

Collini, Stefan. *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Apparently, England doesn't have any intellectuals—at least according to the two cultural accounts that Stefan Collini surveys (and questions) in *Absent Minds*. First, he explores the narrative of *absence*, which, from one angle, *applauds* the fact that the English, thanks to their good sense and practicality, do not reward those who “merely think.” A variant on this thesis *laments* the fact that the English, thanks to their stubborn empiricism, do not value and therefore do not produce “true” intellectuals. Second, Collini discusses a narrative of *decline*: whereas once England made space for intellectuals, now it does not.

These accounts are important signposts towards understanding English national identity, but Collini finds them wanting in historical reality. He points out, for instance, that such events as Harold Laski's trial in 1946, the BBC's *Third Programme*, and Edward Said's public lectures in 1997 demonstrate that England not only has intellectuals but also pays attention to them. The rise of celebrity culture and the new power of the media cannot contravene this. In the 1920s and 30s, he writes, although new technology expanded the visibility of celebrities,

it did not follow that these developments, and the reshaping of the forms of celebrity that went with them, simply resulted in the

withdrawal of intellectuals from some previously unified public sphere. New forms...also represented opportunities to reach new publics, and the mechanisms of celebrity could partly work *for* intellectuals as well as against them. (481)

The same is true today.

Ultimately, Collini is less concerned with whether the English are, in fact, anti-intellectual than he is with the sway that the narratives of absence and decline have held over English self-identity. Indeed, what is the value of narratives that seem to be so dislocated from reality? Collini considers them part of the polemic of power. At different times, intellectuals could gain credibility by positioning themselves as anti-intellectual or, conversely, as intellectual outsiders. For instance, George Orwell, a proper English intellectual if there ever was one, railed against “the pansy poets” (358), calling Auden “a sort of gutless Kipling” (357); placed quotation marks around “intellectual”; and, in short, “position[ed] him[self] outside the group to which, by the very fact of his writing, he so clearly belonged” (355). Examples of the other sort include “well-heeled, well-reviewed novelist Virginia Woolf aspiring to found a ‘Society of Outsiders’” and the “Cambridge don and influential critic F. R. Leavis describing himself as an ‘outlaw’” (414).

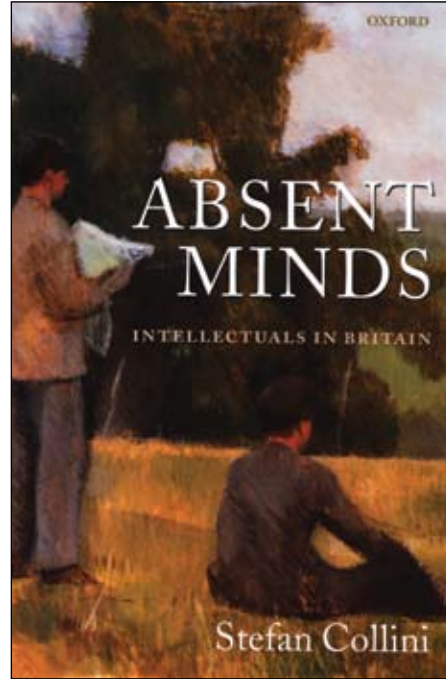
Collini concludes, “as a self-ascribed status, outsiderdom is an empowering identity, an attempt to use the available media to address...the publics without” (414).

He argues that there is “no denying the satisfying thrill, the subtly self-flattering frisson of excitement, involved in thinking of oneself as an ‘outsider’” (413). Here we are close to Mark Lilla’s book *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics*, published in 2003, which explores the curious twentieth-century tale of some of the brightest minds embracing some of the worst tyrannies in human history.

In contrast to Lilla, Collini does not traffic in the psychology of his intellectuals. Indeed, one of the most appealing aspects of this book is its lack of either partisan snobbery or voyeuristic vignettes; one thinks, in contrast, of Paul Johnson’s *Intellectuals*, which possesses both. Not that Collini’s prose isn’t wickedly funny; I laughed out loud when, for instance, Collini described Colin Wilson as “one of British culture’s greatest mistakes” (415) and referred to the “almost vengeful immediacy” of sociologist Peter Nettl’s broadcasts (184).

On the face of it, then, the book is about English identity and English intellectuals. However, in his archeology of English cultural sensibility, Collini makes some general points that are suggestive and possibly prescriptive in other contexts.

First, how does he understand “intellectuals”? Collini’s understanding of an “intellectual” is not someone who merely fulfills a sociological role (someone who generates and disseminates ideas) or a political one (someone who storms the barricades in the name of universals). Rather, Collini considers an intellectual to be someone who combines a high level of intellectual or cultural accomplishment with an ability to address non-specialist



audiences in areas of common concern. An intellectual is, by definition, “public.” Both the specialization and the publicity stand in *necessary tension*: become too specialized, and you lose your audience; become too public, and you lose the special knowledge that brought cultural authority in the first place.

For Collini, then, it is the form, not the content, that makes an intellectual. An intellectual may be conservative (T. S. Eliot) or radical (Colin Wilson) vis-à-vis his society; he *need* not be either to qualify. Collini rejects, in particular, the recent tendency to call one’s work “oppositional,” a posture he considers irresponsible as well as unrealistic (469).

Second, does Collini’s work offer some implicit advice to Western intellectuals? I believe it does. If being an intellectual demands that one balance specialist

achievement and public voice, then one must work to nurture both sides of the see-saw. For an example of a specialist-cum-publicity-hound, he cites historian A. J. P. Taylor, who “remained so consistently in the public eye that he lost his cultural authority” (388–9).

Further, Collini seems to suggest that we accept intellectuals as a permanent part of Western societies, rather than see them as a near-extinct species, and we should regard them as normal human beings rather than creatures possessed of a special dispensation. Intellectuals will always be a part of Western culture, ever adapting, sometimes making mistakes, often doing good, plodding on like everybody else. In fact, the very *ordinariness* of Collini’s intellectuals may prove offensive.¹

Lastly, Collini indicates that intellectuals might do well to understand and harness the power of modern media. No one would doubt that this power at times defies reason, goodness, and good taste. At the same time, it generates new opportunities:

we should acknowledge that a journal as intellectually and politically serious as the *London Review of Books*, whose pages regularly carry long analytical articles by leading writers and scholars, now claims a circulation almost twice as great as the combined *total* of the circulations of the three periodicals in which most of Orwell’s

famous essays appeared: *Horizon*, *Tribune*, and *Polemic*. (489)

Absent Minds is an excellent book. Collini sets out to illuminate specific, potent national accounts and to suggest broader applications, and he accomplishes these aims successfully and in worrying detail. My only complaint about the book is that the details at times obscure the fascinating story that Collini is telling us. The trail is a little too easy to lose. Nevertheless, the book places in relief not only English questions but international ones, and in a fashion that convinces and delights.

Ashley Rogers Berner is completing her doctorate in Modern History at Oxford University. She is a research fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture.

Gattone, Charles F. *The Social Scientist as Public Intellectual: Critical Reflections in a Changing World.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006.

Should social scientists, in the interest of balanced scholarship, stay away from a direct involvement in public life, or are they, due to the nature of their work and vocation, intrinsically unable to do so? According to Charles F. Gattone’s *The Social Scientist as Public Intellectual*, these two questions have been at the heart of

¹ For one instance of offense taken, see Kenan Malik’s review in *The Sunday Telegraph* (14 May 2006) or at <http://www.kenanmalik.com/reviews/collini_absent.html>.