Beyond the Ivory Tower: The Public Role of the Intellectual Today

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Abstract

In this paper, I attempt to contextualise the question regarding the public role of the academic as intellectual in terms of the present, global, neo-liberal "govern-mentality". With the aid of thinkers such as Bourdieu, Foucault, Sennett, Arendt, but also social geographer, David Harvey, it becomes clear that neo-liberalism radically attenuates the individual's capacity to enter the public sphere. This incapacitation leads to the inevitable depoliticisation of intellectual labour through the increasing individualisation of the self, on the one hand, and the rampant privatisation of the public, on the other hand. This is explained by laying bare the corrosive impact and pervasive nature of neo-liberalism. Foucault and Bourdieu nevertheless believe in the possibility of resistance, which they locate in the individual and in his/her capacity as politicised intellectual. However, the repoliticisation of intellectuals and their role in the political sphere presupposes a more fundamental recovery of the public *sphere. The tactical question regarding the possibilities of and means to resistance is therefore rooted in the* ontological *question regarding the freedom of the self that comes into being in the social space between the self and the other. In the final analysis, the thought of Levinas is used to argue that fidelity to the self is not realised through the pursuit of limitless freedom (although our freedom is undeniably at stake), but in the social dimension, which enables the self – via the other – to re-enter the public and eventually the political sphere.*

1. Problem: the Academic as Intellectual?

"Once upon a time you could always rely on the academy to take a vociferous and contrarian stance on the issues of the day and because of the moral impetus driving them, they were more often than not right, and at the cutting edge of societal change", complains the author of a recent article published in the *Mail and Guardian*.[1] "And now? Selling your core business

to a student so that you can offer 'Business Ethics in one-and-a-half-days' seems as though some of our institutions have lost sight of the original point of dressing badly and calling oneself an academic" [original text modified].

The question regarding the role of the academic as intellectual, of the university in life beyond it, is, of course, embedded in a long history. "Since the days of Bologna [when the first university of the Western world was founded in 1088], the university has always been the clown to the crown. Like Shakespeare's fools it has purposefully existed outside of authority. Like Lear's fool, academic freedom and institutional autonomy gave it the freedom to critique the moronic machinations of democracy". So we have to ask ourselves, as the author of this article does, "when last did one of our public universities assume the mantle of critiquing the social order?"

In another article published in *Die Burger* on last year's meeting of the *Nederlands-Afrikaanstalige Wysgerige Genootskap* held in Stellenbosch,[2] Marcel Becker of the Radboud University Nijmegen stated the following: "characteristic of Continental philosophy (with which Afrikaans speaking philosophers are better acquainted than with the Anglo-Saxon tradition, according to him) is a strong sense for the historical, but also an engagement with the actual, the desire to make philosophy socially relevant. In the Netherlands we do not have such a strong tradition of engaged thought as the Germans and the French do. Our South African colleagues teach us to think in a socially relevant way". After a short summary of the papers presented at the conference, the author concludes with the following rather sneering remark: "Typical, therefore, of philosophers' talk – often strange, sometimes true, but always fascinating" (my translation). But what about the "critical social engagement" that Becker and also Pieter Duvenage insisted upon? This question is also echoed by an African philosopher quoted within the context of an analytic article on the responsibilities of philosophers. According to Mabogo More, "few persons in this country, if any, would argue that academic philosophy has played any major or significant role in setting and arguing for agendas for the unfolding of the South African political situation today".[3] What is the public role of the intellectual today? Idle talk is one thing, but entering the public realm something entirely different. Apparently it is not only something we do not dare, but also something we are no longer capable of.

In this essay, I shall attempt to contextualise the question regarding the public role of the academic as intellectual in terms of the present, global, neo-liberal "govern-mentality". With the aid of thinkers such as Bourdieu, Foucault, Sennett, Arendt, but also social geographer, David Harvey, it will become evident that neo-liberalism radically attenuates the individual's capacity to enter the public sphere. This incapacitation leads to the inevitable depoliticisation of intellectual labour through the increasing individualisation of

the self, on the one hand, and the rampant privatisation of the public, on the other hand [§2]. This will be explained by laying bare the corrosive and pervasive nature of neo-liberalism [§3]. Foucault and Bourdieu nevertheless believe in the possibility of resistance, which they locate in individuals and in their capacity as politicised intellectuals [§4]. However, the *re*politicisation of intellectuals and their role in the political sphere presupposes a more fundamental recovery of the *public* sphere [§5]. The tactical question regarding the possibilities of and means to resistance is therefore rooted in the *ontological* question regarding the freedom of the self that comes into being in the social space between the self and the other. In the final analysis, the thought of Levinas will be used to argue that fidelity to the self is not realised through the pursuit of limitless freedom (although it is undeniable that our freedom is at stake), but in the social dimension, which enables the self – via the other – to re-enter the public and eventually the political sphere [§6].

