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SOCIOLOGY OF PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS – SOCIOLOGISTS AS PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS

Speaking about the fate of intellectuals is one of the things intellectuals do passionately. Since the time the very term intellectual was invented during the Dreyfus affair intellectuals have been engaged in debates locating themselves in the wider contexts of society, politics and culture. They fought each other, tried to exclude competitors from the public sphere, and each group was trying to expand their influence vis-à-vis rivals. Over the years new groups of intellectuals entered the stage, older ones disappeared -- social differentiations took place, and conceptual reformulations were suggested to keep pace with the social change. At the beginning of the 21st century the role of intellectuals has changed profoundly compared with hundred years ago. At least there are more varieties of intellectuals, emerging from different social corners with very different agendas.

The aim of the following is threefold: First, we try to identify the major changes the field where intellectuals act underwent over the last decades. Secondly, we concentrate our analysis on a particular configuration, where actors participate actively in more than one well defined social field, each of them functions differently with regard to specific role expectations and follows incommensurable rules with regard to the recognition of what is worth to be taken as a serious contribution. Finally, we attempt to establish a frame which is flexible enough for a cross-national comparison.

As a starting point it seems wise to look back to the origins of the intellectual as a particular social group. The original "classical" intellectual was a man, seldom a woman, speaking to a single and undivided audience, the educated people, at this time a relative small portion of the population. Two types participated in this effort: On the one hand literates of all sort, and on the other hand university professors. Usually the former did not come under cross-pressure, and if so the cross-pressure stemmed from parts of the public, and their conflicting expectations only. The prestige of university professors was then high enough to suppress any objections with regard to the authority of their public utterances.

In addition the consensus, what Bertolt Brecht called “das große Einverständnis”, between those intellectuals which were based in the university world and the ruling class was deep enough to see the public statements of the former as located within the boundaries of the dominant discourse. Fundamental opposing pronouncements were the exception. Much of the debates were, so to speak, about the pace of social improvement, but not about the direction in which societies should evolve. Before the labour movement won access to the decision making institutions by enlarging their fractions in parliaments, those few intellectuals collaborating with the labour movement or expressing ideas very similar to those from the organized left could be marginalized and have been neglected by the majority of the educated public. During his lifetime Karl Marx did not experience any recognition outside his tiny group of comrades, and it lasted some time before his work was taken as a serious contribution to the intellectual debate.

The status-set of classical intellectuals was simpler than the status-set of present day intellectuals. Within the status of being an intellectual one had to handle different expectations but they could be balanced in one role-set whereas today several status-sets compete with each other.

The second group forming classical intellectuals were usually writers. Some of them could make a living from their very work, few of them were even able to ignore expectations of the public-at-large either because they earned enough money from their preferred mode of doing things or they subsidized their intellectual work from other sources of income. Writer-intellectuals deviated more from the overall societal consensus, but most of the transgressing was confined to artistic questions, and not to social problems. The great realistic novels of Balzac, Zola, and Dickens, and the naturalistic plays of Hauptmann and Ibsen portrayed social misery but seldom their authors spoke out in favour of something societal completely different like “socialism.”

The debates of intellectuals in the long 19th century, to borrow a phrase from Eric Hobsbawm to cover the period up to World War I under a single label, were closely related to the viewpoints of particular social forces: Nationalism and self-regulation of tinier ethnic groups, imperialism and the idea of spreading civilization worldwide, the ongoing challenges of the Enlightenment, arguing in favour of the inclusion of women and workers into society under the heading of democratization, and finally fighting superstition and the domination of the people by the church.

Fundament opposing contribution from intellectuals which gained recognition in broader circles of the public appeared only after the Communist Party conquered power in Russia and formed a worldwide network of devoted subordinates.

Between 1917 and 1989 much of the debates by intellectuals were indeed debates about the pro and con of Communism.

This brought unintentionally the Social Democratic left in accord with the Western type of societies, in some countries quicker than in others. Halfway through this era Daniel Bell announced the *End of Ideology*, because he thought that the big ideological struggle was over, just to see a new ideological driven movement enter centre stage: neo-Marxism and the students and youth movements with their new idols like Che, Ho and even Mao.

