The Death of the Concerned Intellectual?

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Introduction

The incident of September 11 in the first year of the new millennium provided a strong reminder to us of the power of ideas, either in the form of fundamentalism driving people to sacrifice their lives, or in the form of the humanistic concern uniting peoples across the planet to defend the bottom line of human civilisation, namely the protection of people's lives. Given that ideas do matter, it is critical at this historical conjuncture to examine the function of men and women working with ideas in different societies. This paper will define the term of the intellectual, and then examine the changing roles played by intellectuals and explore the ways in which the concerned intellectual survives in the context of the post-modern reality.

Symbolised Knowledge, Universal Values and the Intellectual

There are so many definitions of the intellectual that a desperate expert on the topic has declared: 'It makes little sense therefore to ask the question "who are the intellectuals" and expect in reply a set of objective measurements or even a finger-pointing exercise. It makes no sense to compose a list of professions whose members are intellectuals, or draw a line inside professional hierarchy above which the intellectuals are located. In any place and at anytime "the intellectuals" are constituted as a combined effect of mobilization and self-recruitment' (Bauman 1987, 87).

I would argue that the exercise of 'mobilization and self-recruitment' is only part of the story, and it is not beyond the intellectual capacity to arrive at a working definition of the

intellectual with certain objective measurements. Throughout cultures all over the world, there are three major ways to define the category 'intellectuals': the level of education, the nature of professions, and the social role based on one's beliefs and attitudes.

China is probably the best example of a country where the category of 'intellectuals' is defined by the level of education. During the Period of Spring and Autumn (770-476 BC) and the period of the Warring States (475-221 BC), there emerged a special social stratum known as *shi* (scholar). This category was composed of educated but not necessarily propertied people, who acquired knowledge in history, geography, literature, philosophy and politics, and provided service to kings, and rulers with other titles. They were fully aware of their position in society and were busy exploring and debating the ways to serve their rulers and the moral principles they should uphold (Yu 1987). Known later as *shidafu* (scholar-official) collectively, their position as royal servants to imperial courts remained the same during the entire period of imperial China, albeit in distinct ways. During the Republican period from 1912-1949, the term 'intellectuals', derived from the West, was translated into Chinese as *zhishi fenzi* (literally 'elements with knowledge') or *zhishi jieji* (literally 'class with knowledge'), referring mainly to those who had received tertiary education and worked as professionals.

In the categories used by the Chinese Communist Party during that period, and the Era of Mao from 1949-1976, the term 'intellectual' might apply to all educated people including even those with only primary school education (Zhou 1984, 208-21). The Chinese used the terms 'petty intellectuals', 'medium intellectuals' and 'big intellectuals' to mark the internal differences between those who had received primary education, secondary education and tertiary education respectively. Therefore, in the 1950s, Mao and many of his comrades were known as 'petty intellectuals', whereas those 'Rightists' who had received tertiary education or even a PhD in the West were known as 'big intellectuals' (Xian 1993, 209; Li 1986, 833-34). The obvious advantage of this definition of 'intellectuals' with reference to the level of education is its certainty and convenience, avoiding any ambiguity in a finger-pointing exercise. However, it can also easily render

the definition meaningless, when politicians, soldiers or anyone receiving some level of education are also identified as 'intellectuals'.

The sociological definition of 'intellectuals' with reference to their profession helps to narrow down the scope, and this is understandably the most popular practice in many societies. In Mexico, intellectuals define themselves as people having a broad education who disperse ideas to a broad audience (Camp 1995, 38). In China, a more formal definition of intellectuals refers to professionals working in five areas: research institutions, education, engineering, health services, and cultural establishments (Zhou 1984, 228). Thus, in typical dictionaries in China, an 'intellectual' is simply defined as a 'mental worker', as distinguished from a 'manual worker'.

