(Re)acting Together: Grexit as Revival of Intellectuals

Abstract The paper explores the messages of engaged global intellectuals in the case of Grexit, the case of Greek attempt to break up with neoliberal practices and produce a left turn in politics and society, which was followed worldwide. How their words contribute to the general understanding (if there is one) and change (if there should be change)? What kind of action we can expect from intellectuals, as it is intrinsic to the concept? The issues examined in this paper deal with the intellectuals as bearers of articulating social critique, focusing on the specific Greek case in the time of temptations.

Keywords: global intellectuals, Grexit, action, critique

Introduction

The question of action and human agency often points towards intellectuals. Readiness to act can be understood as one of four main components of the concept of intellectual, together with knowledge, authority and the public. The concept of intellectual used to be and still is the place of polemical discussion and interpretations. In addition, the concept is often strongly based in normative or moralistic justification, where theorists “criticize what intellectuals do and make a case for what they ought to do” (Brym, 2015: 277).

Separating the content of the two intertwined concepts – the intellectual and intelligentsia - proves difficult, but necessary. I will, therefore, focus here on the idea of an intellectual as a social actor who has developed intellectual authority on the basis of achievements and/or appointments in the field of cultural (knowledge) production, and who uses that authority when acting in the public on the various topics, regardless of whether they are expert or not for those topics. This definition, borrowed from Collini (2002: 2006), and slightly adjusted, encompasses all four elements mentioned at the beginning. According to this view, intellectuals are atomized actors originating in intelligentsia whose achievements and appointments demonstrate their established authority in the public, but whose collective or group consciousness and collective action need not to be inherent to the concept of intellectual as such. It is important to say that this definition does not presuppose any value based judgement on the intellectual action, as intellectuals can act on different sides of ideological spectre.
The issues examined in this paper deal with the intellectuals as bearers of articulating social critique, critique directed towards most important social questions, which are global in scope. Strong interconnectedness of social processes on the global level even provoked discussions on the issue whether society, as it is traditionally understood, still exists as solid and unique concept (i.e. Latour, 2005). These claims leave little space for nation/state considerations. Action becomes global nowadays and intellectuals become global actors, if it is at all possible to say that their action was national in the first place.

In this paper I will seek to explore what is the actual potential of engaged intellectuals. How their words contribute to the general understanding (if there is one) and change (if there should be change)? What kind of action we can expect from intellectuals, as it is intrinsic to the concept? I will try to offer answers to these questions, observing global intellectual actions in the case of Grexit, the case of Greek attempt to break up with neoliberal practices and produce a left turn in politics and society, which was followed worldwide.

**Why intellectuals count?**

The intellectuals are frequently seen as supposedly independent, neutral or socially rootless actors\(^1\). This notion is at least partially coming from intellectuals themselves, who continue to directly or indirectly spread elements of such paradigm in order to legitimize their own authority in the eyes of the public. The understanding that intellectuals earnestly engage with mundane daily issues and have oppositional attitudes to the existing order and systems of power relations has dominated the sociology of intellectuals. The epithets of independence and rootlessness are often, and mostly unjustifiably, attributed to intellectuals. As Collini rightfully says, the independence of intellectuals was always a desired state-of-art that is projected on the “some others somewhere else”, because we ourselves are interrelated and interdependent in multiple ways: “somehow survives the fantasy that someone else, somewhere else, can escape from worldly circumstances and ascend to the heights of being real intellectual” (Collini, 2002: 214).

But, how do intellectuals engage? Do they engage in such a way that they interfere in the state affairs and politics, either supporting or resisting

\(^1\) For clarity sake, intellectuals/intelligentsia as a group were seen as or free-floating, socially rootless (Mannheim, Said), or embedded into class structure (Gramsci, Bourdieu), or as a part of the specific class (middle or upper), although there were theories on the intellectuals as a unique class (Djilas, Szelenyi, Gouldner).
them, or do they engage indirectly through broadly defined socio-cultural processes and spheres (such as education, art, science) and maintain the existing political discourse or do they introduce elements of discourse which would have the power to become a political discourse one day – I claim that this is the key issue of intellectual engagement in general.

