

THE ROLE OF INTELLECTUALS IN MALTESE SOCIETY TODAY

Louis Caruana SJ

There are various kinds of intellectuals. Reflecting on their role in society is often straightforward when dealing with members of the Faculties of Architecture, Dental Surgery, Economics, Medicine, and Engineering. It is much more difficult when referring to members of the Faculty of Humanities. If intellectuals are not producing anything tangible, their value to society is easily brought into question. It is clear that society needs architects, surgeons, doctors, economists and engineers. But does it really need people working in history, in literature, in philosophy, theology, music, art and drama? This is the question I will explore in this talk. My hope is that the answers will be relevant not only to those directly engaged in the Humanities, but also to those whose output is more concrete or practical. We need to recall that intellectuals, of whatever type, are necessarily involved in society. Whether they like it or not, they form part of a group characterised by language, politics, history and culture.

This talk is not just about the role of intellectuals. It is about the role of intellectuals in Maltese society today. It therefore includes the difficult task of determining some significant aspects of Maltese society today. My strategy will be the following. I will move from considerations that are general and somewhat abstract to considerations that are particular and concrete. I will be referring to two current studies of the role of the intellectual in the public sphere. As I go along, I will try to apply some of their insights to the particular situation of Maltese society today. I have, of course, no pretension of being exhaustive. My aim is to suggest some important lines of argument that may stimulate reflection and debate in this complex but crucial area.

First a few words about the public role of the intellectual person in general. Not all intellectuals, of course, go public in a politically or socially relevant way. Although the attitude of intellectuals as regards the rest of society varies enormously, it's useful to indicate two extreme positions that are, though rarely exemplified, yet useful to keep in view. The first extreme position is that of elitism. In a recent book entitled *Intellectuals and the Masses*, John Carey offers convincing evidence that some intellectuals of the 20th century (he mentions Virginia Wolff

as a major example) used their intellectual skills primarily to set themselves apart from others, creating a gap between them and common humanity.¹ Towards this common humanity they harboured a deep revulsion. Such elitism is not restricted to our times. It can be traced all the way back to Plato, who, because of his great loathing towards poets and artists, was called by Nietzsche ‘the greatest enemy of art Europe has yet produced’ (*Genealogy of Morals* 3rd Essay, § 25). In the *Republic*, Plato argues that the real habitat of the intellectual is the realm of unchangeable Ideas. The intellectual should have nothing to do with material reality. He argues that, if material reality is itself a poor imitation of the Forms, the artists’ imitation of material reality is a double mistake, an imitation of an imitation. The arts appeal to human emotions and base desires, and hence block the rational soul’s dominion. In a republic therefore mimesis should be avoided.²

This is one extreme. The other involves the opposite trend, namely the trend of intellectuals to oversimplify their contribution. They can oversimplify their contribution to such an extent that their intellectual contribution disappears completely. Frank Furedi of the University of Kent has recently argued that intellectuals nowadays have abandoned their fearless search for truth. They have done this for various reasons. For instance, some of them blindly accept an exclusively instrumentalist view of knowledge, others fear being charged with elitism, and others give in to the pressure that arises from the belief that, to make money or a career, they need to ‘dumb down’ their output. Furedi’s book has the interesting title: *Where have all the intellectuals Gone? Confronting 21st Century Philistinism* (Continuum, London 2004).

Very few intellectuals, if any, exemplify these two extremes. Most of them lie somewhere in between. It is, however, important to highlight the distance, the *creative* distance, between intellectuals and the world. Intellectuals belong to society, and yet reach out, in some way, beyond it. Policy makers often have a hard time understanding this. They see intellectuals as essentially opposed to their task of administration. The aim of the policy maker involves issues of immediate and

1. *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939*, Academy Chicago Publishers; New Edition, 2002.
2. *Republic* 606d. He also argues that poetry or drama should be substituted by the fostering of virtue in the young (388d); poets allegedly reach out to what lies beyond the normal range of knowledge, hence it’s very risky to follow their advice (387b). Aristotle in his *Poetics* famously disagreed with this and argued that art (referring here mainly to drama) doesn’t result in emotional anarchy, but rather purifies the soul (it has a cathartic effect).

localised concern, while the aim of the intellectual often involves issues of universal concern. In Kantian terms, the policy maker lives in the kingdom of means, while the intellectual lives in a kingdom of ends.³ The policy maker seeks to know the principles of political machinery, while the intellectual seeks the truth that lies over and above political levers.⁴

With these distinctions in view, I will now proceed by referring to two recent studies that, according to me, can be helpful for our inquiry about today's Maltese situation. One of the authors is very well known; the other much less known. I start with the less well-known.

