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## On the role of an intellectual

The article tries to answer the question of the role of an intellectual in the current system. It takes as its basis the structural difference between intellectuals and non-intellectuals that puts the former into the position of domination. This difference can be overcome if everyone is considered an intellectual to a certain degree as Gramsci claims. An intellectual takes the role of an interpreter in his or her own society and rejects the vanguard position as well as the position of a professional who ordains what is right and then takes care of it. There is a role for an intellectual even if s/he is in danger of legitimizing the capitalist system by falling into the trap of the postmodern cultural logic of late capitalism. This is the activist task embraced by Foucault who seeks new politics of truth. But one should not forget that intellectual strives for less power thus enabling the subaltern Other to be heard.

**Key words:** Intellectual; professional; interpreter; legislator; subaltern; truth

What is the definition of an intellectual? They are many and diverse, but have one trait in common. “[T]hey are all self-definitions” (Bauman 1989: 8). These definitions assume the right to draw a boundary for the identity of their authors and thus divide society into those who possess knowledge and those who do not.

Therefore, Bauman aims at treating the category of an intellectual as a structural element within the societal figuration, “an element defined not by its intrinsic qualities, but by the place it occupies within the system of dependencies” (ibid.: 19). And he manages to show the difference between the modern legislator and the post-modern interpreter. The intellectual legislator is the one who served the state to tame the “wild cultures” and to turn them into the “garden cultures”. The concept presupposes that there are people in the society who need guidance, because they are incapable of “conducting their life business on their own” (ibid.). This makes them dependent on intellectuals and put the latter into the position of domination. The main differential factor is knowledge, which one group possesses and the other lacks. There is thus an urgent need created within the society for a group of intellectuals to emerge.

### Everyone is an intellectual

One such intellectual according to Bauman is Antonio Gramsci. He created probably the most well-known distinction among intellectuals. As he inverted the material bases and the ideological superstructure, the role of intellectuals regained prominence. According to Gramsci, “[e]very social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals

which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields. The capitalist entrepreneur creates alongside himself the industrial technician, the specialist in political economy, the organizer of a new culture, of a new legal system, etc.” (Gramsci 2000: 301).

Gramsci creates several distinctions in his work. The most important is the difference between the traditional and the organic intellectual. He puts “the man of letters, the philosopher, the artist,” (ibid.: 321), “administrators, scholars and scientists, theorists, non-ecclesiastical philosophers, etc.” (ibid.: 303) within the former group. These consider themselves to be “autonomous and independent of the dominant social group” (ibid.: 303). Not only do they claim to be independent, but it is also their “independent” position that they defend. Their main task from their perspective then is their own reproduction.

Gramsci does not agree to this “social utopia” (ibid.: 303) of intellectuals “endowed with a character of their own” (ibid.) Not only is it the goal of every social group to create its own organic intellectuals, but the goal is also “to assimilate and to conquer ‘ideologically’ the traditional intellectuals” (ibid.: 304). Traditional intellectuals are never autonomous because “the intellectuals are the dominant group’s ‘deputies’ exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government. These comprise: 1. the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group 2. the apparatus of state coercive power which ‘legally’ enforces discipline on those groups who do not ‘consent’ either actively or passively” (ibid.: 306 – 307).

The role of the intellectual is thus to create consent with the ruling discourse. In this sense they are the mind of the ruling class, but this is not necessarily so. Even if “it is to be noted that the mass of the peasantry, although it performs an essential function in the world of production, does not elaborate its own ‘organic’ intellectuals, nor does it ‘assimilate’ any stratum of ‘traditional’ intellectuals” (ibid.: 302), this does not mean that the peasantry cannot have its own organic intellectuals. These would then come from within the communist party for example. Schooled within the old system, they would be capable of criticizing the ruling class with its hegemonical way of thinking and would defend the lower strata of the society who are usually not defended either by the traditional intellectuals or the new forms of intellectualism.

