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Note on Society/Réflexion sur la société

Intellectuals in a World Made of Knowledge¹

Tu Weiming

The idea of a “public intellectual” recently has attracted a great deal of attention. The term “intellectual” first appears during nineteenth-century Russia. On the surface, it does not seem to have any antecedent in the Hindu, Buddhist, Judaic, Greek, Christian, or Islamic traditions. The Hindu quest for union of the real self with the cosmic reality, the Buddhist salvation as delivery from worldly attachments, the Jewish covenant with God as the source of all values, the Greek search for truth through the contemplative life of the mind, the Christian faith in the Lord in Heaven, as well as the Muslim devotion to Allah all presuppose the existence of a spiritual sanctuary essentially different from, if not diametrically opposed to, the world here and now. The engagement in and management of worldly affairs is either by choice or by default relegated to the background.

Not surprisingly, the intellectual, as we understand it today, is not the functional equivalent of the guru, monk, rabbi, philosopher, priest, or mullah. The minimum requirement for an intellectual—politically concerned, socially engaged, and culturally sensitive—is fundamentally at odds with a person passionately devoted to the service of a higher reality beyond the mundane concerns of the secular world. Surely, all spiritual traditions are inevitably intertwined with the ordinary lives of their devotees. But in all of the aforementioned religions the rupture of the chain of being by privileging the

1. This paper was presented at the UNESCO 21st Century Dialogues: Building Knowledge Societies, Seoul, Korea, 27-28 July 2004.

“Pure Land” or the “Kingdom of God” outside of the daily routine of human existence is undeniable.

By making the existential decision to be an integral part of the world in order to transform it from within, Confucius opted for a form of life unique among the axial-age civilizations. Confucian followers were primarily action intellectuals, deeply immersed in “managing the world” (*jingshi*) of economics, politics, and society. Their strategy was to transform the world, defined in terms of both wealth and power, through culture, specifically through moral education. Historically, the Confucian project was instrumental in developing a distinctive East Asian personality who did not necessarily accrue a great deal of power and wealth, but was extraordinarily influential in society, politics, and the economy as opinion leader, critic, adviser, bureaucrat, or official. Confucian influence extended beyond governmental affairs. It certainly had major effects on national policies. But it was also manifested in cultural values, social ethics, and artistic expressions. Confucian scholar-officials were perceived of as the conscience of the people, for they served the long-term well-being of the entire country. This is precisely how a modern intellectual is expected to behave.

Normally, we assume that intellectuals are intimately affiliated with institutes of higher learning, particularly those intellectuals in the humanities and social sciences. This is understandable because professors and students dedicated to the study of the world’s cultural heritage, the structure and function of society, the ritual and process of exercising power, or the nature of the economy ought to be particularly sensitive to the state of the world. In reality, the situation is quite different; the overwhelming majority of scholars in the humanities and social sciences are specialists. Dictated by the stringent demands of their professions, they become so much involved in their research that they rarely have time or energy to rise above the confines of their well-defined expertise to do things that do not have a direct bearing on the advancement of their careers. Analytic philosophers and mathematical economists are outstanding examples, but literary scholars, archaeologists, historians, linguists, theoreticians in sociology and political science, and physical anthropologists are no exception. On the other hand, natural scientists and engineers can be intellectuals if they choose to bring their expertise to bear on important social issues, although in general they are preoccupied with their own research. It is worth noting that as preservers and creators of basic knowledge, academicians perform major social and cultural services vitally important for human flourishing. Their contributions to society are evident. Their decision not to play the role of the intellectual, and to criticize those who do, should be respected.

Obviously, the academic community is not the only arena in which intellectuals can fulfill their mission. In a pluralistic civil society, the role and

function of the intellectuals can be played out in virtually all spheres of interest. Indeed, apart from the academic community, mass media, business, religion, the professions, entertainment, voluntary associations, non-governmental organizations, and social movements all provide space for intellectual activities. The governmental bureaucracy is no exception. But a caveat is in order here. Etymologically the English term “intellectual” originated from the idea of the intelligentsia in Tsarist Russia. A salient feature of the Russian intelligentsia was its spirit of protest. As a rule, members of the Russian intelligentsia were critics of officialdom, and they were frequently persecuted as dissidents. Their relationship to the political establishment was always adversarial. This distinctive characteristic of the intellectual remains strong in Russia to this day. One loses one’s reputation and status as an intellectual if one joins the establishment or if one no longer challenges the authority of the government. This political radicalism is not shared by French, German, British, or American intellectuals. In the French case, for example, Jean Paul Sartre’s anti-establishment and Raymond Aron’s intimate relationship with the Gaullist government symbolize two distinct yet equally respectable intellectual styles. Intellectuals in the modern West are often part of the establishment and they habitually identify themselves as associates or colleagues of the political elite.