Study One

This is a book published last year with the title *Intellectuals and the Public Good: Creativity and Civil Courage* (CUP 2007); the author is Barbara Misztal, professor of sociology at Leicester University. The book is essentially a philosophical and sociological study of Nobel Prize winners who were engaged in the public sphere, at least during some period of their lives. She laments at the start that, although there has been a long tradition of public intellectuals as guardians of universally grounded values and truths, things are not so any longer. She writes:

The institutionalisation and the specialisation of intellectual life, together with the dominance of mass culture, are seen as responsible for the disappearance of the charismatic public intellectual and the decline in the quality of the public (p. 2).

Of course, gone are the days of the philosopher-king. The main question today is: what determines the role of the public intellectual within a democracy.⁵ For Misztal, the main features of the intellectual person's role within a modern democracy are two: courage and creativity.

3. In Kant's *The Groundwork of a Metaphysics of Morals*, we find the Kingdom of Ends proposed as a hypothetical state wherein humans live purely in line with universal laws, as rational beings should.
4. I draw here from J. Ahearne and O. Bennett (eds), *Intellectuals and Cultural Policy*, Routledge, London 2007). See also: Peter Winch, 'Introduction', in: *The political responsibility of intellectuals*, CUP 1990, pp. 1-16.
5. She recalls Vaclav Havel's memorable expression that intellectuals should 'speak the truth to power'.

Creativity comes in various forms. It is, in most of its features, domain-specific. The type of creativity we are talking about here refers to the ability to see things from a new perspective. Public intellectuals are engaged in an ongoing exploration of the possible, as regards new ways of guaranteeing a better democratic future. Misztal calls it ‘creativity that provides us with ideas on how to democratise and humanise the workings of modern societies’ (p. 64). The important question here is: which situations facilitate creativity, and which don’t? It may help to simplify matters and think of a totally rigid society, driven by rules to the least detail (Misztal calls this a formal system), and think also of the opposite type of society: a loose or informal society. For an intellectual to be creative in such environments, we can expect the following outcome:

Type of society:	Totally Rigid	Totally Loose
Resistance to be expected:	Max	Min
Probability of success:	Low	Low

The mid-way system between total rigidity and total informality is the one to aim for. It has the capacity to react flexibly to external and internal creativity. Where is Maltese society situated on this scale? It seems fair to say that Maltese society is neither on one hand extreme nor on the other hand. It is on the move, from left to right on the table.

As regards civic courage, Misztal takes Socrates as the prime example: the one who remained faithful to his project in spite of the hostility of his peers. She follows the Aristotelian tradition and takes courage to be the middle position between two possibilities. The courageous person is the one who acts neither too rashly nor too cowardly. This holds for courage in general. For courage that is civic, the intellectual person who goes public with a creative idea or position needs to recall the two opposing forces that often take the following form:

Act rashly	shock to attract attention (no other reason needed)
Act courageously	
Act cowardly	don’t rock the boat, lest you end up in trouble (no ‘whistle-blowing’)

Civic courage of this kind is apparently needed in Malta in situations where conformity to a group is a major feature. Whistle-blowing is made more difficult if social groups are tightly knit, with their members finding their identity through conformity. This is not limited to the uneducated. Young people as well are extremely sensitive to peer-group pressure, and thus lack individual freedom. In situations where anonymity is high, as we have in major cities in the developed world, an innovator is less likely to encounter resistance. In Malta, considerable courage is still needed by creative individuals. Their new ideas will have to face unreasonable resistance based solely on the sense of belonging to a group.

