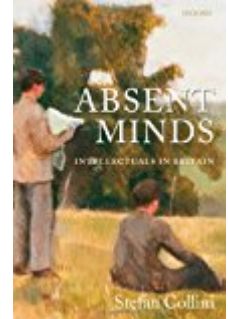


Stefan Collini. *Absent Minds*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 536 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-929105-2.



Reviewed by Rohan McWilliam

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Commissioned by Mark Hampton (Lingnan University)

After winning his seat at Bristol in a by-election in 1950, Tony Benn announced that he needed to lose the stigma of being an intellectual. Tony Crosland, his fellow Labour member of Parliament (MP), responded: “You’d better acquire the stigma before worrying about losing it.”[1] It is an exchange that says something about both men: Benn, the earnest and preening new MP conscious of his middle-class distance from his party’s normal supporters, and Crosland, the foremost Labour thinker of his generation. The exchange takes on new meaning in light of Stefan Collini’s *Absent Minds*, which documents the troubled and complex relationship that twentieth-century Britain has had with the word “intellectual” and with the intelligentsia in general. Collini notes how the British usually cannot employ the word “intellectual” without preceding it with the words “so-called” (p. 2). Intellectuals are one group who can be safely disdained, not least by people who are intellectuals themselves.

Collini’s is a major work that profoundly alters the scholarly landscape in ways that are com-

plex and need to be teased out. It says something about its importance that this book has already generated a number of symposia in print.[2] It is easier to describe what it is not than what it is. It is not a sequel to Collini’s earlier *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850-1930* (1991), although it grows out of it. It is thus not a history of British intellectual life in the twentieth century nor is it a sociological study of intellectuals (although, despite disclaimers at the start, it has elements of that). It is not a book about academics (a category that gets little discussion although a fair number of academics feature in it). It is also a book about modern British intellectuals with remarkably few references to Bloomsbury and (no mean feat) nothing on Hampstead. Instead, the book is devoted to a precise argument that is explored with immense insight and panache as well as a determination not to take any hostages.

Collini’s target is the common view that one of the characteristics of British life is that it has proved inhospitable to intellectuals and indeed

(in the most unreflective version) that Britain does not have any intellectuals. A moment's reflection on the land of Arnold Toynbee, Philip Toynbee, and Polly Toynbee should make us think again. But the point about anti-intellectualism remains. One surprise of Collini's book is that "Pseud's Corner" in the magazine *Private Eye* only makes an appearance ten pages before the end, but, along the way, we hear a lot about such constructions as the "chattering classes," and, of course, George Orwell's complaint that socialism seemed to attract "every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, "Nature Cure" quack, pacifist and feminist in England" (pp. 372, 354).

The contrast is with the Continent (and, more especially, France) where intellectual life has apparently flourished and intellectuals have been respected. Collini adopts a comparative approach to demonstrate that the claims about the besieged status of intellectuals can be found in many other countries, including France, which has its own culture of pronounced anti-intellectualism. Britain's attitude to intellectuals is actually pretty run of the mill when compared with other countries in Europe and with the United States. Moreover, its approach to intellectuals is far more complex than a glance at "Pseud's Corner" would suggest.

Collini devotes the first part of the book to exploring the history of the word "intellectual." The term is very difficult. Who or what is an "intellectual"? He considers a number of political and sociological definitions before opting for a cultural definition, viewing intellectuals as "possessing some kind of 'cultural authority'"; those "who deploy an acknowledged intellectual position or achievement in addressing a broader, non-specialist public" (p. 47). The discussion of the intellectual in everyday life (what Collini calls a "subjective definition" [pp. 46-47]) is clearly for another day, so is any consideration of how science fits into views of the intellectual life.

Collini tracks British attitudes to intellectuals to demolish the "absence thesis" as he calls it (Britain's lack of a cadre of intellectuals and a general preference for empiricism and practical solutions over idealist or abstract thought). In a painstaking treatment, he powerfully argues that the heyday of the absence thesis was in the 1950s, although it has been a consistent theme throughout the twentieth century and at all times was at odds with the reality. The strategies of denial he uncovers, therefore, make an important contribution to thinking about British mentalities in the twentieth century. This is where, I believe, the book will have most impact and provide a foundation for further work.