In the West, the most forceful theory of intellectuals as defined by occupation is elaborated by Alvin Gouldner, who defines intellectuals as a new class monopolising a special kind of cultural capital, or 'the culture of critical discourse', by which he means the distinctive language behaviour acquired by and confined to knowledge producers and transmitters. (Gouldner 1979, 1-8) According to Gouldner, through the monopoly of the culture of critical discourse or the possession of cultural capital from which they derive their incomes and social status, the new class shares a particular relationship to the means of production defined by Karl Marx. In Gouldner's category, the new class consists both of 'intelligentsia', whose intellectual interests are fundamentally 'technical', and 'intellectuals', whose interests are primarily 'critical, emancipatory, hermeneutic and hence often political'. (Gouldner 1979, 48) He argues that the emergence of this new class is made possible by several historical 'episodes', such as a process of secularisation giving rise to the modern grammar of rationality or culture of critical discourse, the growth of an anonymous market for cultural producers, the operation of a European-wide communication network allowing intellectuals to share a cosmopolitan identity, and, most importantly, the rise of the modern public education system that produces the new class of intelligentsia and intellectuals. In Gouldner's opinion, the power of this new class is growing and may become dominant on the social stage in the future. Gouldner sees this as a promising future for the world, because this new class is part of the working class

and these 'bearers of knowledge' may provide the best hope for humankind. On the other hand Gouldner also sees it as a 'flawed universal class' in that it is elitist and cultivates its own guild advantage (Gouldner 1979, 7).

This conceptualisation is also held by George Konrad and Ivan Szelenyi, who define intellectuals as 'the monopolistic proprietors of knowledge which society accepts as having cross-contextual validity and which it uses to orient its members' (Konrad and Szelenyi 1979, 32). Furthermore, with a focus on developing countries, Robert J Brym describes radical intellectuals as a 'governing class' responsible for revolutions and modernisation (Brym 1980). Edward Shils has also defined the term 'intellectuals' in a similar way: 'Intellectuals are the aggregate of persons in any society who employ in their communication and expression, with relatively higher frequency than most other members of their society, symbols of general scope and abstract reference, concerning man, society, nature and the cosmos. The high frequency of their use of such symbols may be a function of their subjective propensity or of the obligations of an occupational role' (Sills 1968, 399).

This occupational or professional usage of the term 'intellectuals' is widely accepted through common practice, and various qualifications are employed to account for internal differentiation and diversity, hence the terms 'technical intellectuals' and 'humanistic intellectuals', 'scientific intellectuals' and 'literary intellectuals', 'academic intellectuals' and 'political intellectuals', 'managerial intellectuals' and 'cultural intellectuals', 'specific intellectual' and 'universal intellectuals', and 'assorted intellectuals' and 'public intellectuals'.

There are still those who believe that the term 'intellectuals' itself means more than a profession or occupation. The modifiers they choose in talking about intellectuals are ideologically, morally or politically charged, such as 'establishment intellectuals' and 'critical intellectuals', 'conservative intellectuals' and 'radical intellectuals', 'conformist intellectuals' and 'dissenting intellectuals', 'reactionary intellectuals' and 'revolutionary

intellectuals', 'traditional intellectuals' and 'modern intellectuals', and 'unattached intellectuals' and 'engaged intellectuals'.

According to Karl Mannheim, intellectuals are 'social groups whose special task is to provide an interpretation of the world', and they are by definition 'socially unattached' (Mannheim 1936, 9). Following a similar line but attempting a higher level of sophistication of this conception, Jean-Paul Sartre argued that a 'true intellectual' could only be defined as 'a man [sic] who has achieved consciousness of his own constituent contradiction', discovering his class particularism as a member of the middle class but struggling to perform his task of universality and engaging in what is not his business (Sartre 1974, 230). More recently, Edward Said went a step further in polishing the term by his 'characterisation of the intellectuals as exile, and marginal, as amateur, and as the author of a language that tries to speak truth to power' (Said 1994, xiv). However, on the other end of the spectrum, Antonio Gramsci asserted an intimate link between knowledge and power, and categorically rejected the concept of intellectual independence or autonomy. Following a Marxist tradition, Gramsci saw 'organic intellectuals' forming inevitably within the hegemonic or counter-hegemonic classes. He believed that ideological hegemony was essential for the prevailing order of the bourgeois society to maintain itself, therefore, it is the central task for intellectuals acting on behalf the proletariat to contend for 'intellectual and moral leadership' of a society (Gramsci 1971, 5-23).

