

Who is afraid of Stupidity?

In his essay on stupidity, Robert Musil argues that in order to comment on stupidity, one must not be stupid:

[...] the best place might be with the initial difficulty, which is that anyone who wants to talk about stupidity, or profitably participate in a conversation about it, must assume about himself that he is not stupid; and he also makes a show of considering himself clever, although doing so is generally considered a sign of stupidity! (Musil, 1997, p. 270)

Still, this account is challenging when considering that claiming to be intelligent is commonly taken to be a sign of its inverse. A situation emerges where only the intelligent can comment on stupidity but, in doing so, they turn themselves stupid hence invariably delegitimizing their account.

If one adopts this assessment, it seems stupidity has two main features. It is firstly always the category of some other who is a threat to us despite being inherently inferior to us. Secondly, it is impossible to comment on stupidity since this would require an unchecked *hubris* associated with stupidity. This situation makes it an object that cannot be tampered with, despite its obvious inferiority. Stupidity seems to be a trap for intelligence (to outsmart it in some sense even!). In that sense, intelligence never occupies itself with stupidity or never seriously. It remains this ultimate unvanquishable challenge. Hence the question “who is afraid of stupidity?” can be easily answered: only the intelligent.

Moreover, rightly so! Only the intelligent are aware of stupidity's destructive power. The stupid invariably believe themselves to be carriers of reason or else they would be aware that their claim is stupid. This is perhaps the distinction between stupidity and evil where only in the latter we encounter the clear intention and motivation for destruction whereas in the former it is a collateral effect or an unintentional consequence. Intelligence is the exclusive power capable of assessing reality and acting accordingly: accessing the facts and foreseeing the appropriate set of responses to it.

This seems correct in theory, but does it survive the actual encounter with the world? When we reflect on some of the worst examples of extreme violence in our history such as colonialism and eugenics, can we say they were the result of stupid and outdated views? One is tempted to say 'yes', but the answer should not be so clear nor comfortable. Maybe in hindsight it seems that way yet even a superficial historical investigation proves otherwise. Colonial and eugenicist logics were not the superstitious beliefs of the uneducated masses. They were upheld by scientific and *reasonable* scrutiny.

The colonizations of America and Africa were not 'unfortunate' steps in the development of civilization nor social Darwinism an error in the otherwise progressive evolution of science. Intelligence, as a totalizing form of knowledge and reason, is invariably a project of naturalizing (social) order and hierarchy. John Marion Sims , dubbed 'The Father of Modern Gynecology', legally experimented on enslaved black woman without anesthesia because it was believed they did not feel pain. This is a direct development of the cartesian mechanistic account of the body which conceived of soulless animals as pure mechanism. In 1927 the US Supreme Court ruled it was

constitutional to perform sterilizations on its citizens (Day, 2016) - resulting in 83,000 women of 'weak mind' being sterilized because they were 'irresponsibly reproducing'. As recently as the 1990s programs of mass enforced sterilization took place in Peru where women of native origins were vociferously targeted (*ABC News* 2021).

A more sophisticated version of this argument is Federici's (2004) Marxist opposition to Marx. Marx argues that the development of capitalism is the violent step towards communism (he uses the metaphor of birthing as a violent event that creates something new). Federici argues against him that this was not a progressive event unfortunately embedded with the necessary violence but a counter-revolutionary one where struggles were repressed to impose domination i.e., just pure dominating violence. If Federici is right, and I am arguing that she is, we can think of the whole of history as a regressive movement driven by intelligence and reason.

Federici's argument demonstrates that the notion of rationality and agency are not in any way objective and emerge exclusively within a disciplinary impetus. She argues that the opposition to magic is not located in feudalism but in the necessity of capitalism to root production in work disciplinary and obedience. To achieve that goal capitalism had to eradicate the possibility of magic and inoperative production on behalf of an account of agency that is mechanically constructed. In her understanding this is the logic behind the cartesian rationalism and its division of body and soul. The parallel here being that in the same manner that spirit governs the mechanic body, the invisible hand governs, via the dominant class, the mechanic masses in the factories.

This same dynamic is present in Brown's assessment of manhood's political construction. In her account, manhood is determined by its taming and domestication of womanhood (Brown, 1988, pp. 26-27). The irrational and untamable object exists as

an already pacified object, mechanized in the cartesian vocabulary, or an object to be pacified by the reasonable autonomous agents. Again, the ideas of order, rationality, agency, autonomy and citizenship are not objective standards one can impartially hold and employ as measurements for actions. They are invariably and inherently tainted by their violent and repressive constructions along with the naturalization of those dynamics as factual or objectively true.

