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***What Does It Mean to be an Intellectual Today?***  
**Filip Šimetin Šegvić, University of Zagreb**

An Interview with Steve Fuller by Filip Šimetin Šegvić, conducted by e-mail from Zadar, Croatia on 6 September 2013. The occasion for the interview was the annual conference, 'Desnican Encounters', dedicated to the 20<sup>th</sup> century Croatian writer and intellectual, Vladan Desnica. Fuller's book *The Intellectual* has been translated to Croatian.

*How would you define an intellectual and his or her role today? What should an intellectual represent in modern times?*

An intellectual is someone who makes a living out of the production and distribution of ideas. The focus on 'ideas' is quite important because it means that the intellectual must be adept at communicating in a variety of media — e.g. not simply academic texts — through which ideas may be conveyed. Intellectuals have been effective in two roles in the modern period: First, they develop society's immune system by challenging taken-for-granted notions so that even if society fails to fully adopt an intellectual's provocation, it comes away both with a stronger sense of its own identity and greater open-mindedness to the wider world. Second, they act as what I have called 'agents of distributive justice', in that they often magnify the voice of those minorities or dissenters who might not otherwise receive a fair hearing in society.

*How do you see your own role in society? Do you consider yourself an intellectual?*

Yes, I see myself as an intellectual, although it is not what I get paid to do. Being an intellectual is not part of the job description of an academic (of course, some major intellectuals have been academics). Academics are typically — perhaps even increasingly — trained and encouraged to transmit ideas within a restricted range of media, such that the medium becomes the message. For example, academics tend to believe that ideas cannot be properly developed in a radio program or a newspaper column. This attitude at once establishes the academic's expert authority (since publishing an academic article is not a trivial skill) and implicitly sets up the intellectual as an anti-academic figure who assumes that any complex conception worth conveying can be done effectively in the popular media. Sometimes the intellectual is cast as degrading academic knowledge. This underestimates the threat that intellectuals pose to academic knowledge, which is to de-skill it and ultimately render it redundant. Thus, if you can understand evolutionary theory after reading a 750-word column by Richard Dawkins, why read Darwin's voluminous tomes, let alone the even more verbose academic commentaries that have followed in their wake?

*To which aim should intellectuals point most of their attention in these times?*

The short answer: What does it mean to be 'human' in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? This question meant something quite specific in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the consensus answer to which is captured in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That document was composed against the threats to global civilization posed by poverty, genocide and nuclear warfare. Its mentality

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continues to inform the oldest intellectuals today, such as Jürgen Habermas, who came of age in the postwar period. However, a new century poses new challenges, and we need to move on. The 'threats' to humanity facing us today are of a more second-order, conceptual nature. They pertain to how to divide the 'human' and the 'non-human' — with the division itself increasingly called into question. Consider these three recent developments: the greater moral and legal status given to animals, the greater blame placed on specifically human behavioral patterns for various ecological crises, and the massive scientific and technological breakthroughs relating to the cracking of the genetic code and the proliferation of computer code. If you re-read the original UN Declaration, which was written in 1948 under the influence of the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, you will find that it anticipated none of this. Today's intellectuals need to think in terms of a new Declaration for a new world — and here Habermas simply instructs us on how it should *not* be done.

*Would you say that society today has a lack of real intellectuals, or would you be more inclined to say, as some do, that there are too many of them?*

If by 'real intellectuals', you mean people who speak their own minds and not function as ideological mouthpieces, then the minimum requirement is that their income is not dependent on the popularity or validity of what they say. Academic tenure historically supplied this requirement — what I have called 'the right to be wrong' — but it was mainly to encourage researchers to stake risky hypotheses and venture into *terra incognita*. Some academics, quite legitimately I think, have also used tenure to become public intellectuals because they know that even if they say very unpopular things, they still keep their jobs. In the other great breeding ground for intellectuals, journalism, the situation has been always more precarious. Typically journalists have had to turn their world-view, or style of approaching issues, into a 'brand' that attracts followers who then buy the newspapers and magazines where those journalists appear, simply because they want to learn what the journalists have to say. Just as serious challenges have been lodged against academic tenure in recent years, so too it is no longer clear that the market for readers in today's cyber-inflected media environment allows for the effective branding of intellectuals. But I don't think that these larger structural transformations have anything to do with the quality of the individuals capable of becoming intellectuals — if anything, their ranks have swelled. My advice to a young aspiring intellectual is to read very widely and critically but take a multi-media course in university so that you are equipped to transmit your ideas in variety of literary and audio-visual media.

