

THE MYTH OF THE NEUTRAL PROFESSIONAL

by Robert Jensen

The rules of life in modern authoritarian and totalitarian states are clear. The state — which represents the interests of a particular set of elites — governs through a combination of coercion and violence that typically is quite brutal, and propaganda that typically is heavy-handed. In that formula, intellectuals have a clear role: Serve the state by articulating values and describing social, political, and economic forces in a fashion consistent with state power and its ideology. To the degree one does that, one will be rewarded. The Soviet Union was perhaps the paradigm case of this kind of system.

In a contemporary liberal, pluralist, capitalist democracy such as the United States, things are more complex. The state — which represents the interests of a particular group of elites — still maintains a monopoly on violence and uses it when necessary to maintain control. But because of the nature of the system and the advances made by popular movements in the past century, the state cannot rule simply by force or crude propaganda. Those who rule also realize that one advantage of a relatively open society is that it fosters a dynamic, creative intellectual climate that produces innovation. To elites, that innovation is desirable in certain realms (especially the sciences, both pure and applied) but potentially dangerous in other realms (especially the humanities and social sciences). How to encourage innovation in one arena but discourage it in the other? This requires the state to maximize social control through a more complex management of ideology and the institutions that reproduce and transmit that ideology.

In short, the liberal, pluralist, and democratic features of the system are constantly in tension with capitalism and the state (which typically serves the interests of capital). As Alex Carey put it: “The twentieth century has been characterized by three developments of great political importance: the growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power, and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy.”¹

But propaganda in a liberal, pluralist, democratic system is not achieved by direct state control of the institutions in which intellectual work is done and through which ideas are transmitted. Intellectuals in the contemporary United States do not face the crude choices (subordinate yourself to the

state or risk serious punishment) that intellectuals in more authoritarian states face. While dissident intellectuals in the United States are not always treated well — they may risk not being able to find permanent employment in an officially recognized institution, for example — they are not at this point in history routinely subject to serious consequences. (Note: While that is true for those from the more privileged sectors of society, there are contemporary examples of harsh treatment. Sami Al-Arian, a tenured Palestinian computer science professor at the University of South Florida, was vilified in the mass media and fired in December 2001 for his political views.² In 2003 he was indicted by the U.S. government on charges that he used an academic think-tank at USF and an Islamic charity as fronts to raise money for the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. He was denied bail later that year and a judge set his trial for 2005.³)

In a liberal, pluralist, capitalist democracy, the elites in the state and the corporation must adopt a strategy different from authoritarian states to contain the potential threat from intellectuals. Elites need intellectuals in some arenas to innovate, while in other arenas they need intellectuals to articulate values and accounts of reality that will support the system of concentrated power. But given the substantial freedoms in place in the society, allowing intellectuals to have the time and resources to pursue the truly independent, critical inquiry needed for innovation poses a risk: What if some of those intellectuals engage in that work and come to a critique of the concentration of power that elites want to maintain? What if, instead of articulating values in support of that power, intellectuals articulate other values? Even worse, what if those intellectuals use their privilege not only to talk about such things but to engage in political activity to change the nature of the system and the distribution of power?

In short: In a system in which intellectuals can't easily be killed or shipped off to the gulag when they get feisty, how can they be kept in line?

The Neutral Professional

Enter the myth of the neutral professional, as a way to neutralize professionals. Here I will shift from the term “intellectual” to “professional,” because I want to focus on how the myth of neutrality works in specific occupational groups: journalists, university professors, and librarians, three of the most important intellectual positions in this society.

In the political and philosophical sense in which I use the term here, neutrality is impossible. In any situation, there exists a distribution of power. Overtly endorsing or contesting that distribution are, of course, political choices; such positions are not neutral. But to take no explicit position by claiming to be neutral is also a political choice, particularly when one is given the resources that make it easy to evaluate the consequences of that distribution of power and potentially affect its distribution.

