

The ethos of the intellectual and its public meaning

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Although I would not like to argue against the idea that the university as a place of intellectual life would be an adequate place for (parts of) teacher education and that teachers should be seen as «intellectuals», I have a lot of difficulties with the text, with the overall argument and the way it is presented.

The most important difficulty relates to what is meant by the intellectual and by «intellectual life», the ethos it implies and the political meaning that is related to it. In fact it is not really elaborated, but at some point we can read that intellectual life includes «a disposition to persistently pursue reason and good judgment», and we can assume that it is about «justification of claims» of reason, «disciplined scientific work» and «extensive subject knowledge». This intellectual disposition, then, would have made, if it would have been more present in the population i.e. in teachers and through teaching, that «the willingness to support governments embarking on highly questionable foreign and domestic policies» would have been far less spread. Implying also that, in that case, a far better policy would be made, without «the grave consequences» of today's policy.

So it seems that the intellectual is the one who disposes of extensive knowledge, is concerned about the justification of claims and persistently pursues reason i.e. subjugates herself to the tribunal of reason and judges what is presented to her accordingly (as Kant required of his enlightened readers). And it seems that good policy itself has to be rational in that sense i.e. that the civil kingdom should be subjugated under the kingdom of reason. The teacher, then, as intellectual, would act in name of this kingdom. This is, however, a very particular way of looking at politics and at the intellectual and her ethos and activities. The main activity seems to be judging implying a subjugation under principles of a tribunal in whose name one operates and to which one claims to have a (privileged) access, addressing an audience (the polis/public) as in need of (intellectual, rational) guidance, guidance by the principles or claims of reason. This critical intellectual, thus, would continue a pastoral attitude as the gate keeper of the kingdom of reason and as the one who guides people towards this kingdom and who equips people with the necessary subjectivity in order to pass the gate. Many remarks could be made here, but I confine myself to two.

One should, first, point to the fact that this intellectual ethos implies the instauration of a fundamental division (or inequality) between intellectu-

als and non-intellectuals, those who are (already) subjects (of reason) and those who are not, a division which is itself not rational, and implies to consider oneself, as intellectual, to be better, and to be more able for good politics. This is in fact the (political) ethos of aristocracy (the aristocracy of the intellect e.g. of those who, as Platon tells us, either where blessed by the Gods since they were blended with gold, or where educated to take part in the kingdom of reason) rejecting democracy and its hypothesis of equality of all (voices).

Secondly, there are good reasons to wonder whether these intellectual dispositions and ethos are really working in the way Ladwig suggests. Indeed, many have pointed to the at least ambivalent political role of intellectuals (and of some of the greatest of them) throughout history, one of the most troubling examples being the very educated and highly intellectual elite that supported and enabled fascist policy in Germany. But it was Hannah Arendt who analyzed first and in detail how precisely the attitude to subjugate under «principles», which are in this case the principles or claims of reason, and to judge accordingly, did not prevent at all from being involved in atrocities, rather the contrary seems to be true.

However, at the same time, Arendt maintained that what could help us refrain from politics with «grave consequences» was the activity of the mind called «thinking». Thinking not being about pursuing reason or logical argument, not being about being very intelligent or having elaborated an extensive knowledge, but about the preparedness to live explicitly together with oneself, i.e. to deliver oneself to that «silent intercourse (in which we examine what we say and what we do)», in which one knows oneself as being confronted with an invisible partner or witness with whom one has to live together and to whom one has to respond. This we could use as a totally different way of looking at the intellectual disposition. This disposition would be the disposition to think for oneself i.e. to take care of oneself, which does not require a particular intelligence and which is not the privilege of those who know, but is open for all and implies that one confirms one's own capacity i.e. that one starts from the (democratic) hypothesis of equality (that we are all equally rational beings i.e. that we all can think, and therefore also I can think). Arendt writes: «Thinking ... as ... the actualization of the difference given in consciousness, is not a prerogative of the few but an ever-present faculty in everybody; by the same token, inability to think is not a failing of the many who lack brain power but an ever-present possibility in everybody – scientists, scholars, and other specialists in mental enterprises not

excluded» (Arendt 1978, p. 191).

If we follow Arendt (and others) here, this means that there is no difference between people qua intelligence (as capacity to think), but only between those who deliver themselves to (or embark in) thinking and those who don't. And the political task of teachers, then, is not to transmit knowledge or to propagate subjugation to (the tribunal of) reason, but, as Jacques Rancières ignorant schoolmaster, to support the will to think, not by judging, but by exposing one's own thinking. In this context it would be worthwhile to explore the idea that the possible political role of the teacher has to do with

his/her «public» appearance i.e. with the remarkable circumstance that teachers, still up today, are willing to expose themselves (i.e. the part of the world that masters them, that they «love», to continue with Arendt) individually to a group of a younger generation. Taking care of this ethos of exposition is most certainly not the privilege of the university (although it can be one of the places where it is cultivated).

References

Arendt, Hannah: *The Life of the Mind*. New York: Harcourt Brace 1978