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# ONCE AGAIN ON THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF INTELLECTUALS

Since the end of the 19th century, by taking advantage of the social acceptance of their position in the productive structure of society and the institutional validity of their speech, intellectuals choose to associate with the public sphere and intervene in political and social issues that are not directly related to their scientific discipline.

The issue of social involvement of intellectuals has been a topic of discussion and a field of study for a series of thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci, Jean Paul Sartre, Henry Giroux, Enzo Traverso, Russel Jacoby and others. Key questions concern the position of the intellectual in the social division of labor, her social responsibility, the question of her simultaneous intervention in the public sphere, and her responsibility in scientific practice. This paper will focus on the following question: Does now, in the epoch of late capitalism, exist the intellectual who has the courage to think differently (uncompromising) and to act with a sense of political commitment, moral conviction and social responsibility that examines and interferes with important social issues? The presentation will focus, in particular, on the role of the university teacher as an intellectual and her role in the educational process so as to fashion citizens with a strong sense of individual and social responsibility, with an expanded intellectual horizon and the ability to think critically and participate in social debates with large audiences.

## WHO IS THE INTELLECTUAL?

As I have previously mentioned, since the end of the 19th century, by taking advantage of the social acceptance of their social position and the

institutional validity of their word, intellectuals have chosen to intervene in political and social issues that are not directly related to their scientific field of activity.

The founding act of the emergence of the social category “intellectual” is considered to be the “Dreyfus affair” in France. In 1894, Colonel Dreyfus was accused of spying in favor of Germany, with a slanderous indictment and being punished with exile from France. This case opened the wick of anti-Semitism that began to develop in France.

For the first time, a series of scholars and writers intervened publicly against this verdict by signing the Manifesto of Intellectuals in 1898. Among them, the socialists Jean Jaures and Leon Bloom, Marcel Proust, Anatol Frances and Emile Zola, who wrote the *J'Accuse...! (I accuse)*, an open letter published on 13 January 1898 in the newspaper *L'Aurore*.

The result of this mobilization was the foundation of the Union of Human Rights in 1898 by the French politician Georges Clemenceau, the President of France during the 1<sup>st</sup> World War. Thus, the Dreyfus affair puts under the microscope a series of functional features of modernity: democracy, justice, human rights, Semitism/anti-Semitism. It is, rightly, considered a symbolic moment for the emergence of the social category of “intellectuals”<sup>1</sup>.

This is the first time that the adjective “intellectual” is used as a noun, meaning: one who exploits any scientific or artistic credibility achieved on a personal level, in order to intervene in social tensions and in cases for which he has no formal appointment. She functions as an upsetter of the established order, a subversive element for the state and the nation. In this context, the “intellectual” and the “leftist” scholar are identical/synonymous concepts<sup>2</sup>.

For Jean-Paul Sartre, the intellectual grows in an unfertile soil and he becomes a renegade of his class (bourgeois or middle class, usually). And here lays the difference between the modern intellectual from the philosopher of the Enlightenment: the Enlightenment philosopher opposes the Palace and converses with the “progressive” bourgeoisie and/or the

1 E. Traverso, *Où sont passés les intellectuels?*, Les éditions Textuel, Paris 2013.

2 J.P. Sartre, *Plaidoyer pour les intellectuels*, Gallimard, Paris 1972.

aristocracy. The 20th century intellectual lives within a much more complex social structure, politically divided into Left and Right<sup>3</sup>.

The social position of the intellectual in modernity, with such characteristics as the industrialization, urbanization and the emergence of mass society, the mass media, etc. changes and allows for an elementary functional autonomy: she can live without the help of any ruler, from the products of his intellectual labour (eg. writings, works of art etc.) that seriously influence the public sphere<sup>4</sup>.

The intellectual now increasingly undertakes to realize the second part of Marx's "11th thesis on Feuerbach": to change the world.

We will find her to mobilize during the revolt of the Spartacists in Berlin and in the crisis of the short-lived Weimar Republic, to be a protagonist in Red Vienna, causing the anger of typical academics like Max Weber<sup>5</sup>. Conservatives and nationalists will thus define the intellectual of the interwar period, often a Central European Jew, as the representative of the so hated late modernity, which is considered by the conservative post-modernist theorists as a time of generalized decline<sup>6</sup>.

