THE ROLE OF INTELLECTUALS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE
Conference, 24-25 February 2000, Beirut, Lebanon[1]

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The airline skims over a forest of flats: Beirut. I make my way through a shining, empty marble air terminal to find myself in a traffic jam. Half of the cars are Mercedes-Benz, the rest are mostly equally large. Rules are hardly even necessary: every driver pushes his solid metal box determinedly forward into the smallest possible opening between the other cars. There is not an inch of concession, but also no trace of aggression. "Lebanese like to show off and enjoy life," my guide explains when I express surprise about all the shops, high-rise and wealth on the way to a conference on something like 'development.' Lebanon is a trade and banking centre that offers the Middle East a space with a good amount of freedom, beautifully set on the Mediterranean. At first glance, not much damage is evident after almost twenty years of civil war (1975-1992) that destroyed the old city and a broad swathe of houses and flats along what was known as the Green Line. The large billboards with models in modern lingerie suggest that prudishness and the influence of Muslim fundamentalism is not all that repressive either.

Dutch academics quickly feel themselves on thin ice when it comes to the Middle East. Have we not been fed so many stereotypes about Islam and fundamentalism that we trip up in any discussion? Is the Dutch-Israeli alliance not sufficient to make us immediately suspect? Our knowledge of the history and situation in the Middle East is generally so limited. I remember when I was travelling in Western Africa my continual surprise at the impression Islamic culture made on me, it seemed so relaxed and pleasant, my surprise in itself revealing a vast amount of hidden preconceptions. A further concern about Beirut was safety; only a few days before my departure the Israelis had bombed a number of Lebanese power plants, and students demonstrating in front of the CNN building had to be dispersed by police.

The conference 'The Role of Intellectuals in the Public Sphere' had been organised by the Prince Claus Fund and the Lebanese American University of Beirut. In addition to the annual Prince Claus Awards for innovative artists and intellectuals, the fund wishes to facilitate cultural production outside the wealthy Western world by means of publications, projects and subsidies. The location in a non-European cosmopolitan city, as well as the varied participants and choice of topic was intended to prevent the discussion from being dominated by European conceptions of intellectuals and their roles. This provided not only a context for an original discussion but also an opportunity for

the fund to explore how its subsidy policy can avoid well-trodden paths, by responding to the specific situation of intellectuals in various developing countries. With participants from such countries as Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, Cuba, Guyana, England, Nigeria, Benin, Eritrea, the United States and the Netherlands, the conference had a promising starting point.

The image of Lebanon found in tourist guides was immediately corrected at the opening of the conference by Elias Koury, a prominent Lebanese writer and editor-in-chief of the cultural supplement of the most important newspaper. Koury discussed the role of intellectuals starting from an analysis of a scandal concerning the censure of a diary of a bodyguard of one of the militia leaders in the civil war, a militia leader who is now a minister. The diary, which has since become available to the Lebanese public by means of photocopies and the Internet, openly describes the brutal practices and excesses of the leader, the bodyguard himself and the militia as a whole. There is no reason to believe that it was any different in other militias whose leaders are also among the political elite right now. The integrity of a whole political elite, of a whole segment of the population in fact - namely the militia members - is put into question. In the opinion of Koury, the 'forced amnesia' of recent history in the name of stability and the current political system is a bomb under the Lebanese nation as a whole. This is an important responsibility for intellectuals: to bring forward the truth. Truth is essential for a society, truth for the purpose of national reconciliation as has become clear in South Africa, Argentina and Chile.

The ensuing discussion did not treat the pretensions of intellectuals as spokesmen of truth or other subtleties; censorship and violations against truth are clear and flagrant enough. The discussion concentrated on the possibly one-sided fixation of intellectuals on 'truth' when reconciliation, the danger of social instability and similar issues perhaps make greater demands on them. Must truth sometimes be sacrificed for conflict prevention and social stability? Is 'Truth' always the vehicle for 'Reconciliation' or can horrible truths also sustain conflict and strife? Such questions cannot be answered in absolute terms. In some countries like South Africa and Argentina there were two clear camps, each with a hierarchy of responsibility: the commando structure of the aggressor was clearly identified. In Lebanon, however, the situation concerned a multiplicity of militias and innumerable citizens who were members of the militias. These were more or less forced to participate in criminal practices. It is simply impossible and probably also undesirable to bring a whole generation before the courts.

