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A POLICY OF TRUTH: POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT OF THE FRENCH INTELLECTUALS IN THE 20TH CENTURY BETWEEN EPISTEMOLOGY AND AXIOLOGY

Abstract

This article deals with the three discursive strategies which were used by French intellectuals for establishing their attitudes towards the political sphere on the basis of different ‘truth speeches’. This paper states that the notion of truth, which represents a certain relation between reality and the knowledge, played a special role in the debates between French intellectuals over their social and political vocation in the 20th century — from the Dreyfus Affair to contemporary media debates.

Key words: intellectuals, 20th century, France, engagement, truth

THE CRITICAL INTELLECTUAL AND THE RIGHT TO TELL THE TRUTH

When observing history, one can hardly deny that intellectuals represent one of the most important sociocultural categories of the 20th century, especially in application to France. Their positioning was at the epicentre of all major political and cultural processes; French intellectuals played a crucial role in shaping ideologies, contesting national state politics and even leading some revolutionary movements. Although a specific status being attributed to cultural producers was, to some extent, commonplace for every modern society, nothing is comparable to the special role of intellectuals in the French national tradition. The question of this overwhelming cultural power of French intellectuals has been studied extensively in the last few decades, with spe-

cial attention given to their acting role both in political and cultural fields of production¹.

Starting from the late 18th century, the intellectual field in France has gradually acquired a significant amount of autonomy from governing institutions: the latter ones provided “*les hommes de lettres*” with a relatively autonomous position and contributed to the establishment of their critical function in the public sphere.

Highly centralized and capital-centred, French political culture guaranteed large public attention was paid to current intellectual debates, and this special visibility allowed intellectuals to be seen as moral guides for society². As a result of this historical circumstance, the French intellectual first emerged as a force for critiquing political power. Later, this self-representation would become a label if not a trademark of French *maîtres-à-penser*³.

In critical scholarship, there have been many attempts at classifying the various modes of intellectuals’ self-positioning in terms of their political engagement⁴ or interaction with the social realities of their time. Thus, Gérard Noiriel (1950–) distinguished three main intellectual ‘figures’ — revolutionary, governmental and specific⁵; whereas Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) introduced notions of the ‘total’⁶, ‘collective’⁷ and ‘mediatized’ intellectuals⁸. But the most debatable question in relation to the intellectuals concerns their relations with politics.

The political approach introduced by the French scholars Jean-François Sirinelli (b. 1949) and Pascal Ory (b. 1948) defines an intellectual as a political agent, who, on behalf of his scientific or artistic competence, intervenes into

¹ P. Ory, J.-F. Sirinelli, *Les Intellectuels en France, de l’Affaire Dreyfus à nos jours*, Paris 1986; J.-F. Sirinelli, *Intellectuels et passions françaises. Manifestes et pétitions au XXe siècle*, Paris 1990; M. Winock, *Le siècle des intellectuels*, Paris 1997; M. Leymarie, *Les intellectuels et la politique en France*, Paris 2001; D. Drake, *French Intellectuals and Politics from the Dreyfus Affair to the Occupation*, New York 2005.

² S. Sand, *The End of the French Intellectual: From Zola to Houellebecq*, London 2018, pp. 6–8.

³ On construction of the French concept of intellectual and its international impact see: C. Charle, *Les Intellectuels en Europe au XIXe siècle: Essai d’histoire comparée*, Paris 1996; V. Datta, *Birth of a National Icon: The Literary Avant-Garde and the Origins of the Intellectual in France*, Albany 1999.

⁴ G. Sapiro, *Modèles d’intervention politique des intellectuels. Le cas français*, “Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales” 176–177, 2009, pp. 8–31, especially p. 14.

⁵ G. Noiriel, *Les fils maudits de la République. L’avenir des intellectuels en France*, Paris 2005.

⁶ P. Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l’art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Paris 1992, p. 293–297.

⁷ P. Bourdieu, *Contre-Feux 2, Raisons d’agir*, Paris 2001.

⁸ P. Bourdieu, *Sur la télévision*, Liber-Raisons d’agir, Paris 1996.

the public sphere and political debates in order to be heard⁹. The fundamental prerequisites which are essential to this positioning are the following: valuable cultural capital, political intervention and public resonance. However, if we go further, it will become clear that by being public political figures intellectuals use two discursive strategies. According to Hans Bock (b. 1940), the first one is the critical strategy, which addresses the political field and its representatives in terms of power structures. The second is the polemical strategy, which is used for internal debates between the actors in the intellectual field. Both of these strategies are utilized in concurrence for domination over interpretative power in the public sphere¹⁰.

