

The political function of the intellectual

Michel Foucault

Note. The text here translated consists of extracts, published in Politique Hebdo No. 247, 29 November 1976, from a preface to the Italian translation of a collection of articles and interviews by Michel Foucault, entitled 'Microphysics of Power', to be published shortly by Einaudi, Turin. The preface is in the form of an interview with Alexandra Fontana and Pasquale Pasquine. (Michel Foucault recommended this piece to us for translation in preference to the interview we published in Radical Philosophy 16.)

For a long time the 'left' intellectual spoke and was acknowledged to have the right of speaking in the capacity of master of truth and justice. He was heard, or purported to make himself heard, as the representative of the universal. To be an intellectual meant to be, a little, the consciousness/conscience of everyone. I think we encounter here an idea transposed from Marxism, from a faded Marxism indeed: just as the proletariat, through the necessity of its historical position, is the bearer of the universal (but its immediate, unreflected bearer, scarcely conscious of itself as such), so the intellectual, by his moral, theoretical and political choice, aspires to be the bearer of this universality in its conscious, elaborated form. The intellectual is supposed to be the clear, individual figure of a universality of which the proletariat is the obscure, collective form.

For some time now, the intellectual has no longer been called upon to play this role. A new mode of 'connection between theory and practice' has been established. Intellectuals have become accustomed to working not in the character of the 'universal', the 'exemplary', the 'just-and-true for all', but in specific sectors, at precise points where they are situated either by their professional conditions of work or their conditions of life (housing, the hospital, the asylum, the laboratory, the university, familial and sexual relations). Through this they have undoubtedly gained a much more concrete awareness of struggles. They have also thereby encountered problems which are specific, 'non-universal', often different from those of the proletariat and the masses. And yet, I believe that they have really come closer to the proletariat, for two reasons: because it has been a matter of real, material, everyday struggles, and because they often came up, even though in a different form, against the same adversary as the proletariat, the peasants and the masses, namely the multinational corporations, the judicial and police apparatuses, property speculators etc. This is what I would call the 'specific' intellectual as opposed to the 'universal' intellectual.

'Universal' or 'specific'

This new configuration has a further political significance: it makes it possible, if not to integrate, at least to rearticulate categories which were previously kept apart. The intellectual par excellence

had hitherto been the writer: as universal consciousness, free subject, he was counterposed to those who were merely competent instances in the service of State or Capital (technicians, magistrates, professors). Since politicisation has begun to take place on the basis of each individual's specific activity, the threshold of writing, as the sacralising mark of the intellectual, has disappeared. And transverse connections have been able to develop between different areas of knowledge, from one focus of politicisation to another: magistrates and psychiatrists, doctors and social workers, laboratory workers and sociologists have been able, each in his own field and through mutual exchange and support, to participate in a global process of politicisation of intellectuals. This process explains how, even though the writer tends to disappear as a figurehead, the lecturer and the university emerge, not perhaps as principal elements, but as 'exchangers', privileged points of intersection. If the universities and education have become politically ultrasensitive areas, this is no doubt the reason why. And what is called the crisis in the universities should not be interpreted as a loss of power, but on the contrary as a multiplication and reinforcement of their power-effects as the centre of a multiform ensemble of intellectuals who practically all pass through and relate themselves to it...

It seems to me that this figure of the 'specific' intellectual has emerged since the Second World War. Perhaps it was the atomic physicist - let's say in a word, or rather a name: Oppenheimer - who acted as the point of transition from universal intellectual to specific intellectual. It's because he had a direct and localised relation with scientific knowledge and institutions that the atomic scientist could make his intervention; but because the nuclear threat concerned the entire human race and the fate of the world, his discourse could be at the same time the discourse of the universal. Under the cover of this protest which concerned the entire world, the atomic expert brought into effect his specific position in the order of knowledge. And for the first time, I think, the intellectual was hounded by political powers, no longer on account of the general discourse he conducted, but because of the knowledge at his disposal: it was at this level that he constituted a political threat...

The end of the writer

One can suggest that the 'universal' intellectual as he functioned in the 19th and early 20th century was in fact derived from a very particular historical figure: the man of justice, the man of law, he who opposes to power, despotism, the abuses and arrogance of wealth the universality of justice and the equity of an ideal law. The great political struggles of the 18th century were fought over the laws, justice, the constitution, what is just in reason and nature, what can and must apply universally. What we today call 'the intellectual' - I mean the intellectual in the political, not the sociological or profes-

sional sense of the word, in other words the person who makes use of his knowledge, his competence, his relation to truth in the order of political struggles - was born, I think, out of the jurist, at any rate out of the man who invoked the universality of a just law, on occasion against the legal professions themselves (Voltaire, in France, is the prototype of these intellectuals). The 'universal' intellectual derives from the jurist/notable and finds his fullest expression in the writer, the bearer of values and significations in which all can recognise themselves. The 'specific' intellectual derives from quite another figure, not the 'jurist/notable' but the 'savant/expert'...

