

# The Call of Values and Justice? Rethinking Intellectual Freedom Via Caillios

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I want to engage with the question of intellectual freedom through a reading of Roger Caillios's essay "Sociology of the Intellectual."<sup>1</sup> Along with Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris, Caillios founded the College of Sociology in Paris in 1937 as a reaction against surrealism; in this new intellectual venture the focus was on a sacred sociology in and for modern life. One of the central issues for intellectual freedom is *what type* of intellectual freedom is *deemed possible* - and permissible? What and who are we 'allowed' to draw upon and what types of self-policing, institutional policing but also peer-policing occur? I am also interested in the way intellectual freedom polices within the wake of acceptable 'big names', a series of totem figures that become the boundary markers of acceptable thought and action. Too often it appears as if intellectual freedom occurs within what I term academic restriction whereby you are free to be an intellectual if you exist within current orthodoxies and what, to all intent and purposes, is a mainstream of intellectual thought and models.

Therefore I want to engage with Caillios's essay from the late 1930s in which he positions himself against Julien Benda's famous *La Trahison des clerks* in the name of what can be termed a modern sociology of the sacred. This in itself raises issues for our contemporary re-reading of Caillios, not least if we begin with the provocative question: what if the intellectual is a type of sacred task and so freedom itself is sacred and not to be profaned? But what this

sacred task might mean today needs itself to be considered, but in doing so drawing upon Caillios's reworking whereby issues of such a role in a secularized society occur within a wider debate as to whether the intellectual holds any position of transcendence and authority.

As Claudine Frank notes, Caillios later stated that his essay drew on the position of both the Indian Brahmin caste and the Roman *falmen* (the priest of specific deities) who "served as sacred doubles or simulacra of the sovereign power".<sup>2</sup> This idea, of the intellectual as the sacred double of sovereign power, interests me because it also helps us understand why so many intellectuals seem to take on a victim status, yet exist as victims who are never sacrificed by the sovereign power. The answer why is obvious, because in sacrificing the intellectual, the sovereign power would be attacking its own double. In fact the intellectual exists as the one who claims an authority over and against the sovereign power. This means, in my re-reading, that intellectual freedom is in fact not an issue - unless we who seek to be and act as intellectuals wish to make it so. But it does become a problem when we see ourselves as constricted by secular power and so have no position or authority from which to critique such secular power. For as Caillios explains the position of authority of the intellectual is versus the secular power of the state.

I want to expand this to the position that so many who wish to be or be called intellectuals find themselves; that is, employed within the contemporary university which itself often operates by fiat as an extension of the secular power of the state. It is increasingly my sense, and more so after engaging with Caillios's essay, that the issue of intellectual freedom only arises when we - as intellectuals - attempt to position ourselves as *alternative secular power* within yet against the existing secular power. Our (and by our I write as one seeking to act as intellectual) problem is when we attempt to position ourselves as oppositional secular power claiming a counter secular authority; a secular authority not recognized by the sovereign power. As a reading of Caillios makes clear, by attempting to act as alternative secular power and authority the intellectual is abandoning their role and seeking instead to become an alternative sovereign power without any mandate for so doing. That means the intellectual exists, and the attendant intellectual freedom that they pursue and express exists, only if they also recognize their role *vis a vis* sovereign power.

Caillios reminds us that the intellectual's role is drawn from that of the cleric who operated free from temporal interests. The tension of intellectual and sovereign power occurs because intellectual values are those positioned as free from temporal interests because they are deemed "abstract, eternal and universal". These values, identified by Caillios as "justice, reason, truth" are problematic for sovereign power because they "challenge embodied ideals

such as nation, state, or class”, which by nature “involve the unconditional pursuit of gain”.<sup>3</sup> A conflict with intellectuals arises because these embodied ideals are what the sovereign power “promote to supervise the administration, preservation, and growth of public wealth.” We can see that such a tension puts the intellectual and their values always at odds with sovereign power, no matter what political or economic stripe it embodies, for any sovereign power involves both ideological and pragmatic “administration, preservation and growth of public wealth.”<sup>4</sup> If we reduce this relationship down to that of the university, the university powers are those of particular embodied ideals, whether of the sovereign state, or of their own ideals of rankings, specializations, graduate profiles, ethos, reputation and the like.

