



Deposited via The University of Sheffield.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/136268/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Zbinden, K. (2018) "Man of No Party": Tzvetan Todorov and intellectual engagement. *South Central Review*, 35 (2). pp. 43-59. ISSN: 0038-321X

<https://doi.org/10.1353/scr.2018.0016>

---

© 2018 South Central Review. This is an author produced version of a paper subsequently published in South Central Review. Uploaded in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy.

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

## “Man of No Party”: Tzvetan Todorov and Intellectual Engagement

---

“Engagement” has a very specific resonance in French. On the one hand, since the Dreyfuss affair, it is immediately associated with the general notion of intellectual, while, on the other hand, it is closely bound to the figure of Jean-Paul Sartre and existentialism. This article will not engage (no pun intended) with the thought of Sartre, even though his shadow always lurks in the background, but perhaps slightly unexpectedly with that of Tzvetan Todorov’s.

The article will seek to draw out Todorov’s conception of the intellectual’s role from a range of works spanning more than three decades. Although he is well-known within literary theoretical circles, it seems that the details of his intellectual development are less commonly known. Therefore, a very brief overview of his intellectual biography will help define his intellectual practice as well as the conception of intellectual engagement which we can derive from his body of work. In the latter part of the article I will compare and contrast his definition of the role of the intellectual with that of other prominent intellectuals.<sup>1</sup>

A quick search on Google associates the following terms with the query “Tzvetan Todorov”: “theory”, “the fantastic”, “narrative”, “narrative theory book”, “the conquest of America”, “the fantastic pdf”, “quotes”, “film theory”. Of course, search engines in particular and even the Internet in general cannot be credited to be the most accurate research criteria by academic standards but this gives us a sense if not of what his intellectual activity is widely perceived to be dealing with, at least in the Anglo-American world, but at any rate of what people who take the trouble to look

him up are interested in or expecting to find. In brief, this would seem to be an intuitively accurate reflection of how people have seen and continue to see him. There may well be a major flaw in this reasoning, loosely based on a Google algorithm, but it probably gives an indication of which of his works American syllabi reference in their undergraduate courses the most and by default in which of the disciplines he has engaged with his influence appears strongest. If this is indeed the case, the balance tips predominantly towards his early, structuralist works.

The most commonly searched terms on Google do not give us an incorrect image of Todorov's intellectual activity, only one frozen in time. Todorov edited a collection of texts by the Russian Formalists and wrote the most successful and complete analysis to this day of fantastic literature. These two works were published, respectively, in 1966 and in 1970.

In the decade which followed, he co-founded with Gérard Genette the series at Le Seuil entitled "Poétique" and together they can be credited with some of the most penetrating analyses of narratives of the 1970s and for the "birth" of narratology ("*narratologie*"). Those among you familiar with Bakhtin's thought know that Todorov wrote what was for years the definitive introduction to Bakhtin (*Mikhail Bakhtine: Le Principe dialogique*), at least in France.<sup>2</sup> This book was phenomenally successful: although it is now out of print in French (Bakhtin's star has waned a little in France), in English it went into eleven reprints. Although it was bought and referenced a lot, it was not read very attentively. There are some sizeable problems with Todorov's interpretation of Bakhtin, it is true, but also some very interesting finds which went largely unnoticed at the time. Interestingly, this book does not come

up in the most common search terms associated with Todorov. One reason could be that his reading of Bakhtin was dominated by the trends that actually come up in the search box, in other words a structuralist approach. However, this is a contentious point, which I have explored at length elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, his *Conquest of America*, published in 1982, which truly inaugurates his change of vision and approach as a literary theorist now appears in the most commonly searched terms (a year or so after his death).<sup>4</sup> In this work, he analyses the narratives of the conquest of the Americas: the conquistadors' memoirs, the missionaries' texts and some native accounts. He develops a semiotic explanation for the surprising success of the few hundred conquistadors opposed to the millions of natives. In his interpretation of these texts, Todorov brings to light the sophisticated understanding of the Europeans, in particular Cortès, of the ways in which communication can be manipulated to achieve a certain goal. In short, this use of communication takes into consideration the Other and how he or she will understand and interpret the messages. It also relies on a fairly sophisticated awareness of the Other's worldview, what the Other may or may not know, and how to take advantage of any blind spots. The Europeans, especially Cortès, are masters at subjecting all their communications to the objective of conquering the land, the people and the gold. This book functions as a turning point in Todorov's *oeuvre* because it already posits one of the most important aspects of his thought: in *The Conquest of America*, Todorov places literature and narratives at the center of his enquiry, but this enquiry is no longer focused on the mechanics of narratives. It seeks on the contrary to enlighten us and broaden our understanding of the world and of others. It is a historical enquiry, which uses as its material, if not quite literature in the narrow sense of the word, at

least narratives, native chronicles and written testimonies. In this, it does not conform to recognisable norms of historical research, since it applies the methodologies of literary research. Literature appears here, as in much of Todorov's later writing, as the privileged medium to access knowledge about ourselves, others, our past and the world (in this he is in total agreement with Sartre). This is in embryonic form what Todorov will later define as "dialogic criticism", to which I will return in a moment.

