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# IN PUBLIC, OR ELSEWHERE: STEFAN COLLINI ON INTELLECTUALS

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Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

The subject of Stefan Collini's *Absent Minds* is a "rich tradition of debate about the question of intellectuals" in twentieth-century Britain, in particular debate about "their absence or comparative insignificance" (1). The debate begins with the Dreyfus Affair and its unpredictable British reception (the queen, for example, was a believer in Dreyfus's innocence), simmers intriguingly through the 1920s and 1930s, and becomes positively effervescent in the 1950s, perhaps because of a new democratization of the public sphere. Collini is less interested in the possible historical causes than in the rhetorical structure that persists, swirling around figures as different as T. S. Eliot, R. G. Collingwood, George Orwell, A. J. P. Taylor, and A. J. Ayer, each of whom gets a full-length profile. Other chapters mix shorter profiles—for example, the devastatingly funny discussion of Colin Wilson and the authorities who briefly and embarrassingly made him a star in their firmament—with synthesis of the debate over intellectuals at different scales (for example, how it was shaped by particular periodicals and by the transition to electronic media) and in different national settings. Coming closer to the present, Collini admires Edward Said for what he *did* as an intellectual while disputing what he *said about* intellectuals—a celebration of rigorous exile from all social belonging, which could only leave the category of the intellectual looking almost totally uninhabited. The move turns out to be characteristic: it is as if Collini felt he could win a proper admiration for what intellectuals do only by rejecting most of their self-images, or evasion thereof.

Several libraries-worth of intellectuals' self-reflection are on display here. This is entirely appropriate, for the very volume of the debate, as Collini argues, constitutes evidence against the proposition that so often both initiated and concluded it: that intellectuals were indeed absent or comparatively insignificant. Who were the debaters themselves, Collini asks, if not (by a definition to be



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discussed below) intellectuals, unconsciously indulging in "the paradoxes of denial" (2)? Demolishing the denials and the "intellectuals-are-absent" premise is the central and most satisfying accomplishment of this deeply satisfying book.

But *Absent Minds* also expresses a secondary desire to establish the positive significance of intellectuals, or at a minimum to refute their "comparative insignificance." The idea that intellectuals in the UK were and are no more insignificant than the intellectuals of other nations is a matter of setting the historical record straight. To establish that they are of absolute significance, or significant in comparison with other domestic social actors, is a larger and more pressing question, at least to the would-be intellectuals who are likely to make up a sizeable proportion of the book's readers. This is more of a reach. Collini is oblique about this argument. He builds a case largely by doing the historian's work of reanimating a largely forgotten world, honoring the intelligence and commitment that went into minor periodical disputes, ephemeral radio talks, and so on. But properly accounting for the social significance of intellectuals might seem to entail moving to a higher level. Intellectuals would have to be compared with social actors other than intellectuals and with non-intellectual modes of action (supposing these exist). There would have to be reference to standards of significance that are pertinent beyond the domain of statements uttered by and about intellectuals. In making the "anti-absence" argument, on the other hand, Collini can stay within that domain. He is very much at home there, marking his points by means of scrupulous attention to the debaters' words and to the tones and contexts in which they are delivered. His skillful registering of this sort of contextual nuance shapes itself little by little into a kind of ideal, the image of a certain intellectual civility. Civility is not one of Collini's explicit topics, but it is an ethic for intellectuals that must be counted as part of his argument, and maybe even as crucial to its appeal. The question of how much or what kind of significance Collini's readers are finally willing to ascribe to intellectuals will perhaps depend on how personally or how passionately this ethic motivates them.

