

Intellectual Freedom Today: Mechanisms of Power

Gianni Vattimo

In answering “What is intellectual freedom today?’, one cannot proceed from a philosophical definition of freedom, following a classical method through *genus proximum* and *differentia specifica*. For intellectual freedom is just a socio-political aspect of our experience as people engaged in any predominantly “intellectual” activity: reading, writing, teaching in public or private institutions. One can be more or less free in these activities depending on the pressure that some extraneous power puts on the practice of such activities by the individuals involved.

Obviously the very term “intellectual freedom” is deeply connoted by the history of the relationship of intellectual activity to power – be it political, religious or economic. This history, often in itself but especially in the minds of intellectuals in their self-representation as a social group, is predominantly characterized by constant tensions and conflicts. Socrates or Giordano Bruno or the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment are the emblematic characters of the intellectual history of the West. Should we consider the conflict as an essential trait of the relationship of intellectuals to power? And, by the way, may intellectuals be treated as a social category, even a “class”?

We should here remember Antonio Gramsci. He did not consider intellectuals as a class, but tried to situate them within the framework of the class conflict that he considered to be an essential trait of (capitalist?) society. Without following Gramsci in all his developments, mostly related to the history of intellectuals in Italy, we take from him the idea of the connection of

intellectual freedom to the class structure of (our) society.

The basic point to which I want to call the attention is the relative lack of conflict between intellectuals and power in our late capitalist societies. The situation might be described in the terms of Heidegger: the real emergency is the lack of emergency. The relative “peace” which today characterizes the relationship of intellectuals to power (in its various declinations), far from constituting a “normal” condition for intellectuals, is more or less a way of silencing them by the way of a normalization. Above all, the development of the mass media (press, TV, etc.) offers a more defined and more favorable socio-economic condition to intellectuals.

Many students of mine, although they cannot find a teaching position in schools or universities, work now for advertising agencies as copywriters, or even in travel agencies. Aren't they “intellectuals”? They don't engage any longer in struggles against some social, economic or political power; they are integrated in a system to which they contribute and support by working in the immaterial domain of the creation of social consensus around “shared” values, expectations and the social imaginary. There are no more “*poètes maudits*”. In many senses, the non-conflictual intellectuals “normalized” in the late capitalist society are a sort of clergy, agents of the “common sense”, of the shared ideology, which expresses itself in the mainstream press, in the popular talk shows of the TV, etc. Without conflicts with the power, intellectual freedom seems condemned to disappear.

This lack of conflict, the lack of emergency, corresponds to the fading of what one used to call “class struggle”. Gramsci imagined that intellectuals would take part in the class conflicts; but given the “normalization” of politics which takes place in late capitalism, where politics is reduced to administration and the technical functionality of the economic system (in Heideggerian terms: the *Machenschaft*), intellectuals face two possibilities: accept the function of the “clergy” supporting the system of values functional to the existence of the Machinery, or try to raise conflicts in the field of the superstructure, where the struggle is limited to the divergence of *Weltanschauungen*.

Recently, Pope Francis, speaking to an assembly of youth, summoned them to “*hacer lio*”: create disturbances, disrupt and break the silence and the uniformity of the mainstream thought. So to defend intellectual freedom today means breaking the uniformity of the conformist resignation. Shall we think that the “revolt” of intellectuals, like that of the great *avant garde* art and philosophy of the beginning of 20th century, is “just” a superstructural movement which is guaranteed a vast freedom because it does not touch the “real” mechanisms of power? The risk exists; but as this is the sole “freedom” we still have, the best is to use it – *hacer lio*, as Pope Francis says.