

Valérie Savard

Dr. David Clark

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Slow Thinking vs. Fast Production:  
Rethinking Time in the Production of Knowledge, the Problem of Progress, and the  
Complicated Argument in Public Intellectualism.

This essay takes up the issue of clarity in the sphere of public intellectualism in the work of thinkers both inside and outside the university. Henry Giroux has recently argued that “the voices of progressive academics have become increasingly irrelevant when it comes to assuming the role of engaged intellectuals interested in sharing their ideas, research and policy recommendations with a broader public” (Truthout). He remarks on the general public’s unenthusiastic and dismissive reception of what he calls the arcane language that is used in many works produced by academically trained individuals. I would like to take up two positions put forward by Giroux in an article entitled “On Pop Clarity: Public Intellectuals and the Crisis of Language” in which he argues in favour of repudiating the “assumption that clarity is the ultimate litmus test to gauge whether a writer has successfully engaged” her or his “educated” audience (Truthout). He also insists that “public intellectuals need to take matters of accessibility seriously in order to combine theoretical rigor with their efforts to communicate forcefully and intelligibly to a larger public about the most pressing matters of the day” (Truthout). I am interested in how public intellectuals can negotiate between the seemingly contradictory yet equally important aims put forward by Giroux. What

complicates the goal of disseminating rigorous theory in an argument that is also considered clear and how have other thinkers expressed different sides of this problem?

This essay will expand upon Giroux's "Pop Clarity" article by considering how the notion of hurried time<sup>1</sup>, which is espoused in the capitalist rhetoric of an increasingly corporatized university system in North America, affects the way academics and public intellectuals put forward their arguments. I will draw on the work of Zygmunt Bauman and Mark Fisher to facilitate my discussion of the capitalist need to simplify and rush in order to fulfill the consumerist desire to be constantly stimulated and never self-reflexive or socially responsible. In the spirit of slowing time down this paper will also consider one instance of Jacques Derrida's work on the university, with an emphasis on how his form and content themselves provide commentary on the state of the Humanities in the university's rushed atmosphere, an atmosphere that advocates for economizing time through the use of simple language and phrasing. To write clearly is not necessarily to write simply or to "talk down" to the reader: Complex arguments *can* be clear. In fact neither Giroux nor Derrida claim to abstain from the desire to write clearly. Giroux's writing is distinguished in its ability to present important and complicated arguments without excessively complex language and even Derrida, despite his notoriety as a difficult writer to follow, has expressed uncertainty whether his work might be "intelligible, if it makes sense" (The Future of the Profession 56). In his work, George Orwell worried about how writers of fiction, as well as scholars, might clearly present their own politics in their writing without contributing to the "general collapse" of language (156). Antonio Gramsci was also concerned with the misuse of specialized language in an age that he argued incorrectly labelled industrial labourers and other

workers as “non-intellectuals” (Gramsci 9). I am interested in the possibility of refusing to acquiesce to society’s addiction to simplicity while, following Giroux’s lead, finding a kind of language and form of argument that encourages the general public and academics alike to think beyond the constrictive rules that have been set out for them by their society.

The argument against the use of difficult or specialized language is not without legitimate defence, and it is certainly not a new concern. In “Politics and the English Language” George Orwell makes it abundantly clear what issues he takes with unnecessarily complex syntax and diction. Though Orwell’s work appeared more than a half-century ago, his concerns remain valid, especially when considering the desire that many public intellectuals may have to reach less formally educated members of the public. Writing in the early half of the twentieth century, Orwell criticized what was then becoming a standard rhetorical style being used by intellectuals:

[M]odern writing at its worst does not consist in picking out words for the sake of their meaning and inventing images in order to make the meaning clearer. It consists in gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug. The attraction of this way of writing is that it is easy. It is easier — even quicker, once you have the habit — to say *In my opinion it is not an unjustifiable assumption that* than to say *I think*. If you use ready-made phrases, you not only don't have to hunt about for the words; you also don't have to bother with the rhythms of your sentences

since these phrases are generally so arranged as to be more or less euphonious. (Orwell 164, italics in original)

