

INTELLECTUALS AND SOCIETY: EXIT, VOICE OR LOYALTY?

What is an intellectual? What is his or her proper role in the life of society? To what extent does this role depend on the intellectual's self-chosen path, to what extent upon the demands and challenges which society presents? What are the conditions for the intellectual to engage in "exit, voice or loyalty", and what consequences do such choices entail?

For Socrates, the answer was clear. Although he questioned the legitimacy of the gods of Athens, and indeed corrupted her youth, he yet considered himself a loyal citizen. Despite its flaws, he was grateful to Athens for the opportunity it gave him to live a meaningful life. Socrates defined his relationship to Athens as a gadfly to a horse: just as the horse needs the sting of the gadfly to ward off complacency, so too the gadfly needs the blood of the horse to sustain him. Against the pleas of his friends, and rejecting the possibility of tranquillity in exile, he refused to flee. Both defiant and loyal, he remained and died according to the will of the Assembly. His was the ethic of "voice".

According to the Socratic ideal, then, the role of the intellectual is to observe and question the myths and idols of his or her society. On the one hand, a role which may threaten those in power; on the other, a role in which the dictates of conscience or of principle may invite grave personal risk.

The intellectual is not defined simply by intelligence, but by a critical stance to the status quo. Accordingly, a brilliant mind which loyally and uncritically serves the established order, however benevolent that order may be, is not an intellectual at all. Being an intellectual involves a social act: it is a matter of deliberate choice not of unconscious fate.

But if this is true, then it follows that to cease being an intellectual is no less a matter of personal choice. For that "critical stance" which is the mark of the true intellectual cannot be achieved or maintained in the absence of individual autonomy. While it is true that the intellectual's role as "social conscience" or "devil's advocate" implies a responsibility to defend the defenceless, prod the lazy, and admonish the tyrants, this role presupposes a prior obligation of the intellectual to his or her own conscience and principles. Thus, for society to insist that the intellectual is always and everywhere obliged to exercise the option of "voice" is as much a violation of his or her autonomy as the censure of any tyrannical regime. Because both are necessary to the cultivation of the intellectual's "critical stance", the values of autonomy and responsibility are mutually dependent.

Very often, however, they are denied expression or thrown into conflict. Under repressive regimes, intellectuals are typically forced into internal or external exile, or are cajoled and coopted to betray their obligations to both principle and public, while those who maintain these values do so at great personal cost – and with questionable effectiveness. Though less evident, the fate of the intellectual in an open and stable society also has consequential trade-offs, as the mundane demands of life, the temptations of wealth and comfort, and a public made indifferent by complacent times all serve to exile the intellectual in more subtle, but no less fateful, ways.

It is, however, during times of social stress, political upheaval or moral confusion, when the value of the intellectual's individual autonomy may be most clearly at odds with the value of social responsibility. In such times, the intellectual often faces an agonizing choice of whether to "fight or flee": that is, at a time when the fate of society's welfare may be most at stake, but where both the possibility of effective "voice" and the option of "exit" for the sake of self-preservation or the preservation of intellectual autonomy are equally compelling options, whether a commitment to the intellectual's own development or to social welfare should take precedence. In other words, just how much is the intellectual beholden to his or her society, under what conditions, and with what consequences? Likewise, if it is true that an intellectual is, at least partly, defined by his or her engagement in society, can one exit from the public sphere or from one's own society and yet remain an intellectual?

To understand these issues better, then, the question we invite you to address is: at what point, and under what conditions, is the proper role of the intellectual in his relation both to intellectual life and to social welfare, "exit, voice or loyalty"? At what point is entering or exiting the public sphere a necessity? A futile and hazardous exercise? Or a routine and legitimate act?