In the French tradition, an intellectual is primarily a critic, whose position implies a certain attitude towards the political sphere — namely, independence, autonomy and notable distance. The critical strategy of an intellectual concerns his primary function and a mode of intervention in the political sphere. As I will demonstrate, the political definition naturally presupposes an epistemological notion as well. As David Bates elucidates, we can define the intellectuals as “those men and women of intellect who engage in the public realm so as to speak the truth in the face of injustice¹¹”.

The critical tradition of French intellectuals can be traced to the age of the Enlightenment, when philosophers started to make political judgments on behalf of their claims to be ‘an incarnation of reason’. It is not accidental that Michel Foucault (1926–1984) called the Enlightenment the starting point of modernity — it gave birth to a ‘critical attitude’ which challenged pastoral rule. This critical attitude emerged with the criticism of the Church’s dogmatism. It started questioning the Church’s monopoly on truth, which legitimized the mechanisms used for governing people. Thus, the critique emerges as the question of “how not to be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them”¹². Being independent from all the normative institutions, the critic has the opportunity for free intellectual

⁹ P. Ory, J.-F. Sirinelli, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹⁰ H. M. Bock, *Les intellectuels, le pouvoir interprétatif et la polémique: Aperçu historico-sociologique*, in: *Intellectuels et polémiques dans l’espace germanophone*, V. Robert (ed.), Paris 2003, pp. 65–70, here p. 65. Bock also stresses that in the countries like France where political culture is clearly bipolar, the intellectual polemics have a much greater public resonance than in countries whose political culture is characterized by polycentrism of the actors (as may be observed in Germany).

¹¹ D. Bates, *Introduction: Marxism, Intellectuals and Politics*, in: *Marxism, Intellectuals and Politics*, D. Bates (ed.), London 2007, p. 2.

¹² M. Foucault, *What is Critique?*, in: *M. Foucault, The Politics of Truth*, S. Lotringer, L. Hochroth (ed.), New York 1997, p. 44.

maneuvering, and, therefore, is more in alignment with the figure of a prophet, than of a priest¹³.

What type of legitimation is then used in his critical discursive strategy? One of the most important reasonings concerns the argument of truth. From Romain Rolland (1866–1944) to Bernard-Henri Lévy (b. 1948), intellectuals claimed to be the ‘truth holders’. In his famous article published during the Great War, Romain Rolland argued that the responsibility of an intellectual is “to seek truth in the midst of error”.¹⁴ Almost a century later, during a public discussion organized by *Le Monde*, Alain Finkielkraut attributed to the intellectual the role of analysing the current reality and of telling the truth about it¹⁵. As I will argue further, a special attribution to ‘truth’ by French intellectuals may be seen as a cornerstone of their critical strategy, which serves as the basis for the existence of the modern intellectual. And starting from here, we encounter the problem of political epistemology, which concerns the zone of complex relationships that exist between knowledge, which the intellectuals think they possess (about truth, moral values and the best social order), and power (actual politics, party activism, and self-positioning within the field of intellectuals).

NORMATIVE DISCOURSE AND THE INTELLECTUAL’S SELF-IDENTIFICATION

Intellectuals usually attribute to themselves a certain number of values which they want to defend. This constructs a normative discourse that would explain their duties and modes of behaviour in the eyes of society.

The term ‘intellectual’ first appeared in French public discourse during the famous Dreyfus Affair (1894–1906), which concerned the first collective political intervention of writers, professors, and artists, defending the Jewish Captain Dreyfus, who was unjustly accused of treason. Firstly, it was used by opponents of Dreyfus as a pejorative name for the so-called ‘dreyfusardian’ party. The famous Dreyfus Affair helped the intellectuals to identify themselves as a group, proceeding to claim their right to assess political and social realities from a critical standpoint¹⁶. Starting from this affair, French intellectuals, both from the Left and the Right, established their intervention into the public sphere in the name of such ‘universal’ values as Truth, Justice, Reason or Civilization, Nation and Order.

¹³ G. Sapiro, *La responsabilité de l'écrivain: Littérature, droit et morale en France (XIX–XXI)*, Paris 2011, p. 511.

¹⁴ R. Rolland, *Au-dessus de la mêlée*, Paris 1915, p. 14.

