

Is the Western World Vanishing Away?

Public Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of the European and Transatlantic Crises

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THE PRESENT article deals with the role and of public Western intellectuals in a world determined by globalization, consumerism and cultural relativism. The main question of the article is whether public intellectuals are still representative for the Euro-Atlantic world and if their influence has not become a fading picture of the Western culture glorious days. As a rule, one cannot imagine modern Western society without the direct or mediated involvement of intellectuals. But, after decades of globalization, intellectuals have lost much of their former prestige, becoming more or less a league of specialists or experts, too often subordinated to political power, viewed as agents acting for its legitimization. The condition of intellectuals changed dramatically since the days the Enlightenment period and of the Republic of Letters (Winterer 2012: 600, 622–23). One of the causes of their decline is to be found in the diminishing intellectual ethos which slackened the sense of ideality in public affairs as well as the meaning of virtue in public matters. At the same time, it is not hazardous to regard both the transatlantic rift and integration tensions in enlarged Europe as consequences of the intellectuals' social diminished presence. Once, at the dawning of the modern Western world, intellectual ethos was regarded as the needle of a compass pointing to the merit of modernity, setting the foundations for civil society, better governance, free opinions and adept opinion leaders. Very few would dare entrusting intellectuals with such a task, any longer.

The Western world created civil society, the state of law, instituted industrialization and capitalism, built the University and the free market, invented journalism and the electronic media, last but not least, it made the intellectual appear as the main factor of civil society, a challenging leader of opinion. Intellectuals have often been portrayed as defending reason, freedom of thought, liberty of opinion, progress of ideas. Yet, they have never behaved as a single individual in face of the Western world's dramatic challenges. Intellectuals have never formed a homogenous crowd. Homogenization of intellectuals has almost always resulted in their weakening or eventually in their public demise. The unification of Europe through military dictatorships under Napoleon or Hitler, or the dismemberment of Europe during the Cold War demonstrated not only the frailty of the European peace, but also that intellectuals have formed since Enlightenment

opposing camps, according to their beliefs and visions. Culture wars in the US and the controversies of cultural integration in the EU convey a persuading picture of the intellectuals' antagonistic positions regarding a large variety of topics, including even their will to act jointly.

Often regarded as builders of gilded roofs rather than of solid foundations, (after Gramsci's formula), intellectuals always depended on representation and on public recognition. Therefore, it is highly important that today's Western intellectuals should weigh carefully their positions concerning the consequences of a possible final breaking up of the Western world resulting from enhancement of the transatlantic rift or from deterioration of European unity. The economic crisis and poverty, the revival of nationalism and flares of xenophobia, re-emergence of authoritarianism and the predominance of dictatorial regimes in other parts of the world compose a worrisome tableau of the new millennium. Whether intellectuals' relevance has dwindled today more than yesterday, it is not the fault of anyone, of intellectuals particularly, even if they became specialists, experts and University professors abandoning their critical and visionary ethos. The growth of the media sphere and the spreading of communication technological innovations, the institutionalizing of the cultural sphere delivered a deadly blow to the meaning of being an intellectual.

Immediately after 1990, still breathing the euphoria of the fall of the Berlin wall, intellectuals from Western and Eastern Europe faced a new reality emerging from the predicament of post-communist transition. Post-communist transition varied according to the cultural heritage of each Eastern European country evincing different stages of modernization existing in Europe, which had not been caused by the fall of the iron curtain, only. So that the much eulogized "oneness of Europe," a slogan cherished by Eastern European intellectuals appeared to be a mere illusion. Robert Bideleux esteemed that East-Europeans still dwelled in the stage of the state-nation construction, whereas the West-Europeans had already stepped on the way of a super-national community project (Bideleux 1996: 283–288). The year 2003 brought along with US military intervention in Iraq one the most serious crisis between chiefly Western European states officials and the government of the US. Juergen Habermas's intervention in favor for "core Europe" (Habermas and Derrida 2003: 3–13) demonstrated that the nature of crisis pertained not only to anti-American views but it also affected the status of equality of the members of the EU. Given the fact that Juergen Habermas, an outstanding Western European intellectual, employed the notion of "core Europe" versus the rest of Europe, it was obvious that cultural and civilizational differences between Western Europeans and Eastern Europeans built a new political hierarchy, so that promises about equality among members of the EU did not ring true any longer. "Core Europe" reminded Eastern Europeans chiefly that the EU enlargement relies on power traditions and experiences. On the other hand, manifest opposition against the invasion of Iraq threw out of gear relations between the US government and some Western European officials. A number of scholars and intellectuals, Ralph Dahrendorf, Umberto Eco, Fernando Savater, Timothy Garton Ash, Ulrich Beck, Dan Diner, Esterhazy Peter, Adam Krzeminski, Andrzej Stasiuk among others, voiced their nuanced disagreement with the constituting of a monopoly on the meaning of Europe and on the escalation of transatlantic disputes.