JOHN HALL

Discussions of the role of intellectuals has been made exceptionally difficult by the licentious mixing of normative and sociological categories. But if we try and distinguish these categories, then two useful points can be made. In normative terms, intellectuals should try to tell the truth. Observance of this prescriptive rule will not bring much comfort to softer versions of liberalism, that is, it will not ensure the triumph of liberal pieties. For intellectuals have with utter sincerity been convinced of the truth of various nationalist, fascist and marxist doctrines. Nonetheless, the suggested rule does make it possible to criticise a Jean-Paul Sartre for refusing to tell the truth about Stalinism for fear that it would discourage the workers of Bilancourt. Sociologically, there remains much to be said for Tocqueville's analysis (in *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*) of the relations between intellectuals and power. Political exclusion encourages grand ideological productions, total alternative visions of the world within which intellectuals characteristically are to have significant powers. Such production is understandable, even glorious, but it is indeed the case that the imposition of such schemes has caused much suffering. Such isolated intellectuals can be contrasted with the social critics of more open societies, able to agitate and encourage so as to make sure that liberal ideals are realised in practice. Such social criticism is hard to implement institutionally but it is a possibility - as the very different careers of Maynard Keynes and Jurgen Habermas so clearly demonstrate.

PETR PITHART

I shall narrow down your question: Should or shouldn't the intellectual enter politics as practised? I had contemplated and written about this dilemma long before I tested it personally; I have been contemplating and writing about it for the past four years, ever since I once again dropped out of politics.

It will be beyond the powers of the intellectual, that discoverer of questions even where there seems to be nothing but certainties, that dab hand at answers which turn out to be only further questions, that patented sceptic, that artist in doubting, addicted, as if to drugs, to turning things inside out, that spirit truly mainly dynamic and, therefore, critical; it will be beyond his powers to remain himself if he has to engage in party politics. And that is true of the politics of any relevant political party. The imperative to succeed in the next elections narrows the field of possible futures to (at most) the miserable four years to come! For an inquisitive and sceptical spirit that, however, is something like a lobotomy. Moreover, the intellectual most reveals himself to be a good-for-nothing precisely at the apogee of parliamentary democracy: he will have the least success in the election campaign. I maintain (and I know what I'm talking about, because I am also talking about myself) that he is practically useless in it. How is he supposed to praise himself, and his party, to the electorate, when, after all, he doubts absolutely everything? Is there, though, any kind of politics other than party politics? And a party means elections every four years. There is nothing more to say.

When, though, the intellectual gives it a try (say, during a grave period, after a revolution or before one, when there is a danger of the rise to power of an authoritarian or totalitarian regime), and when he is able to use his intellect to silence the intellectual in himself, then he can succeed. But he has to conceal his scepticism and doubts, and demonstrate, on the outside, a clear will, positive belief, positive certainty, clear refusals and clear consent, a black-and-white vision. He can succeed, but not as an intellectual. His sacrifice might one day even be praised. At other times, more frequently, I'm afraid, he only denies himself, betrays his daimon.

The role of the politician and the role of the intellectual are not compatible: the influential intellectual can, in the end, manage to be a politician; the successful politician, of course, can only with difficulty manage to be an intellectual. Possibly, the answer to your question is in the following statement: the one who is harder to substitute for should hold on to his role more frequently. Particularly because usually no one even wants to substitute for the intellectual: no one has yet made a career, earned money or gained fame (not to mention glory) in one's own lifetime, on the basis of scepticism, prying questions and doubts.

All those who went over to the camp of majority opinion and to the consent of the masses - perhaps initially led there by caustic criticism - drop out of my definition of "the intellectual". Including those who, as voices in the wilderness, first formulated this sort of opinion and this sort of consent. Behold, an attempt at a definition: the intellectual is the one who can never be completely proved right, but whose scepticism is

absolutely indispensable in the search for truth. Without it, foolishness and, finally, brute force stand a greater chance of winning.

The intellectual is not more than the politician: the former is more useful in his ability to utter a cautious "No"; the latter, in his ability convincingly to realize "Yes". We shall always need both. Sometimes more of the former; at other times more of the latter. Usually, though, we don't know when it is "sometimes", and when it is "at other times". Or we think that we know, but nevertheless we have our doubts about it.