Let us first consider our present-day global context, which forms the backdrop of the more broadly construed *intellectual* role of the academic.

2. The Current State of Affairs: the Impact of Neo-liberalism on the Individual[4]

▪ Individualisation and Responsibilisation

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1998: 97-99) explains that our present context is typified by the globalisation of financial markets, combined with the progress of information technology. Together these two ensure an unprecedented mobility of capital, which forces companies – like the present-day university – to adjust ever more rapidly to the demands of the market. This leads to the absolute reign of flexibility, with recruitments on short-term contracts or on a temporary basis and repeated "downsizing". In addition, this leads to the creation, within departments, i.e. within the university itself, of competition between individuals through strategies of individualisation and responsibilisation. Individualisation is accomplished through the setting of individual objectives and assessments, personal increments or bonuses based on individual performance or merit, and individualised career paths, whereas strategies of responsibilisation contribute to the self-exploitation of the self. While remaining wage-earners subject to strong hierarchical authority, members of a department, for example, are at the same time held responsible for their performance. Moreover, they are expected to "self-appraise" their functioning, which extends their involvement in accordance with the techniques of "participatory management" far beyond the executive level. These are all methods of rational control which, while imposing over-investment in work under the constant pressure of urgency – and not only in posts of responsibility –, contribute to weaken and eventually destroy

collective references and solidarity.

- **Flexploitation and Precarity**

Part and parcel of this phenomenon of ever increasing individualisation and responsibilisation is the "flexploitation" and "precarity" of large segments of the academy. Because of neo-liberal market reforms, an ever greater percentage of the academic work force is employed on short-term contracts and are therefore subjected to flexible exploitation and existential precariousness. These phenomena are characterised by temporary, flexible, contingent, casual, intermittent work, and therefore by the absolute lack of any job security. Low wages or an intermittent income combined with the high cost of living and welfare cuts, make these workers particularly blackmailable. Together these conditions have a severely adverse effect on material and/or psychological welfare. More generally, these conditions mostly affect two categories of workers that are at opposite ends of labour market segmentation in post-industrial economies: pink-collar workers – mostly (but not exclusively) women, immigrants or migrants in retail and low-end service industries (including cleaners, waitresses, receptionists, maids, etc.); and "creaworkers", i.e. young talent temping for cheap in the information economy of big cities around the world: the creative class of strongly individualistic workers, such as designers, artists, architects, academics, researchers, etc. This highly individualised, self-responsible and flexible labour force is occupying a central position in the process of capitalist accumulation under Post-Fordism. In Western Europe between a quarter and a third of the labour force is employed on temporary and/or part-time contract basis.[5]

Furthermore, the marketisation of the university goes hand in hand with the depoliticisation of the academy. An increase in managerialism and bureaucratisation, the commodification of knowledge production and resultant increased emphasis on research output and inevitable specialisation are having an increasingly detrimental effect on the deepening of thought and on critical exchange. Academics recruited on a part-time and/or fixed term consultancy basis to do a specified amount of teaching or research have no space or time for the casual interchange which glues the academic enterprise together. Output is measured in terms of subject specific academic publications rather than public lectures or popular media contributions through which the academy reaches a wider audience. In short, the rampant retreat of academics into the ivory tower is largely due to increased mutual competition and loss of critical intellectual exchange due to the drive towards "professionalisation" in the new, marketised university (cf. Van Rothkirch 2008).

• The Corrosion of Character

Richard Sennett analyses "flexible capitalism" in terms of its corrosive impact on personal character. Following Horace, Sennett (1998: 10) states that "character depends on one's connections to the world. Character is expressed by loyalty and mutual commitment, or through the pursuit of long-term goals". But "[h]ow can long-term goals be pursued in an economy devoted to the short term? How can mutual loyalties and commitments be sustained in institutions which are constantly breaking apart or continually being redesigned?" Flexible capitalism – or the short-term flexibility and flux characteristic of global late-capitalism – "threatens to corrode character, particularly those qualities of character which bind human beings to one another and furnishes each with a sense of sustainable self". Corporations break up or merge, jobs are created or companies scale down, short-term contract workers are employed and then made redundant when their contracts expire. As Sennett explains, these should not be understood as links in a chain joined towards realising a common goal but rather as disjointed events with person-specific objectives and life-spans (ibid.). According to economist Joseph Schumpeter, "creative destruction" – or the process of transformation that accompanies radical innovation – requires people, such as entrepreneurs at ease with the unpredictability of change, with not knowing what comes next. But, as Sennett (1998: 30) points out, "most people... are not at ease with change in this nonchalant, negligent way". In short, "[t]he conditions of time in the new capitalism have created a conflict of character and experience, the experience of disjointed time threatening the ability of people to form their characters into sustained narratives". Its corrosive effect on character seems inevitable given that short- and flex-time "disorients action over the long term, loosens bonds of trust and commitment, and divorces will from behaviour" (ibid., p. 31).