The question of engagement and independence of intellectuals was substantially elaborated in the work of Edward Said, particularly in his *Reith lectures* (1993) on representation of the intellectual. Said believed that the key role of intellectuals was to challenge and defeat invisible tentacles of power and to question entrenched norms arising from such power (Said, 1996; Said, 2002). He himself could be described as the globally engaged intellectual who embodied those ideals he had set, but he could also be used as an example of intellectual naïveté, where the freedom of intellectuals is overestimated. An intellectual should amount to alternative narratives and different historical perspective in relation to those offered by defenders of the official memory, those who manipulate demonized or distorted presentation of adverse and/or excluded populations. Said’s view here points out to the kind of action which resembles a Benda’s sort of “treason” (Benda, 1996). Said particularly emphasizes the importance of the role of intellectuals in the struggle for peace, social justice and redistribution of resources. Intellectuals must be able to handle words in such a way that they reach out to the public and cause controversy and discussions. Intellectual consciousness is sceptical, engaged, tirelessly devoted to rational investigation and moral judgment. For Said, engagement and action is always action from aside, of someone who is capable to see things from above and more than others. Doubtless, his own experience of an intellectual without roots and who was stranger everywhere left a strong mark on his belief in intellectuals’ role. This was vision of intellectual as it ought to be and ought to act, vision offering positive impact on society, which I find idealistic.

However, the idea of intellectuals as actors having irreplaceable role of critical voice in contemporary society is not universally shared. Many theorists (notably Bauman, Jacoby, Posner) claimed that intellectuals (almost) disappeared, grounding their views primarily in two lines of arguments. First line of argumentation relies on idea that knowledge specialization atomizes the intellectual space, which makes it difficult to build intellectual authority as a prerequisite for intellectual action. Second line of argumentation considers intellectual action to become less and less important in mediatized societies which cultivates the production
of celebrities, and where, by inference, all have a say and no one truly has it (Collini, 2006: 451).

Russell Jacoby points to the inability of intellectuals as freelance thinkers to act in contemporary societies. He argues that intellectuals are being contained almost exclusively in the sphere of academy, where the processes of institutionalization of science, theory and research significantly enabled and increased their integration in the social power structures and thus dulled their critical edge. Even the “new left intellectuals” seek tenure and limit their scope of intellectual action to professional audience (Jacoby, 1987). Posner goes even further, by saying:

“The growth in specialization of knowledge has made it extremely difficult for even highly educated people to evaluate the claims made by public intellectuals. (...) The public protects itself against the high variance and low average quality of public-intellectual work mostly by not taking it very seriously” (Posner, 2001: 388).

Both views precede the advent of crisis in 2008. Indeed, global developments prior to it, lead to a conclusion that intellectual was no longer needed, as it seemed that Francis Fukuyama’s paradigm of the “end of history” had triumphed, which left little room for any alternative vision of societal and political order. The triumph of neoliberal concept led to a weakening or even disappearance of alternatives, which favoured the expansion of the paradigm of the intellectual decline and the shrinking of the importance of intellectual action in general.

It is, however, possible to reconcile these two approaches, at least partially. Ralph Dahrendorf, whose understanding of the intellectual role is in a certain sense applicable to the position elaborated in this paper, explained in his lecture and later paper on the intellectuals in the age of totalitarianism (Dahrendorf, 2008), that intellectual shines in the times of temptation. Crisis and temptations put intellectuals in focus, as they are expected to take intellectual and even political leadership, or at least point out the directions of desirable changes. Dahrendorf further explains that the virtues of the intellectual are: 1) the courage to champion the cause of freedom, 2) to cultivate the passion of reason, 3) his or her ability to live with contradictions and 4) position of the engaged observer in society. All these virtues are subject to discussion, as they apparently recall Edward Said’s expectations from the intellectual.

I argue that this thesis about intellectuals as important actors in times of temptations is fairly compatible with the recent theories that proclaim
the fall or even death of the intellectual. Quiet everyday life of society, not characterized with commotion and turmoil, leaves no space for significant intellectual action, according to Dahrendorf. In his view, great societal challenges put intellectuals in a specific position, giving them the influential role of the torchbearer. The twentieth century was an era of great “temptations”, and thus an era of intellectuals. Taking October Revolution as its departure point, the involvement in large and tragic events of the First and Second World Wars, the action of dissidents in real-socialist Eastern European societies behind the iron curtain, the intellectuals were a voice that was vocal, although it is questionable whether it was really ever listened to\(^2\). After the fall of Berlin wall, the role of intellectuals has been minimized, and this is the period when the theories of the “fall” of intellectuals were becoming dominant, and in the line with the “end of history” paradigm.