It is the time when Antonio Gramsci introduces the notion of the "organic intellectual", by making a distinction between the "organic" and the "traditional" intellectual. The organic intellectual is a renegade of his class, the traditional intellectual defends the interests of his class of origin. Gramsci goes further, defining the duties of the working class intellectual, based on the abolition of the distinction between intellectual and manual labour, Homo Faber and Homo Sapiens.

In this way, Gramsci, whose work has set the context for further discussion, considers that intellectuals represent the rival social classes, divided into "traditional" and "organic", focusing on the analysis of the role of the collective-working class intellectual, which for him is the Communist Party. The goal of the collective organic intellectual is not simply a corrective political intervention but hegemony at the level of the existing

3 A. Elefantis, "Introduction", Jean-Paul Sartre, *Plaidoyer pour les intellectuels*, Greek edition, Politis, Athens 1994.

4 E. Traverso, *Où sont passés les intellectuels?*, cit.

5 M. Weber, "The Politics as a Vocation", Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis, IN 2004.

6 E. Traverso, *Où sont passés les intellectuels?*, cit.

social formation as a whole<sup>7</sup>.

Leftwing intellectuals fighting for social progress and human rights became one of the main targets of fascist regimes. Joseph Goebbels, for example, speaks with contempt for “the intellectuals of the asphalt”, asphalt here should be conceived as a symbol of the city deformed by modernity.<sup>8</sup>

In the interwar period, therefore, the intellectual identifies herself with the Left and criticizes the entire social, cultural and political structure of the Western world. It has to be noted that a series of mobilizations against anti-fascist intellectuals took place and is known to be particularly massive. But this opens the gate for another presentation...

Before I move on, I would like to raise another matter for discussion and this is the position of intellectuals in the Soviet Union under Stalin.

The position of Stalinism on the role of intellectuals (Stalin used to call intellectuals “the engineers of souls”) has to be studied further giving emphasis on institutions like the Academy of Sciences and focusing on the distinction between the dissidents and those who were loyal to the regime.<sup>9</sup>

After the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, in the context of the Cold War, the leftist intellectuals will be mobilized in the support of both camps, west and east. That was a period of intellectual confusion for the left in general due to the frequently unconditional support given to the eastern bloc by the intellectuals of the western Communist Parties.

This schism will be lifted by the events of May 1968.

Historically, the last massive appearance of intellectuals in the sense of criticism of the knowledge and power relationship and in favour of new forms of social organization is the late 1960s, when intellectuals are sided with the rebellion of May 68 and inspired by the emerging radical social movements (anti-colonial, anti-racist, anti-nuclear, feminist). These social movements acted as a source of inspiration for leftist intellectuals both in terms of theory and action.

7 A. Gramsci, “The Intellectuals”, in Roger S. Gottlieb (ed.), *An Anthology of Western Marxism*, Oxford University Press, New York-Oxford 1989, pp. 113-119.

8 E. Traverso, *Où sont passés les intellectuels?*, cit.

9 M. Labridis, «Σταλινισμός και διανοούμενοι» (“The Intellectuals and the Stalinist regime”), *Λεβιάθαν (Leviathan)*, no 12, 1992, (in Greek).

## THE ECLIPSE OF INTELLECTUALS?

The question that arises today, in the epoch of late capitalism, is whether the type of intellectual who thinks subversively and acts with a sense of political commitment, moral conviction and social responsibility by analyzing and intervening in important social issues, still exists.

This question has been and continues to be of interest over the last years, with answers focusing on the characteristics of the intellectual who continues to be active in the social sphere arguing for the need of change of the existing social system, although it is now obvious that a majority, perhaps, of this social category has come to accept the hegemony of capitalism by internalizing (even passionately) its values.<sup>10</sup>

Has the end of history, as the postmodernists suggest, lead to the absence of those who have a range of knowledge of the world as a totality, do not refrain from expressing their views in the public sphere and intervene politically on the side of the oppressed of this world?<sup>11</sup>

It is a fact that in the 21st-century the organic intellectual, as we used to know her, is in eclipse, or to put it differently, the majority of those who claim to represent her has embodied the values of the dominant class.