Myles Horton, the founder of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee and a legendary figure in progressive organizing and adult education, is one of many who have critiqued the act of claiming neutrality, which he described as “an immoral act.” Neutrality, he said, is “a code word for the existing system. It has nothing to do with anything but agreeing to what is and will always be — that’s what neutrality is. Neutrality is just following the crowd. Neutrality is just being what the system asks us to be.”⁴

Similarly, South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu has said that neutrality is choosing the side of the oppressor: “If you are in a situation where an elephant is sitting on the tail of a mouse and you say, ‘Oh no, no, no, I am neutral,’ the mouse is not going to appreciate your neutrality.”⁵

This same insight lies behind the title of Howard Zinn’s political/intellectual memoir, *You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train*.⁶ If a train is moving down the track, one can’t plop down in a car that is part of that train and pretend to be sitting still; one is moving with the train. Likewise, a society is moving in a certain direction — power is distributed in a certain way, leading to certain kinds of institutions and relationships, which distribute the resources of the society in certain ways. We can’t pretend that by sitting still — by claiming to be neutral — we can avoid accountability for our roles (which will vary according to people’s place in the system). A claim to neutrality means simply that one isn’t taking a position on that distribution of power and its consequences, which is a passive acceptance of the existing distribution. That is a political choice.

In the contemporary United States, professionals who want to be taken seriously in the mainstream political/intellectual culture (and have a chance at the status that comes with that) are encouraged to accept and replicate the dominant ideology. Two key tenets of that ideology are the claims of (1) the benevolence of the United States in foreign policy (the notion that the United States, alone among nations in history, pursues a policy rooted in a desire to spread freedom and democracy) and (2) the naturalness of capitalism (the notion that capitalism is not only the most efficient system, but the only sane and moral economic system). At the same time, those same professionals are encouraged to be politically neutral, but within this narrow framework that takes the legitimacy of state power and corporate power as a given. In practice, this means one is supposed to present material that takes no explicit position on which policies should be implemented in the existing system, but one is not supposed to step back and ask whether that existing system itself is coherent or moral.

I am not arguing that people who work within, and accept, the dominant ideology are by definition wrong or corrupt; reasonable people can disagree about how best to understand and analyze complex systems. My point is simply that it is not a position of neutrality. Those of us who routinely critique the dominant view are political; that is, the politics we have come to hold certainly has an effect on the conclusions we reach — but no more and no less than people who don’t critique. That is not to say that

journalism, university teaching, or library work is nothing but the imposition of one's political predispositions on reporting/writing, research/teaching, or acquisitions/program design, but simply to observe that everyone has a politics that affects their intellectual work. The appropriate question isn't "are you political?" but instead should be "can you defend the conclusions you reach?" It is interesting that the criticism I have received in my university career for "being biased" or "politicizing the classroom" almost never includes a substantive critique of my ideas or my teaching. It appears to be sufficient to point out that I deviate from the conventional wisdom, from which the conclusion can be drawn that I am bad.

To return to the train metaphor: When we ride on trains, we typically conform to the system. The trains run on a certain schedule to certain destinations. Once a person decides to take the train, it's understandable why we typically focus on working within that established framework. We don't tend to look at a schedule and then demand that the railway company route a train to a different location at a different time; in most cases it's easier to fit into the system than to buck it. But that keeps us from asking important questions: Should this train be on another schedule? Should these tracks be ripped up and laid elsewhere? Or, maybe, should we not be riding trains at all in favor of some other transportation system?

The Rules

My adult life has been spent in journalism and academia. In journalism, the rules of "objectivity" keep reporters and editors hemmed in and discourage examination of those big-picture questions. Central to that is most journalists' slavish reliance on "official sources" — those people in positions of some authority within the mainstream institutions. These people from government and the corporate sector are presumed to be credible sources and, hence, have great power to determine what will be a legitimate story and how it will be defined; they are news framers and shapers.

In university teaching, similar objectivity rules are in place, varying somewhat depending on the discipline. The primary vehicle for this has been importing the methodology from the physical sciences into the social sciences, in an attempt to give the study of humans and human institutions the imprimatur of "real" science. In such a system, political and moral choices are obscured by methodology.

The result is that both journalism and universities are, in general, overwhelmingly conservative spaces, in the sense that they function mostly to conserve the existing distribution of power. But because they also are liberal institutions (in the Enlightenment sense of adhering to broad values of free thought), they also allow critical inquiry that takes some people outside the consensus that favors the existing order. In my experience in both kinds of institutions, universities tend to be slightly more open to critique because there is more original work done there, which requires less stringent controls.

This argument about neutrality, and the assessment of modern U.S. journalism and higher education, can be applied to libraries and librarians. I speak here not as an expert or insider, but as a patron and citizen, someone actively involved in political organizing and eager to see a dramatic expansion of political dialogue and activity in the United States. My views are rooted not only in my status as a fellow professional in an intellectual field, but as a political activist.