The Confucian literati can very well be conceived of as the forerunners of the modern intellectual. As scholar-officials, they assume political roles and perform their social functions through the bureaucracy. Like Indian gurus, they are teachers; like Buddhist monks, they are ethical exemplars; like Jewish rabbis, they are learned scholars; like Greek philosophers, they are wise men; like Christian priests, they are spiritual leaders, and like Islamic mullahs, they are community leaders. Yet, in the final analysis, their commitment to the improvement of the human condition, rather than to a reality outside or beyond this world compels them to take on social responsibilities comparable to those of the modern intellectual.

Arguably, more than personality types shaped by any other spiritual traditions, the paradigmatic Confucian literatus is most compatible with the modern intellectual in both theory and practice. For the Confucian literatus, the separation of this shore and the other shore, the sacred and the secular, and the mundane world on earth and the Kingdom of God yet to come is neither necessary nor desirable. From the Confucian perspective, it is inconceivable that a conscientious ethical and religious leader is not deeply concerned with political affairs, actively engaged in social services, and profoundly sensitive to cultural matters.

In a comparative religious perspective, this seemingly unique Confucian spiritual orientation — regarding the secular as sacred, or, more appropriately, rejecting the separation between the defiled earth and the sublime Heaven — has been embraced by most, if not all, major religious traditions in our age.

Virtually all axial-age civilizations have undergone substantial transformations so that they can respond meaningfully to the crises of the modern world. No mainstream ethical or religious belief can afford to ignore environmental degradation, abject poverty, social disintegration, violence, crime, or drugs as worldly affairs beneath the purview of their God-centered spirituality. Without a doubt, a defining characteristic of religion is its avowed compassion and love for humanity; thus, all forms of suffering, from brutal torture to routine boredom, are intimate concerns of spiritual leaders. However, since the "ultimate concern" is often directed otherwise, salvation is seldom to be found in the world here and now. Those who have identified themselves with the things that are God's rather than the things that are Caesar's would not consider politics as a calling, let alone accepting the bureaucracy as the proper domain for religious commitment.

For reasons too complex to discuss here, the advent of modernity has fundamentally transformed virtually all religions. Max Weber defines modernization as rationalization. A salient feature of rationalization is secularization. Unlike premodern communities, the overwhelming majority of contemporary societies are managed by secular governments. The United States, perhaps the most religious country in the West, maintains the separation of church and state. In the political process, religion is perceived of as a matter of the heart and therefore as a private affair inadequate for public debate. Educational institutions are wary about religious advocacy and they jealously protect their neutrality in religious disputes.

The need for religious leaders to become bilingual is obvious. It is natural that they be proficient in the language of their respective faith community. Yet, in addition, they must also learn to be proficient in the language of world citizenship. In other words, they cannot abandon their responsibility to assume the role of the public intellectual. Ideally, bilingualism enables them to bring their own spiritual resources to bear on the vital issues of the global village: protecting the environmental, alleviating poverty, eliminating gender inequalities, and abolishing child labor, just to mention a few. In the information age, even if they choose to concentrate on the spiritual well-being of their own communities, religious leaders cannot be immune to the major events occurring in the world.

If religious leaders are duty-bound to be politically concerned, socially engaged, and culturally sensitive, responsible persons in other occupations must be even more involved in the secular world. Besides secularity, another manifestation of modernity is specialization and, by implication, professionalization. The most prominent feature of the specialized, professionalized, rationalized secular modern society is the bureaucracy. Despite Weber's image of a highly efficient and differentiated bureaucracy as the military establishment, modern bureaucracies with the British civil service as their antecedent,

are primarily civic organizations. The word “civil” as in “civil society” is contrasted with barbaric, military, or official. But in the British as well as the Confucian traditions, although the civil is opposed to the barbaric or military, it is quite compatible with the official. In the British Empire or in the Confucian Middle Kingdom, officialdom by definition was primarily staffed with civil servants. As expected, an ethos of civility, rather than the martial spirit, pervades the modern bureaucracy.

