

THE ROLE OF THE INTELLECTUAL IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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Proceeding from what my friend Elias Khoury has said, I would like to remind him of the challenges that arise in South-Africa in relation to the Truth and Reconciliation process. In order to achieve peace and reconciliation, or to fabricate a peace, one at times has to sacrifice justice. This is a practical challenge we find in different parts of the world today, Lebanon being one example. To insist on achieving justice would entail imprisoning the bulk of Lebanon's current ruling elite, including the President, the Prime Minister, ministers and members of Parliament. Some would say that Mr Samir Jaaja is now in prison on behalf of all of them; in order to possess some form of reconciliation in Lebanon they tended to sacrifice justice. It is the job of the political elite and society as a whole to make these choices. However, the intellectual must always find the truth and must carry the candle in search of the truth, while leaving it to others to decide what to do with it. The other day I was watching a documentary on the life of Mubutu of Zaire, which left me in no doubt that this man was a criminal and that any form of justice should have executed him. But, if one were to serve justice properly one would have to imprison or even execute all his allies: people like Jacques Chirac, the President of France, and George Bush, the former President of the USA. These people assisted him in his crimes. So to serve justice one would have to do unimaginable things in the world today. In the case of Pinochet in Chile, almost 100% of the Chilean people know this man is a criminal, but 50% of them are willing to sacrifice justice in order to retain the form of reconciliation they have achieved in Chile and without which the whole country will fall apart once again. This would in turn lead to the regeneration and recreation of criminality and a Pinochet Mark II, Pinochet Mark III and so on. This is the real dilemma for humanity collectively, yet this is precisely where we have to locate the position of the intellectual. The intellectual is a truth finder, a candle bearer for truth, but not the maker of the ultimate peace. It is not the intellectual who effects justice in the end. The processes of finding the **truth**, enforcing **justice** and achieving **reconciliation** are inter-related, but are much too complex to be borne by the intellectual.

So, what is the role of the intellectual? What, in fact, is an intellectual? To go on from what Lolle Nauta said a while ago, let me again pose the broader questions: Who is an intellectual? This is a very difficult question to answer and involves the use of lots of nouns and adjectives. Our teachers at school are intellectuals, our professors at university are intellectuals and academics. Journalists are intellectuals, media people are intellectuals. So who is an

intellectual really? To answer this question as precisely as we can, we have to have a contextual definition based on the conditions of the society in question, the level of literacy and education in this society, and take this as the qualitative denominator for defining who is an intellectual. I would also say that there is a quantitative dimension. For example, one could compare a country like Egypt, which has 12,000 PhD holders, with a country like Mozambique, which a few years ago only had one PhD holder. They may have a few more now. Would we then say that Egypt is a country full of intellectuals and that Mozambique is a country with none? I firmly doubt that this would be the answer. There might be better intellectuals in Mozambique than in Egypt. The question cannot, therefore, be answered simply with statistics. We can better use a qualitative contextual definition: in a remote area of upper Egypt the gentleman who has basic literacy, being the only man in the village with such a level of education, is an intellectual par excellence; this is the only man who can read and write, inform people, pose questions and provide answers. They might be the wrong answers, but still he is trying. He is, of course, an intellectual. In another context - Cairo, Alexandria or elsewhere - there could be different definitions of an intellectual. You would not expect every university graduate to be treated as an intellectual; you might require a higher level of education to fulfil the definition. Having given just one easy example it therefore seems to be a question of context. But I would also say that this is a problem for all societies, including the so-called 'advanced' or 'developed' societies.

Now, we also need a verbal definition, so to speak. To speak of someone as an intellectual we have to use a number of verbs. The verbs to read, to write, to think, to speak and, most importantly, the verb **to criticise**. To criticise oneself, society, events, ideas, friends and colleagues. Even if an intellectual works within the establishment, within power, if he remains critical he is still the good intellectual. I would not say that Andre Malreaux in France is a bad man because he was the Minister of Culture, he was a servant of power, but he was a good man because he remained critical. However, I would still say that there are two more important verbs which present the challenge in the definition of the intellectual.