One must not underestimate, still less forget, the fact that the intellectual reputation of the whistle-blower makes a difference. Civic courage in this case has a higher chance of being effective. If the whistle-blower is a highly educated individual, known in other contexts for personal integrity, then the whistle-blowing is more likely to be effective. It is even more effective, and this is the most important point I want to make here, if it is carried out by a group of such intellectuals acting together. As Misztal points out, the reputation for scientific or artistic achievements can be traded or exploited in order to advance a specific cause.⁶ This way, intellectuals can impact on parliamentary debate, either directly, when

6. As some of you may know, Jesuits see themselves as 'contemplatives in action'. Towards the end of her book, Misztal proposes this as a guiding principle for all public intellectuals. One element of her conclusion deserves closer study. She observes that the twelve intellectuals she studied 'although they sometimes entered the political fray, tried to stay above all political parties and work towards finding common ground, without, however, compromising their democratic convictions. Despite their persistent nonconformity, they believed that public intellectuals had a duty not only to criticise but to affirm as well' (p. 240). One may ask here whether engaging in public debate is indeed compatible with remaining above the fray. The second half of Misztal's study, which I cannot include here for lack of space, contains a typology of intellectuals' public involvement. This is essentially a sociological study supported by a number of case-studies. She takes a sample of those Nobel Prize winners who can be considered public intellectuals. The types she describes are four: dissidents, heroes, champions and pioneers. Dissidents: radicalised intellectuals who display the exceptional courage demanded in societies in which the sphere of individual autonomy is minimal, which impose impersonal control, and enhance reliance on informal networks. These are usually found in repressive societies, and their action is a form of civil disobedience. Their courage takes the form of perseverance against all the odds and against loneliness. Heroes are charismatic individuals who challenge the formal rules and who promote the good of their community; they have the courage to express what their fellow members of that community don't have the courage, or know-how to express; there is a question of loyalty here. Champions are public intellectuals who reach beyond their informal networks to advance a particular group interest or specific cause; they do so not primarily via criticism but through a manifestation of their trust in the positive power of reason and communication. Pioneers are

academics are consulted in the formation of policy, or indirectly, when academics ensure a high quality of public awareness and understanding of a given issue, and thus set the agenda for parliamentary debate.

Study Two

I will now move on to a talk given by Jürgen Habermas on the occasion of his winning the Kyoto Prize. The talk was delivered at the University of San Diego 3 March, 2005, and might very well be one of his last major contributions to academia. As is well known, Habermas is an intellectual who retains a keen interest in public policy without losing sight of purely philosophical concerns, his main struggle being the reclamation of Enlightenment values (what he calls ‘the philosophical discourse of modernity’). The talk is entitled: ‘Religion in the Public Sphere’.⁷ I’m choosing this talk because of its relevance for the multi-ethnic and pluralistic future that Malta is facing. Of course, religion has been, and still is, a foundational unifying force within Maltese culture and identity. But is there any guarantee that things will remain so in the future? As historians tell us, inhabitants of these islands have been interacting with foreigners since time immemorial. These last decades, however, have seen a particular rise in non-Maltese residents who show no clear intention of becoming assimilated within Maltese culture as we know it today. The resulting variety in ways of life, value-systems, and religious affiliation poses new problems. Moreover, what it means to say that the State has responsibilities as regards education and community support is itself changing.

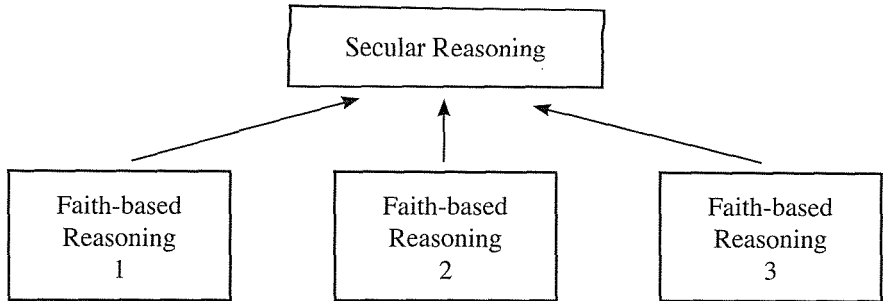
So let’s see what Habermas has to offer. He starts by comparing the development of the Enlightenment and of freedom in France with that in the US. In France, freedom is cashed out in terms of laicism, understood as the subjugator of religious authority. In the US, freedom is cashed out in terms of safeguarding the possibility of religion across denominational boundaries. Because the first model doesn’t acknowledge the positive role of religion within society, it is better, for an inquiry about the Maltese context, to concentrate on the second model, the one exemplified