While this work has recently appeared in the list of most commonly searched terms, and some of his more recent works don't: among them, *Les Morales de l'histoire* (*The Morals of History*), *Face à l'extrême* (*Facing the Extreme*), *Nous et les autres* (*On Human Diversity*), as well as all his works on French Humanist thought: on Constant, Rousseau, Montaigne, on the Enlightenment, on democracy, on painting: including Goya, the Dutch masters, esp. Rembrandt, and more recently on social issues which affect us, his readers, now from military intervention abroad to terrorism and islamophobia.

Why are we lagging so far behind? Is it a general fact that academia and the educated public take a number of decades to digest thought and books and will have more or less caught up with his thought in forty years from now? Is it incredibly sensitive material, which harbors enormous potential for subversion and is best ignored? While all these questions may be to a degree answered with a yes, it is clear that there is more to it. And we need to turn to his definition of the role and the function of the intellectual to address the problem correctly.

In *The Morals of History* (*Les Morales de l'histoire*) Todorov starts his examination of the role and importance of ethics in the humanities – "histoire" plays on the double French meaning of "story" and "history" while the whole expression (*la morale de l'histoire*) designates the moral teaching of a story – with a historical survey of the relationship between the natural sciences, the human sciences, the questions of truth and of the good. Even though Todorov criticizes the scientific view that science discovers the truth, only to debunk it by clarifying that science operates by creating falsifiable hypotheses, he does adhere to the commonly held conception of the separation of the natural and the human sciences which is at the origin of our modern academic and research institutions and which can be traced back to the neo-Kantian philosophical tradition and the construction of academic disciplines in the nineteenth century. This separation is based on the nature of the object of study, an object in the natural sciences, but another subject in the humanities. Todorov then refines the distinction by bringing together the natural and the human sciences and claiming that they both have as their horizon of enquiry, or research goal, the search for truth, although truth itself may well never be attainable or complete. And this search for truth in turn leads to ideological and ethical choices: he writes in *Literature and its Theorists* that "[a]nyone who accepts the principle of a shared search for truth is already practicing dialogic criticism". He further explains that "one's own opinion expressed in dialogue with the text under examination is the expression of a responsible ethics".<sup>5</sup> There is therefore no avoiding the moral dimension not only in the intellectual's work but also in the critic's.

This ethical dimension of research inquiry is central to the role of the intellectual in Todorov's work. To Leo Strauss's universalism and Max Weber's diversity, Todorov

opposes the synthesizing position of Raymond Aron, which reconciles facts and values and the search for truth not as a material given but as an aspiration towards universality. In this way, one can overcome the incompatibility between philosophy and politics, in other words, the incompatibility between on the one hand the search for truth and justice and on the other hand the defense of local interests, in other words politics.<sup>6</sup> In a short piece entitled “Modern Gadflies” (“*Les Taons modernes*”), included in *The Morals of History*, and which follows the debate about values, Todorov expounds his conception of the intellectual’s role in more detail.

Drawing on the imagery of the gadfly from Plato’s *Socrates’s Apology*, Todorov places at the center of his definition of the intellectual the critical role of the intellectual, who constantly must pressure or sting his peers and contemporary society more broadly to keep to their ideals.<sup>7</sup> Of course, the title itself is just such a sting: in French it sounds identical to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty’s journal, *Les Temps modernes*. The role of the intellectual, as Todorov theorises it in this short text, is opposed to both the researcher’s (which the English term “*academic*” would probably best translate) and to the activist’s. He playfully divides up the day from 9 to 5 for the academic and from 5 to 9 for the activist, thus emphasizing the possible coexistence and alternation of these two roles within a single individual’s life. Interestingly, this division of the day’s labor seems to exclude the possibility that academic research could constitute activism. Perhaps, this reveals more about Todorov’s conception of the intellectual than may appear at first sight. Academic research deals with universals whereas activism necessarily defends local interests, although in some cases they can be of global significance, such as the protection of the environment and the fight against climate change or the defense of human rights. In today’s globalized world,

issues such as climate change and neoliberal economic exploitation of vast areas of the world for the benefit of the “North”, appear a lot less local than previous definitions of political activism might entail. However, one could argue that local interests, even in the narrow sense, usually have a more universal value at some level: for example, an activist may be resisting the construction of a nuclear reactor in his/her area, not just because it affects local people but also because he/she considers nuclear power dangerous and opposes it wherever it comes from (fracking is another example which comes to mind). Activism by nature has to involve some form of action; and how can one act in abstraction from all localisation? Works by Naomi Klein or Noam Chomsky debunk in exemplary fashion the notion that academic research and activism are incompatible. But there is more to Todorov’s definition of the intellectual than this. He defines the third role, that of the intellectual, in the following way: the necessity for the specialist of the human mind (“*l’esprit humain*”) and its works to give account of the values underlying his/her work and of their relation with the values of society (Todorov, *Les Morales des l’histoire*, p. 358). He goes on to write that:

the intellectual confronts the particular which we all experience with the universal and creates a space in which we can discuss the legitimacy of our values. He (sic) refuses to see truth reduced as much to the pure adequation to facts which the academic claims for himself as to truth-revelation, or the faith of the militant; on the contrary, he aspires to a truth of unveiling and *consensus*, towards which we get close by practicing reflexive examination and *dialogue*. (Todorov, *Les Morales de l’histoire*, pp. 358-59, my emphases).<sup>8</sup>

