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On Being Poisonous: A reply to Robert Fisk

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The 'Communicating War' conference at the University of Surrey gave some inkling of the very positive dialogues that are already part of the War and Media Network. As an academic I found it very rewarding to listen to the experience of journalists, especially with regard to the institutional problems they encounter when seeking to report the reality of war, or the discursive difficulties they face in trying to challenge existing frameworks of knowledge that determine in advance what they can or can't say about a given situation. The network offers the kind of forum that is essential if both journalists and academics are to resist the militarist logic that seems to be increasingly embedding itself within the media, a phenomenon that has taken root especially in the US with the ascendancy of Fox News and the coupling of the military and the entertainment industries under the banner of the Institute for Creative Technologies at the University of Southern California, where computer games manufacturers, Hollywood imagineers and military and defence staff share research into new technology that is mutually beneficial. In the light of these new synergies the role of a critical forum such as the War and Media Network becomes increasingly important as a space in which the dominant and official language of war is at least challenged if not interrupted.

I was thus saddened to find my optimism rather short lived. In fact by Saturday lunchtime on the day after the conference it seemed that my hope for a constructive conversation between the worlds of journalism and academia was hopelessly naïve, for I found out that as far as the plain speaking world of journalism was concerned my work was 'poisonous'. In *The Independent* on Saturday 14 May 2005 Robert Fisk wrote an article entitled: 'Let us rebel against poisonous academics and their preposterous clap-trap of exclusion'. The argument presented was one that has been presented many times before and will no doubt continue to resurface as numerous people claiming to have a monopoly on reason, right thinking, plain speaking, and pragmatism attack academics for being irrational, perverse, obtuse and irrelevant. Despite the familiarity of Fisk's diatribe I found it deeply saddening. It was as if a long-time friend had turned on me claiming that whatever I had thought up to that point he had always despised me. This strange claim to friendship with

someone I have never met let alone spoken to developed because whenever I read Fisk's articles I felt that we shared a similar political outlook, a similar ethical commitment and a similar view of the world. There is a curious virtual fraternity that takes place when reading the words of someone who articulates shared concerns, a moment of identity that seems natural and very real. It is thus something of a surprise to find the assumed friendship erased and a stark enmity put in its place.

The problem for Fisk stems from a lecture given by Michael Gilson at the American University of Beirut at which the word 'matrilineal' was used in a question to the professor. "Matrilineal" does not exist in my dictionary', Fisk declares. It is part of a 'secret language' of academia, he continues, the message of which is that '[w]e poor dunces should keep our noses out'. This argument is then supported by a comment from an academic who told Fisk that the "silly language" was used so that academics can differentiate themselves from, and not be compared to journalists. It is, then, this desire that an academic's work should not to be compared to 'dirty journalism' that determines the nature of academic language, not the complexity of the world, not the need to challenge common sense conceptions, not the need to be inventive, not the nature of language itself, not the historical density of disciplines that have set down layer upon layer of different idioms, not the intermingling of different cultures that has made academic language, especially in the Humanities, so rich and multifaceted. No, it is none of these it is simply that academics are 'snobbish'. But this judgement has little to do with academic language and everything to do with placing journalists at the centre of the intellectual universe. In this scenario academic language is propelled simply by its desire not to be journalism.

According to Fisk, however, the problem with academic language is only a recent thing, developing 'over the past 20 years'. Before that 'any non-university educated man or woman' could read PhDs on Hegel. This in itself is an interesting thesis given that I have always found Hegel and Hegelian scholarship difficult, irrespective of whether I was reading something contemporary to Hegel or a more recent commentary. In fact Hegel's language is infamous within some academic circles for being quite impenetrable and it is baffling why something that was difficult in the early 1800s might be readable in the 1920s, only becoming 'a language of exclusion' circa 1985. Fisk's example of the scholarship he regards as poisonous, however, is not taken from this new exclusionary turn in Hegel scholarship, but a piece of research in international diplomacy: Marc Gopin's book *Holy War, Holy Peace*. This is an especially good example of bad academic language because it use words like "constructs", "othering" and "interplay", as well as phrases like "meaning system" and "hermeneutic possibility". Fisk notes that Gopin can indeed write plain English because there is evidence of it in a letter to Bill Clinton published in the book, but more importantly this capacity for plain English dictates that he should use this register all the time. However, I fail to see why Fisk believes he has the authority or the right to dictate how academics speak. When I write a lecture, prepare a seminar, write an article, or compose a letter to my MP, I

use a different register, one that I feel is appropriate to those I address. Fisk, of course, is absolutely correct when he complains that academics 'are great at networking each other but are hopeless at communicating with most of the rest of the world', but this is not a problem caused by academic language *per se*. While the issue pertaining to the use of jargon is a debate that is very old within academia itself, as the charge of sophistry indicates, the problem also lies in the way in which public debates are framed such that academic discussion is excluded, or the form of news bulletins in which academics are given slots where their ideas and arguments are reduced to soundbytes. Academics do indeed need to find ways of disseminating their work and ideas more widely, but I cannot see how Fisk's portrayal will help facilitate that.