So what then is the issue of intellectual freedom? As Caillios situates it, the cleric either strives to instate their abstract principles in society, or decide to “worship them peacefully, far from any strife, safeguarding their integrity and immutable form.”<sup>5</sup> I want to stress this differentiation and state that freedom for the intellectual comes in two forms: either the safe option of worship or the harder option of instating values into society; the former I call the option of the academic, that latter the task of the intellectual. To expand on this central difference, I suggest that a common definition of intellectual freedom is nothing more than the ability to worship the abstract principles which is really what a university focussed on international and national rankings, league tables and outputs within an audit culture of research still allows. This creates a home for the tame intellectual who takes on the role of the academic. However, the real question of intellectual freedom, the type of intellectual freedom that is problematic for both the individual intellectual and their host university, is the problematic one of attempting to instate such values — justice, reason, truth — as are taken to be abstract principles, into society and into the workings of the institution they find themselves within.

Caillios observes that the politician must prefer injustice to disorder for “here is the supreme maxim of politics”;<sup>6</sup> but intellectuals “are not responsible for the smooth workings of the countless mechanisms of social life”.<sup>7</sup> Rather, their role, as the cleric, is that of the position of authority versus the sovereign power. To relinquish that role is, I would claim, the attitude of the academic, those who mistake domesticity for freedom and so serve, if only by withdrawal, the sovereign power. Of course, underlying all of this is that distinction between the cleric and the layperson, a distinction based on that between the spiritual and the temporal. Caillios’s concern was how such a distinction was to be maintained and made meaningful in a society lacking any such distinction as an understood meaning. His differentiation is based between those who subordinate everything to order and those who subordinate everything to

justice. The cleric looks to justice, the layperson to order. The tension then becomes the cleric who, in the modern world, keeps the values as abstract ones and so does not seek to ensure such values have “practical application in the temporal world” such as to bring to the temporal world “any degree of moral resolve”.<sup>8</sup> This is the central tension, not only does the intellectual have to prove the values they champion “have enough real implications to motivate some degree of personal commitment” but that the implications of such commitment involve the linking of truth and justice. The task of the intellectual, or rather, the role of the intellectual is to raise “the question of value”, the worry “about what ought to be” as critique of the preference of order to injustice by the sovereign power. In short, we could position the cleric and now today the intellectual as the one who proclaims an alternative in the interlinking of truth and justice.

So what does this mean for intellectual freedom? It is not the freedom to be an intellectual, that is to write, talk and think as one wishes. This, if we consider it seriously, is not denied to most who work within our universities. For as long as we are competent teachers, maintain a steady series of outputs, serve our time on some administrative duties and, increasingly, at least apply for some funding grants, in the main the sovereign power, either the university or the state leave us alone. Instead, following on from my reading of Caillios, intellectual freedom occurs not because the sovereign powers leave us alone but rather because and when the intellectual *does not* leave the sovereign powers alone. True intellectual freedom is that of the cleric as the representative of the other authority against the sovereign powers. True intellectual freedom is that speaking of truth and justice as they are linked by circumstance “and truth thus means taking a stand in the real debates of the day”<sup>9</sup> whether in one’s university (our immediate sovereign power), city and nation or against the current global sovereign of capitalism in all its guises: neoliberalism, state capitalism, financial capitalism, digital capitalism.

Justice is, as Caillios reminds us, the only value “that, in extremis, exists exclusively in terms of the temporal; that, when put into practice, engenders a course and politics of action; that, above all, makes us choose between itself and the polis.”<sup>10</sup> The academic takes their values and activities as being, in the end, of private implication. They pursue a value or a critique that does not shake them from their position of domesticated quietude; all they ask is a soft prison whereby they have the freedom to pursue, by themselves, that which they wish to pursue. In this they mimic the state’s preference of order. The intellectual disturbs the academic as much as the state, in fact the intellectual often disturbs the academic far more than the state for they hold up clearly the distinction between on the one hand the state worker and self-disciplinarian of

the academic, and on the other the disorder in the name of justice and truth of the intellectual. So for the academic, intellectual freedom is temporal worship of order relocated into what was the sacred zone of the cleric: the academic zone as refuge from the world. For the intellectual, freedom is that of the act of critique of the sovereign power, of the polis, of the university, the state, the nation or global sovereign power in the name of truth and justice. It is the critique of disorder against sovereign power.