Bureaucracy as an administrative unit is everywhere; international, regional, national, and local governments, multinational corporations, universities, media conglomerates, non-governmental organizations, entertainment businesses, voluntary associations, and religious enterprises are all managed by bureaucrats. It was not accidental that the imperial examination as a way of recruiting officials in Confucian China served as a model for the establishment of the British civil service. The Confucian idea that classical education was essential for political leadership may have also influenced the training of British administrators.

Confucian literati as scholar-officials and bureaucrats were seasoned in literature, history, and philosophy. They composed poems, practiced calligraphy, played chess, and amused themselves with lutes and paintings. In short, they were humanists, the Chinese counterpart of the Renaissance man. Joseph Levenson uses “amateur” to describe their way of life. Far from having limited skills in or knowledge about the fine arts, Confucian literati as a rule were accomplished poets, proficient calligraphers, chess masters, excellent lute players, and superb painters. In the case of calligraphy and painting, some of them, like Dong Qichang (1555-1636), were so admired by their contemporaries and subsequent generations that they defined artistic taste in China for more than a century. Their “literati style” (*wenrenhua*), expressing a vision of self-cultivation and communion with nature, was considered by connoisseurs and collectors (including wealthy merchants) as much superior to that which professional painters, with their impeccable technique, were able to achieve. “Amateur,” in this sense, connotes a great of interest in engaging in the refined arts as an end in itself for personal and communal pleasure, both as a pastime and as a spiritual exercise. Levenson laments the demise of the amateur idea as the result of modernization. He observes that rationalism, as manifested in specialization and professionalism, necessarily undermined the Confucian literati’s way of life. In modern society, the expert, rather than the amateur, rules the world.

It is worth noting that although Confucian scholar-officials were generalists, they normally dealt with bureaucratic routines conscientiously and efficiently. As magistrates, they handled legal cases, oversaw budgets, managed public works, organized relief efforts, confronted criminals, and, above all, supervised education. Under extraordinary circumstances, as in the case of the great

Confucian thinker Wang Yangming (1472–1529), they even controlled riots and led military campaigns against rebellions. Needless to say, a group of experts in various fields assisted them in carrying out specific missions. But their leadership was crucial for the smooth functioning of the bureaucracy. In short, it was not their expertise or professionalism, but rather their insight, rectitude, fairness, judgment, and sense of appropriateness that really mattered.

The demands for expertise and professionalism in a highly differentiated modern bureaucracy have definitively relegated the amateur ideal to the background. The market economy, for example, is too complex a mechanism to be understood, let alone managed, by amateurs. Neo-classical economists of course insist that free markets should never be managed. Yet, since there is no perfect market, or, in a practical sense, no totally free market exists, some measure of institutional and political intervention is unavoidable. The emergence of knowledge economy makes the application of information technology indispensable to all aspects of the market. This is also true with the democratic process and the infrastructure for a vibrant civil society. There is hardly any aspect of our lifeworld that has not been touched by experts or professionals. Lawyers and doctors are the most conspicuous examples. Even in religion, priests and monks increasingly behave like experts and professionals, in competition with psychologists, psychoanalysts, and social workers. The appearance of the idea of technocrats seems to be a logical consequence of this seemingly inevitable trend.

Nevertheless, it is hasty to conclude that the age of technocratic control is upon us and that the world is inescapably ruled by experts. The epoch-making debate on “red vs. expert” in the People’s Republic of China in the 1960s is definitely outdated. Mao Zedong’s attempt to “hoister a red flag against bureaucratization in the Party, systematization in the economy, and professionalization in the university”² failed miserably. His romantic revolutionism is no longer relevant in Chinese politics. Even the rhetoric of revolution has been abandoned by official ideologists. The “reform and opening” policy strongly suggests that expertise has triumphed and redness has faded away. Yet, in the ethos of China’s quest for a cultural identity occasioned by her newly achieved economic and political status, the technocratic mind-set seems woefully inadequate to provide the necessary leadership. As the social fabric has been substantially eroded by the rampant marketization, a sense of urgency surfaced among intellectual and political elite that China is desperately in need of an ethic, hopefully rooted in her own cultural tradition and receptive to Western influence. The issue of value priority underlying the “red vs. expert” debate is far from being settled.

