

Academic Life, Public Space and Political Culture in Western Europe and the United States, 1945-90

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An integral part of modern society, academics have been producers of specialized knowledge that is mainly disseminated within the confines of academia and the sphere of the university. At the same time, academics have sought ways, and have been urged, to interact with a wider public as experts or intellectuals, and to act as political advisers. The workshop „Academic Life, Public Space and Political Culture in Western Europe and the United States, 1945-90“, held at the University of Bonn and funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, focused on changes in academic life and their connections to transformations in the structure of the public sphere and in the fabric of political culture. These transformations were approached through an investigation of a number of academics, who tried to exert a wider public influence during the Cold War era.

RICCARDO BAVAJ (St Andrews/Bonn), who organized the workshop together with DOMINIK GEPPERT (Bonn), developed the basic objectives in his introductory remarks, relating the subject to the challenge academia currently faces: the question of „impact“. The „ivory tower“, a metaphor used with positive connotations in the nineteenth century, has come to refer to an academic community as a segregated and specialized sphere, which – deplorably – has lost touch with a wider public. Therefore the demand for higher „impact“ and „knowledge transfer“ has been brought to the forefront of the debate. To come to grips with the different roles of academics, Bavaj suggested ways of defining the terms „intellectual“ and „expert“, mainly drawing on Stefan Collini's conceptual framework.¹

The papers showed different ways of studying the academic as intellectual and expert against the background of divergent structures of the public sphere in which they were

acting and which they tried to shape. In the first section MARCEL VOM LEHN (Jena) and MEREL LEEMAN (Amsterdam) concentrated on the public roles of historians. While vom Lehn chose a comparative approach contrasting the historiographical communities and their connections to politics and the media in Germany and Italy from 1943/45 to 1960, Leeman looked at the influence that two American historians with a background as refugees, George Mosse and Peter Gay, had on the mediation of European history in Cold War America. In an era of endangerment of liberal thought and society they played an important role in increasing the previously scarce knowledge of German history. Leeman argued that „Mosse and Gay's evaluation of the fall of the Weimar Republic served as a guiding narrative during the early Cold War.“ Vom Lehn was able to show the different challenges historians were facing in West Germany and postwar Italy. While in the Federal Republic the field was much more professionalized, with historians primarily acting as experts or „specific intellectuals“ (Foucault), Italian historians engaged in politics or journalism much more easily. However, it was not necessarily of their own choosing that German historians confined themselves to the role of experts or political consultants. It was also the media that limited their access. Furthermore, the stance taken by professors and the media alike was also due to the ideological divides that took very different forms in the Italian and German case. While in Italy a highly partisan press was keen to tap into the academic prestige of liberal and Marxist historians respectively, the West German field was much more unified against the ideological enemy of Communism.

The second section of the workshop focussed on two of West Germany's most influential academics of the postwar era: Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker and Ralf Dahrendorf. ELKE SEEFRIED (Munich) scrutinized Weizsäcker's growing engagement with questions that reached far beyond the scope of his scientific research as a nuclear physicist. Weizsäcker, she argued, made for a paradigmatic case of highlighting some

¹ Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds. Intellectuals in Britain*, Oxford 2006, pp. 15-66.

fundamental issues regarding „the relationship between science, politics and the public sphere“. Influenced by his Protestant background, Weizsäcker held the scientist responsible for the ethical repercussions of his research. Starting out from a growing concern about nuclear weapons, he became involved in peace studies and around 1970 turned to futurology and ecology, ending up as a critic of nuclear energy and the doctrine of endless economic growth. His objective was the creation of a new balance. His initial efforts to influence politicians directly were complemented by using the media to build up pressure and to break the intransigence of the likes of Franz Josef Strauß. Weizsäcker understood the public rather as an instrument than as a force of its own accord, though his commitment turned him rather unintentionally into a figurehead of new social movements and an important part of West Germany's civil society. While his involvement in politics was largely confined to the national arena, his networks of knowledge production transcended national borders. An internationally renowned expert in the area of peace studies, he profited highly, for instance, from the expertise of American think tanks in questions of nuclear energy.