Before we look in more detail at this specification of the role of the intellectual, it is important to note two terms: *consensus* and *dialogue*. *Dialogue* has been particularly fashionable since the ascent of Bakhtin in American academic discourse in the 1980s; but it has far deeper roots stretching as far back as Antiquity and the practice of Socratic dialogue. With the concept of dialogue, Todorov grants either the ideas he is discussing, or their author, equal status with his own ideas or himself, and posits the discovery of truth as the ultimate aim of the exercise, much as Socrates did. With *consensus*, he goes beyond the Socratic mold and accepts that the other's ideas may be as equally *valid* in that process in the sense that they contribute just as much to the aim of discovering the truth (although, it has to be noted, both the dialogic framework and truth as the horizon of enquiry automatically exclude absolute relativism). He is therefore faithful to the neo-Kantian background of Bakhtin's conception of dialogue, which rests on a subject-subject relation.

To return to the quotation above, it appears that the intellectual's role and activity is not merely the combination of the academic's and the activist's, but is in fact of a different order. The very function of the intellectual is to "judge the real in comparison to an ideal" in Todorov's own words, and if this seems just a little too abstract, the following quotation might explain what Todorov has in mind more specifically: "Today the typical intellectual [...] addresses the whole of society, which he would rather represent than the State."<sup>9</sup> In other words, his/her activity is purely ideological and does not meddle with politics. The role of the intellectual is therefore closely interconnected to the media, which enable this link between the intellectual and his society: the media here include books, the press, radio and television.<sup>10</sup>

This is of course very reminiscent of Sartre's 1947 work *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (*What is Literature?*) in which he extolls the power of the media: newspapers will give an author a thirty-fold readership; radio, the BBC in this case, gave Sartre's *Huis Clos* a twenty-fold audience while it had been censored on stage in England; cinema's impact is even more spectacular when one considers film adaptations of novels which only had a very small initial print run but are then watched by millions.<sup>11</sup> This unprecedented reach and exposure would seem, at least to the untrained eye, to bring unprecedented power. However, Sartre immediately tones down this optimistic assessment. Only a few thousands of the newspaper readers will have the curiosity to seek out and buy the author's other works, where the best of his talent is expressed; the English theatre-goers would have willfully chosen to attend Sartre's play, whereas the radio audience is only switching on to the program by habit and will forget the play, never mind its message, as soon as it is finished. Finally, cinemagoers are no better treated in Sartre's pessimistic assessment of mass media: the original novel will only appear as a more or less faithful commentary of the film on which the latter is nevertheless based.<sup>12</sup> Sartre seems to condemn mass media without appeal, and perhaps unjustly. After all, he must have had some form of belief in the medium when he founded *Libération* in order to give a voice to the people, as its first issue pompously claimed it would on 5 February 1973 (it is true that initially at least the newspaper was free from advertisements and shareholders and could therefore justifiably claim a degree of independence). In contrast, the social media platform Twitter announced in November 2017 that it would double the accepted length of its tweet from the current 140 characters to 280 in order to woe back users and advertisers. So financial imperatives do not just shape the content but also the format

of social media. We can only speculate what Sartre would have made of our contemporary media culture, as well as of the advances of Web 2 technologies and social media. Now, not only the intellectual can benefit from the unprecedented power of the media to disseminate ideas but also the man in the street can have his message amplified by the fortune of tweets, retweets, hashtags etc. to reach, potentially, millions.

But to return to Todorov's appraisal of the media, the important criterion here is pluralism: the media needs to be independent from power (be it political or economic) and represent as wide a variety of opinions and interests as possible. This text was published in French in 1991, before the advent of the Internet and its plethora of blogs and social media sites, but at a time when the media was already increasingly in the hands of large corporations, which had unprecedented influence over politics. The owner of a large media empire and several television channels had not been elected president of a European nation-state; here in Britain Tony Blair had not enjoyed a landslide victory at the 1997 general elections possibly thanks to Rupert Murdoch's (and more specifically *The Sun*'s) backing of New Labor. More recently, the Brexit campaign had not yet been won by the conflation of huge financial interests, savvy use of Facebook analytics to predict voter behavior and a media campaign run largely on falsehoods and sound bites. However, I think that Todorov's description of the media is more that of an ideal than a reality. In the more recent *The Inner Enemies of Democracy*, he dwells on the unprecedented power of mass media, which by bombarding us from morning to night day in day out with the same message restrict our margin of freedom to form our own opinions.<sup>13</sup> He points out that nowadays,

provided one is rich enough, one can purchase television and radio channels, newspapers, in multiples even and control what they say:

The final result is that he [the media mogul] is no longer looking to persuade but to manipulate; and it is no longer a democracy but a plutocracy: it is not the people that holds power, but simply money.<sup>14</sup>

And to ground this diagnosis Todorov draws “on a recent example”: Rupert Murdoch’s close ties with David Cameron (and previously with Tony Blair) and the *News of the World* phone hacking and bribery of Scotland Yard officers scandals.