Let us now turn to more detailed issues. Let's acknowledge, with the development of technico-scientific structures in contemporary society, the importance acquired in recent decades by the specific intellectual. And also the acceleration of this movement since 1960. The specific intellectual encounters certain obstacles and faces certain dangers. The danger of immersing him in conjunctural struggles, in pressing claims within particular sectors. The risk of letting himself be manipulated by the political parties or union apparatuses directing these local struggles. Above all, the risk of being unable to develop these struggles for want of a global strategy or of outside support; also the risk of not being followed, or being followed only by very limited groups. In France we have before our eyes at the moment an example of this. The struggle over the prisons, the penal system, the police/judicial system, because it has developed 'in solitary' among social workers and ex-prisoners, has tended increasingly to separate itself from the forces which would have enabled it to grow. It has allowed itself to be penetrated by a whole naive, archaic ideology which makes the criminal into at once the innocent victim and the pure rebel, society's sacrificial lamb and the young wolf of future revolutions. This return to anarchist themes of the late 19th century was possible only because of a failure of integration of current strategies. And the result has been a profound divorce between this campaign with its monotonous, lyrical little song, heard only among a few small groups, and the masses who have good reason for not accepting it as valid political currency but who also, because of the studiously cultivated fear of criminality, tolerate the maintenance, or rather reinforcement, of the judicial and police apparatuses.

The politics of truth

It seems to me that we are now at a stage where the function of the specific intellectual needs to be reconsidered. Reconsidered, but not abandoned, in spite of the nostalgia of some for the great 'universal' intellectuals (we need, they say, a philosophy, a vision of the world). It's sufficient to consider the important results that have been achieved in psychiatry: they prove that these local, specific struggles haven't been a mistake and haven't led to a dead end. One can even say that the role of the specific intellectual must become more and more important in proportion to the political responsibilities which he is obliged willy-nilly to accept, in his character as nuclear scientist, geneticist, data processing expert, pharmacologist etc. It would be a dangerous error to discount him politically in his specific relation to a local power, on the pretext either that this is an affair for specialists and doesn't concern the masses (which

is doubly wrong: they are already aware of it, and in any case they are implicated in it), or that he serves the interests of Capital and State (which is true, but also reveals the strategic position he occupies), or again that he propagates a scientific ideology (which isn't always true, and is certainly a matter of secondary importance compared with what is primordial: the effects proper to true discourses).

The important point here, I believe, is that truth isn't outside power, or deprived of power (contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, it isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of prolonged solitudes, or the privilege of those who have been able to liberate themselves). Truth is of the world: it is produced by virtue of multiple constraints. And it induces the regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse it harbours and causes to function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements, the way in which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures which are valorised for obtaining truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

In societies like ours the 'political economy' of truth is characterised by five historically important traits: 'truth' is centred on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it; it is subject to a constant economic and political incitation (the demand for truth, as much for economic production as for political power): it is the object, under diverse forms, of an immense diffusion and consumption (it circulates in apparatuses of education and information whose extent is relatively wide within the social body, notwithstanding certain strict limitations); it is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media...); lastly, it is the stake of a whole political debate and social confrontation ('ideological' struggles).

Local not sectoral

It seems to me that what must now be recognised in the intellectual is not the 'bearer of universal values'; rather it's the person who occupies a specific position - but with a specificity, in a society like ours, linked to the general functioning of an apparatus of truth. In other words, the intellectual has a three-fold specificity: specificity of his class position (a petty-bourgeois in the service of capitalism, an 'organic' intellectual of the proletariat); the specificity of his conditions of life and work, linked to his condition as an intellectual (his domain of research, his place in a laboratory, the political or economic demands which he submits to or rebels against, in the university, the hospital, etc); lastly, the specificity of the politics of truth in our societies.

And it's with this last that his position can take on a general significance and his local, specific battle can carry with it effects and implications which are not simply professional or sectoral. He can work and fight at the general level of that regime of truth which is so essential to the structures and functioning of our society. There is a battle 'for truth', or at least 'around truth' - it being understood once again that by truth I do not mean 'the ensemble of truths which is to be discovered and given acceptance', but rather 'the



ensemble of rules according to which true and false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true'; it being understood also that it's not a question of a battle 'in favour' of truth but of a battle about the status of truth and the economic/political role which it plays. It is necessary to think the political problems of intellectuals not in terms of 'science' and 'ideology', but in terms of 'truth' and 'power'. And it is here that the professionalisation of the intellectual and the intellectual/manual division of labour can be envisaged in a new way.

Some propositions

All this must seem very confused and uncertain. Uncertain, yes, and what I'm saying here is, above all, in the nature of a hypothesis. In order for it to be a little less confused, however, I would like to advance a few 'propositions' - which are not hard assertions, but are simply put forward for future essays and tests.

- By 'truth' is meant a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution and circulation of statements.

- 'Truth' is linked by a circular relation to systems of power which produce it and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which redirect it. A 'regime' of truth.

- This 'regime' is not merely ideological or super-structural; it has been a condition of the formation and development of capitalism. And it's the same regime which, subject to certain modifications, operates in the socialist countries (I leave open here the question of China, which I do not know sufficiently well).

- The essential political problem for the intellectual is not that of criticising the ideological content to which science is linked, or to bring it about that his scientific practice should be accompanied by a correct ideology. But of knowing that it is possible to constitute a new politics of truth. The problem is not one of changing people's 'consciousness' or what's in their heads; but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth.

- It's not a question of emancipating truth from every system of power - which would be a chimera, because truth is already itself power - but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony (social, economic, and cultural) within which it operates at the present time...

(translated by Colin Gordon)

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