The first is the verb **to convey**; to convey ideas from one's own brain to other people's brains using whatever form or whatever medium for conveyance: writing, speaking, appearing on television, and so on. The ability to convey is a challenge for the intellectual; you might have good ideas in your mind, but be unable to convey them to other people. What shall we call you? An introverted intellectual? A secret intellectual? An underground intellectual? An unspoken intellectual? But if you convey, so you enter into the heart of an interactive process that locates you as an intellectual amidst other people who

listen to you, who learn from you, who criticise you or engage with you in a form of intellectual exchange, even if they are not considered intellectuals themselves. Even a poor peasant who comes to you and discusses with you as an intellectual is still imposing an intellectual challenge on you.

The other verb is **to influence**. The assumption here is that an intellectual influences. If he does not influence at all, would we still consider him to be an intellectual? Even a novelist whose novels will be read has influence. To have a certain readership, certain popularity, a certain audience is, of course, to have influence. But if the novelist is not read, if no one listens to him, if no one engages in a discussion with him, should we still call him an intellectual? To me, part of the challenge lies in these two verbs: the verb to convey - to transmit and sometimes to transform; and the verb to influence - to leave an impact, no matter how tiny the impact may be. If there is no impact at all, we would have to ask whether we are really dealing with an intellectual or not.

The other key word in today's presentation, the subject of our workshop, is **public space**. What is public space? I think we can compare it with private space. While there are limits to private space, I believe there are no limits to public space and this may contradict the conventional wisdom that you may do what you like in private, while in public you may not. In a certain sense this is true, but in another sense, in a very intellectual sense, I don't believe there are any boundaries to the search for knowledge, learning or to investigation, even to the extent of sending astronauts to Mars to inspect the planet and find out whether other creatures live there. We could potentially even go to see it for ourselves, on a picnic in a space shuttle. That is intellectual endeavour, not pure science or technology; the search served by an intellectual perspective, which says everything is possible, there are no limits to knowledge. Knowledge is infinite. Although I believe there are no boundaries to the public sphere as such, there are, of course, sub-categories within which we can focus our attention and discussion. We can speak of education as a sphere, culture as a sphere, development as a sphere, economics as a sphere, politics and so on. All aspects that we may call 'societals' or different domains and walks of life. These are the sub-categories of the public realm which we have to fix when we speak. This is not to place a clear demarcation line between all these spheres because they are juxtaposed. But still we have to decide what it is we are talking about. Is it politics, development, economics, culture, or what is it not? While I say there are no boundaries to the public sphere, I would agree with my friend Elias who said that there are boundaries that are forced by repressive powers. These are the most notable boundaries, laid down by repressive powers, especially regimes of nation states, supposedly sovereign states. Were I to provide an exhaustive list of those whose freedom to express themselves in the public realm has

been repressed by these regimes I would be sitting here until Doomsday, because this is human history. The victims, the victimised in the quest for freedom, have no numbers or boundaries. The list is endless, so let us call them the unknown soldiers. The victims onto whom repressive powers have been imposed.

There is also the repressive power of religion. To mention a few cases, you have the case of the university professor and writer Nasr Abu-Zeid in Egypt (now in Holland), or the singer Marcel Khalifa here in Lebanon (still here) who, by quoting the Koran in one song, has become an enemy of religion. There is, of course, no need to mention Salman Rushdie and a great many others. Within the Christian framework and within Western Europe, from Sweden to Greece, there are cases of repression by repressive powers, even in supposedly democratic, liberal systems.

And then there is global repression. If you look at the globalised world of today, with the unpopular power of the United States of America, one does not necessarily accept the argument that America is playing a libertarian role in international forums. On the contrary, it may be seen by many people world-wide as a repressive power in the United Nations, a repressive power in the Security Council, a repressive power in UNESCO, a repressive power all over the globe and in global organisations. To mention very recent cases, there are the cases of the two international civil servants who resigned because of international, read American, policy towards Iraq and how it affects Iraqi children and Iraqi citizens. Without, of course, wanting to defend Saddam Hussein, here are two people who severely criticised the repressive nature of American global power. These are people who may call themselves not only international civil servants, but also intellectuals with a conscience.