Timothy Garton Ash, one of the few publicists who still bolstered the doctrine of Atlanticism was persuaded that the Western alliance would still have a future. In defending Western values, Garton Ash underlined that Europeanization and Americanization are two forms of the same process of Westernization (Garton Ash 2006: 232), which indicated that the Western world should not be represented eventually by only a single pole of power. The ongoing controversy about the leadership of the West need not be transformed into a provincial one, upheld Garton Ash. Both the US and the EU were envisioned by Garton Ash as not simply holding power for themselves, but to warrant freedom, good governance and the state of law for citizens (Garton Ash 2006: 244). Garton Ash thought that the crisis of the Western world provided the chance of its reconstruction which would bring together both Europeans and Americans in an effort to rediscover the prevalence of similarities among Europe and the US in contrast with the present-day political estrangement and hostility among them (Garton Ash 2006: 247). Sharing the same views, Ludger Kuhnhardt, a German EU integration scholar, estimated that crises in European Union might develop eventually a beneficial result for the quality of the integration process. Crises are to be classified as crises *of* integration, which affect the rationale of integration, and crisis *in* integration, related to the difficulties of achieving the momentary phase and goals of integration (Kuhnhardt 2009: 1–2). The rationale of European integration was regarded as a locus for the assertion of democratic principles and human rights, for the implementation of market economy and elements of welfare, for observing multilateralism in international politics, while counting on the United States seen as Europe's most indispensable partner (Kuhnhardt 2009: 7). For Kuhnhardt, Europe's inner crises as well as the critical relations with the US are "adaptation" crises (Kuhnhardt 2009: 8–9). Likewise, for Michael Gehler, another scholar and observer of European integration, the concept of crisis meant a process of "decision," not bearing actually a negative effect on European integration, but a constructive one (Gehler 2009, in Kuhnhardt 2009: 110). Nevertheless, in spite of the optimism with which crises are dealt with, European integration and transatlantic rapprochement demand more coherent and efficient policies, relying on reciprocal trust not only among government officials, but among intellectuals as well (Kuhnhardt 2009: 123).

Since the Enlightenment, the intellectual has been regarded as a "secular clerk" in a world whose faith was put in freedom and reason. Dedicating his energy to the cultivation of knowledge and truth as well as to the making of the public sphere, the intellectual distinguished himself from artists, writers, politicians. The quality of the intellectual discourse has always constituted the reliable basis for the expressing of free opinions and the articulation of civil society, as shown in the main democracies of Western Europe in the post-Enlightenment period. Intellectual formation was often seen as the steady development of a personal vocation, the blossoming of a public authority constantly refined as in a process of artistic self-creation (Wolfe 2006: 94). At the same time, a profound conflict broke out between freedom seen as the fundamental premise of intellectuals' status and many intellectuals' ideological conformism, or obedience to class or ethnic matters. Explaining the so-called "tyrannical complex" of intellectuals in the 20th century, Mark Lilla concluded that intellectuals may be fatally attracted to political power,

becoming political factors of influence (Lilla 2005: 220). It seems indispensable therefore to return to the question of the intellectual ethos as a primordial condition for the freedom of the individual, autonomy of public sphere, and the ideality of the art of knowing.