After Adam Smith, writings on political economy shifted emphasis from regulation to sheer change, which was associated with entrepreneurial virtues (as opposed to the industrial labourer's dull plodding).[6] Mill was the first thinker to insist that flexible behaviour begets personal freedom.[7] We are still inclined to think that it does, that the human being is free precisely because capable of change. However, the new political economy betrays this personal desire for freedom. The pursuit of flexibility has produced new structures of power and control, rather than create the conditions which set us free (Sennett 1998: 47). Global late-capitalism requires two character traits: (1) the capacity to let go of the past; (2) and the confidence to accept fragmentation. These traits paradoxically encourage spontaneity on the one hand, while fostering individualisation and the attenuation of collective efforts, on the other. (ibid., p. 63).

3. The All-pervasive and Corrosive Nature of Neo-liberalism

▪ Neo-liberalism as Governmentality[8]

This all-too-familiar and increasingly pervasive phenomenon of individualisation and the self-responsibilisation coupled to it are symptomatic of the most prevalent form of political rationality today namely neo-liberalism, which can be understood with the aid of thinkers such as Foucault, Arendt and Harvey. According to Foucault, it embodies a certain power/knowledge construction, which is actively implemented to reshape the world in the image of its own projections. It refers to the not altogether infamous fusion of political and economic thinking, beginning in the 1970s and increasingly prominent since 1980, which de-emphasizes or rejects government intervention in the economy, focusing instead on structured free-market methods. The means and the ends of this neo-liberal form of power cohere in the pivotal and paradoxical phenomenon of globalisation. The notable rise in living standards that has occurred as barriers between nations have fallen, and the resultant escape from poverty by hundreds of millions in those places that have joined the world economy certainly count as among the merits of openness. At the same time, we have become all too aware of the high cost of globalisation reflected in the corrosive effects that corporate giants wreak upon the communities in which they operate their retail and manufacturing facilities. Barrier-busting international trade does not only bring riches to those previously excluded from the free market circuit but also spreads the less desirable side-effects of neo-liberalism such as those associated with opening nations to entry by multinational corporations. As we know, it is often at odds with fair trade, labour rights and social justice. As globally mobile capital reorganises business firms, it sweeps away regulation and undermines local and national politics. Globalisation creates new markets and wealth, even as it causes widespread suffering, disorder, and unrest.

A radically free market therefore means "maximized competition and free trade achieved through economic de-regulation, elimination of tariffs, and a range of monetary and social policies favourable to business and indifferent to poverty, social deracination, cultural decimation, long term resource depletion and environmental destruction" (Brown 2003: 2). But neo-liberal political rationality is paradoxically not only or even primarily focused on the economy. Rather it is intent on subjecting the political sphere along with every other dimension of contemporary existence to an economic rationality. In other words, it entails extending and disseminating market values to all institutions, social action, down to individual life. It reduces homo sapiens to *homo economicus* and submits every aspect of human life to considerations of profitability. Equally important is the production of all human and institutional activity as *rational entrepreneurial* action,

conducted according to a calculus of utility, benefit, or satisfaction against a micro-economic grid of scarcity, supply and demand, and moral value-neutrality (ibid., pp. 5-6).

Neo-liberal political rationality should be understood as a form of what Foucault terms *governmentality*, i.e. a mode of governance encompassing the state but not limited to the state, which produces subjects, forms of citizenship and behaviour, and a new organisation of the social. It comprises those techniques of governing that exceed express state action and orchestrate the subject's conduct towards him/herself (Brown 2003: 8). In other words, deployed as a form of governmentality, neo-liberalism permeates the entire spectrum from the microphysics to the macro-level of power on every register - personal, social, political and economic.