I have been speaking of the intellectual and the public sphere within the framework of this definition. But now I would like to turn to my third keyword, which combines the two. I would like to speak about the interactive process which combines both the intellectual and the public sphere. Here I would say that there is what one may describe as a minute perspective for intellectual performance in the public sphere. By this I mean that, while the intellectual stands right in the middle of the public sphere, he cannot stand there to defend a common cause, nor to analyse nor to discuss it; he can only defend his own interest. Here I refer to Nauta's text which invokes and quotes Benda and others on the subject of the intellectual as someone without an ego, someone without personal interest, someone who is truly aloof, serving only a cause. The intellectual as such does not engage in public activity out of self-interest. Reversing this argument is what he calls the end of philosophical idealism. In other words, he claims we should not indulge in this nonsensical

idea. Intellectuals, after all, are human beings, breadwinners, and they too have to defend their own interests. Perhaps the bulk of what they do in public life or the public sphere is precisely out of self-interest, to defend self-interest. This argument requires greater consideration. However, I am only going to consider one perspective of the intellectual in the public sphere: the 'minute perspective'. Here the intellectual can be consistent if he defends his own interest. Consistent with himself, but he can be traitorous to a cause, to an idea, to a value in another perspective. It is therefore not surprising that several intellectuals have spoken of the treachery or the treason of the intellectual: 'Le Trahison des Clercs' (Benda), for example. Take two recent episodes in the world: the bombing of Baghdad and Belgrade, and consequently the death of so many civilians. These attacks took place under the pretext of sorting out Saddam Hussein and Milosevic. Yet in both cases innocent people died. Politicians can justify these actions, but can intellectuals? Can an intellectual give the intellectual green light and say, 'Go ahead...to get rid of a criminal like Saddam or Milosevic you have to kill a few innocent people.' I think this is a very difficult challenge for an intellectual and it may distinguish between an intellectual and a politician, although both of them meet and interact in public life, even within the same institutions. Having mentioned Baghdad and Belgrade, I would also have to add the recent Kargil episode in Kashmir. If you look to our friend Arvind Das from India and his excellent publication 'Biblio', you will find a review of a book that addresses precisely this issue: criminal acts perpetrated against ordinary civilians in Kashmir. Speaking of this would expose you to attack for being anti-patriotic in both India and Pakistan, because you met the intellectual challenge and said, 'Yes, there were innocent civilians who died'. It is easy to kill human beings while defending the national cause, especially within a chauvinistic framework. And we have to mention Chechnya and the very recent episode of Russian brutality there, which is almost paralleled by American brutality in Baghdad and Belgrade. The enemies of the Cold War are friends once again, but over the corpses of human beings elsewhere in the world. So the challenge for the intellectual is to at least say something about it. We could add to this and comment on what the Israeli Foreign Minister said only yesterday in the Knesset: that he is going to burn and kill Lebanese children. A highly irresponsible statement, even for a politician. Politicians have to be more deft, even if it is their intention to prepare for or carry out such an act. They have to pay lip service to justice and human rights and all other pleasant things. But in this case, the minister could not afford to pay even lip service. These are all simple examples of what we really face as intellectuals in the modern world.

This leads me, finally, to what I call the global dilemma: that intellectuals work in institutions. They work at universities, in establishments of some kind. With the globalisation of today, the cost of living, the cost of education,