The intercultural setting of the conference brought out another complication concerning the idea of 'Truth and Reconciliation'. The strategy of such a set-

tlement of past offences is that revealing truth and recognising guilt is seen as atonement. The Indian sociologist Arvind Das pointed out that the whole idea of guilt and atonement hardly exists in Indian cultures. Nor is truth considered an unconditional good; in India the approach is: "speak the truth, but speak the pleasant truth."

A discussion on the definition of the role of the intellectual appeared inescapable. The emphasis that emerged was interesting. An intellectual in not just someone who is active in the public sphere, as Lolle Nauta, the conference chair, had suggested. Ahmed Abdalla, an Egyptian journalist-social worker and someone involved in the fight against child labour, also proposed influence and social relevance as characteristics. Others put forward that an intellectual without a connection with social movements is no more than gratuitous decoration to society. Gramsci's idea of an 'organic intellectual' continues to be relevant. According to the theatre director and actor Roger Assaf of Beirut it is in fact inevitable in his society that intellectuals seek active alliances with the population. Without popular backing, intellectuals are completely powerless against the state and the economic elite.

During the discussions, the danger of Muslim fundamentalist movements played a strikingly small role. That may have to do with the idea of the 'organic intellectual,' although a number of discussion participants actually did not see a close connection between intellectual and social movements as an ideal. The radical Islamist movement Hezbollah is generally not seen as a fundamentalist threat in Lebanon but as one of the most active, and thus legitimate, political and social movements of the moment, perhaps even warranting support. In contrast to the French prime minister, Jospin who has labelled Hezbollah a 'terrorist' group, our Christian (!) guide called the Hezbollah fighters "heroes." The conference participants from the Middle East saw the corrupt and oppressive political elite in their countries much more as enemies than the Islamist movements.

Fundamentalism and a corrupt elite are not the only obstacles to intellectual freedom and autonomy, however. The gripping true story of the Lebanese Dalal el-Bizri relates how a young girl struggling in her family, school, romantic relationships, political activism and the Communist party finds herself as a young single mother in the civil war. The endless struggle as a woman and as a leftist critic leads to a very personal project of being an intellectual. She conquers her own 'modernity' and follows her heart. Being a public personality with a striking flair and her own style, she establishes her autonomy in a complicated society. You have to fight for intellectual autonomy not just in the public realm but also in the private realm.

The conference also discussed the unusual topic of the material conditions necessary for intellectual work. Is the intellectual without a laptop possible in a globalising world? The Nigerian journalist Waziri Adio described the deprecating situation of intellectuals who have to make due without almost any basic facilities such as libraries, electricity and the like.

The conference organisers had expected a great deal of discussion about the topic 'Tradition: Hindrance or Inspiration?' Fundamentalism and more generally the political mobilisation of identity by the state or opposition movements is a current issue. Another important issue among intellectuals is the topic of minority cultures and the formulation of 'African' or 'Islamic' alternatives to such 'Western' concepts as democracy, human rights, philosophy and even science. However, the discussion on what the discussion leaders called "dilemmas of mobilising and challenging the indigenous cultural traditions of which intellectuals themselves form part" concentrated primarily on indigenous knowledge. Prof. Mamadou Diawara, head of a research centre in Mali on indigenous knowledge practices, introduced the idea of the 'New South' for a knowledge practice located in the South. The centre's interest is not in writing down and admiring traditional wisdom, rather in tracing extant local practices in agriculture and health care which are often a mixture of 'native' and 'western' knowledge. The dynamism of local knowledge is important in this and is being studied by a joint research group of Malinese, Europeans and Americans. The discussion about the relevance and possibility of local science revealed a complete division of opinions among conference participants.