It must be admitted that this ethical and political conceptualisation of 'intellectuals' stands closer to the original meaning of the term. It is generally agreed that the term 'intelligentsia' was first used in Poland and Russia in the 1840-1860s period, where it referred to a social stratum distinguished from the rest of society by its education and value system, bound together as a cohesive group in opposition to the establishment, and transcending personal interests in favour of social progress. The term 'intellectuals' was first coined by Clemenceau in France in 1898 to describe the group of prominent defenders of Dreyfus in the name of justice against the French military (Gella 1976, 7-34; Jennings & Kemp-Welch 1997, 1-21). According to this 'classical usage', the term

'intellectuals' is reserved for people like the philosophers of ancient Greece, the humanists of the Renaissance, and the French *philosophes* and Encyclopaedists of the Enlightenment, who were thought to command reason, universal knowledge and eternal truth, and who intervened in social and political affairs.

It is well to bear in mind these particular connotations of the term. However, the definition of intellectuals as a self-styled elite of philosophers, academics, writers, or cultural critics no longer reflects the reality and the common use of the term, which has a much wider scope in most societies in the world. Accordingly, this paper offers a definition of the intellectual that covers both professional and moral dimensions. An intellectual is a specialist who creates and communicates symbolised knowledge as a means of living, and hopefully intervenes in social and political affairs in the name of universal values, truth and justice. This definition does not reject a value judgement, but it does not privilege such a judgement either, thus allowing the term to be inclusive enough not to violate commonsense. 'Symbolised knowledge' is used here in order to avoid the confusion with other forms of knowledge derived from direct personal experience in production and life. The purpose of using 'specialist' as the subject term is to exclude such categories as politicians, soldiers and business people who exercise political, military, financial and other forms of power, but not intellectual power, in their social function.

Confidence and the Survival of the Concerned Intellectual

According to this inclusive approach, intellectuals have varied characteristics and play diverse roles in societies. They can constitute a class in their own right, either as a 'cultural bourgeoisie' in developed countries or a 'governing class' in the political structure in communist or developing countries. They can remain independent from, or enter into alliance with, other social classes. They can be royal servants providing the legitimacy essential to a regime, or fearless critics exposing the abuses and evils of a regime. However, the primary concern of the intellectual is the discovery and communication of knowledge and truth. By extension, the concern of social justice and progress is also intrinsic to intellectuals, because truth, justice and progress are closely

related. Commitment to truth and justice entails a constant fight against absurdity, oppression, domination, discrimination and exploitation.

However, doubt has been raised from different corners about the survival of the concerned intellectual in all of the three senses emphasised here: the search for knowledge and truth, the pursuit of social justice, and the struggle for social progress. Paradoxically, the greatest threat of the very survival of intellectuals comes from within the ranks of intellectuals themselves. There are post-modernists who have announced the death of universal knowledge and truth, leaving no ground for the existence of intellectuals. France used to be thought of as a 'paradise for intellectuals', and perhaps precisely because of the prestige enjoyed by intellectuals, France became the birthplace of post-structuralism and post-modernism with their focus on deconstruction, which, among other things, has worked to discredit the function of intellectuals. Post-modernists have waged sustained attacks on the intellectual's representativeness, of the society in general, and of the working and the underprivileged classes in particular. In 1980 Michel Foucault formally declared the death of representation as well as of the intellectual (Foucault and Deleuze 1980, 206), although Foucault also argued that a better understanding of knowledge systems and power relationships would allow the breaking down of oppression. As Jeremy Jennings and Tony Kemp-Welch comment, 'once the claim (or pretension) to universality has been stripped away, the oppositional function of the intellectual becomes difficult to sustain. All disputes are purely local in character and all truth-claims are discredited. We are left with only discourse' (Jennings and Kemp-Welch 1997, 17). Jean-Francois Lyotard also announced the death of the intellectual upon arrival in the post-modern age where pretensions to universality were no longer tolerated (Lyotard 1983, 307). And it has been argued that the 'post-modern age' began with the death of Jean-Paul Sartre in 1980 (Schalk 1997, 271-285).

