The responsible intellectual: Adviser and critic

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What is the relationship between the political scientist and the wielders of political power? This article presents two basic positions that an intellectual may assume in relation to foreign-policy decisionmakers: the role of the adviser and the role of the critic. The article draws a genealogy of the two positions. It draws on the writings of Michel Foucault and the example of Edward Said, Noam Chomsky and others, to discuss more closely the role played by the intellectual critic – the parrhesiast – in contemporary foreign affairs.

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My topic is nothing as grand as the nexus between knowledge and power or the nexus between intellectuals and political leaders. I am going to paint a little cameo about how I have tried to reconcile my rather diverse experiences as an intellectual. I have worked 10 years in think tanks, four years in state ministries, and six years in universities. During most of that time, I have also been a public intellectual: I have published newspaper articles, spoken at café meetings and political rallies, given advice to politicians and activists alike. Here I want to speak about the preconditions that make such a life possible.

For those intellectuals who do not want to take up permanent residence in the ivory tower of study, the Western tradition holds out two subject positions. Consider, for example, one of the many updated imagined worlds based on Hamlet, namely the 1994 Walt Disney film The Lion King. There are two intellectuals in this film, Zazu the hornbill and Rafiki the mandrill. Zazu is the King’s adviser. Rafiki is the prince’s teacher and scolder. They are both knowledgeable, but they differ in most other ways. Zazu is measured, focused on the form and appearance of the here and now, true to his King. Rafiki is expansive, focused on the substance of the long view, true to himself. These two subject positions have a history. Let’s call them the adviser and the critic.

**Genealogy**

Since almost all leaders of polities acknowledge that the world is simply too big for them to keep tabs on, the adviser’s existence is guaranteed by functionality. He is a ubiquitous political figure. In the Western tradition, the adviser starts out as the court favourite. Up to and including the renaissance, however, there was no interest in the responsibility of the adviser. The reason is obvious: the King needs advice, but he does not need advisers.

For example, the many books with advice to Kings do not pay any heed to the adviser himself. Neither does Machiavelli in The Prince. He is interested in the art of receiving advice, not in the adviser. In the 17th and 18th century literature on consorting with princes (e.g. de Callières), there is a lot of practical advise, but beyond the need to stay alive, this literature has little on the implications of doing this or that. There are of course exhortations to be good – Lady Macbeth is of inter-
est here as a 17th century portrait of the bad adviser – but the existence of a differentiated discourse on the adviser’s responsibility is a relatively new one. It has as its condition of possibility a liberal discourse on individual responsibility, as well as an institutional situation where there is space for opinion. No liberalism, no adviser responsibility.

Given the dependence of actor responsibility on liberalism, the institutional landscape in which adviser responsibility has existed is given by Western developments since the Napoleonic Wars. It is one where the state is the key polity, the Foreign Ministry the key part of the state (with the Ministry of Defence as a runner-up), and the Universities the principal sites of knowledge production. It is also one where the Press plays an important role in disseminating policy debates. Three key institutional factors emerge underway: Parliament becomes important following the introduction of Foreign Affairs Committees beginning in Britain from the mid 19th century onwards, and emerge as a new locus for advisers. NGOs are of increasing importance throughout the period, with some of them, for example transnational corporations and foundations, becoming sites of advisers. Let us also take that, beginning with the foundation of Chatham House, knowledge production at universities is increasingly being complemented by knowledge production in think tanks. Today, these five loci – the state apparatus, the universities (and think tanks), the press, parliament and NGOs – all harbour their own advisers. The distance from policy and the responsibility of these advisers will vary from locus to locus. For example, the adviser-journalist will have responsibilities as a commentator as well as an adviser. There are all kinds of interesting integration between the loci. For example, there is a clear mutual dependence between foreign policy journalists and university professors. Journalists need professors to furnish them with social and historical background, whereas professors need journalists in order to access public debate.