According to Gramsci the new intellectual differs from the traditional one in his or her activism. It is not enough to remain within the ivory tower or the sanctuary, one needs to be active. “The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, ‘permanent persuader’ and not just a simple orator” (ibid.: 321). This brings one to the most important insight regarding intellectuals that comes from Gramsci. Who is an intellectual? “What are the ‘maximum’ limits of acceptance of the term ‘intellectual’?” (ibid.: 304). According to Gramsci “purely physical labour does not exist and (...) even Taylor’s phrase of ‘trained gorilla’ is a metaphor to indicate a limit in a certain direction: in any physical work, even the most degraded and mechanical, there exists a minimum of technical qualification, that is, a minimum of creative intellectual activity” (ibid.). Thus “[a]ll men are intellectuals... but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals” (ibid.). Every person possesses the capacity of knowledge of some kind and hence is an intellectual in the sense that s/he conducts an intellectual activity. People usually have some kind of a taste, ethics, philosophy and other attributes of intellectualism.

One then needs to flee to the distinction between being more or less intellectual, i.e. between verbalizing certain discursive moments more or less openly, more or less textually, more or less discursively. One perpetuates the discourse through one's own practice, but also through speaking or writing. This is where one can be more of an intellectual than somebody else, but nobody is a non-intellectual.

For Baumann, however, organic intellectuals "instead of trying hard to make themselves useful, had their usefulness literally forced upon them by 'historic interest' of a class" (Bauman 1989: 174 – 175). He criticizes Gramsci (without mentioning his name) for considering the workers "uneducated, ignorant, incapable of grasping great and complex ideas, of tying their personal suffering into the majestic march of history" (ibid.: 175). On the one hand, Bauman's structural approach rightly forces him to put Gramsci into the legislators group. On the other hand, he overlooks Gramsci's (and before him non-elitist intellectuals such as Condorcet, see Coser 1989: 264) innovation in the sense that the difference between intellectuals does not necessarily have to lead in the structural direction, which Bauman keeps throughout his book.

### **An intellectual as an interpreter**

One of the most important roles of an intellectual is then to be an interpreter. This is the direction taken by Michael Walzer. He also discusses several contrasts and contradictions in relation to intellectuals. His intellectuals are Jewish prophets such as Amos, Jonah or Moses, but also the 'usual ones' Rawls, Descartes, Gandhi or Orwell. He speaks of three ways in moral philosophy, the path of discovery, the path of invention and the path of interpretation.

The first path is that of Moses. A prophet climbs up a mountain or goes into a desert, meets God and brings the people his or her word (Walzer 1993: 5). This path can be secular as well and this is the case of a philosopher who uncovers what the natural law is. The discovery is made from no particular point of view. But Walzer doubts "that we can ever step back all the way to nowhere; even when we look at the world from somewhere else, we are still looking at the world. We are looking, in fact, at a particular world" (ibid.: 7).

The second path is based on an invention of a morality. "The end is a common life, where justice, or political virtue, or goodness, or some such basic value would be realized" (ibid.: 10). John Rawls' theory of justice is the most elegant example of this approach. It is the veil of ignorance that makes it possible to invent a morality that would suit everyone. The universal morality is not discovered but it is invented.

Walzer argues also against this morality as being close to what he calls minimal or thin morality (see Walzer 2006) that might be useful for "a group of travelers" (Walzer 1993: 13) who could share it as they share a hotel room, but such morality would not be sufficient for something that we call home.

The path of interpretation is the most common and suitable form of moral argumentation. Basic (almost) universal moral prohibitions, such as the prohibition of murder, or cruelty are only a framework for "a fully developed or livable morality" (ibid.: 23). "It's not until the conversations become continuous and the understandings thicken that we get anything like a moral culture" (ibid.). It is within this conversation that the framework is filled with concrete culture, concrete – thick – morality. The interpretation is then the only correct method for reaching our

morality. We always only reinterpret what already exists and the interpretation itself can have various forms in various contexts. Thus, “we are all interpreters of the morality we share” (ibid.: 27).