the cost of making an intellectual, the cost of publishing a book, it seems to me that intellectual institutions have finally become owned by market enterprises and commercial interests. It is impossible to imagine a great university like Emory in Atlanta, USA, without the support of Coca-Cola, for example. This is not to say that all our intellectual colleagues at this university are led by Coca Cola. But they cannot survive without Coca Cola's support. The same applies to Harvard, with the many endowments it receives. Within the global framework of today we have to ask the questions: Who owns what? And, who owns whom? These enterprises are able to own the intellectuals, are able to own the intellect itself. Let me give you a recent example of the American University in Cairo, a very recent example from the last few weeks. There were several cases of students' parents who told their children that this bloody university is atheist because they teach you the wrong syllabus, an anti-religious one. The administration of the university responded by saying: Yes, the parents are right, we are wrong in our so-called freedom of expression, freedom of academia and the like. For the American University to survive as an institution, it has to take orders from its paymasters, in this case the payers of the students' fees. So, if the fee payers come and say that you are anti-Islamic, the only thing you can say is: 'We are sorry for being anti-Islamic, I will be a good Muslim in the next classroom or in the next lesson.' It drives you crazy, of course, when you speak of the good old days when intellectuals stood fast and said: '*J'accuse!*' Now, it is almost the reverse: '*Je suis accusé!*' I am accused and I am sorry. You are right because you are the paymaster'. This is a real problem: Who is financing the very production of the intellectual class? People outside this room decide the fate and destiny of the intellectuals in this room. That is the real dilemma of today.

Finally, a word on the subject of the broader title of our project, 'Creating Spaces for Freedom'. What can an intellectual do to create spaces for freedom, for expression, for serving certain causes and values, or the very space to be an intellectual. One has to defend one's own identity and the very entity of the intellectual. Here there are different approaches.

Firstly, we can muddle through, as we would say in English. In Arabic we would say *mashie halak*. As individuals, intellectuals just want to survive. And herein lies the dilemma of intellect and bread. That is a challenge and in the end it could actually lead to the end of the intelligentsia. We will become the nouveaux bureaucrats of whatever establishment requires our services. The end of history will not come about in return for our bread and butter, but the end of the history of the intelligentsia and the end of the existence of an intelligentsia.

The second approach is what one might call the streamlining of intellectual libertarian currents. In other words, intellectuals are fighting for a cause, which includes their very existence as a cause in itself, by maintaining a

certain fabric, certain features of what possibly determines the intellectual class. This is a collective activity to create certain currents; currents are ideas, currents are institutions. We can contribute to it in a small way through meetings like today's; it is a global effort that is already taking place. Defending the intellectual class, while defending values and causes. This is *collective* self-interest, not individual self-interest. This might eventually lead us to form coalitions with other freedom fighters who fight for social liberty, political liberty, for human liberty in the broadest sense. These freedom fighters can be our allies, and I am reminded of the song by Paul Robson, 'Old Man River'. I think we all remember it, 'We must keep fighting until we die'. This is a song to invoke here. I would also refer to Edward Said's interview in Arvind Das's magazine 'Biblio', published in India, in which he says that the intellectual should be independently associated with a social movement. Said's simple definition states that the intellectual should be associated with a social movement and not necessarily be a fully legitimate member or leader; independent within it, and critical of it. Otherwise he would lose his credentials as an intellectual and the social movement in question would lose its credibility. It is a freedom fight of some kind, big or small. Perhaps it is here that we may link the very global with the very local. In his presentation, René Gabriels used the term contextual universalism: to be very global, but at the same time very specific. I think this provides a broad heading for intellectual motivation, as I see it, in the modern day realities of globalisation and reactions to globalisation. The demonstrations that have taken place from Seattle and Bangkok to Davos have shown us how activists and lay citizens all over the globe are meeting and trying to take action; trying to say something that differs from the statements of the repressive powers sitting inside the global conference rooms. They make themselves heard on the outside through demonstrations, each of them perhaps expressing their own portion of contextual universalism, their own piece. But within this collectivity one can also speak of a global social movement of freedom seekers, freedom fighters in many branches: those who work on women's issues, children's issues, environmental issues and so on. However, one could also speak of such a social movement as one with which intellectuals can associate themselves by being globalised intellectuals and at the same time being contextualised intellectuals; linking the very macro with the very micro, as some miserable people like myself are trying to do. We attend meetings of an international elite like this, but at the same time, in a couple of days, I have to go back to my old Cairo district to help working children in their own environment, in their difficult conditions. So, linking the macro with the micro is a challenge that all intellectuals have to address if they are to be really credible in their work for the freedom of humankind, while at the same time trying to free themselves from the repressive powers that dominate the world of today.