Advisers are supposed to solve problems at hand, and highlight the existence of problems as yet unseen by the King himself. After Nuremberg, the adviser’s responsibility has a minimal presence in international law. There are still huge differences across countries, however. For example, if we are to believe Said Rifari, in the summer of 1990, Tariq Aziz did no feel that he could advise Saddam Hussein against invading Iraq, because negative response as such was considered to be illoyal (see Cockburn 2000).¹ In this case, the preconditions for there
being such a thing as adviser responsibility were hardly met. Speaking more generally, the adviser’s responsibility remains a thin one, and it is to do with general responsibilities to general publics.

The Western tradition also harbours another subject position into which the intellectual may step, however, namely that of the critic. The last lectures Michel Foucault gave before he died, at Stanford, were an attempt to sketch the first part of a genealogy of the critical intellectual (1999: 170-171). Foucault begins in Athens in the fifth century BC, with *parrhesia*, which may be translated as fearlessness. More specifically, we are talking about fearlessness in speaking truth to power even when there is a certain risk involved. *Parrhesia* was informed critique, not rambling - the *parrhesiastes* needed *mathesis*, knowledge, or else he was no parrhesiast. Parrhesia was a strategic game between wills, between the parrhesiast as critic and a King or perhaps a tribunal as the criticized, where the stakes were political as well as personal: «If, in a political debate, an orator risks losing his popularity because his opinions are contrary to the majority’s opinion, or his opinions may usher in a political scandal, he uses *parrhesia*. *Parrhesia*, then, is linked to courage in the face of danger» (Foucault 1999: 16). Foucault highlights how it was not only a right, but also a duty for the free men of Athens to partake of this game. Foucault suggests two reasons for this: First, the good of the polis: someone had to tell the truth, particularly in cases where the powers that be would not listen. Secondly, the good of the citizen: if the *logos* were given like parrhesia, then this was the ideal to form oneself on. Like any practice, parrhesia could be done well or badly, and for those who did it very well, it became a lifestyle (Foucault 1999: 85–86). Foucault sums up the genealogical importance of this ancient Greek experience to us by concluding that in «the question of the importance of telling the truth, knowing who is able to tell the truth, and knowing why we should tell the truth, we have the roots of what we could call the ‘critical’ tradition» (Foucault 1999: 170).

There are a number of specific preconditions that have to be fulfilled before the work of parrhesia may be done. First, the instance on behalf of which one talks is nothing but one self. There is no representational logic here, no reference to speaking in the name of the people or democracy or history. Secondly, the target must be a specific political process that one knows well. Thirdly, the critique must come from a position that is known to and intelligible to the instance criticized.
Fourthly, the King must take notice of the critique. These preconditions are met in varying degrees throughout the world today. What kind of people who have the knowledge resources and the structural position to be parrhesiasts – i.e., who are free citizens – is highly variable from society to society. So are the available arenas – in societies with strongly representing public spheres, the arenas are necessarily fewer than in societies with strongly deliberative public spheres.

Advisors and parrhesiasts

Somebody should undertake the job of linking this first part of a genealogy of the critical intellectual to today’s situation. My hypothesis would be that the subject positions of the Holy Fool and the court jester would feature prominently in such a genealogy – again, we have a good example in Shakespeare, namely The Fool in King Lear. He is definitely speaking truth to power, at the risk of being whipped, no less. But instead of dwelling at the missing genealogical links, let us return to the here and now and compare the adviser and the critic.

If we compare adviser and critic responsibility, it is immediately clear that the critic is the more responsible one. The critic has always been held morally responsible, whereas the adviser has only recently been made so, and then only patchily and tentatively. Crucially, where the adviser’s responsibility is general, the critic’s responsibility is direct. He or she is the one who responds to – is responsible for – specific actions vis-à-vis specific audiences.

The preconditions for playing parrhesiast politics vary a great deal between countries. It is no coincidence that the Greek parrhesiast was recently excavated by a Frenchman. In France, parrhesiastic politics are institutionalized – critical professors regularly cow leading politicians in broadly televised debates. In Norway, the country I know best, the space is not that wide open, but there are ample opportunities. In the US, to an outside observer, the space for parrhesiastic politics is rather limited, and so is the number of professional parrhesiastes. I can recall only two: The late Said and the early Chomsky. Within the ambit of Political Science, I can think of a whole slate of people who criticize the King on a regular basis. Some of these people even do it in arenas where they are noticed. But in the US, discourse seems to be formatted in such a way that you have to be an insider to be a parrhesiast. To insi-
ders, parrhesia easily becomes less of a lifestyle and more of an occasional thing to do. So in the US, we have occasional parrhesiasts. When Kenneth Waltz spoke out against the war in Vietnam and John Mearsheimer speaks out against the war in Iraq, they are doing the work of a parrhesiast. Their advice was clear enough: The effort is wasted, so stop the war. The risk was not physical, but it was tangible in terms of being shorn of the status of insider.

