

## **Collectives of intellectuals: Their cohesiveness, accountability, and who can speak on their behalf.**

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### **Abstract**

As of late, the sociology of intellectuals has made important inroads into its object of study. Much of this has been achieved by problematising the modes of engagement intellectuals undertake and multiplying the types of actor that can be considered to have intellectual authority, going beyond the traditional mould of the 'authoritative' public intellectual. However, relatively few have theorised how intellectuals associate themselves in groups: how collectives, whether in the form of institutions or not, negotiate their public interventions and position themselves cooperatively in the public debate. This paper delves into this issue, with an emphasis on how 'intellectual collectives' reach a common identity and decide who can intervene 'on their behalf' – what we call *prosopopoeia*. Based on positioning theory, and based on two variables (presence of a single organisational basis and purported intellectual cohesiveness), this article contributes to current debates on the sociology of intellectuals by analysing how collectives of intellectuals intervene in the public debate, reach some form of coordination with their peers, police the boundaries of their collective identity, and, in the process, attain a common position across audiences.

Keywords: sociology of intellectuals; intellectual collectives; collective agency; sociology of knowledge; sociology of organisations.

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This article provides a set of reflections to study how intellectuals - broadly understood as those who seek to inform the public debate on issues of public concern - are perceived as being part of collectives. It aims to build a theoretical framework to examine how groups of intellectuals – be they in the form of stable institutions, informal face-to-face groups, or less tangible ‘currents’ – position themselves in relation to others and acquire some form of collective identity and agency, if at times unintentionally. We illustrate the applicability of this model by employing real-life examples and reflect on current tendencies and pressures faced by these collectives. We hope both to contribute to a relatively under-theorised issue in the sociology of intellectuals and to survey – in the context of this special issue on intellectual strategies of engagement – the implications, advantages, and trade-offs involved when intellectuals organise themselves collectively rather than intervene independently.

More specifically, this paper’s primary goal is to reflect on the implications of intellectuals speaking ‘in the name of’ collectives, drawing on the sociology of intellectual interventions of Eyal and Buchholz (2010), and Patrick Baert’s (2015) positioning theory. It will theorise how intellectual collectives come about, their characteristics, how cohesive they can be, what are their advantages, and what are the challenges they face to persist. When speaking of collectives, we do not presuppose that their members necessarily know each other or act in pursuit of a common goal, but merely that they can be identified as working under the same name. We will argue that the public interventions of collectives imply an exercise of *‘prosopopoeia’* – in Greek, the ‘making’ of a ‘face’ or a ‘person’ – through the continued employment of a name which individuals intervene on behalf of, whether purposefully or not.

In other words, we claim that the ‘position’ intellectuals attain for themselves through their interventions can also be applied to collectives through the ‘names,’ ‘brands’ or ‘labels’ they are identified by. This implies that collective ‘names’ are continually performed by individual members and are dependent on those performances, but also that they can be used by individuals to position themselves in relation to these larger groupings. In that vein, one of this paper’s main contributions is a model to distinguish collectives with the help of two variables: the presence of a single organisational basis and the degree of purported intellectual cohesiveness. These variables in turn affect the extent to which an individual can intervene on behalf of a collective – and by extension, whether the latter can be held accountable for the actions of the former. In order to contextualise

these ideas, the following paragraphs survey recent developments in the sociology of intellectuals, situating the issue of collectives within it.

