



THE DE-SKILLING OF THE INTELLECTUAL

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The educational elite in Germany has not "betrayed" us—it is in the process of disappearing.

Expertocracies are based on the immaturity of the majority, falling on fertile ground when the citizen renounces his freedom of discretion. For Plato, the intellectual tutelage of a spiritual elite was still regarded as a means of self-knowledge, to help man become incorporated into the "harmonious whole." This ideal, however, lost its innocence as soon as its universal values were put in the service of the worldly. To regain it, we must return to the enlightened spirit of an Erasmus of Rotterdam.

"Sometimes that light at the end of the tunnel is a train" (Murphy's Law).

Justice as a Social Structural Principle

The people are too stupid for democracy. That's why it needs experts to avoid being manipulated and deceived by egoistic rulers. This call for a "truth-based" epistocracy (ancient Greek: *episteme* "knowledge" and *kratia* "rule") does not come from me, but from philosophers like Plato, John Stuart Mill or David Estlund.

According to them, society should not be oriented towards equality, but should be shaped according to the principle of justice. This arose, for example, with Plato—as soon as each individual limits himself to the function to which he is entitled on the basis of his constitution; those who are by nature capable of steering the whole should rule over those whose nature consists in subordinating themselves. The individual must recognize himself and understand "to do his own thing." Only in this way does he achieve a "just state of mind" and approaches eudaimonia, the good life with himself as well as within the community.

Just as for Plato a happy life is conditioned by just action, for the latter he presupposed the structure of a hierarchical relationship between the three cardinal virtues of wisdom, fortitude and temperance. To the same extent that these were lived by the individual and the community, the inner harmony of the polis, the space in which ethical life is possible, intensified. If, however, power, ambition and the desire for fame triumph over morality, arbitrariness prevails and insufficient structures of order and permanent conflicts of private individual interests arise. For Plato, who saw the basic flaws of democracy in both an excess of individual freedom and the participation of unqualified and self-interested individuals, this

meant the end of the rule of reason.

His ideal of a ruling philosopher aristocracy thus has a serious catch: it functions only as long as its sages are also interested in what is true. If, however, universal values are put in the service of the worldly, not only any distinction between right and true or good and well-intentioned is extinguished, but also any utopia of justice.

As soon as the freedom and personal responsibility of the individual as well as the moral corruptibility of a philosopher is misjudged, it is no longer a matter of truth but of power. If the will to help the citizen to integrate into the "harmonious whole" by means of reflection and self-knowledge is turned into the illiberal, the citizen may continue to be educated to the "good," but this "good" no longer benefits only him, but those who decide what he is to understand by it.

In the Service of the Worldly

It was the French philosopher Julien Benda who, in view of the unconscionability of his time, took it upon himself to re-examine the nature of the intellectual in terms of the Platonic aspect of virtue. Thus, in his book, *La trahison des clercs* (*The Betrayal of the Intellectuals*), written in 1927 and revised in 1946, he defined the latter's natural constitution as disinterested, static, and rational.

For Benda, the classical intellectual represents justice, truth, and reason in their abstract form. He is not out to find justice on earth, but seeks satisfaction in himself. If his very own interest was cognition and not knowledge, "pure speculative thinking" was perhaps the noblest form of intellectual activity for the intellectual. If he recollected it, the intellectual lived according to what Spinoza once called "time-conditioned perfection": a kind of universalism within the intellectual way of life, from which, in turn, a sense of eternity is able to develop.

If the intellectual realm is consequently "not of this world," he is also not out to set certain "courses" in man by means of "subjective ideologies" and thus to "re-educate" him. His sense of the whole lets him always regard man as an end in himself, as a subject with dignity, morality and understanding, to whom nobody needs to prescribe what he has to do or not to do.

George Orwell wrote about himself in 1940: "Emotionally, I am definitely 'leftist,' but I believe that an

author can only remain honest if he keeps himself free of party labels." Benda saw in the omission of impartiality the betrayal of intellectuals—for their real task was the impartial search for truth using their reason.

