

John Ralston Saul, The Unconscious Civilisation Penguin, Ringwood: 1997
Reflections on a Book

It seems relatively straightforward to review a book: we give an outline of its content, critically analyse its arguments, judge its formal or aesthetic aspects and are done with it. Based on our opinion the book is then recommended or not. To be sure, one may recommend books that are bad for a number of reasons. Is it conceivable that one may discourage the encounter with good books?

As simple as this approach to a book seems, we find it difficult to follow in the case of The Unconscious Civilisation by John Ralston Saul. This may not be the fault of the book itself of course. The reader requires certain intentions, let alone skills to respond and judge written texts in acceptable ways. The subject matter must also lend itself to a distinct form of judgement. We must be confident that there are few ambiguities left in our understanding in order to pronounce our view on the book and its topics.

In our concrete case I am not certain if these conditions are met satisfactorily. Our difficulties may have something to do with the fact that the book is actually a series of lectures (1995 CBC Massey lectures). The performance associated with the spoken word in a lecture may be able to convince in self-evident fashion. As written text arguments must expect to be repeatedly reflected and challenged. The author needs to fortify his arguments accordingly cleverly where the orator may get away with the conviction of his performance. So, it is a trivial observation that Saul does not argue like a writer; his arguments are not always cleverly woven. Instead there are many general observations about society and the modern condition as a whole that - as they are seemingly self-evident- invite the unreflected ascent of the listener. The reader will want to question these, which may well unsettle Saul's entire stream of thought.

Despite its contemporary topics the theme of the book is not all that novel: According to Saul our civilisation prides itself on increased freedom and personal autonomy of the individual and supposedly democratic political and social structures. Much of this apparent progress in human emancipation is allegedly the result of technological and in particular economic progress- a mistaken conception as Saul attempts to show. Saul observes that contrary to this appearance human behaviour is in reality increasingly subjected to powerful, unconscious determinations by corporate hierarchies and economic and political ideologies. Substantial issues are not democratically debated by a community of citizens, but -according to Saul- decided by hierarchically organised professional elites whose behaviour resembles that of courtiers. Social and political changes are subject to streamlined and mechanistic approaches discouraging opportunities for provocative questions and challenging critique. Contemporary civilisation seems to control human thought by restricting communication and information through obscure often seemingly specialised language rather than increasing personal freedom and autonomy. Modes of thought are pre-determined by an excessive reliance on manipulation, by an interest in economically profitable outcomes or by an administrative desire for certainty and control of the future. Our society's direction is determined by the agendas of interest groups, which bargain about outcomes invoking often artificially urgent timeframes and a questionable sense of technocratic necessity. In addition an almost obsessive reliance on the marketplace sees a replacement of a political leadership inspired by a disinterested attention to the public good with the determinations of a self-interested, functionalised technocracy.

Against this rather general description of contemporary culture Saul advances a non-ideological alternative of "practical humanism". On an abstract level this attitude accepts the incompleteness of any solution and the absolute indeterminability of the future. It attempts instead to attain a balance between the need for assertive action and sceptical hesitation. On a concrete level, the "Socratic" responsibility not "to mind one's own business" but to question all matters pertaining to the public good is seen to be vital in restoring the individual in its role as a "citizen" and in countering the "dehumanising" influences of the spirit of corporatism. Ultimately the balancing of human qualities results in a better equilibrium between knowledge and action.

While there is more detail to be added to this picture Saul's cultural critique recalls major aspects of the thought of Plato and Socrates. Saul explicitly invokes the Socratic spirit with its uncompromising commitment to critical questioning as a device to contain the increasing domination of life and thought by ideology. For Saul the Socratic method of the Apology, where Socrates insists that it was impossible for him to cease to investigate proclaimed understanding, is essentially critical. It can restore a sense of individual freedom and resulting democratisation against the ideology of corporatism. However, it is here that some worthwhile questions in regard to Saul's approach in general need to be posed. For Saul Socratism seems to have a political, world-changing function. It establishes the individual's autonomy in the face of a dominance by structures and ideologies of managerialism and corporatism. Although this seems indeed initially correct, we should perhaps consider the topics of Socratic inquiries in consonance with his method. We would then observe that Socrates (as Plato describes him) displays little interest to apply his skills and method in the areas of political planning or social problem solving. His investigation concerns "abstract matters" of little concrete political relevance. Even the Republic (qualified by Saul as Platonic ideology) is strictly speaking not a concrete political work. It is a utopian reflection on an ideal state as it will never exist. Socrates is no political activist of any kind. He examines thought, however, not to achieve practical political or social outcomes but to alter the relationship between thinking and doing for the individual partners of his discourses- not primarily for society as a whole. His condemnation and death is in fact a proof of the fact that Socrates' approach did little to inspire a greater social or political justice or increase attitudes of "practical humanism" in his own society.

