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Do Intellectuals Matter?

Proposal for a Study of Influence

Abstract   The paper strives to explore the (non)existence of influence of intellectuals in society. Intellectuals are seen as a loose elite network of specific social actors who possess advance *knowledge* or *creativity* recognized in the cultural field of academia and/or art, hold a certain *authority* or power to be heard in the public, and who are *publicly engaged*. The aim of the paper is to fill the gap in the sociology of intellectuals and offer a possible framework for empirical research of intellectuals' influence. This framework is operationalized using three levels: *self-evaluation* of their own influence, estimation of their *social status* and *intellectual authority* over (primarily) elites, and finally *external "objectified" measures*. The author hereby calls on the testing of the proposed model and any proposals for its improvement.

Keywords: Intellectuals, Engagement, Influence, Power, Social Network

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Why Intellectuals?

There is a story about the intellectual who ought to be a moral individual, standing up against social injustice and opposing the powers that be in the name of the powerless. This is a story that speaks of the greatest individual virtues and represents an elusive role model, a kind of utopia for the majority of individuals. This is a story of perceived influence, and power of words and knowledge. But the intriguing question remains – is there any influence, any power that can be ascribed to intellectuals?

Further, when we think of intellectuals, we immediately think of engagement. The current issue of the journal explores the notion of engagement, questioning whether we can claim there are new forms of the engagement, politicization and mobilization present and/or necessary in society today. As the introductory article points out, "'engaging reflexivity' means that critical theory must have a social or a political impact: it does not only speak *of* the social reality, it does not only say something *about* the political field, but as a theory it pretends to have an impact on it (not to interpret it, but to transform it, as old Marx said)" (Krtolica et al, 2016).

If we disregard the obvious question of why social theory needs to be critical in this sense, we can focus on the social act – of critical theory – which requires specific actors. When social theory says something of society to society and when social theory pretends to or does have impact on society,

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it is intellectuals who are actually speaking or channeling the messages. A French intellectual, Eric Fassin clearly emphasized this:

> "L'intellectuel a selon moi une mission de service public. Je suis sociologue, mon métier est de parler de la société, mais je dois aussi parler à la société" [Intellectuals, I believe, have a mission of public service. I am a sociologist, my job is to speak of society, but I also have to speak to society] (Cavignioli, 2015).

This is a contemporary rewriting of what Wright Mills already expected from social sciences:

> "It is the political task of the social scientist – as of any liberal educator – continually to translate personal troubles into public issues, and public issues into the terms of their human meaning for a variety of individuals. It is his task to display in his work – and, as an educator, in his life as well – this kind of sociological imagination" (Wright Mills, 1959[2000]: 187).

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Why intellectuals? We could easily argue that some other social groups exercise much more power to influence society then do intellectuals. Political elites are defined through claims for power and economic elites "buy" their power. Civil society activists also exercise some power by organizing collectively around pursued/desired social change. So, why does engagement of intellectuals matter?

To be able to answer this question, first we need to clarify who is an intellectual. Despite numerous classifications and slightly fewer definitions of the term, there are several aspects which I find common in sociology of intellectuals, delineating the concept in the dynamic aggregation of social actors. First is *knowledge* or *creativity,* recognized in a cultural field of academia and/or art. Second, this recognition provides intellectuals with specific *authority* or power to be heard in the public sphere. Third, intellectuals are always engaged with the public. Possessing an intelligence that "can remain in the private domain, may it be in their own dwellings or in cloistered environments such as temples, churches, mosques, yeshivas, or monasteries" (Sassower, 2014: 9) is not to be equated with being an intellectual. There can be no such thing as a public intellectual, as being in the public, speaking to the public is already intrinsic to being an intellectual. He/she speaks to society and this engagement is specific since it is not only diagnosing society and its problems, but also requires engagement *pro* or *contra*. Finally, the last characteristic points to their very substance and the reason why there are so many expectations of intellectuals, at least in the European societies (Anglo-American society nurtures a slightly different tradition of intellectuals). Therefore, it is the *public* sociologist, as Burawoy defined him/her (or anthropologist, or historian etc.), who produces reflexive knowledge intended to influence the actions of a broad extra-academic audience who can be defined as an intellectual (Burawoy, 2005; Brym, 2009).