¹⁵ https://www.lemonde.fr/festival/video/2016/09/20/patrick-boucheron-et-alain-finkielkraut-quelle-responsabilite-pour-les-intellectuels_5000783_4415198.html.

¹⁶ See: C. Charles, *Naissance des 'intellectuels', 1880–1900*, Paris 1990.

The rise of nationalist movement in the wake of the Great War, alongside the strong antiwar revolutionary sentiment inspired by the victory of the October Revolution, both greatly influenced the French intellectual field. The critical stance of the intellectual and his influence on society became a crucial argument in critical debates, which substantially reshaped the intellectual field and forged new modes of intellectual self-positioning. The most important questions in these debates considered the choice between the autonomy and political engagement of the intellectual. Should he intervene into the public sphere in correspondence with his values, beliefs and authority? Or should he detach himself from politics and guard the independent critical position? These questions constituted the crux of the French intellectual's identity, while the quarrel over the Truth (*Vérité*) shaped the figure of the French intellectual in the 1920–30s and influenced the image of the French intellectual in general¹⁷.

As Tony Judt (1948–2010) pointed out, “ever since the early thirties, intellectual life in France (as elsewhere at the time) had been permeated by moral bifocalism, the capacity to apply different criteria of truth and value to different phenomena”¹⁸. I will add that the origin of the process described by Judt can be traced to the early twenties, and that this ‘moral bifocalism’ can be also seen differently if one takes the Weberian concept of values into account. According to Max Weber (1864–1920), values should be seen as a form which helps people to understand and formulate their experience, or as a logical method of understanding the world. The values are intrinsically entwined in given epochs, creating their normative systems. Having said that, I shall note that intellectuals’ relations to politics were prescribed by a wide range of normative frames and values.

The manifesto of Roman Rolland entitled “A Declaration of the Independence of Spirit”¹⁹ can be called the starting point of the debate on the responsibility of intellectuals and the values to be defended by them. During the Great War, Rolland was the most fervent critic of nationalistic hatred which was widespread within intellectual circles of all belligerent countries. In this text, Rolland invited all the “workers of spirit” (*travailleurs de l’Esprit*) to unite against the nationalism of their states. For him, intellectuals should only serve the high cause of Spirit, Truth and Reason, and not nationalistic hatred, war or national interests. This manifesto launched the so-called new ‘war of manifestos’ between the French intellectuals, which remained very prominent during the interwar period.

¹⁷ D. BENOIT, *Littérature et engagement de Pascal à Sartre*, Paris 2000, p. 19.

¹⁸ T. JUDT, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

¹⁹ R. ROLLAND, *La Déclaration de l’indépendance de l’Esprit*, “L’Humanité”, 26 June 1919.

In response to Rolland, *Le Figaro* published the text entitled “For the Intellectual Party”²⁰, which was written by Henri Massis (1886–1970), and which was inspired by the right wing and nationalist movement ‘*Action Française*’, as well as by the ideas of Maurice Barres (1862–1923) and Charles Maurrasse (1868–1952). The so-called ‘Maurrassism’ or ‘national moralism’ was a very influential conservative movement of antidemocratic, counterrevolutionary and nationalistic character²¹. Initiated in the last decade of the 19th century, Maurrassism reached the peak of its influence after the Great War due to its role in the antigermanism and nationalistic propaganda of 1914–1918. The manifesto published in *Le Figaro* proclaimed the foundation of the right-wing ‘Intellectual party’, countering the ‘Bolshevization of Thought’ and directly attacking the internationalist position of Rolland. According to the manifesto, ‘true’ (vrais) intellectuals must engage in politics in order to defend the stability of social order and state institutions in the face of the corrupted ideology of the republican, democratic and revolutionary movements. The absolute values for this ‘party’ were Motherland, Church and National Interest, arguments which supposedly referred to Reason and proved to be more natural for France due to its geographical and historical conditions²².

The concept of the superiority of French civilization was seen as the protective ideal of European civilization due to its cultural and political power, which enabled the right-wing intellectuals to name themselves “intellectual defenders of the national interest”. Envisioning themselves as the Atlantes, who bore the burden of civilization in the fight against cultural degradation — a stance which was developed in opposition to the Bolshevik revolution — these intellectuals criticized the French Revolutionary tradition and the Enlightenment, namely Voltaire (1694–1778), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), and Denis Diderot (1713–1784), for laying out the foundation for the “intellectually organized political hate”²³. This position was largely echoed within the walls of the major cultural institutions of the epoch. Conservative nationalistic thought was widespread in literature, salons, press, political circles and within the French Academy. Therefore, the intellectual field of the epoch can be characterized more as the “right” political camp, while the “left” party represented only a small

²⁰ *Pour un parti de l'Intellegence*, „Le Figaro” (Supplément littéraire du Dimanche), 19 July 1919.