In twentieth-century Britain, Collini suggests, the intellectual makes his presence felt more often than not as an elsewhere, a collectivity in which the writer himself resists membership. Some very amusing pages are devoted to documenting the ingenious ways in which British writers on the topic of intellectuals manage to pretend, for better or worse, that they themselves have nothing to do with that category. Collini pares down this resistance to two essential premises: 1) there are no intellectuals here, though they exist, of course, in France or Russia or somewhere else; and 2) once upon a time we used to have intellectuals, but at present they have disappeared or are in the process of disappearing. Each premise is then illustrated with examples from a number of different decades as well as from various countries other than Britain. The resulting dossier is so

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very imposing in its bulk as to become a quietly devastating piece of mockery. Refutation is unnecessary; the premise collapses under the weight of its excessively numerous and various adherents. Anything that has been asserted as a description of so many different times and places, Collini implies, is very unlikely to be true in a useful or important sense about any of those times or places, least of all the present. Like laments for the loss of organic community or anticipations of the coming of the messiah, the absence-or-decline-of-the-intellectuals story is too transhistorical to serve as the key that fits this particular moment in history, too temporally and geographically promiscuous to seem a convincing account of our dilemmas now and here.

For readers who have tended to nod with instinctive approval at the (always safely rhetorical) question "where are the intellectuals?", and Collini makes it clear that their name is legion, *Absent Minds* can be taken as a plea that they try a little harder to formulate the precise grounds of their disaffection from the present. Some of the contentious reviews the book has received probably indicate a reluctance to do so.[1] It is certainly easier to declare roundly that the present is the worst of times, securing thereby some intellectual credibility ("I am one who takes the more rigorous, more uncompromising view") while hinting at the complacent Whiggery of one's opponents, than it is to subject either the present or the familiar litany of anti-progressive reproaches to the fresh scrutiny they require. Other readers, already suspicious of the devious comforts and political ambiguities of decline-story ritual, will feel gratitude is owed to Collini for performing the no doubt unpleasant work of collecting so many numbingly repetitive samples. The collection features some bright spots, for example when Collini discovers British intellectuals unexpectedly awarding credit to other British intellectuals *as* intellectuals: Perry Anderson on Keynes and Leavis, or Francis Mulhern paralleling the oppositionality of *Scrutiny* with that of the Frankfurt school. And there are sparkling sections where Collini devotes himself to the careers of more or less kindred spirits, like the chapters on A. J. Ayer and A. J. P. Taylor. But there are also stretches where the only news is bad: more clichés about absence-and-decline. No historian can envy Collini the time spent tracking a rhetorical structure that appears to go its merry self-propagating

[1] Representative examples are Ben Macintyre in *The Times* (14 April 2006), who proudly reasserts the premise of anti-intellectualism that Collini is questioning, and Kenan Malik in the *Sunday Telegraph* (14 May 2006), who takes Collini to be threatening the idea that culture is special and important. In these reviews, Britain's practical good sense (reaffirmed by Macintyre) does precisely the same work as its commitment to Arnoldian high culture (reaffirmed by Malik): each is supposed to offer a British alternative and antidote to Continental ideology and thus, of course, a standard against which the present can be condemned for its slide *into* ideology.

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way, generating praise of the distant and blame of the here-and-now without any troublesome friction from empirical particulars. It is a tribute to Collini's much-remarked grace as a writer that the experience of reading the book manages to be so very different from what it must have been like to do the research. At the same time, the excellence of Collini's style could also be seen as putting a perverse strain on his argument. The better he sounds, the less inclined one is to say the same of his subjects. More often than not those he describes are culpably self-deluded, at least on the topic of the category to which he would assign them. Why should anyone so scrupulously clear-eyed as Collini be eager to associate himself with a category that allows for and perhaps encourages quite so much vagueness and self-delusion? If it is so tolerant of fools, is this a club that he would really want to join? The very massiveness of the evidence by which Collini makes his first argument (against absence/decline) threatens to undermine his second argument (in favor of positive significance), and even to risk tipping it over into its opposite. That is, it risks turning *Absent Minds* into another, more circuitous version of the received wisdom that we have few, if any, intellectuals, at least of the right sort. And if that received wisdom can be interpreted, even more circuitously, as a backhanded or performative encouragement to the reader to *become* the right sort of intellectual, then the same would have to be said of the whole melancholy discourse that Collini has taken so much trouble to unearth. That would be quite a turnabout. But as a book about rhetoric, *Absent Minds* has to acknowledge the rhetorical principle that makes this interpretation conceivable.