Intellectuals are expected to be independent, impartial and to "speak truth to power". They are expected to be *contra* actual social order, to be *contra* dominant political elites (as well as other elites), but to be *the elite* that knows where a particular society should head and how it should get there. These expectations pretty much define why intellectual engagement is important on a *symbolic* level in society. The very birth of the notion of intellectuals tells its story regarding engagement. The story is connected to the opposition, to the *contra* argument against social order, contra *injustices* (nota bene) of the society where the intellectual was born. It was the Dreyfus affair that provoked French cultural workers, to be named intellectuals after, to step into the public realm and make a statement *contra* an anti-Semitic government action. And it was Russian intellectuals who, engaged politically *contra* the establishment, brought down the Russian empire. And while these engagements of early modern intellectuals were engagement *contra*, at the same time, they also had *pro* engagements. In the French case, it was for the freedom of individuals over national security and for equal treatment. In the Russian case, it was for the revolution and subsequently for different visions of Russian society, later clashing with one another and causing the persecution of intellectuals in Russia. We could even name coordinated actions of contemporary intellectuals, such as petitions and individual voices calling for relief in the Greek crisis (Pudar Draško, 2015) or condemning Turkish operations against Kurds (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

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The role of intellectuals in social change is the question at hand. This role, whatever it is, could be a major indicator and also the *raison d'être* of intellectuals in society. Sociological theories dealing with social change inevitably focus on power relations and power structures. Hence, the important question here is what kind of power intellectuals possess (if any) and how that power is manifested in society? Here, I claim that intellectuals represent a loose elite network within society. Elite, because they exercise certain power through their authority enabling them to be heard in society (instead of someone else). Loose, because they do not form a social group in the strict sense, as they do not need to have (and usually do not have) a common interest. Network, because even though they are not a group, they are interconnected without a single central power relation.

My understanding of intellectual groups is closest to Mannheim's "free-floating intelligentsia" (Mannheim, 1936). Intellectuals could be, according to Mannheim, recruited from different classes, or undergo similar educational paths. They are capable of social criticism, creativity and dedication which allows them to overcome their membership in a particular class and become part of another class. However, this position does not mean that the individual intellectuals are independent of particular influence, or that they do not bring their views and values to the context in which they operate.

On the contrary, it is the totality of these particular positions of intellectuals that forms the collective intellectual heterogeneity, which is defined as the free-floating intelligentsia. Independence is only possible if the group is seen as an aggregate of individuals with their individual contexts. Yet it is very difficult to estimate the effects of their engagement in the real time, in ongoing change (presuming we define real change), even if we disregard the notion of independence. Pointing out possible paths would be a challenging but ultimately rewarding endeavor.

Having Impact?

My intention here is to explore models which could help us identify whether intellectual engagement actually has impact on society. Of course, in the sociology of intellectuals, there is no consensus on this issue. Moreover, there are no developed models that could be used to explore the impact of intellectuals' engagement, except several attempts which employ a bio-graphical method. Mapping the influence of ideas is a long process that requires historical distance. Therefore, this cannot be the objective of this article, nor any other that deals with contemporary intellectuals and their engagement. My attempt, rather, will be directed towards possible methods of identification of impact of intellectuals parallel to their engagement. Therefore, it is my aim to explore the notion of intellectual impact in contemporary society. The scope of this task obviously goes beyond this article, but here is a model that can be used in further research.

There are two questions relevant for the exploration of intellectuals' impact. First, as we saw, intellectuals are intrinsically public figures. It is important to identify what is the public at stake. Crucially for the argument, it is necessary to delineate the public to whom he/she speaks and the public listening. Could we claim that this is the same audience? Could we claim that intellectuals are addressing civil society in general, with the purpose of advancing civil emancipation (Goldfarb, 1998)? Or are those rather homogenous groups, ideologically united, the ones who utilize intellectuals (willingly or unwillingly), not as initiators of dialogue or challengers of opinion, but as mere spokespersons?