The post-modernist challenge is a serious attack on the universal principles of the Enlightenment project. Is that project of pursuing universal knowledge and truth defendable? Enlightenment beliefs in reason and progress have been abused by some revolutionaries in establishing political and ideological despotism in different parts of the

world, but it is less than fair to hold the Enlightenment thinkers responsible for the crimes committed by authoritarian regimes in the name of reason and progress. The Enlightenment is based precisely on a universal liberation of individuals from any kind of ideological despotism and superstition, no matter whether in the form of the Church, the State, or any other institution. It is even more dangerous to completely abandon the universal principles of the Enlightenment in favour of post-modern ethical relativism, simply because reasonable doubt is not the same as post-modern cynicism, iconoclasm or nihilism. Furthermore, the principles of equality and recognition never mean that each culture or society's values are truly relative to its own conditions—for example, that cannibalism is right for cannibals. It was European colonists who first sought to maintain the status quo of primitive and pre-modern societies, not for the post-modernist excuse of 'respecting the differences', but for keeping the local peoples under control as a lower class. In spite of the post-modern trend to emphasise the 'local' over the 'universal', Enlightenment principles centred on the individual at one level, and on the whole of humankind at another, remain truer than post-modern thinking, located halfway between these poles, that privileges 'communities' and 'cultures'. Knowledge is personal, local and universal at the same time (Hollis 1997, 289-299).

As a matter of fact, socialists found the Enlightenment inadequate long before post-modernists. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, some had already realised that 'the kingdom of reason' pursued by the Enlightenment thinkers had turned out to be nothing more than 'the kingdom of the bourgeoisie'. As Fredrick Engels put it, 'compared with the splendid promises of the philosophers, the social and political institutions born of the 'triumph of reason' were bitterly disappointing caricatures' (Engels, 1954, 27). Instead of denouncing and abandoning the project of the Enlightenment, socialists have sought to transcend the limits of the bourgeoisie by advancing universal values, such as freedom, justice, equality and peace, in order to benefit the working class and humankind as a whole. In this way, modern socialism has precisely been 'a more logical extension of the principles laid down by the great French philosophers of the eighteenth century' (354). The flame of universal knowledge and truth has not extinguished, and neither has the

concerned intellectual who carries on the pursuit of universal knowledge and truth, and tries to defend the universal values of liberty, equality and fraternity.

The second challenge facing the concerned intellectual is specialisation and professionalism. It is believed that intellectuals have settled down to the pursuit of promising careers as experts, such as academics at universities, advisers to government, and engineers in companies, while giving up their ideological vision, social responsibilities and endeavour for social justice. An early concern was expressed by Richard Hofstadter who found the intellectual 'either shut out or sold out' in bourgeois society (Hofstadter 1963, 417). Another concern was raised by Andre Gorz, who saw 'fragmentation and specialization' eliminating critical intelligence and bringing a technical intelligentsia 'restricted to their specialized fields' according to the capitalist division of labour (Gorz 1976, 159-189). A fuller elaboration of this anxiety was undertaken in the 1980s by Russell Jacoby, who raised a cry of warning that 'the missing intellectuals are lost in the universities', in an era when the full-scale academisation of intellectuals resulted in widespread mediocrity, to the extent that even 'New Left intellectuals' aimed only to become professors with tenured employment, keeping their eyes exclusively on 'professional journals, monographs and conferences' (Jacoby 1987).

Has the intellectual been reduced in this way to a selfish 'mental technician' only capable of specific tasks assigned by the management in the 'normal' life? It should be emphasised that the professional interests of intellectuals are not necessarily in conflict with the general interests of the society. The modern legal and political framework that guarantees liberty, autonomy and independence of individuals, intellectuals included, is one of the most remarkable achievements of humankind since the Enlightenment. There is nothing wrong in intellectuals enjoying this achievement and pursuing their private and professional interests. The knowledge produced and spread by intellectuals in their 'normal' life is essential for the modern society as a whole. With humankind advancing into the 'knowledge-based economy' and 'information society', the symbolised knowledge produced and communicated by intellectuals can only become increasingly significant.

For intellectuals working in the fields of the social sciences and humanities, such as humanistic intellectuals, literary intellectuals and cultural intellectuals, it is their 'normal' life and professional interests that concerns them with themes of moral and political issues. For intellectuals working in the other fields, such as scientific intellectuals and technical intellectuals, it can be too demanding for them to devote their lives to moral and political issues on a daily basis, but they may also become involved when there is a moral or political dimension to their work. In any case, when intellectuals do intervene in social, political and moral issues of public concern, their positions as experts in something that provides legitimacy or social authority that allows them to do so. In this sense, professionalism is a source of strength rather than weakness.