TEODOR MÜNZ

Intellectuals are always faced with grand moral imperatives: they should be the consciousness of the society or the nation, they should educate her, elevate her to noble ends, they should.... They should somehow maintain distance from society and be guided by the truth imbedded in it. Yet where can we find such intellectuals? Society is always divided, various groups have vested interests and the intellectuals partake in each of them. It would be arrogance to presume that the "intellectuals" are only on "our" side.

To discuss the role of intellectuals, I am myself a victim of this prejudice and I must judge them by "our" criteria. I think they should have certain notions about the direction of their society – i.e., for the whole society and not only a particular group – and they should pursue that notion. They should navigate their societies into larger units today represented by large supranational groups. They should espouse a certain philosophy about history, have a certain concept of the direction of humanity and substantiate it. Intellectuals have a greater capacity than others and feel obliged to help them. According to their own need and abilities they express approval or support, but they can also rebel or sacrifice themselves. The Socratic model of obeying the law even in an unjust situation is just one of many. Intellectuals enter the public sphere when they feel it is their obligation. Any escape from public life is also up to them: whether due to a change of heart, muting of the categorical imperative, being silenced or coming under the grips of fear. They have the same limitations every human has. The future will show if they acted in vain. They can consider their deeds natural and legitimate as they become heroes or traitors in the eyes of others. There is no objective measuring stick to judge such intangible matters.

One of the intellectuals' shortcomings is their capacity to predict the future. Their judgement might fail them, be wrong or lead them astray.

A. J. LIEHM

I think that the intellectual cannot be anything but an independent voice. Those who cease to be that lose their identity as an intellectual and rank themselves somewhere else, wherever they choose, it doesn't matter where. That is also why, as I have often written, the non-conformity of intellectuals in a Communist regime (and Fascist, authoritarian, indeed any regime where democracy is being trampled on) is no great merit. An intellectual simply must defend his identity as an intellectual, which is based precisely on the independence of his voice. If one did not defend it, one would have to become something else, would have to give up one's own identity.

Intellectuals are important for society in complete disproportion to their number within that community. To be an intellectual, to play that thankless role in society, is, furthermore, not a question of education or profession. I like to say that in my life I've met a lot of university professors, great experts in their fields, who were not in the least intellectuals, and, on the other hand, I have known at home, in Europe and in America, labourers and farmers, who were a genuine example of the intellectual. (Consider, by the way, eighteenth-century Czech writers, as well as Huguenots, Lutherans and, at other times in other places, Catholics, in situations in which the intellectual, that is to say the independent voice, is clearly recognisable.) Every period needs the intellectual, each in a different way. And every intelligent politician needs him, or rather them. Except that there are not many like that.

EGON GÁL

We live in an era that no longer needs intellectuals to be the "consciousness of society." More than some "Socrates," a democratic society needs good universities, institutions for the free exchange of ideas and information, and independent courts.

Beyond these, it requires independent foundations, civic associations and charities. More than "devil's advocates," it needs quality professors, scientists, journalists, judges and other founders of civil societies.

True, a Socrates type intellectual would be useful. However, such an intellectual should not see him or herself as "someone who questions the ideals and myths of a society" (even Socrates did not question the gods, only their interpreters). An intellectual should view him or herself as "a servant to argument," a bridge between the past and the future, a link between those who worship different myths and ideals.

"To leave or to stay, to be loyal or not?" Each of us, of course, answers this question with our daily deeds. I think public avowal of one's own decisions or judgement of others' is inappropriate.

WILLARD MULLINS

It is difficult to say in a short comment - even a long one - what an "intellectual" is, and what constitutes an intellectual's social-political responsibilities. The term "intellectual", has been a pejorative one for many, and was given a negative load particularly by adherents of the so-called "end-of-ideology" movement of the 1950s and 60s. They portrayed the intellectuals as obsessively narrow and dogmatic theorists, mainly of a leftist persuasion, who had no understanding of political actualities, and who were pathologically incapable of accepting the world as it is. I see intellectuals in a different and more positive way as those who attempt to illuminate the familiar and established particularities of the everyday world - especially its social and political dimensions, but not limited to those - by understanding them within a wider and deeper context.