Why so Pervasive?[9]

But what exactly is neo-liberalism and how did it conquer the world in just three short decades? According to David Harvey (2005: 2), "[n]eoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade". Since the 1970s there has been a decisive turn to neo-liberalism in political-economic practices and thinking everywhere. Deregulation, privatisation, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision have become common practice. Almost all states, from those rising from the ashes of the Soviet Union to entrenched old-style social democracies and welfare states such as New Zealand and Sweden have succumbed – either voluntarily or in response to coercive pressures – to the neo-liberalising trend. Post-apartheid South Africa continues fervently along the neo-liberal path carved out by the Apartheid government of the late 1980s, and even present-day China is towing the line. Neo-liberalism is making its coercive influence felt everywhere from corporate boardrooms, financial, state and international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) responsible for regulating global finance and trade, but also in universities and the media. As the dominant mode of contemporary discourse and thought, it has infiltrated not only our politics and our economy, but also our commonsensical way of interpreting, understanding and relating to the world encompassing every sphere of life – the private as well as the public (Harvey 2005: 3).

But what accounts for the pervasive success and avid global implementation of the neo-liberal ideology? The widespread prevalence of neo-liberalism might be best explained with the aid of Plato's wisdom who

proclaimed in *The Republic* that "the best guardians" are "those who have the greatest skill in watching over the interests of the community" (Plato 1955: 156-165 [412-421c]). In order to be able to lead successfully, a leader does not propose what is useful for himself, but what is useful for the one he commands. According to Plato, then, to command is to be in accord with the will of one's subjects. In his commentary on Plato, Levinas (1953: 15) explains this as follows:

> [t]he apparent heteronomy of a command is in reality but an autonomy, for the freedom to command is not a blind force but a rational act of thought. A will can accept the order of another will only because it finds that order in itself... If the will is contrary to reason, it will come up against the absolute resistance of reason.

For a rule, ideology or form of government to be imposed successfully, in other words, it must coincide with the interests of those on which it is imposed. To command, in short, is to do the will of the one who obeys! This holds not just for the commands of the philosopher-king, however, but also for those of the tyrant and therefore harbours the danger of slavery. The despotism of the senses – what Plato calls the animality with which we are infected from within – constitutes the source of tyranny. This is when obedience no longer follows from a free and rational consciousness, but from inclination; when supreme violence becomes supreme gentleness, and we accept it as though it came from ourselves (ibid., p. 16). Herein lies the secret of neo-liberalism's success. Harvey (2005: 5) explains it as follows:

> For any way of thought to become dominant, a conceptual apparatus has to be advanced that appeals to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and our desires, as well as to the possibilities inherent in the social world we inhabit. If successful, this conceptual apparatus becomes so embedded in common sense as to be taken for granted and not open to question. *The founding figures of neoliberal thought took political ideals of human dignity and individual freedom as fundamental, as 'the central values of civilization'.* In so doing they chose wisely, for these are indeed compelling and seductive ideals. These values, they held, were threatened not only by fascism, dictatorships, and communism, but by all forms of state intervention that substituted collective judgements for those of individuals free to choose (my emphasis).

This is, of course, exactly what Gramsci meant by *hegemony,* which refers to the reign of a certain system of values that derive its force from consent and consensus rather than force or enforcement. This leads to the maintenance of the status quo in power relations through the permeation *throughout* society of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs and morality (think, for example, of neoconservatism), which affords it popular support and legitimacy. To the extent that this prevailing consciousness is internalised by

the population, it becomes part of what is generally called "common sense" so that the philosophy, culture and morality of the ruling elite comes to appear as the natural order of things (Boggs 1976: 39).

The neo-liberal conviction that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade, is deceptive, however. The freedoms attached to profitable capital accumulation – the fundamental goal of neo-liberal regimes – reflect the interests of private property owners, businesses, multinational corporations, and financial capital (Harvey 2005: 7) instead of what Plato calls "the interests of the community".

▪ Dark Times

Our present is therefore not that different from what Hannah Arendt (1970) described as "dark times" – borrowing the term from Brecht's famous poem, "Zur Nachwelt" ("To Posterity") defining it as a time of despair "when there was only injustice and no resistance" [10]. Arendt explains that although it took place in public with nothing secret or mysterious about it, it was by no means visible to all –

> covered up not by realities but by the highly efficient talk and double-talk of nearly all official representatives who, without interruption and in many ingenious variations, explained away unpleasant facts and justified concerns... If it is the function of the public realm to throw light on the affairs of men by providing a space of appearances in which they can show in deed and word, for better and worse, who they are and what they can do, then darkness has come when this light is extinguished by 'credibility gaps' and 'invisible government', by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality (Arendt 1970: viii).

Das Licht der Öffentlichkeit verdunkelt alles. The light of the public obscures everything, or as Arendt explains, generally accepted commonplaces often mask the truth. This goes to the very heart of the matter, summing up succinctly existing neo-liberal conditions.