According to the bottom line of intellectual ethos principledness, normativity, universal knowledge, respect for cultural values and traditions, human and civil rights should be always promoted and defended. Yet, the ideal portrait of the intellectual is seldom encountered in real life. Intellectuals, unlike political leaders are not idolatized by the masses. Their quickly passing fame need not be immortalized in bronze. Intellectuals live in the memory of their audiences. Their capacity to influence a public and witness the spirit of the time in the name of the audience, expressing the mindset of a community is what defines their ephemeral role (Brick 2011: 392, 408). The coming into being of the “two cultures,” the ongoing dispute over the cultural cannon, 20th century religious rebirth, innovations in the field of media, the effects of popular culture gradually altered not only the enduring perceptions of intellectuals but eventually their own status. It is necessary that the definition of the intellectual be continuously readapted to the changing circumstances of the actual world. To define the intellectual from a decade to another has become a usual practice providing a systematic account of the changing circumstances of our present world (Posner 2001: 17). In defining intellectuals, one reviews their societal role in relation to their discourse and recognition of the public. Such definitions vary with the cultural and political standards of different periods in intellectual history. The question why should one define the intellectual time and again remains however unanswered, sparking the thought that delving into intellectuals’ destinies might be a superfluous activity magnifying their narcissism rather than showing their concrete usefulness. Do intellectuals need new definitions? Is it because of their inevitable separateness or in order to demonstrate that in spite of all differences, intellectuals are alike? Probably neither of the questions is relevant. Intellectuals should continue to be defined as long as they exist, due to their originality and genuine specificity.

Isaiah Berlin resorted to the metaphor of the fox and of the hedgehog, in order to find a suitable answer to demarcate intellectuals (Berlin 1953: 10). Julien Benda urged intellectuals to be prudent about the risks of abandoning their privileged status of impartial judges and venture in politics, betraying their mission and neutrality (Benda 2003: 150–162). Intellectuals’ betrayal was in Benda’s eyes the sanctification of the political and nationalist passions (Benda 2003: 256). Karl Mannheim upheld that intellectuals represented a socially “unattached” layer, a fact which showed their willful, self-imposed cultural as well as political conduct. Intellectuals displayed social “sensibility” determining them to take sides into conflicting events or to be parts of opposing forces (Mannheim 1954: 140). Antonio Gramsci claimed that all human beings are intellectuals, but not all fulfill this function in society (Gramsci 1983: 86). For Gramsci, the definition of the intellectual was probably the most comprehensive one. As known, he elaborated on the question of urban and rural intellectuals, sought for the effects of industrialization, bureaucratization, nationalism and racism on the intellectual ethos (Gramsci 1983: 91–101).

Edward Said succeeded probably like no one else to describe the traits of the intellectual in clear and succinct formulations. For Said the public intellectual is an exile, a

marginal individual, an author who risks his freedom to tell the truth to the powerful of the day (Said 1996: xvi). The intellectual's main distinctive characteristic rests in his faculty for representation and the capacity to address a critical, often an unpleasant public message (Said 1996: 11). For others scholars, the intellectual is seen as a "knower," meaning that his public address might contain the vision of a prophet, the preciseness of a scientist, the refinement of a philosopher and the statesman's prudence, but without assuming that intellectuals should take for good one of these roles (Melzer 2003: 3). Being a non-conformist, refusing political favors, the intellectual is an outsider of the "system" (Melzer 2003: 11). Yet, being an outsider does not prevent the intellectual from the threat of becoming a cultural entertainer or from turning into an academic expert (Melzer 2003: 13). The word "intellectual" is not any longer a current term in the everyday speech, noted the American literary critic J. Hillis Miller, referring to the decay of the learned public and the rise of the "digital nation" (Hillis Miller 2006: 195–96). The "eclipse" of American intellectuals was surveyed by Jacoby Russell in an accurate and almost an exhaustive manner (Russell 1987: 3–22). Since then, the spreading signs of the decline of the intellectual ethos have appeared in Europe as well, without a sign of a credible recovery.