Thus, to be an intellectual implies to me a critical stance, but critical in the sense of a "distanced" reflection that the striving for wholeness provides. To be critical, then, may or may not involve being revolutionary; it could mean quite otherwise if the search for wholeness leads one to see the intractability of the world and the limitations of human beings in the face of this. And although intellectuals may often attempt to illuminate this world by reference to imagined alternative worlds, this does not necessarily imply a disloyalty to existing orders or the incapacity for living in them.

So far, it may seem that the intellectual is distinctively a philosopher or political philosopher. Yet, while it is often true that philosophers fit the description I have set forth, I don't mean to suggest that the group called intellectuals is so circumscribed. There are others who may also express the disposition toward wholeness and provide the insight into the familiar and immediate world that such a disposition gives. One thinks of artists, religious thinkers, musicians, poets, dramatists, novelists, historians, writers of utopias, and workers in various of the academic disciplines, but also of humourists, comedians and satirists, because laughter is one of the surest antidotes for narrow-minded pretentiousness, excessive earnestness or obsessive dogmatism. Requiring, as it does, the kind of "distanced" perspective and appreciation for context that are crucial for genuine insight, laughter also punctures the constricted claims of the partisan zealot.

Similarly, it should be remarked that while the term, "intellectual", seems to imply systematic knowledge and structured reflection, often associated with bookish learning, these, alone, are not definitive - nor is the mere amassing of "factual" and univocal information. What is necessary, I believe, is the ability to connect particular elements in enlightening ways, with appreciation for the ironic, paradoxical, antinomial and dialogical features of reality properly understood. This makes it clear that I do not simply equate the terms "intellectual" and "academic".

Finally, to directly address the social - and, more particularly, the political - responsibilities of the intellectual, it should be said that whereas most of us rightly admire those thinkers who bravely insist on their spiritual autonomy and stand up against political injustice, one cannot say that this is necessarily the responsibility of the intellectuals. It is certainly not their responsibility alone. Although we may expect the intellectuals to have certain advantages over the multitude in terms of perspective and articulateness we should be careful not to treat them as a super-class to whom we habitually defer. And, we should not charge them with political

RICHARD RORTY (VĽAVO) A VÝTVARNÍK KÁROL BARÓN, OPIERAJÚCI SA O SVOJE DIELO NAZVANÉ „RICHARD RORTY“



responsibilities of which the rest of us are absolved. Not only does this unwisely let the rest of us off the political hook, it also holds the intellectuals to an unrealistic accountability which, historically, has often gone unfulfilled. There are, moreover, many political things - tyranny among them - that ordinary citizens can understand as well as the intellectuals.

For the intellectuals who choose to take a political stand in opposition to political injustice, it may be observed that there are various ways of doing this. Silence or self-exile may be eminently effective forms of repudiating a bad regime, and sometimes, perhaps, as personally painful as going to prison or suffering death. One cannot say a priori what is most appropriate given the situation. This must be decided in the terrible existentiality of dire circumstances, often without the assurance of being honoured, or even remembered, for one's integrity.

ERAZIM KOHAK

I am no "intellectual". I reject that label like the prophet Amos (7:14) rejected the label "prophet". In democratic countries, the word "intellectual" has a pejoratively elitist tint. You see, the task which you ascribe to him - to become a participant in a social act, a subject of an intentional, considered choice, of a conscious fate - to act freely and responsibly is generally the task of every citizen in a democratic society. If he or she does not fulfil this task, that person ceases to be a citizen and becomes a serf. Thus, those who signed Charter 77 in January 1977 were acting freely and responsibly. They did not, however, sign it because they were "intellectuals". Some of them were manual labourers. They acted simply as citizens - in the midst of a crowd of serfs.