The question of how its author imagines himself fitting into the category of the intellectual does not arise directly in this book. But *Absent Minds* would sacrifice much of its emotional and even existential intensity, which is palpable throughout, if the reader did not sense this as a question lurking between the paragraphs. Collini is clearly trying to establish the proper dignity of people like himself, academics who have successfully "crossed over," winning for themselves a more than academic readership on issues well beyond their official expertise. At its heart the book is about how to evaluate that achievement. It is to Collini's credit that he leaves the results of the evaluation in some doubt. Are you certain it is a point in your favor that, having emerged from your specialization, you have managed to catch and hold the public's notice? Collini would like to believe that it is, but he does not appear entirely certain. After all, as he shows, many have become publicly recognized by spouting nonsense. The particular sort of nonsense about intellectuals that Collini so fervently and properly derides might even be considered a royal road to public approval. His own elevated public status came well before this book was published. Still, can he be sure he is not part of the pathology he is diagnosing?

Critic James English has astutely noticed a resemblance between Collini's voice and that of certain of his subjects, like Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin, toward

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whom he is extremely critical.[2] Like Amis and Larkin, Collini is a gifted comic writer. He too is willing on occasion to be entertaining at the expense of the academy. Summing up his argument, Collini begins the book's epilogue with a powerful and positive invocation of Larkin: "Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence" (499). As we have seen, intellectuals generally do allow their existence to be underwritten by the contrasting features of elsewheres. In that sense, among others, Collini shares Larkin's impatience with intellectuals. There is a moment toward the close of his discussion of the 1950s, perhaps the crucial period for his narrative, when he nicely ventriloquizes the Orwellian, no-nonsense, man-in-the-street antagonism to intellectuals that is his book's own major antagonist: "And for God's sake, man, keep your voice down" (169). It takes nothing away from the force of this sentence to consider that Collini, too, keeps his voice down. (Well, not at the moment he utters this wonderful sentence, but most of the time.) When he accuses Raymond Williams of "self-dramatizing" (191), one might say that he, too, is policing the range of acceptable tones and even, in the name of the common man and what the common man finds tolerable, threatening a sort of citizen's arrest. But as the "keep your voice down" line indicates, Collini is also struggling (like Orwell at his best) to free himself from some of the visceral aspects of his historical inheritance. This internal, gut-level struggle helps account for the power of the writing, which could not have come from sweet reason alone.

The more important issue here is not personal, however, but conceptual. It has to do with the intellectual's public authority—where it comes from, and how one should feel about it. According to Collini, this authority is the intellectual's defining attribute. One only gets to be an intellectual by being recognized as an intellectual; to be an intellectual is to be seen as one in public, by the public. This definition may seem self-evident, but it takes for granted a set of unarticulated political limits that, whether finally accepted or not, need to be made explicit. Both Gramsci's concept of the "organic" intellectual and Foucault's concept of the "specific" intellectual have been greeted as necessary additions to the critical debate over intellectuals because they work to salvage the importance of intellectual activities that exceed those limits, which may may make the term "public" in Collini's sense inapplicable. Foucault and Gramsci were, of course, wary of granting too much conceptual power to a public understood as singular, socially central, and thus presumptively socially conservative. Collini seems aware of this problem; he declares that he does not want his definition to rely on the illusory criterion of acknowledgment by "society as a whole" (55), a phrase he judges "unhelpful" (55). On the other hand, he does not allow the multiplication

[2] James English, "Hazards of the Higher Debunkery," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68/3 (July 2007).

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of publics to express itself in a promiscuous proliferation of kinds of existing intellectuals, varying conceptions of the general interest that authorize each, or of the different cultures they might express. Like his concept of the public, his concept of culture tends to drift away from an acknowledged empirical plurality, gravitating back in the direction of an idealized Arnoldian singularity.[3] Thus Collini is left with a conception of the intellectual which, though bowing to heterogeneity, often seems functionally homogeneous. The final jurisdiction over what an intellectual is resides in culture, which becomes almost coterminous with a singular public opinion. The intellectual is defined as one who enjoys "public standing" or "cultural authority"—the same thing, and only one thing.