Walzer uses a powerful example, a story, from the Bible. Rabbi Eliezer is in a conflict with a group of sages. He is alone with his argument against the whole group and desperate calls God to help him – to make the carob tree the proof. The tree is then lifted into the air. But Rabbi Joshua speaking for the group says that the tree does not prove anything. The same happens with a change in the direction of the nearby stream and the walls of the school, which start to fall. Eventually Rabbi Eliezer calls God him/herself who says “Why do you dispute with Rabbi Eliezer? In all matters the law is as he says” (in ibid.: 29). But Rabbi Joshua stands up and exclaims: “It is not in heaven!” (ibid.). The law cannot be anywhere else but in the very society, to which it is tied. Even if it comes from heaven in a form of a code it is then interpreted here on the Earth, in our world. We do not know who actually is correct in the dispute, but it is Rabbi Joshua who is procedurally speaking correct. He interprets the law, Rabbi Eliezer discovers it.

Such an approach is close to Foucault’s concept of genealogy. According to him “if interpretation is a never-ending task, it is simply because there is nothing to interpret. There is nothing absolutely primary to interpret because, when all is said and done, underneath it all everything is already interpretation” (Foucault in Dreyfus – Rabinow 1982: 107). The task of a genealogist is to “destroy the primacy of origins, of unchanging truths” (ibid.: 108 – 109).

### **The vanguard problem**

Even though Michael Walzer at one point claims that we are all interpreters, he is mostly concerned with special individuals such as prophets or philosophers. This is the problem that becomes most visible with Lenin’s vanguard or with Lenin as a legislator (see also Bauman 1989: 175 – 176). The hegemony of the working class within the Leninist tradition is to be secured by political leadership. The masses are thus divided from their leaders who know which way the history moves. As Laclau and Mouffe claim: “The centrality attributed to the working class is not a practical but an *ontological* centrality, which is, at the same time, the seat of an *epistemological* privilege: as the ‘universal’ class, the proletariat – or rather its party – is the depository of science” (Laclau – Mouffe 2001: 56–57). Even if they “do not seek to deny the need for political mediation,” (ibid.: 59) the nature of the political link between the working class and its party makes Leninism authoritarian. The scientific law of history discovered and enacted by the enlightened vanguard is the key aspect here. “The roots of authoritarian politics lie in this interweaving of science and politics” (ibid.). Lenin thus made the party the necessary – scientific – unifying force that would be capable of creating hegemony and thus achieve revolution “in a growing dissolution of old solidarities” (ibid.: 60).

The intellectual according to Lenin is then a part of this vanguard that enables the history to advance in its natural direction. The intellectual is epistemologically privileged as a member of the party. His or her authority stems from his or her position. Douglas Lummis shows how the communist path in this sense only follows the capitalist one (Lummis 1996: 45 – 78), but within capitalism this Leninist intellectual turns into a professional. S/he does not need the party to fulfill its role. The professional keeps his or her scientific aura only to become an everyday part of the ordinary life.

## Against professionals

Ivan Illich makes the case against professionals. He is interested in those processes “through which autonomy is undermined” (Illich 1978: 13) and argues for the lay against the expert opinion. His enemies – the professionals – are the people who shape our needs and then prepare the packaged products that fulfill them. The products are morally approved by the professional expertise. He sees professionals all around us, especially among doctors and teachers, social workers and bankers, psychoanalysts and nutritionists, lawyers and town planners and even dog-catchers. These professionals “claim special, incommunicable knowledge, not just about the way things are to be made, but also about the reasons why their services ought to be needed. Merchants sell you the goods they stock. Guildsmen guarantee quality... Professionals, however, tell you what you need... They not only advertise what is good, but ordain what is right” (ibid.: 49 – 50). Illich offers several examples of The Age of Professions. For example in Mexico, child-birth has become unthinkable without professional care. A personal story of a woman illustrates this well. Having borne two children, she felt both competent and experienced to give birth to the third, but as she sensed the child coming and called the nurse, the nurse started to press the baby’s head back into the womb “and ordered the mother to stop pushing because ‘Dr. Levy has not yet arrived’” (Illich 1978: 33–34). Even if this is an unusual situation and we have today the possibility to give birth at home, it shows the power of the professional over our lives. We have ‘the need’ to be assisted when we are giving birth, because this need has been prescribed to us by the professional who then takes care of it.