Posner, for example, argues that intellectuals are not catalyst of opinion change, but rather proponents of existing opinions, attracting attention of the audience that tends to agree with their premises (Posner, 2001). This theory has psychological grounding and significantly resembling Leon Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory (1957). Festinger suggests that people tend to ignore opinions and actions that are inconsistent with their adopted beliefs. Such homophily is recognized as a tendency in society, from classic philosophers to present days, and it could be summarized in the proverbial expression used by Merton and Lazarsfeld – "birds of a

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feather flock together": individuals are more likely to associate with others who share their views or social characteristics (McPherson et al, 2001). The statement is partially confirmed and/or promoted through the practice of the main internet media as Google or Facebook to select and present information based on our searches, limiting our surrounding to the concepts of our interest.

Wright Mills, along with many others, supported the view that intellectuals are powerless. Following his extensive work on the power and elites in United States, Mills considered the centers of political initiative less and less accessible to intellectuals. In his 1944 essay on the social role of intellectuals, Mills openly claimed that we live under the illusion that his (dominantly his at that time) thinking makes a difference.

> "In the world of today the more his knowledge of affairs grows, the less effective the impact of his thinking seems to become. Since he grows more frustrated as his knowledge increases, it seems that knowledge leads to powerlessness. He feels helpless in the fundamental sense that he cannot control what he is able to foresee. This is not only true of the consequences of his own attempts to act; it is true of the acts of powerful men whom he observes" (Mills, Horowitz, 1963: 293).

In speaking of influence, Mills even then recognized the challenges of addressing the public, an act inseparable from the intellectual. Modern society, with its structure and rapidly increasing communication channels and complexity of relations, requires public actors to speak on current themes, popular topics. The power of intellectuals to implore or bring forth issues they truly consider relevant is limited in today's society. The actions of intellectuals have been seen as decreasing in importance in mediatized societies that cultivate production of celebrities, and where seemingly all have a say while none truly does (Collini, 2006: 451).

However, there is some evidence that intellectuals do matter. The history of intellectual engagement reveals that some of these figures contributed greatly to social changes in certain societies (Russia, Czech Republic, Serbia). Dahrendorf points out that intellectuals come into focus in times of crisis and temptations, as they are expected to take intellectual and even political leadership, or at least point out the directions of desirable changes (Dahrendorf, 2008). All three examples mentioned in the brackets above witness to his point.

Political and social changes that happened in Serbia in the early '90s, first with the introduction of parliamentary elections and later with the so-called "petooktobarske promene [October 5th changes]" in 2000, were marked by a significant contribution of intellectuals. It is difficult to find a political party in '90s Serbia which was not founded and led by intellectuals, including the former state president Vojislav Koštunica, the assassinated

prime minister Zoran Đinđić, the former dissident and president of the parliament Dragoljub Mićunović etc. Without dwelling on the question of political engagement of intellectuals and the delineation of the political and non-political social engagement here, it is enough to say that these intellectuals stepped into politics as intellectuals, becoming prominent party figures. However, the question remains whether intellectual engagement can bring change and produce an impact without intellectuals acting as political figures *sensu stricto*.

Intellectuals' Network and Influence

In the following paragraphs, I turn attention to the question of social networks, opinion leaders and measuring intellectual influence in those networks. Perhaps the word "measuring" here is not the most appropriate choice, but it is difficult to find another describing exactly what is being explored – the level of intellectuals' impact in society.

The notion of social networks is usually connected to online media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. However, this concept has been exploited in social sciences for a century or more, pointing to the interconnectedness of the social actors on different levels. Social networks are created in the interaction of individuals, but more importantly for this paper, in the interaction of the social roles, positions, statuses, groups and institutions. These networks evolve from individuals interacting and producing invisible extended structures that can change the very institutions and social relations (see Kadushin, 2012). We could to a certain degree observe all of society as a large interconnected network of networks, which is further conceiving global society as a network. The preference here of using the concept of network comes from its usefulness in describing and explaining the flow between its points, or "nodes" as they are usually called in theory. Social network theories, with their software solutions, create ample possibilities for showing how the nodes in the network (people, groups, institutions and even objects) interact with each other and create the flows between the nodes.