*The American philosopher Richard Rorty once said that philosophy, or all intellectual beings, were "part of the conversation which we are". Would you say that society, the interlocutor of the intellectuals, has changed in the last 10, 20 or more years? Do contemporary intellectuals have a significantly different role than in the previous decades?*

As I said in response to the last question, I think the political economy of knowledge production has changed substantially — our so-called neo-liberal world order. This makes it more difficult for the emergence of people who in the past would have been called 'intellectuals'. And of course, as in my response to question 3 [To which aim should intellectuals point most of their

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attention in these times?], the specific issues and terms of reference have changed. But generally speaking, if people have a secure social position from which to challenge the pieties of the day — or 'speak truth to power', to put it more grandly — then they should do what intellectuals in the past have done: They should strike sharply, try to draw blood, and expect retaliation.

*Ever since the 1980s there have been numerous books in the market with dramatic titles ranging from The Last Intellectuals (1987), Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline (2001) or Public Intellectuals: An Endangered Species (2006). What has most contributed to this feeling that intellectuals have been marginalized or lost their way among the faculties? How do you view the position of public intellectuals?*

While there are some interesting observations in these works, I regard the entire genre as fairly inconsequential. Intellectuals have been bemoaning the 'decline of intellectual life' throughout the history of the concept, with Julien Benda's *La trahison des clercs* (1927) being the most dignified and self-aware work in this vein. Benda realized that what really bothered him was not the lack of respect given to intellectuals in society but the democratization of culture, which led intellectuals (so he said) to debase themselves. Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) is the equivalent work in the English-speaking world. Not surprisingly, both Benda and Bloom were Platonists. This lineage is not more apparent in the more recent works because their authors still claim some nominal attachment to the public sphere (and some, like Russell Jacoby, still see themselves as being 'leftists'), yet without wanting to endorse the public sphere's *de facto* intellectual judgements. In this respect, these works display incredible bad faith in failing to admit their own anti-democratic impulses. The real scandal of public intellectual life has been the inability of pro-democratic intellectuals to bring about effective non-violent political revolution. Although in recent times Czechoslovakia stands out as an exception, the overall pattern is one of failure, as documented by Charles Kurzman in *Democracy Denied* (Harvard 2008), which covers China, Russia, Mexico, Turkey, Iran and Portugal in the years leading up to the First World War, when an interlocking group of ambitious intellectuals with strong Western ties and media outlets singularly failed. As long as the sword remains mightier than the pen in practice, the diminished role of intellectuals will appear justified.

*Jean-François Lyotard warned that the universal authority of intellectuals was vanishing in today's time. What is your opinion of this segmentation of knowledge and the making of specialists for more and more narrow fields?*

Intellectuals have always been marginal to the normal modes of societal reproduction. Indeed, Joseph Schumpeter sarcastically explained the rise of intellectuals as a 'safety valve' that blows off steam when the capitalist machine starts to overheat. In any case, intellectuals as a class have appeared powerful only because, in the English boxing metaphor, they have 'punched above their weight'. Increasing knowledge specialization has not really altered that general phenomenon, but it has served to diminish the role of academics as intellectuals. A simple example suffices. If you submit an opinion piece to *The New York Times*, you are asked about the expertise that you bring to your chosen topic, which in turns helps to determine whether you are published. In other words, the academic's authority as a 'intellectual' is tied very closely to research work, which is

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presumed to produce a form of knowledge and insight that others would not have. That newspapers regard academics in this limited fashion is largely academia's own fault: The price of claiming expertise is being left with a narrowed field of relevance in public discourse.

*Would you say that today's middle and lower-class generation has become immune to the ideals of utopia which had until recently been espoused in one way or another by many public intellectuals?*

To be honest, I believe that the distinction relevant to this 'immunity' is generation — rather than class-based. People who have always lived with personal computers, the end of Marxism, and the persistence of environmental problems are not likely to be very captivated by the old left-right ideological divide in which much of public intellectual life is still framed. Indeed, someone like Slavoj Žižek is like a one-man band that plays (very well!) hits from the 1960s. The performance receives an enthusiastic response but merely because the songs are familiar — not because they especially speak to our times. (The test here is whether anyone does politics differently as a result of a 'Žižek experience': No, they just feel better about themselves and worse about the world.) The truly effective intellectuals of our times are engaged with the science and technology that quite explicitly aim — and to some extent have already succeeded — to transform the human condition in quite radical ways. Silicon Valley is a good place to start looking for such intellectuals, including for their critics (e.g. Evgeny Morozov). The literary agent to the scientific stars, John Brockman, has been running the website [www.edge.org](http://www.edge.org) for several years now as a forum for this new style of public intellectual discourse, which attracts many of the younger generation.

