THE ROLE OF EUROPEAN INTELLECTUALS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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Abstract

This paper tries to understand – throughout a comparative social, historical and political analysis – if there is any continuity in the *modus operandi* of intellectuals in contemporary public arena. Thus, the main purpose of this paper is to identify, if the European public intellectual of the 21st century has recovered his/her active role and legitimacy in the public domain such as the one he/she already experienced in the mid-sixties and seventies. Having in mind the contradictory discourses around the role and representation of the intellectual, it seems, nevertheless, crucial to keep hold of E. Said's argument about intellectuals as "representative figures" (E. Saïd, 1993), who through responsible action, creativity, courage (B. Misztal, 2007) and an "avantgardistic instinct for relevance's" (Habermas, 2009) should be endorsed with the values of a free and deliberative democracy. In a nutshell, this paper enables us to understand that the resurgence of critical intervention and political engagement of civic-minded intellectuals in the public arena has been contributing to a greater vitality and re-politicization of European public sphere.

Keywords: European Intellectuals, Public Sphere, Resistance, Social movements.

This paper about "European Public Intellectuals and Social Movements" tries to understand – throughout a comparative social, historical and political analysis – if there is any continuity in the *modus operandi* of intellectuals in contemporary public arena. Thus, the main purpose of this paper is to identify, if the European public intellectual of the 21st century has recovered his/her active role and legitimacy in the public domain such as the one he/she already experienced in the mid-sixties and seventies. Nevertheless, to establish a comparative analysis between public European intellectuals and social movements it is helpful to revisit the contemporary debate around of the transformation of the role of intellectuals.

At a time, when some see intellectuals as an endangered species (eg. Steve Fuller, 2004, T. Judt, 2008 and R. Posner, 2001), and others stress their betrayal (J. Benda, 1927; Chomsky, 1969; Jacoby, 1987; Johnson, 1988 and Grass, 2000[21]), there is still who persist on their involvement in the social and political spectrum. The discussion about the role of contemporary public intellectuals has been highly controversial. While some defend a clear rupture with the tradition of intellectuals from Zola to Sartre, others continue to admit their commitment with universal values. Hence, while M. Foucault replaces the traditional intellectual by the expert specialist, who engages in and articulates the interest within his or her field of specialization (Misztal, 2007) - and Z. Bauman (1987) admits that as a result of the end of meta-narratives and grand-ideologies (J-F. Lyotard, 1979) intellectuals have lost their charismatic role as a public legislators and their role now "is [...] to mediate the communication between 'finite provinces' of 'communities of meaning'".[22] E. Said (1993)[23], on the other hand, while criticizing the functionalist-bureaucratic[24] view of intellectuals as policy-makers, who gravitate towards centers of power, asserts that they role "is essentially that of […] heightening consciousness, becoming aware of tensions, complexities, and taking on oneself responsibility for one's community. […]". In other words, "they are the ones […] who provoke difference and change" (2001: 385-386). J. Habermas (1985) also regards the intellectual as a politically engaged citizen, as "the medium and intensifier of a democratic

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[21] In a interview about the intellectual's role with P. Bourdieu, G. Grass claims the different connotation between a French and a German Intellectual: "In France, it seems to me, one speaks always, without hesitation, of "the intellectuals," but my experiences in Germany have shown me that it's a mistake to believe that all intellectuals are on the left. You can find proof to the contrary throughout the history of the twentieth century, the Nazi era included: A man like Goebbels was an intellectual" (2000).

[22] Compare Z. Bauman (1987: 197): "[…] the strategy of interpretation does differ form all strategies of legislation in one fundamental way: it does abandon overtly, or put aside as irrelevant to the task at hand, the assumption of the universality of truth, judgement or taste; it refuses to differentiate between communities which produce meanings; it accepts those communities' ownership rights, and the ownership rights as the only formation the communally grounded meanings may need. What remains for the intellectuals to do, is to interpret such meanings for the benefit of those who are not of the community which stands behind the meanings; to mediate the communication between 'finite provinces' or 'communities of meaning'."