Placing British intellectuals in a larger international perspective, he examines the American and French cases where there is a major reading of Raymond Benda's much misunderstood *La Trahison des clercs* (1927), a work whose title is often quoted without any understanding of its contents. In a section titled "Some Version of Denial," he moves on to a series of case studies in which he analyzes five intellectuals and their attitudes to the figure of the intellectual. The most important of these, given the overall argument, is devoted to Orwell, whose attack on intellectuals (quoted above) fits into a particular kind of English persona, which grates on Collini. Orwell "was surely guilty of that most unlovely and least defensible of inner contradictions, the anti-intellectualism of the intellectual" (p. 372). It is central to Collini's purpose that Orwell's views of the intellectual should receive a debunking. Collini notes how Orwell came close to "endorsing that cliché of Blimpish culture: character is more important than intellect" (p. 371). The book ends with a series of arguments about the outsider status that intellectuals have often sought as well as (in contrast) the status of the celebrity (for example, the telly don). Collini also critiques the argument that intellectual life is suffering from an excess of spe-

cialization, demonstrating that this familiar argument is not new but in fact very old.

How can we think with this book? The arguments about the forms of performance and denial involved in claiming that Britain is the land of anti-intellectualism are well put. *Absent Minds* makes sense of some aspects of national identity. It can thus profitably be read alongside such works as Peter Mandler's recent book, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (2007). Collini's location as an intellectual historian in an English department (he claims that his approach here owes a great deal to literary studies) also places it as a work that is interdisciplinary and has a lot to offer scholars in a wide variety of fields.

Collini's discovery that the heyday of the absence thesis was in the 1950s is significant. He allows us to understand why the complex constructions of the intellectual in these years were shaped as they were. What I would seek to argue in response to Collini is that much of the pathology he identifies in the 1950s and after is really a fear of ideology than of ideas as such. It seems to me that this is what actually drove the political conversation.

Collini even notes that the 1950s saw much discussion of the "end of ideology" (p. 149). One characteristic of that generation (say, Karl Popper or some of the figures who ended up writing for *Encounter*) was the strong sense that ideologies were dangerous because they ended up with people in concentration camps. One sees this in the generation of intellectuals also later challenged and changed by the writings of Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn and other Soviet dissidents. Given for what ideologies were responsible, it is not surprising that there was so much ambivalence around the role of the intellectual. Intellectuals were represented as figures who wanted to try to shape society around a single idea. This was the key right-wing charge against intellectuals, that they were potentially enemies

of pluralism. It explains why some of the venom has gone out of these arguments since 1989.

One of the reasons why *Absent Minds* may be unpalatable to some readers (and it has a rough ride from a few critics) is that Collini's final conclusion on intellectual life is that we should start thinking about intellectuals as ordinary. According to Collini, it may be that intellectuals are not exceptionally important. Let us hear what he says: "important, yes, but not exceptionally important. Perhaps it's time to stop thinking of intellectuals as Other People, and to try not to fall so easily into the related tabloid habits of demonizing and pedestalling" (p. 505). This logically follows from a book that has punctured the inflated claims of a large number of intellectuals, including (to his credit) people who, one suspects, that Collini would otherwise find sympathetic. But one wonders. The history of intellectuals will always be written by intellectuals. They have a vested interest in maintaining the mystique of the intellectual life. If Collini says they are not exceptionally important, one has to ask "important for what?" I welcome an assault on the preciousness of intellectuals, especially when it comes from a source that is the opposite of philistine or right wing and that so clearly respects the life of the mind. I relish the robust humanity that one discovers in these pages. The book can even be regarded as countercultural. But I fail to see how we would be better off with Collini's recommendation. Sure, it provides a way out of the absence thesis but, given that (as Collini demonstrates so effectively) British intellectual life has managed to get along pretty well alongside anti-intellectual populism, is there a problem here?

This also takes us to a possible argument against Collini. In a curious way, the book instantiated in my mind the very thing it seeks to demolish. I finished it reflecting on the way in which intellectuals are dangerous people--dangerous because they are liable to think in an original way or to come up with something that may rock the

boat. This is why there is a fear of intellectual life—not least in academia where intellectual production is increasingly disciplined and structured. However, perhaps anti-intellectualism is merely an attempt to contain the self-importance to which intellectuals are prone. In other words, it serves to achieve the outcome that Collini himself advises.

Collini's originality comes from identifying the complex self-definitions of the modern intellectuals and the ways they have negotiated with forms of anti-intellectualism that we find are in no way peculiar to Britain. At the end, Collini suggests that someone should write an article titled "Intellectuals Are Ordinary." Perhaps this is a good idea. Collini, in any event, has not written an ordinary book.

Notes

[1]. Susan Crosland, *Tony Crosland* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), 52.

[2]. *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68 (2007): 363-405; and *Political Studies Review* 6 (2008): 1-41.

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