What is interesting about Orwell's argument is that he simultaneously diminishes the use of unnecessarily complex turns of phrase while advocating for writers to take their time when writing and for the careful selection of diction. He demonstrates this kind of writing in the above quote, choosing, for example, the word "euphonious," a literary term that may not be widely known, but which he prefers because of its singular ability to condense many words into one, effectively simplifying the sentence. Thus, rhetorically, Orwell does not equate 'simple' with 'easy' as it is obvious that he does not look respectfully upon writers who take the easy route. Orwell's concern with "ready-made" phrasing, which in his time appeared as convoluted elocution and unnecessary formality, looks ahead to the concerns of the contemporary thinkers to which I will soon turn in this essay. Yet, for them, the very same effect (that is, of laziness and complacency) derives from the simplification that was promoted by Orwell in 1946.

In "The Intellectuals," Antonio Gramsci speaks to the idea of intellectualism itself, arguing that there are no such things as "non-intellectuals" because, given the opportunity, many people are capable of comprehending different kinds of knowledge. However, like Orwell, Gramsci writes from a time where learning was less intimately connected to consumer culture, unlike our contemporaneous "liquid modern era" (Bauman) and he does not consider those who, if given the opportunity, would chose *not* to learn, and *why* it is that they may chose that option. The rejection of the term "non-intellectual" however remains important because public intellectuals seek to share knowledge and thought with those outside of the academy as well as within it. Like

Orwell, Gramsci argues that the use of rhetoric and eloquence in writing is dangerous because it isolates social theory from the realm of action and forecloses the participation of some members of society in that action:

The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as a constructor, organiser, “permanent persuader” and not just a simple orator... From technique-as-work on proceeds to technique-as-science and to the humanistic conception of history, without which one remains “specialized” and does not become “directive.”(10)

Here, Gramsci betrays his perception of eloquence as mere poetry with the power to move “feelings and passions” but not to incite action. According to Gramsci, the new intellectual is a response to and an improvement on what he calls “[t]he traditional and vulgarised type” of intellectual, “the man of letters, the philosopher, the artist” (9). Gramsci advocated in favour of a new intellectual class composed primarily of the working class that would move toward “technical education, closely bound to industrial labour” (9). His aim was to eliminate the kinds of specialized discourses that were inaccessible to some. He asks if “intellectuals [are] an autonomous and independent social group, or [if] every social group [has] its own particular specialised category of intellectuals” (5). The question makes a compelling point because it suggests that though one ‘educated’ individual does not understand the specialized rhetoric of another ‘educated’ individual neither of them is necessarily less intelligent (or less educated). Later in this paper I will argue that complex methods used to disseminate difficult

knowledge have an important place inside the academy if not outside as well. Yet, despite the usefulness of complex syntax or phrasing and heightened diction, perhaps one should consider how to present similar kinds of difficult knowledge to less formally educated individuals who arguably should have equal access to that knowledge should they choose to negotiate with it. However, what is to be done about those who do not choose to “know” and what societal factors have caused the rather common refusal to retain any knowledge that leads to the impatience for and rejection of difficult language?

While Orwell and Gramsci’s concerns are still valid today, Giroux makes the equally (or more) compelling point that, in America at least, the move to complicated discourse in the academy was a deliberate response to rhetorical and media-friendly soundbites that came to characterize mainstream news, beginning in the 1980s:

Under the growing influence of a corporate-dominated cultural apparatus producing right-wing public pedagogies, civil discourse degenerated into cheap advertising copy, promulgated by an expanding celebrity culture and its consumerist dream world. Or, it became a nonstop avalanche of vicious soundbite[s] for the new class of conservative talking heads that dominated the mainstream media aimed at denigrating all things public. Attempting to break through this citadel of linguistic conformity, many progressive academics hoped to raise the intellectual bar in order to engage complex ideas that challenged the attack on critical thought and democratic political culture that was sweeping across the country.