To return to Caillios, he also makes an important qualification, noting that concepts and values are “deeply ambiguous”<sup>11</sup> in the modern world, for there is no longer a singular basis in spiritual power from which to critique temporal power. Rather, all intellectuals, by necessity, argue from what can be termed a faction of interests and prejudices. This means, drawing on from Caillios, that Intellectual freedom means the hermeneutical proclamations of truth and justice, that is: “we find contingent and multiple interpretations of the case in question, whereby each participant (who cannot rigorously return to the idea’s definition) interposes between the idea and the concrete issue to be settled the forms of mediation that seem most appropriate.”<sup>12</sup> So while we talk of intellectual freedom, in expression it becomes the voices of intellectual *freedoms*, not necessarily of agreement as to what is to be done “as to demands of justice in every instance, and propose[s] different solutions that nonetheless all claim to derive in equal measure from justice itself.”<sup>13</sup>

Intellectual freedom today, is its proclamation to the sovereign power, is therefore not impartial and cannot claim to be. The intellectual is not impartial in the expression of some value that is itself, today, accessible and existent as abstract and eternal. Intellectual freedom therefore also involves the intellectual self-recognition as the expression of a faction and every prejudice of that faction she may unwittingly share.

However the politicians are themselves also the representatives of factions and the prejudices of those factions and so what occurs is not a situation of homogenous opposition and balance, not the abstract and idealised position of the intellectual as the cleric who is the sacred double or simulacra of the sovereign power as competing singular blocks and powers. In the non-homogenous society, intellectuals (as the modern clerics) occupy and represent a variety of positions and prejudices, as do the politicians and authorities of the sovereign powers. Because intellectuals have to descend from principles to events, that is from abstract values to the expression of these as the claim of justice, intellectuals have to accept they have recourse to contingency. In this they exist in a similar position to the sovereign power that in its expression of order over justice also finds itself having recourse to contingency. Caillios reminds us that while politicians and “clerics” may take different sides, both

“consistently define their positions by upholding views contrary to those of their opponents”.<sup>14</sup> So consider this redefinition, is intellectual freedom the freedom to be like politicians- but *not* politicians? That is, intellectual freedom is the freedom to speak into the polis, to critique the sovereign power, to be able to uphold views “contrary to those of their opponents”; and their opponents are, at the most base level, politicians, because the intellectual champions truth and justice and the politician champions order, nation, state and class. So the question arises, what is the status of the intellectual that gives them the freedom to critique; that gives their critique authority?

Caillios wrestles with this difficulty, because the traditional authority of the cleric was not ultimately vested in them or the values they represent but rather from the sacred authority of the singular church. The cleric in himself was but the means for the expression of the authority of the church; in Caillios’s description, “a vessel of the sacred.”<sup>15</sup> The church provided the cleric with the authority, the office, the garment or the Tonsure that enabled his exclusion from the secular domain. In so being removed from the profane world, from the world of temporal authority, clerics therefore had a platform from which they “could then address it from on high.”<sup>16</sup> It is in this traditional role as the representative of a singular counter-authority in a homogenous society that the role of the intellectual derives: the scholar as critic of the feudal lord in China, the Brahmin as advisor of the Rajah in India, “and in the Christian West, the monk faced the feudal lord while the pope confronted the emperor, armed with the thunderbolts of anathema, interdict, and excommunication.”<sup>17</sup>

The cracks in this role, for the Christian west, occur with the rise of Protestantism; the Church is now not a singular authority but one itself of competing authorities. However, if the State was still Christian in belief and ethos, if the temporal power still recognized the spiritual power of the cleric, even if one of a number of factions, then the cleric still had the freedom to critique and call to account. Our problem today occurs because the university as an authority is not in itself accepted as possessing the counterbalance to the sovereign power, just as within the university the intellectual is not accepted as possessing the counterbalance to the sovereign power of the university authorities. In both cases the state and the university prefer the academic, the scholar who does not seek to be an intellectual but rather withdraws to concentrate on the peaceful worship of their values, “far from any strife, safeguarding their integrity and immutable form.”<sup>18</sup>