The outburst of the economic and societal crisis in 2008, created structural preconditions for the “return of intellectual”, with the return, to rephrase Dahrendorf, of the time of temptations. The quest for the new paradigm has begun, and the first protagonists of the new intellectual action were to be found among economists. For example, in his global bestseller *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Thomas Piketty (Piketty, 2014) promoted the intellectual as an actor who can enlighten in the times of turmoil of global society and offer alternative\(^3\).

The quest for new paradigm, different from neoliberal ideology, soon found the new protagonists in Greece. Massive attention of global audience was directed to the Greek economic and political crisis during 2015. Despite the fact that Greece has been facing substantial debt crisis followed by economic recession for almost 6 years, events in 2015, before the referendum on austerity measures imposed by Greek’s creditors in 2010, appeared to be ground-breaking. The referendum was seen as the first step towards Greek exit from Eurozone and even European Union, which was popularized by the name of “Grexit”. The Grexit story began with the rise of the left anti-austerity oriented block of parties (*Syriza*), which managed to win parliamentary elections in January 2015. Since

\(^2\) The scope of the influence of the intellectuals, even the most prominent among them, is a subject to potential future research. As intellectuals do not act from the positions of the embodied political power, nor they act as representatives of capitalist oligarchy, it is not easy to operationalize their influence and authority. Therefore, their influence is usually considered, but often not evidence based.

\(^3\) It is also questionable whether Piketty’s book offered new alternative, or it is still employs the concepts of the existing paradigm of welfare state.
then and after establishing the openly leftist government, Syriza was trying to refuse imposed austerity measures and to get more favourable debt repayment agreement with financial institutions. During the pre-referendum period, Greek government was using different strategies and instruments, some of which were widely disputed as populist and unrealistic. 

Crucially for the paper, Greek resistance against the global system, characterized as unjust and favouring strong and rich nations/states, provoked substantial left-oriented endeavours to foreground the final stages of neoliberal paradigm and the ultimate need for radical changes. We were witnesses of the extensive intellectual action, where intellectuals played the role of actors offering the detailed analysis and even possible pathways for the solution of the Greek crisis. This action proves Dahrendorf’s thesis that intellectuals are important actors in times of temptations. Apart from that, Grexit was also an attempt of the Left to offer alternative, to re-emerge from marginality by creating actions in places where it managed to seize power. In spite of disappointment and apparent failure of the Greek Left to provide a real, tenable alternative, a different viable paradigm, by remaining trapped within the global developments in which capitalism still dominates in its neoliberal guise, the Grexit proved to be a moment when the intellectuals shone. I will now try to elaborate the scope and the content of this intellectual action, pointing out the key messages, based on the online media representation during the three months of 2015.

**What was the focus?**

As intellectual action in public can take various forms, researching those actions can be a durable process which presents many challenges, connected to definition who is intellectual, how to grasp their action etc. In this paper the focus was on the selected international newspaper articles, opinions and other forms of action publicized during the considered period, embodying the intellectual reaction to Greek crisis in the international online newspapers and portals. Therefore, convenient sampling was used to select the available materials and offer initial hypotheses for further investigation. Analysis is based on 28 articles of global intellectuals published in English language on portals of *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Politico*, *The Nation*, but also *Analyze Greece*, *Open Democracy* and several other channels⁴.

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⁴ See appendix.
The research itself was stimulated by several reactions of prominent intellectuals, hereby called global intellectuals due to their attempted global action and their global public (more in Nagy-Zekmi, Hollis, 2012). Probably, the most important among them was the petition published under the title “Greeks, don’t give in to the EU’s austerity ultimatum”, signed by more than 70 intellectuals, including Etienne Balibar, Immanuel Wallerstein, Judith Butler, Alain Badiou, Chantal Mouffe, and many others. Having so many prominent intellectuals raising their voice in Greek case led to assumption that is motif of this paper – intellectuals stepped again vigorously into public and called for attention from the decision makers. In the following paragraphs I will show what they called attention for.