2. Tu Wei-ming, “Confucianism: Symbol and Substance in Recent Times,” in Tu Wei-ming, *Humanity and Self-Cultivation* [reprint, Boston, MA: Cheng & Tsui Company, 1998], p. 259.

It seems that the age of the Confucian scholar-official or of the British civil servant as it existed in premodern times is no more. Nowadays, it is rare to find technocrats who are also literati. The fine arts that the Confucian administrator cherished as a supreme value and practiced as a daily routine must appear to be irrelevant to technocrats in their professional work. At best, it is an dispensable luxury. Apparently, with a view toward the future, bureaucrats are likely to be experts in law, business, or information technology. However, even if this trend is unstoppable, it is too early to assume that the role of the generalist, the functional equivalent of the Confucian scholar-official or the British civil servant, is irrelevant to modern management. On the contrary, as globalization gathers momentum, the real challenge to leadership is not identifiable problems that can be tackled by specialists, but the unforeseeable and unpredictable troubles totally beyond any rational calculation.

Equally significant in defining leadership is insight into long-term benefits rather than short-term gains for the whole society. More important perhaps is the ability to cumulate social capital, cultivate cultural competence, and enhance ethical intelligence among the young. The art of negotiating in uncharted waters and the foresight to anticipate unintended consequences of otherwise well-planned programs are hallmarks of a responsible executive. True leaders ought to be resourceful and inspiring. They must be able to tap the rich symbolic resources in their own culture. As they are empowered by their immersion in living traditions, they are capable of energizing others to take part in those joint-ventures that they envisioned. A narrowly focused schooling cannot train imaginative, creative, flexible, and responsive leaders. The continuous importance of a liberal arts education in American colleges is a case in point.

The conception of a liberal arts education is predicated on the idea of cultivating the total person. Despite full recognition of the importance of technical information in the social and natural sciences, the emphasis is on cultural studies broadly defined. Literature, history, and philosophy feature prominently in the curriculum. All students are required to take core courses in these subjects so as to lay the intellectual foundation essential for learning to be world citizens as well as future national leaders. This approach to education is significantly different from that of professional schools. Whereas liberal arts colleges conceive of the educated person as an all-round intellectual with the potential for continuous growth, the professional schools provide knowledge and skills with the purpose of marketability in technical fields. Even though comprehensive universities as well as liberal arts colleges are under great pressure to adapt to market forces and to seriously consider advances in science and technology, their commitment to the humanities remains strong. This raises critical issues about leadership training in the knowledge economy of our information age.

The challenge to religion may serve as a reference. As I have already mentioned, the new human condition dictates that religious leaders become

proficient in two languages: one specific to their faith fellowships and one for global citizenship. Similarly, experts and professionals should also feel obligated to become bilingual. They must be able to address themselves to two overlapping communities. One is the expert language relevant to their profession and the other is the language of the public intellectual. Unless they are capable of rising beyond their own interest groups, they cannot properly situate their expertise or professionalism in a knowledge economy and society.

Levenson's pessimistic reading of modernization's adverse impact on the Confucian literati (scholar-officials and bureaucrats) reflected the mentality of the 1960s, a generation before the advent of the information age. In the current context, the need to go beyond mere expertise is obvious. The complexity of the human condition requires an all-embracing humanistic vision to serve as a guide for action. Nothing less than a new cosmology and a new way of life are required to help us face up to the grave danger of the viability of our species. We are relatively sure that there will be enough data, information, and knowledge at our disposal. But there is no guarantee that we will become any wiser.

It is unrealistic that we can revive the status of the "bureaucratic literati" to provide the urgently needed wisdom for our age. Yet, experts, professionals, and technocrats must be empowered to become public intellectuals, who are, in a deep sense, reminiscent of the Confucian literati or British civil servants. Nevertheless, there remains a crucial difference. Public intellectuals, equipped with the expertise to determine the best practices to manage the world, must offer us a reasonable chance to learn to survive and flourish on our blue planet. Neither the Confucian literati nor the British civil servants were charged with such a heavy burden. Zengzi, one of Confucius' most revered disciples, makes a pertinent observation in this connection: "A scholar [literatus] must be strong and resolute, for his burden is heavy, and his journey is long. His burden is humanity: is this not heavy? His journey ends only with death: is this not long?"³

3. *Analects*, 8; 7; Simon Leys, trans., *The Analects of Confucius* [New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1997], p. 36.