

## The House of Intellect

Jacques Barzun (1907-2012), a noted American educator, used “the house of intellect” as the title of an influential book, first published in 1959. The house of intellect encompassed “the persons who consciously and methodically employ the mind; the forms and habits governing the activities in which the mind is so employed; and the conditions under which these people and activities exist.” Many writers have since come to use the phrase as a loose synonym for the institutions of higher education. Barzun actually wrote about it with a more complicated, distinctive meaning.

Barzun’s *House of Intellect* exemplified his gift for engaging, lucid prose, his concern for the condition of education at all levels, and his questioning convention and fashion, all to strengthen important forms of thought and action. Barzun wrote about a collective capacity, intellect, which he thought was important yet poorly maintained. At the time, Barzun was provost of Columbia University, a cultural historian of great stature who could address a wide range of topics—from baseball and crime stories to Berlioz and all aspects of Western culture—to an extensive, non-specialized audience. The phrase—the house of intellect—stuck, perhaps better than his diagnosis of its plight.

Barzun distinguished *intellect* from intelligence—intelligence was a universal trait of persons, but specific persons constructed *intellect*, a social force supported by special forms and institutions. Intellect was “intelligence stored up and made into habits of discipline, signs and symbols of meaning, chains of reasoning and spurs to emotion—a shorthand and a wireless by which the mind can skip connectives, recognize ability, and communicate truth.” (p. 5) The alphabet and its many uses typified the achievement and resources of intellect. The *house* of intellect had structure and furnishings, as well as component parts and routines, all of which needed care and maintenance.

Intellect had problems of its own making: its abdication of its virtues and capacities. Intellect was losing three strengths—its status as a distinct group apart from others; its abiding effort within to keep its working tools, particularly skills of literacy, in good order; and its confidence that “with a cautious confidence and sufficient intellectual training, it is possible to master the literature of a subject and gain a proper understanding of it: specifically, an understanding of the accepted truths, the disputed problems, the rival schools, and the methods now in favor.” (p. 12)

Readers often interpret Barzun as a conservative elitist, but doing so blurs what is unique in his thought. He generally spoke for matters like intellect, which had direct and indirect value to all, and he criticized popular and elite developments that diminished them. With intellect, Barzun warned that art, science, and philanthropy were powerful forces abetting the internal weakening of intellect. Art liberated the spirit by celebrating ambiguities but harmed intellect, which could not maintain its standards of precision as devotion to art became too single-minded. Science shared with intellect a commitment to precision, but created difficulties because its jargons and narrow foci made the commitment to common knowledge more difficult. Finally, philanthropy, a pursuit of “free and equal opportunity as applied to things of the mind,” weakened intellect’s drive to precise discrimination and judgment.

Barzun’s book addressed “the state of the language, the system of schooling, the means and objects of communication, the supplies of money for thought and learning, and the code of feeling and conduct that goes with them.” These topics summarize well the concerns animating all of Barzun’s writing over his long and productive career. For instance, through cultural history, his main professional calling, Barzun was exploring in one way or another “the code of feeling and conduct that goes with” thought and

learning:

- Superstition — *Race: a Study in Modern Superstition* (1937) and *Darwin, Marx, Wagner: Critique of a Heritage* (1941);
- Romanticism — *Romanticism and the Modern Ego* (1943 expanded in 1961 into *Classic, Romantic, and Modern*) and *Berlioz and the Romantic Century* (2 volumes, 1950 and subsequent editions);
- Music — *Berlioz*, an anthology on the *Pleasures of Music* (1951), and *Music in American Life* (1956);
- Art and literature — *The Energies of Art: Studies of Authors, Classic and Modern* (1956), *The Use and Abuse of Art* (1974), and *The Culture We Deserve: A Critique of Disenlightenment* (1989);
- Aspects of popular culture, sympathetically appreciated, — *God's Country and Mine: A Declaration of Love, Spiced with a Few Harsh Words* (1954), *The Delights of Detection* (1961), and *A Catalogue of Crime* (1971); and
- Biography — *Berlioz* and *A Stroll with William James* (1983)>

These works led to his magnum opus, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life, 1500 to the Present* (2000), published at 93. It is an innovative, comprehensive work on the codes of feeling and conduct in the thought and learning of the modern West.

Many of Barzun's other publications concerned "the state of the language" and "the means and objects of communication." These cultivated the value of literacy for the work of intellect.

- *The Modern Researcher* (1957 and later editions);
- *Follett's Modern American Usage* (1966);
- *On Writing, Editing, and Publishing* (1971);
- *A Word or Two Before You Go: Brief Essays on Language* (1986); and
- *Simple and Direct: A Rhetoric for Writers* (1975).

Other books dealt with "the supplies of money for thought and learning," not simply their scale and source, but how the supplies could best serve intellect:

- *Science: The Glorious Entertainment* (1964);
- *The American University: How It Runs, Where It Is Going* (1968); and
- *Clio and the Doctors* (1974).

Lastly, Barzun consistently expressed his commitment to clear and disciplined instruction, to effective, unencumbered teaching, and to curriculum that imparts the skills of intellect to all children.

- *Teacher in America* (1945);
- *Begin Here: The Forgotten Conditions of Teaching and Learning* (1991);
- *What is a School? and Trim the College!* (2002)

Among Barzun's many awards, in 2007, his hundredth birthday, he received the 59<sup>th</sup> Great Teacher Award from the Society of Columbia Graduates, a fitting recognition of his service in the house of intellect.