But what *is* cultural authority? It is not specialized expertise, which is too small, nor is it mere celebrity, which is too large. Inconveniently, these extremes do not point to a size in between that would be just right. Collini notes the concept's unresolved "puzzles" and "complexities" (56). The notion of "cultural authority," Collini notes, "may in fact be conceptually the trickiest of all" (56). This admission is generous but not quite adequate. Collini seems not to want to fall into cultural relativism (which would allow the intellectual to be anyone at all whom the culture decides is an intellectual), but he also does not want to admit how far the intellectual's stature hinges on who precisely is doing the recognizing, whose version of cultural authority is being bestowed, and under what circumstances. The more limited the public that bestows it, of course, the more contestable the authority. The enigma of recognition and of the public that accords that recognition is not dispelled even by Collini's rather elegant treatment of the plurality-of-publics problem. His working definition of public artfully combines the concept's desirable singularity with its awkward but unavoidable multiplicity. Modern society, he says, is fragmented by the division of labor into numerous specializations. In such a society, publicness begins, from the perspective of the intellectual, at the border of any one of those multiple specializations. The intellectual enters the public sphere when she or he makes use of the authority gained in that specialization in order to speak on a subject for which that specialized expertise does not in fact provide a source of legitimate authority.

As Collini presents it, this process of conversion remains something of a mystery. How does it happen? When and why does it fail to happen? Are certain currencies of knowledge more easily converted into public standing than others? Is there a conceptual or rhetorical talent by which the intellectual herself can

[3] The adjective "Arnoldian" is mine, not Collini's. In arguing that intellectuals are ordinary, Collini sides with Raymond Williams against Arnold. In arguing that culture is important because it is capable of changing the world, he is on common ground with both Williams and Arnold. The issue of where each stands vis-à-vis culture's multiplicity—not to be confused with culture's ordinariness—is too complex to enter into here.

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facilitate this exchange? Or is it once again a matter of what "the" public (but which one?) is prepared to perceive as valid and valuable? Without venturing theoretical answers to these questions, Collini's account manages to explain a good deal of what has been and continues to be said about intellectuals—most strikingly, why the topic should have generated so much vituperation and self-misapprehension. If intellectuals are obliged by definition to oscillate between the poles of genuine expertise in a particular specialization and speaking generally in the public sphere, then they are permanently vulnerable to the opposite charges of having "sold out" to journalism, on the one hand, and of having retreated from the public sphere into the ivory tower, on the other. Out of this tension within the concept itself come disappearance narratives according to which particular intellectuals or intellectuals as a group have prostituted themselves in the media, or gotten caught up in masturbatory self-involvement, or whatever. Such narratives make sense only if they are seen as independent of the putative details of individual careers and historical moments and are taken instead as the diachronic workings out of the contradictory demands that the concept itself places on intellectuals. As Collini says, "movement between these two poles is inherent in the logic of the role itself" (58).

This is an immensely useful point.[4] One can only hope it will induce some hesitation in the persistent tellers of those very trite tales of intellectual disappearance. Given Collini's structural analysis, on the other hand, one cannot in fact be very hopeful that the tales will disappear any time soon. What then *should* we legitimately hope for? In arguing so effectively against a mode of rhetorical exhortation that easily becomes self-dramatization and self-aggrandizement, Collini sometimes seems a bit strict on the question of hope. And his strictness is of course relevant to the issue of how to measure the significance of intellectuals, how much desire the category should legitimately excite.

Collini's definition of the intellectual, which involves trading on the limited authority of professional credentials in order to obtain a new, more public sort of authority, derives from the Dreyfus Affair. It is re-embodied for postwar France in the figure of Sartre, who manufactured a politically prophetic role for the intellectual by crossing distinct sorts and sources of authority—in particular, that of philosophy at the École normale supérieure and that of the successful novelist and playwright.[5] Again and again Collini catches his subjects in the act of

4 At the same time, this point has to be somewhat qualified if, as Dolan Cummings suggests in *Culture Wars* (18 April 2006), one looks behind the conceptual contradiction and the repetitious rhetorical structure it generates, inquiring into the historical reasons why people at a given time and place care about intellectuals at all.