²¹ R. R é m o n d, *Les droites en France*, Paris 1982 (First published in 1954), p. 230.

²² During the Nazi occupation of France Maurrasse openly supported the regime of Petain and the politics of collaboration. After the Liberation of France in 1944 he was sentenced to life imprisonment.

²³ D. H a l é v y, *Deux livres sur l'apostasie des peuples*, Revue de Genève, December 1927, pp. 733–750, quoted in: J. B e n d a, *La fin de l'éternel*, Paris 1977 (First published in 1929), pp. 42–43.

avant-garde group²⁴. As Judt fairly noted, throughout the 20th century French intellectuals defined themselves through one or another political agenda, which they took in the major national conflicts. They always faced such dichotomies as whether to be socialists or nationalists, fascists or antifascists, to support Communism or Capitalism, and to always choose the appropriate political side, Left or Right: “The very idea of an intellectual who did not think in these terms, or chose to transgress them, or to disengage from such public identifications altogether seemed a contradiction in terms”²⁵.

THE IDEALISTIC INTELLECTUAL: TRUTH AS THE UNIVERSAL VALUE

As Michel Foucault pointed out, the figure of the ‘universal’ intellectual in the way he was established during the 19th and early 20th centuries claimed to be a ‘master of truth and justice’ and ‘common consciousness’²⁶. The most notable advocate of this position was the French writer Julien Benda (1867–1956). In his famous essay “The Treason of Intellectuals” (*La trahison des clercs*), which was first published in 1927, he explicitly condemned the intellectuals who accepted political commitments, which went contrary to their mission, all in order to become the guards of ‘eternal values of reason’. Benda supported what can be characterized as moral universalism, which prescribes that intellectuals should be above not only all political ‘passions’, but also stay away from any practical or materialistic interests in order to keep an independent position. According to him, a ‘clerk’ should act as a moral judge to society by preferring the ‘universal values’ such as truth, freedom and justice over the temporary interests of a class, race or nation²⁷. The word ‘clerk’, used by Benda in the French original and rendered as ‘intellectuals’ in the English edition, had a strong religious connotation, which distinguished the ‘sacred’ from the ‘profane’, or a ‘clergyman’ from a ‘layman’. This meant that an intellectual had a special moral position which corresponds to Christ’s formula “My kingdom is not of this world”²⁸. In Benda’s treatment, this was the reason why the vocation of scholars, journalists, writers, philosophers and artists was to serve intellectual values, and not political ones.

²⁴ J.-F. Sirinelli, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

²⁵ T. Judt, *Past Imperfect. French Intellectuals, 1944–1956*, New York 2001, p. 10.

²⁶ M. Foucault, *La fonction politique de l’intellectuel*, in: *Dits et Écrits*, Tome III, n° 184, p. 31.

²⁷ J. Benda, *La Trahison des clercs*, Paris 2003, p. 92 [First Edition: Collection Les Cahiers Verts, Grasset, Paris, 1927].

²⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 126–127.

Having a strong commitment to the dreyfusardian tradition, Benda criticized both the nationalistic rhetoric of the right-wing ‘*Action française*’ and its main ideologists Maurice Barres and Charles Maurras. Such a stance was viable in light of the leftist intellectuals embracing the Bolsheviks’ *coup d’état* and revolutionary violence in the name of a better social order. In both cases, the major vice for Benda was that both movements tried to impose their political commitments as a universal moral duty, the images of Good and Evil understood in political terms. His fervent criticism was targeting those intellectuals who were using the notion of ‘truth’ in order to pursue the interests of a nation, class or race, while in his eyes the ‘truth’ was never political but a universal value in itself. Sticking up for a Kantian version of deontological ethics, Benda even stressed that a clerk has nothing to do with the questions of social order or national interest: it is not upon him to prevent the government from telling lies, he just has to contest that those lies are true²⁹.