Interestingly these men were seen as practical intellectuals, following their ideology by sacrificing themselves or their people for a good cause. To add in parenthesis some of the admirers imitated their idols by acting in their own society similar to their idols by founding guerrilla troops in Western countries – not so different to present day's suicide bombers from another ideological driven background.

Classical intellectuals' audience were the educated people, a relative small portion of the population at large. Due to modernization processes this audience grew. Mass education and an increasing professionalization of occupations produced more receivers for messages by intellectuals and contributed to an ongoing differentiation of the expectations address to them. Besides the enlargement of the audience the expansion of the education system offered would-be intellectuals jobs and income. As a consequence up to then the normative term "intellectuals" qualified for an alternative interpretation, and became the label for all those professions which develop, manipulate, and disseminate knowledge. Echoing older classifications this kind of intellectuals were named knowledge workers later on. According to its narrowly defined class-analysis-scheme Marxism-Leninism used for a while "intelligentsia" or "intelligence" to identify this stratum of educated workers.

The old world of bourgeois reasoning became democratized and it is fair to suppose that this shaped intellectuals and their products. Those intellectuals, or would-be-s, which entered the formal system of higher education (in some countries only the secondary level of the education system opened up for them) as professors or instructors were exposed to competing role expectations. Only after World War II in some developed countries special regulations made particular jobs available for them, for instance writer-in-residence, professorships for creative writing, or humanistic studies etc., where the intellectuals turned into professors could follow a single minded performance. But the majority encountered some kind of cross-pressure, where expectations of the public at large weren't congruent with inner academic rules. Paraphrasing Niklas Luhmann's terminology one could say that the medium of scholarship is truth, whereas the medium of the public is applause. Rarely one get applause for the truth, and seeking truth afford another habit than seeking public acknowledgment.

One way to evade situations of permanent cross-pressure is to concentrate one's activities in one field only. The retreat of scholars from the sphere of public debate is therefore often just the most probable consequence of avoiding to be exposed to cross-pressures.

The "classical" intellectual was located in a three-polar environment: Driven by ideology, oriented towards the public at large and in need of subsidizing themselves. Each of these poles eroded during the 20th century. Ideologies lost their appeals; mass culture diversified the public and offered the later an increasing spectrum of voices, and finally the economic base for independent middle class existences disappeared during one or the other economic crisis.

The new haven for intellectuals, the world of higher education, experienced fundamental changes too. Differentiations took place inside the world of scholarship. During the 20th century scholars and scientists were confronted with an increasing complexity of their roles. In the first quarter of the last century university professors could remain in the proverbial ivory tower and could ignore demands from the outside more or less. If professors spoke to the larger audience beyond the classrooms they could be sure that their authority was not challenged. Later, changes in the organization of the scholarly environment forced professor to transgress the boundaries of their native world and they found themselves more often in the position to legitimize their status and pronouncements. Besides this some scientific disciplines developed different patterns of exchange with other actors. (See Graphics)

The most common relationship to the outside world was and is the surveillance authority, in Europe usually located in ministries or other parts of the state apparatus; in countries with a larger share of private universities the surveillance authority is exhibited by boards of overseers, trustees etc. Originally the state provided all the means university professors needed. Step-by-step another actor entered the field: Funding bodies, like philanthropic foundations, offered additional means for research. Since research couldn't be done purely individually any longer, the new spenders became more influential than before. Usually these agencies funded only "projects", which means that contracts had to be negotiated and regular interaction with actors outside the traditional realm of scholarly work happened. Whereas state funding was seldom aimed to particular research agendas, funding bodies gave money for well defined endeavours to be completed within pre-defined periods. A particular discipline at a particular place looked differently if their leading members were able to raise such funds. A side effect was an increase of competition inside a particular discipline and between neighbouring disciplines. New role obligations were the consequence.

