

## THE CONCEPT 'INTELLECTUAL' IN THE POSTMODERN SOCIAL STRUCTURE: MICHEL FOUCAULT'S 'THE SPECIFIC INTELLECTUAL' AND ZYGMUNT BAUMAN'S 'INTERPRETERS'

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### Abstract

The concept of the intellectual has been addressed by many authors, including Foucault and Bauman. Foucault challenges the universal concept of the intellectual, which has been widely accepted in Western thought, emphasizing the need for a new understanding of the intellectual subject within the postmodern social structure, which he refers to as the 'specific intellectual'. According to Bauman, the modern perspective defines intellectuals as 'lawgivers', while postmodernism highlights the role of the 'interpreter'. In this context, in the postmodern era, the 'lawgiving' feature of intellectuals has gradually disappeared, taking the form of the 'interpreters'.

This paper will analyze the contributions of Michel Foucault and Zygmunt Bauman, specifically Foucault's 'specific intellectual', who does not place himself above the masses but works with them on concrete fronts of social/political struggle, and Bauman's two paradigms of the intellectual: the lawgiver of modernity and the interpreters of postmodernity.

Thus, the postmodern intellectual is a translator of challenging reality, without claiming access to absolute truths.

*Keywords:* Intellectual, specific intellectual, interpreters, Michel Foucault, Zygmunt Bauman, postmodernism.

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### Introduction

The existence of a subject that represents discourses, thought, and ideologies, guiding both thought and social action, has always been a necessity. In different societies, "those who possess more knowledge than others have been named in various ways". Today, however, the most commonly used concept is intellectual, which holds a dominant paradigm in Western philosophical thought.

The concept of the intellectual first entered political literature in France in 1898 with the article "*J'Accuse!*"<sup>53</sup> written by Émile Zola following the Dreyfus Affair, as an open address to the then French president, Félix Faure. At that time, Zola was the first writer to rebel against the accusation of espionage against Alfred Dreyfus, a French officer of Jewish origin. Later, several individuals who used the authority of thought and knowledge signed a statement in support of Dreyfus, which was criticized by the press of the time, derisively calling it the "declaration of intellectuals." Thus, the concept of the intellectual became a meaningful term in the years that followed.

Like most similar concepts, the intellectual who holds an important position both in terms of functionality and his social position or identity is a highly debated concept that cannot be easily fitted into a single definition or approach. This is why it became a central category in the works of Antonio Gramsci, Edward Said, Noam Chomsky, Michel Foucault, Zygmunt Bauman, and others.

Let us recall Gramsci's approach, cited by Said, to the intellectual: "*All people are intellectuals, but not all in society perform the function of the intellectual.*" (Said 2009, 21). Based on this,

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<sup>53</sup> Émile Zola "*J'Accuse...*", *L'Aurore*, Paris 13 January 1898

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Antonio Gramsci divides the intellectual into traditional intellectuals and organic intellectuals, considering traditional intellectuals as representatives of a formation that *"appears autonomous and independent from the dominant social group."* Among these intellectuals are scholars, administrators, church members, philosophers, theorists, and scientists. Meanwhile, organic intellectuals emerge in the world of economic production. The most apparent distinction of these intellectuals is their role in guiding the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong. (Gramsci 2011, 10). Their primary task is to *"enable that consciousness, the working-class knowledge, to enter the system of information, expand, and consequently, help other workers or people who are not workers gain awareness of what is happening."* The knowledge of an intellectual is always partial in relation to the general mass experience possessed by the working class. Unlike Gramsci, Noam Chomsky emphasizes the moral responsibility of the intellectual: the effort to understand the truth, deep understanding in collaboration with others, to transmit and strive for the creation of constructive action to better understand others. (Chomsky 2005, 20). Chomsky starts from the idea that every human being, wherever they are born, in whatever culture, class, or race, possesses what he calls an innate mental structure, which is part of the biogenetic ability of a child that enables them to learn the language around them as well as any other language.