A number of causes can interpret this change, including the impoverishment of public culture, the replacement of intellectuals by high tech intelligent people who do not intervene and enrich public life.<sup>12</sup> The discomfort for over-professionalism and specialization is a universal feature of the discussion that is being held on the modern zeitgeist.

This discussion, which opened during and after May 68, focuses on the role and function of research, knowledge and science in late capitalism.

## THE UNIVERSITY TEACHER AS AN INTELLECTUAL

In contrast to the dominant model of the technocrat / specialist univer-

10 R. Sayre, M. Löwy, «Figures of Romantic Anti-Capitalism», *New German Critique*, vol. 32, 1984, p. 90.

11 See, as example, Francis Fuluyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, New York 1992.

12 R. Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals. American Culture in the Age of Academe*, Basic Books, New York 1987.

sity teacher, it is now necessary to reinvent the philosopher / educator as the new radical / organic intellectual of our epoch. In this new model of intellectual, philosophy is the expression of the class struggle at the level of theory as Althusser has pointed out.

The university teacher who will not only have a critical attitude towards the existing relationship of knowledge and power that functions to the benefit of the dominant social classes but will also be able to see critically his own place in the production and transmission of knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

The core of the answer here is the political nature of intellectual labour, a Gramscian principle that is crucial to my analysis. Based on this, the function of the intellectual in education is to challenge the dominant conception of neutral and objective research and teaching. The word of a university teacher is not neutral, not empty of values, not independent of class references, culture, power and politics.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, the university teacher should not accept the commonly held view that her role is to produce specialists, a glance at the university curricula and the OECD documents reveals this orientation: the educational practice turns into management of power strategists.

On the contrary, the role of the teacher-intellectual is to educate students in a critical view of society.<sup>15</sup> It is not a matter of teaching the principles of a reified social world, the teacher must instead place the social rights as a teaching aim, not as a corrective measure of the present situation but as an emancipatory project opposing oppression and exploitation. Knowledge specialization, though it is ultimately necessary in today's knowledge societies, should not be identified with opposition to critical thinking.

Specialization is a mechanism that is often used by fragmenting complex areas of knowledge and refusing at the same time to students the critical tools they need to link these areas in order to gain a better understanding of reality.

13 S. Aronowitz and H. Giroux, "Teaching and the Role of the Transformative Intellectual", in Stanley Aronowitz, Henry Giroux, *Education under Siege: The Conservative, Liberal and Radical Debate over Schooling*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1986, pp. 23-46.

14 S. Aronowitz and H. Giroux, "Teaching and the Role of the Transformative Intellectual", *ibidem*.

15 E. Traverso, *Où sont passés les intellectuels?*, cit.

As Sartre said, what made Oppenheimer an intellectual, despite his scientific expertise, was not the construction of the atomic bomb based on his knowledge, but the fact that he took the stand against the arms race. Perhaps what is necessary is a process of radical transformation of the academic world about the ways in which knowledge is constructed and pedagogy defined.

While there is room for specialization and well-defined disciplines in the academic field, too often these disciplines exhibit defensive behavior in their territory. By being well defined and delimited, they leave out problems that they cannot tackle.

The boundaries between disciplines are structurally restrictive of intellectual work, and create confusion as to how academics are positioned within the structure of knowledge in higher education.<sup>16</sup> Interdisciplinarity is therefore, crucial.

The aforementioned define a number of characteristics for the social function of the university teacher as an intellectual.

The new intellectual at the university should:

- 1) regain the role of criticizing the existing social system and standing by the side of the weak.
- 2) envision another type of society, another social organization is possible!!
- 3) acquire organic connections with the multiplicity of realities operating in society and especially to be aware of the reality that the students are experiencing.
- 4) In this context, the challenge concerns both criticism and self-criticism of the academic discipline and the academic workplace.
- 5) That is to say that she adheres to academic and social responsibility, both in the academic and public spheres
- 6) so that her space of activity becomes a place of struggle against the dominant ideology and social inequality.

16 Henry Giroux, “Πολιτισμικές σπουδές, διανοούμενοι και νεολαία» (Cultural Studies, Science and Youth”, *Επιστήμη και κοινωνία (Science and Society)*, no 29, 2012, pp. 19-35 (in Greek).

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