Socrates appears to be removed from any culture- critical debate focussing rather on the human individual and his ability to engage with abstract thought in the realm of truth. He has no public agenda he wishes to achieve, no public improvements he wishes to make and no public recipes to prescribe. He is an investigator, a "gadfly". Socrates' has the ability to move people through dialogue into a different relationship to themselves and the world - he does not move the world into a different relationship with people.

This brings us to a second, closely related issue. How is the newly found equilibrium to be promoted or asserted? There seems the suggestion that the "practical humanism" proposed by Saul must result in political actions of some kind to realise the insight won through a critique of current ideology. It appears, however, that criticising the realities of coporatism requires certain decisions and convictions which themselves may inevitably turn out to be ideological. And indeed, Saul seems fully convinced and certain that the world is just the way he describes it. And furthermore, he seems on occasion at least to imply that the forces of corporatism are somehow "pressed" upon

contemporary people assigning them the role of victims. For Socrates such wisdom and understanding about the world, such opinions about appearances would themselves be worthy of questioning. Is the world as corporatised as Saul alleges it to be? Is corporatism as fundamental as Saul believes? Are the aspects of Saul's description perhaps an expression of a more fundamental ontological phenomenon? Is it in fact perhaps the case that any political action or change must accept- or to some degree even promote elements of corporatism?

Firstly, it is quite possible that corporatism is only the expression of a much more fundamental, blindly objectifying interpretation of being. In this case one would need to reflect on this issue as eg. Heidegger has done. Secondly and Saul's description of reality granted, there could indeed be ontological reasons preventing fundamental changes to the current reality. These can be summarised by the statement that all political action is ultimately pragmatic. It presupposes that there is agreement in advance on the nature of matters, on the way they are to be approached, debated and determined. Pragmatism or the submission to the thing as a thing is thus ever present where things must, should or could change. Since action deals with the pragma our attitudes underpinning actions are interested in the sense that they are already interested in matters as public matters.

For Saul the issue seems one of combating "self-interest". However, if he is right to say that alternatives to the attitudes of corporatism such as substantial thought and attention to the public good require a disinterested attitude, abandoning "self-interest" does not already result in adopting disinterest. Disinterest can not just be an attention to a higher entity, eg. considering the society rather than the individual or the company interest. Disinterest needs to be an attention of an entirely different kind. Otherwise Saul's view could find itself surprisingly aligned with some of the most striking corporatism with the only distinction that interest for the public good might represent a different level in the constellation of interests. So, it will not do to merely expand the context of the interested attention to include perhaps the society as a whole. It seems necessary to regard the "public good" as an abstract idea of absolute truth. Saul seems to imply this himself when he refers us to some of the critics of corporatism such as the deconstructionist view. This view in fact reinforces "the corporatist point of view that we all exist as functions within our corporations" when it abandons its search for knowledge and truth in its attempts to demonstrate that all language is tied to interest.

However, the difficulty with an absolutist conception is that it will give birth to ideology where knowledge of this public good is proclaimed. The difficulty seems to be that political thinking supporting action relies on some kind of proclaimed understanding and affirmation about the public good, ie. it appears to be inevitably ideological.

It appears then that a disinterested stance needs to be private, contemplative and a-political. It would leave the political realm behind because the public good appears to be no obtainable political aim but an abstract notion of reflection requiring constant contemplative attention and clarification. One consequence of this conclusion is that our actions remain to a certain extent mysterious to us. Only from the point of view of a detached reflection can consciousness perhaps emancipate itself from the unconscious determinations of human action. Consequently, one question looms large over Saul's book: What kind of freedom is he ultimately implying? Is it the political kind achieved through a process of democratisation of individuals that are currently

the victims of corporatism? Or is it a contemplative freedom achieved, however, not through a manipulation but more likely through a dissociation from the world. As we have seen the much cited Socratic conviction to "let no day pass without discussing goodness" may well refer to "the good" itself and not to good things, deeds or actions. To follow a Socratic alternative to the alleged corporate reality would require us not just to be critical. We would need to question our personal condition and reflect on the good itself as Socrates states in the Apology:

"For I tried to persuade each of you to care for himself and his own perfection in goodness and wisdom rather than for any of his belongings, and for the state itself rather than for its interests, and to follow the same method in his care for other things." (Apology, 36c)

It would be unlikely that our incentive for such questioning would be practical. We would be unlikely activists of social or cultural change, as this would suppose an understanding how matters are. It would rather be "at the God's behest" that we investigate the world, however, not from the point of a critique and argumentative challenge but from a reflective stance (a Gelassenheit) which attempts first and foremost to understand.

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