**What are intellectuals standing for?**

Generally, the public stance of the intellectuals in the case of Grexit is already a bold statement. I therefore wanted to explore what is their engagement in this matter, or more precisely what are the messages they wanted to send. I will try to emphasize those elements of intellectual discourse which can give overview of the key messages, and to identify whether they see themselves as social actors which could play a role in activities they propose.

The first glance at the corpus already made it clear that critical voice dominates strongly over the attempt of the so called “Troika” to impose further austerity measures on Greece. Second, when reading the articles in this sample, the reader can easily sympathize with the Greek people and take the Greek stand. Third, the atmosphere described in these articles calls for immediate action, which would relieve “unconscionable torture of the present” where we hear “the rising crescendo of bickering and acrimony within Europe” (Stiglitz, 2015a). This is backed by a sense that “social democracy is a political corpse in Europe today, it no longer exists” (Balibar in Mavroeidis, Varoucha, 2015) and “there’s a definite 1914 feeling to what’s happening, a sense that pride, annoyance, and sheer miscalculation are leading Europe off a cliff it could and should have avoided” (Krugman, 2015e).

The most frequent message transmitted was about “failure”. This word acted prominently in 14 out of 28 articles, although almost all articles could be examined as an analysis of the European failure. Habermas judges that “the current crisis can be explained both through economic causes and political failure” (Oltermann, 2015). Krugman recognizes that
“the troika’s program for Greece represents one of history’s epic policy failures. Even if you ignore the economic and human toll, it was an utter failure in terms of restoring solvency” (Krugman, 2015b). Therefore, it came without surprise that “the population rejects the continuation of a policy whose drastic failure is something they have experienced at first hand” (Habermas, 2015; italics mine).

The failure is attributed to Europe, which usually works as a euphemism for European Union. Europe failed to recognize and apply its core values, as “the de facto relegation of a member state to the status of a protectorate openly contradicts the democratic principles of the European Union” (Habermas in Oltermann, 2015). In the petition that gathered so many influential intellectuals, they claim that “the lenders, however, insisted on the continuation of their failed recipe, refused to discuss a writedown of the debt – which the IMF is on record as considering unviable – and finally, on 26 June, issued an ultimatum to Greece by means of a non-negotiable package that would entrench austerity” (Anonym, 2015b).

In this game of thrones, the most significant Other is not the European Union, although it is most frequently mentioned, just as it is the so-called Troika. Even when these international institutions are mentioned, the reader has impression that they are ruled by the dominant political and economic force in Europe. It is Germany which is recognized as inexplicably stubborn, with obvious lack of solidarity and political sensitivity. Habermas states that “yet the German government did just this [creating more damage] when finance minister Schaeuble threatened Greek exit from the euro, thus unashamedly revealing itself as Europe’s chief disciplinarian. The German government thereby made for the first time a manifest claim for German hegemony in Europe – this, at any rate, is how things are perceived in the rest of Europe, and this perception defines the reality that counts” (Oltermann, 2015; italics mine). Such behaviour cannot pass without consequences, as he fears that “the German government, including its social democratic faction, has gambled away in one night all the political capital that a better Germany had accumulated in half a century – and by ‘better’ I mean a Germany characterised by greater political sensitivity and a post-national mentality” (ibid). Amartya Sen is cited when comparing “the austerity policy pushed through by the federal German government with a medicine that contains a toxic mixture of antibiotics and rat poison” (Habermas, 2015).

Also, moderately often, they name European technocrats as the actor to be blamed for imposing the measures, since they do not possess sufficient
political vision or courage to face the problem in its profundity. European technocrats’ insisting on the austerity measures and their behaviour in general is described as scandalous, especially since they avoid to even consider normative aspect of the Greek crisis and possible reform of the system inside the European Union. Slavoj Žižek therefore claims that, as the Greek officials “talk as if they are part of an open political process where decisions are ultimately ‘ideological’ (based on normative preferences), the EU technocrats talk as if it is all a matter of detailed regulatory measures”, masking that these “purely expert regulatory measures are effectively grounded in politico-ideological decisions” (Žižek, 2015a). This camouflaging hides the situation which is the source of fear for several intellectuals: behind the administrative doors, a muffled cancellation of democracy takes place, transferring the power from democratic institutions to circles which are out of control of European citizens. As Žižek points out, “this passage from politics proper to neutral expert administration characterises our entire political process: strategic decisions based on power are more and more masked as administrative regulations based on neutral expert knowledge, and they are more and more negotiated in secrecy and enforced without democratic consultation” (ibid). It is this “late capitalism” which “depends on the neutralisation of democracy” (Douzinas, 2015), which contradicts the principle of social justice praised as the core European value, together with democracy and solidarity.

