

The Intellectuals in Contemporary Europe: Between Conformism and Non-Conformism

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Abstract

Various issues related to the European intellectuals and their place in modern socio-political developments are explored in this paper. A new model of intellectuals' involvement in the civic and political life is proposed, suggesting three levels of relations with the authorities: that of the "powerless people," of the "independent experts," and of the "outsiders/nonconformists". Within this framework, the leading feature defining the European intellectuals' identification, their stance with regard to the state and society, and their motive for social action is shown to be the distinction between conformists and nonconformists.

Keywords: European history, contemporary society, political participation, intellectuals (intelligentsia).

1. Introduction

In the modern world, the political self-determination of intellectuals is a complex and ambiguous process. Their multifaceted and inconsistent participation in social and political transformations tends to lack conclusive interpretation in contemporary scholastic works.

It has to be noticed that no matter how thorough the practical observations in the field might be, they alone cannot provide the conceptual basis for the inquiry into the issue of the intellectuals in the modern world. For this reason, scholarly examination of contemporary intellectuals should not be limited only to identifying certain attributes of their social and cultural experiences, achievements and untapped opportunities, or moral concerns of individual intellectuals or entire communities of "educated people," although all these inquiries are important in themselves. In scientific research, we should strive for something more: namely, to ensure that we have achieved an objective identification of verifiable performance parameters of the intellectuals as a distinct social group, to determine the defining features of this group's behavior and to consider the prospects for its further development, as well as its interaction with other social strata. This implies, in turn, a solid historical, sociological, and political analysis based on an equally solid methodological foundation.

Analyses of this sort have frequently been conducted, but they have often become exceedingly complex and entangled due to the simultaneous inclusion in scientific discourse of two concepts, *intellectuals* and *intelligentsia*, which were used as synonyms even though they did not fully correspond to each other.

2. Methods

It is therefore necessary to make some methodological refinement of the concepts of *intelligentsia* and *intellectuals*. We find it interesting to study a few basic conceptual approaches to the issue of intellectuals: "sociology of intelligentsia", historical anthropology and the concept of conformism by Frankfurt school. In this context, we paid attention to very interesting analysis by the Polish-American professor Aleksander Gella, formulated in his introduction to the proceedings of the Eighth International Sociological Association World Congress in Toronto (1974), "The Intelligentsia and Intellectuals." In this introduction, Gella presented a basic understanding of the sociology of intellectuals that is still positively regarded by many analysts forty years later.

Gella supported a narrow interpretation of the term *intelligentsia* as referring to a social group that “not only consisted of men and women of a wide range of occupations and various intellectual and educational levels, who shared certain beliefs, attitudes, and manners, but ... formed a broad segment of society with a relatively homogenous spiritual culture” (Gella, 1976, p.20). Even more significant is his line of demarcation between the two social phenomena: “In particular it is necessary to clear up some confusion in sociological and political literature between the term ‘intellectuals’ and the term ‘intelligentsia.’ There is an essential difference between these two groups of people. In short, ‘intellectuals’ designates collectively the members of certain occupations, while ‘intelligentsia’ is a social stratum encompassing among others the intellectuals together with their wives and children” (Gella, 1985, p.1).

Gella further contended that humanity needs a stratum of educated people, united by a common culture, who interact and cooperate with each other and are oriented toward common universal goals. This group would be, according to his future expectations as of 1974, “the intelligentsia of the world,” and its appearance would be “a new social phenomenon.”

The image of the non-conformist intellectual is itself an ideal type with a strongly normative component, as any brief survey across the vast landscape of literature on intellectuals quickly shows.

The solid research works on the conformism in the modern world by Frankfurt School had considerable success. The image of the non-conformist intellectual is itself an ideal type with a strongly normative component, as any brief survey across the vast landscape of literature on intellectuals quickly shows. In this sense, talk of non-conformism as a complete or self-explanatory normative category is simply another way of decreeing where a dialectical analysis of the intellectual's function within a complex society should stop. (Pensky, 2003, p.143).

At the same time, the study of self-actualization of intellectuals in the network society (Manuel Castells and Pekka Himanen, Randall Collins) (Castells, Himanen, 2002; Collins, 1998) allows identifying conditionality of the internal behavior of this or that intellectual group rather than the variants of their interaction with government and society.

Amidst the varying interpretations offered by thinkers and scholars, one strand is consistent: intellectuals are one of the most dynamic social groups in the history of the world. They are very responsive to social transformations and to changes in the spiritual and intellectual atmosphere of society.

3. Results

The patterns of political behavior among Western intellectuals are substantially different from those of the Russian intelligentsia. We have identified three main options for the political involvement of European intellectuals: “powerless people,” “independent experts,” and “outsiders/nonconformists.”