Benda perceived truth in Plato’s way as an ‘*eidōs*’, an innate unchangeable idea inseparable from human consciousness. Notwithstanding those arguments, asserting that all scientific theories can be contested or that modern physics challenged the very principles of rationality, Benda emphasized that the idea of truth is eternal, which meant that ‘a statement is true when it corresponds to reality’³⁰. Being a Cartesian rationalist, he denied the possibility of the mind transforming itself over time due to acquired experience. For him, reason exists *a priori*, while analysing and interpreting the facts are our innate abilities³¹. Thus, those ‘eternal values’ represent no less than the inner constants of our mind — from Nebuchadnezzar up to the present day, people have been using the same principles to distinguish ‘true from false’ as much as ‘just from unjust’. In other words, for Benda, the intellectual holds the superposition of a universal subject who tells the truth to society, while the very content of that ‘truth’ is eternal and cannot be defined in political categories.

However, in the early 1930s, after having accused those intellectuals who intervened into politics as traitors, Julien Benda entered the antifascist left movement, thereby undermining his own position of an ‘independent clerk’ and becoming a traitor himself³². In the text addressed to the critics of “The Treason of Intellectuals”, Benda tried to overcome this contradiction by utilizing a moral argument, stating that “[...] the mystique of the Left praises the values of Truth and Justice. It’s beautiful. While the mystique of the Right, at least

²⁹ J. B e n d a, *La Jeunesse d’un clerc*, Paris 1969, pp. 115–116.

³⁰ J. B e n d a, *Y a-t-il des valeurs éternelles?*, “Les Études philosophiques” 3–4, 1946, pp. 183–189, here p. 186.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 187.

³² P. E n g e l, *Les lois de l’esprit: Julien Benda ou la raison*, Paris 2012, p. 258.

today, absolutizes power, subjects the Truth to the established order, and sanctions an ‘inevitable’ injustice. It’s disgusting”³³. Nevertheless, by praising the mystique (or moral value) of the Left, Benda clearly dissociates himself from leftist politics, stressing the important distinction between the two dimensions: the moral (idealistic) and the practical. Leftists have a beautiful mystique and poor political practice, while the Rightists fail in both³⁴. Having been accused of hypocrisy, in 1935 Benda clarified that politically he differentiates between the act (*fait*) and the idea (*idée* or *mystique*). According to this logic, the intellectual, being the guard of universal values, should abstain from political activities (movements or party politics), but, at the same time, he can support the underlying idea (*mystique*) of some political doctrine in correspondence with his own moral convictions³⁵.

Benda’s discourse of truth and his intellectual opposition to politics derives from the Enlightenment’s faith in the universality of reason — no wonder that he criticises philosophers of life such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and Henri Bergson (1859–1941) — as much as from Plato’s dichotomy between true knowledge and doxa. Although, as Foucault demonstrated, the Western philosophy inherited a ‘myth’ of eternal contradiction between knowledge and power from Plato, while Nietzsche was the first to show that all knowledge results from a struggle for power³⁶.

In the era of struggles between totalitarian regimes, this critical strategy of an independent ‘intellectual-judge’ became inconvenient, and, as Raymond Aron (1905–1983) has stated, “[...] if a treason meant to prefer the temporary over the eternal, thus each intellectual who lived in those times turned out to be a traitor”³⁷. As we will see further, the Left intellectuals constructed a rather powerful discourse of truth in order to legitimise the necessity of political commitment, which largely impacted the intellectual’s relations with politics for the rest of the 20th century.

THE REVOLUTIONARY INTELLECTUAL: TRUTH AS A TOOL FOR EMANCIPATION

The other perception of ‘truth’ emerged in the aftermath of the Great War in the discursive interventions of the French intellectuals inspired by the October revolution and the Marxist political philosophy. In accordance with Marx’s

³³ J. Benda, *Précision, 1930–1937*, Paris 1937, p. 23.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

³⁶ M. Foucault, *La vérité et les formes juridiques*, in: *Dits et écrits*, II (1970–1975), Paris 1994, pp. 538–645, here p. 570.

³⁷ R. Aron, *L’Opium des intellectuels*, Paris 1955, p. 310.

revolutionary formula, they aimed to “get to know the world in order to change it”³⁸. For those intellectuals, from Henri Barbusse (1873–1935) to Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), who saw their vocation in changing political reality, the notion of truth was no longer a pure metaphysical concept, but a means of social change understood through Marxist categories of class struggle. Thus, for the Left intellectuals who were inclined towards communist ideology, ‘revealing the truth’ meant to disclose the reality of bourgeois oppressive politics towards the working class and to form the political and historical consciousness of the masses in order to attain revolutionary change.

