

Intellectuals, Nationalism, and Politics

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Nowadays, in one way or another, intellectuals are involved in politics. They are either directly involved in a political struggle, or more or less influence and guide public political discussions by explicitly expressing their supports to any political group or by explaining their views on particular issues. The point here is that on the one hand, they are willing to do this, and on the other hand, society, in some form, expects them to express an opinion or a position on public issues.

In this article, intellectuals are defined as individuals who think about, conduct researches on, and shape a public opinion about the problems of their society and/or of the world. Intellectuals participate in social formation of knowledge. Since they are in the process of public knowledge formation, it is impossible not to have a connection between intellectuals and politics.

It would be naive and also unfair to the twentieth century to think that participation of intellectuals in politics definitely has a positive effect on political outcomes. For the twentieth century reminds us well that the participation of intellectuals in politics does not necessarily lead to desired outcomes. This may be the greatest lesson we can take from the last century.

In *Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics* (2002), Mark Lilla, an American political scientist, perfectly shows us that the participation of intellectuals in politics does not always lead to positive outcomes. The word “reckless” is used to describe those individuals who do not care about negative consequences of their actions. Mark Lilla’s book has been widely criticized. In fact, this book has become popular as a

result of these criticisms. The book tells how the great minds of the twentieth century (Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmidt, Walter Benjamin, Alexandre Kojève, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida) were involved in politics/practice and how they supported both the left and the right tyrannies in Europe.

At the end of the book, in the chapter called "The Lure of Syracuse," the author talks about Plato's journey to Syracuse for teaching the Philosopher-King Young Dionysius. He argues that Plato presented this idea of the Philosopher-King as a matter of caution rather than as a good example for a path to political reforms. The central argument of the book is that "eros" or "force of desire" is the cause behind the service of intellectuals (he also calls them "philotyrants") to tyranny. According to the author, it is eros which directs philosophers to serve the tyranny in the search of truth and create acting tyrants out of politicians. Eros wants positive outcomes; however, it also thoughtlessly serves the negative ones.

Mark Lilla sees the philotyranny as the services of the abovementioned philosophers to tyranny. However, tyranny may also be in the minds of unofficial individuals, including intellectuals, who are outside of the government. In other words, without any direct service to any particular tyrant or tyrannical power, intellectuals can keep tyrannical ideas alive in their minds and can also spread them in the society. It does not necessarily mean that they have to serve a particular tyrannical government; they can generally serve tyranny, that is, cruelty and oppression. As a result, they can turn into internal tyrants. But how does this recklessness of intellectuals occur?

While eros, or in other words, a strong enthusiasm, drives intellectuals to search of the great story, the great ideals, it encourages political leaders to seek an absolute power. It is a strong passion that misleads intellectuals by turning them into an internal tyrant. In my opinion, under the

influence of eros, the internal “tyrantization” of intellectuals, whose aim is to find the truth via a great story, develops through two stages.

At the first stage, an intellectual accepts the well-known concept of “art of possible” in politics. That is, instead of asking what is right and what is just, an intellectual asks what is possible and what is the best. Eros, the “force of desire,” causes them to adopt this approach. That is, an intellectual is only looking for the possibilities of today. The transition from “what is right” to “what is possible” occurs gradually. By the end of this process, the second stage begins.

At the second stage, an intellectual is withdrawing from universalism for two reasons. The first is that, accepting the concept of “art of possible” in politics opens the way to the abandonment of universalism. For it seems very difficult and even impossible to build a universal “great story” and create a universal solidarity for this purpose in the contemporary world. Second reason is that tyranny loses its value in universalism. Eros always moves people away from universalism. The great ideal or the great story cannot belong to everybody. If it belongs to all, it ceases to be “the great.” Therefore, an intellectual who experiences a process of tyrantization and is in search of the great ideal/story ends up seeking a lower level of solidarity than a universal one.

Therefore, in other words, when intellectuals involve in politics, they pass through two stages of transformation: they accept the concept of “art of possible” in politics, and they abandon universalism.

As a result of this abstention from thinking about and for the whole humanity on the side of intellectuals, who also accept the idea of “art of possible” in politics, their participation in politics, thus, almost inevitable paves the way for nationalism.

One of the places where an intellectual who has lost his universalism finds solidarity for his great story is within national borders or an ethnicity. Solidarity within national borders or an ethnicity seems to be more realistic, and this feeds the rise of eros with more hopes. The more it feeds, the more it turns into an internal tyrant. This, of course, is the ideal peak case. In reality, intellectuals who are involved in politics in one way or another experiences this, or other words *become reckless*, to varying degrees.

In fact, perhaps, the issue can also be interpreted in a different way: tyranny and universalism. The former emerges in the absence of the latter. There is a tyranny inside of everybody who cannot embrace universalism. All humans who fail to embrace universalism have a tyranny within themselves. To be precise, everybody is, to some extent, simultaneously a tyrant and a universalist. This tyranny within ordinary individuals is carried to the public sphere by intellectuals. Nowadays, one of the forms of its manifestation is nationalism. Nationalism is a kind of expression of tyranny in public consciousness, it is a product of a reckless mind. In short, the participation of intellectuals in politics does not necessarily lead to positive outcomes.