The phenomenon of “powerless people” was identified and interpreted by prominent twentieth-century American scientist Charles Wright Mills, who authored the essay “Powerless People: The Role of the Intellectual in Society” at the end of the Second World War. Mills portrayed American intellectuals as, voluntarily or involuntarily, under the thumb of the “ruling elite” and thus serving its interests, being powerless to propose and champion their own ideas and solutions for public and political problems (Wright Mills, 1944).

We use this concept in a broader sense. The powerlessness is not due to intellectual shortcomings or lack of will on the part of this type of Western intellectuals. On the contrary, they are often very competent and active persons. Their impotence derives from a sober awareness of the impossibility of crossing very real boundaries, outlined by the interests of the Western political elite and the existing power structures. For a large number of these intellectuals, such impotence is a quite familiar and even comfortable situation that they unconditionally accept. Others are powerless in the truest sense of the word, as they struggle not to violate the unspoken rules of political correctness so as not to lose their position or contract in a university, a private corporation, or public service.

As notable European examples of this type of Western intellectuals, we could name the well-known late French philosopher Jacques Derrida and the famous late German professor Ralf Dahrendorf.

Derrida was known, among other things, as an apologist for multiculturalism, promoted by the European political elite (Yegenoglu, 2003). Characteristically, in 1995, Derrida was associated with the campaign of the French Socialist Party candidate, Lionel Jospin.

Ralf Dahrendorf, over the years, was a member of the Social Democratic Party, later, a member of the Free Democratic Party of Germany; thereafter, he became European Commissioner for External Relations and Trade and European Commissioner for Research, Science and Education in Brussels. After moving to the U.K., he became a member of the Liberal Democratic Party and of the House of Lords. The Queen of Great Britain bestowed on Dahrendorf the honor of Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire. Meanwhile, his analysis of the relations between intellectuals and authorities has influenced many subsequent researchers and continues to hold relevance today (Dahrendorf, 1969). Defining the relations of the intellectuals and global elite, Dahrendorf claimed: “Scientists certainly belong to that global

class. But, of course, intellectuals never fit wholly into that picture because they are “free-floating”; they are able to defend and promote the global class but they are also able to defend other groups, which are now on the defensive. So intellectuals are not the core of the conflicts of today, but the interpreters of these conflicts” (Dahrendorf, 2005, p. 41).

In short, Derrida and Dahrendorf, though politically active, remained influential scholars, and their values and opinions significantly influenced the intellectual environment.

“Independent experts” are probably the best-known of our three types of Western intellectuals. Many have pondered this group’s role, and their participation in politics has been analyzed by many researchers. However, it should be noted that the position of independent expert is controversial in several respects. One reason is that such a status is very difficult to attain, as it is not sufficient to simply be a legitimate expert in one’s field—it is also necessary to achieve recognition for oneself among the potential “customers” for one’s expertise. Another, even more important reason is that the lines of real independence between an expert and a client are blurred. In politics, such relationships are very peculiar, so that the room for maneuver to maintain one’s reputation, even in an environment characterized by the stable traditions of political democracy, is often not as extensive as might be expected.

One of the most striking independent experts among European intellectuals of our time is the Italian author and public figure Umberto Eco. As far as we know, he never showed any political ambitions or definite political sympathies. However, all the works of this world-famous Italian university professor and author—his novels, his essays, or even his writing as a thesis advisor—had an undeniable social context and, it may be said, a certain political orientation. Eco’s ideological and socio-political reference points were obvious: humanism, secularism, and Eurocentrism. The impact of his views on the public was amplified because he presented them in a vivid, artistic form as a type of opinion journalism, imaginatively and with a very particular sense of humor.

Eco himself drew a distinct line between the social practices of the Eastern intelligentsia and Western intellectuals. In the interview published by *Paris Review* in May 2008, he stated, “I don’t believe that in order to be politically committed an intellectual must act as a member of a party or, worse, write exclusively about contemporary social problems. Intellectuals should be as politically engaged as any other citizen. At most, an intellectual can use his reputation to support a given cause” (Eco, 2008).

Perhaps the most compelling example of an independent European intellectual of our time is the well-known German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. This venerable 86-year-old man, the last pillar of the famous Frankfurt School and persistent fighter against attempts to silence or justify the crimes of Nazism, is the author of several influential works, on topics including the responsibility of public intellectuals and the role of communication in the modern world. Habermas’s active participation in the social and intellectual life of modern Europe has been quite impressive. This eminent scholar manages not only to produce fundamental works but also to write articles on many different subjects, give numerous interviews, and deliver many speeches (usually on occasions when he is awarded various prizes).