Noam Chomsky has tirelessly explored the construction of propaganda and the way in which the news is dictated and shaped by market economics, controlled by and profiting only a few. Audience ratings, or its tyranny to be more precise, are crucial in the current mass media. Profit comes before information value. Although he is primarily focusing on the state of the media in the United States, the situation is not much better in Europe. Edgar Morin says nothing else when he explains why he is not a “media-friendly intellectual”:

Today the danger is that you are part of a debate and the presenter interrupts you without cease because he thinks that one must not bore the viewer by talking too long. There are more and more constraints, so-called media-based, but which in my opinion lead to entertainment, which is very bad. One notes a real decline on this score.<sup>15</sup>

In spite of Morin’s alarming diagnostics Todorov brings some hope to an otherwise gloomy situation. For him, the function of the intellectual is always two-fold: critical

and constructive. Here is it important to look in detail at how these two different aspects combine to form a fully-fledged role. For Todorov, the critical function of the intellectual supersedes that of the “nihilist” (“*la fonction de pourfendeur et de négateur*” in Todorov’s words) who wholly rejects present society and either considers the future or the past in order to condemn the present. On the contrary, the critical function of the intellectual “refer[s] to the constitutive principles of present society—in this instance, democratic principles—in order to criticize their imperfect realization in everyday life.”<sup>16</sup> The intellectual’s job is therefore not just critical but also constructive. Comparison to an ideal should not lead to blanket condemnation of reality but to an informed and sophisticated critique of the actual failings of our governments in view of improvement. This leads Todorov to state:

Intellectuals judge present society not from without, but by reviving the intensity of its principles; they call not for a radical revolution, nor a return to the past, but for the reanimation of an ideal that has been extinguished. To act in such a way is more than a right: it is a duty imposed on them by the very position they occupy in the heart of democratic society.<sup>17</sup>

Todorov’s distrust of politics and government mandates for intellectuals extends to the enrolment of an intellectual for a political party, which has defined intellectual engagement for decades. Over Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, Todorov chooses David Rousset or Germaine Tillion. Rousset, former political prisoner at Buchenwald, tirelessly fights for the denunciation of Soviet camps, the Gulag, after his liberation. His former communist comrades cut all contact with him, and the communist press

insults him (*Les Lettres françaises*, which he successfully takes to court for libel). As Todorov recounts:

În 1950 Sartre and Merleau-Ponty published in *Les Temps modernes* a piece entitled “Les Jours de notre vie” (The days of our life) by which they broke off all relations with their comrade.: “The truth is that experience, even of something as absolute as the horror of the concentration camps, cannot determine a political position,” they wrote, so as to justify their refusal to condemn the Soviet Union – thereby providing us with a striking example of the political irresponsibility that was characteristic of French intellectuals of the period.<sup>18</sup>

As we know, Sartre’s position on the Gulag will cost him the following year his friendship with Albert Camus and fuel Camus to write that he has had enough of being criticised by people “who ever only put their armchair in the direction of History”.<sup>19</sup>

Tillion, on the other hand, leads a no less remarkable, and inspiring, life. Joining the French Resistance in 1940 during the Nazi invasion of France after the French capitulation, she was arrested in 1942 and eventually transferred to Ravensbrück, where her own mother was to be killed in March 1945. Tillion barely survives until her liberation in May 1945. Like Rousset, after her release, she does not remain politically inactive but on the contrary joins him in his fight against other concentrationary structures in Eastern Europe. She goes to Algeria when the war breaks out in 1954 and endeavours to save as many lives as possible, regardless of

political affiliations. She denounces the use of torture in Algeria by the French military. Not just a militant, Tillion was an ethnographer by training and wrote numerous books not just about her fieldwork in Algeria and Africa but also on Ravensbrück. She died in 2008 at the age of 101 and in February 2014 President Hollande announced that her ashes would be interred in the Pantheon, in recognition of her importance in the Resistance, an honour granted her by the nation, which Todorov and anthropologist Christian Bromberger had argued for in *Le Monde*.<sup>20</sup>

In *Devoirs et Délices*, Todorov's intellectual autobiography in the form of conversations, he explains why he was so shy of any form of involvement with political action, including his shunning the demonstrations of May '68, as directly related to his experience of totalitarianism. In effect, he had grown up to believe all politics to be if not malevolent, then at least frivolous and pointless. Furthermore, while his family was living under totalitarianism in Bulgaria, he felt compelled not to endanger them with his actions, which is both responsible and understandable. More recently, in an interview with Pascal Boniface, he has defined the position of the intellectual in slightly different terms, which may cast some light on the present discussion:

On the one hand the intellectual has a certain competence in a particular domain of study, such as the different sciences (natural or social) or in a form of creation, which demands a certain knowledge of the world too. On the other hand he feels concerned by social issues of the society in which he lives. Intellectuals are those who hold in their hands both ends simultaneously.<sup>21</sup>

He continues with references to some of the intellectuals he values most: Tony Judt, Edward Said, Vassilii Grossman, Raymond Aron and François Furet, to name just a few. The tension between activism and intellectual enquiry is permanent. Even Said is said to have gradually relinquished intellectual enquiry for activism at the end of his life.

This aspiration to truth is put into question if one embraces a cause and one wants to subject everything to it. The position of the intellectual is somewhat uncomfortable, fragile, because he is pulled between these two extremes. It is a constant threat: if he does become a pure militant, he is no longer an intellectual.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, what Todorov is hinting at is the question of intellectual honesty or integrity. As an intellectual, one must remain impartial even if the truth one uncovers goes against one's convictions. One must not massage it in any way to make it fit our worldview or aims. When asked whether it is acceptable to lie for a greater good, Todorov predictably gives a nuanced but uncompromising answer:

It is unacceptable if one wants to remain an intellectual in the sense given above, that is as somebody who tries to simultaneously hold both ends: concerned by the public interest (*la cause publique*) but trying to remain faithful to his ideal of searcher for the truth.<sup>23</sup>

But when asked directly in one of his last interviews about the division he introduces between the search for truth of the scholar and the political activism of the militant, he replies, half convincingly:

But I think the first two [Said and Chomsky], at least, had two different elements to their work. Said, whom I knew as a friend, on the one hand wrote scholarly books in which he analyzed texts from the past, and on the other hand was a member of the Palestinian parliament in exile and went to meetings with Yasser Arafat and other Palestinian leaders. The two types of activities were related, but they did not merge. If we had had the feeling that Said, in *Orientalism* and his other works, was playing fast and loose with history, then we would not have been very happy. We would have considered that irresponsible. ... Let me just interrupt what I was saying to recall a quotation from Rousseau that I like to use from time to time: “the man of the party is for that very reason an enemy of the truth.” So, if you accept the truth – that is to say, the attempt to be as fair and accurate as possible – as the ultimate criterion, then you are no longer a man of the party, since you are putting something above the interests of the party or any kind of bias. So you have to choose. Chomsky made this change a little later on, not from moment to moment but over the course of his life. Between the ages of twenty and fifty he was essentially a linguist, and then he became a political commentator whose work I read with great interest. I value his opinions very much, but all that has nothing to do with his theory of syntactic structures and generative grammar. And the same goes for the others. Naomi Klein is the most difficult example, in that all her books are both well researched and activist in nature: they are written in favor of a particular thesis. But in her case, too, I think that if we found out there was a conflict between the two dimensions of her work, we would be displeased by the conflation.<sup>24</sup>

Although he clearly accepts that in Klein's case both functions, scholarly and activist, are embedded in each other, inseparable, it does not lead him to reconsider his theoretical position. The cases of Said and Chomsky are interesting in that they indeed maintain a degree of separation between their academic activities and their activism. But this argument does not totally convince either. Indeed, when Chomsky uses his scholarly practice, expertise and reputation to investigate the workings of the US government in detail and pull apart the false ideology which conceals their real intentions and motivations, it is precisely his status as a "public intellectual", and professor at MIT, that guarantees the soundness of his research and the truthfulness of his critique. The fact that he built his career on structural linguistics seems irrelevant. It appears, though, that what Rousseau had in mind was slightly different: one cannot be partisan while searching for the truth. But one can dedicate one's research to uncovering the facts about labor exploitation embedded in globalized economics or the involvement of various U.S. administrations in war crimes.

However, in the past ten years, Todorov's intellectual production has diversified into another sphere: political commentary. Although he has contributed to newspapers on occasion over the past two decades, in particular to *Le Monde*, Todorov has published (since 2003) three books that do not focus on, or even consider, literature, but on the contrary provide detailed and penetrating analyses of current international affairs and specific political events.<sup>25</sup> These books are: *Le Nouveau Désordre mondial* (2003), which examines the evidence in favor and against the then impending War on Iraq (and clearly argues against it); *La Peur des barbares (The Fear of Barbarians)* (2008), which dissects the rise of populism and concurrently of islamophobia in Western Europe and of Islamic fundamentalism; and *Les Ennemis intimes de la*

*démocratie* (2011) in which he analyses the ways in which “freedom” is used and transformed in order to further geopolitical aims, and how our core democratic values are thereby undermined.

