits, and it will take courage to stop flattering ourselves and forego the counterfeit pleasures of life as a player. At the end of the day, "being a player is [not] an aspiration worthy of a grown man or woman" (Keizer 2006: 38). Nor is it an aspiration worthy of an academic, especially not one who wants to make even an oblique contribution to making the world a better place. As Keizer writes: "Change will come only when people who work, who love work, whose conception of the world is of a work in progress, come to realize they have no choice but to fight" (2006: 38). Fight what? The creeping culture of the player. Fortunately, academics can do this, and can engage with the world at the same time, simply by establishing some critical distance from the economy of knowledge and innovation that calls us out to play, and instead doing what comes naturally to us: working.

Notes

This essay was written in honour of Frederick J. Fletcher. An earlier version was presented at the 2006 meetings of the Canadian Association of Learned Journals and the Canadian Communication Association, York University, Toronto, Ontario.

1. Those who despair at the influence Straussian Platonism has had on the Bush administration might note how precisely this passage from Plato indicts the regime's current practice (those who exercise this influence should note this as well).

2. The difficulty academics face in publicizing their work may have more to do with punctuation than vocabulary. As Michael Warner writes:

A public can only act in the temporality of the circulation that gives it existence. The more punctual and abbreviated the circulation and the more discourse indexes the punctuality of its own circulation, the closer a public stands to politics. At longer rhythms or more continuous flows, action becomes harder to imagine. This is the fate of academic publics, a fact very little understood when academics claim by intention or proclamation to be doing politics. In modernity, politics takes much of its character from the temporality of the headline, not the archive. (2003: 96-97)

3. It is important to note that here Arendt is referring specifically to art as tangible and worldly. Academics do not need to build schoolhouses for their work to be materially engaged and, by the same token, the work of theory should not be construed as necessarily escapist.

References

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