

Where are the Autodidacts?

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Abstract

In 1937 the poet John Betjeman (1906-1984) published a poem entitled Slough about the Berkshire town of the same name. In it he railed against the so-called march of progress and its impact on lives and the landscape. In the second stanza he writes of:

Tinned fruit, tinned meat, tinned milk, tinned beans, Tinned minds, tinned breath.

This clarion call against the dehumanisation of society raises some interesting questions about the purpose of our existence. As stakeholders in society we should all be prepared to reflect on the way in which we acquire knowledge, develop discernment and hone our thinking skills. For many the process of education, and indeed it has become a process that in some ways has echoes of the production line, has become totally utilitarian in nature. To some extent knowledge has been debased, and is now merely that which we need to know to pass exams or perform a required function or role. How dispiriting it must be to be asked the following question: Do I need to read this book? Surely there is a summary online?

*In view of the countless problems that currently beset the world we need individuals to challenge the established orthodoxy, whether this be in universities, in business or the body politic. If as the old adage goes, the toughest steel is forged in the hottest furnace, surely we need to ensure that the young are challenged and taught to think independently. Sadly, all the signs are that in many respects the current generation is being cossetted, spoon fed and presented with a royal road to learning; is it any wonder that they have been dubbed Generation Snowflake. In many respects wider society has become increasingly thin skinned and risk averse. Betjeman would no doubt deplore our hermetically sealed lives. To all intents and purposes we have become enslaved to a certain way of living and thinking that has reduced our capacity for independent thought. Some cynics and conspiracy theorists might claim that this is all part of a grand plan by the powers that be and the Illuminati to ensure that the general populous is docile and supine. We could easily debate at length what the modern equivalent of the bread and circuses of Ancient Rome are. Those of us who have read George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *1984* will appreciate the dangers of our complacency. Personally, I do not subscribe to the notion that certain forces are deliberately creating a dystopian world, but that should not stop us working to ensure that it does not take place either by accident or design. In this regard our ability to seek knowledge and to empower ourselves is of paramount importance.*

Whilst in some quarters there is a sense of resignation, inertia and even ennui, as sentient beings we each have the capacity to become an autodidact. For in the search we become more discriminating and better able to form our own opinions. Free thinking enables a person to develop a mind untrammelled by the conventional wisdom. That said, having an independent mind invariably comes at a cost, that being that there will be some who view one as suspect. Yet, rather than worrying about a diminution in our popularity ratings, we would be far better off asking: What price freedom? Autodidacticism is a means to grant ourselves a form of manumission.

A truly democratic society needs its citizens to be able to reason as well as possess foresight. The ability to ask questions is a key requirement, a point that can be illustrated by the five questions that the British Labour Party Politician Tony Benn (1925-2014) suggested should be asked of people in power:

1. *What Power Have You Got?*

2. *Where Did You Get It From?*
3. *In Whose Interests Do You Exercise It?*
4. *To Whom Are You Accountable?*
5. *How Can We Get Rid Of You?*

Self-empowerment whether through our reading matter, availing ourselves of the offerings of the likes of www.futurelearn.com or by making a conscious effort to be an autodidact enhances our well-being. Those activities and interactions that help make us more fulfilled will surely makes us more rounded and interesting human beings.