Nadel, as one of the first to employ this concept, believed that the social network approach offered the opportunity to describe a social system in terms of a hierarchically interlocking structure of roles (Cavanagh, 2007: 27). The claim here is that the flow between the nods could be observed as a prerequisite for power relations or more specifically for the influence of particular social actors/roles at stake here – intellectuals. As I have emphasized in the introduction, intellectuals are an excellent example of a possible elite network that can be observed on the national and also international level. It is a loose network of *individual* social actors, where flow among the nodes (intellectuals) can be direct or indirect. Engagement of

one node in the network inevitably affects others, whether causing reactions directly or indirectly through the imposition of narratives and themes. As Kadushin states:

> "Elites in different domains such as politics, business, media, and intellectuals tend to pay attention to other elites in their circles and form opinions and policy views in reaction to others in their circles" (Kadushin, 2012: 146).

We can observe these phenomena in a given civil society, but also globally. I will once more use the example of the Thomas Piketty (2014) and his global bestseller *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, which somehow brought back the question of capital into focus on a larger scale – to the intellectual community/network but also to a wider audience.

However, one has to be very careful not to claim that intellectuals function as a free-floating network, independent from influence of other societal actors. Intellectuals form just one of the many interconnected networks, and it is difficult to distinguish between the influence it exerts and that of other networks. Networks are not reducible to the intentions only of the actors who constitute them. Although agency remains in the nodes of the network, with intellectuals in this case, these nodes or better to say, these roles are culturally patterned, as Cavanagh rightfully notes (Cavanagh, 2007: 29). Nevertheless, I would like to map several layers of possible exploration of this issue.

Setting the Research Framework

There are many reasons to be very cautious with measuring influence. The biggest is how to trace the influence process. This can be done with less uncertainty within a network of intellectuals. Researchers have already produced several studies mapping the citation flows and flow of ideas, which could be reasonably good indicators of the influence within academia and partially within intellectuals' network (Andres, 2009; Collins, 2002). Ultimately, almost all academics are pressured by the citation indexes that show the impact of particular authors. But, how can we operationalize the source and nature of the influence, and how can we eliminate, as much as possible, given relations, in order to isolate the crucial one? Methodologically, analyzing multiple relationships within networks remains a challenge. The principal question is whether we can claim any causal relation between an intellectual and any other network. Relations yes, but causal?

The concept of intellectuals as a loose network in society could be linked to the notion of opinion leaders. Opinion leaders' investigations mark an entire research field, especially in the United States, where the concept is frequently used in action research and finds application in policy and management. There

is much experimental evidence that deliberate interventions to find, create, and inform opinion produces real change in communities (see Valente, 2010). The link between these two concepts is obvious. Intellectuals are believed to define the desired parameters of thought and action in a particular society. They are the ones who have the power to produce and/or influence public discourse and to strengthen or relativize the importance of certain values that citizens should strive for. This is very similar to opinion leaders, who are transferring those values on a lower scale, in smaller communities. Valente claims that opinion leaders influence behavior in their communities through four pathways, as they (a) raise awareness, (b) persuade others, (c) establish or reinforce norms, and (d) leverage resources (Valente, 2007: 891).