Although Todorov is not concerned in these works with the definition of the role of the intellectual, some passages enable us to further characterize it. I will focus on Todorov’s treatment of the use of torture in the last few years, during what George W. Bush has called “the War on Terror”, as an immediate response to 9/11. Of course, the United States has long used torture abroad, particularly in Central and Latin America, as detailed by Chomsky in numerous lectures and books; but it seems appropriate to signal here that Great Britain too has a history of practicing torture, in Northern Ireland, but according to Ian Cobain, author of *Cruel Britannia*, in London as well, in the so-called “London Cage” (as it was known), in other words “the London office of the Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Centre”, a torture center run by MI19 (the War Office section gathering intelligence from enemy prisoners of war), where “the British military had operated throughout the 1940s, in complete secrecy, in a row of Victorian villas in one of the exclusive neighborhoods of London [Kensington Palace Gardens]”.<sup>26</sup> Thousands of Germans, as is to be expected, were tortured there, but also British fascists, at least until November 1940, when interrogations of British nationals stopped. The center remained in use until 1948, according to Cobain. The International Red Cross initially had no idea about its existence, but once it became aware of it, was, it would seem, powerless or unwilling to do anything about it. However, once it was closed, the British continued their practices, this time in internment camps in Germany, where allegedly the treatment of prisoners was considerably worse.<sup>27</sup> This is very different from the situation in the

first decade of the twenty-first century, as then torture is acknowledged in all but name and even made legal.<sup>28</sup>

To return to Todorov, in a discussion of the US's routine and legalized recourse to torture in the Army (as long as it is not referred to as "torture") in *Les Ennemis intimes de la démocratie*, he details the damage that the legalization of torture causes the torturer and the fact that numerous groups of professionals are implicated in its practice: judicial advisers to the government, psychiatrists, doctors etc. He then adds: "At the same time, university professors produce moral, legal or philosophical justifications for the use of torture", and concludes that "a State that legalizes torture is no longer democratic".<sup>29</sup> We have to go back to *The Fear of Barbarians* for a more detailed discussion of the topic. In a memo (commonly referred to as the *Torture Memo*), dated 1 August 2002, signed by Jay Bybee but written by John Yoo, Professor of Law at Berkeley and addressed to Alberto Gonzales, legal advisor to President George W. Bush, a redefinition of the term "torture" is put forward in order to posit the legality of certain practices of the Army, thus no doubt increasing its use.<sup>30</sup> However, Todorov goes on to write that open reference to and support of torture became increasingly common among media pundits and even Republican candidates for the 2008 Presidential elections. Even more worryingly, perhaps, he points out that "The subject has also entered academic debate and there are renowned professors [willing] to provide judicial, political and moral arguments in favor of torture. We can read a sample of them in the collective volume *Torture: A Collection*' (published in 2004 in NY and Oxford by OUP)." Todorov goes on to name names: Alan Dershowitz from Harvard Law School, Jean Bethke Elshtain from the University of Chicago, Oren Gross from the University of Minnesota, Sanford

Levinson from the University of Texas, Richard Posner from the Chicago Law School. He then declares that:

The condemnation of torture ceases to be obvious and becomes a question about which opinions diverge, as the title of the volume *The Torture Debate in America* shows. One can imagine that soon chairs and departments teaching the why and the how of torture could be created...<sup>31</sup>

...

Although not all academics involved in the publications support or justify torture (some clearly condemn it unambiguously), Todorov clearly finds it objectionable that the subject of torture can become a matter for debate.

These academics, who advise the US Government on how to define and carry out their “coercive practices” in order to avoid future lawsuits, would certainly fall within the category of the “technocratic and policy-oriented intellectuals”, responsible and serious thinkers who devote themselves to the constructive work of shaping policy within established institutions and to ensuring that indoctrination of the young proceeds on course”, as Chomsky puts it in his article “The Responsibility of Intellectuals, Redux” published in the *Boston Review* in 2011. These “expert” intellectuals not only contribute to perpetuating the *status quo*, they also shape it!<sup>32</sup> To them, Chomsky opposes what he calls “value-oriented” intellectuals: “It seems to be close to a historical universal that conformist intellectuals, the ones who support official aims and ignore or rationalize official crimes, are honored and privileged in their own societies, and the value-oriented punished in one or another way.” He goes on to explain:

Since power tends to prevail, intellectuals who serve their governments are considered responsible, and value-oriented intellectuals are dismissed or denigrated. At home that is.<sup>33</sup>

This leads him to reflect on what responsibility can be apportioned to intellectuals:

As for the responsibility of intellectuals, there does not seem to be much to say beyond some simple truths. Intellectuals are typically privileged—merely an observation about usage of the term. Privilege yields opportunity, and opportunity confers responsibilities. An individual then has choices.<sup>34</sup>

In fact, what Chomsky seems to hint at is that the intellectual has an enhanced responsibility towards the society which gives him/her subsistence for his/her intellectual activity to uncover government abuses, cover ups, policies which go against individual human rights, etc. With not just the education to empower the intellectual, but also access to resources and abundance of time to investigate issues of social concern, the intellectual's responsibility to his/her peers is to direct his/her intellectual activity to defend the public interest (rather than to further his/her own careers or nurture personal privileges). It seems that this would be a conception of the intellectual's role with which Todorov would appear at ease.