[23] Compare A. Melzer: "The public intellectual […] self-consciously rejects the contemplative ideal of withdrawal and detachment, and is vitally concerned to 'make a difference', 'to take a stand', to 'help society'" (2003: 5)

[24] See Brym's definition of the functionalist view of intellectuals, "who pointed to the absorption of intellectuals by expanding government bureaucracies, university systems, business corporations, broadcasting networks […]" (Brym, 1980: 20)

will" (1985:51) that contributes - along with his/her critical reasoning and civic participation - to a pluralistic and deliberative public sphere.

Meanwhile, and more recently, the eruption of the global economic crisis there has been a resurgence of European intellectual's social and political commitment. Together with other differentiated social groups of activists, they are now challenging the *status quo,* i.e. the 'permissive consensus', the social "(…) retreat into conformism" (Castoriadis, 1997, p. 36), the political deficit and scarce civil involvement (which puts in check the accountability of the EU council) the excessive bureaucratic instruments and the imperatives of the economic system. Their oppositional stance against political power is, meanwhile, gaining a greater visibility in both domestic and in the European public sphere. According to Justine Lacroix and Kalypso Nicolaidis (2010: 17-18) in their recent book *European Stories: Intellectual Debates on Europe in National Contexts*, "concepts such as democracy, citizenship, or the republic as well as values, ethics, or norms are now at the core of debates that inextricably link the 'national' and the 'European.'"

Even though the idea of a European public sphere, of a sense of a common identity is controversial, Europeans have - over the years – tried to grow a shared cultural and political imaginary. The way the 'Peoples of Europe' imagine their social existence is influenced by their, nevertheless inconsistent and paradoxical, common historical past. Terror, horror and crime, stresses G. Steiner (2005) are some of the expressions employed in "Europe's self-definition as a *lieu de la mémoire*". He points out the irrationality of a *locus*, where "Goethe's garden almost borders on Buchenwald, where the house of Corneille abuts on the market-place in which Joan of Arc was hideously done to death" (Steiner, 2004: 22). Meanwhile, J. Derrida (2004: 410) upholds that the Europeans, while not leaving the memories aside, must "[…] fight for what of Europe remains irreplaceable for the world to come, for it to become more than a market or a single currency, more than a neo-nationalist conglomerate, more than a new armed force".

Although there are various skeptical views on a EU and European public sphere (Philip Schlesinger (1995), Peter Graf Kielmansegg, 1994; Dieter Grimm, 1995), there are others who cultivate the idea of common ground for public communication and intervention that transcends the level of nation-state. Aligned with J. Habermas and J. Derrida, Outhwaite and K. Eder assume that "[a] transnational public … exists in Europe as a cross-cutting of elite publics, citizens' publics and popular publics, related to each other by some supranational institutional environment…A European public is not a chimere but a thing that already turns up in critical times … A transnational public sphere … is one which is no longer tied to a reified body

of people such as the nation, but to a latent demos that can be there when time requires it" (Eder cited in Outhwaite, 2009: 64).

During the last two decades, prominent European intellectuals: Z. Bauman, P. Bourdieu, J. Derrida, U. Eco, A. Giddens, J. Habermas, S. Zizek have explored this transnational public sphere, primarily through privileged sites of resistance, for instance, through printed media[25]: Le Monde[26], The Guardian, Die Zeit, among others, in order to create a European sense of citizenry. One of the key moments of resistance towards the EU political pragmatism occurred in May, 2003 when J. Habermas with the co-signature of J. Derrida published an article entitled "February 15, or what binds Europeans together: A plea for a common foreign policy, beginning in the core of Europe" in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* against the US invasion in Iraq. These two politically active and responsible intellectuals (in E. Said's definition of a true intellectual's role) were here "able to sift, to judge, to criticize" (Said, 2003: 98-99)[27] and influence the millions of Europeans, who rallied (in London and Rome, Madrid and Barcelona, Berlin and Paris) against the US invasion of Iraq, while upholding the values of freedom and justice. Yet, other civic-minded and engaged intellectuals such as Umberto Eco (Italian), Adolf Muschg (Swiss), Gianni Vattimo (Italian), Fernando Savater (Spanish) also endorsed in this resistance movement.