The German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, in *The Five Lectures* (1794), emphasizes that the intellectual must put his knowledge at the service of society, helping people understand their needs and the ways to fulfill them, without necessarily involving them in the deep inquiries he undertakes to discover certain truths. Although not every individual can fully grasp the complexity of human knowledge, each should engage with the part that belongs to them through three perspectives: philosophical, historical, and philosophical-historical. (Fichte 2011, 64-68). Edward Said, as a contributor to the concept of the intellectual, and as a reflector and commentator on Gramsci's ideas, raises the aspect of the intellectual's effort, their critical and ethical role in public life. He considers that the intellectual has transformed into a sociological image, and although the concrete interventions and contributions of the intellectual have not been sufficiently valued, he still emphasizes that the very source of the true intellectual's life is this effort – which often goes beyond and even contradicts systems, no matter how dangerous it may be. (Said 2009, 13).

On the other hand, Jürgen Habermas, studying the process of the constitution of the public sphere, argues that the development of new media, primarily the internet, had a decisive impact on contemporary society, leading to both the expansion and the fragmentation of the communication context. This is why it can have a subversive effect on the intellectual circles of authoritarian regimes.

"The emergence of millions of *chat rooms* and public issues scattered across the globe encourages the fragmentation of the entire public opinion, which takes on unpredictable dimensions of spread. In this way, national public opinions lose their significance. The web provides the hardware for the deterritorialization of a dense and accelerated communication, but it cannot counter the centrifugal tendency". (Habermas 2011, 169)

In fact, he criticizes the internet as an egalitarian medium that created opportunities for an anonymous and decentralized approach, which in no way is regulated, thus diminishing the significance of intellectuals who should shape the focus of public opinion. He also draws attention to the lack of rational communication, specifically the absence of a principle that would direct communication toward a shared understanding. (Ahmeti 2021, 296) *"Public opinion contributes to the democratic legitimacy of state activities by choosing, by selecting politically significant issues, in formulating the problem and, together with positions, more or less informative, unites in competing public thoughts"*. (Habermas 2011, 142).

## Michel Foucault and the 'Specific Intellectual'

The portrait of the intellectual presented by Michel Foucault is different from that of the universal intellectual: the one who is able to use his expertise in a particular discipline. He defines two types of intellectuals: 'universal intellectuals' (engineers, judges, professors), who until World War II served as authorities of the state and capital, while now these have been replaced by 'specific intellectuals'. *"The universal intellectual has its origin in the distinguished jurist and fully comes to expression in the writer; the bearer of importance and values in which everyone can recognize themselves. The origin of the specific intellectual is a completely different figure, no longer in the distinguished jurist, but in the scientist-expert"*. (Foucault 2010, 161-162).

According to Foucault, the best example can be found in the "left-wing intellectual," who possessed the right to speak as a master of truth and justice and to be heard as a representative of what was understood as universal, because they were guided by the principle *"to be an intellectual means to be the conscience of all"*.

"I believe that here we have found the only idea conveyed by Marxism, and that from a detestable Marxism: just as the proletariat, in the necessity of its historical position, is the bearer of the universal (but a direct bearer, a non-reflective bearer, not sufficiently conscious of itself), so too the intellectual, with his moral, theoretical, and political choice, wishes to be the bearer of universality, but in the form and construction of his self-consciousness. The intellectual would be the clear and individual figure of a universality, the unclear and collective form of which would be the proletariat." (Foucault 2010, 158-159)

Confronted with specific problems, which were different from those faced by the masses, the new intellectual became capable of working in particular fields and points, including conditions of labor and ways of living (housing, hospitals, the home, the laboratory, the university, family and gender relations), thus creating a new way of connecting theory and practice.

*"The intellectual, until now, has been the intellectual par excellence: universal consciousness, a free subject, he opposed those who were merely workers in the service of the state, or rather, capital (engineers, judges, professors). As one moves towards politicization, starting from the specific activities of each individual, the threshold of writing, as a sign of the sacralization of the intellectual, disappears; and then, a transversal connection can be created from knowledge to knowledge, from one point of politicization to another: in this way, judges and psychiatrists, doctors and social workers, workers in laboratories and sociologists, each in their place, through exchange and support, can take part in the global politicization of the intellectual"*. (Foucault 2010, 159-160)

Thus, with the gradual but certain disappearance of the writer from the scene, according to Foucault, the university professor appears as a key element of exchange. The reason why the university and discourse became a well-known political field lies precisely here and must not be interpreted as a loss of power or the so-called crisis of the University, which can be considered similar to the crisis of the 1960s that culminated in the bitter theorization of writings aimed solely at preserving political privileges.