### **The new sociology of intellectual interventions and the place of collectives within it**

In the last decade, the sociology of intellectuals has made substantial headway. Perhaps the most important theoretical-methodological innovations stem from taking the public interventions of intellectuals – their conditions of possibility and their effects – as the main object of study (Baert, 2012; Eyal & Buchholz, 2010). In this literature, intellectual interventions are understood as illocutionary acts with a concrete and context-specific format – e.g., books, academic articles, policy reports, speeches, interviews, op-eds, tweets – that disseminate an interpretation of the state of affairs on an issue to an audience, however narrowly or broadly defined. Interventions are the ‘vehicles’ through which ideas travel, and imply a position, a relevant environment, and a format. In this process, interventions ‘position’ the original ‘intervenor’ in relation to others and, if successful, help said intervenor occupy a recognisable place in the public arena. A focus on interventions as a basic unit of analysis distinguishes this type of sociology of intellectuals from earlier scholarship that understands intellectuals either as an identifiable social group or class with shared characteristics and interests – in the manner of Gouldner (1979) – or a common normative orientation towards ‘speaking truth to power’ – much like Saïd (1994) did. In what amounts to a ‘performative turn,’ the sociology of intellectual interventions focuses on the products of intellectual labour, their context, and their conditions of possibility, rather than attempt to settle who should be considered an intellectual.

The main advantage of these developments is that they allow sidestepping three common pitfalls in earlier literature. First, by concentrating on intellectuals’ public interventions one can avoid implicitly claiming access to the intentions that animate their actions and views. Examining intellectuals’ products instead necessitates a closer focus on what they actually say (and how they say it, in what context, and with which effects) without requiring access to their ultimate aims. After all, it is difficult to have access to ‘intentions.’ and intellectuals often have little control over how their interventions are interpreted. Second, focusing on interventions allows us to move beyond various ill-fated attempts to define the intellectual; for, as Bauman (1989) stated, these efforts are always-already an exercise of self-definition. Third, and relatedly, a focus on interventions can help supersede the allure of ‘declinist’ theories. These claim that public intellectuals are on the wane, either because of their cooptation by a university system that discourages speaking beyond a narrow community of expertise or by the rise of successful competition from

actors whose priorities are not necessarily the advancement of 'pure knowledge' (Jacoby, 2000; Misztal, 2012; Posner, 2003). By zeroing in on the dynamics of interventions instead of on delimiting the 'legitimate' social characteristics or goals of their producers, the sociology of intellectual interventions multiplies who can lay claim to influencing the public debate, including academics, journalists, polemicists, consultants, activists, think tankers, etc.

Among these new actors, collectives and their members in their many forms occupy a central place. After all, with the multiplication of potential 'intervenorers' comes an expansion of the contexts from which interventions may come and the organisational support they may entail. Nevertheless, relatively little work has focused on how intellectuals organise themselves in collectives, whether fleetingly or on a more permanent basis. There is much sociological work on how institutions and organisations come about and take shape (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991), influence the way we think and make decisions (Douglas, 1986), and coordinate themselves and police their public image (Scott, 1995). However, these ideas are rarely applied to intellectuals operating in collectives, and only rarely are the interventions of organisations considered with the same solemnity with which we treat the work of 'public intellectuals.' After all, intellectuals are often seen as the archetypal actors that are not only shaped by institutions and social structures but also shape them themselves.

This relative disconnect between the sociologies of organisations and intellectuals is perhaps expectable. Notwithstanding the influence of canonical theorists of the social organisation of knowledge – notably Bourdieu, Foucault, and Gramsci – still much of our image of 'intellectuals' hinges on the ideals of independence of mind and freedom from social pressures, institutional obligations, and even steadfast political commitments. Since at least Émile Zola's *J'accuse*, intellectuals have often been defined in opposition to *apparatchiks* and followers of the 'party line' (Benda, [1927]2006; see also Collini, 2006). Indeed, Mannheim (1932[1993]) spoke of a 'free-floating intelligentsia,'<sup>1</sup> unconstrained by the social and material bounds that affect most other members of society. This view of the hallmarks and tacit dictums of the 'life of the mind' is frequently, if implicitly, at odds with the perception that participation in organised groups requires a modicum of acquiescence, routine, and compromise, as otherwise collective action and representation would be improbable and impossible to maintain. A paradigmatic case of this reluctance

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<sup>1</sup> Or more precisely 'socially unattached intelligentsia,' from the German *freischwebende Intelligenz* (Mendel, 2006).

to become a permanent part of organisations is Sartre's insistence on remaining a 'fellow traveler' rather than becoming a fully-fledged member of the French Communist Party.