It is interesting to notice that public European intellectuals took once again "the role of 'democracy's helpers'" (Misztal, 2007: 1). This "call to resist", call for a renewed EU public sphere, with critical, free and politically reflexive individuals was certainly an example of a progressive and enlightened European citizenship and a sign of a deliberative democracy. The struggle towards the emergence of a European deliberative democracy, i.e., a democracy that "focuses on social movements, and on the civil, cultural, religious, artistic, and political associations of the unofficial public sphere, as well" (Benhabib, 2002: 21) has certainly prompted a debate from

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[25] See D. della Porta et al. research work's results: "[…], we assume that the printed media are one of the most important arenas of public claim-making, and that most actors will, at one stage or another, try to make their views public." (della Porta & Caiani, 2009: 30)

[26] According with a recent case study about "French Sociologist and the Public Space of the Press" by Laurent Jeanpierre and Sébastien Mosbah-Natanson (2009:179; 185), *Le Monde* journalists tend to favour sociology over economics and humanities. Sociology consider as a counterweight to the "hegemony of economics as a mode for problematizing and constructing public issues"

[27] They shared in this article the following premises: "the determination of a European political responsibilities beyond any Eurocentrism; the call for a renewed confirmation and effective transformation of international law and its institutions, in particular the UN; a new conception and a new praxis for the distribution of state authority, etc., according to the spirit, if not the precise sense, that refers back to the Kantian tradition" (Habermas, Derrida, 2003: 1).

below between the voices of EU civil society actors. Since 2002 activists have, as well, come together in European Social Forums. Some persist that the growing relevance of social movements[28] in Europe is a consequence of the encroaching capital-market liberalization. The Lisbon Treaty, for instance, which dismantled the welfare state in the name of free competition, and the current economic instability in Europe have stimulated new transnational social movements that contest, challenge and call into question the dominance of what J. Stiglitz calls the market fundamentalism. The recent marches in Europe (e.g. Indignant demonstrations), especially in the southern countries, against a self-regulating market, against the austerity measures, high unemployment rate, precariousness and exclusion, present a common framework of action and resistance. Such wave of a generalized societal discontent in Europe has intensified alliances between NGOs, Unions, Parties and European citizens. Moreover, and even though the "conditions of plurality of values, repertoires, traditions and political cultures, where people have different perspectives" D. della Porta (2005: 340f) suggests that they now face common problems.

The recent protests in Europe, especially in southern Europe, involve a strong socio-economic orientation and agenda and are highly motivated by a collective common goal: social self-protection. Similar to the old, classical social movements (labour struggle), and differently from the ones of the mid-60s headed by the sons and daughters of the Welfare state (Rootes, 1995), in which all demanded recognition of all kinds of rights – cultural, economic, national, generational and sexual rights (Touraine, [2005] 2007). The current social movements fight back against the implementation, in the name of integration, of restrictive EU's economic and political policies. Europeans symptomatic felling of *Unsicherheit* and the global awareness of the failings of free market liberalization has, however, strengthened the affiliation of an intellectual elite with other networks of resistance and solidarity. These intellectuals are not really engaged in the classical role of organizer, on centralizing for her/himself the decision-making and division of labour, rather they have developed new intervention strategies. In a glance, from S. Hessel *Indignez-vous* (2010)' slogan "create is to resist, resist is to create", to J. Habermas[29], J. Derrida, S. Zizek's media strategy

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[28] "Social movements are conceptualized as dense informal networks of collective actors involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents, which share a distinct collective identity, using mainly protests as their modus operandi. In this sense, they tend to overlap, at least in part, with civil society actors, usually identified with a set of voluntary associations, distinct from both the state and the market and sharing some common, civic values" (Della Porta and Caiani, 2009: 6)

[29] See for instance Habermas' article "Rendons l'Europe plus démocratique ! La crise européenne", published in Le Monde, 25.10.11

and Fernando Savater's involvement in virtual forums of activists - there is a clear commitment with society and social justice.