It is comfortable to reflect on John Marion Sims and others like him as historical missteps we moved past, but it is vital to take full account of those events. Those were not foolish hang-ups we overcame as a civilization; those were the implementations of utmost rigor, determination and assurance. In other words, it is important to take full account that intelligence would not have prevented those events. In fact, intelligence was *the* central motor driving those events. Thus, it appears that intelligence, order, morals, and so forth are in fact the causes for all that which is blamed on stupidity and evilness.

Beyond Musil's account where intelligence turns into stupidity, here the evilness of intelligence cannot be dismissed as merely accidental i.e., as a form of stupidity. Dispossession, genocide, chattel slavery, ICE detention centers and the destruction of indigenous forms of knowledge and kinship relations (to name but a few) are *not* collateral damages but *the very aim* of the colonial, neocolonial and eugenicist projects. In other words, those are not deviances in the overarching advancement of civilization, they are the very meaning of civilization. So, even though no one is purposely evil, evilness is intentionally enacted on behalf of intelligence (which is perhaps much worse). Intelligence and evilness are interconnected leaving stupidity as

the unclaimed element. Or to put it in a more cliché manner: one's freedom fighters is another one's terrorists but none of them are stupid nor uncivilized.

I will wisely refrain from defining stupidity here, but I want to nevertheless pose the question of why are we so afraid of being stupid? Considering the evilness of intelligence and the innocuousness of stupidity, why is it stupidity in particular that we are afraid of?

I will make the claim in another way: by showing that intelligence is leading us nowhere so we should consider stupidity as an alternative. To be frank, it is not a robust argument. It can be summarized by two quite trivial statements: (1) intelligence is bad; and (2) stupidity is not intelligent - which obviously leaves miles in theoretical work to be done but I would like to believe, perhaps stupidly, that it is a small initial step, nevertheless. In other words, I do not aim to describe what stupidity is but rather what it *is not* whilst making the case that because it refuses the current logic, it must be considered an alternative prospect. This text aims merely to open a debate, not close it. It barely even asks the question of stupidity, much less closes it. It merely proposes that we consider it a question in the first place: to consider it a worthy issue and not a problem to be resolved by intelligence.

Consider briefly the logics of racism, homophobia and even conspiracy theories. They are undoubtedly wrong. Yet these accounts are more consistent with approaches to intelligence than with stupidity if we consider intelligence as the privileging of knowledge and stupidity as marginalized otherness. For instance, conversion therapy advocates, Q-Anon supporters and 'race scientists' do not ground their worldview on the absence of facts. Quite the opposite, they claim to be the ones holding the facts.

They support their claim on statistics and information. Despite being absolutely wrong, they do not claim that we should ignore the facts.

The same is true for Trump and Bolsonaro. Again, it is not that they are 'in fact' astute political characters. They are unquestionably bad politicians (and human beings in general) but they do not abdicate the privileging of intelligence and they do not challenge existing political structures. If anything, they are radical defenders of lawfulness. Unlike liberal 'snowflakes', they argue that the law is a *fact* and must be upheld against these stupid masses.

Slogans such as 'intolerance towards criminals', 'when the looting starts the shooting starts' and 'just don't break the law and you would have nothing to fear' are emblematic of that. The cleverness of their common sensical imperativeness is something to be highlighted: there is no reasonable opposition to them. To oppose it, means opposing legality and morality, hence supporting criminality. Only a bad citizen, or idiots, would advocate that so (1) they can be legitimately repressed, (2) they are always the figure of some other not oneself since no one thinks of themselves as idiots/bad people, and (3) one should support those repressive platforms since one is a good citizen who defends law and morality and has nothing to fear and only to gain from them since they will persecute the bad elements exclusively.

Those who stormed the US Capitol in January were not doing so *against* the constitution but on its behalf. They were not trying to break the law but rather to prevent it from being broken: they were 'stopping the steal'. They are obviously wrong, but the argument here is that in calling them stupid we buy into the account that stupidity is threatening normality and, in that sense, even if indirectly, reinforce the narrative: normality, intelligence and 'truth' must prevail. The moral panic around

post-truth relies on the possibility of a return to normality where facts and expertise guide politics against this degeneration. In other words, the dispute over the correct facts overshadows the overarching *common* presupposition: facts should govern. My argument here is that ‘facts’ never stopped governing, even if very often they are proven to be incorrect.

Or in Rancière’s (2014) words one encounters “[...] the intense wish of the oligarch: to govern without people, in other words, without any dividing of the people; to govern without politics. And it enables the expert government to rid itself of the old aporia: how can science govern those who do not understand it?” (p. 62) The obvious element that appears problematic here is the ‘without people’ aspect but I believe Rancière’s argument should be read in a deeper sense. The wish to govern is inherently problematic because it is always already a desire to govern without people. The desire to govern is always grounded on the necessity to govern those who are unable to govern themselves and hence require governing. In that sense, governing is always without people. It is always the governing of those who do not understand, or else they would not need governing since they would be able to self-govern, by those who understand.