A new feature of relations to the outside world emerged when scientific disciplines established regular business with principals. Some of them are more successful than others but one should bear in mind that these kind of relationship shaped the intellectual products of the disciplines. Principals expect that particular contractually defined products were delivered to them exclusively. Seldom is the public at large even aware about those products. A privatization of the production of knowledge evolves and sometimes scholars as partner in such contracts are yet forbidden to disseminate the content to others. These relationships could be located on one dimension, running from a high degree of specificity on the side of principals to the more generalized expectations expressed by state overseers. However in any of these relations the agents placed outside the scholarly world are more powerful than the university people.

Another patterned relationship between scholarly disciplines and users is the one to ordinary individuals as clients. In some disciplines these clients are the prime audience. For instance psychotherapy cannot survive as a scholarly endeavour without patients; literature needs at least some readers, and pedagogy wants some pupils. Disciplines without well-defined clients are of particular interest here. As long as some kind of clients are at hand a discipline is not forced to retreat themselves to the inner world of scholarship, where the main addressee are the other members of the academic tribe. These self-sufficient disciplines are usually of small scale, sometimes not even their names are well known to outsiders.

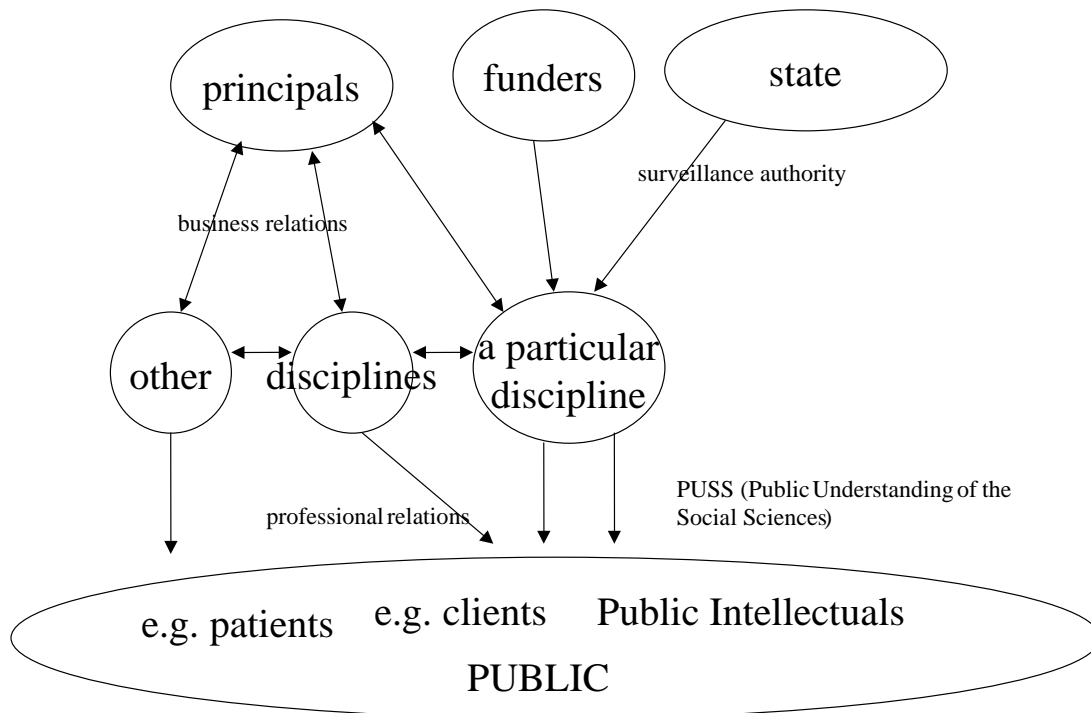
Numismatics, cosmology, palaeontology, Egyptology, and similar fields are happy enough to talk to themselves exclusively. Members of these disciplines seldom feel encouraged to offer their scholarly insights to the audience at large, and if a member of such a discipline is engaged in public affairs he or she seldom writes or speaks in the capacity of his or her discipline but as a public intellectual.