To return to his complaints regarding terminology he concludes his attack by proclaiming that should a lecturer use the phrase "hermeneutic possibility", the students should walk out of class. Aside from the irony that a journalist, especially a journalist whose expertise is a knowledge of the middle east, would have a problem with the word hermeneutic, this is a grossly irresponsible statement. We now work in an environment in which students are increasingly understood (and understand themselves) as customers demanding we give them only what they have come shopping for, namely the ingredients they need to write essays and pass their degree. Fortunately there remains a strong part of the student body still very much committed to learning and exploring new ideas, but with the encroachment of marketization into every aspect of social life, learning is becoming increasingly commodified and lecturers are under pressure not to challenge or question, but simply fit students into the social, political and economic system pronounced victorious at "the end of History". That Fisk should be telling students to walk out of classes because they are spoken to in a language they may not immediately recognise is unhelpful, to say the least. At one point Fisk flippantly remarks that one reason for the difficulty of academic language may be 'a protective shield' guarding against political interference. Perhaps in solidarity with academics who like him have tirelessly strived to resist the US version of Middle Eastern politics this might have been a good moment for him to mention Campus Watch, the new form of McCarthyism that has taken over universities in America. Numerous academics are finding themselves marginalized at work if not actively removed from their jobs having been blacklisted by conservative students that monitor their every poisonous, unpatriotic word. That Fisk, in this article, should choose to ignore these realities of contemporary university life is difficult to understand.

So, the man whose articles I give to students to read in class is now telling those students to get up and walk out when I use the word hermeneutic. Having just completed a book in which I use hermeneutics to question the rhetoric of the war against terror, the word hermeneutic will always find a place in the courses I run. Another word for hermeneutics is interpretation, and in his policing of language Fisk would no doubt demand that I use interpretation rather than hermeneutics, but hermeneutics is used because it represents a very specific interpretive task. The discipline of hermeneutics stems for the interpretation of

Scripture and is thus an interpretation of divine commands, commands that remain deeply embedded even in secular societies as guiding principles. To talk of the contemporary hermeneutic task in relation to the war against terror is to examine and interrogate the founding commands of a society that sees itself engaged in a clash of civilizations (a thesis presented by Samuel Huntington, which, incidentally, remains ludicrous despite the use of plain academic English). As Tariq Ali has noted, the war against terror is really a clash of fundamentalisms and hermeneutics can offer us a valuable insight into those fundamentals that divide the world on both sides into good and evil. Fisk's ban on the word, and consequently on the discipline of hermeneutics, is as disturbing as it is absurd. The logic here is to ban all words where a similar or approximate meaning can be gained from a plainer word, but such a belief runs counter to Fisk's own writings, and the writings of very many journalists who clearly understand the political and ethical importance of linguistic nuance.

Re-reading Fisk's article I cannot help but feel that this is not an argument regarding the nature of academic language at all, it is simply another expression of a deep rooted prejudice, an anti-intellectualism that is pervasive throughout British society. It is also evidence of the belief that a certain number of journalists believe themselves authorized to pass judgement upon everything. Indeed one of the problems with contemporary journalism, something that is more pervasive in broadcast than print media, is the propensity for celebrity journalists to be used to comment and report on anything that happens no longer needing the expert knowledge exemplified by Fisk and other specialist journalists. Increasingly it appears that in pursuit of viewing figures and newspaper sales recognizable journalists are being used more and more. This means that people like Fisk whose knowledge of the Middle East is unsurpassed are becoming the exception rather than the rule, and the level of reporting is suffering as a result.

One example that encapsulates both this disrespect for academic work and the propensity for journalists to be the arbiters of everything was the media's response to the death of Jacques Derrida. On this occasion *The Independent*, rather than asking two academics to present the case for and against this controversial philosopher, gave the job to Johann Hari. In his rather ill-informed assault on Derrida, who he called 'the mad axeman of Western philosophy' the prejudice towards academic work was revealed in a way that I believe is deeply problematic. In the newspaper article of Wednesday 13 October 2004 Hari's complaint against Derrida is that his deconstructive method undermines all progressive politics. While I don't agree with this interpretation, this claim cannot be said to be wrong and would receive a great deal of support within the academic world. However, Hari's limited knowledge of Derrida's work is made plain in the following summary: 'So the whole foundation our culture is built on - the absolutely fundamental assumptions we act on every day - are rotten. All we can hope for is to *establish* a "metaphysics of presence", where we try to clear the clutter of language from our minds and experience a few things directly and purely'. In response to the numerous e-mails I assume he received telling him that Derrida argues quite

the opposite the 'same' article was different when I looked at Hari's website the next day. It now read: 'So the whole foundation our culture is built on - the absolutely fundamental assumptions we act on every day - are rotten. All we can hope for is to *destroy* this "metaphysics of presence" - where we expect immediate access to meaning'. (The italics in both quotes are mine). I have yet to receive a reply from Hari explaining why the two versions of the same article make opposing claims for Derrida's work, but more importantly I was surprised to find that *The Independent* saw this as irrelevant. I had assumed that if a journalist contradicts himself, in the interests of truth some record should be made as to which of the two conflicting versions the journalist abides by and which version of the facts is to stand. If, for example, Hari had said of the Middle East peace process that Sharon wants to *establish* something in one version of an article and *destroy* it in another version I would assume the paper would wish to confirm the facts and print a correction if the version it had printed was erroneous. In this instance *The Independent* saw no reason to publish a correction even though the article they published factually misrepresented Derrida's work. I can only conclude that the work of an academic is not worthy of a published correction and that journalists are at liberty to say whatever they like. Again this is nothing if not ironic given that the main thrust of Hari's argument was a criticism of Derrida's supposed relativism.

This example is problematic, but I would not use it to condemn journalism as 'poisonous'. If academics are to communicate with a wider public it will be in part through alliances with journalists, which is the very important function of the War and Media Network. Generalized pronouncements condemning academics and academia, however, will do nothing for the dialogue that is urgently needed. As I said earlier, what is so strange in all of this is that enmity has suddenly sprung up where I imagined there was friendship, suspicion where there was trust, and disappointment where there was admiration and respect. In spite of this academics and journalists have a responsibility to work together and develop some sense of solidarity and collective agency if we are to resist the very real institutional changes that will in the end erode our autonomy and our capacity to challenge; and how we talk to each other is more important than how academics talk amongst themselves.