However this is not the only option, because there is also a type of complicit intellectual freedom that occurs; that is, because the university does not have the authority of the church, too often intellectuals claim an intellectual freedom granted by the state precisely because this is a freedom without

impact. This freedom lacks impact not only because the university does not have the authority of the Church. As Caillios reminds us, even in the historical examples he provides, it was never just the Church that was the sole source of authority for the cleric. Rather, combined with the authority of the counter-balance organization, the cleric also had a “more private and personal source” of authority<sup>19</sup> and this was “the severity of his vows and voluntary constraints.”<sup>20</sup> This type of personal renunciation of the gratification of “whatever flesh, money, and worldly grandeur can provide”<sup>21</sup> gave him a personal authority over those who pursue the benefits of the temporal realm. So the cleric carried with and within them a sacred, moral and ethical authority.

Today the situation arises whereby we need to reimagine intellectual freedom and the role of the intellectual precisely because we cannot return to the role of the cleric. Too often intellectual freedom is reduced to the freedom to express that which is held to be of no account by the sovereign power; intellectual freedom is counterbalanced by the right to ignore the intellectual, to not heed her critique because they do not speak from an authority recognized by the state, the sovereign powers or even more so, the laity. Intellectuals also find their freedom discounted by their fellow scholars, the academics, who, by their determined withdrawal, encourage the sovereign powers to ignore the intellectual as not the true representative of the university. The crisis of the authority of the university in the modern world is therefore the basis of the crisis of intellectual freedom. Unless we have a university that stands itself against the quest for order of the sovereign power, then the intellectual lacks true freedom: the freedom that comes from the position of the sacred double that speaks of justice into a world ruled by the quest for order and those embodied ideals “which by nature involve the unconditional pursuit of private gain” and “the administration, preservation, and growth of public wealth.”<sup>22</sup>

So intellectual freedom is tied to a rethinking of the university as that which stands for justice against a sovereign power focussed on private gain and public wealth. This also means that the university has to refocus support for those areas (traditionally the humanities and social sciences, but also, of course, law and theology) that situate themselves in the legacy of the cleric. Caillios emphasises that central to the position of the cleric - and now the intellectual - is that he “raises the question of value”, that she worries “about what ought to be”.<sup>23</sup> A university that supports the demands of the sovereign power as to what should be taught, what areas are to emphasized, that follows a STEM agenda, that itself is focused on league tables and audit cultures is not a university that stands for justice. Rather such a university- and this is almost all universities to greater or lesser degree - have become not the sacred double of the sovereign power but rather the extension of the sovereign power.

Therefore the intellectual, if they are to pursue intellectual freedom, must also seek to hold their own university to account in the name of value, in the name of justice - and the university, if it is take intellectual freedom totally seriously, must recognize the right and indeed duty of the intellectual to do so. Further more, the university must be willing to be held to account by its intellectuals; that is, to recognize the authority from which they speak.

Yet far too often the greatest offenders against intellectual freedom are the universities themselves, unwilling to heed the critique of their own intellectuals. As extensions of sovereign power, universities tend to follow the lead of the sovereign power and, if allowing the intellectual to speak, dismiss them as of no account. Yet as well as the authority deriving (hopefully) from the institution from which they speak, the true freedom of the intellectual freedom derives also from the taking up of the responsibilities of the intellectual. The questions arise, in what name is the intellectual speaking with freedom, of what value, of what basis of and for justice? Here perhaps it is uncomfortable to remember the claim of Carl Schmitt, in what has almost become the Schmittian cliché from *Political Theology* (1922) that, “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts”.<sup>24</sup> If this is indeed the case, then the basis of the critique of the sovereign power, that is the state and its institutions (including the university), needs to draw upon that which provides their secularised basis: that is, theology. This is especially so today, for where else can we find such a powerful resource of the claim of justice and human value, if not in theology? But this basis in theology, as the basis for true intellectual freedom, is a theology that must itself be freed from its domestication in both institutions and in public anti-intellectualism.