The counterstrategy, according to Illich, “demands nothing less than the unmasking of the professional ethos... only those citizen initiatives and radical technologies that directly challenge the insinuating dominance of disabling professions open the way to freedom for non-hierarchical community-based competence” (ibid.: 40). The public acceptance of dominating professions needs to be considered political and questioned. Illich tries to avoid the false strategies applied by the professional themselves that include (1) self-criticism as in the Club of Rome report and ‘critical’ professionals, (2) accommodation of the professional approach to the multifaceted character of human problems and (3) the self-help of a professionalized client (ibid.: 86 – 92). All these strategies keep the professional at the steering wheel.

Illich calls for the convivial tools that “are used primarily to generate use-values that are unmeasured and unmeasurable by professional need-makers” (ibid.: 94) People need to be capable to shape and satisfy their needs. This does not mean that we have to get rid of all technologies. For example high-speed traffic is “not the necessary result of ball-bearings or electronics” (ibid.: 76) Their function depends on the needs they are supposed to be serving and it is these needs that we have to question.

What is then needed is an anti-professional intellectual. But s/he is not to be found among scholars and the like but especially among those who have been thrown into the modernized poverty and seek their way out by their own means. Such an alter- (rather than anti-) scientific approach is close to the radically democratic anti-expert perspective.

### **An intellectual and the dead-end of cultural capitalism**

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to discuss what Frederic Jameson calls the cultural logic of late capitalism. According to him the post-modern theories about post-industrial, consumer, media, information, electronic, or high-tech society “have the obvious ideological mission of demonstrating, to their own relief, that the new social formation in question no longer obeys the laws of classical capitalism, namely the primacy of industrial production and the omnipresence of class struggle” (Jameson 1984: 55). The old-fashioned ideological critique becomes impossible in the system “so deeply suffused and infected by its new cultural categories” (ibid.: 86). Jameson thus sees almost no possibility for an intellectual – an artist or a philosopher – to escape this cultural logic that makes the critique of capitalism part of capitalism itself.

Such a position seems to mute any attempt to criticize this system. If the critique becomes immediately part of it, does it make sense to engage in any criticism? Cowen and Shenton who criticize any ‘intentional development’ come close to this position of discarding any action as merely the continuation of the inherently authoritarian effort to deal with the so called surplus population produced by capitalism. What they seem to propose is to wait for the revolution until it comes (Cowen – Shenton 1996: 110).

I prefer a different reading of Jameson and the role of an intellectual in capitalism. One may only agree that the world of academia functions in a way that accommodates the rest of the system. The radical critique is being marginalized and either becomes an extreme leftist part of the curriculum or is not included at all. Mostly it is not applicable in the capitalist real world by the M.A. graduates from social sciences and becomes self-referential endeavor among professors and the growing number of (unemployed) PhD graduates. One may only ask, what else is one supposed to do other than wait for revolution? Or, one may go further and ask what more is there that one might do in a world that mostly functions according to the capitalist logic including its cultural part without obeying this logic? In other words, what might be the role of an intellectual who criticizes the current system?

Bauman suggests four contemporary intellectual strategies as the answer to the fact that “no social group or category, either dominating or struggling for domination, seems to have any overwhelming demand for the kind of authoritative versions of truth, judgment or taste the intellectuals are capable of providing” (Bauman 1989: 194). There is no demand for traditional role of the intellectual-legislator anymore and therefore some intellectuals seek a new historical agent “interested in constructing rationally organized society” (ibid.). Feminists or the greens could serve as such an agent. Other intellectuals, notably those from the Frankfurt school, abandon all global projects and prefer the despair. If reason has become a technique of oppression, there is no hope of human emancipation and no place for an intellectual in this endeavor. The third strategy is to retreat to the field of science and art and serve as the provider of the foundation of the truth as in Popper’s strategy of falsification. The fourth strategy, embodied by Rorty, is to interpret others properly. It is the practice of translation without the power to legislate, yet with the need for a community to accept this interpretation. Rorty in this sense is the most radical as for him the most important is his own moral conviction (ibid.: 198).