courageous intellectuals who, in order to innovate and change, especially when the system’s receptiveness to change declines, skilfully construct multiple network resources far beyond their informal ties. This often goes with the intellectual’s ability to cross boundaries between various disciplines, and a hope in the realisability of a well-ordered society.

7. The refined version of the talk was eventually published in *European Journal of Philosophy* 14 (2006) 1-25; also available at URL: < <http://www.law.nyu.edu/clppt/program2006/readings/Habermas.Religion.pdf>>

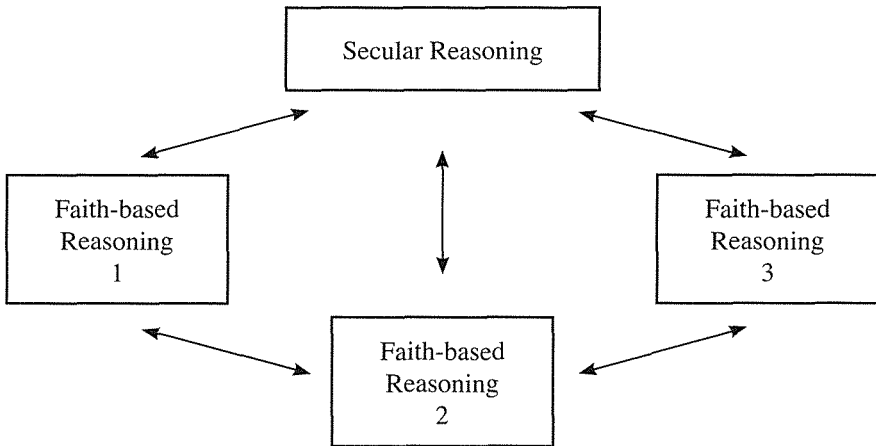
by the US. Habermas proceeds by explaining the importance of the concept of Public Reason. Citizens from the various sub-groups of society need to justify their views by resorting to publicly accessible reasons. They need to resort to a common stock of reasons everyone can understand. A problem arises when views are expressed by religiously motivated groups. How can these views be justified? If they are justified by resorting to faith, they will not be effective. They will not count in the public sphere. Consequently, there is an imperative, Habermas argues, for religious groups to become polyglot. By this he means that religious subgroups of society need to gain the skill of translating faith-based reasoning into secular reasoning. Only in this way can they guarantee that what they say can be understood.

Two main consequences of this reasoning deserve special attention here. The first one concerns what a genuine democratic process requires. It requires not only the acknowledgement of legitimate subgroups of society, divided on religious or other grounds. It requires also the mutual obligation of all members of society to be ready to face one another in debate. This last obligation refers essentially to the skill of translation. Democracy guarantees a *modus vivendi* built upon a constitutional consensus that safeguards unity in spite of differences of opinion, culture and tradition. The Enlightenment explains this by highlighting the central role of Secular Reason. The various sub-groups of society are obliged to translate their reasoning into Secular Reason. All intellectual goods must be cashed out in the currency of Secular Reasons for them to have any value. This is well understood by most citizens around the world, and Malta is no exception. One could perhaps recall here that, up to a few decades ago, faith-based reasoning in Malta enjoyed a quasi-monopoly as regards justifying public policy. Things however have been changing rapidly, and it seems to me that the point made by Habermas is very relevant to us today, when a number of prominent members of Maltese society go public as entirely secular personalities, and when other kinds of faith-based reasoning are starting to make themselves heard. Together with this, let us also keep in mind another fact. The Catholic tradition in Malta and elsewhere has always retained an appreciation of the justificatory dynamics discussed here. The search for the reasonableness of faith (recall St. Anselm's *fides quaerens intellectum*) is in fact a way of translating faith-based reasoning into a language accessible to all rational persons. The situation in Malta is therefore somewhat different from the situation in the US discussed by Habermas. The kind of Protestant fundamentalism he seems to have in mind has never been significant in Malta. From what has been said so far, we can envisage the general situation as follows:



Why religious believers in a democracy are obliged to be able to translate their views into the language of Secular Reason should be obvious. Without such an obligation, democracy loses the background consensus that holds a society together. Losing that consensus would result in progressive degeneration and conflict.

Now I come to the second consequence of Habermas' reasoning, which constitutes his original contribution. He draws our attention to the fact that, as things stand in the model represented by the diagram above, Secular Reason enjoys a paramount position, a common platform towards which all other sub-units of society must work in order to be heard. The arrows in the diagram are significant. They all point one way. Habermas challenges precisely this asymmetry between the level of Secular Reason and the level of faith-based reasoning. He argues that democracy will be more genuine when the Secular Reasoner is not exonerated from the obligation to translate. Secularists, in line with Enlightenment attitudes, often look down disdainfully at religious justification. They see it as some form of cultural fossil. Democracy is moving away from this set-up. Secularists will need to learn how to live with religious views that are not fossils. Habermas explains this point by saying that secularists, just like any other sub-unit of society, need to make an effort. They need to see their disagreement with religion as a *reasonable* disagreement. The move towards a more genuine democracy involves the transformation of disdainful agnostics into appreciative agnostics. The proposed dynamic role of reason in a mature democracy can therefore be represented thus:



How is all this relevant to the role of intellectuals in Maltese society today? Few people have doubts about the rapid changes Maltese culture and society is undergoing. Few people have doubts about the increasing sense of moral and religious relativism. Such relativism is often associated with a distorted understanding of the rights of the individual. Often without knowing it, many individuals endorse Kant's view that human beings will only gain maturity once they start thinking for themselves, once they start breaking off the tutelage of the 'guardians' intent on telling others what to think and how to live.⁸ Maltese individuals of various cultural and social backgrounds are often heard saying that one needs to think things through for oneself. It seems to me that Habermas offers us a way out of this naïve picture. He reminds us of the possibility of *shared* reason. This insight is especially important for the young, who are often assailed by options of all kinds and, at the same time, deprived of the means to decide well, deprived of the wisdom to choose. The outcome is often a kind of apathy. They replace the task of reasoning with the blind following of the majority view.⁹ It seems plausible to conclude, therefore, that one important aspect of the role of intellectuals in Malta includes the support for a genuine democracy modelled on shared reasoning. The quality of public debate is crucial. It impacts on all levels of culture ranging from policy-making

8. E. Kant, 'Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?' [1784]; trans.: 'Answering the question: What is Enlightenment?' URL: <http://sap.ereau.de/kant/what_is_enlightenment/>

9. Democracy does not oblige citizens to set aside their personal convictions. For a clear statement about this point, see John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, §69.

to commentary on film, drama, art and literature. If there isn't a satisfactory level of literacy and familiarity with critical questions, then intellectuals and educators should feel challenged to do more.

Let me now recapitulate and conclude. My original question was: what role can be played by Maltese intellectuals in the public sphere? My reply can be summarised in three points. First, I argued that Maltese society is moving from being highly rigid to being highly informal, and that it is at present somewhere in between. This position augurs well for any creativity to be appreciated rationally. Second, civic courage is always needed especially in situations of whistle-blowing. I highlighted the fact that whistle-blowing is more effective if the whistle-blowers are reputable intellectuals, and if they act in a group. And third, I argued that intellectuals are called to help youth arrive at a richer kind of democratic living, one based on shared reasoning where no sub-group is exonerated from the obligation to understand others. Have I said all there is to say about this topic? Certainly not. But if some of the points I have raised serve to stimulate personal reflection, debate and discussion, I would be more than satisfied.