

Call for Papers

Young Scholars Conference

Intellectual: An Elusive Category?

Definitions, Social Identities and Transnational Contexts

Université de Paris, Laboratory ICT (“Identités, cultures, territoires”)

Starting from the late 1970s and especially the 1980s, intellectuals became an important object of inquiry within the fields of political and cultural history and sociology. Particularly in France, where scholars have been producing an extensive literature and elaborating a range of new methodological approaches to the subject during the last few decades. Such a boost in this field of research led to the fact that today the history of intellectuals may be even considered as a distinct sub-discipline. However, the definition of the “intellectual” is still an object of historiographical disputes, where scholars’ positions on the subject are often influenced by their political and ideological preferences. Speaking about writers, artists, academics, critics and journalists, or even political theorists and activists, when it comes to a clear categorization or definition, this large and diverse group of “intellectual figures” remains elusive.

What are we talking about when we talk about the intellectual? Do we mean a particular social class, a set of intellectual professions, or someone who has a specific visibility and political weight in the public sphere? While some even argue that the intellectual disappeared with the end of the era of “great” thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre or Michel Foucault?

In critical scholarship there are two major approaches to the concept. According to the political history, the intellectual is “a cultural figure - creator or cultural mediator - who is placed in the position of a political figure - producer or consumer of an ideology” (J.-F. Sirinelli & P. Ory), who intervenes in the political sphere on behalf of his reputation acquired in his sphere of competence (J. Julliard & M. Winock). In the meantime, the sociological approach – from Antonio Gramsci and Karl Mannheim, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu to Daniel Bell or Steve Fuller – were analyzing the relations between the intellectuals and their positions within the social and class structures. The major question here is whether they represent a distinct social class or are rather the spokesmen of their own class of origin?

It would be no exaggeration to say that the history of intellectuals was politically biased and highly influenced by the opposition between the “left” and the “right”, and ideological clashes between the East and West, which characterized a “brief” XX century. If we take a closer look, we must admit that the possible definitions of intellectuals reflect the binary political positions: the dreyfusardian intellectuals against antidreyfusardian, “universal” against “revolutionary”, “organic” against “traditional”, “fellow-travelers” against “watchdogs”, “critical” against “councilor of the prince”, “expert” against “clerc”.

During this conference we will focus on the various forms of intellectuals’ representations with regards to the different methodological and disciplinary approaches, with a special attention towards different national and transnational contexts. The French model of the “intellectual” as the word itself, which have both appeared during the Dreyfus affair in the late XIX century, is largely used and applied to the different national contexts and historical periods.

While the universality of this model, as far as the epistemological relevance of such an “importation”, seems to be dubious, we propose to examine the questions of intellectuals’ identities, self-representations and subjectivities from comparative and contrastive perspectives. We encourage the contributions analyzing these questions within the contexts of European, international and transnational transfers and circulations of knowledge, as well as those examining the political and social practices of intellectuals. We consider it important to observe the various self-definitions of intellectuals in order to reexamine their position as operating agents and not as mere objects of study.

Besides, we would like to get back to the old question of the intellectual’s status within their society with regards to the major changes which have taken place during the last four decades. It concerns the changes in relations between the intellectuals and politics (the graduate vanishing of the opposition between the “left” and the “right”, neoliberal conditions favorable for experts and technocrats); on the other hand, the democratization of the higher education has largely modified the main structure of the intellectual field. In these circumstances the common idea of the “end of intellectuals” shows an interesting case of an “epistemological break” which we are also willing to examine.

We are welcoming postgraduate students and early career researchers to propose contributions which address the following topics of the conference:

- Construction of the subject: the possible definitions of the intellectual (approaches, methods, traditions)
- Social identity of intellectuals: between responsibility, vocation and social status
- Travelling concept: the usages of the concept of the “intellectual” in different national, transnational and international contexts (intellectuals, intelligentsia, mandarins, public intellectuals, etc.)
- Engaged intellectual: classification, modes and strategies of engagement
- Postcolonial/gender studies: “western” intellectual’s authority revised?

The conference will take place in Paris on **29 June 2020**.

Working languages are English and French.

Please send the abstracts (400-500 words) and a short CV to intellectualsdiderot@gmail.com

The deadline for applications is **April, 20, 2020**. We will get back to you by the mid-May.

We can cover the accommodation costs for a limited number of invited participants.

Organizers: Daria Petushkova (MGY- Université de Paris), Marion Labeÿ (ICT, Université de Paris and Università di Roma II Tor Vergata)