### An activist intellectual and the politics of truth

It seems to me that Michel Foucault offers a different answer, which is close to Rorty's. Even if Jameson is correct to perceive his *Discipline and Punish* as a powerful vision of "some increasingly total system" (Jameson 1984: 57) that leaves the reader paralyzed without the critical capacity to revolt, I would argue that Foucault is capable of overcoming this paralysis by his work as an activist. This is the role of an intellectual. Not only is s/he capable of analyzing current situation but most of all s/he is capable of acting to change that situation.

Foucault distinguishes between a universal and a specific intellectual. The first is the bearer of the universal truth. S/he is "an offspring of the jurist, or at any rate of the man who invoked the universality of a just law..." (Foucault 1980: 128). As such s/he becomes a writer with universal consciousness. Voltaire or Sartre are the prototypes of such figures. They bring us the truth of the world only they can see and understand. They are close to what Walzer calls the path of discovery or invention. They can become Gramsci's organic intellectuals representing the class, because the universal truth resides within the proletariat.

But rather than bringing light to Plato's cave or finding the Archimedean point, the specific intellectual takes over the universal one and seeks very different forms of truth. Foucault finds intellectuals at the same place as Illich, but from the opposite side. It is not the jurist or notable but the savant or expert. The specific intellectual is "no longer that of the 'writer of genius', but that of the 'absolute savant'... It is... he who, along with a handful of others, has at his disposal, whether in the service of the State or against it, powers which can either benefit or irrevocably destroy life" (ibid.: 129).

Such a figure emerged after the Second World War for example among the atomic scientists. Oppenheimer had the specific scientific knowledge and worked in the specific local place – the atomic institutions and therefore could make his intervention. The result was then that he was not hounded by political powers because of his universal discourse on justice or equality, but "because of the knowledge at his disposal" (ibid.: 128).

According to Foucault intellectual then has a three-fold specificity. The first is his or her class position, which is similar to Gramsci, the second is his or her condition of life and work. That means the field of research and the political and economic demands to which he submits or against which he rebels in the university, the hospital, etc. (ibid.: 132). The last specificity of the specific intellectual is connected to the second one. The intellectual fights the stable regimes of truth, i.e. the "ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true" (ibid.). His or her specific knowledge then tackles one particular discourse about one particular truth. But since we speak about the truth, it is a universal fight. The truth is not only part of his or her sector, but "is essential to the structure and functioning of our society" (ibid.).

According to Foucault then: "The work of an intellectual is not to shape others' political will; it is, through the analyses that he carries out in his own field, to question over and over again what is postulated as self-evident ... and on the basis of this re-problematization (in which he carries out his specific task as an intellectual) to participate in the formation of a political will (in which he has his role as citizen to play)" (Foucault 1990: 265). To put it differently: "The essential political problem for the intellectual is not to criticize the intellectual contents supposedly linked to science, or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by a correct ideology, but that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth. The problem

is not changing peoples' consciousnesses - or what's in their heads - but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth. It's not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time" (Foucault 1980: 133).

Foucault himself tried to fulfill his role as a citizen. Even though he did not have any specific scientific knowledge at his disposal he went beyond his role of a philosopher. Together with Deleuze they took part at the Prison Information Group. Rather than explaining to people the meaning of freedom within prisons like the universal intellectual used to do, they tried to allow the prisoners to publicly reflect on their life conditions and problems (Barša – Fulka 2005: 80). Didier Eribon in a bit celebratory book quotes Seweryn Blumsztajn, one of the leader of the Solidarity committee founded by the French Polish community, who describes how Foucault was helping them with the most monotonous clerk-work. He was actually doing the accounting for the committee (Eribon 2002: 310).