This duty recalls a different form of the intellectual’s responsibility, while any abstention from politics was regarded as a different form of ‘treason’ than the forms which Benda tried to expose. According to Henri Barbusse, “the primary role of the intellectual is to understand his social and thus political responsibility”³⁹ which meant to reject the individualistic position and embrace collective action. In his fervent manifestos addressed to intellectuals he criticised these ‘intellectual workers’, as he called them, for their absenteeism and political indifference despite the significance of their public resonance. In his opinion, by defending the abstract concepts of truth, justice and good they were supporting the *status quo* of bourgeois order, while their esoteric way of thinking created a gap between them and the masses. He stressed that tradition grounded in universalism is meaningless and ridiculous because social changes would not come into being with the help of philosophical abstractions, but only by political means⁴⁰. On these terms, the revolutionary intellectual authorises himself to speak for those without a voice and to struggle with speculative metaphysics, bourgeois positions towards the nation, civilisation and social order, while ‘independent’ thinkers remained silent in their ivory towers.

The major work in defence of the position of the engaged intellectual was presented by Paul Nizan (1905–1940), a young communist writer who entered the French Communist Party in 1927 at the age of 22. In his famous pamphlet “The Watchdogs” (*Les Chiens de garde*) he criticised French academic society from the Marxist stance, primarily focusing on its praise for the ‘universal truth’. Directly addressing Benda’s “The Treason of Intellectuals”, Nizan wrote: “according to the philosophers, Philosophy-in-general knows nothing of political parties and factionalism. It is a virgin that loves Truth for its own sake, just as Saint Theresa loved God. And the philosophers believe this. They have continually forgotten that Truth could always be served with whatever sauce one chooses, that there are a thousand and one recipes for dressing Truth. Every

³⁸ J.-P. Sartre, *Plaidoyer pour les intellectuels*, Paris 1972, p. 68.

³⁹ H. Barbusse, *Manifeste aux intellectuels*, Paris 1927, pp. 9–10.

⁴⁰ H. Barbusse, *Le Couteau entre les dents: Aux intellectuels*, Paris 1921, pp. 12–14.

philosophy seeks to establish and justify a set of spiritual truths corresponding to certain temporal modes of existence”⁴¹. And to stress this point he adds that “there is no univocal, eternal, knowable Truth which some univocal, eternal, knowing Philosophy might elect as its sole object”⁴².

Being a Marxist, Nizan perceives values and ideas as historically contextualised and determined by the processes of social development. Opposing his realistic position to the idealistic one of Julien Benda, he makes a historical insight and claims that by ‘eternal’ values Benda means the republican values of freedom, civil rights, private property, etc. In other words, he universalises the particular values of a given historical period, which in reality was no more than a product of the bourgeois liberal ideology of the 19th century. And thus, when eternal values proved to be bourgeois, Nizan blamed their ‘prophets’ for “identifying human society — all possible human societies — with bourgeois society, and human reason... with bourgeois reason. And, one might add, human morality with bourgeois morality”⁴³.

This is why for Nizan Benda’s ‘clerical fetishism’ represented no more than an old speculative idealism, which he saw as a major vice for the intellectual’s self-determination. According to him, the French academics were the watchdogs of the bourgeois institutions who served the ‘oppressors’ and thus were the real traitors of the intellectual’s responsibility. For Nizan, the universal metaphysics and concepts such as Freedom, Truth, Reason, and Justice were no more than the theoretical basis for bourgeois domination. He points out that there always exist only two types of truth — that of the oppressors and that of the oppressed⁴⁴. Referring to Lenin, Nizan insists that those who remain independent and ‘indifferent’ in politics are satisfied with the bourgeois *status quo* and belong to the class of the oppressors⁴⁵. Benda is not the only target of his criticism — according to him, writers such as Jean Guéhenno (1890–1978), Jean-Richard Bloch (1884–1947), André Malraux (1901–1976), or Henry Poulaille (1896–1980) refer to the same vague ‘universal truth’ which, by no means, can help to resolve the problems of inequality, violence and injustice: “We don’t need a humanist truth (*la vérité humaine*), but first of all a revolutionary one”⁴⁶. In light of this, Nizan postulated that the revolutionary intellectual should use art, literature and philosophy as critical tools in order

⁴¹ P. N i z a n, *The Watchdogs. Philosophers of the Established Order*, New York–London 1971, p. 42.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 43.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 42.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 46.