Nevertheless, groups of intellectuals that position themselves as a collective are perhaps becoming ever more ubiquitous, especially when compared to 'authoritative' public intellectuals in the mould of Sartre himself. Much of the public debate, especially that oriented towards expert knowledge, is today mediated by organisations tasked with producing public interventions. Many factors play a part in this prominence of organisations *vis-à-vis* individuals, some of which have been identified by the 'declinist' literature and to which we return at the conclusion of this paper (Baert and Booth, 2012). At any rate, nowadays it is not rare to hear of public interventions by the OECD, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Amnesty International, think tanks, pressure groups, or political movements, made in some sense or other in the name of their membership – even if, conceivably, some within the relevant collective might disagree. By way of illustration, a statement on behalf of an organisation uttered by one of its (often senior) members acting as its public voice is most frequently understood as the *prise de position* of the institution itself rather than of the person concerned.

There is, to be sure, a long tradition of research on the social conditions that underpin intellectual life and the institutions that shape it, much of which focuses on universities and academic disciplines. Central among this body of work is Lewis Coser (1997), who produced a groundbreaking book on the institutional conditions that have supported intellectuals across time; from *rococo* salons in pre-revolutionary France and London coffee houses in the nineteenth century to modern-day university departments and research foundations. According to Coser, the shape of these institutions, and who they accepted or excluded, had a profound effect on the ideas and intellectuals that were likely to thrive. There is also an active scholarly debate on the sociology of the networks of patronage and mentorship of intellectuals (Collins, 2004), as well as on intellectual movements and how they bring about social change (Frickel & Gross, 2005).

While we owe much to this scholarship, our concern is narrower. Rather than focusing on the institutional conditions and resources that shape intellectual interventions, this article dwells on the mechanisms through which collective action and representation are possible in public interventions – on which, to be sure, institutional conditions such as funding are a factor (Gonzalez Hernando and Williams, 2018). That is, we concentrate not only on the social and material underpinning of ideas – an inescapable preoccupation for any sociology of intellectual life – but also on how groups and organisations themselves can be seen as purveyors of ideas. We believe this is important because of two reasons. First,

organisations are increasingly seen to have a role in the public debate *as if* they had ideas and agency of their own. Second, intervening on behalf of collectives implies organisational resources, coordination, and accountability that are often taken for granted when an intervention occurs only on behalf of the individual uttering it.

Pierre Bourdieu's (2001; 2003) work is also of relevance. He framed his theoretico-political mission in the model of Foucault's 'specific intellectuals' (Swartz, 2013), who 'speak truth to power' by recourse to specialised knowledge. However, he went further, championing the ideal of the 'collective intellectual' – which he understood in a pertinent if narrower manner than how we employ the term 'collective.' By 'collective intellectuals' Bourdieu meant specialists working with a certain position within a relatively autonomous field (in his case sociology), that by virtue of said position, intervene in larger public debates in representation of their field. He called this paradoxical position, guided by the rules of a single field but oriented outwards, the 'corporatism of the universal.' By extension, collective intellectuals come in contact and collaborate with actors from other fields and associated skillsets – e.g. arts, politics, journalism. Indeed, he saw his own research as a team effort where individuals contribute towards a common goal by playing to their advantages, employing the metaphor of sports teams (see Lenoir, 2006). In contrast, when we refer to collectives, we simply mean that an intervention is associated with more than one individual by recourse to a common label – and indeed, its 'collective' character might at times not even be intentional.

Building on these ideas, the remainder of this paper is structured in three parts. The first part explores under what conditions intellectual collectives can develop a relatively independent existence and a perceived sense of shared agency. That is, the focus here is on what makes their emergence possible and their permanence likely. The second will concentrate on different factors that influence the shape of intellectual collectives: their organisational and intellectual cohesiveness; and the capacity of some of its members to speak on behalf of the whole membership. This section will also cover issues of accountability: for instance, how do intellectual collectives allow for internal diversity, how do they police their boundaries, and under what conditions do they take the blame for the actions of a member? The last section reflects on current tendencies in collectives acting *qua* intellectuals, drawing implications for the shape the public debate may take in the future.