As soon as intellectuals labeled themselves and justified political passions with their teachings instead of eternal wisdom, they also ceased to be intellectuals for Benda. They became servants of the mundane—experts or "media intellectuals" who subscribed to the dogma of "the perpetual development of science" and thus considered worthless everything that did not belong to the "real." They began to act "as if thinking did not have to be thinking exclusively, without wanting to put itself in 'the service' of whatever" and became supporters of a system, "which respects thinking only insofar as it serves it, and ostracizes it as soon as it finds satisfaction in the pure accomplishment of itself." They want to uphold doctrines, not people.

The Unmasking of the Ethos of the Expert

While this betrayal of the intellectual's intellectual heritage led even Noam Chomsky to call the modern expert an anti-intellectual, a follower of a "kind of secular priesthood" for the power elite, this "distribution of tasks" of intellectual activities allows Michel Foucault to distinguish between the "universal" and the "specific intellectual": If the universal intellectual was still free of ideology, this allowed him to clarify general values and to represent with them "the conscience of all." If he wants to feel diversities in all their depth and indissolubility, the specific intellectual strives for unification.

The specific intellectual is to be regarded as the result of a world whose horizon expands from day to day in such a way that specialization appears as the only possibility of reducing complexity. Thus, just as the intellectual's topics are now no longer universal but specific, he too is no longer impartial and free of judgment. As an expert or "media intellectual," his task henceforth is no longer to clarify truth and justice, but "to influence by thought, to develop ideas for the powerful, and to proclaim to all what they should believe." He can provide plans, strategies, theories, and justifications, but no autonomy, no recognition, no appreciation for the individual.

Ultimately, the expert ends up as a prisoner of his own barriers to thought—unable to recognize that in his attempt to establish universal morality and truth from his own discipline alone, he betrays those very morals. While his world view is just as fragmented as the interdisciplinarity of his sciences, he is so taken in by himself and his matter that his narrow-mindedness suppresses any form of unconventional

solution-finding and ultimately becomes his own undoing.

Thus, shackled to the fragility of those "value scales of the earthly," public venues for long reflection or enlightened discussion disappear from his listening radius; their concerns cannot be expressed either in statistics or in studies. His belief in generating higher evidence, and certainty for the good life by means of research, ultimately exceeds his confidence in that good life itself.

Is this still Politics, or sheer Driven-ness?

As soon as a society tries to establish truth through itself, it becomes blind to the fragility of its own knowledge bases. The loss of the classical intellectual as an intellectually and materially independent companion of events can also be viewed under this aspect: With the disappearance of his role as a "disruptive factor" (Joseph A. Schumpeter), not only the fundamental criticism of the ruling system—which had been common until then—disappeared, but also along with it that spirit which still knew how to stand up to the temptations of unfreedom.

What remains is a lack of intervention in public discourse, driven by wanting to be prominent and pride, as well as a collective thinking based on the disorientation of modernity, permeated by obedience, spinelessness and command structures.

"The renewal of society must start from doubt"—Ivan Illich.

Freed from oppositional insurgencies, those doctrines strengthened which always hit fertile ground where man is given a morally justifiable reality without any alternative. Consequently, it is not surprising that our Western hemisphere has fallen prey to such hubris—after all, it not only protects itself and its members from many forms of systemic pathologization, but at the same time generates a momentum of its own that has nothing but universality, coherence, homogeneity and precision in mind. If there is no friction, there can be no contradiction. And where man encounters no inconsistency or runs into doors, there is no reason to question things. A loyalty to the line that Rudi Dutschke defined back in his conversation with Günter Gaus in 1967 as follows:

"But we have systematically been given governments again and again, which in a sense could be described as institutionalized instruments of lies, instruments of half-truth, of distortion; the people are not told the

truth. No dialogue is established with the masses, no critical dialogue that can explain what is going on in this society.... We (have) after 1945 a very clear development of parties, where the parties are no longer means to raise the consciousness of the totality of the people in this society, but only instruments to stabilize the existing order, to enable a certain apparatus layer of party functionaries to reproduce themselves out of their own framework, and thus the possibility that upward pressure from below and upward consciousness can prevail, as an institution of the parties, has already been made impossible."

