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Why Be Melancholic? European Intellectuals and Academia Nowadays

Russell (1996) argues:

There is much to be said on the narrowly utilitarian view of education. There is not time to learn everything before beginning to make a living, and undoubtedly 'useful' knowledge is *very* useful. It has made the modern world. Without it, we should not have machines or motor-cars or railways or aeroplanes; it should be added that we should not have modern advertising or modern propaganda. [...] No community as yet has enough of it, and undoubtedly education must continue to promote it. (pp. 20-21)

I am a product of plenty of "useful knowledge", trained in matters related to modern advertising and modern propaganda, as my disciplinary orientation comes from communications. Besides, having grown up in Romania, I have often heard during my BA teachers and students speaking in praise of useful knowledge. In the early '90s, this kind of knowledge was going to prepare a cohort of specialists ready to save my country from the post-communist disaster. An older, elite, bourgeois type of intellectual or a more recent though already dead by now former dissident type of the same species were going to be replaced by a specialized individual with no knowledge of Greek, Latin or French, but highly skilled and happy with his assets and lacks. Yet, as a proud member of one of the last regimes of "Taliban" Romanian kids who have been raised to become well-rounded individuals with knowledge of French and some of Latin, at sixteen, I was rejecting this new dream of specialization.

At eighteen however, I chose to write and write with a practical purpose, so I went into "Journalism and Mass-Communication", a glamorous American import which has started to develop in Romania only after the nineties and which has been my source

of skills and lacks in various shapes, forms and contexts ever since. Back then, at the age when we become citizens so to say, consciously and unconsciously I have made a pact with a kind devil – a devil that was arguing an education can provide both the meaning and the job on the same plate. In tune with this voice, I later pursued the avenue chosen at eighteen in Canadian institutions. Among a range of jobs and subfields covered, I remember one in particular: teaching assistant for COMS 360 - “Propaganda”. Fundamentally, I remember it not because of the teaching assistantship or the subject matter of propaganda, but because of the professor who told me it was going to be valuable to speak from personal experience regarding matters of propaganda during the seminars. Unless I met this teacher, I would not venture to present my unspecialized thoughts today and to give them a practical end into this paper although they essentially represent what Russell (1996) would call a “delicious savor of ‘useless knowledge’” from my disciplinary viewpoint (p. 26).

Even from such an isolated, personal account one can infer that each individual has a particular take on the ideas of education and of being an intellectual that stem from more or less national understandings of the terms. Personally I believe an intellectual is generally speaking someone who can understand, along the lines of the Latin *intelligo*, -*ere* (i.e. to understand). However, different types of intellectuals have emerged in Europe and in North America that cannot be confined to such a simple, though wide in scope definition. I argue we cannot begin to comprehend the roles of education and of intellectuals unless we find their connections and relations with the nation. This is what I begin to explore in this paper.

In “the abysses of interstellar space” where Russell (1996) invites us to go with the pursuit of “useless knowledge”, there is also something called the “Romanian soul” (p. 27). Noica (1992) was arguing Romanians would not be able to understand the Western philosophy until they would understand their own. His conclusions to an article written in 1943 do not point to what a Romanian philosophy would be though they deepen the problems of a Romanian philosophy of knowledge. What is of interest here is not the Romanian philosophy or the lack of it, as this would be another project but the idea that a philosopher like Noica has been concerned, in the Romanian context with fundamental questions about his nation. From another vantage point of the same “interstellar space”, in 1966, Ortega y Gasset wrote that Europe was facing a crisis in terms of its cultural conscience. If the 17th century marked the moment when the European peoples started to feel as distinctive nations and national cultures were therefore effervescent and stimulating forces, at the time he wrote, nationality had already become static and passive. The organic intellectual was always at the core of the development of a national conscience in Europe. To understand how the roles of education and intellectuals change throughout time demands a clear rendition of the idea of nation.