Here we can consider the theological turn in continental thought as the way to proceed. Consider the turn to theology as a resource and language that in its articulation of value and justice, in its radical interruption into a world - and a university - unable to understand how the non-fundamentalist would choose to draw upon such language and heritage, restores the intellectual to a rethought position of cleric in our contemporary world. That this is an imaginative task is too easily forgotten. Yet as Caillios notes, “genuine clerics do not defend values; they create and supply them.”<sup>25</sup> In practice this means the modern cleric, that is the intellectual, “will devote themselves to working out the values that will renew the century, values that are as un-abstract and un-eternal as possible, but no less uplifting and ideal for all that: in a word, historical values, subject to change and death, fulfilling the needs of the time and milieu, and perishing on account of their own victory.”<sup>26</sup>

We can perhaps re-read this as the claim that true intellectual freedom is the hermeneutics of the time undertaken to work out the values that then are

used to call the sovereign powers and its institutions to account. It is the task of the intellectual to therefore “not to hold onto words that are increasingly detached from things; rather, it is to grapple with reality and prepare its transformation”.<sup>27</sup> Intellectual freedom is therefore not something to be granted in today’s world, it is a task to be undertaken despite all attempts to deny and limit it, despite all attempts to ignore it. Intellectual freedom is, in my reading from Caillios, deeply tied to what I see as the central basis of a radical theology, that is the hermeneutical claim of alternative, an alternative based in the equal value of every human being and in the attendant call for justice. It is the alternative that speaks of the value of all humans against against the embodied ideals of nation, state or class, against the unconditional pursuit of private gain, against the state’s pursuit of order and public wealth over the pursuit of justice. True intellectual freedom is the hermeneutics of value that holds to account the sovereign powers and its institutions in the name of human value and justice and to do so draws upon that which speaks centrally of such values; that is, theology. Yet aware of the all too-often complicit relation of theology and power, true intellectual freedom is therefore drawn from a radical theology, a radical inversion of all that has been taken to be theology, that begins with the death of God, whereby secularity is a theological condition. Intellectual freedom therefore speaks as secular theology; that is, using theology and theological language as the way to critique and interrogate the world we live in. As the death of God theologian Gabriel Vahanian proclaimed: “You do theology not against the background of the death of God but in spite of it”.<sup>28</sup> This is a theology that speaks as much against the retreat to transcendence as it does against a profane world that dehumanizes and excludes. Therefore, in its use of the language of a value and justice that acts continually to interrupt the world of the sovereign powers and call it to account, Intellectual freedom begins with the hermeneutics of theology as the hermeneutics of value and justice. Only as a scandal to the sovereign powers, a scandal to our host institutions, a scandal to our colleagues, can intellectual freedom can recover its role as the call to justice and value in a profane, mundane world.

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Caillios, “Sociology of the Intellectual”, in Claudine Frank ed. *The Edge of Surrealism. A Roger Caillios Reader* (Duke University Press: Durham & London, 2003), 192-197

<sup>2</sup> Claudine Frank, ‘Introduction to “Sociology of the Intellectual”’, in Claudine

Frank ed. *The Edge of Surrealism. A Roger Caillois Reader*, (Duke University Press, Durham & London: 2003), 191

<sup>3</sup> Roger Caillios, *Sociology of the Intellectual*, 192.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Caillios, *Sociology of the Intellectual*, 193.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Roger Caillios, *Sociology of the Intellectual*, 194.

<sup>12</sup> Roger Caillios, *Sociology of the Intellectual*, 195.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Roger Caillios, *Sociology of the Intellectual*, 196.

<sup>15</sup> Roger Caillios, *Sociology of the Intellectual*, 197.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Roger Caillios, *Sociology of the Intellectual*, 192.

<sup>19</sup> Roger Caillios, *Sociology of the Intellectual*, 197.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Roger Caillios, *Sociology of the Intellectual*, 198.

<sup>22</sup> Roger Caillios, *Sociology of the Intellectual*, 192.

<sup>23</sup> Roger Caillios, *Sociology of the Intellectual*, 193.

<sup>24</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. and with an introduction by George Schwab with a new foreword by Tracy B. Strong, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago & London, 2005), 36.

<sup>25</sup> Roger Caillios, *Sociology of the Intellectual*, 199.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Gabriel Vahanian, *Theopoetics of the Word*. (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2014.),121. (For a further discussion of Vahanian's secular theology see: Mike Grimshaw, "In spite of the death of God": Gabriel Vahanian's secular theology, Palgrave Communications 1, 13 October 2015 10.1057/palcomms.2015.25 <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/articles/palcomms201525>