After 1990, Wolf Lepenies, a German scholar, referred to intellectuals as of a community of two genres, namely "the melancholy" and the "utopian" ones (Lepenies 2005: 13–15). Lepenies, a keen observer of the Eastern Europe intellectuals, thought that Europe's intellectuals had a noble duty to continue to perfect the process of the cultural unification of the continent, alerting Europeans about the perils of losing their "cultural intelligentsia." Lepenies spoke in clear terms about the danger of cultural homogenization (Lepenies 2005: 69). Looking at the gravity of the changes produced by postmodern relativism, the media discourse, the determining impact of economic and political politics in society, Lepenies warned that intellectuals may leave the public stage and take refuge in the bosom of bureaucratic institutions functioning only as experts and specialists, no longer as authentic critics. In general, one may say that there are two prevalent perceptions concerning the intellectual: the intellectual seen as a critic of power and society, and the intellectual viewed as a legitimizing agent of power, ideology, ethnic groups and corporate interests. It is therefore of great importance that when redefining the intellectual one should shed light on the latter's complex autonomy, as Pierre Bourdieu did in his insightful study dealing with the "birth of the intellectual" (Bourdieu 1995: 117–31).

A recurrent motif in the above definitions is that the intellectual matters as a critic, normative and prescriptive public voice. Identifying these traits in many generations of intellectuals, Amitai Etzioni delimited the authentic intellectual from "the spin doctors" or "house intellectuals" (Etzioni 2006: 4), highlighting the authenticity of the discourse of the intellectual. The representativeness of the intellectual cannot equal the fame of a politician, but the former's influence might be more lasting and more effective in social and political changes. Wondering about the societal role of the intellectual, Etzioni wrote that intellectuals create "communities of assumptions" which influence governing elites as well as the perceptions of an "attentive" public (Etzioni 2006: 6). Etzioni showed explicitly that if society obstructed intellectuals to express their

opinions freely, or if the quality of the intellectual discourse lowered, society would lose its trustworthy benchmark of reality and thus it could easily fall prey to ideologization (Etzioni 2006: 8). Autonomy of intellectuals in a consumerist society is relative or partial, because of the institutionalization of cultural life (Etzioni 2006: 76). The intellectual contributes to the expression of the public mindset as a generalist and not as specialist, considers Richard Posner in an inspiring analysis about the intellectual's authenticity, arguing that the term "intellectual" should not be synonymous with "cultivated, intelligent or bookish, since these qualities do not automatically make an intellectual (Posner 2001: 17–18). Intellectuals should address a larger audience than the one made only by academics, venturing into farther areas of knowledge than the familiar ones, coating their expertise into a wider, more comprehensive pattern of social participation, interfering with the canonicity of society, seeking to reform or even change it (Posner 2001: 31).

Almost unanimously, the institutionalization of intellectuals is regarded as the aggravating circumstance of their decline. The consequences of modernization, specialization of culture and the bureaucratization of universities led to irreversible changes in the world of the intellectuals and to the phenomenon of "academization" (Teichgraber III, 2011: 129–32). A significant number of American and European authors think the University has failed to in its enlightening humanistic project, becoming an instrument subordinated to mass society, legitimating political interests. Totalitarian experiences in Eastern Europe added a different chapter to the history of the University, ennobling party activists with university titles or diplomas, impeding thus the modernizing of this part of Europe. In examining the status of the intellectual in the University, Amitai Etzioni remarked on the increasing specificity of intellectual's discourse which diminishes the audience, eventually making the intellectual be severed from his public (Etzioni 2006: 11). In the case the intellectual chooses by all means to hunt for celebrity, he may become a public jester or entertainer, losing cultural relevance. In both cases, the intellectual is put in a difficult spot. In his radical critique of the American University, Allan Bloom's deplored the incapacity of the American higher educational system to educate the youth in the spirit of American set of values and of democracy. His notion of the "closing of the American mind" triggered a heated dispute over the aim of the University in a technological age in stark contradiction with the 19th century Emersonian optimism. Lamenting over the impossible return to the forgotten days of literature and philosophy primacy in culture, Bloom condemned nihilist and left-oriented policies which did away with the formative spirit of the University, no longer allowing professors to be mentors (Bloom 1987: 247–357).