While Foucault highlights Voltaire as the best example among universal intellectuals, he also describes the atomic physicist Oppenheimer as the person who represents the transition from the universal intellectual to the specific intellectual. The specific intellectual, being in a direct and limited relationship with the scientific institution and scientific knowledge, had mediated between them, as the nuclear threat loomed over all of humanity and their fate. "For the first time, I believe, political power had pursued the intellectual, not because of his general discourse, but because of the knowledge he possessed: in fact, at that level, he had become politically dangerous". (Foucault 2010, 161)

Foucault describes the role of the intellectual as someone who challenges forms of power, acting

both as an object and an instrument in this process. The specific intellectual, who uses their knowledge and skills within a particular discipline, demonstrates their professionalism in every field. As a product of modernity and its crisis, this intellectual does not always respond to power in the same way, because rebellion, for them, is a moral obligation. Power tends to manipulate information, while the intellectual must show courage to fight against power and use all available tools of resistance.

Consequently, his role is to destroy the distinctiveness, to break the accepted popularity, and not to shape the political will of others, telling them what they should do:

“For me, the intellectual is the person who is connected, not to production, but to the informational apparatus. They can reach to listen. They can write in newspapers, present their standpoint. They are also connected to the old informational apparatus. They have knowledge given by reading a certain number of books, knowledge that others do not directly possess. Their role, thus, is not to form the working consciousness, because it already exists, but to enable that consciousness to enter into the system of information, to expand, and consequently, help other workers or people who are not workers to gain awareness of what is happening. The knowledge of an intellectual is always partial in relation to the general mass experience possessed by the working class”. (Foucault 2001)

The role of the intellectual in contemporary society, according to Foucault, should precisely be the discovery of the mechanisms of power, and not offering perspective analyses. "The role of the intellectual is no longer to be placed 'a little ahead and a little to the side' in order to tell the untold truth to everyone; his role is rather to fight against the form of power where he is simultaneously both the object and the instrument of that power; in the movement of 'knowledge', 'truth', 'consciousness', 'discourse'." (Ahmeti 2016, 70)

The intellectual must demonstrate a moral approach, whereas the traditional intellectual, under the influence of an authority, offers his knowledge and expertise to serve power. In contrast, the specific intellectual operates without any power and creates his theories to analyze social structures, also engaging in practice. He believes that the specific intellectual does not have the duty to tell others what they should do, and if he does so, we must question his right to act in this way. Thus, this intellectual has no ambition to enlighten the masses or to tell the truths for everyone. His role in this new struggle is to engage in a local battle against power, a struggle that, in addition to consciousness, aims to expose power in an unexpected way.

Foucault, like Nietzsche, criticizes the universal concept of truth, because for him, truth is not a norm or a set of propositions, but a form of discourse produced within institutions.

"Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth: these are the types of discourses it accepts and makes function as truth; the mechanisms and instances that distinguish true statements from false ones, the ways in which both are validated; the techniques and procedures whose validity in order to acquire truth is defined, and the status of those who are obliged to pronounce what functions as true". (Foucault 2010, 164-165)

Truth is linked to certain rules and performs a specific control over all mechanisms of information, such as universities, the media, and political and economic forces. He suggests that information systems create the effects of truths, and when the media attempts to inform the public about something, it starts to be internalized as truth in the minds of many people. According to him, truth is created in a reciprocal relationship with power and is redefined by it in different periods. In all societies, there is a conflict that revolves around truth, or in its name. However, this conflict is not about the truth itself, but about its status and the social, cultural, and economic expectations associated with it. (Foucault 2016, 13-15)

In fact, he considered that since Nietzsche, the fundamental question of every philosophy, "What is the safest path to truth?", transformed into "What is the boldest path to truth?".