If power is built on the basis of oppression, truth loses its audience. It is no longer about knowledge, but about consensus: If bourgeois interests are in conflict with political-economic ones, there is a tendency—instead of letting the mask of the welfare state fall and thus mutating into a horror itself—to invent circumstances which aim at the desired action by suppressing certain needs in themselves. Washed clean by the intention to serve only the common good, the human being as the actual purpose of all endeavors is lost from view. What education, politics or treatment might ultimately consist in, becomes secondary. Where only their application counts, their observance becomes an end in itself.

If today's totalitarianism prefers to wear a suit and a gown instead of a uniform, it nevertheless retains its corset of narrow-mindedness: if some plunge into a kind of sublimated conformism by means of consumption and mass culture, others suffer a so-called *déformation professionnelle*; an adaptation of the professional goggles for the entire practice of life.

While in the case of designers, gardeners, or cooks this may still take place within the framework of a penetrating everyday comedy, such a universality in the case of politicians, police officers, and teachers as well as scientists, doctors, and virologists entails much more far-reaching consequences—suddenly everything becomes political; everyone is potentially contagious or a supposed danger; and in addition, third parties are involved whose life trajectories were previously still able to move outside of any encroachment. According to Ivan Illich, the dissolution of the private sphere, which he once described as "incapacitation by experts," threatens to blur the individual contours, and people are seen only as stenciled educators, consumers, clients or patients.

In the Soup Kitchen of Political Realism

While philosophers like Aristotle and Hegel still assumed that truth was subject to an inner dynamic and that one could only ever approach it, but never reach it, their thinking was not only outside the contradiction of eternity and status, but they lived within a lack of pretension as to the meaningful

contexts of this world, which is diametrically opposed to our claim to be alone today—particularly in times of crisis, we experience how scientific killer-arguments are used by politicians to immunize their own decisions.

Whether climate change or pandemic emergencies, under the aspect of sovereignty, rules are drafted in which those who are subjected to them must participate procedurally—an inductive procedure that declares correctness in detail to be valid in general. As such, it represents a level of encroachment that would doubtless provoke broad waves of indignation if our lifestyles had not reached a level of passivity that makes us perceive paternalism more as relief than as disenfranchisement.

Benda saw the origin of this procedure in the three-pronged nature of political passions, consisting of the weakening of intellectual attitudes, the abolition of idealism, and the decimation of discernment. In the course of the past century, this has created a field of thought through which the state's endeavor to mobilize all moral resources for itself need no longer be confined to wartime—instead of letting people develop their own ideas and values in the midst of an open utopia, they have decided to keep people dependent on those ready, prefabricated narratives by means of mental atrophy.

Whether the debate is about digitization, gender, war advocacy, eco-communism or "daring more dictatorship" has therefore become completely irrelevant—people's moral will is nowadays so quickly integrated into the value framework of these prefabricated guidelines that it is difficult to deny the rise of a new political religiosity.

Our inner and outer worlds are simply too one-sidedly played upon not to perceive this as a kind of "semi-permeabilization" of our self: The more susceptible we have become to outside influences, the more our voice has lost relevance. It has become irrelevant what we actually want, how we actually want to live, and what our emotional state would actually consist of if we weren't constantly being twisted like this.

The medialization, medicalization and mathematization of our perception of reality has decoupled it from the reality of our everyday life in such a way that auto-, experto- and technocrats have an easy game in restabilizing the detached uncertainties about right and wrong, good or evil, with their own value concepts. While the individual loses his voice in the speech poison of the masses, the latter became so fragile over time that they preferred to follow instructions instead of guidance and only orders instead of advice for fear of making mistakes in the course of their own decisions.