5 See Anna Boschetti, *The Intellectual Enterprise: Sartre and Les Temps Modernes*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

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taking the regime-shaking strenuousness of the French model as a standard for the evaluation of intellectuals as such; this is one of his most effective polemics. But his own account might itself be taken as too reverential to the French transcendence-of-specialized-expertise paradigm. At any rate, it seems worth asking whether there perhaps exists a form of intellectual authority that might *not* involve a transfer of qualifications or cultural capital from one domain to another. Can one become an intellectual without trading on a capital amassed elsewhere, but simply by means of work done on the premises, as it were? Are we sure that some sort of conversion or crossover is essential to being an intellectual? After all, the sort of creative synthesis often associated with interdisciplinary scholarship is also a phenomenon that necessarily occurs within disciplines, not to speak of other professions and institutions. It is something for which a good journalist or labor union organizer or representative of Doctors Without Borders might receive a normal salary. If publics are multiple and if address to a singular, comprehensive public is illusory, if there is no "society as a whole," then some specializations may already be public enough, in this diminished sense of public, to boast their own intellectuals.

The Dreyfus Affair paradigm also raises a related question about the presumed centrality of professional credentials in the making of the intellectual. Are we sure it is a rise in the status of specialized knowledge that is the definitive source of the new counterauthority? Collini quotes the right-wing riposte of Brunetière: "I don't see that a professor of Tibetan is qualified to govern his fellow men." Some of the force of this remark seems to come from the irrelevance of academic knowledge as such, but some surely comes from the particular randomness ascribed to knowledge of Tibet. Brunetière seems to be ridiculing the idea that knowledge of a distant and exotic nation might be of pertinence to the issues facing turn-of-the-century Frenchmen. If so, then perhaps xenophobic ridicule deserves a more than incidental place in the birth-of-the-intellectual story. At a moment of crisis when national loyalty was so much at issue—Dreyfus's, of course, but also that of the Jews and of all those, recently named as intellectuals, who came to Dreyfus's defense—it seems reasonable to speculate that there may also have been something peculiarly constitutive about what Collini calls "the 'foreignness' of intellectuals" (126). The Dreyfus Affair might be read, from this perspective, as offering a different sort of founding myth, not so much one in which professional credentials get mobilized as one in which the category of the intellectual arises in response to accusations of national betrayal and, with or without mobilizing those credentials, intellectuals acquire a newly authoritative voice . That would help explain why the category has remained affiliated with the problematic relationship between national identity and cosmopolitanism.

This line of thought would lead to the question of whether and how cosmopolitanism—the ability to take a distance from the interests of one's nation,

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to weigh one's national loyalty against loyalty to the interests of humanity as a whole—might paradoxically become a source of *local* authority, something to be valued *within* one's nation. This is not the place to pursue this question further. But we can at least recognize its formal resemblance to the contradiction that Collini himself takes as central to the intellectual. While asking how anyone can turn professional credentials into public authority, we could also ask how antinationalism can ever turn into national influence, can confer cultural authority within a given nation. In other words, perhaps the tension between specialized knowledge and public standing is itself only one specialized version of a more general paradox. One way to phrase this more general paradox (probably not the best) would be to set opposition to society against reward by society. How can it happen that society rewards its own opposition? Why should there be a social place for social criticism? How can a dissident be socially influential and yet remain a dissident?

Collini quotes Tom Nairn, who sees intellectuals as embedded in the British social order—very much there rather than absent, and indeed quite influential, but influential in a conservative cause. Collini comments, "Before our very eyes, the absence-thesis removes its false beard and stands revealed as its opposite, the little-known Peculiar-Strength-of-Intellectuals-in-Britain thesis" (181). The thesis may seem unfamiliar, but its logic is firmly implied by the very paradox Collini has been considering, now raised from the level of publicness to the level of politics. There could be no clearer demonstration of the contradiction on which the concept of the intellectual seems to be founded. Intellectuals are not present if they are defined as dissident. And if they *are* present, then they cannot truly be dissident; they are necessarily conservative. The concept of the intellectual demands two things—dissidence and presence—that are perpetually felt to contradict each other. Thus the crowning moment of their coexistence must be projected outward or backward, along with intellectuals themselves, to the elsewheres of the past and of foreign countries. A core of self-idealization is preserved, but at a high price: by insisting that anything found in an actual historical context cannot genuinely express or embody that ideal.