I do not think that the quality of life in a given society is based on how many intellectuals it comprises. It is, though, directly dependent on the number of citizens it has. Men and women "of the pen" have a special responsibility only in so far as through their visibility they have an influence on their neighbours. If they are able by word or deed, at home or abroad, to offer something to their fellow citizens and support them, then they are fulfilling their mission. Sometimes simply living as a citizen can have its own meaning. We each have to judge for ourselves how and when to best fulfil the task of citizenship. Socrates by sacrifice. Aristotle by departing. The method is not what's important. If, however, people "of the pen" surrender that task, or when they begin to reconcile their neighbours to serfdom, it doesn't matter to me whether they do it at home or abroad or whether they continue to call themselves "intellectuals". They are no longer what's important.

DUŠAN POKORNÝ

Each intellectual is a member of a society, and each reflection on his position in it starts - whether consciously or not - from perception of the "membership" in question. Thomas Hobbes - who also learnt from Galileo - begins with presocial individuals (with the parts of which a machine consists) and asks how such individuals must combine (what "transmissions" must exist among the parts), in order that a society (the machine consisting of these parts) be put together. But the presocial individual is by definition his own product, and is therefore rightfully concerned primarily with himself and with his own good. Such individuals form a society in their own image, a society dominated by competition, rather than by solidarity. In modernity, this is a society that starts from individual rights and treats "citizenship" as the power to defend these rights and to ensure thus the citizens' influence on the government's decision making. "Citizen capacity" is not a value in its own right: at issue is not a modern form of solidarity, the stress is on the exercise of entitlements whose function is instrumental.

In this world - in this perception of the present - an intellectual may, strictly speaking, at most defend those individual rights. The words "at most" are not meant to belittle the endeavour: such defence often requires great courage and many sacrifices, and is worthy of esteem because it helps people to extricate themselves from the clutches of humiliation and violence. "At most" refers to the limitations inherent in the initial perception of the relation between the individual and the society. When asked to choose between "exit, voice, or loyalty", the intellectual is entitled to reply that the decision rule will be the same as that of everybody else: I shall opt for the course of circumstances I have to treat as given. True, my utility function may include also the good of others. But this is the good of others according to my view of what is good for them; and it is also for me to decide how much weight my awareness of their good will have in the composition of my own good.

If we start with Rousseau, the path - however circuitous it has by now become - leads to a radically different view of the relation between the individual and the society. At the beginning of human history is a community in which "personality" is not constituted by what distinguishes one individual from the others; on the contrary, each is a "persona" in virtue of what she shares with all, in virtue of what identifies her as a member of that community. Similar is, and always has been, the case of the individual: the child first accepts the view of itself implicit in the rules and customs that are valid for everybody. In both instances - in the evolution of the species and in the development of the individual - the true self is being formed against the background of the "self" originally accepted from "outside". Socialization and individuation become thus two sides of the same process. Each of us is born into a certain language and into a certain forms of social togetherness - and it is only on the basis of what each thus shares with all that one can form a perception of who he is and what social conditions would permit him to develop to the full his identity. This is also how we arrive at a perception of civil society in which "citizenship" is the right to participate in legitimate "self-formation" of the society as a whole - and this is a value in itself, not just a means of attaining another end.

In this picture of the present, intellectuals are entrusted with the task of helping in the formation of social will in the proper sense of the word, that is, a will that is not merely a summation of individual wills treated as data. We know fully well that individual wills can be blind to the wider consequences of their operation. It is therefore necessary to find forms of communication that will mediate critical "encounters" of the initial views on the social problems of the epoch. In this regard, intellectuals have these days a particularly heavy responsibility. The reasons are obvious. Words that by their very nature invite interpretation yield to images that by their very nature claim to be indubitable, that is, true - although the angle, from which the picture is taken, influences the message it conveys. Moreover, the picture captures a detail, while the development of general ideas - capable of showing the place of the detail in the whole of events and circumstances - lags behind the processes that make the contemporary world each day more and more complex.