In comparison to Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, the fields that Ralf Dahrendorf covered as an intellectual might seem less wide-ranging, as any engagement with natural sciences was lacking. However, while Weizsäcker tried to assert his influence mostly within the national context of the Federal Republic, Dahrendorf assumed different roles and was at home in two countries at least: first in Germany and later as director of the London School of Economics (LSE) and Dean of St Antony's College (Oxford) in the United Kingdom. In her paper, FRANZISKA REINFELDT (Berlin) took her cue from Dahrendorf's self-perception as a „border crosser“ (*Grenzgänger*), who not only transgressed national borders but also boundaries between different functional spheres. Popularizing his knowledge as a sociologist, he influenced Germany's educational debate of the 1960s. The ensuing work as a political consultant for the government of the German state of Baden-Württemberg led to a short stint in politics.

In 1974, he returned to academia, accepting the position as Director of the LSE. In England, where he was well received, he carried on with his combined, if not altogether successful approach of seeking close ties to politics and taking part in public discourse. What generally seemed, in Reinfeldt's words, like „a smooth alternation between the fields of the university, politics and the public sphere“ was part of a process to adapt to different „rules of the game“ in Germany and the UK.

In the final section, MATTHIAS OPPERMANN (Potsdam) turned the focus on yet another, internationally renowned intellectual: Raymond Aron. Oppermann concentrated on Aron's connections to and his „reception“ in the US. Initially, Aron had been close to the exponents of „vital centre liberalism“, but his allegiances began to change when those early friends in his perception shifted more and more to the left. Holding fast to his anti-totalitarian stance, he sided with the emerging group of „neo-conservatives“, or „liberal-conservatives“, though not necessarily sharing all their beliefs. For many „neo-conservatives“, however, he became an influential source of thought. Yet, on the whole, Oppermann showed that Aron cannot be understood as an integrated part of any current of the American intellectual milieu. He „could be a friend of America and, if necessary, acknowledge the political and military leadership of the US, [...] but he could not be part of an intellectual current in which the American element took priority over the general Western element.“ In spite of all his differences with Charles de Gaulle he always remained a French patriot at heart, hoping for the independence of European nations following the defeat of the Soviet threat.

Judging from the commentaries and the discussions, the questions shifted away from terminological issues. The notion of „the intellectual“, for a long time closely connected to left-wing political positions, was not challenged as a label for any of the academics discussed. If it was less the issue of terminology that sparked controversy, it was all the more the question of impact, of the relationship between academics as intellectuals on the one hand, and politics and the media on the other, that was at the centre of the debate. The

discussion revolved mainly around the question of intellectual success and individual influence. Naturally, the workshop could not provide any definitive answers but some of the questions became clearer. Different parameters for the measurement of intellectual success and impact were offered: Morten Reitmayer (Köln) alluded to network analysis as one possible form, while Dominik Geppert called for a closer look at national traditions and political path-dependencies. Jens Hacke (Hamburg) stressed the need of transcending intellectual self-stylizations, and Siegfried Weichlein (Fribourg) proposed the notion of „crisis“ as an analytical term, around which most intellectual endeavours seem to revolve in one way or another. In any case, deeper insights into the structure of the media and the functioning of the public sphere will be necessary. The transnational and comparative approaches used in some of the papers should prove helpful in this respect. Sometimes, though, it seemed as if the deliberations on success and influence could profit from turning the whole thing around and from taking a closer look at those acting in the political and economic sphere, thereby trying to determine by whom they were influenced intellectually.

Conference Overview:

Riccardo Bavaj (St Andrews/Bonn): Introduction

Section 1

Marcel vom Lehn (Jena): Wissenschaftler oder Intellektuelle? Westdeutsche und italienische Historiker im Umgang mit der Zäsur 1943/45 (1943/45-1960)

Merel Leeman (Amsterdam): The Cold War West: George Mosse and Peter Gay's Views on the Role of European Cultural Traditions in Cold War-America

Siegfried Weichlein (Fribourg): Comments

Section 2

Elke Seefried (München): Weltinnenpolitik und Wachstumskritik: Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, Politik und Öffentlichkeit

Franziska Reinfeldt (Berlin): Der öffentliche Intellektuelle als Grenzgänger: Ralf Dahren-

dorf in der Bundesrepublik und Großbritannien (1964-1984)

Jens Hacke (Hamburg): Comments

Section 3

Matthias Oppermann (Potsdam): Ein transatlantisches „vital center“? Raymond Aron und der amerikanische Liberalismus (1945-1983)

Morten Reitmayer (Cologne): Comments

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