Cutting off access to these elsewheres is a strong response to this compulsive incoherence, but it is not, perhaps, the strongest. Better would be to dispute the understanding of contradiction that exiles it from history. That is, of course, the problem with the conceptualizations of society that beget cultural pessimism and narratives of decline. If society cannot be conceived as providing locations within itself for social criticism, then society is being conceived too narrowly or schematically. As supposed proponents of a dialectical view of history, Nairn and Anderson should be taken to task for using "France," the putative society in which historical progress of an imperfect sort has been realized, to stand in for the

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properly dialectical view of Britain that is missing from their accounts—a view in which imperfect but actually existing intellectuals could be seen as bearers of and participants in the imperfect forces by which historical progress has in fact been realized, when and where it has. France enables them to chide Britain, but also to avoid engaging with Britain's own peculiar mix of progress with ongoing catastrophe, its failure to do nothing but decline and disappoint.

In rephrasing Collini's paradox in the more general terms of dissidence and influence, I have been tugging him in a direction he does not seem to want to go: from publicness to politics. For Collini, politics is one subset of the larger category of publicness: "being politically active is one form which that public role will frequently, but not necessarily, take" (50). The demand that intellectuals engage in some sort of political intervention or activity, especially a revolutionary one, is a demand that in many times and places may well go unsatisfied. As a requirement for the existence of intellectuals, politics therefore does what Collini most distrusts: it threatens to make their absence seem genuinely plausible. So his resistance to the criterion is logical enough. But is it possible to keep publicness, seen as politically neutral, as the more universal, hence definitive, category?

Collini accuses E. P. Thompson of tendentiousness on this point. Thompson, whose colorful Dickensian retort to Perry Anderson on the subject of Britain's dependence on the French is clearly one of Collini's inspirations, shared unexpected common ground with his *New Left Review* interlocutors, Collini notes. Thompson, too, thought that "one of the distinguishing marks of 'a real intelligentsia' is to produce 'a systematic critique' and that this entailed a certain intensity of conflict with its political opponents" (173), in other words, that to be a real intellectual you have to be "Marx or Lenin or Gramsci" (174). Collini comments that this is a "blatant case of building certain preferred characteristics into the very meaning of the terms 'intellectuals' and 'intelligentsia'" (174). True enough. However, is Collini not doing the same thing, but on behalf of different characteristics, when he shifts the center of his definition from the wild-eyed prophet to the socially accepted reformer? Is his enlargement of the frame via the criterion of public recognition really neutral, or does it quietly restrict the sort of politics that would count as a subset of it? Consider. Collini notes, as a rebuttal to the usual charges against intellectuals, that an apparent falling off in the post-World War II prestige and effectiveness of intellectuals might be accounted for by a loss of prewar deference to the educated classes. If this is right, as it seems to be, then it is a strong argument against the somewhat restrictive criterion of cultural authority by which Collini allows intellectuals to be defined. For it suggests that some large component of that authority or public standing was, precisely, class deference. Class deference would not favor, say, labor organizers, let alone left-wing revolutionaries.

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A better definition, then, would have to allow for the existence of intellectuals without such deference, which is to say without cultural authority, at least in the strongest, most deferential sense. It would allow for the term to cover, among other things, those working in the "unpublic" social sites indicated by Foucault and Gramsci. The Gramsci–Foucault point is that if you understand politics differently, it can be seen to be happening without publicness of this sort, and intellectuals can thus be intellectuals without being public. It is at least conceivable, working on these different premises, that publicness or publicity could be seen as a means to the higher end of politics, and as a means that is merely contingent.