This is why research of opinion leaders is useful for setting the framework for researching the influence of the intellectuals in society. In doing so, we need to distinguish between influence within and beyond the intellectual network. Even if it is difficult to demarcate one network from another in a complex and multiplex society, this has to be done for analytical purposes.
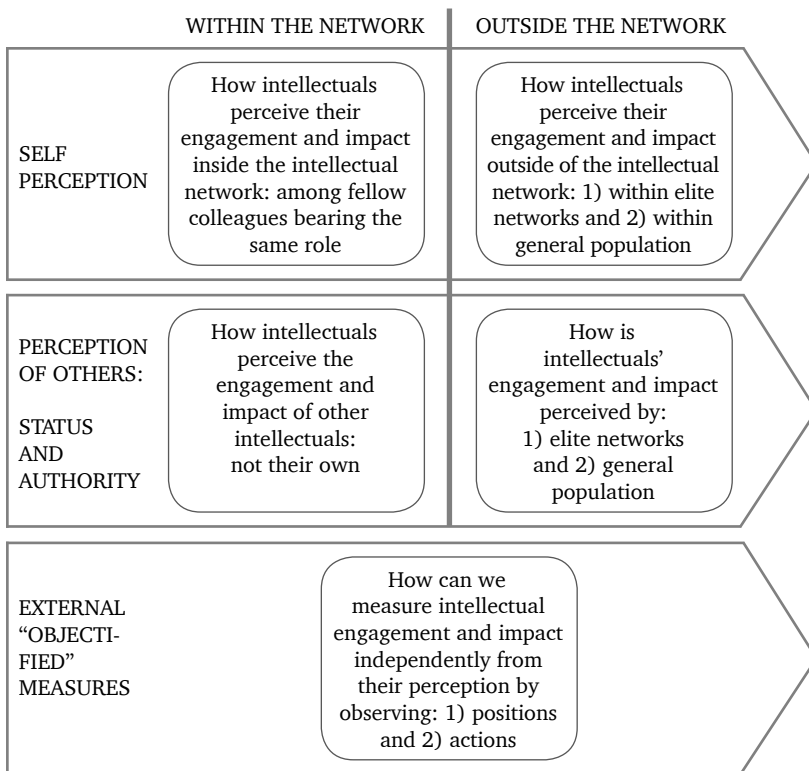
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Figure 1. The research proposal diagram

I will rely here on the *engagement model* (Keller and Berry, 2003) which defines opinion leadership as a combination of social embeddedness (measured as density of connections in the network) and persuasion potential (which is impact itself). Hereby, social embededness will be estimated using the "objectified" external measures, explained below, while persuasive potential will be measured based on the activities directly addressing audiences and people (perception and self-perception).

Therefore, I consider here two major levels of analysis of intellectual influence:

1. Who or what is the indicator of influence?
2. Is the influence measured within the intellectual network or outside in other networks or society in general?

This general framework is yet to be developed in detail. The first layer presented above relies only on *self-evaluation* of internal influence and it is the most frequent in the opinion leadership research, as Nisbet reports (Nisbet, 2005). The second layer is dedicated to the estimation of the *social status* and the *intellectual authority* (power to be heard). These two layers can be operationalized using indicators borrowed from Roper ASW's engagement instrument (Keller and Berry, 2003), further adjusted here. The instrument measures the *presence/absence* of the specific activities.

Self-evaluation	Evaluating status and authority
Have you performed any of the following actions in the last (one, three, five) years	In your opinion, who are *the most influential* intellectuals you have observed to perform the following actions in the last (one, three, five) years
a. Written or called any politician at the state, local, or national level	a. Having connections with politicians at the state, local, or national level
b. Attended a political rally or speech	b. /
c. Signed any petition	c. Stood behind any petition
d. Made a public speech not addressing your professional audience	d. Made a public speech you have followed
e. Personally organized protest/ campaign of any kind	e. Stood behind the organizing protest/campaign of any kind
f. Held or run for political function	f. Held or run for political function
g. Served on a committee/board/has been active member of some civil society organization	g. Served on a committee/board/has been active member of some civil society organization

h.	Worked for a political party/ served in any political party body	h.	Worked for a political party/ served in any political party body
i.	Been an active member of any group that tries to influence public policy or government	i.	Been an active member of any group that tries to influence public policy or government
j.	Written an article for a magazine or newspaper	j.	Written an article for a magazine or newspaper
k.	Been active (posting daily) in online media and networks (Twitter, blogs, op-eds)	k.	Been active in online media and networks (Twitter, blogs, op-eds)

