



4-1-1960

## *The House of Intellect* Jacques Barzun

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### Recommended Citation

Fielding, R. Kent (1960) "*The House of Intellect* Jacques Barzun," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol2/iss2/14>

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## Book Reviews

Jacques Barzun, *The House of Intellect* (Harper and Brothers, New York, New York, 1959).

In this latest effort to include thinking America in his class room, Dr. Barzun constructs for us the metaphor of a house where intelligence reigns, surrounded by its offspring, the alphabet, linguistics, systems of education, communications, chains of reasoning and habits of discipline, to name only a few. One quickly notes that the intellectual "house that Jacques builds" sees the democratic world through a patrician window from a vantage similar to that of De Tocqueville, who is quoted therein with approval. His architecture is classical, not utilitarian; his materials are granite and marble, not red brick republican. One cannot be sure whether he is Sir Christopher Wren or Pierre C. L'Enfant, but he is not Frank Lloyd Wright.

His intent is to "plumb the ignorance of the educated and the anti-intellectualism of the intellectual." His criticisms are useful and, for the most part, well deserved. They solidly meet many problems faced by a democratic culture seeking to lift itself by its own bootstraps, vague as to which way is up and without effective systems for accomplishing what it does conceive to be good. Equalitarianism dilutes standards of instruction. Art is vague and full of mystic yearning. Men of the mass media obviously pander to prejudice and should know better because they have been exposed to learning. Page by page we agree. Certainly no travesty more inane was ever imposed upon intellect than what it is compelled to endure in "Big Town" or "Gopher Prairie" in the name of conviviality or even common sense; and every college professor will acknowledge as authentic, descriptions of scenes daily rehearsed in his own class room.

Despite similar indictments from other pens in recent years, Dr. Barzun's sketches escape the commonplace, for they are rich with historical and literary allusions drawn from a wide acquaintance with Western culture. They are done with such finesse that they prevent us from dismissing the book as an

accumulation of the author's personal frustrations and special viewpoints perhaps more suitable as single installments from the editor's chair, unconfined by a common cover.

And they are attractive in another way as well, for Dr. Barzun is not simply an ordinary thinker, lucid and profound; he is adroit and elusive, subtly doubling back upon himself with qualifications that undermine argument and with changing definitions that shift the ground of debate. One regrets that the margins of the book are too narrow for proper rebuttal, for need is frequently felt; but as one makes wind for rejoinder, he tacks and makes sail on your breeze. Perhaps the resultant delightful confusion is a deliberate reflection on the world, but one is disconcerted to find, for instance, that intellect is different things throughout the book. Now intellect must be followed, it is quick and perceptive, driving straight to the heart of the matter, yet beware, for we discover that it cannot formulate compromise and thus disaster lies in its rapid wake. Intellect is stiff and angular, not fit to guide life, which pulses and throbs; it should be excluded from politics; it was responsible for the Civil War; its possessors in America of the 1930's naively followed after the delusive phantoms of Communistic idealism. Similarly, art, being vague, is now an enemy of intellect, who is precise, but later "true art" is a complement. Here science divides the house into narrowly specialized apartments and its esoteric jargon makes the building a modern Babel, but elsewhere, the inductive and pragmatic approach to truth—another name for science—has created communications, educational systems, and patterns of government.

All of this is delightful stuff for jousting, but it does not add up even to a quest, much less to a blueprint for a brave new structure. Perhaps, as he suggests, things *were* better for intellect in the good old days of general illiteracy, or in nineteenth century England when the classics were studied and "clerisy" governed the land. But how does one go forward? Can a nation which has followed the slogan "the business of this country is business" readily orient itself to the affirmation that "what is good for intellect is good for the country?" Dr. Barzun thinks so, but beyond suggesting the exercise of our flaccid intellectual muscle, he does not show the way.

At the risk of appearing complaisant, may it not be asserted that intellect has never "had it so good" (bad as it is) as in America in mid-twentieth century? The evident confusion is of our own making and choosing. It is our accepted premise that anarchy (which is to say, maximized individualism) gradually collected into political, economic, religious, or intellectual consensus by democratic processes, is to be preferred to the frequently mis-directed strength of the strong.

We concur with the "fathers" of our political faith that neither monarchy nor aristocracy, during a Graeco-Christian millenium demonstrated a better way. Modern totalitarianism, which furnishes a chateau for its kept intellect and a grave for dissenters who will not be intimidated (our sympathies to Mr. Pasternak), hardly offers an acceptable alternative.

Democratic standards of value frequently need to be reset. It is a proper calling for a patrician, and Dr. Barzun does his bit for our present need. We shall help to restore the House of Intellect and urge the fidelity of its praetorian guard in the hope that it may become a showplace and a tradition, though not a dynasty. Meantime, we will not vacate our tower or expect even intellectual miracles to transform the wilderness into a promised land.

R. Kent Fielding