

Matteo Bortolini

Christian Fleck, Andreas Hess, and E. Stina Lyon (eds.), Intellectuals and their Publics. Perspectives from the Social Sciences. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009, 282 pp.

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Book reviews

Christian Fleck, Andreas Hess, and E. Stina Lyon (eds.), *Intellectuals and their Publics. Perspectives from the Social Sciences*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009, 282 pp.

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Intellectuals love to think and write about their role and its ongoing crisis. This collection of essays includes fourteen chapters conveniently divided into three parts: provocations (Alexander, Evans, and Zulaika), complications (Outhwaite, Lyon, Auer, and Rabinbach), and case studies (Torpey, Garvin and Hess, Jeanpierre and Mosbah-Natanson, Kaesler, Müller-Doohm, Wisselgren, Reichmann and Schweiger, and Davis). In their introduction, the editors underline the changes in the role and the societal function of intellectuals, and suggest a classical assortment of problems: the idea and possibility of a “public” intellectual; the grounds of critique and the “intellectual styles” of scholars and critics; the structure of the public sphere and, more generally, the relationship between intellectuals and their audiences. While many of the chapters are well written and provocative at times, no essay really breaks new ground in terms of either the history or the sociology of intellectuals or the conceptual (or normative) understanding of the role of the intellectual. Since it is quite difficult to give a global evaluation of such a diverse collection of essays, I will touch upon some of the recurring themes and comment on them.

The first of such themes is the grounds of critique: where does the intellectual stand as a critic of her/his society? Is critique valid only when it comes from a “free floating intellectual,” as in the old Mannheimian trope? Can it be exercised as clearly and legitimately from a situated point of view? Here the answers vary from Jeffrey Alexander’s intellectual who performs an universal point of view to the more or less wide symbolic distinctions (gender, political ideology, discipline, and so on) on which other authors rely. The best illustration of the problem is, however, given in Joseba Zulaika’s chapter, titled “Terrorism and the Betrayal of the Intellectuals.” In a deeply personal and imaginative essay, Zulaika speaks about his ethnography of ETA and the ambiguities and paradoxes of being part of a community in which terrorist organizations have a long and continuing tradition of popular support. Here, Zulaika writes, “the intellectual is faced with the dilemma of demonizing or normalizing the other” [p. 45]. From a sociological point of view, it would be truly interesting to study these pressures as structural effects on different individuals in different roles, as Zulaika does by comparing academic scholars and journalists as narrators and interpreters of terrorism. In general, this tension between the local and the general, to paraphrase E. Stina Lyon, is of utmost importance to understand how intellectuals work.

Unfortunately, most of the essays in this collection frame this problem in normative terms, while a more sociological attitude would be needed for understanding it from a descriptive and explicative point of view. This becomes clear as we approach the second major question raised by the book, that of the societal institutions (not only universities or the media, but also the more symbolically defined ones, such as disciplines and scholarly schools or traditions) within which intellectual work is carried on. In general, the authors of the essays in the book tend to overlook the question, and this gives rise to

some simplifications and conceptual confusions that risk to impair our understanding. Take, for example, Hess and Garvin's description of Gustave de Beaumont as a public sociologist. How can any intellectual be labelled as a "sociologist" if sociology did not exist as a clearly defined academic discipline at the time he or she was writing? And how could a sociologist be said to be a *public* sociologist without any reflection on the particular disciplinary figuration which pushed someone (in this case, Michael Burawoy) to invoke a public sociology vis-à-vis the growing disciplinary professionalization of sociological work? The same holds for Wisselgren's chapter on Kerstin Hesselgren and Alva Myrdal, in which the concept of "public intellectual" is stretched up to the point to include women who held political positions for the most part of their lives. In this case, the distinction between, on the one hand, the opportunities and the dynamics of intellectual, and critical, practice, and, on the other hand, the chances and limitations which characterize political roles are blurred, and the analysis loses its bite. In other words, it takes much more than being clever, well-informed, and interested in social research to be an intellectual, especially if the constraints of party political action seriously limit the capacity of being "detached." We may even say that one cannot be in power and speak the truth to power, as long as the problem is approached from a sociological, and not a normative, point of view. Without an analysis of the structure of opportunities surrounding the individual social actor, any description is destined to slip into normative discourse. In other cases, such as in Jeanpierre and Mosbah-Natanson's chapter on French sociologists, social contexts and institutions are taken into account but remain under-theorized. In addition, if we extend the concept of "institution" to include interpersonal relationships, like that between teacher and student, Müller-Doohm's essay on Adorno and Habermas might be interpreted as a missed opportunity to relate the performance of intellectuals and their "styles of thought" to their particular relationships, just as Michael Farrell did in *Collaborative Circles*.

The third major question is that of the public sphere as a site for the creation and the performance of intellectuals. Some of the essays, such as Outhwaite's paper on European intellectuals, state the problem but go only a short way in responding to it. E. Stina Lyon covers some new ground in describing the public sphere in its relationship with the State, but the theory remains vague and does not help in covering new ground. At times, as in Reichmann and Schweiger's chapter on Lazarsfeld and Hayek, the public sphere is used in quite a naive fashion as an explicative factor, without the necessary rigour of a sociological explanation - this chapter is also plagued by a series of (un-educated?) guesses which strongly limit its descriptive and explanatory appeal. Also, the public sphere is mostly taken as an homogeneous field, without tensions or differences between different publics. This brings us to a general assessment of the book. It could be said that *Intellectuals and their Publics* would have been helped from a stricter sociological and anthropological approach, as its subtitle (*Perspectives from the Social Sciences*) would imply. As a matter of fact, most of the essays would have benefited from stricter analytical precision and more detailed case studies, as well as from clearer references to existing theoretical frameworks on intellectuals and their relations with their publics.

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