"I have been arguing," Collini writes,

> that the relationship with politics is only one form of the larger structure implicit in the relevant sense of "the intellectual" in English usage, that is to say, the reaching out to a public and an issue that is "general" in relation to the primary activity or initial source of cultural standing. (216)

Collini is aware that by this reclassification he is not merely contesting the power of the revolutionary French model over British thinking, but deliberately dedramatizing intellectuals. For some readers, as he notes, he may thus be undercutting the significance of intellectuals and the desire to become one. On the last page before the epilogue, Collini arrives at a conclusion of exemplary balance:

> Once we shed the unrealistic ambition nurtured by the illusion that previous generations of intellectuals reached and directed a public that was coextensive with society as a whole, then we are better placed to see how intellectuals can make use of existing media to reach those publics who, being neither as doped up nor as dumbed down as fashionable commentary suggests, *do* want to see issues of common interest considered in ways less instrumental or less opportunistic, more reflective or more analytical, better informed or better expressed. (495–6)

He immediately adds that some will find this "a dispiritingly unambitious job description" (496). For it means giving up on the "self-dramatization" that goes with "that heavily romanticized conception of the intellectual as the acknowledged legislator of the world, marching at the head of mass movements, political or other programme in hand . . . the barricades have never been a very good platform from which to try to conduct rational argument" (496).

Collini may be right to worry that, as a job description, his account of the intellectual is not as inflammatory or ambitious as it might be. But if so, it is not because he forces his readers to choose an insipid liberalism that shuns movements and marches over a red-blooded Marxism that is properly ready to send us all to the barricades. Collini values rational discussion, but he is hardly a predictable liberal. He refuses to judge British intellectuals by their deviation

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from a supposed standard of capitalist development and anticapitalist reaction. He would have to count as a liberal as measured by the more radical French norm of Sartre. But when Jeremy Jennings asks him to acknowledge Raymond Aron's "committed observer" as an alternative to Sartrean *engagement*, Collini will have none of it. His alignments, he says, are not those of the Cold War.[6] Another sense in which the tag "liberal" fails to do him justice appears in his discussion of A. J. Ayer. Commenting on a passage in which Ayer declines to advise the public on politics and morals—for the philosopher, "his professional task is done when he has made the issues clear" (395)—Collini writes, "The passage, like Ayer's writing more generally, is not in fact as self-effacing or transparent as it pretends to be. There is, on closer inspection, plenty of 'prescribing' going on here . . . [Ayer] does a fair amount of pontificating after all" (395–6). It is a wonderful analysis, not least because it serves (and is I think meant to serve) as an acknowledgment that the same is true for Collini himself, whose liberalism never contents itself with the supposed rational virtues of transparency and self-effacement.

It has not been sufficiently noted that if this book is a defense of the existence of intellectuals against those who persist in seeing them as absent, it is also a defense of academics against those who persist in judging them by their failure to become intellectuals. There are few public voices brave enough to take this position. The majority view, amply sanctioned by the market, tends to be unrepentantly satiric. If some have found the book's commitments lukewarm or otherwise hard to read, the explanation may lie not in Collini's politics, which are none the less indignant for being well-modulated, but in his seemingly outrageous desire to give proper credit to the ordinary workings of university teaching and research.[7]

That desire should not be taken as a definitive resolution of the book's struggles over the proper significance of intellectuals—whether the significance of the achievement of public status, or the significance of intellectual work as such, assuming (as the academic subtheme suggests) that scholarship can be labeled intellectual in the honorific sense without the extra qualification of "crossing over." The question of significance is left open, as is the question of whether Collini would like to see the discourse of elsewheres simply closed down. An

6 See Jeremy Jennings's "The View from Calais" in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* symposium and Collini's response.

7 Reluctance to see credit given to the university helps explain another characteristic note struck in reviews, as when David Womersley (in *Social Affairs*) notes a "Cambridge" ring in Collini's prose (though this could as well be an Oxford/Cambridge affair, I suppose) or when Terry Eagleton (in the *New Statesman*, 3 April 2006) complains that there is "something of the view-from-King's-Parade about this book."

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inability to believe in habitable elsewheres is one plausible cause of Larkin's pathological xenophobia. By contrast, the sort of generous citizenly engagement that Collini models for his reader, here and in his other writings, seems to indicate that the freedom to imagine things otherwise and to speak out accordingly—a freedom that is as mysterious, under analytic scrutiny, as any exotic elsewhere—is one of his firmest commitments, even if it is far from being the hero of his historical narrative. In this sense *Absent Minds* does not try to put an end to the tradition it describes. It is an upstanding dues-paying member, if a richly ambivalent one.

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