



BRILL

---

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Intellectual Pursuits: Toward an Understanding of Culture* by Bernard Barber

Review by: Bruce C. Wearne

Source: *Philosophia Reformata*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (2002), pp. 194-196

Published by: Brill

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24710663>

Accessed: 26-05-2017 04:56 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



*Brill* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Philosophia Reformata*

BOOK REVIEWS

Bernard Barber, *Intellectual Pursuits: Toward an Understanding of Culture*. Lanham MD & Oxford, England 1998: Rowman and Littlefield. ISBN 0847688607.

This book provides a delightfully written overview of the cultural context of intellectual and academic life. The book's analysis is framed within a perspective developed by one of the English-speaking pioneers of the sub-discipline known as the sociology of science. It is a many-sided, albeit brief, exposition, and presents the author's multi-dimensional perspective of how the sociological vocation is nested within its own cultural situation.

The book was published in the author's 80th year, and carries the hallmarks of well-percolated reflection. It is enriched by the insights of social philosophy and sociological theory, a work by one who understands his (subordinate) role as a "public intellectual". The author gives himself room to expound upon complex ethical and policy questions, and provides a framework to analyse the various social forms of intellectual life coming to expression within our complex and highly differentiated culture. *Intellectual Pursuits* provides Barber's critical summary and extension of the theoretical tradition in which he locates his own work.

The book is a critical stimulus to the theoretical examination of culture, and in particular of the university's place within it. When read in terms of the theoretical "stream" with which Barber has been most closely associated (the so-called "structural-functionalist" school), *Intellectual Pursuits* is a critical update of Parsons and Platt *The American University* (Harvard University Press, 1973). But it is more than that. Barber had been introduced to sociology at Harvard in 1936. Parsons was the teacher who had the biggest impact upon him, and these were the years when Parsons' "general theory" was being developed as a critique of the extension of business culture over academic pursuits. In 1937 Parsons had critically discussed the views promoted by President Hutchins of the University of Chicago (see Parsons "Education and the Professions" *Ethics* 1937:47, 354-359). Barber was introduced to sociology on the ground floor, as it were, of that critical tradition. This should be kept in view when readers assess this work. This is also why *Intellectual Pursuits* can be read as Barber's summation of his academic contribution.

Barber's *Intellectual Pursuits* embodies a problematic that will be well-known to the readers of *Philosophia Reformata*. How is the student to set forth a distinctive contribution when s/he is working in a scientific speciality in terms of a general theoretical approach developed by a famous mentor? Many find their mentor's shadow to be a big burden to carry. Is it a choice between giving a traditionalistic and dogmatic recitation of the teacher's categories and developing a critical repudiation of the teacher's theory? Barber is clearly respectful of all of his prominent teachers — Parsons, Merton, Sorokin, Henderson — but he also writes as a scholar who knows he should be judged by his own disciplinary contribution and not judged merely by association. *Intellectual Pursuits* includes Barber's cogent critical summary of "social system theory" and it is of one piece with his view that the academy is a place where tolerance, criticism and scientific accountability must find expression.

*Intellectual Pursuits* is about culture, cultural studies, intellectual culture and the culture of the university. It is a book of sociological theory, an application and summary of the basic concepts and methods of analysis which Barber has refined in the sociology of science. In language that is crisp and clear, Barber applies "social system theory" to a range of academic, scholarly, scientific, practical and political problems and issues.

This book's value becomes clearer if we examine the basic premise of Barber's "social system theory". A system, says Barber, consists of an inter-dependent set of independent variables. This concept is basic to this stream of sociology and it is with this concept of theory that this multi-dimensional "general theory" has been applied to all social sciences. Such systematic theorising upon the entire fabric of human action, continues in universities around the world to this day.

It occurs to me that Barber's theory might give reformational philosophy a mirror to evaluate how its articulation and defence of "sphere sovereignty"/ social structural principles / free university can be read as a reformational variant on the structural-functional theme. It is, of course, firstly a source of useful cultural insight, but Barber's exposition may also help us better understand what is happening when reformational social philosophy is dismissed as "grand theory" or "system building". And we should not forget that Parsons acknowledged that his social system theory had inherited social insights which initially had come to expression in the culture of Calvinism.

When Barber became Parsons' student in the mid-1930s, Parsons' colleague, Carl J Friedrich, had also been publishing introductions to Johannes Althusius. Parsons saw the cultural roots of social system theory to have grown in the pre-secularised soil of Calvinistic free associations. This involved, as a *sine qua non*, the freedom to engage in the scientific search for truth wherever it might lead. In Parsons' view this approach prevailed against Lutheran nominalism which allowed for an ambiguous princely constraint to be placed upon empirical rigour when extra-scientific dogmas or metaphysical biases were felt to be under threat.

Barber's social system theory, and his formulations in this book, represent an important advance of the general theory first advanced by Parsons. His crisp, critical and suggestive summary of "action theory" stands, in this reviewer's opinion, as a most significant statement of the core concern of this "stream" of sociology, at least since Jeffrey C Alexander's formulations (*Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, 1982), and it is possibly the clearest statement of that theoretical vision. Barber, now 20 years past his retirement from Barnard College, New York, reminds us that some of the most cogent formulations arise when intellectual pursuits no longer have to compete with academic demands. This is another reason why we need a critical view of intellectual pursuits which respects and transcends its academic context.