4. Resistance How?[11]

▪ Bourdieu: the State

Foucault and Bourdieu nevertheless believe in the possibility of resistance. For Bourdieu, it is anchored in resources such as state institutions and the disposition of agents that are capable of being harnessed to invent and construct a social order that is not governed solely by the pursuit of selfish interest and individual profit. This will clear the way for collectives oriented towards the rational pursuit of collectively defined and approved ends.

Bourdieu believes that among these collectives – associations, unions and parties – a special place should be reserved for the state as potentially the most effective means to control the market (1998: 104-105).
Foucault's genealogy of power, on the other hand, has exposed the state as both an individualising and a totalising form of power, which keeps its subjects locked in a political "double bind" of simultaneous individual empowerment and totalising stultification. The state does not empower the subject without also overpowering it. As long as we stay attached to the type of individualisation linked to the state, which is what Bourdieu is effectively pleading for, the growth in our capabilities will never be disconnected from the intensification of power relations (Foucault 1982c: 213-216; 1983: 48).

▪ Resistance in the Name of ... ?

Notwithstanding Foucault's fundamental disagreement with Bourdieu about the state as the preferred means of resistance, he would certainly agree with the ends: resistance involves challenging neo-liberal governmentality with an alternative vision of the good, one that rejects *homo economicus* as the norm of the human and this norm's correlative formations of economy, society, state and (non)morality. Minimally this would entail an approach in which justice is not geared towards maximising individual wealth, privilege or right but towards developing and enhancing the capacity of citizens to share power and govern themselves collaboratively (Brown 2003: 25). The development and dissemination of a counter-rationality would entail a radically different conceptualisation of what constitutes the properly human, citizenship, economic life and the political. Resistance would mean the rejection of the blatant valorisation of economic over moral (and every other kind of) value. What is useful about Foucault's notion of governmentality is precisely that it uncovers the insidious governing power of rationality, which dominates without recourse to overt rule. Instead, rationality governs through norms and values. As we shall see, Foucault's emphasis is not on an alternative *substantive* vision of the good, but rather on the uniquely human capacity to resist emanating from an intractable surplus of freedom, which always slips through the cracks in the power/knowledge network.

▪ Foucault: the Individual

While Foucault's analyses of neo-liberal governmentality uncovers the "self-care" and "self-responsibilisation" of the individual as the very means through which neo-liberal power reproduces and sustains itself, it is nevertheless in the individual rather than in the state apparatus that Foucault localises concrete possibilities for resistance. Foucault's conceptualisation of the individual forms the cornerstone of his concept of the intellectual as the means to resistance.

In his later work on power, knowledge and the subject, Foucault reconceives the individual as a node in a network of power/knowledge. Being constituted in and through power, this "individual" is something other or something more than a distinct singularity. Not that Foucault opts for the personification of power and the depersonification or dehumanisation of persons by making them into effects of power. The individual is still vulnerable to subordinating forces but no longer the sum total of these forces (Hofmeyr 2006). S/he always retains at least a minimum of freedom not only to react to these subjugating forces but also to engage with them creatively through his/her privileged access to the "politics of truth", through the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth. It is not, as Foucault explains, "a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time" (Foucault 1977: 133). "Individual" action, understood as an acting or reacting relation of force that reconstitutes the prevailing politics of truth, therefore cannot simply remain localised (or be conceived as individualistic) for it has the potential of causing a chain reaction or ripple effect through the social fabric.

▪ Politicised Intellectuals

It is based on this conceptualisation of the individual that Foucault conceives of the intellectual as the one...

> to reinterrogate the obvious and the assumed, to unsettle habits, ways of thinking and doing, to dissipate accepted familiarities, to re-evaluate rules and institutions and, on the basis of this re-problematization (in which he exercises his function as an intellectual), to participate in the formation of a political will (in which he has his role to play as a citizen).[12]

Foucault's position is closely aligned to Bourdieu's vision of the intellectual as nodal point of resistance. In *Acts of Resistance* the latter defines the intellectual in terms of "freedom with respect to those in power, the critique of received ideas, the demolition of simplistic either-ors, respect for the complexity of problems". However, the efforts of these intellectuals are subject to the onslaught of persistent and unanimous public complacency and inertia. According to Bourdieu, the intellectual is most likely to succeed when acting collectively, i.e. whenever s/he can make common cause with others on some particular point. This ideal is nevertheless not always easy to put into effect. His own efforts at resistance, whether individual of collective, were aimed – if not at triggering a mobilisation – at least at "breaking the unanimity which is the greater part of the symbolic force of the dominant discourse" (Bourdieu 1998: vii-viii).