⁴⁶ P. N i z a n, *Littérature révolutionnaire en France (1932.) in Pour une nouvelle culture; textes réunis et présentés par Susan Suleiman*, Paris 1971, pp. 33–43, here p. 39.

to reveal the truth about bourgeois society and to struggle for the proletariat's emancipation by means of direct political engagement. To conclude, for Nizan the 'truth' is always political. There can be no independent intellectual position (or philosophy and literature), which means that political choice is inevitable. This ontologisation of politics lies at the core of the binary oppositions between proletariat and bourgeoisie, *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, oppressed and oppressors.

Besides this powerful criticism of Benda's idealistic argument, Nizan exposed another idealistic conviction — the one which absolutises the proletariat's role as universal subject of history and thus confers on the intellectual a duty to speak on behalf of those 'who have no voice'. After Nizan, his old friend Jean-Paul Sartre will define this political engagement as a vocation in his famous formula, prescribed to the intellectual — "to interfere in matters that do not directly concern him, to question established truths, and to champion the cause of the oppressed"⁴⁷. As we can see, both of the positions taken by Benda and Nizan (whether it comes to defending a 'universal' truth or the 'proletarian' one) proved to be 'universalist' or representative of the universal. In this regard, the famous distinction between the 'universal' (*universel*) and the 'specific' (*spécifique*) intellectual elaborated by Michel Foucault as far as his historical analysis of relations between intellectual, politics and truth goes, needs to be examined as a further step in the French intellectual's self-reflection.

THE SPECIFIC INTELLECTUAL: THE COURAGE OF TRUTH-TELLING

During the major political struggles of the first half of 20th century, French intellectuals played a significant role by producing powerful discourses in order to examine and evaluate current political and social realities. In the early 1970s, this privileged position began to fade away. Observing these transformations, Michel Foucault, in his interview with Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) in 1972, said that during the 19th and 20th centuries intellectuals acted as political figures in order to speak truth to power for those who had no voice for themselves, but it turned out that the masses no longer needed them to 'reveal their consciousness', because the masses had already become self-conscious. When intellectuals claimed themselves as possessors of common truth, they neglect their own social and cultural position within the bourgeois system, ignoring their role in maintaining it. For Foucault the aim of intellectuals was not to 'speak the silent truth', but to lay bare the modes of the discourse production exhibited by the

⁴⁷ S. Hazareesingh, *How the French think: An Affectionate Portrait of an Intellectual People*, New York 2015, p. 188.

power structures, their ‘truth regimes’, and to transform theory into the local practice of political struggle⁴⁸.

In 1976 Foucault specified this argument by stating in one of his interviews that the intellectual who represented society’s consciousness was capable of bearing truth and justice, could distinguish what is true or false, became a rudiment of the past and was replaced by a new type: the ‘specific’ intellectual⁴⁹. According to him, the figure of the so-called ‘universal intellectual’ which derived from the figure of the jurist — the man of justice who was opposed to power in the name of the universal law of justice — had been gradually replaced by the expert, who no longer sought to provide society with the answers to global moral and political truths, but instead concentrated on specific problems referring to his professional or academic field⁵⁰.

Foucault linked this major change with the transformation and desacralisation of the figure of the author in the era of disciplinary-specific knowledge⁵¹. Speaking about the role of the intellectual in contemporary society, Foucault resituated the focus of analysis from the problem of political engagement to the question of the production of truth. While the universal intellectual positioned himself as the one who speaks truth to power, Foucault perceived the concept of a ‘liberating truth’ as illusory. For him the ‘truth’ is a product of discourse, power and practices, never something objective or authentic which can be attained by metaphysical or scientific speculations.

He explains his attitude in these terms: “Truth is a thing of this world: It is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its own regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the type of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true”⁵². If Nizan advocated that intellectuals should disguise the truth about the oppressive conditions of bourgeois society in order to liberate the masses, Foucault stated that there is no escape from power into freedom. In these terms, the ‘truth’ of the proletariat is not ‘universal’, but is just another ‘truth discourse’ which seeks to change the dispositions of power. Foucault continues by stressing that for an intellectual the main political problem is not an ideology or alienation, but the truth itself: what should be examined and changed is the political, economic and institutional regime of truth production⁵³. Thus, this

⁴⁸ M. Foucault, *Les intellectuels et le pouvoir: entretien de Michel Foucault avec Gilles Deleuze*, in: *Dits et écrits*, II (1970–1975), Paris 1994, pp. 306–315, here p. 308.