"Caring behavior has a tendency to incapacitate. Protecting keeps people down. Caring is therefore number one of the ten ways to make people passive"—Reinhard K. Sprenger.

The Unwaveringness of the Erasmanian

Even if every generation has the right to fail because of its own stupidity, it is still far too short-sighted to look for the reason for a lack of emancipation solely in the individual. In times when universities mutate into corporations and the discussion rounds of all media formats are geared only to ratings—generating "confrontainment" instead of enlightenment and education of a critical public, it is simply no longer enough to "know" the roots of earlier authoritarian systems—especially since these usually hit the most fertile ground with that "cultivated" social class.

To unmask the bondage of one's own zeitgeist, even though its representatives not only prove not to be advocates of enlightenment but to be profiteers or even initiators of unfreedom, requires more than "knowledge" or insight into the political: In order to muster the courage to stand up for freedom and independence in the midst of a society that mistakenly believes itself to be free and independent, one needs a self that is unspoiled by the constraints of the time, that does not allow itself to be distracted by what one has to think and say, but knows how to preserve the value of justice in itself, independent of all moral constitutions.

"It is necessary to create sober, patient people who do not despair in the face of the worst horrors and do not delight in every stupidity. Pessimism of the mind, optimism of the will"—Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebook 28, paragraph 11, 2232.

From Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin, and Norberto Bobbio to Alexander Mitscherlich, Erich Fried, Michel Foucault, and Golo Mann to Hannah Arendt, Theodor W. Adorno, Primo Levi, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Jan Patočka, or Group 47—all of them did not let their sense of justice be driven out of them in "times of trial"—one more, the other less. They not only resisted the temptations of unfreedom, but also made the voice of reason resound in the midst of all Gleichschaltung. For them, freedom was still the absence of coercion.

For Ralf Dahrendorf, this made them Erasmusians, those "lateral-thinking individualities" who often stood alone as representatives of the liberal spirit—and thus immune to the currents of their time. If

they kept their moral and political heads while others lost them, loneliness became the price of their thoughts and thus also the price of their freedom. If Raymond Aron or Walter Benjamin died for this principle, today's court intellectuals lack any form of discipline, self-control and prudence to make even a comparable sacrifice in the "fight for reason."

Undoubtedly, "tying" moral decisions to reason is rarer than ever. At the same time, there is a lack of those cool, clever minds that still see things from the perspective of the future—How do we want to live? Who do we want (to have been)? There is a lack of that way of being that has always been able to maintain a far-sighted view without falling out of its own center.

There is a lack of voices that ask questions rather than say them; thinkers whose aphorisms still encouraged people to think for themselves instead of boiling them down to a moralizing mood-mash by means of emotionalization.

Those "guardians of truth", whose stock of knowledge reached so far that they could be called "world specialists," but who never used their competences to keep their fellow world down. Those whose concern was to give people differentiated trains of thought so that they, in turn, do not lose their heads in this world? In short, there is a lack of those thinkers one can look up to without feeling small. But who says that we can't be these thinkers ourselves?

"When I say that people have always made their history, but have not yet made it consciously, then that should mean that if they make it consciously, then the problem of the elites becoming independent, of the apparatuses becoming independent, no longer arises. Because the problem consists in voting out elected representatives again—being able to vote them out at any time—and being aware of the necessity of voting out"—Rudi Dutschke, in an interview with Günter Gaus, 1967.

Lilly Gebert loves to rack her brains, be it about how humanity can be preserved in a system based on inhumanity or how it can still be measured in times of technocracy and alienation. Since she knows how quickly the view of the world can be blocked with a newspaper, she tries to bring clarity to the mental derangement of our time on her blog "[Treffpunkt im Infinity](#)." This article appears courtesy of [Rubikon](#).

Featured: Fool's Cap Map of the World, ca. 1580-1590.