If one looks at civil society in this way, a scientist or philosopher, a writer of motion picture director, a journalist or actor is forced to choose between "exit, voice, or loyalty" when those, who have the political (or economic) power to do so, make it impossible for him to participate, to the full extent of his capabilities, in the legitimate formation of the society's will. Put another way, an intellectual's position in the social division of labour also assigns her a distinct place in the overall distribution of responsibilities for the society's future development; and as a result of external interference, she cannot acquit herself of the responsibility. In most instances, however, such responsibilities do not go back to specific obligations, and the response to your question cannot be based on an existing norm. The intellectual finds himself in the shoes of a judge who has to admit that the law at his disposal is too general to do justice to the particularities of the case he is called upon to adjudicate. In this case, as Aristotle says, the judge must ask himself, what rule would the legislator prescribe for such a situation? In our case, the person confronted with your question has to proceed in a similar way: Having recognized the duty (assigned him by social situation as a whole), he must deduce from it a rule of conduct - a rule that addresses only "this" unique situation and is (so to speak) fully permeated by it.

For all these reasons, a lot again depends on who is the person deciding whether to opt for "exile, voice, or loyalty". But this decision making is still fundamentally different from constrained maximization of the value of one's utility function: It is not personal preferences that are the data of the process. The point of departure is recognition of the responsibilities inherent in the intellectual's place in the society.

BÉLA EGYED

My answer to your question is based on the assumption that all societies are constituted by a more or less open system of relational identities from which, in turn, emerge hegemonic subjects (groups or individuals) as they reach a certain level of relative stability. In other words, a society is not a closed system of relations centered around an absolutely stable core.

This way of looking at society, which is inspired by Althusser's and Gramsci's ideas, does have some unsettling implications for our usual conception of "intellectuals". Can we given this view, for example, make clear the notion of what it is to engage a dominant power? The best answer to this question is that, what is commonly referred to as "dominant power" must itself be conceived as fragmented, dispersed, and relative.

Consequently, it is misleading to speak of complicity, or opposition, to the “established order”. Instead, it is more appropriate to speak of taking positions in diverse, at times intersecting, hegemonic (in Gramsci’s sense) struggles.

Politics is everywhere. Does it then follow that intellectuals, who by definition are those who “reflect”, can and must play a special role in the identification, and articulation, of hegemonic struggles? In your question you suggest that engaging in political struggles might at times be a futile act, - leading to no social benefits, but only to great hardship for the individual involved. Intellectuals are, indeed, engaged in futile, and hazardous action if they see political power, theirs as well as their opponents’, as absolute. The “dominant” power is never absolute, nor is it ever homogeneous. This theme is emphasized in Foucault’s later writings. It is a relatively stable equilibrium of forces which may, at any moment, change, decompose, or recombine. There are cracks running through this field of disequilibrium-in equilibrium, giving plenty of opportunity for mostly unheroic, at times unimpressive, work, for or against, change. The more complex liberal democratic societies become, the less appropriate global narratives of power are for understanding, and changing, them.

Intellectuals cannot, therefore, see themselves as occupying a stable position within a set of stable relations of power. They too take their positions in diverse, at times incompatible, hegemonic groups assigned to them by a set of social practices and institutions, within which they can act out their modest parts.

IVAN KAMENEC

There is no exit! Physical or internal exile is only a temporary escape not a solution. This does not mean that an intellectual holds an “obligatory seat” in the politics of the modern state. In most cases so far, history has shown that an intellectual leaves politics utterly defeated, or ends up tainted or corrupted by it, which also means downfall – not only political but also moral collapse. For now, there is no satisfying solution to or explanation for this paradox. Every effort, even those with the best intentions, have failed, and this is a source of trauma, uncertainty and scepticism.

The natural state of being for intellectuals, either in politics or in society, is relentless criticism, regardless of the political system they find themselves in. At the same time, they should have no illusions about being rewarded or respected for their efforts by the power-holders of this world. Thus, in order to have their voices heard, it is that much more important not to abdicate, either through exit or through more-or-less- steadfast loyalty.