Gerard Granel, a French philosopher and intellectual, considered like Bloom that the University was no longer attached to the founding principles of the Enlightenment, the institution rationale being lost in the bureaucratic labyrinth of the society of consumption. Granel thought that the University should start reinventing itself, returning to the old principle of *scholé*. In this manner intellectuals in the University should abandon the so-called "scientificity" and the pompous title of experts and become again real researches and critics in the search of truth. Granel demanded for a thorough reconstruction of the University, decoupling the institution from political and economic interests. In this sort of alternative University, knowledge should be freed from the ster-

ile production of “skills,” which is viewed by Granel as a necessary justification to employ the University for legitimizing of political roles pertaining to political and economic leadership and domination. In the same vein of thoughts, Granel spoke about a reviewing of the existing rapport between the teaching of sciences and of humanities, the latter ones being fatally undervalued and pushed to the margin of the educational state-system. Pleading for the re-centering of the humanities in the University, Granel pleaded for a teaching system in which the individual should not be regarded as an ideological recipient or as a client of governmental soft authoritarianism (Granel 1982, 2002: 64–71). The same views were shared by Bill Readings who considered that the University’s mission had been completely mystified because the decline of the state-nation and the degradation of the professor/researcher, who had stepped down from his status of intellectual to that of an administrator (Readings 1996: 3).

Photography, film, television and the new media boosted rapidly the role of image in public communication, influencing dramatically the time used for information, and in the making of the leaders of opinion. I shall point out briefly to the opinions of three leading intellectuals who described substantially the changes in the media in the 20th century, respectively to Walter Benjamin, Juergen Habermas and Pierre Bourdieu. I chose to refer to these authors primarily because they sustained a disenchanting view about the transformations of the media and implied that the role of the intellectual would be peripheral in a technological society. Walter Benjamin was the first European intellectual who conceptualized the major consequences of film and photography and their relation to the aura of the artistic work as well as to their birth of a different artistic sense of perception (Benjamin 1968: 222). According to Benjamin, modernism ushered the “equality” of the artistic objects. A larger public was thus exposed to the benefit of artistic experiences, so that not only the elitist character of the artistic audience vanished away, but also the attitude of the masses gradually changed (Benjamin 1968: 234). Benjamin’s conclusions, namely that if fascism aestheticizes politics, communism must politicize art, indicated a closely-knit relationship among media, art and politics. According to Benjamin a new type of artistic syncretism was born in the first decades of the last century and it had to be interpreted politically because the new developments in the media created a new public (Benjamin 1968: 242).

Juergen Habermas upheld that that quality of the public sphere decreased since its setting up in the Enlightenment period, when the public sphere was the sphere of private persons reunited publicly. The appearance of the public sphere, or actually the passing from the private sphere to the public one was intermediated through the art of the correspondence, or by the cultivation of personal diary, remarked Habermas. Public opinion, the cultural product of the bourgeoisie suffered later on a series of changes, according to the cultural affiliations of opinion leaders. Of a great import in the making of opinion leaders and subsequent cultural spreading divisions was the development of theatre and of the art of the spectacle which may be accounted for a pattern of the modern European cultural mindset. The formation of a cultural style no longer belonged to the elite only, and therefore, individualization and enhancement of different public opinions had become a constant characteristic of the public sphere (Habermas 2006: 88–98). Pierre Bourdieu’s viewpoint is similar to Habermas’s in what regards

the new media culture, especially in accounting for the influence of television on the other branches of journalism and on the cultural sphere, in general. Bourdieu thought that quality journalism had been transformed according to the laws of the commercial media, and the sensationalist journalism had conquered the press entirely because of rating policies (Bourdieu 1998: 68–70). Anti-intellectualism began to spread because of the general low quality of the media, fuelling controversies among readers, journalists and intellectuals (Bourdieu 1998: 68). Bourdieu denounced vehemently the narcissism of television (Bourdieu 1998: 14–19). Television was regarded as setting up a manner of “fast-thinking,” which turned became a tool of symbolical oppression (Bourdieu 1998: 12).