Yet, these intellectuals do no longer present solutions. P. Bourdieu (1998: 58) emphasizes the *modus operandi* of intellectuals in a context of neo-liberalism and in a global risk society "is not only to invent responses, but to invent a way of inventing responses, to invent a new form of organization of the work of contestation and of organization of contestation, of the task of activism." For J. Habermas, their "[…] sense for what is lacking and 'could be otherwise' […] spark of imagination in conceiving of alternatives; and a modicum of the courage required for polarizing, provoking, and pamphleteering (Habermas, 2009)[30] makes them privileged players that animate the *civitas*, forge synergies and inspire new forms of reflection and demands.[31] In the meantime, F. Savater responded in an interview of *El País* last February (25th, 2012) [Cultura, 25 Feb. 2012] that intellectuals should not only bring to the public debate proposals that transcend the usual political pragmatism, but as well they should enrich the comprehension, instead of the confusion or the simplification of these themes.[32] In short, we can conclude these intellectuals remind the "Peoples of Europe" the need of a participatory European citizenry based on critical thinking, political reasoning and free discussion. According to them, to create a "social Europe" and restore our utopias, "[…] we must create",

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[30] Compare B. A. Misztal (2007: 36-37) "Creativity is a means that enables intellectuals to participate in the realm of knowledge and to transcend their professional specializations into critical sensitivity, and by this process to ensure their authority as critic-specialists. By emphasizing creativity as one of the main characteristics of the intellectual role, we can hold that the creative achievements of intellectuals, while taking place against a background of specialist knowledge, also refers to the movement from specialized domains of scholarship into domains of public debate and back. The courage of conviction, as the necessary precondition for speaking in defiance of the established powers and the public, also contributes to public intellectuals' special authority."

[31] Compare Morris et al. (2004: 171), "Leaders are critical to social movements: they inspire commitment, mobilize resources, create and recognize opportunities, devise strategies, frame demands, and influence outcomes". Aldon Morris and Suzanne Staggenborg (2004: 175) conclude in their study "Leadership in Social Movements" that leaders usually possess a greater cultural and educational capital than other activists. They stress that "[t]o be successful, social movements require that a myriad of intellectual tasks be performed extremely well. A host of social movement activities – framing, interfacing with media, writing, orating, devising strategies and tactics, creatively synthesizing information gleaned from local, national, and international venues, dialoguing with internal and external elites, improvising ad innovating, developing rationales for coalition building and channeling emotions – are primarily intellectual tasks."

[32] ["Los intelectuales son escritores, profesores y artistas que quieren hacerse oír fuera de sus áreas de trabajo sobre cuestiones políticas y sociales. Deberían aportar al debate público argumentos o propuestas que trascendiesen las cautelas del pragmatismo político habitual, para así enriquecer la comprensión y no la confusión o la simplificación de esos temas"].

emphasizes P. Bourdieu, a European social movement." (2000). In other words, to recover the founding values of Europe, citizens must revitalize the EU's public sphere now strongly-bureaucratized, "colonized" by the economic imperatives of the "System" and by a top-down political model (Habermas [1981], Benhabib, [2002]). Thus, explains J. Habermas, "[a] public sphere that functions politically requires more than the institutional guarantees of the constitutional state; it also needs the supportive spirit of cultural traditions and patterns of socialization, of the political culture, of a populace accustomed to freedom" (1992: 453).

In a nutshell, this paper suggests that the resurgence of critical intervention and political engagement of civic-minded intellectuals in the public arena has been contributing to a greater vitality and re-politicization of public sphere. In this dramatic moment of the European history, the responsibility to speak truth to society (Melzer, 2003, p. 11) becomes once again the fundamental task of contemporary intellectuals. Such commitment with "transparency and justice […] requires the active public participation of public intellectuals in expanding the democratic imagination and civic sensitivity of citizens and their leaders alike" (Misztal, 2007, p. 4).

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