So for both Bourdieu and Foucault it is intellectuals – *politicised* intellectuals – who constitute those nodal points of resistance, subversion and empowerment in our present-day dystopia of neo-liberal entrapment. The politicised intellectual is not the one enjoying the privileged seclusion of the ivory tower of academia, but rather "the person who utilizes his knowledge, his competence and his relation to truth in the field of political struggles" (Foucault 1977b: 128). These individuals are operative where they are situated within specific sectors and mainly concerned with the task of *problematisation* – rather than problem solving. They question what is accepted as unavoidable and place social obstacles on the political agenda. For Foucault, critique is always a strategic exercise within the network of power/knowledge. It is a call to constant vigilance but also and ultimately to action!

The task of the intellectual, therefore, is to pose resistance by breaking the unanimity which is the greater part of the symbolic force of the dominant discourse. This unanimity derives from the conviction that neo-liberalism is the only means to secure the alleviation of poverty and global economic empowerment. It is further buttressed by the new generation of leftist intellectuals like Joseph Stiglitz who, although severely critical of global capitalist institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), advocate not a radical break with but the "better management" of capitalism – capitalism with a conscience, in other words. "I believe", writes Stiglitz, "that globalization – the removal of barriers to free trade and the closer integration of national economies – can be a force for good and that it has the *potential* to enrich everyone in the world, particularly the poor. ...if this is to be the case, the way globalization has been managed... need to be radically rethought" (2002: ix-x). This kind of "enlightened" reasoning is symptomatic of the prevailing complacency, inaction and even complicity that reign supreme also and especially amongst those supposedly charged with the task of resistance.

After the events of '68, the intellectual might no longer be the representative spokesperson of humanity, the guardian of truth and justice for all, or the conscience and consciousness of society. Instead s/he is that savant or expert with access to a direct and localised relation to knowledge brandished as an instrument of power. This privileged access uncovers the fact that the present state of the world, global late-capitalism, is not our inevitable fate but the result of a normative political programme implemented to actively recreate the world in the image of its own predictions. As it was made, therefore, it *can* be unmade. The task of the intellectual, then, is local and regional, not totalising. It is not to awaken consciousness; it is an activity alongside those who struggle for power, rather than theory practiced from a safe distance. It operates at a local level, in immediate and concrete situations, and in particular institutions. Above

all, the task of the intellectual is to struggle against the forms of power that transform him/her into its object and instrument in the sphere of knowledge, of what counts as truth (cf. Foucault 1972 & 1977b). "What's effectively needed", according to Foucault (1975: 62),

> is a ramified, penetrative perception of the present, one that makes it possible to locate lines of weakness, strong points, positions where the instances of power have secured and implanted themselves... In other words, a topological and geological survey of the battlefield – that is the intellectual's role. But for saying, 'Here is what you must do!', certainly not.

5. What is the Public Role of the Intellectual then?

What exactly is the *public* role of the intellectual then? I find myself approaching this question only after a rather laborious detour, and even now the question itself remains more pressing than the hope of ever finding an answer. For, as I hoped to have shown in the course of my paper, neo-liberalism has left an indelible mark on our bodies, our characters and our place in the world. Subjected to the forces of individualisation and self-responsibilisation, we are witnessing an increasing turn towards the self and away from the public realm. I wholly agree with Sennett's assessment in *The Fall of Public Life* (1974) that participation in the public realm has become a matter of formal obligation (Sennett 1976: 3). In this context, Sennett defines participation in the public realm in the broadest possible sense insisting that the "public enervation is in its scope much broader than political affairs. Manners and ritual interchanges with strangers are looked on as at best formal and dry, at worst as phony. The stranger himself is a threatening figure, and few people can take great pleasure in that world of strangers, the cosmopolitan city". According to Sennett, "[a] *res publica* stands in general for those bonds of association and mutual commitment which exist between people who are not joined together by ties of family or intimate association; it is the bond... of a 'people', of a polity, rather than the bonds of family or friends... participation in the *res publica* today is most often a matter of going along, and the forums for the public life... are in a state of decay" (ibid., pp. 3-4). Global late-capitalism has turned us into *homo economicus*, which in turn has turned each person's self into his/her principle burden. To take responsibility for oneself and one's performance has become an end, instead of a means through which one knows and engages with the world. This obsession with ourselves at the expense of more impersonal social relations acts as a filter which discolours our rational understanding of society. It leads us to an attenuated conception of community – as "an act of mutual self-disclosure" – and undervalues the community relations with strangers. In our current condition of being "together-apart", we have become exclusively concerned with our own

individual life-histories and curriculum vitae – a shared concern that simultaneously radically isolates us from one another. I agree with Sennett that "Western societies are moving from something like an outer-directed condition to an inner-directed condition" (ibid., p. 5). However, I want to recast the terms of Sennett's assertion in terms of our entanglement in what Foucault calls the reigning neo-liberal governmentality, which have diverted our attention from the public – and by extension, the political – to the private, which itself has been redefined in terms of the neo-liberal agenda, increasingly alienating us from ourselves. And, as we know, self-actualisation can only be achieved through the radical discovery of what is other than ourselves.