It is time now to ponder on the question of "How much damage can a pen really do?" as Marshall Mathers, more widely known as American rapper Eminem, interpellates in "Who knew," in which a typically ironic and cynical narrator declines responsibility for his lyrics in view of the general hypocrisy and moral bankruptcy of contemporary American society.<sup>35</sup> If we consider Todorov's position, from his critique of Sartre's endorsement of the PCF, even after he knew of the existence of

the Gulag, or if we recall Chomsky's discussion of the critical intellectual's responsibility, the answer can only be: "A lot!".

We can now attempt to articulate the concept of *engagement* more clearly and move away from the now clichéd view of the *engaged intellectual* as a mouthpiece for a political party to a more nuanced understanding of intellectual engagement, one which at once embraces Todorov's sophisticated, analytical stance and comes out of the shadows of intellectual detachment to defend, indeed further, its underpinning values. Todorov, perhaps thanks to his slightly marginal position, eschewing fashions and the glare of mass media, has helped us define intellectual engagement as a more sober, potentially less exciting, but decidedly more grounded conception of the intellectual's role, one that would take the search for and exposition of truth as its ideal and a constant reevaluation of its activity in relation to our core democratic values as a relentless practice. The main tools of our trade may be pen, paper and ink, or more likely word processor, computer and printer, but that should not diminish our sense of participation in a common goal of striving to make our societies and our world more intelligible and hopefully help change them for the better. Therefore, isn't it time to think about how much good a pen can really do?

Karine Zbinden

Bakhtin Centre and French Studies

University of Sheffield

k.zbinden@sheffield.ac.uk

---

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps congruently with his notoriety in France as a public intellectual addressing a wide, educated audience rather than a narrow, specialised academic readership, he has not been the subject of many critical academic publications and his position remains somewhat marginal. Exceptions to this relatively low presence as a subject of other scholars' inquiries, one need

mention: "A Symposium on 'Living Alone Together'", *New Literary History* 27:1 (1996); "Tzvetan Todorov and the Writing of History", *South Central Review* 15: 3-4 (1997); "Tzvetan Todorov: The Replacement of Ethics by Aesthetics", *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 31:2 (2004) and *Tzvetan Todorov: Thinker and Humanist*, edited by Henk de Berg, and Karine Zbinden (Rochester, NY: Camden House, forthcoming 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Todorov, Tzvetan, *Mikhail Bakhtine: le principe dialogique (suivi de : Ecrits du Cercle Bakhtine)* (Paris: Seuil, 1981). English translation: *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*, trans. by Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Zbinden, Karine, *Bakhtin Between East and West: Cross-Cultural Transmission* (London: Legenda, 2006) 92-122.

<sup>4</sup> Todorov, Tzvetan, *La Conquête de l'Amérique: la question de l'autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1982).

<sup>5</sup> Todorov, Tzvetan, *Literature and its Theorists: A Personal View of Twentieth-Century Criticism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 163.

<sup>6</sup> Todorov, Tzvetan, *The Morals of History*. Translated by Alyson Waters (Minneapolis, MN: 1995) 207.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 209-10, emphases mine.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 215 and 216.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>11</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, *What is Literature?* Trans. Bernard Frechman (London and New York: Routledge, 2003 (2001), 187.

<sup>12</sup> Sartre, *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>13</sup> Todorov, Tzvetan, *Les Ennemis intimes de la démocratie* (Paris: Laffont, 2012) 187. All quotations from the French publications are my own translations.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>15</sup> Boniface, Pascal, *Les Intellectuels intègres* (Paris: Jean-Claude Gawsewitch Editeur, 2013) 229-30.

<sup>16</sup> Todorov, *Morals*, 217.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>18</sup> Todorov, Tzvetan, *Hope and Memory: Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. Translated by David Bellos (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2003) 149.

<sup>19</sup> Camus, Albert, "Lettre au Directeur des *Temps modernes*", *Les Temps modernes* 82 (August 1952): 317-333.

<sup>20</sup> Christian Bromberger and Tzvetan Todorov, "Germaine Tillion doit entrer au Panthéon", *Le Monde*, 28 June 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Todorov, Tzvetan, "Sortir du cercle étroit de consensus politico-médiatique français." In *Les Intellectuels intègres*, 264-284 (264-65).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 281-32.

<sup>24</sup> . De Berg, Henk and Karine Zbinden, "Interview with Tzvetan Todorov." In *Thinker and Humanist*. The phrase comes from Rousseau's *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques*, published posthumously in 1782. *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, ed. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, trans. By Judith R. Bush, Christopher Kelly, and Roger D. Masters (Hanover, NH, and London: UP of New England, 1990) vol. 1, 237.