It is not a paradox that intellectuals and journalists find themselves in diametrically opposed camps since they strive for different cultural representations. The prevalence of one group is the other’s deprivation. Formerly, the press was the public locus where both intellectuals and journalists were reunited in a harmonious entirety under the same ideals of progress and cultural expression. Today, it is believed that one of the causes of the decline of the intellectual category lies in the unprecedented development of the media and the radical change in media discourse. Whereas journalists have had a corporatist representation, forming a different type of authority in comparison with the intellectuals’, the latter ones became more and more dispersed and parochial within their representativeness, getting stranded from the main body of the public (Joffe 2003: 109–112). The increasing number of today’s pundits or so-called “talking heads” whose discourse is more palatable than that of academics’ is an evident sign of the commodification of the media. The “scientification” or “academization” of the discourse impoverished the communication in the public sphere, allowing entertainment (infotainment) raise at a considerably higher rate (Joffe 2003: 120).

Following McLuhan’s and Innis’s reputed writings about the media, Joshua Meyrowitz upheld that electronic media did not result only in a cultural effect but in a social one, as well. A highly important trait of the communicational change was that transformations occurred at the beginning in a slowly moderate, course, but then, the rhythm of transformations accelerated year by year. Transformations of media communications did not imply merely substituting outmoded technology with a new one, but supplementing the old system of communication with an updated one, which meant that the old system of communication was not completely replaced, but it was altered gradually into a high-performance system (Meyrowitz 1985: 19–23). The consequence of this kind of transformation provoked a wholly different type of socialization, which affected the psychological and social levels of communication as well. (Meyrowitz 1985: 57–60).

Though such complex transformations had not been sufficiently mapped, Meyrowitz claimed that at least three types of modifications were at work in our society, namely the specifically different social structures of masculinity and femininity, the disappearing of the difference between adulthood and childhood, and the trivialization of the political hero. The input of electronic communication did not replace the world of the book with the one of the computer screen, but it created a mentality of public exposure, affecting all layers of society, chiefly the youth (Meyrowitz 1985: 309–311). A political consequence of this transformation consisted in the possibility that the electronic media provided “a distinct advantage to the average people,” paving the way for a future direct

democracy (Meyrowitz 1985: 322–323). However, it is not the speed with which the media evolved from decade to another, but the general corollary of the innovations which impacted our way of life. As regards the quickly developing spiral of changes in communications, Roger Fiedler wrote about the existence of a continuously developing “mediamorphosis” based on the rule of the “thirty years” which was verified in the last five centuries (Fiedler 1997, 2004: 20). Fiedler’s prophecies about the social and cultural transformations caused by the electronic media showed an evident disruption of traditional culture. Communication priorities of the present-day world have had as a consequence the disappearance of the interest for humanities and the wide dissemination of a visual culture often lacking in content (Fiedler 1997, 2004: 107).

By way of a conclusion, I think it would be relevant to know in what manner dilemmatic aspects of the transatlantic world and of European integration were perceived and interpreted by Romanian intellectuals after the breakdown of communism. Though the insufficient institutional modernization in Romania and the post-communist transition thwarted a rapid involvement of Romanian intellectuals in public affairs as it happened in Hungary, Poland or the Czech Republic, Romanian intellectuals did not witness passively the split between the US and the EU, or the controversies of the EU enlargement process. The span of time which separated Romania’s entering the EU (2007) from the official downfall of the communist dictatorship was a time for bitter cultural and political disputes which enhanced the deficiencies of post-communist transition and the uncertain directions of democratization. Nowadays, it is obvious that Romanian intellectuals as well as experts are engrossed in regional economic and cultural disparities resulting from European integration (Benedek, Kurko, 2102: 116–26). However, in the recently passed years, the public interest focused on the authenticity of intellectual life during the communist age, respectively on the question whether autonomous intellectuals could actually outdistance themselves from party intellectuals. In this respect, remembering that Czeslaw Milosz explained the double discourse of the intellectual in the Eastern “popular democracies” by using the notion of *ketman* (Milosz 1999: 67–69), it is unquestionable that rebuilding intellectual ethos after the 1990s was an urgent priority for the benefit of civil society. Nevertheless, such priorities pertain more to intellectuals’ circles than to politicians. The rebirth of the intellectual ethos cannot be imposed from above.