The real problem, then, lies not so much in academisation or specialisation per se, but in institutional arrangements exhausting the time and energy of intellectuals, rendering them unable to devote themselves in a meaningful way to issues of public concern, and in the decline of moral standards among intellectuals who choose to care for nothing beyond their life and professional careers. Too often, intellectuals in societies all over the world have remained indifferent even when their colleagues were victimised by unhealthy regimes, or basic human values such as free inquiry and other personal freedoms were undermined by evil forces. The correct priority seems to rest in the rejection of economic rationalism and encouragement within institutions for intellectuals to have more favourable workloads and working environments, thereby fostering their public spirit and leaving them with time and energy to intervene in social and political affairs of public concern.

Another problem is the inhibitors preventing intellectuals from acting as agents for social progress centred on the liberation of the working class. As early as the 1950s, Irving Howe in the U.S.A. asserted that the Western world had entered an 'age of conformity' where intellectuals not only 'lose their traditional rebelliousness but to one extent or another they cease to function as intellectuals' (Howe 1954, 13). Discussing in the 1980s the role of intellectuals in liberal democracies, Alain G. Gagnon set out to explore

'whether the institutionalisation of reward structures for scientific and intellectual research has led to an increasing integration of intellectuals into society's power structures and a concomitant decline in their critical, innovative function' (Gagnon 1987, 4).

It seems true that intellectuals in the West have long been subordinated to and co-opted by the state and market, thereby compromising their commitment to champion the cause of the oppressed, underprivileged and marginalised. In other words, they no longer identify with the working-class urge to 'change the world'; rather, they have accepted the world of the bourgeois order. However, this is still not necessarily an act of betrayal, as long as intellectuals continue to fight for the cause of truth and justice, sometimes within the frameworks of the state and market. The left-oriented intellectuals in the West have long maintained a critical attitude toward the bourgeoisie and its ethos: individualism, materialism and mediocrity, alleged to run against noble aspirations for solidarity, beauty and justice. There is a natural tendency among them to emphasise the role of intellectuals as revolutionaries or politically engaged dissenters, and there is a general anxiety among them to expect the emergence of intellectuals as historical agents for social revolution after the industrial proletariat was found to be incapable of fulfilling its historical mission assigned by Karl Marx. Contemporary left-oriented intellectuals in the West were born too late to experience great revolutions; instead, they witnessed the decisive decline of revolutionary spirit among the working class in the West after the general strike in France in 1968. Due to de-industrialisation and resultant changes in the social structure, where industrial workers have become a minority accounting for about one-fifth of the population in the developed West, socialist parties not prepared to accept a permanent minority status no longer relied on the working class as their social base. To make things worse, state socialism has everywhere collapsed. Since the early 1980s, when one after another developing country embarked on reforms in the direction of marketisation or democratisation, we have also seen a 'loss of innocence' among the left in the West, who used to theorise the Third World as the new collective proletariat, the most significant of the new social agents, and the key site of revolutionary upsurge (Aronowitz 1990, 3-56). Yet, while all of these heart-breaking changes have brought about pessimism among

some left-oriented intellectuals, the contemporary world is actually not as hopeless as they see it.

Revolutions and social movements are means to achieve the goals of social progress under some particular circumstances, and they are less desirable means given the high costs and human sacrifice involved and the serious problems experienced in all of the post-revolutionary societies. There are good reasons to condemn overwhelming materialism, consumerism and mass entertainment culture for fostering a 'false consciousness' among the working class, who are no longer ready to answer calls by left-oriented intellectuals to seek social movement. However, radicalising the population and stirring up the working class or other underprivileged classes for social movements is not the only role the intellectuals on the left can play for social progress—although it can undoubtedly be exciting to be part of a large scale social movement or intellectual engagement informed by a meta-narrative or grand ideology such as Marxism or existentialism. Even collaboration with the state, social democratic states in particular, can be very positive for the liberation and empowerment of the working class. Socialist parties, the traditional ally of left-wing intellectuals in the West, have exercised their power through the state to achieve many desirable goals, such as equality, social security and common prosperity to a certain extent.