"It is true that Western philosophy, ever since Descartes, has always been tied to the problem of knowledge. One cannot escape this. In what sense can someone who believes he is a

philosopher, and has not asked the question of what knowledge is, or rather what truth is, be said to be a philosopher? I foolishly said that I am not a philosopher." (Foucault 2001).

"He considered that the politicization of any intellectual has traditionally been influenced by two things: their intellectual position in civil society and the ideology it produces, specifically the impositions (to be exploited, to be brought to misery, to be discarded, cursed, accused of subversion, immorality, etc.); and their discourse, if it would bring any truth, revealing political relationships where they have not been encountered. On the contrary, he believed that it was the intellectual's duty to present just and true issues, with the highest precision, complexity, and importance, such that the solution would not emerge from a single move, that it should not come from the head of any intellectual, nor from any office in the party's headquarters." (Ahmeti, *Analitika Postmoderne e Michel Foucault - Raporti midis Pushtetit, Dijes dhe Individit*, 71)

Therefore, the intellectual should no longer play the role of an advisor, because the project, tactics, and goals that need to be achieved belong to those who lead the struggle. What the intellectual can do is offer tools for analysis, and today this is an essential duty of historians.

"In other words, topological and geological control of the battlefield—that is the intellectual's task. But to say "This must be done," is certainly not his job". (Foucault 2001)

When the specific intellectual begins to find social support and engages in actions, he becomes a political threat, and the attention of power turns toward him. In this way, he begins to be perceived as an individual who must be controlled because of his ideas and discourses that provoke interest. Foucault emphasizes that society tries to taboo subjects it does not wish to discuss, maintaining a defensive reflex toward these ideas, even if they are not openly expressed. Any individual who dares to speak about these matters' risks becoming the object of repression by the power, where his word is discredited, and if he continues, he may face harsh measures.

The society's enthusiasm to either accept or discredit the intellectual depends on how he is treated by power. Foucault, emphasizing the importance of historical analysis, believes that it is crucial to understand the present and strive to solve its problems. While he does not see the intellectual as a solver of problems, he views him as an individual who helps prepare the data for change and its implementation.

For Foucault, the masses do not necessarily need intellectuals to acquire information; they often know better than the intellectuals. However, systems of power prevent the flow of knowledge and discourses through information channels, creating a strong climate of control at all levels of society, including the intellectual. While the mission of the intellectual is to ensure that information and knowledge enter information systems and create a social sensitivity, Foucault argues that this is not as easy as it seems. All of these evaluations of Foucault regarding the intellectual form an important aspect of how the intellectual is perceived in Western thought. (Foucault 2016, 42-43)

### **Zygmunt Bauman and the 'Interpreter'**

Zygmunt Bauman observes that the role of the intellectual is gradually declining in the postmodern period. Intellectuals who emerged in the 18th century were primarily known figures of society, such as writers, poets, artists, and journalists. These individuals contributed to the formation of intellectual truths, as well as ensuring that moral and aesthetic values were shaped through a shared sense within society. Intellectuals are, in fact, people who are interested in matters related to the world beyond their field. With the rise of the modern state, the state's effort to produce a strong discourse made intellectuals more involved in social life. In this context, there is an important link between intellectuals and the government, although this connection has weakened over time and has come to a breaking point in the postmodern period. "The discourses that grew with modernization actually made their work harder. Although

initially such a project of unity seemed rational in thought, it was very difficult for them to make it work as intended in practice". (Bauman, 31) However, this connection has weakened over time and reached a breaking point in the postmodern period.

The institution of politics has gradually lost its significance in the globalized world; the circulation of capital has made power spatially irrelevant. Identities have now transformed into temporary selves. In this ambiguity, life politics has fallen into deep uncertainty. According to Bauman, the most obvious point of division today is the separation of power from politics. Power is flowing (it is liquid), it has become global and has spread beyond space.

While the modern view claims that the world is orderly, the postmodern view asserts that there are an unlimited number of orders. While modernity seeks to achieve accurate knowledge, the postmodern view defends the relativity of knowledge. While the modern perspective defines intellectuals as 'lawgivers', postmodernism emphasizes the role of the 'interpreter'. In this context, in the postmodern era, the 'lawgiving' characteristic of intellectuals has gradually disappeared.