Benedict Anderson (1991) attempts to find a workable definition for the concept of “nation”: the nation is “an imagined political community – imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (p. 6). It is *imagined* – “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p. 6). It is *limited* – “because even the largest of them (...) has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie

other nations” (p. 7). It is *sovereign* – “because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm” (p. 7). And it is a *community* – “because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that might prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (p. 7). Nationalism as such, becomes “not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness, it *invents* nations where they do not exist” (p. 6). The nation became possible in the context of print culture and capitalism. The initial market was literate Europe, “a wide but thin stratum of Latin readers” (p. 38). Reformation added up as another important cluster. Luther was, as Anderson (1991) argues “the first best-selling author” (p. 39). Thus, the coalition between Protestantism and print capitalism soon conduced to the production of cheap editions and created new reading publics: e.g. merchants, women, etc. Translations of biblical texts into the vernaculars created the basis for national identities. In conclusion, in the 19th century we already assist at the formation of linguistic nationalisms.

Intellectuals per se are not mentioned in Anderson’s account in terms of their role in the translations and spread of written productions to a larger audience, but it is not difficult to infer that the connoisseurs of Latin were an intellectual/clerical elite.

Along similar lines, though from a totally different standpoint, disciplinary tradition and time frame, Sorin Adam Matei (2004) argues the elite intellectual groups were the driving forces in Western Europe in early phases of capitalism. The thread Anderson (1991) follows in his account on the nation would also be indicative of that. These elite groups – or prestige groups – as Matei (2004) calls them, are still instrumental in Eastern Europe, where the nation-states still experience a “para-modern” or “pre-

modern” phase, being on their way to the development of a fully fledged market economy.

For instance the Romanian “para-modernity” is fundamentally different than the occidental one not only because of the different temporality but also because of the relationship between 1) the prestige groups and the market and 2) the same prestige groups and the notion of class (Matei, 2004). Late capitalism imposes a translation of the intellectual social vector from prestige groups to a larger intellectual class, which has a good rapport with the market and accepts it as a natural driving force. If the Occident ascribes a dominant role to the intellectual elite at large, although the prestige groups have not fully disappeared, a society such as the Romanian one is dominated by the ideas professed by such prestige groups, who are or are not in tune with the market. An intellectual class, in the sense described above is thus still incipient.

Therefore there is a fundamental difference between the role ascribed to the intellectual in the past in Western Europe and still in the past, though closer to us in Eastern Europe and today. If before they were “prophets”, today they become essentially “entrepreneurs of ideas” (p. 39). In addition, in Eastern Europe, intellectuals, particularly dissident intellectuals, before the ‘90s were ready to assume the role of “philosopher-kings” guiding the people towards a brighter, more democratic future, as Stan (2000) argues though authors like Marino (1996) clearly reveal the complexity of the roles played by dissident intellectuals. However, to turn to our point they were at least regarded as Stan (2000) argues to be “genuine symbols of freedom, heroes of democracy and beacons of morality” (p. 1). They were slowly shaping up the “myth of the messianic dissident”, a political myth which “though emotionally charged, utterly ambiguous and

essentially irrational”, was a coherent narrative and a reflection of a voice that was employed in “times of crises, when communities lose their center and polarize themselves along belligerent lines” (p. 8).

While in Western Europe the majority was concerned with consumerism and a few others were declaiming the market from some academic “ivory towers”, and Eastern Europe was experiencing a different dynamic, today even the Eastern European intellectuals work with the same dichotomies and choices as everywhere else (Stan, 2000). The dissident turned liberal is a *rara avis* nowadays in the region, as the author continues.

These dichotomies and choices are even more accrued in North America where Matei (2004) identifies other interesting grey areas in terms of the social strata of intellectuals and prestige groups. The “entrepreneurs of ideas” from North America do not detest popularity offered by the market, but embrace it. Yet, one can observe different modes of behavior associated with what are usually referred to as “public intellectuals” such as let’s say Noam Chomsky, on one hand and the institutionalized academic elite, on the other hand. If Chomsky would probably be just as best-selling as Luther a while ago, the latter group, the academic elite poses interesting problems in regards to the notion of intellectualism. Matei (2004) observes that lately, the American academic world, especially in social sciences, has increasingly become an amalgam of bureaucracy and economic rationalism, characteristic to institutions that remind of the classic prestige groups. Otherwise, a certain degree of uniformity of ideas within faculties and even disciplines cannot be explained. Yet, there are some capital differences in terms of the functioning of these groups.