Between the years 1947–1989, Romanian elite followed unequivocally communist rules, with a few exceptions. Under the rule of communist ideology, intellectuals were recruited to fulfill the tasks of *apparatchiks*. Communist authorities purged and controlled the elite, creating so called types of “total” institutions or of the “bastard” ones (Gheorghiu 2008: 217–26). The famous “school for literature” prompted generations of writers who remained loyal to communist propaganda especially after the period of ideological Stalinist indoctrination and strict political surveillance had changed to national-communism. Connections among Bucharest, Leipzig and Moscow where such centers existed might reveal more facts about ideological and cultural instrumentation and their still obscure mechanisms (Dragomir 2008: 240–48). A significant number of Romanian writers who had been students of the “school for literature” sustained the national communist trend called “protocronism” (national-communist propaganda), isolating Romanian culture

from the international dialogue, ensuing serious repercussions on the brand of Romanian modern culture.

The status of the Romanian intellectuals after 1989 was surveyed by Sorin Adam Matei in a challenging comparative approach to Western Europe and the US. Matei considered that even that free from ideological indoctrination, Romanian intellectuals are under the domination of the so-called “groups of prestige.” Because of the rather sluggish course of intellectual debates and the almost inexistent civil society, Matei thought that the Romanian intellectual class is at an incipient stage (Matei 2004: 39). Looking optimistically in the future and expecting that a “cultural market” could take shape eventually so that opinion leaders should confront freely among them, Matei considered that Romania intelligentsia might wake up from its post-ideological slumber and become involved in defining and defending the project of a modern civil society. Quite on the contrary, in case that the influence of the groups of prestige lasted, the author estimated that moral balance and cultural resourcefulness would be seriously deteriorated (Matei 2004: 48).

In an insightful article about the intellectuals’ potentiality to “re-enchant” the world, that is to win back their prestige, Aurelian Crăiușu wondered whether the course of democracy could be kept straight so that transition to democracy could be implemented safely. In other words, Crăiușu wondered if intellectuals could act as “trimmers” of democracy. The low quality of democratic life remarked upon in various parts of the Western world, including Eastern Europe where cultural traditions had no meet with the requirements of democratic institutions and policies constitute potential threats to democracy (Crăiușu 2010: 273–75). The author upheld that present-day democracies still need intellectuals in order to enliven the public sphere dialogue as well as to enrich democratic culture. Reminding Tocqueville’s warnings against the apathy of civil life in democracy, Crăiușu considered that intellectuals and philosophers in today’s Western democratic world should act in salutary way to avoid the peril of confounding democracy with populism (Crăiușu 2010: 275). Populism’s omnipresence in post-communist Romania defies representation, entrapping almost all politicians (Părvu 2012: 175–87). Subsequently, one may state that the ethos of intellectuals is essential to be revived in order to ascertain the quality of democracy and the preservation of the democratic regime. Intellectuals should establish a firmer common basis in order to stand against instrumentalization and subordination, whether economic or political, and strive to express and disseminate critical views for the benefit of a society living in freedom, truth and reason.



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Abstract

Is the Western World Vanishing Away?

Public Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of the European and Transatlantic Crises

In questioning the role of European and American intellectuals in the present-day Western world, the author of this article links the decline of intellectuals with European and transatlantic recent crises. While the rift between the two great Western entities, European Union and the United States, continues to grow and the course of European cultural integration is tarrying, one wonders if intellectuals would act as mediators or leave the Western world be ravaged by unprecedented conflicts. It is of cardinal importance to know whether rebuilding the ethos of the intellectual to warrant the survival of the Western world as a cultural and political alliance amidst a conflicting postmodern world is a realistic opportunity or just a sample of wishful thinking. The article pleads in favor of restoring the intellectual ethos, though the solution does not appear easy and painless.

Keywords

intellectuals, intellectual history, civil society, Transatlantic crisis, European integration.