Under the influence of eros, the first modern kind of intellectual who transformed himself into an internal tyrant was Jean Jacques Rousseau. It is a known fact that Robespierre, who believed in the necessity of terror and carried it out for the sake of "common good" during the French Revolution, was influenced by Rousseau's *volonté générale* (general will). Since the nineteenth century was relatively calm in terms of politics, we do not see the great examples of intellectuals' tyranny in politics.

However, in the early twentieth century, we see the intellectuals who internally became tyrants in the case of participation of intellectuals, such as Lenin and Trotsky, in the Bolshevik movement. These were the intellectuals who

carried out the "Red Terror" campaign after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. They were transformed into "internal tyrants" like those intellectuals which were serving the tyrannical powers that we would observe later in the twentieth century. Moreover, unlike what we were going to witness afterwards of the twentieth century, they, like political tyrants, also came into political power as well as destroyed their rivals and ideological enemies.

At the turn of the twentieth century, we were observing the participation of the Ottoman intellectuals in the nationalist-pan-Turkic movement. Generally speaking, nationalist intellectuals were among the leading figures in national independence movements of all the nations that have gained their independence in the twentieth century. However, perhaps this is a slightly different category, and maybe they need to be considered in a different theoretical framework. Six individuals that were discussed in Mark Lilla's book (Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmidt, Walter Benjamin, Alexandre Kojève, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida) were the greatest minds that had been transformed into internal tyrants and had served tyrannical regimes.

Among them, Martin Heidegger draws a particular attention. It would be appropriate to take a brief look at his life. Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933, and Heidegger was elected rector of Freiburg University on April 21 and became member of the Nazi Party on May 1. The last event happened when Professor Edmund Husserl, Heidegger's colleague and his friend, was dismissed from the university and then from the academy because of his Jewish origin. Hanna Arendt accused Heidegger of causing Husserl's death (she later abandoned her claim and tried to justify Heidegger till the end of her life). Later, in one of his works, Heidegger implicitly claimed that due to his Jewish origin, Husserl would never be able to be a great philosopher.

However, because he was not accepted by his colleagues,

Heidegger's position as a rector did not last long and he resigned the next year. Yet, he continued to remain a member of the Nazi Party. He gave an interview to the *Der Spiegel* magazine in 1966 with the condition of posthumous publication. He put forward two arguments in this interview that was published in 1976. First, he argues that he had no other choice but to be a member of the party, and that he hoped that he would be able to prevent the politicization of his university. Second, he said that at that time [the 1930s] he really saw an "awakening" or "aufbruch" (departure) that would help the German society to find a new "national and social approach" but, he added, later he changed his mind. (Read more about his life: Hans Sluga, 1993. *Heidegger's Crisis: Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, & London: Harvard University Press).

In *Mussolini's Intellectuals: Fascist Social and Political Thought*, Anthony James Gregor talks about intellectuals, and their thoughts, who served the fascist regime during the Mussolini era. Unlike Heidegger, these intellectuals also served the fascism in order to strengthen its ideology with their theoretical works and after the war, some of them continued their academic careers by altering their philosophical positions.

I would like to repeat one idea that was mentioned at the beginning of the article. One of the most important lessons we need to get from the twentieth century is about the participation of intellectuals in politics. In the twentieth century, we saw that many intellectuals served tyranny in the formation of public opinion by either directly serving political tyranny, or by transforming themselves into internal tyrants. The lesson for us is that we should not expect that the participation of intellectuals in politics will always lead to a positive outcome and we should be cautious and critical about their involvement in politics.

But this does not mean that we should try to keep

intellectuals out of politics. As actors who are responsible for forming public knowledge, it is impossible to remove them from politics. Even political tyrants need the participation of such intellectuals in politics. It does not mean that involvement of all intellectuals in politics (which may be in various forms as it was mentioned at the beginning of the article) leads to negative consequences. A lesson needs to be taken from the twentieth century is that we should be aware of the dangers posed by internal tyrantization, great stories and great ideals which are formed under the influence of eros.

Nationalism is such a great story and one of the greatest ideals. Due to its departure from universalism, in a broad philosophical sense, it carries tyrannism within itself. Although nationalism is just one form of public manifestation of tyrannism, I especially emphasized it in this article since nowadays it is one of the main threats in Azerbaijani society as well as around the world. Nationalism can be understood as two kinds of threats. First, it is a threat to universalism. Second, it has a destructive capacity as every "great story" and every "great ideal." We can see a nationalistic tendency of intellectuals in our society as we have been always observing it in all over the world. Not surprisingly, this nationalistic inclination also may occur in the brightest minds as we have seen it in the examples given by Mark Lilla concerning the twentieth century intellectuals. For eros, which is responsible for the brightness of intellectuals' minds, can also lead them to the tyranny. As it is thought of in ancient Greece, eros serves for positive outcomes; nevertheless, it recklessly serves the negatives ones too.