⁴⁹ M. Foucault, *La fonction politique de l’intellectuel*, in: *Dits et écrits*, III (1976–1979), Paris 1994, pp. 109–113, here p. 109–110.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 110.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 112.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 114.

new character of the relations between theory and practice, in his view, answers the question of the mode of the intellectual's political engagement. By working on the edges of power structures and examining the heterotopias such as jails, mental health institutions and the relations between 'knowledge' and power, Foucault himself demonstrated the functioning of a 'specific' intellectual.

However, while for Foucault the transition from the 'universal' to the 'specific' intellectual seemed natural and positive, some of the French public intellectuals in the 1980s understood it as the end of the intellectual as a figure. The essayist Bernard-Henry Lévy (b. 1948), known for the leadership of the "New Philosophers" movement created in the late 1970s, detected the degradation of the French intellectual field which, in his opinion, resulted from the corruption of universal intellectual values. Referring to Julien Benda's work he stated that the intellectual is impossible without the idea of Truth, understood as a universal and eternal, while due to the Marxists, Sartre and Foucault the concept of truth became relative and thus, unnecessary⁵⁴. Lévy stated that a victory of the Foucauldian "fetishism of specificity" had seriously undermined the vocation of the French intellectual by relativising the value of transcendental Reason, Truth and Justice⁵⁵. However, this outdated critical reaction to the Foucauldian concept of the 'specific intellectual' does not characterise the disposition of the contemporary French intellectual field. As Gisèle Sapiro emphasises, the figure of a critical universal intellectual is no longer preponderant in France. At the same time, a significant number of associations embracing researchers and experts working jointly to bring their scientific, theoretical and critical expertise for a social cause emerged in France in the late 1970s⁵⁶. This process does not only demonstrate the deep transformation of the intellectuals' modes of engagement with social reality, but also indicates a transition from individual intellectual intervention to a collective one.

CONCLUSION

As I have outlined in this paper, the notion of truth, which represents a certain relation between reality and knowledge, played a special role in the debates between French intellectuals over their social and political vocation in the given epoch. The 'truth' argument laid at the heart of the intellectuals' discursive strategies legitimises their engagement into the political sphere or their abstinence from it. Therefore, the concept of truth was successively seen as a 'value

⁵⁴ B.-H. Lévy, *Éloge des intellectuels*, Paris 1987, p. 42.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 46–48.

⁵⁶ G. Sapiro, *Modèles d'intervention politique des intellectuels. Le cas français*, pp. 30–31.

in itself superior to reality, a tool for the ‘consciousness raising’ of the masses, and finally, as a type of discourse produced by the power structures in order to legitimise their governing practices. These three ‘truth discourses’ corresponds to the three types of intellectual figures represented in the French intellectual tradition: ‘universal’, ‘revolutionary’ and ‘specific’. As we can observe, during the past century the figure of intellectual faced a radical transformation. The most significant outcome of this change may be the decline of the intellectual’s didactic power over public opinion. The reconceptualisation of the relations between theory and practice transformed the ‘universal’ intellectual who tended to be a ‘common consciousness’ into a democratic one, who seeks no more to be the moral and intellectual guide to society. Instead of this, he seeks to serve as an expert who uses his specific knowledge for the social and political cause.

Summary

This article deals with the three discursive strategies which were used by the French intellectuals for establishing their attitudes towards the political sphere on the basis of different ‘truth speeches’. While there were various ways in which the intellectuals interacted with politics, there was always an underlying epistemological reasoning for legitimising their integration into the political sphere or for their abstinence from it in their discursive strategies of self-representation. As Michel Foucault pointed out, the problem of the intellectual must be examined not in terms of knowledge and power, but in terms of truth and politics. As demonstrated here, an ‘idealistic’ intellectual sees responsibility in critiquing political and ideological realities on behalf of such universal values as truth, reason and justice. The ‘revolutionary’ position defended by the Marxist intellectuals implied a political struggle for social change in the name of the historically justified truth of the oppressed. In opposition to these two types of the ‘universal intellectual’ who use truth as a tool, a ‘specific’ intellectual examines different forms and ‘regimes of truth’ in order to alter their modes of production.

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