I locate the urgency of continuing with the project of challenging the anti-intellectualist move in capitalist culture to over simplify and thus prevent critical thinking from taking

place, in this initial move to break through “linguistic conformity” that exists almost thirty years later (not only in the US but in places that practice critical pedagogy the world over). As universities become increasingly privatized and operated like corporations, designed to churn out as many students as possible, these students cannot learn critically or even hope to retain whatever knowledge they have learned because their concern is only to achieve a higher grade or simply pass a course. As Bill Readings notes the emphasis in the university on the efficiency of time that is measured in part by how long it takes to get one’s degree (25). The focus in the classroom as well as all other parts of the university (including those in charge of funding research) is often on productivity and on economizing time in order to ‘finish’ the learning process as quickly as possible. This emphasis may be hegemonic and unconscious on the part of the teacher but nevertheless this move to hurried classroom time is evident to critics of the state of education worldwide. As Mark Fisher argues<sup>2</sup>, many students reflect the consumerist demand for constant stimulation coupled with the capitalist drive toward productivity in their attitudes toward work and thinking in the classroom. Educators are placed in an uncomfortably divided position: While teachers may feel a responsibility to teach important critical citizenship they are also occupied by the need to help the students achieve high marks and perform competitively (two further contradictory challenges to the idea of actual knowledge) in addition to the formidable challenge of simply holding the students’ attention and interest.

Fisher argues that

teachers are now put under intolerable pressure to mediate between the post-literate subjectivity of the late capitalist consumer and the demands of

the disciplinary regime (to pass examinations etc). This is one way in which education, far from being in some ivory tower safely inured from the 'real world,' is the engine room of the reproduction of social reality, directly confronting the inconsistencies of the capitalist social field. (25-6)

Fisher indicates that this conflicted focus of pedagogy places the professor in the precarious position of not only teaching, but also taking charge of instructing the most basic kinds of social responsibilities. As a teacher myself I can see this problem reflected in the sheer amount of time spent corresponding through e-mail to repeatedly address issues that were discussed on more than one occasion in class. Students are frequently tardy and have difficulty paying attention to others (including the teacher). This seemingly societally-influenced deficit of attention reflects what Fisher calls "depressive hedonia." While depression is commonly understood as "ahedonia," or, the inability to get pleasure, Fisher asserts that students today experience "an inability to do anything else *except* pursue pleasure" (22). This incessant pursuit of pleasure in the classroom is mirrored by students who have a low tolerance to any kind of learning that requires them to focus their attention and thus isolate the use of their time.

The desire for constant entertainment in pursuit of constant stimulation is translated as a need to speed up time so that students can manage to fill their days with as much entertainment (misunderstood as knowledge) as possible. The university system caters to this desire by making the classroom 'fun,' and keeping the students 'alert' by using unnecessary power point presentations in small classrooms and "clicker" technology to find out what course mater students find challenging<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, testing in large enrolment classes is achieved through true/false or multiple-choice exams rather

than assessments based upon a more substantive examination of knowledge retained and concepts learned. Fisher argues that a “decaying disciplinary system” is to blame for the students’ subscription to consumerist ideas of disposability and instant gratification and as an example he likens the study of Nietzsche to the purchase, consumption, and ultimate digestion of a hamburger:

To be bored simply means to be removed from the communicative sensation-stimulus matrix of texting, YouTube and fast food; to be denied, for a moment, the constant flow of sugary gratification on demand. Some students want Nietzsche in the same way that they want a hamburger; they fail to grasp—and the logic of the consumer system encourages this misapprehension—that the indigestibility, the difficulty *is* Nietzsche. (24)

Fisher’s analogy is apt, but the gastric metaphor can be taken further. The desire to *consume* thought (and, thus let another—in the case of the burger, the anatomic digestive system— do the digesting) and Fisher’s analogy of the difficulty as comparable to “indigestion” indicates that these students expect that learning should be pain-free. The strength of the metaphor is that it suggests that the discomfort is in fact only temporary and that, as the student sees it, the exam, or the process of reading Nietzsche, is short-lived and may be forgotten soon enough.

In “Hurried Life, or Liquid-Modern Challenges to Education” Zygmunt Bauman addresses the fluidity of thought in the contemporary western world. Like Giroux, he laments the relatively recent move to the economy of thought in schools and how it is displayed in what is (not) taught and how brief and pointed such teaching must be. He does not limit his critique to the classroom, but his concern can be applied to the

challenge of revolutionary or radical intellectuals looking to break through (as Giroux puts it) the (language) barrier that has indoctrinated a large portion of the masses<sup>4</sup>.