In this manner, we notice a reproduction of the dominant strategy in the attempt to oppose it. In making the case that the issue is that Trump, Bolsonaro, the capitol invaders or any other problematic ideology are breaking the law or another conceptualization of a social contract, one is merely directing the logics highlighted above towards them. It uncritically employs problematics accounts of criminality and normalcy that can never serve a counter-hegemonic purpose since they are the precise mechanisms of the dominant order. The irony in this iteration being that the

progressive alternative does the conservative's work by taking the position of the hegemonic posture and appealing to some form of legal authority. The issue with those phenomena is not that they are criminal but rather that they are unable to be. They will repeatedly fall within the law or only on its edge since they are ultimately covered by it.

Nothing is more emblematic of this than the response to the capitol invasion that resulted in what can only be described as symbolic imprisonment that were immediately followed by a wide discussion over the constitutional rights of those people resulting in limitations to what was already a limited response. Instances range from organic food demands to one woman being set free to go to her planned Mexico vacation but in my opinion the most symbolic case was the fact that after some airlines put people who proudly associated to the invasion on the no-fly list, this was proven to hurt their constitutional rights since no American can be placed there without being charged with terrorism.

I argue this is the most symbolic because of the combination between the known leniency in using terrorist charges in the past together with the very unamerican intervention in the private sector on behalf of people who were publicly self-advertising their intention to invade a government building among other clear infringements of the law less the 48 hours before. Those people had no fear of becoming criminals and I would argue that it is no surprise that history has proven them right since they were in fact operating within the 'law' (in the larger sense of a social contract) even when planning to infringe its literal sense.

Put plainly, in all these cases stupidity is a radical form of otherness which remains that which must be contained or, better yet, eliminated. *Despite what might*

seem to be the case, stupidity has never taken over. *As stupid as it might sound*, Trump, Q-Anon and conversion therapy remain of the regime which speaks to intelligence. Trump supporters and flat earthers are not stupid. They are simply wrong; just as eugenicist programs and the practices of colonization were *and are* wrong.

The essential question then is: what we have to lose from abdicating intelligence? It is not that renouncing intelligence will disappear all evil; rather that we do not need such a promise. There is nothing to gain from upholding the imperative of intelligence. The politics of intelligence is *inherently* violent and not by accident. Moreover, one finds that intelligence is not only pure domination but also the self-evident privileging of this domination: the neutral violence of progress which cannot be refuted nor refused. Only idiots refuse the facts so there is no harm in repressing them. In fact, it is for their own good. My argument here is that this is the logic which engenders both the eugenics of sterilization mentioned earlier and the IMF's worldwide imposition of neoliberal debt reconstruction policies (for example, in Argentina , Nigeria and Trinidad & Tobago [the Budhoo case¹]) - yet only one of them is no longer a valid policy. In both cases we have the imposition of a neutral power that claims its authority on legitimately knowing what is best against those who are not only unable to see what is expected of them but are moreover incapable of even the awareness that they are incapable. The argument here is that it is not enough to challenge whether they have the legitimacy to claim such knowledge or not or whether there should be any normative standards for the power that knowledge grants, but rather whether such legitimacy grants anyone that power at all. Put in simple words, the question is not whether anyone can claim to know what is best or not, nor is it the

¹ For his impressive letter of resignation see (Budhoo, 1990)

limits of the power that such knowledge grants, but rather why such power exists in the first place and the problematic scenarios it creates.

The political category of stupidity is useful in refuting this violence since it argues that the logic does not hold. Or as Rancière (2011) proposes it:

There is politics when this presupposition is broken by the affirmation that the power belongs to those who have no qualification to rule – which amounts to saying that there is no ground whatever for the exercise of power. There is politics when the boundary separating those who are born for politics from those who are born for the ‘bare’ life of economic and social necessity is put into question. (p. 3, my emphasis)

Considering that domination is the defining characteristic of civilization, then maybe (and no more than maybe at this stage) it is time to be *uncivilized*, to truly bring ‘degeneration’ to civilization. It might be a ‘stupid’ argument, but this is precisely the point. We *should* not be afraid of being stupid, ‘barbaric’ or anarchic. To put it as blatantly as I can, I am not saying that we *need* to be stupid, I am just raising a question regarding the imperative to be intelligent, namely, its assumptions and worldview that the best is always desirable and given an account of it, its implementation is self-evident. The text does not aim to convince or provide any definite answers on the question. It is merely saying that there is a question, an interesting one that is often overlooked or wrongly framed.

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