### **An intellectual and the subaltern Other**

But Foucault needs to be corrected by Gayatri Spivak in relation to the Other in his role as an intellectual. She criticizes him (and Gilles Deleuze) for reestablishing the legal subject and especially for "rendering 'Asia' (and on occasion 'Africa') transparent" (Spivak 1994: 67). By conflating two different meanings of representation, first in the sense of speaking for (*Vertreten*) and second in the sense of re-presentation as in art or philosophy (*Darstellen*) the two post-structuralist figures claim to be doing only the first but actually engage in both. This is possible through the reintroduction of the sovereign subject, which goes against their theoretical assumptions. If the subject is sovereign all that is necessary is to let him or her speak for him or herself and "merely report on the nonrepresented subject" (*ibid.*: 74). The result is a transparency of the subject and essentialization of the Other – "the worker's struggle" or "a maoist" (*ibid.*:67, see also Ziai 2006: 114 – 121 and Kapoor 2008: 41–59). Spivak argues against the possibility of a transparent subject and according to her, as the subaltern cannot speak, they have to be represented in the first sense. They have to be spoken for.

Spivak's main suggestion as to what one should do in the encounter with the subaltern in the global South is the deconstruction. Similarly to Foucault and Walzer, she does not see the possibility of escaping one's own home. All that we can do is to deconstruct and renegotiate things and discourses from within, which surround us. We should not discard our home entirely, because we are inherently part of it. This leads Spivak to be "unscrupulously vigilant (i.e. hyper-self-reflexive) about our complicities" (Kapoor 2008: 55) and to make her field the West rather than the South. She changes the focus of her gaze and deconstructs and anthropologizes the Self and not the Other. In the encounter with the Other, her goal is to learn from him/her and refrain from thinking that we might have the solution. The subaltern thus becomes the subject and the source of knowledge and the production of information will be reversed. In practice this may mean for example that one learns the language of the people one encounters. In Spivak's own practice of training primary school teachers she highlights the one-to-one relationship that allows for a less institutionalized and more equal encounter.

Even though Spivak's analysis is highly relevant, her conclusion might be dangerously close to the vanguard problem. I would prefer to try to make it possible for the subaltern not only to be heard, but more importantly to be heard in their own discourse. This could be practiced along the representation (Vertreten) Spivak suggests.

## Conclusion

So what is the role of an intellectual? Bauman's structural analysis seems to have created an insurmountable problem. As if an intellectual by definition had to be separated by a boundary from the rest of the society. According to Bauman "[i]t is vitally important to note that the post-modern strategy [of interpretation] does not imply the elimination of the modern one... While the post-modern strategy entails the abandonment of the universalistic ambitions of the intellectuals' own tradition, it does not abandon the universalistic ambitions of the intellectuals towards their own tradition; here they retain their meta-professional authority..." (Bauman 1989: 5). To answer this intellectual dead end, the notion that we are all intellectuals becomes important. We can see this intellectual multitude not only in the massive proliferation of blogs and anonymous discussions. At these fora people express their opinions on public matters in whichever form they can. Not only is the intellectual dethroned due to other – especially disciplinary and market – forms of power, which render his service futile; at the same time the multitude of intellectuals further degrades the esteem of an intellectual act. It becomes normal, rather than special. Such equalization of the participation at the public debate reminds one of the democratic decision making of the Iroquese. Mander (maybe in a too romantic way) describes the non-hierarchical way, in which the decisions become accepted. Every member of the tribe can speak for as long as s/he wants (Mander 1999).

Everybody is an intellectual and his or her role stems from this fact. On the one hand an intellectual should, as Said says, promote what s/he believes in (Said 1994: 12), on the other s/he should strive for less power of intellectuals to further allow the voices of the subaltern to be heard, their discursive muteness notwithstanding.

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