In Europe, according to Matei (2004) the ideas professed by a certain prestige group, tend to reproduce themselves in the interior of the same group, upon the invitation of other members that are in tune with the same ideas or in competition with them. At the same time, there is still the notion of the prophet intellectual, like Habermas, for example to whom one bows and whom one approaches with deference and from a certain distance. In contrast, in North America a certain degree of proximity between the academic elite and apprentices has been accomplished as a consequence of the logic of the market. The academic, himself an intellectual in the sense described above or not, needs a clientele, just as much as the client - apprentice needs the academic. The academic institutions are in a continuous process of advertising their assets in order to attract tuition payers and funds from alumni. The economic paradigm has taken over the academic act and this is probably for good reasons. Neither Matei (2004) in his account, nor I here cast a judgment-value on this phenomenon. At least, in his case, this is what he calls a “sociological analysis”.

To keep up with Matei’s (2004) argument, professors in North America need to consider the market all the way throughout their careers, the direction their research takes and the accessibility of their work being essential in this equation. A certain degree of uniformity goes even farther in the sense that even the political structure of departments is quite cohesive. Rarely, argues Matei (2004), does one find different political orientations within departments. From this, a certain student culture follows, that is in tune with such ideas and a respective notion of education that tends towards a certain degree of uniformity.

I argue this model is or will be to a certain extent present in Europe. The context which Ortega y Gasset was just pointing to in the late 60's becomes more evident in Europe nowadays as one speaks more about integration and less about organic intellectuals and national belonging. The status of the European intellectual should be thus reassessed. It is clear that a new model of intellectualism is evolving that includes the marketing of intellectual production. Western/North American academic models are not only fashionable but are also the centers where new meanings are associated with intelligentsia and new roles of intellectuals in society are emerging. Last but not least, they are very popular, as North American academic towns are increasingly becoming the Paris and Berlin "d'autrefois". They attract the largest number of international students, future specialists and maybe elite intellectuals and certainly large numbers of tuition payers.

If the usual thesis would be that Europe needs to find its particular tone in every aspect, and particularly, its own ways of framing the role of intellectual participation in society, and implicitly the role of academia in the process, in this paper I will argue in favor of a different thesis.

In fact the longing for a lost meaning of intellectualism in Europe makes total sense nowadays because as Zizek (2001) says "anyone who is not a melancholic [...] can today be suspected of 'totalitarianism'" (p. 141). Zizek (2001) argues:

... the mistake of depreciating melancholy can have dire consequences – papers are rejected, applicants do not get jobs because of their 'incorrect' attitudes towards melancholy. [...] Melancholy is thus an exquisitely *postmodern* stance, the stance that allows us to survive in a global society by maintaining the appearance of fidelity to our lost 'roots' (p. 142, author's emphasis).

Thus, melancholy for a lost meaning of the organic intellectual is part of the European academic act. There should be a certain melancholy, that makes sense in a fragmented post-modern world for past roles and prophet intellectuals, for prestige groups, for the civic virtues associated with dissident intellectuals for instance, even only because certain values such as democracy sometimes work like old ladies, who need remember themselves. In Eastern Europe for instance the old ladies still have a lot to learn. At the same time, education, one of the most powerful democratizing tools nowadays should be the business of everyone who is involved in it, intellectuals, academics and tuition payers. After all, as Stan (2000) argues, “the study of intellectuals will be informative and intellectually perceptive only to the extent that it successfully avoids the Scylla of sycophantic lionization and the Charybdis of unnecessary criticism” (p. 8). Better definitions of notions of “profession” and “vocation” will eventually become possible.

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