Those scholarly disciplines which lack clear defined clients can be divided into two subgroups: On the one hand there a disciplines which hijack the public for their own attempts; and those who think that their insights might be of some value for the public. Hijacking disciplines usually need a lot of money to perform their scholarly work, and their members have learned to impress the audience, and through it state bureaucracy and other funding bodies by offering them bits and bytes to satisfy curiosity. Take for example High Energy Physics and its wish to build a Super Collider or Quantum Physicists who promise that their quantum encryption will someday benefit the audience. In both cases one can suppose safely that the vast majority of the people don't even have a clou what's going on in fields like these ones. But clever members of these disciplines trigger the curiosity nerves and secure funds for their esoteric interests. The whole Public Understanding of Science endeavour is aimed to legitimize research of this kind and secure the funding for the next big laboratory.

The social sciences are in a different position. Their ability to feed the public's curiosity is limited. The main reason seems to be that scientists' presentations of their very esoteric knowledge collide with convictions in the lay audience only exceptionally. The "deep impact" experiment where a kind of weapon was shot from a satellite towards an asteroid does not interfere with beliefs, morals or presuppositions on the side of the lay people. It cost only US \$ 280 millions. The social sciences are in a similar position to those science disciplines whose findings contradict popular convictions, as it is the case with genetics, evolutionary biology, and parts of medical research. Whereas these sciences strive to preserve their authority to offer a sound reading of their findings the authority of the social sciences is much weaker because their findings contradict popular expectations regularly. The persuasiveness of the social sciences is undermined further by the very fact that they lack an overall consensus which could function as a platform from which scholars argue. Social sciences, sociology in particular, are fragmented, divided into rivalling schools and approaches. An inventory of persuasive insights from the social sciences which did not experience counter-statements from lay people would be relatively short. Perhaps the Milgram experiment and some results from experimental economics like those about risk averseness would overcome the threshold of public scepticism.

The lack of clients in disciplines like sociology force disciplines like this one either into retreat from presenting their research findings to the public or encounter immediate quarrels after announcing new insights. Adapting to this environment isn't an easy task. Not at least because besides the scepticism from the lay people sociologists entering the public sphere get mixed reactions from their peers too. Simplification is the least they hear from their colleagues. Those sociologists who regularly contribute to public debates have to envision the decline of their scholarly reputation.

Graph: Relations between scholarly disciplines and outside actors



The role set of public intellectuals encompass several more or less well defined elements. Each role segment offers some rewards and is connected with some difficulties. The most uncontroversial role is the expert. They interact primarily with principals, either from the private or the public sector, or as commentator in the media, especially in TV. Any principal has a strong interest to secure the reputation of the expert, because otherwise the utility of the experts and their advice would be damaged. Experts use highly esoteric knowledge and hid themselves behind complicated calculations and models, as we can see e.g. in the ongoing debate about pension reform and the demographic consequences of aging. A special case of experts are counsellors and consultants. Their advices become seldom known to wider audiences; in a way they are more privatized versions of experts because they counsel their clients exclusively. As a rule both types of experts provide recommendations toward public policies and avoid what intellectuals regularly do, namely criticizing given social condition and regulations principally. As long as experts are giving advice in one policy field only they can secure their public and scholarly reputation much better than those experts who comment on several topics. Experts who leave their narrowly defined fields of competence and offer for instance schemes for a reform of the whole welfare system encounter much stronger responses from other experts, from politicians connected with opposition parties, and the media. “Welfare to work”, “third way”, and “affirmative action” could be given as illustrations.

The broader an expert's portfolio the more visible s/he became. Professor X is then not only the expert for the reform of the higher education system, but a panellist at the Annual Meeting of an Academy of Fine Arts, writes regularly op-ed commentaries in a widely circulated newspaper, shows up in talk shows, be persuaded by a publisher to exchange letters with another celebrity just for publishing a bestseller, earns honorary degrees, and so on. This trajectory of becoming a public figure is self-supporting, it spirals one up and up. Finally this person remembers one on Malcolm Bradbury's Doctor Criminale, a character which looks like a clone between Georg Lukács and Umberto Eco.