Though he does not emphasize language and argument complexity, both qualities are implicitly part of his argument:

While still a constant preoccupation, identification is now split into a multitude of exceedingly short (and, with the progress in marketing techniques, ever shorter) efforts fully within the capacity of even a most fleeting attention span; a series of sudden and frenetic spurts of no pre-designed, predetermined, or even predictable succession—but instead with effects following the beginnings comfortably closely and quickly, and so freeing the joys of wanting from the dark prison of waiting.

(Bauman 176)

Here Bauman presents the multitudinous implications related to hurried teaching and learning . He emphasizes the preoccupation with and the need for constant yet brief stimulation and echoes Giroux’s sentiment that

we are witnessing a withdrawal from complexity... and a devaluation of the cultural apparatuses now overwhelmed by an infusion of endless soundbites, celebrity babbling, hate talk, consumer mania and endless pornographic representations of violence. All too often justified with the appeal to clarity, entertainment and record-breaking profits. (Truthout)

The dark prison of waiting implies the hastiness involved in learning that I would argue is reflected not only inside university walls or the walls of earlier public and private education, but in the public sphere in which “non-intellectuals”<sup>5</sup> engage with what is

called news and current events. Bauman insists on the importance of “lifelong” learning, that education should be “continuously confronted, never completed” (190).

Consumerism, he argues, has gotten in the way of this continuous confrontation. While individuals are careful not to get left behind with respect to “professional knowledge” and “new technological information,” arguably both areas of knowledge that will aid in the pursuit of financial reward, there is little interest in acquiring social skills and a knowledge regarding the political process (190-1). The sense is that there is no time to wait, that one must consume knowledge and expel any knowledge that is no longer relevant to current professional or productive trends. Bauman notes Bourdieu’s point that in order to consider the future one must have a grasp on the present (192) and argues that it appears that “most Americans must have but a misty view of what the present holds” (192). It does seem that ingrained in the consumerized society of which Bauman critiques is the contrary belief that one must free oneself from the present at all costs.

Bauman’s “dark prison of waiting” calls to mind the dry-eyed animal of which Aristotle speaks in *De Anima*. In “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils” Jacques Derrida discusses Aristotle’s distinguishing of these animals from humans. Derrida notes that they lack eyelids to “protect the eye and permit[ ] it, at regular intervals to close itself off in the darkness of inward thought or sleep” (132). This ability to selectively choose when to open and to close one’s eye indicates an ability to select, focus, and therefore to be critical. He argues that “what is terrifying about an animal with hard eyes and a dry glance is that it always sees. Man can lower the sheath, adjust the diaphragm, narrow his sight, the better to hear, remember, and learn” (132). Thus, Derrida equates learning with retention and comprehension that cannot be fruitful without

the time necessary to look inward and to reflect. The dry-eyed animal, like the consumer/student in today's university takes everything in, constantly in pursuit of good grades and consuming knowledge as though it were expendable, but does not remember and thus does not learn; this, Derrida says, is terrifying. He insists that "[t]he university must not be not be a sclerophthalmic [dry-eyed] animal" and wonders to that effect what it is that opens and closes the university's eye (132). I contend that, though he does not betray a political agenda (or a blatant criticism of right-wing political society) as do Giroux, Bauman, and Fisher as well as Gramsci and Orwell to a certain extent, Derrida implicitly draws attention to the commodification of knowledge and education. Indeed, what, or who decides how and when the university shuts its eyes and how (in)frequently it reflects upon itself?

I am not arguing that Derrida's work is free of politics—far from it, he is merely less explicit about identifying the 'culprits,' (as) if there could be any one group: "A major debate is under way today on the subject of the politics of research and teaching, and the role that the university may play in this arena: whether this role is central or marginal, progressive or decadent, collaborative with or independent of that of the other research institutions sometimes better suited to certain purposes" (140). Derrida argues that the problem of education is not merely systematically focused on the state but global, focused on a multi-national level on "end oriented research" (141). The problem, he is careful to note, as I am here, is not the form of research in itself, but that students are not being taught to reflect on and evaluate the implications of the various possible ends to their research "and to choose, when possible, among them all" (148). The university, just like any institution that subscribes to any kind of power or political structure, needs to

look inward, it cannot be like the dry-eyed animal taking in as much external media as it can bear without negotiating with its own system first; once the university takes the time to be self reflexive, it will then be equipped to open its metaphorical eyes to carefully select other topics of focus.