Table 1. The research instrument I

In addition, we should pay attention to the layer called *external "objectified" measures*. This aspect of the research framework is important for bringing in some "hard" data on the position, roles and independently measurable actions of intellectuals. Indicators used to calculate social positioning of intellectuals include, but are not limited to:

a. Appearance in social media – number of postings and their reach, e.g. Paul Krugman's reach was 1,413,988 accounts on Twitter as of March 15th 2016, while Yanis Varufakis amounted to 761,972 accounts[1].

b. Appearance in non-electronic media – the number and positioning of the contributions in printed media. This method has been previously used for selecting influential intellectuals in my previous work (Pudar Draško, 2016).

c. Having formal positions on the non-political/cultural/economic scene – Board/Committee members in institutions, bodies (other than political) and major companies.

d. Having formal positions in think tanks and non-governmental organizations.

e. Having awards or other major recognitions of their professional and public engagement.

Influence within the intellectual network is probably the least challenging and difficult in this research framework, especially if we have in mind that these networks are not particularly large in size. On the other hand, we cannot rely solely on the self-perception of intellectuals: external perception is thus valuable for estimating primarily the status and authority of intellectuals in society. There are higher chances that intellectuals named by members of other networks will be more influential in the public and able to demonstrate their persuasion potential. Even more specifically, we could

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1   TweetReach Report at https://tweetreach.com/, accessed on 15.03.2016.

claim that those who are named by other elite network members enjoy significantly higher status and authority, and possibly have greater influence. This happens because elites possess more power and are able to set the frames under which other groups and networks operate in society. Considering this, together with other factors – chief among them mediatization of the society – we could even claim that researching perception of intellectuals among the general population cannot bring valid results for estimating intellectuals' influence. Focusing on political, cultural and economic elites can be crucial for the framing of this research.

Conclusion

This text is an attempt to call attention to some visible gaps in the sociology of intellectuals. In spite of numerous studies and mostly theoretical works, this field of sociology has failed to produce systematic research frameworks which could explore the position and influence of intellectuals in contemporary societies. The important issue for researchers in the field is how to apply sociological methods without losing his/her sociological imagination to reach the valid and reliable results on intellectuals as a loose network of specific social actors. Here is a presentation of a draft of a research model that could be tested empirically and also further improved.

In a certain way, dealing with intellectuals and their influence and trying to find the source of their assumed influence can be viewed as an attempt to further our own engagement as public sociologist. Yet we still cannot say whether intellectuals have real influence on the social changes and social processes or not. But once again, I choose to follow Wright Mills in this paper, ending with this thought:

> "If he is to think politically in a realistic way, the intellectual must constantly know his own social position. This is necessary in order that he may be aware of the sphere of strategy that is really open to his influence. If he forgets this, his thinking may exceed his sphere of strategy so far as to make impossible any translation of his thought into action, his own or that of others… If he remembers his powerlessness too well, assumes that his sphere of strategy is restricted to the point of impotence, then his thought may easily become politically trivial" (Mills, Horowitz, 1963: 300).

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Gazela Pudar Draško

Da li je intelektualac važan?
Predložak za istraživanje uticaja

Apstrakt

U radu se istražuje (ne)postojanje uticaja intelektualaca u društvu. Pri tome, intelektualci se posmatraju kao labava elitna mreža specifičnih društvenih aktera, koji poseduju *znanje ili kreativnost* prepoznatu u kulturnom polju akademije i/ili umetnosti, *autoritet* ili moć da ih publika sluša i koji su aktivno *društveno anga-žovani*. Cilj rada jeste da ponudi mogući okvir za empirijsko istraživanje intelektualnog uticaja. Ovaj okvir je operacionalizovan kroz tri segmenta: samoodređe-nje sopstvenog uticaja, procenu društvenog statusa i autoriteta intelektualaca među drugima, prvenstveno elitom i konačno, korišćenje spoljašnjih „objektivi-ziranih“ činilaca. Autorka stoga poziva na testiranje predloženog modela i svaki mogući doprinos njegovom unapređenju.

Ključne reči: intelektualci, angažman, uticaj, moć, društvena mreža