Discussions about the imposition of Sharia in some states in Nigeria, about female circumcision and the ceremonial slaughtering of animals brought up the sharp dilemmas that are part of 'tradition.' According to the Lebanese artist/publisher Mai Ghoussoub the matter of female circumcision demonstrated that the recognition by intellectuals of the universality of some norms is an absolute requirement. There must also be a willingness to impose effective compliance with such norms. The Eritrean publisher Kassahun Chekole brought up the question of imposition. Practices die out only when people recognise for themselves that that is better. In the guerrilla army during the thirty-year Eritrean war of independence, men and women were treated equally, and female members of the army also wanted to eliminate the circumcision practices of the population in the liberated areas. However, the decision was made to carefully study the practices first and then to combat them by means of discussions and consciousness raising. Such cultural 'modernisation' turned out not always to be enduring, however. Because of social pressure, marriages between partners from different religions or classes, for example, were very hard to maintain after the war.

Over the past years, the idea of a 'universal modernity' has quickly begun to evaporate. In this process, the significance of 'locality' has increased. Studying the contextuality of our accepted concepts as well as the roots of perceptions and knowledge in localised practices becomes the logical thing to do. Nonetheless, the participants found that the elaboration of this idea by Annemarie Mol in her inimitable style a bridge too far. Perhaps there was agreement that it is unfruitful to analyse cultural differences in terms of 'knowledge systems' that tend to 'clash' the more these systems are construed as consistent, self-contained wholes (modern - premodern; Western - Islamic/African). Similarly, participants may agree that it is better to adopt the idea of analysing differences in terms of 'practices.' But is it really true that water does not boil at 100^{o} C everywhere in the world, that facts cannot simply be transported, and that certain concepts are Paris-based (e.g. 'intellectual') and others Athens-based (e.g. 'public sphere')?

It was striking that just naming the conceptual pair of tradition and modernity in the announcement of the conference was a source of confusion. Although the concepts were criticised in the announcement, they continued to surface, in particular participants from the Middle East found them useful. In various ways, a third position was defined alongside of tradition and modernity. The two concepts served as a springboard for the search for this third position. Postmodernism turned out to be unpopular in this search, whereas the idea of 'contextual universalism' as René Gabriels introduced, was received more positively.

Postmodernism is perhaps not popular in Beirut, but situations did come up that could perhaps be called postmodern. While one of the fellow conference attendees was sleeping off a late night party of drinking and hash smoking with the young, avant garde, well-to-do art elite of Beirut, I found myself in a Palestinian refugee camp. The camp is located in the city of Sidon and has been in existence since 1948. It is surrounded by a high barrier with observation towers and circled by half-buried tanks - Lebanese tanks - with their guns aimed straight at the camp! It is an unbelievable mass of people, according to my guide about 60,000 of them, squashed into a small area with a handful of streets. The houses are so close together that sometimes supposedly when there has been a death, the body has to be brought to the street to be placed in the coffin because the corridors are too narrow for the coffin. Whenever I had heard on the news in the west that 'bases in the refugee camps' had been bombed, I had imagined a sort of spread-out area with here and there a half-buried bunker and fighters. However, in fact the bombs land on houses full of people; the former PLO office that was bombed is now a small car park, clamped in between houses. After half a century of bombing,

Lebanese restrictions and bulldozing of the camp, this absurdity has become as normal as the sound of the Israeli fighter jets that we heard in the distance but paid no attention to.

Those who fled in 1948 (and for whom the Palestinian state in the areas occupied in 1967, about which negotiations are underway at the moment, has no solution) have almost run out of hope after 50 years. Palestinians are only allowed to work in the lowest paid positions in Lebanon. Anyone who finds work abroad and fails to extend his permit on time is not allowed in the country ever again. It would seem that the Lebanese intend to smoke out the Palestinians. Thus, it hit me even harder when my Palestinian friends later told me about the most recent modest initiative called *'A'idun'* to try to gain support for the 'right to return' for those who have been driven out by force. They produced a wonderful declaration that calls on a whole series of UN resolutions, international conventions and generally accepted principles of justice. Universalism as weapon. Were we talking about the public role of intellectuals? If there are no inherent universal principles, it is important to do our best to 'make' some principles universal, and to go one step further: to impose compliance with those principles.

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[1] The conference "The role of Intelectuels in the Public Sphere" was organized by the Lebanese American University, Beirut, and the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development in The Hague, The Netherlands