*Pierre Bourdieu spoke of the danger of television that faces the intellectual, of the cheapening of intellectual thought and the appearance of talking heads – called Le Fast Talker. How do you see the relationship between intellectuals and television, and looking forward with regard to the internet?*

Bourdieu's anti-television bias simply betrays his age, as someone who came to adulthood before television became ubiquitous. In fact, intellectual life has always placed a positive value on fast-talking. It's called *wit*, a term that really came into its own during the Enlightenment. Wit involves the strategic mastery of enthymematic reasoning, whereby one can simply state the conclusion (and perhaps one premise, used as a rhetorical prompt) and the audience can infer the implied argument. The addition of visual imagery facilitates wit because, as the Chinese say, a picture speaks a thousand words. To be sure, wit can be seen in both elitist and proletarian terms. At the elitist level, the failure to make explicit the intermediate steps of an argument can leave the audience puzzled and confused. But at the proletarian level, wit can drive home a commonly recognized truth without spending scarce time and effort explaining why it's true. What has yet to be seriously explored is the psychology underlying wit (though Freud had views on the matter), which involves the interjection of short, sharp emotional outbursts in otherwise emotionally neutral reasoning, something that television ritualizes in its laugh and applause tracks.

*How does technology influence the world of modern intellectuals?*

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The most obvious answer is that it enables more people to function as intellectuals while making it harder to decide which intellectual is worth taking seriously. But this problem was already recognized at the dawn of the printing press, and yet we have managed to develop the relevant powers of discrimination. So I am sanguine on that front. I think the more dangerous problem specifically posed by the internet is the prospect that you might be deemed an 'intellectual' simply by releasing information into the public without offering any specific interpretation, except a vaguely menacing pose. In effect, you can hide behind the avalanche of data that you unleash. Consider the radical difference between the actions of a paradigmatic intellectual of the modern period, Emile Zola, and Julian Assange, founder of Wikileaks. Zola's *J'Accuse* was based on his reading of the transcripts of Captain Dreyfus' trial, which led him to conclude that the French Foreign Office was framing Dreyfus. Assange, in contrast, simply hacked into diplomatic websites around the world and sent the information to journalists to do whatever they wished. In his day, Zola was called a traitor for explicitly trying to undermine the authority of the state. While Assange may be currently pursued on similar grounds, in fact he is really only guilty of mischief on a grand scale. Whereas Zola used his personal authority to make up for a lack of evidence that might exonerate Dreyfus, Assange simply hides behind the evidence without exerting any interpretive authority, presuming that other people will do the work for him.

*What is your own view on artificial intelligence as opposed to "classical", that is human intelligence? The basis of science and philosophy in ancient Greece — some would say intelligence — were mathematics and logic? They are the foundations for the development of artificial intelligence which is now being structured in a corporal form. What is your opinion on the relationship between artificial and human intelligence?*

I agree that modern notions of intelligence are grounded in mathematical reasoning, understood as providing the foundations for logic. However, this would have been seen as quite extreme in ancient Greece, associated mostly with the Pythagoreans and Platonists. Of course, human beings are much more than pure intelligences, but if we're talking about intelligence, then this is what we are talking about. For me, the interesting question is how we came to think that (a) this is the most significant feature of human existence and (b) we might be able to reproduce, if not extend, this feature in a creation of our own. My answer is our continuing belief — even after the religious impulses and justifications have disappeared — in a rather Platonic reading of the Biblical claim that we are created 'in the image and likeness of God'. In other words, humans are both god-like and not quite gods. This suggests a successor species (perhaps artificially created) capable of amplifying our understanding of God, whose scope is defined as universal. Mathematics provides the clearest access to this ultimate conception of being by opening us to the idea of infinity. On this basis, it is not unreasonable to want to use our god-like capacities to construct beings still better capable of reaching this state of universality. It is perhaps no accident that Isaac Newton, George Boole, Norbert Wiener, Herbert Simon and Ray Kurzweil all identified themselves as 'Unitarians', which is the Christian heresy that most explicitly asserts humanity's inherently divine nature.

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*In the past the brain and the thinking process were often associated with the concept of a clock. Now the clock has been replaced by the computer, and we say that the brain is a computer, although this is not correct. What is your view on the relationship of modern intellectuals and computers, computer science and intelligence? Is this another component of the modern intellectual, or does the modern intellectual resist the concept of a computer — that is intelligence based on norms, variables and laws?*

The intellectual should not have any problems with the spread of computers because ultimately the intellectual's task is more about *judgment* than thinking as such. In fact, computers can be very useful in providing intellectuals with an array of options that need to be considered in reaching a judgment but ultimately the judgment is the intellectual's own. It is always worth recalling that during the Enlightenment, the intellectual's public role (the 'public use of reason', as Kant called it) was to demonstrate the capacity to make judgments regardless what, if any, concrete consequences they had. (Usually they had no consequences, since even most adult males had yet to receive the right to vote.) However, insofar as intellectuals adopt a 'postmodern' position that simply shows all the sides of the issue without passing judgment, then they do indeed run the risk of being replaced by computers. Computers are great at manufacturing complexity and ambivalence.

**Contact details: [phillip.simetinsegvic@gmail.com](mailto:phillip.simetinsegvic@gmail.com)**