The primary feature of Habermas’s scholastic work, his public face, is a relentless passion for the problems of Europe. We can say that Habermas is a real advocate of European integration, not just in theory but also as a critic and a persistent analyst of numerous ongoing processes. For example, he was extremely concerned about the revival of nationalist sentiment in Germany during the 1990s (Habermas, 1998).

Finally, Professor Habermas is also a regular participant in political meetings and debates. For example, in February 2014, he appeared at a meeting of the leadership of Germany’s Social Democratic Party and called for energetic measures to overcome the crisis of the current European strategy (Doemens, 2014).

One could argue that Habermas is not just a vehement and sincere supporter of a united Europe but a theorist who attempts to find a conceptual foundation for this process in order to make it more effective and irreversible. Therefore, in contrast with the EU bureaucrats in Brussels and Strasbourg, he does not focus on the political and administrative mechanisms but on strengthening the solidarity of the European peoples, the assimilation of common democratic values against national egoism and local particularism, and strategic cooperation. Since the past forty years, Habermas has functioned as a liberal, globalist, and conformist.

The conformity of this venerable German professor presents itself in a form without which it would be very difficult to imagine his analysis. Perhaps, for Habermas, this approach has become an integral feature of his writing style. This particular feature of the esteemed professor’s intellectual self-expression manifests itself especially vividly in his acceptance speech on March 9, 2006, as he was awarded yet another accolade—the Bruno Kreisky Prize. The content of the speech seems to be quite original and distinct. It is full of many observations and thoughts on the challenges and problems that independent intellectuals are facing in the modern world. Habermas identifies some qualities required of contemporary Western intellectuals that certainly cannot be considered comfortable and pleasant for the existing system. In this category, he refers to being “a mistrustful sensitivity to damage to the normative infrastructure of the polity,” “the sense for what is lacking and ‘could be otherwise’”, “a spark of imagination in conceiving of alternatives”, “a little

bit of courage to initiate polarization of positions,” and even “a modicum of the courage required for polarizing, provoking, and pamphleteering”. However, the German scholar always keeps his prudence and subsequently warns that the intellectual “has to have sufficient political common sense” not to let his emotions out of control (Habermas, 2006, p.5).

Even more noticeably, at the end of his speech, the eminent German professor gracefully offers his respects to the very European political elite that so generously rewards his scholastic work, referring to “those politicians whose ideas are ahead of the others [and] can serve as a model for intellectuals” (Habermas, 2006, p.7).

Third, “outsiders/nonconformists” are also a very recognizable type among Western intellectuals. Moreover, this type could potentially be the most promising in terms of actual competence and independence. In this respect, it is appropriate to recall an argument made by the famous American philosopher Herbert Marcuse. As Marcuse stressed, in conditions of technological progress in the modern world, the domain of independent expression of individuality, independent intellectualism, is increasingly compressed between the government and its subordinate, the “one-dimensional man”: “The development of consciousness becomes the dangerous preparative of outsiders. The area in which individual and group transcendence was possible is thus being eliminated and with it the life element of opposition” (Marcuse, 1955, p.437).

Herbert Marcuse himself did not become this kind of an outsider; he attained a very wide popularity, and his undeniable nonconformity was ambiguous and not so uncompromising. If we wish to find European intellectuals who consistently sought not to be associated with the political establishment, then on the right wing of the intellectual map of Europe, for decades there has been the French New Right, headed by Alain de Benoist, and on the left have been the British and others united around the journal *New Left Review* (at least until the end of the twentieth century).

In particular, A. de Benoist, exposing the basics of intellectual conformism, points to the trend in the development of the modern world that makes inevitable the phenomenon of ‘universal obliteration of differences’. And sadly notes the degradation of intellectual life in his country, when even the Left justify the existing order of things (de Benoist, 2005).

The British New Left has a different view of the origins of intellectual conformism in today’s world. It is symbolic that, in criticizing conformism, one of the founders of the *New Left Review*, renowned British writer and scholar Perry Anderson, uses the intellectual explorations of Jürgen Habermas. For Anderson, Habermas’s books and speeches are the most convincing evidence of the insolvency of “egocentric Europeanism.” Anderson quips: “Habermas, being a winner of numerous European awards, having more awards than a Brezhnev-era Soviet general, has in part been the victim of self-importance”. The primary reason for Anderson’s denunciation of this German celebrity is that Habermas “enthusiastically supported what he had recently sharply condemned,” and he began to praise the Treaty of Lisbon. Therefore, Anderson’s final assessment of Habermas’s accomplishments is one of disappointment: “Habermas’ desire to turn Europe into the navel of the world, without being particularly interested in the daily life of its inhabitants, thus reflects a continuing trend” (Anderson, 2012). The trend to which Anderson refers is a deepening conformity among European intellectuals of our time.