Consider the way in which Barber applies the social system concept to his analysis of the role of the intellectual. The roles of scientist and scholar are found in the same cultural action system, he says, where "public intellectuals" and propagandists also function. In his view the role of any one of these types of intellectuals can not be established at the expense of some, or any, of the others. He does not mean, of course, that scientists have to accommodate with intellectuals who violate moral principles or in other ways threaten the fabric of civil society. Public law has its place, of course. But the point of Barber's analysis is to emphasise the importance of authentic scientific work for building an authentically intellectual culture which is then conducive to science and its further advancement.

The book is not long. It does not reach 150 pages. It explores current debate about the contributions of intellectuals, surveys the views of Andrew Ross, Michael Berube (on black intellectuals), Tony Judt (on French intellectuals), and Edward Said. The academic trend toward "cultural studies" is critically examined, as Barber outlines his own theoretical position. The critically important issue of ideology is examined, and there is a challenging chapter on the "high and low problem" in relation to democratic culture. Finally the university is examined under the rubric that the "full diversity and complexity of the cultural tradition is present in the modern university" (p.111). For Barber, the ideologist's role may be a noble one but it is not scientific. When the sociologist has done scientific research or theory work s/he might take on the reformer's or ideologist's role. Ideology and reform is one thing; science is another. Both

are intellectual pursuits and, says Barber, a better understanding of the functions of each, and of their desirable relations with one another, is needed.

There is a question here about how the scientific reformer working *within* science is to be understood. Clearly such reform is not achieved *a priori* via the self-definition of the scientist who wants to promote a reformation of theoretical thought. But in Barber's frame of reference one wonders whether the core concept — a system is a set of inter-dependent independent variables — can be subject to further reformation. Any immanent critique of this sociological stream must also involve a critical examination of this problematic. There are other parallels and connections between Barber's approach and that of *reformatorisch wijsbegeerte* which will repay careful and detailed investigation. Barber's idea of academic freedom reminds this reader at points of the "free university principle". The classification of the various modal dimensions of the social system (Figure 2, p.31) is reminiscent of Dooyeweerd's "General Theory of the Modal Spheres" and some of the diagrams that over the years have been developed to explicate it.

Bruce C. Wearne

A. van de Beek, *Ontmaskering. Christelijk geloof en cultuur*. Zoetermeer 2001: Uitgeverij Meinema. 99 pagina's. ISBN 9021138697.

De traditie van de reformatorische wijsbegeerte heeft zich vanaf het begin verzet tegen iedere vorm van synthese-denken waarin het christelijk geloof in schema's van vorm-materie, natuur-genade of natuur-vrijheid wordt gegoten. In Dr. A. van de Beek vinden ze in dit opzicht een medestander. Of wellicht een kritische reisgenoot, omdat denkers in de reformatorisch wijsgerige traditie, minder dan vroeger, geneigd zijn om te denken in termen van de antithese. Het boekje *Ontmaskering. Christelijk geloof en cultuur* is een uitwerking van de inaugurele rede die Van de Beek op 21 september 2001 gaf als hoogleraar symboliek aan de Vrije Universiteit te Amsterdam. Aansluiting zoekend bij het gedachtengoed van vroege kerkvaders als Origenes en Athanasius staat hij een apologetiek voor, die niet, zoals tegenwoordig gebruikelijk is, een poging inhoudt om het geloof acceptabel te maken voor de moderne tijd, maar die inzet op een ontmaskering van de leugens die door de tegenstanders van het christelijk geloof worden verspreid (p. 7). Van de Beek voert met andere woorden een pleidooi voor een hermeneutiek van het wantrouwen, die het onrecht van deze wereld demonstreert en aan de kaak stelt (p. 13).

Een belangrijk kenmerk van onze moderne tijd is, aldus Van de Beek, dat het zoeken naar de ene waarheid is opgegeven en de menselijke kennis in verschillende brokstukken uiteen is gevallen. Er is geen oriënterend midden meer dat richting geeft aan ons denken. Omdat de waarheidsvraag niet meer wordt gesteld, verwordt het respect dat mensen van elkaar mogen verwachten tot een onverschilligheid ten opzichte van het doen en laten van anderen. Dit moet volgens Van de Beek wel tot een balkanisering leiden, tot een situatie waarin iedereen zijn eigen opvattingen heeft en doet wat goed is in zijn eigen ogen (p. 41). Echter, ondanks deze postmoderne versnippering van gezichtspunten en overtuigingen viert één ideologie, aldus Van de Beek, meer dan ooit hoogtij: het kapitalisme in de meest botte vorm. Terwijl Marx nog dacht dat het bezit van productiemiddelen maatgevend was, blijkt in deze tijd dat het uiteindelijk het geld is dat bepaalt hoe het in de wereld toegaat (p. 58). De enige kracht die nog weerstand lijkt te bieden tegen de wereldmacht van het kapitalisme is het Moslimfundamentalisme. Echter ook de weerstand hiervan is beperkt (p. 66).

De kritiek van Van de Beek richt zich niet alleen op de wereld. Evenals de apologeten, die vaak nog scherper waren in hun kritiek op de kerk dan op de wereld, wil Van de Beek het falen van de christenheid die een compromis sluit met de wereld,