Derrida's intricate and often multifaceted style would probably not be condoned by Orwell or Gramsci due to his odd choice of syntax (Miller 279) and double-entendres. He de-centres and de-stabilizes language in order to emphasize the endless possibilities of meaning and that de-stabilization disagrees with the earlier thinkers' projects of 'clarity' through transparency. It is certainly not 'easy' to read Derrida's work. J. Hillis Miller contends that Derrida's reader "seeks a solid rock or an anchor in the flux, something around which the 'whole,' if there is a whole, even a non-systemic whole, may be organized" (280). Miller rightly indicates that Derrida provides continually de-centred arguments that do not allow the reader the organization she craves. Yet, by destabilizing his arguments and constantly asking questions that lead to opposing answers, Derrida encourages the very kind of slow reading that is certainly not provided elsewhere in the university system or in contemporary media. I would argue that his style and his use of language is revolutionary because it urges his reader and his audience to reflect on, not merely ingest<sup>6</sup>, what he calls "scientific normativity" (149) and, to which I would add, capitalist ideologies related to speed and productivity<sup>7</sup>. Derrida argues that many methodological forms of science and theory "never touch on the principle of reason and thus on the essential foundation of the modern university. They never question scientific normativity, beginning with the value of objectivity or of objectification, which governs and authorizes their discourse." They are "controlled by the deep seated norms, even the

programs, of the space that they claim to analyze” (149). Derrida’s critique of these forms of analysis comes from his own experiences in the academy wherein he too struggled with systematic rules and sought to subvert them. He did so, peculiarly, by following the institutional rules and protocols “to the letter:” “I did just what the New Critics told me to do: ‘Read closely. Ask questions of the text: Just why is this or that feature there? What is its function? What does it do?...’ Strange things happen, as I discovered, when you do that conscientiously and with as open a mind as possible” (quoted in Miller 283).

Though Derrida notes that he did “just” what he was told to do, it is evident that “just” is not how he did it. Unlike the students who eat Fisher’s Nietzschean hamburger, Derrida relishes the indigestion that *is* knowledge. He discovers that strange (not predictable or digestible) things happen when—to use Derrida’s metaphor—one makes use of the time spent closing one’s eyes. By opening his mind he did not merely ingest and regurgitate, despite having a job as agrégé-répétiteur, a “repeater” by trade (Miller 281), he discovered a subversive way of thinking.

In the university it is important not only to think against the grain that is easily followed, but also to question the methodological approaches taken and to reflect on the institution itself in which these ideas are encountered. Echoing Gramsci, Derrida admits that we must consider areas of research and intellectualism that may be considered non-traditional or even “basic” (Derrida 148). Yet, he cautions against fully subscribing to any one line of thought, no matter how important or “necessary” it may be. The fact that any organized thought process is organized at all requires that it be questioned, not only regarding its motives but also because many of these systems are not self-reflexive in and of themselves: “This [lack of self-reflexivity] can be observed, among other things, in the

rhetoric, the rites, the modes of presentation and demonstration that they continue to respect” (Derrida 149). Derrida argues the common use of discourses such as those belonging to Marxism and psychoanalysis both inside and out of the academy,

explains, to a certain extent, the fact that even when it claims to be revolutionary, this discourse does not always trouble the most conservative forces of the university. Whether it is understood or not, it is enough that it does not threaten the fundamental axiomatic and deontology of the institution, its rhetoric, its rites, and its procedures. (149)

While he acknowledges the complexity of these forms of thought that appear, among others, in academic circles, it is not complexity but a deconstructive engagement with pre-existing rhetoric of academe that is needed. Though the term deconstruction began with Derrida, it is probably his allergy to the attachment to any one line of organized thought that impelled him to neither reject or accept the term as, he argued, the process was “always already at work in a work” (Derrida). For Derrida, then, the form of the argument *is* its content and thus his difficult style, which many complain is difficult to read and absorb, satisfies his goal in breaking the barrier of common speech. I would argue this is one way of breaking the language barrier to which Giroux refers in his own work though admittedly it does not mean this method will get through to everyone since many, as I have already mentioned, refuse the effort needed to engage with such a text.