The relationship between the State, society and intellectuals is complex. In the process of revolutions overthrowing despotic regimes or the transition to economic, political and intellectual pluralism, the intellectual all over the world acted as the spokesperson for the people and the enlightenment avant-garde. We have seen these phenomena in the experience of revolutions and democratic transition in the West, the former communist societies, and the developing world. In societies where this process has not been completed, intellectuals are continuing their historical mission, as can be seen in China and elsewhere. It seems that problems arise in societies where the process of the transition to economic, political and intellectual pluralism has been completed and the tasks of protecting liberties and achieving social justice have taken on new forms. In a sense, intellectuals in these societies live a 'normal' life in pursuing personal and

professional interests, rather than performing their 'traditional' duty in providing political and ideological leadership for the people, revolution and social movement.

It is arguable whether there is a need for intellectuals to *always* work against the state and the market, unless one insists on the anarchist perspective. As we all know, the operation of the market constantly produces its own deficiencies side by side with benefits, and politics is not just a matter of administration and management that can be left exclusively to politicians. Whenever there are cases of injustice and inequalities produced by the state or the market, intellectuals, in their capacity as good experts and active citizens at the same time, should be able to rally their force to effectively intervene in the name of truth and justice. In this way, the state and the market can be brought to become allies of intellectuals and other healthy forces in delivering benefits to the society as a whole.

Conclusion

There are many roles played by intellectuals, and the social location and function of intellectuals can be fundamentally different in different societies. Any of these roles can run into trouble, and they require constant efforts by intellectuals for them to remain sustainable. When production and communication of knowledge are taken as the primary concern of intellectuals, 'the death of the concerned intellectual' becomes an unwarranted anxiety, because there is no reason to believe that knowledge and truth will no longer be pursued and valued by humankind.

The growing role of intellectuals as experts for socio-economic development and their diminishing role as social and political critics has caused anxiety among intellectuals all over the world. Yet if they can contribute so much to the development of the economy, scholarship and culture, there is no reason why they cannot maintain their political relevance and significance. Political marginalisation of critical intellectuals, where it is a reality, seems to be caused not so much by the lack of power of intellectuals as by the lack of solidarity among intellectuals to fight for a common cause. The problem lies as much in their lack of enthusiasm for transcending the boundaries of their professional relevance and intervening in broad social and political issues, as in institutional structures

consuming too much of their energy and time, and seducing them to give up their social responsibilities for personal career. There should be a way for the 'concerned intellectual' to synthesize intellectual and activist roles.

Since the university is part of society and remains an important location of power, the 'loss of intellectuals into universities' may not be a problem, as long as intellectuals can maintain their commitment to, and responsibility for, knowledge and truth. Looking beyond the academic world, there are good reasons for intellectuals to be cautious about their moral superiority, since knowledge or stronger cognitive power does not guarantee a higher moral standard. Intellectuals do not have an automatic claim to being the 'representatives of the conscience of society', given the fact that we have seen so many intellectuals in all societies making cynical or even notorious use of their intellect and knowledge to serve the wealthy and powerful, in their own selfish interests. The traditional dichotomy of the leaders and the led may have become obsolescent. The need is that someone or some institutions provide moral leadership for society. Compared to politicians, business people, labourers or people of other professions who, by the nature of their work and life, are preoccupied with immediate interests, intellectuals—receiving better education and working with ideas—should have the best potential to be more reflective in achieving an understanding of social reality, for maintaining a global and long-term perspective beyond immediate financial gain, and for coming up with solutions to solve the moral and social problems facing humankind. Even acting as one of the interest groups negotiating for its own interests, intellectuals still have a better potential in pursuing an interest in things valuable to all, such as the guarantee for free inquiry of knowledge and truth. To quote Vaclav Havel, 'After all, who is better equipped to decide about the fate of this globally interconnected civilisation than people who are most keenly aware of these interconnections, who pay the greatest regard to them, who take the most responsible attitude toward the world as a whole?'(Havel 1995, 36-37).

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Proceedings of the New Zealand Society of Animal Production	0370-2731	
Produce and Brand Management, Journal of	1061-0421	
Production Planning & Control	0953-7287	
Production Research, International Journal	0020-7543	
Professional Nurse	0266-8130	