Another no less crucial aspect of intellectuals in opposition is self-doubt, the relentless questioning of their own views, judgements and attitudes. Uncertainty is perhaps the safest protection from any illusion that their opinions and solutions are somehow prophetic.

EDUARD CHMELAR

An intellectual cannot enter public life; he is by definition anchored in it. An entirely different matter for an intellectual, however, is entrance into political life. I believe that an intellectual is only acceptable in politics during times of deep societal crisis, when new solutions and values are sought. During a period of stability, an intellectual's participation in politics is not just unnecessary but impossible. A true intellectual cannot handle power. If successful, he or she ceases to be an intellectual, because power affects the individual rather than vice-versa. An intellectual is unable to handle the impediment to his or her reasoning that always accompanies power. I am not aware of any intellectual in history who entered the political sphere and preserved his or her integrity. Plato's ideal regime led by the philosopher-king remains only a utopian vision, not because there are not enough sages capable of running a country, but because even a philosopher-king would be obliged to follow certain norms and rules that exclude independent critical thinking by their very nature. This is the legacy of Socrates' life and death.

So – exit, voice or loyalty? Perhaps the second. It should not, however, be the voice of emotional protest but rather a voice with concrete suggestions allowing indirect influence on the evolution of society; the intellectual is the source of change, not the engine of it.

LUDVÍK VACULÍK

Even if we agree on a definition of "the intellectual", we do not have to agree on his task. Intellectuals can also differ by the level of their "expert" qualifications: in other words, their education, the information they work with ... and what about their individual character? A high quality intellectual, that is to say of perspicacity of judgement, indeed the one who even approaches the "truth", can still be either an optimist or a pessimist. That is to say, a person believing that there is a sense to things, or, on the contrary, a person who, looking into the distance and the depths, reckons that it's futile to try to do anything, that events are uncontrollable and results irrevocable. And what do you say to the fact, for instance, that there's a difference between a healthy intellectual and an ill one? There is, let's face it, a difference in the opinions, behaviour and performance of a bureaucrat or a worker who's healthy and one who's ill!

I think, then, that what's most important in an intellectual is the sort of person he is. I do not think that the intellectual should play some sort of role: he simply plays it or he doesn't. Is the intellectual, in that case, only the one who plays the role, and not the one who decides for many well thought-out reasons not to play any role? What, then, do you call someone like that? Traitor? Coward? That's nonsense. An intellectual can decide to say "yes" or "no". And if he remains an honest person, he doesn't give a hoot whether he's an intellectual or not.

I'm not interested in intellectuals or even discussions about them.

JAN SEKAL

The intellectual today? It depends where in the world. In places where the main worry is mere survival, intellectuals are automatically members of the privileged strata and find their audience purely in consumerist societies. In the so-called developed societies - in some sort of modern Athens where for the majority of the fully entitled population it is taken for granted that they will have enough to eat, clothe themselves properly, be looked after in hospital, and have some place to live - there is room even for intellectuals, their existence is accepted, welcomed or at least tolerated, and, in any case, there's some sort of general awareness of them. In their own way, they even become stars, and are thus part of the entertainment industry.

Is there any point in intellectuals existing? What is their task? Do these freely thinking citizens, when they present the results of their meditations to an occasionally gullible or perplexed society, also have some responsibility? In France, Raymond Aron and Jean-Paul Sartre are often presented as two opposing poles. Developments have perhaps justified the former. Did the latter, though, cause as much evil by his work as many contemporary critics would have it? (If we ignore the assessment and subsequent condemnation of his sex life, worthy only of gossips).

I could come hobbling along with various comparisons. (Painting and work with material provides a completely different space for thinking.) When sublime words begin ceremoniously to flame, I cannot but recall the German Jews in the late nineteenth century who lived in an assimilationist illusion and, amongst themselves, played at being German and considered themselves as such. Illusions can even be life threatening.