This trend is especially apparent among those familiar with the views of Western intellectuals who defend Habermas against critics such as Anderson. In this context, the energetic remarks of Princeton professor Jan-Werner Müller are noteworthy:

“One can find the details of Habermas’s analyses intellectually provincial [Perry Anderson recently pointed out that in Habermas’s latest essay on Europe, three-quarters of the references were to German authors and all others were to Anglo-Americans; apparently the rest of Europe is nonexistent intellectually]; one can criticize Habermas for being inattentive to the lived experience of actual Europeans across the continent; one can find his prescriptions hopelessly idealistic—and yet the fact remains that here is an intellectual who sincerely tries to learn from experts, to explain what he, rightly or wrongly, takes to be the achievements, shortcomings as well as normative potential of the Union, and thus to advance a serious political conversation. Put differently: one can reject the content of what Habermas proposes and still find the model he furnishes for intellectual engagement with Europe attractive” (Müller, 2012).

In defending Habermas, Müller goes perhaps even further than the revered German professor in protecting the interests of the existing political system. Müller openly declares the real conformism: “Diversity and pluralism are not values like liberty and democracy—all depends on the answer to the question ‘diversity of what?’ It is liberty and democracy that European intellectuals ought to defend, if need be; at all other times, they should get on with the tasks of clarifying and explicating” (Müller, 2012).

As could be expected, Habermas in turn has found the judgments of “the young professor of political science at Princeton University” quite convincing (The European Citizen: Just a Myth? 2012).

4. Conclusion

For the Western and particularly European intellectuals the main line of distinction between methods and forms of participation in political and public life is their position with respect to the current system of government: it is either one or another variation of conformity (“powerless people” or “independent experts”) or various shades of nonconformity. This situation among Western intellectuals is not a surprise; after all, in Europe and North America the existing political system and civil society are still quite solid and stable.

They are not only able to integrate the different currents of thought but also, to some extent, to tolerate dissent, though with the essential condition that these dissenters agree to be reasonably peaceful outsiders.

Significant reasons in favor of our proposed model of the European intellectuals’ political involvement can be found in the reflections of the French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu made in his mature age. Even though Bourdieu did not come up with decisive conclusions, some of his ideas on the intellectuals’ political engagement are quite valuable.

The French philosopher did not follow Charles Wright Mills in his assessment of conformist intellectuals as “powerless”. Instead, he considered the process of recruiting them into the power ranks as a means of sharing their “symbolic capital” by way of delegating their potential to the political elite. Apparently, so did Ralf Dahrendorf in his quest for stability and conflict resolution, as well as Jacques Derrida in his advocacy of multiculturalism. Both thinkers supported the key elements of the existing political system, albeit in different ways.

The course of intellectual experiments of the independent experts is outlined by Pierre Bourdieu more vaguely; at any rate, he viewed their choice as sort of a trade-off with the system. That is the reason behind Bourdieu’s remark in his interview with the German writer Günter Grass, that the independent intellectuals oftentimes get known precisely because they do not ask too many questions and stay quiet. In our view, the deliberate political indifference of Umberto Eco and political prudence of Jürgen Habermas could be well explained this way.

Yet it were the origins of the nonconformist intellectuals activity which attracted the closest scrutiny from Pierre Bourdieu in his observations towards the end of his life. He deems it a necessary element of social and political life because:

- a) it provides for challenging the prevalent point of view;
- b) it helps steering the public opinion accordingly;
- c) it allows to defend one’s own stance under fire from the dominant political force.

(Grass, Bourdieu, 2002).

Thus, while recognizing the ingenuity and cogency of Pierre Bourdieu’s study of controversies in value-based pursuits of the modern European intellectuals, an inclination towards normality is evident with regard to his treatment of the non-conformist intellectuals’ mission.

The above mentioned feature is yet more evident in Bourdieu’s disciple Gisèle Sapiro. She constructs her own model of intellectuals’ involvement in politics based in their symbolic capital. She attempts to establish a direct proportion between one’s symbolic capital on one hand, and one’s immunity and independence in the social realm on the other. (Sapiro, 2009, 10-11). However, as demonstrated above, what matters is one’s personal choice between intellectual conformism and non-conformism: had it been otherwise, the most prominent European intellectuals, like Dahrendorf, Derrida, Eco would have been the most scathing opponents of the existing regime. However, it is not the case.

An altogether different approach is also possible, like that of another modern French philosopher Michel Surya. According to his very pessimistic point of view, the fate of an intellectual in the modern world is that of an “exotic animal” (Surya, 2000). If so, the difference between conformism and non-conformism is about to lose any meaning, since all intellectuals are likely to be marginalized. This might well be a possibility for the XXI century Europe, still not an exclusive one.

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