The urge to refuse the “toxic” measures is another key message. It is the “diktat from Europe’s reactionary governments”, led by “the irresponsible suggestions of extremist ideologues”, which shows “extremely savage reaction to Syriza”, where “an act of monstrous folly on the part of the creditor governments and institutions to push it to this point” leads into “a cycle of ever-worse pain without hope”. Krugman insists that these measures serve as “pure vindictiveness, complete destruction of national sovereignty, and no hope of relief... it’s a grotesque betrayal of everything the European project was supposed to stand for” (Krugman, 2015f). Greek people are “exposed to the injuries of poverty, shrinkage of public spaces and services, demoralization, and racism” while creditors “relentlessly came up with new onerous, punitive demands, including demands for additional cuts in the social security and pension system”, seeking to “confirm the ‘there is no alternative’ neoliberal doctrine” (Athanasiou, 2015).

The action of the creditors is seen as the worldwide lecture in power and (non)democracy, more than in economy. The crisis revealed the perception of Eurozone as incompatible with popular sovereignty, since it is
observed as “the economic model (...) predicated on power relationships that disadvantaged workers” (Stiglitz, 2015a). It is exactly the fear of the left movement and social democratic policies which caused such brutal reaction. “The fear of political contagion is the only credible interpretation of the actions of Europeans and the IMF”, claims Costas Douzinas (2015), while Noam Chomsky speaks openly of the class war and of the eroding the welfare state (Chomsky, 2015). “The campaign of bullying – the attempt to terrify Greeks by cutting of bank financing and threatening general chaos, all with the almost open goal of pushing the current leftist government out of office – was a shameful moment in a Europe that claims to believe in democratic principles”, says Krugman (2015a; italics mine).

This political turn, this overt abandoning of the social policies of the welfare state, has been seen as the ultimate defeat of the leftists. Not that left idea failed, but those supposed-to-be left parties failed to stand against harsh austerity, causing much more damage to the overall leftist movement. As Badiou points out: the European Left does no longer exist. “European ‘Left’ has sunk into an irreversible coma. François Hollande? German Social Democracy? Spain’s PSOE? PASOK in Greece? The Labour Party? All these parties are now overtly the managers of globalised capitalism” (Badiou, 2015). Left seems to be disorganized, lacking political unity and closed off within national borders, impotent, without real international initiative which can bring pressure to the globalized capitalist oligarchy which is well organized and have concentrated power in its hands.

The mourning of the Left, international but also national, reveals the values of global intellectuals and their understanding of Europe. Europe should be all about “justice, equality, and solidarity” (Athanasiou, 2015), “based on democracy, social justice and human rights” (Anonym, 2015c), since it should represent heritage of “democracy, trust in people, egalitarian solidarity” (Žižek, 2015a). In the aforementioned petition signed by so many intellectuals, it is specified that the European Union should clearly build on “values of the enlightenment – equality, justice, solidarity – and to the principles of democracy on which its legitimacy rests” (Anonym, 2015b). Greece, as the cradle of Western democracy is symbolically important here, for restoring the faith in Europe and its described values. “So long as you have a brain in your head and care at all about the future of Europe, you will understand why we must save Greece”, exclaims Timothy Garton Ash (2015a).

Ideals shared by the intellectuals reflect to a great extent the values they emphasize. It is by no means democracy which is unquestionable value
for all. True democracy to be achieved capitalism has to be bridled while power needs to be re-distributed in order to bring back voice to the demos. Possible pathways in this process range from moderate political measures to those framed as radical. Stiglitz emphasize inclusive capitalism as “the antithesis of what the troika is creating – the only way to create shared and sustainable prosperity” (Stiglitz, 2015c). Douzinas, on the other hand, sees the way out in radical democracy, pictured in Syntagma Square occupation (2011), which could “place the people at the centre of politics and prefigure an institutional framework in which direct democracy becomes a permanent supplement to its representative part” (Douzinas, 2015). Ultimate value for Douzinas is social justice, which represents a corrective to the market distribution system.