PETR PRIHODA

That is not easy for me to answer. I would like to add something to your definition of "the intellectual": he should be characterised not only by his critical attitude towards the status quo, but also towards himself, that is to say, towards his own critical attitude. You see, I know sophists, utopians and trendies who criticise. Under what circumstances should they carry out their task? They ought to carry them out continuously. At least when they have something to say. The intellectual's task is always public, otherwise it cannot be carried out (the "parameters" of that can vary). One should leave the scene only when forced to. I also understand those who leave the scene, when they discover that they've said all they have to say, when they can't find an audience, when they are tired or fed up. The intellectual's being engaged is never unnecessary, is always risky, sometimes even a gamble, but that becomes clear only later.

FEDOR GÁL

When the Slovak underground publication *Bratislava/nahlas* came under massive attacks from the Communist police and media, a close friend asked me, "Did you not publish it prematurely?" I think that I said at the time, "And how do you judge when the time is right?" I believe this took place in 1988. In November 1989, the center of political action drew in those Slovak intellectuals who had been dissidents, part of the movement, or rebels from the social and human sciences and the cultural world. Many people who were whom we would call close in spirit were glued to their tubes watching the political action. Perhaps boldness and the will to act are portioned out like civility or intelligence. To ask anyone – including the intellectual – why he or she does not possess the former or the latter makes no sense. But it would make even less sense to blame him or her for possessing it.

JANA JURÁNOVÁ

Oh, for heaven's sake! Throw that question at someone else; better to visit old Vajanský in the other world, and he will answer your question to your full satisfaction. Neither pathos nor preaching will be left out, and he also will tell you that one should not run away from responsibility, that one should grumble against tyrants and stand up for the defenceless; in short, his answer would have very little to do with reality but you could chisel it in stone right away.

What should I do with you, my dear friends? I am sorry that I can only scold you for this question, with its trite answer included in it. I can do nothing else.

Kindly allow me to define myself the tyrants and defenceless, and I assure you that my definition will not correspond exactly with yours.

And the words "task" and "role". The role played? Is it necessary to play the role of intellectual in Slovakia? For heaven's sake, in which salon and for whom? Is it necessary to fulfil the task of intellectual? Again, for whom?

I think all these lofty words about the responsibilities of intellectuals are nothing but kitsch, a repulsive ideology that your "defenceless" can hardly defend themselves against.

If I ever wanted to leave Slovakia, it was because the "intellectuals" and the "elite" here have created an uninspiring and discourse-less atmosphere. I can say it more folkich term: "The backyard view".

What does "responsibility towards the defenceless" mean? In Slovakia, thank God, everybody must attend school, so theoretically everyone should know how to read and write. Thus, theoretically, everyone should be able to figure out his or her place. I assume we do not need to create revival societies to enlighten the heads of our impoverished folk, or found societies for the promotion of harmony. I think it is essential to defend myself against all kinds of destructive ideologies, to protect my own common sense and critical distance. This nonsense about the obligations of intellectuals is repulsive. Equally repulsive are discussions urging teachers and doctors to sacrifice themselves and shoulder monstrous responsibility for a penny salary because the former bear responsibility for the education of future generations and the latter for the nation's health. Such words are suspect and insidious, like statements that women should just be patient and should accept their fate calmly. It is always suspect when someone knows beforehand how another person should behave in a certain role. One has to ask what lies behind it – is it a poorly formulated question or evil intent? (I hope it is the former in your case!)

After all that happened in this region, it should be clear to everyone that the so-called "intellectuals" have no right to automatically consider themselves the nation's elite and to solicit only good intentions. Elitists repulse me. I have never figured out who granted them a mandate for what they say and do. I do not want to share space with them. Having to tolerate them makes me sick. It is particularly awkward to act like an elite in Slovakia, to say about themselves, "We are the elite." It turns my stomach. I do not want to be one of them either by mistake or by accident.

For heaven's sake, never ever send me a question like this again!