Re-entry into the common life of the political – what Arendt called the *vita activa* – presupposes a more fundamental re-inscription in the more broadly defined *res publica*. According to Arendt, the private concerns of the *oikos* (of the household) have infiltrated the public sphere (what Arendt calls "the rise of the social" in *The Human Condition*), thereby compromising the properly political (the *polis* or public realm of the political community) by subordinating the public realm of human freedom to the concerns of mere animal necessity. The prioritisation of the economic which has attended the rise of capitalism has for Arendt all but eclipsed the possibilities of meaningful political agency and the pursuit of higher ends which should be the proper concern of public life (cf. Arendt 1958).

Hence I am calling for a two-pronged mobilisation on the part of intellectuals: first, to resist by seizing and wielding our symbolic power (along the lines carved our by Bourdieu) within the sphere of what has come to be defined as *our* responsibility (our own institutional backyard thoroughly delimited from the public and/or political). And second, a re-assertion of our rightful place in the public arena ("the political" broadly construed rather than "politics" in the narrow sense) through a re-insertion in the *res publica*, where the intellectual has the power to influence – perhaps even to rewrite – the politics of truth animating the public imagination.

Any possibility of effective resistance is rooted in loosening the grip of this regime on the imaginings and sentiments of those who willingly subject themselves to its sway. The greater part of the symbolic force of the dominant discourse derives from the unanimity with which neo-liberalism is embraced as the Truth. If change occurs, according to Sennett (1998: 148), it happens on the ground, between people speaking out of inner need. It is hard to know which political programmes follow from those inner needs, but one thing is sure, a regime which provides human beings no deep reasons to care about one another cannot long preserve its legitimacy. The "specific" intellectual, according to Foucault, does not tell others what to do, but operates on the ground, embedded in local struggles. Local struggles do not take place in the

global market place but in the corridors and lecture theatres of the university, where the individual – in his/her role as intellectual – still wields the power to conjure new discourses, to inject the system with critique from the bottom-up, to risk real dissensus, i.e. to break the unanimity which is the greater part of the symbolic force of the dominant discourse.

6. Conclusion: from the Tactical to the Critico-ontological

"Even in the darkest of times", according to Arendt (1970: ix), "we have the right to expect some illumination". Such illumination, she continues, "may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances". These ideas are not necessarily "intended to communicate conclusions, but to stimulate others to independent thought, and this for no other purpose than to bring about a discourse between thinkers" (ibid., p. 10), that will challenge and hopefully disrupt the prevailing complacent unanimity. This is the driving force animating the politico-economic and sociological arguments of thinkers such as Harvey, Bourdieu and Sennett. However, it is also of *philosophical* significance and necessity to pose resistance. The practico-instrumental or tactical question regarding the *how* of resistance is thus rooted in the more fundamental *critical* question regarding the *why*. According to Émile Zola, "we can and must intervene in the world of politics, but with our own means and ends. Paradoxically, it is in the name of everything that assures the autonomy of their universe that artists, writers, or scholars can intervene in today's struggles. And we are all the more enjoined to intervene in the world of men of power, business, and money, the more they intervene... in our world, notably by injecting their cheap 'philosophy' into the public debate" (Bourdieu & Haake 1995: 29).

The thought of Levinas goes to the very heart of the critico-philosophical question of *why*. It is closely aligned with Horace's insistence that character is determined by one's connection to the world, as being necessary for others, but Levinas focuses specifically on the relationship between the Self and the Other.[13] As we have seen, the individualisation and self-responsibilisation characteristic of neo-liberalism lead to an increasing turn towards the self and away from the public sphere. This form of "privatisation" is encouraged in the name of political ideals such as human dignity and individual freedom. In this way, our own common sense – and thus our goodwill and inclination – becomes the very source of our enslavement. Neo-liberal governmentality is enslavement, a form of enslavement in which we actively and willingly participate in the name of freedom, but it is this very hankering after personal freedom – that Foucault

fought so hard to safeguard – that is betrayed by the new political economy. What is at stake, therefore, is the self itself.