<sup>25</sup> This is not an exhaustive list of his recent publications. He has also written about totalitarianism, literature and art. But the three works mentioned in the text take a new approach, one that exemplifies his definition of the "critical intellectual function" as he outlined it in *The Morals of History*.

<sup>26</sup> Ian Cobain, "Torture UK: Why Britain has Blood on its Hands." *The Guardian*, 19 October 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2012/oct/19/torture-uk-britain-blood-government>.

<sup>27</sup> The horrific past of the three houses in question has not affected their retail value: one of them was bought by Lakshmi Mittal for £57m and is one of the most expensive houses in London (Tom Peterkin. "Lakshmi Mittal to Buy Britain's Most Expensive House for £117 Million." *The Telegraph*, May 23, 2008. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2014300/Lakshmi-Mittal-to-buy-Britains-most-expensive-house-for-117-million.html>.) Interestingly, Kensington is on land which belongs to the Crown.

<sup>28</sup> President Obama banned the use of torture by the CIA as one of the first acts of his presidency. After the release of the Senate Report he described torture as "not just wrong but also counterproductive" and in this respect is at odds with MI6 and MI5 directors respectively, John Sawers and Eliza Manningham-Buller (who nevertheless condemns it and considers it wrong) ("Torturing terror

suspects produces useful intelligence’ – ex-MI6 director.” *RT*, March 2, 2015. <http://on.rt.com/umfg10>. Duncan, Gardham, “‘Waterboarding worked’ says former MI5 head.” *The Telegraph*, September 8, 2011. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/8751342/Waterboarding-worked-says-former-MI5-head.html>. However, Obama’s record on torture is more mixed than this may suggest. An investigation into the abuse of prisoners wrapped up in 2012 without any charges being brought. Furthermore, Guantánamo Bay detention centre was still open at the end of his second presidential mandate, in part due to redoubled Republican efforts to prevent him from transferring detainees out, not to mention closing down the detention centre (Donna Cassata, “Top GOP Senators Look to Restrict Obama on Guantánamo.” *The Huffington Post*, January 13, 2015). Whether prisoners there still receive harsh treatment or are still subjected to coercive interrogation methods is unknown but there were prisoners detained there without charges for years, like Mohamedou Ould Slahi, a victim of the rendition programme, whose *Guantánamo Diary* was published in heavily redacted form in early 2015 (Mohammedou Ould Slahi, *Guantánamo Diary*, edited by Larry Siems [Edinburgh: Cannongate, 2015]. Slahi was finally released without charge after 14 years of detention and torture on October 17, 2016 (May Bulman, “‘Most Tortured Man in Guantánamo Bay’ Freed without Charge.” *The Independent*, October 20, 2016. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/mohamedou-ould-slahi-guantanamo-bay-most-tortured-man-freed-without-charge-a7371666.html>). President Trump has since “signed an executive order to keep the Guantánamo Bay prison camp open, reversing the policy of the Obama administration” (Julian Borger, “Donald Trump Signs Executive Order to Keep Guantánamo Bay Open.” *The Guardian*, January 30, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jan/30/guantanamo-bay-trump-signs-executive-order-to-keep-prison-open>.)

<sup>29</sup> Todorov, *Les Ennemis intimes*, 78.

<sup>30</sup> Todorov, Tzvetan, *The Fear of Barbarians: Beyond the Clash of Civilisations*. Translated by Andrew Brown. Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 2010. 115.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>32</sup> Perhaps even more shockingly, *The Guardian* reported in April 2015, in the wake of the publication of the Senate Report, that the American Psychological Association (APA) itself, “the largest association representing psychologists in the US” was involved in the justification of the CIA torture programme (Raya Jalabi, “Psychologists Met in Secret with Bush Officials to Help Justify Torture – Report.” *The Guardian*, April 30, 2015). Its involvement cannot be described as marginal or casual, since more than 600 emails between the APA and Bush government officials were disclosed as well as several meetings; moreover, the association also affirmed “that its members could be involved in the interrogation program, without violating APA ethical codes” according to the newspaper, referring to a report by health professionals and human rights activists (Soldz, Stephen, Nathaniel Raymond, and Steven Reisner, “All the President’s Psychologists: The American Psychological Association’s Secret Complicity with the White House and US Intelligence Community in Support of the CIA’s ‘Enhanced’ Interrogation Program.” April 2015. Accessed March 28, 2018. <https://s3.amazonaws.com/s3.documentcloud.org/documents/2069718/report.pdf>).

<sup>33</sup> Noam Chomsky, “The Responsibility of Intellectuals Redux: Using Privilege to Challenge the State.” *Boston Review*, September 1, 2011. <http://bostonreview.net/noam-chomsky-responsibility-of-intellectuals-redux>.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Andre Young (a.k.a. Dr Dre), Mathers, Marshall (a.k.a. Eminem) and Melvin Bradford (a.k.a. Mel-Man), “Who Knew?” Mashall Mathers LP. 2000. Polydor Records. Lyrics accessible: <http://genius.com/Eminem-who-knew-lyrics>.