

## **The political role and responsibility of intellectuals – Rainis, Fanon and Havel**

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Answer to the question why would it be worth paying attention to texts dealing with socially political matters, is far from being unequivocal. While a portion of commentators point to the value of such texts because these might contain ready-made, framed answers to the questions bothering societies today in their quests for more optimal principles of social order, the opponents categorically negate the possibility of operational recipes being embodied even in the works of classics. The research carried out rests on assumption that the value of looking at various political ideas, stances and orientations which were topical in a particular historical period, lies in the diversity of viewpoints and options which they offer. These have, to a large extent, been determined by the individual experience of the thinker; social, political and historical context within which s/he has operated, etc.<sup>1</sup> Solutions found as suitable then, can contribute to enriching our imagination when seeking solutions nowadays.

A considerable attention has been devoted to problems of the political role and responsibility of intellectuals within the Western academic discourse. There are differing views on what content should the concept of intellectual be filled with, and based on what criteria one is able to distinguish which members of society should the concept be attributed to. Philosophers, political sociologists and theoreticians have analyzed the position and aims cherished by intellectuals in society, from various angles thus offering different perspectives regarding the matter. Some defend the rights of intellectual to argue in favour of universal values and voice the interests of the social whole; others repudiate such model of action, and invite intellectuals to identify and eliminate the restrictions caused by the power relations on the level of *local struggles* (as, for instance, Michel Foucault does). While one category of conceptions justifies the necessity for the intellectually privileged segment of society to engage in governing and decision-making activities thus employing in a meaningful way the unique potential being at their disposal (a comparatively wide perspective which their conclusions are based on; knowledge), others insist that intellectuals must abstain from the practical political matters, as they may lack competence, and politics as a distinct realm of action possesses a unique nature, non-familiar to intellectuals. Besides, intellectuals are able to put into practice their potential in a different way – by taking an active stance in socially-political discourse; their task is mobilizing and educating the civil society. The figures inquiry was targeted at – Havel and Fanon – took exactly this stance.

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<sup>1</sup> Skinner Q. Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas. *History and Theory*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1969, pp. 3-53, p. 52

Engagement of the educated segments of society, the representatives of spheres of culture and science in the social and political processes, has been a characteristic feature of identity-formation of new nations in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) since XIX century – such notion has nearly gained a status of axiom (and not without reason). The efforts of these members of society to put into practice the „non-political politics” grounded into culture and ideas offered an alternative and sustained a counterblast to the external dominating powers in the respective region. Also, during the years spent behind the *Iron Curtain*, culture substituted the realm of practical politics, which, seen as a source of social changes and the initiatives for improvements, was, in essence, paralytic. This is, undeniably, a feature characteristic to any *closed society* – the cultural and scientific occupations provide a comparatively high degree of freedom, thus turning politically substantial.<sup>2</sup>

When one looks at the recent developments in history of the CEE countries and analyzes the specifics of democracy development within this region, it becomes apparent that the oppositionary movements and the processes of regime change were also initiated and lead by intellectuals. At the same time, it is sometimes argued by the critics that these activities made masses to look at intellectuals with certain admiration thus increasing the symbolic meaning of their role which, to a large extent, exceeded their actual social and political impact.<sup>3</sup>

When judged in relation to social and political processes, the notion of the role of intellectuals has in majority of cases contained a great deal of the *rational* element, within the modern Western tradition. However, in the region of CEE and in the postcolonial space, the role of intellectuals took an institutionalized character in a close connection with the *emotional* aspect – the foundation of ethnic nationalism under the influence of the ideas of Romanticism plays a significant role in this respect. As follows, the responsibility, defined in such terms, has often been expected from them by a large public and masses. The emotionally touched *accusing logic of action* has much deeper roots in the region than the *rationally-responsible*. The rapidly changing realities of the epoch during the last century, along with the permanent fluctuations within the political ambience, have required from intellectuals re-definition of their roles. Thus, the self-identification of intellectuals, as well as notions of wide publics regarding to what kind of role intellectuals should be assigned, still remain ambiguous.

Topics which raised the interest of Rainis, Fanon and Havel several decades ago, have been pressing during the last two decades in Latvia as well – problems of ethnic integration; alternative views on what concept of nation (namely, the ethnic or the political one) should the

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<sup>2</sup> Cvijetic S. Ten Years on: the Unbearable Lightness of Being an Intellectual. [http://www.central-europe-review.org/99/22/best22\\_cvijetic.html](http://www.central-europe-review.org/99/22/best22_cvijetic.html) (Internet journal *Central Europe Review*; downloaded on 01.10.2011.).

<sup>3</sup> Hanley S. Book Review: *Intellectuals and Politics in Central Europe*. [http://www.central-europe-review.org/99/25/books25\\_hanley.html](http://www.central-europe-review.org/99/25/books25_hanley.html) (Internet journal *Central Europe Review*; downloaded on 01.10.2011.).

new state rest upon; the role of individual identities and their possible overlap with national and European identities; the legitimacy deficit. Being aware of solutions what have been found as appropriate in different specific circumstances, as well as arguments put forward in favour of that or another model of attitudes, provides the opportunity to enrich the contemporary political imagination, acknowledge the political challenges, characteristic to our own epoch, and thus can help to find appropriate solutions and answers.