According to Levinas, however, fidelity to the self is not secured through the excessive pursuit of individual freedom, although our freedom is undeniably at stake in the present neo-liberal global order. Fidelity to the self has a social dimension and it is precisely this social dimension that is radically attenuated by the "privatisation" and thus corrosive effect of neo-liberalism on personal character and consequently on the public sphere. Levinas defines the social dimension in terms of being responsible for other people. This, as we know, is at once a very simple and a very complicated notion. Simple because it asserts that my sense of self-worth depends on whether others can rely upon me. Complicated because I need to act responsibly, even if I do not know myself, and no matter how confused or indeed split my own sense of identity (cf. Levinas 1991: 180ff; Sennett 1998: 146). Levinas conceives of the subject in terms of a radically inscrutable and inaccessible foreign kernel nestled within the self. In his early works, the pre-ethical existent is "occupied with itself" [*s'occuper de soi*]. Identity is not "an inoffensive relationship with itself, but an enchainment to itself", that constantly drives the self beyond itself in an attempt to escape the unbearably heaviness of Being – the uneasiness that is its being (TA, 146-147/55). The self does not coincide with itself, but is constantly driven beyond itself by the weight of the inescapable responsibility for self amidst the insecurity of the future. This insecurity therefore creates a new dimension of openness or receptivity within the interiority of the existent through which the self-enclosed self is able to await and welcome the other (TI, 124/150). In his later works, the encounter with the other person takes on a definitive significance for Levinas. Through the encounter with the other person, the self is out of phase with itself, an identity in "diastasis"[14] or a subject that is internally divided (AE, 114-115/145-147). That means that I have to act responsibly no matter how split my own subject identity is. But it also means that I *can* act responsibly – I am capable of opening up to and meeting the other – precisely because my own identity is not a matter of seamless self-coincidence, but an uncanniness or homelessness. The inaccessible other "with-in" opens me up, thereby making the other "with-out" accessible. Fidelity to the self is therefore ontologically founded upon a social dimension. The social dimension is not based on some sort of communitarian ideal or a substantive conceptualisation of what the perfect community would entail. We can meet the other only through the inscrutable uncanniness within the self, which leads us via the social to the public and ultimately to the political. It is this ontological foundation that is betrayed by neo-liberalism.

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1. Belacqua's column "And So it Goes" titled "The Private Parts of Higher Education in *Mail and Guardian* (15-21August 2008)'s "Spotlight on Higher Education", 24 (25): 4.

2. Brand, G. (2007). "Globale denke in eie taal", in *Die Burger,* 24 Januarie 2007, p. 17.

3. More, M. P. (1996). "Complexity, Neutrality or Advocacy? Philosophy in South Africa", in *Theoria* 87: 124-135 [127], quoted in Ward, J. (2006). "Philosophers, Their Context, and Their Responsibilities", in *Meta* 37(5): 1-23 [2].

4. The thematics addressed in this subsection is discussed at greater length in Hofmeyr, A. B. (2008). "The Wal-mart Phenomenon: Power/Knowledge/Resistance", in Hofmeyr (Ed.) 2008: 65-105 (see especially pp. 69-72).

5. See, for example, Neilson & Rossiter (2005) as well as http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Precarity

6. Cf. Smith [1754] 2000. After Smith's theory of moral sentiments, philosophical thinking on character struggled to find principles of inner regulation that would save the concept of the self from the sensory flux that Smith, but also David Hume in his A Treatise of Human Nature, insisted upon.

7. Cf. Mill [1900] 2004.

8. Foucault's concept of "governmentality" is discussed at greater length in my "The Wal-Mart Phenomenon: Power/Knowledge/Resistance", in Hofmeyr (Ed.) 2008: 65-105.

9. Cf. Hofmeyr, A. B. (2008) "Introduction. Save Money. Live Better?", in Hofmeyr (Ed.) 2008: 11-29 [see especially pp. 21-24].

10. The original German reads: "al ser nur Unrecht und keinen Widerstand gab".

11. Cf. Hofmeyr (Ed.) 2008: 97-104.

12. Cf. "Interview: The Regard for Truth", in Foss, P., Taylor, P. (Eds.) Art and Text, Burnout, 16 (1984/5), p. 30. (in Barker 1998: 32).

13. Levinas takes his concepts of Self (tauton) and Other (to heteron) from Plato's Sophist [254b-256b] in which they are regarded as the most fundamental categories of Being.

14. The Greek word means separation, from *diistanai*, to separate : *dia-*, apart; *dia-* + *histanai*, to cause to stand.