Bauman relies on Ernest Gellner's classification of the concept of culture into traditional and modern. He distinguishes between wild cultures (traditional) and garden cultures (modern). While wild cultures reproduce themselves without supervision, garden cultures cannot reproduce without a gardener, and this is why the role of the gardener has emerged in these cultures. These gardeners ensured the safe reproduction of the plants entrusted to them. Bauman states that Hobbes created his narrative of the state of nature by observing the situation that emerged with the breakdown of control during this period. In this process, an attempt was made to create a rational human being, while the pursuit of passions was considered harmful. Popular culture was also seen as a remnant of the past and rural life, as well as a lack of education. Cultures have become incapable of reproducing themselves, and people are increasingly condemned by experts. (Bauman, 68)

Although intellectuals undergo a process of education and purification through their internal transformations over time, the intellectual legacy they proposed shaped the West and, consequently, the world. Fragments describing the period from city life to culture, from religion to the field of values, from the culture of pleasure to the functioning of reason and rationality were again described by Western intellectual commentators. At the same time, the discourses developed about them were discourses from within. Over time, these internal discourses gave way to outsiders who interrupted the modern period and gave meaning to a postmodern era based on the distinction between internal interpretations and the reality they experienced. At this point, Bauman examined the position of intellectuals under these conditions, adhering to interpretations based on different parameters such as economy, politics, art, literature, and fashion, which describe the postmodern period. The legislative authority of the intellectual has lost control in the face of the new situation and has become ineffective. (Bauman, 148-149)

Bauman generally emphasizes the modern and postmodern periods in the context of the problematic fields with which we are all familiar. However, the originality of his thought lies in the portrayal of the necessary transformation of intellectual discourse over these periods. In fact, he shows how the intellectual wall that would have acted as a lightning rod against the power of the modern and later periods was destroyed, and how it was reformulated by periodic impulses. This model can be observed through the power of the nation-state, as a fundamental actor, influencing even the motivations of production. It could be said that the intellectual, as an actor, does not have the power to define themselves in the position they occupy in the goal-means equation. Thus, the legislation that emerged from quality evolved into quantity, and later, an *interpretive* identity emerged, subject to the prevailing forces.

In the French Revolution, there were intellectuals who we would call legislative intellectuals who aimed to enlighten and shape society. Intellectuals are concerned with societal problems, while the state uses the information they provide. Even if some intellectuals are against the

state, those with opposing ideas can lead to the creation of a new state structure. The legislative intellectual is, in fact, the intellectual who corresponds with the idea of the nation-state, which implies homogeneity. Therefore, in this sense, the legislative intellectual sought to ensure the homogeneity predicted by the nation-state and served this purpose. However, today we are discussing multiculturalism, arguing that every culture should be respected. Thus, Bauman argues that a new kind of intellectual has actually emerged with changes in various fields within Western societies.

## Conclusion

In this paper, the concept of the intellectual was initially addressed by revisiting its historical roots, examining how it has been defined and what meanings have been ascribed to it over time. Through the analysis of the viewpoints of Antonio Gramsci, Noam Chomsky, Jürgen Habermas, Edward Said, and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, we presented a comprehensive perspective on the figure of the intellectual and its functionality within society.

The main objective was to analyze the contributions of Michel Foucault and Zygmunt Bauman in this field: it becomes evident that Foucault proposes the figure of the "specific intellectual," who does not place himself above the masses but acts alongside them on concrete fronts of social and political struggle. In this context, we can say that, much like Gramsci, Foucault rejects the notion of the committed intellectual who defends universal ideals and speaks the truth on behalf of the masses.

On the other hand, Bauman distinguishes between two paradigms of the intellectual: the lawgiver of modernity and the *interpreter* of postmodernity. This transition—from normative authority to interpretive mediation—reflects the profound transformation of the social structures in our time. The postmodern intellectual/interpreter no longer claims access to absolute truths but instead serves as a translator of a challenging and complex reality.

In conclusion, the concept of the intellectual is not fixed or unchanging, but rather shaped by social and historical context. From a figure that once represented authority, the intellectual in today's postmodern social structure has transformed into an interpreter, one who challenges dominant narratives and supports society in concrete social and political struggles.

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