“Take your time but be quick about it because you do not know what awaits you,” says Derrida at the end of “The Future of the Profession or the University Without Condition.” As this essay draws to its conclusion I would remind the reader that no one text can be read in isolation from those to which it both explicitly and implicitly refers. I

have discussed clarity and accessibility as they pertain to the work of public intellectuals and teachers, and how the influence of capitalism on our society has trained most of us, to some degree, to be complacent in the level of consideration we have put into all forms of thought, especially those that are related to social change and especially the politics of academe. The notion of time and the need for compressing knowledge as a commodity into as little time as possible reflects the lack of consideration that is remarked upon in the works of Giroux, Fisher, Bauman and Derrida. Time in learning can and should be construed as the opening and shutting of the human eye. One must choose when to look out in order to take in new information, yet the eye must also be shut, frequently and at length, in order to consider every implication not only of one's own thought process but of all of the systems that have influenced that thought. The debate over clarity and stylistic complexity is ongoing and the best this short paper can hope to do is to contribute to both sides of that debate by synthesizing the thoughts of a few important public intellectuals regarding clarity and accessibility in the corporate and consumerized university. Working towards a solution to the problem of hurried time would certainly require an even longer consideration of instrumental rationality and its implications inside and out of the academy. Yet, what is apparent is that despite the difficult language barrier and its myriad manifestations, one must look to the system that is in place that has allowed the dissemination of carefully considered knowledge to be rejected by students, readers, and viewing audiences in favour of soundbites and truncated (often censored) information. When Derrida calls for his reader to take her time, he means to be careful, to consider, to reflect and be responsible for one's self as well as others. But be quick about it because there is a sense of urgency in this reflection. Perhaps an alternative (if

circuitous) way to put Derrida's point would be to "think now, for yourself and for others, about your self and about others." Think slowly, but think now.

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<sup>1</sup> I am picking up on Zygmunt Bauman's notion of "hurried life" in his essay "Hurried Life: or Liquid Modern Challenges to Education" in which he addresses the "hurried, emergency culture of consumerist society" (159). Bauman's essay will be considered later in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Fisher speaks about the school and university systems primarily from the perspective of the United Kingdom, but his critique is related to the influence of capitalism which affects the UK system as well as it does in the US and Canada. Thus, I will consider his work, unproblematically, alongside my other theorists but I must also note that some issues in the UK school system are not the same as those in North America. Those issues are not a consideration of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> The 'clicker' is a tool used in classrooms from grade school to late university. It can be used to take attendance, ask students if they are having difficulty in certain areas, and to test them and provide instant feedback. One professor at Ohio State University remarked: "This is the MTV era... It's the instant-gratification generation. They don't like doing a quiz and hearing the responses in three days. They want to see if they've got it right or wrong right then" (Wired).

<sup>4</sup> I note "language" parenthetically as the barrier because Bauman's emphasis is less on the language itself and more about time.

<sup>5</sup> I use the term rejected by Gramsci here hesitantly, but also deliberately. I hesitate because I do not mean to suggest, as Gramsci argues the word does, that the people to whom I refer are without intellect or do not have the capacity to understand complex matter. But the term is also significant because it acknowledges that not all individuals have the educational background to negotiate with difficult syntax or diction.

<sup>6</sup> I still have in mind Mark Fisher's hamburger metaphor as I think the themes of consumption and regurgitation as other end results of the digestive process are fitting to the idea of limited time when it comes to thinking.

<sup>7</sup> Ideally, Derrida's work will effectively encourage slow reading and close analysis as I have mentioned. Unfortunately, the capitalist ideology that encourages speedy understandings counters this encouragement, and many individuals who are considered educated give up too quickly on the multiple readings that are often needed to engage properly with Derrida.

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