Librarians' Choices

Two areas where these issues clearly are relevant for librarians are acquisitions and programming. Given limited resources and physical space, no library can acquire all possible publications and display them in the same fashion. Obviously, choices are inevitable. Those choices should be made on sound professional grounds, just as should choices about what perspectives a journalist includes in a story or what material a professor includes in a course. These professionals are trained to evaluate the quality of a book, source, or theory, and should be free to use that training and exercise judgment. But we also should not ignore that all those decisions have a politics to them. That does not mean they are purely political judgments, but that political and moral values — and the judgments that flow from them — inevitably affect the judgments.

To echo the arguments above, the attempt to cast such judgments as neutral merely accepts the conventional wisdom and existing distribution of power. Take a simple example involving the common assumption in the United States that the capitalist economic system is the only rational and morally defensible way to organize an economy. There can be, and often is, much debate about how to structure and administer a capitalist economy, but the system itself is rarely contested, despite centuries of resistance to capitalism around the world and considerable intellectual work underlying that resistance. Now, imagine that a librarian wants to produce a display of the library's resources on economics to encourage patrons to think about the subject. In many libraries such a display would include no critiques of capitalism, but simply literature that takes capitalism as a given. Such a display that ignores critical material likely would produce no controversy (except perhaps a few complaints from anti-capitalists about the absence of critique, who could easily be dismissed as cranks). It is unlikely that school boards or city councils would take up the issue of the obvious bias against socialism and other non-capitalist economic systems. Consider what might happen if a librarian charged with this task actually produced a display that carefully balanced the amount of material from as many different perspectives as s/he could identify. In many places, that display would be denounced for its "obvious" socialist politics. Now, imagine that a librarian, observing the way in which Americans are systematically kept from being exposed to anti-capitalist ideas in the schools and mass media, decides to organize materials that compensate for that societal failure by emphasizing critiques of capitalism. That librarian could be guaranteed not only criticism and charges of political bias, but likely disciplinary action.

My point is simply that all of those decisions have a political dimension, which is unavoidable. My concern here is not which one is the right decision, but that the librarian whose display is in line with the conventional wisdom likely will escape criticism while any other choices will raise questions about “politicizing” what should be a professional decision. Unfortunately, this neutrality game will derail rather than foster serious discussion of the issues.

Programming is another important issue for librarians. In an increasingly depoliticized society in which there is less and less non-commercialized public space, it is crucial to claim as many venues as possible for public political interaction. We live in an odd time, when proliferating mass media channels flood us with more and more political talk, but there are few places where people can actually engage in politics as participants, not spectators. Libraries remain one of the few common spaces in the society where people come to engage ideas, and hence they are crucial sites where people looking for such engagement can find it, and where others can be encouraged to engage. Part of that can be accomplished by simply making space available. But librarians also can create opportunities for dialogue. Can that be done neutrally? The same analysis offered for the issue of acquisitions applies here. A professional librarian would make a judgment about what kind of programming is most needed in the community. While such programming shouldn't be politically partisan, in the sense of advocating for only one viewpoint, the choices involved will be informed by political decisions.

In all of these situations, the question isn't whether one is neutral, but whether one is truly independent from control and allowed to pursue free and open inquiry. In a healthy society, professionals would be given that independence — not just in theory but in practice — and out of the many choices that varied professionals would make, we could expect a rich cultural conversation and an engaged political dialogue.

The ideology of political neutrality, unfortunately, keeps professionals such as journalists, teachers, and librarians — as well as citizens — from understanding the relationship between power and the professions. Any claim to such neutrality is illusory; there is no neutral ground on which to stand anywhere in the world. Rather than bemoan that fact, I believe we should embrace it and acknowledge that it is the source of intellectual, political, and moral struggle and progress. If we take seriously this claim, then all people, no matter what their position, would have to articulate and defend the values and assumptions on which their claims are made. The other option is intellectual stagnation and political decline.

Footnotes

- ¹ Alex Carey, *Taking the Risk out of Democracy: Corporate Propaganda versus Freedom and Liberty* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), p. 18.
- ² See webpage of United Faculty of Florida, <http://w3.usf.edu/~uff/AlArian/>
- ³ For details, see http://www.amuslimvoice.org/html/sami_al-arian_s_case.html.
- ⁴ Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), p. 102.
- ⁵ Reuters, "Tutu chides Bush on oversimplifying U.S. terror war," March 17, 2004.
- ⁶ Howard Zinn, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Times* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

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