Experts with a broad portfolio cannot be differentiated from public intellectuals easily, at least for the audience they look like each other. This reminds us, that any public intellectual from scholarly origin needs to have some expertise. Strong convictions and a fine prose aren't enough. It seems that this distinguishes classical intellectuals from scholarly public intellectuals. Whereas the former need nothing more than convictions and style, the later are regularly in need of speaking as a scientific authority. To avoid mistakes we would like to add that a scholarly public intellectual can undergo a status change and start a career as a classical intellectual.

Evaluation of contributions of expert-intellectuals follows two conflicting patterns. Experts' proposals become criticized either according to terms of scholarship or politics. The more a suggested remedy conflicts political convictions of other experts or interested parties the more the scholarly standing of the experts will be challenged. The best antidote against annoying policies is to question the scientific fundament on which suggestions have been built. Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein's attack on Affirmative Action got applause because it came along as a purely scholarly approach, arguing that the facts are against preferring Afro-American kids. On the other hand, to challenge the scholarly reputation of someone who is not only a sociologists but a public intellectual too, it is appropriate to say that the one isn't any longer in the real research business, lost track with the very forefront in the field, hold outdated things for new, and so on. This might even be correct, because the demands a public intellectual experience are sometimes so intense that being still an active researcher is nearly impossible. The same can be said about those scholars who direct big research units, and probably about most Nobel Laureates.

An incentive to perform the role of a public intellectual which cannot estimated high enough is that the rewards someone can earn in the public sphere are paid much faster than those one can probably get out of one's research. Whereas as a scholar someone might even have to wait beyond his death to become a celebrity (think on Walter Benjamin), the status of a mass media guru, queen, or king can be reached on short notice. Of course, only few climb up to this level of standing, but the incentives to try are strong, and the rewards can be earned immediately.

Of greatest influence in shaping present days public intellectuals' reputation are the mass media. Take for example Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. Both acted in the public sphere, but at their time this sphere consists only of some newspapers and magazines, public appearances in front of a few people, to whom one could speak using one's own strength of voice, and conversations with a handful of public figures who sought advice. No telephone, no radio, no TV, no easy to use public transport, not to mention Websites, online discussion groups devoted to particular thinkers, and the chance to travel to any place worldwide within 24 hours. Besides the multiplicity of media options, the world of mass media transformed the role of public intellectuals consequentially. The public to whom one can speak consists nowadays of several audiences; only with few of them a speaker might be familiar with regarding their expectations, knowledge, and familiarity to one's own thinking. Therefore transport damages can happen to ideas today much more often than in the past. Below the surface of cosmopolitanism local knowledge still plays a crucial role and mistakes either on the side of the sender or the recipients are inevitable. The multiplicity of media and places where public intellectuals become visible causes sometimes severe dissonances. The critical attitude exhibited by intellectuals' lies at the core of their self-concept. It deserves closer examination. Over the last hundred years the majority of intellectuals were on the political left. Their criticism was rooted in the tradition of Enlightenment but some went beyond and lost track with their addressees. Isolation and alienation on the side of those who claimed to offer a sound interpretation of the present occurred and further radicalization of the interpretators happened. As a consequence they lost track with their imagined audiences completely and their influence on the public mood disappeared. Antonio Gramsci's organic intellectual, embedded in a social movement, can be found less in those situations Gramsci had in mind, but in societies with a higher degree of normative integration. Successful intellectuals were always embedded in their culture and politics. The story of the Myrdal couple is convincing because it shows that getting the message over to the people and the politicians needs some kind of basic accordance with the prevailing mood in one's society. This short overview about some aspects of the role of public intellectuals should function as a frame for further analysis. Perhaps the frame itself must be reformulated and refined. The next step will be the symposium the ANOVASOFIE consortium will held in October 2005 in Dublin, where invited speakers and contributors from inside ANOVASOFIE will exchange their ideas and case studies.

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