In comparative intellectual studies, a special subfield at the crossroads of the sociology of knowledge and the history of ideas, it is a bit of a cliché that the German intellectual tradition is a problem-solving one – the professor-bureaucrat as the mainstay of the rational state – whereas the French intellectual tradition is a critical one – the problem-excavating spoil-the-dinner-party enfant terrible of the bourgeoisie. Such rough dichotomies do not take us far and they are easy to differentiate (see, for example, Sirinelli 1995). I would like to underline how the parrhesiast is an adviser, in the sense that he or she issues clear advice about what not to do. Conversely, the adviser has a critical potential. In the Foreign Office, an exemplary ministry in this regard, there is an institutionalised process of second opinion, with one of the points being to highlight the costs of the first one. When I worked as a senior adviser in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where we did not enjoy the luxury of an institutionalised second opinion, my colleagues nonetheless expected me to come up with what they called crazy ideas (sprø ideer) – i.e. ideas that did not flow from the policy-making process itself. When I did, they listened, but they usually said nothing. A diplomat does not commit to crazy ideas in the presence of other diplomats. Be that as it may – I had room to criticise. Compare this with my experience in the Ministry of Defence, where I also offered crazy ideas, although invitedly so. In the MoD, my colleagues reacted by trying to talk me out of it. They pointed to the official line, and tried to reason with me – the official line was what was real, and as bureaucrats, we should think in the extension of that line. In the MoD, then, whereas I had room to criticise in the sense that I was not physically stopped, I had no audience, which meant that the critical potential of my job as adviser was much lower than it had been in the MFA. The point is that an adviser’s position comes with some critical potential, and that this potential may be expanded until it reaches the level of the parrhesiast. The adviser quitting because of his convictions is an institution in the
Anglo-Saxon world, where he or she is of considerable interest to questions of regime legitimacy. When the adviser’s criticism reaches this level, he or she becomes a parrhesiast, for giving up your livelihood and indeed often facing a judicial court is indeed to expose yourself to danger.

Conclusion

My conclusion is that the professor who is called upon to write a report for the state and willingly obliges and the professor who criticizes the state’s policy for all to hear are both responsible individuals, but the latter more so. You may think that this Foucauldian conclusion is a bit tame. I do not think so. Consider Weber’s attempt to formulate a responsible intellectual ethos on the fact/value distinction, or Leo Strauss’s exhortation to the intellectual of never letting others than the top politicians in on the intellectual’s knowledge. These are competing and, I think, less appealing suggestions.

Serving as an adviser is an intellectually interesting challenge which can be made even more interesting if the adviser dabbles in criticism. There are clear limits to how far a state may accommodate their advisers’ criticism, but it is equally clear that, in a number of countries, the preconditions are there for us to try and expand those limits. To end where I begun, with Shakespeare, the intellectual ethos of the adviser should be: Unto thyself be true.

Noter

This text is based on a round-table presentation for the International Studies Association (ISA) in Chicago on 2 March 2007. The roundtable was called by J. Ann Tickner to discuss responsible scholarship: the relationship between academic scholarship and policymaking. The presenters also included John Mearsheimer, Henry Nau, Gale Mattox and Mariella Rios Tobal – all Political Scientists who have also served as governmental advisers or policymakers.

1 What Aziz reportedly did instead was suggesting that Iraq take on Saudi-Arabia as well – an attempt to raise the ante to absurd levels.

2 Witness what happened to the similar dichotomy between German ethnic-grounded nationalism and citizen-based nationalism once it was made the object of close scrutiny in the 1990s.
Literature