Habermas sees the alternative in strengthening the currency union/Eurozone and European structures, which would be the result of a true “change in political direction, brought about by democratic majorities in a more strongly integrated ‘core Europe’”, which is inevitable process in globalized world (Oltermann, 2015). In another article, he continues that “the citizens, not the banks,... must retain the final say in existential questions for Europe” (Habermas, 2015). Etienne Balibar offers quite a similar route, when he emphasizes that “nations clearly do have to abandon some of their exclusive sovereignty, insofar as today this is only a myth, which has been replaced in practice by a shared sovereignty” (Mavroeidis, Varoucha, 2015). However, in his view nation states figure as the key actors, which “must also gain something from this in exchange, for example in terms of solidarity and equality” (ibid).

Finally, apart from the messages they wanted to convey, what interested me the most was how the intellectuals operationalize their own role and their place in building the European path in the line with their values. In all observed articles, there is only one direct call for intellectual action, which itself lacks elaboration. The researchers of European Union Institute positioned themselves in the open letter as those who need to defend the public interest and the right of people to decide on future of European peoples. “As researchers, committed to knowledge and public interest, we have to take a stand. We can no longer contribute to the reproduction of policies and mentalities of fear. We defend the opportunity given to the Greek people to decide on its own future, and we offer our full solidarity and active cooperation to with them in these difficult moments” (Anonym, 2015c). This petition calls for cooperation and delegitimization of the existing policies among and with intellectuals, but also with other societal actors.
In general, intellectuals’ propensity to act is limited to production of the critical analysis and eventual advising which could direct action of other actors. However, one has to take into consideration that this analysis is based solely on articles/contributions and it doesn’t observe eventual actions of intellectuals not recorded here.

**Conclusion**

“The reality of European democracy remains national (...),” says Timoty Garton Ash “most people in Europe still get the bulk of their news and views from national media – even when there is a shared language” (2015b). It could be argued with almost certain probability that the national overviews of affairs would offer completely different picture of what local intellectual cliques and individuals stand for, with a broad variety of internal clashes from whence other perspectives on Grexit also emerge.

Despite this fact, the analysis of what I here referred to as the “global discourse” emerged during the peak of the Greek crisis, demonstrated that the public reflection in globalized online media offers a global intellectual perspective which is by all means describable as the leftist perspective. Strong sympathies for Greece and support to the Greek governmental policy were unanimous. Let us recall Posner’s question about whether intellectuals influence the public, or the public selects intellectuals on the basis of some of its structurally conditioned preferences (Posner, 2001). This might lead to the claim that global public is more international and left oriented, compared to the national publics. Such conclusion is limited by type of the sample used in the presented research. Nevertheless, the thesis about the strong connection between left orientation and usage of the globalized media would be interesting for further analysis, which would go beyond intellectuals as the target sample.

The temptation era (still unfinished), where Greek referendum acted as its summit, for the time being, did signify the willingness of intellectuals to engage, to react, to offer perspectives. We could conclude that those perspectives revealed no new paradigms, and provided few alternatives to already existing leftist narratives. However, the potential Grexit brought to light has given us at least three massive initiatives of the intellectuals, through petitions and open letters. These initiatives indicated the readiness to act together (Anonym, 2015b; 2015c; 2015d). It is precisely this acting together which could be seen as a necessary step towards putting more pressure on other global actors – capitalist oligarchy whose influence on governments and international institutions is all too powerful.
Intellectual role is to provide potential actors, political or otherwise, with paradigms and ideas which can serve as the basis for a renewed or a new social order.

Deleuze’s paragraph on the purpose of theory seems appropriate for the end of this article: “It must be useful. It must function. And not for itself. If no one uses it, beginning with the theoretician himself (who then ceases to be a theoretician), then theory is worthless or the moment is inappropriate” (Intelectuals and power, 1972).

Bibliography

Sources