### **The constitution of collectives as agents**

The first questions to be addressed when dealing with intellectual collectives are how they come about and how they persist over time. Famously, economist Mancur Olson

(2002[1965]) coined the concept of the 'tragedy of the commons' to show that collective action is improbable for utility-maximising individuals seeking public goods, especially in large groups. According to Olson, in collectives, some members are likely to take credit for the work of others or disown their allegiance when facing external challenges or risks. Added to this that differences of opinion within the same group of intellectuals are common, these types of collectives are perhaps especially beset by fissiparous tendencies. Intellectual coordination is, after all, a laborious and precarious achievement, even for the smallest of groups. Further, Olson believed that collective action is only probable if maintained by coercion or as a low-cost by-product of individual action. Otherwise, groups remain 'latent' (i.e. tacit and unorganised), and only short-term cooperation is likely; for instance, to protest a specific policy at a particular juncture. Further, given that intellectuals are often thought of as individualistic, non-conforming, and protective of their autonomy, one could wonder how lasting intellectual collectives are even possible.

Nevertheless, organised groups of intellectuals have a long history, traceable at least to the schools of thought of antiquity structured around sages and their disciples. There are at least two inter-related reasons for the emergence of such groups, a first to do with networks and resources, and a second linked to the risks posed by potential rivals. A good example of the first – which Collins (2004) masterfully analyses – is 'schools,' where junior intellectuals work under the tutelage of consecrated thinkers. Those who are yet to develop their thinking and build a reputation or networks of their own often seek guidance in their formative years. Meanwhile, more established authorities benefit from having disciples to carry out intellectual labour, bolster their standing, and spread their ideas. That is, intellectuals, however independently-minded, require a space to carve a position for themselves and garner the skills and contacts necessary to launch their careers. Arguably, without these contacts, the interventions of young intellectuals would be unlikely to partake on the same conversation and employ the same language as that of their relevant peers, making it less probable for their ideas, however refined, to have a hearing. Furthermore, the association between junior and senior intellectuals can be fruitful even for 'contrarians,' as the reputation of the latter is often based on their renunciation of their teachers. Plato and Aristotle, Husserl and Heidegger, and Freud and Jung are famous examples of this.

In relation to the second reason for the emergence of intellectual collectives, allies can serve as a bulwark against those who aim to undermine one's ideas, either misrepresenting them or portraying them as irrelevant, esoteric, idiosyncratic, or corrupting (Baert, 2011). Indeed, without a network of fellows, lone intellectuals are likely to be a prime target for more organised groups, as they are often in competition for

resources, students, and for what Collins (*ibid.*) calls a limited ‘attention space.’ After all, some have argued that part of the mission of universities, since their origin, has been to exclude *falsi scholares* by sanctioning admission to an established community of *veri scholares* (Ridder-Symoens, 2003:181). Moreover, allies can aid in the process of repeating the same idea in different formats and across audiences, which is vital for the dissemination of a message. Rarely a single intervention can position an intellectual in the public imagination, especially in crowded arenas where many vie for attention. A similar argument is implicit in Sapiro’s (2009) model on the modes of political engagement of intellectuals: those in subordinated positions are more likely to take part of collectives, as they lack the symbolic capital to intervene effectively on their own.

However, these types of cooperation do not yet fully address Olson’s objections to the likelihood of collective agency. According to his logic, even when advantageous conditions do not apply, unattached intellectuals are still likely to abandon the collective concerned. This happens often, especially in cases of sharp internal differences or when members are accused of being ‘guilty by association.’ The recent resignation of fifteen members of the editorial board of the academic journal *Third World Quarterly* – following mounting criticism of its decision to publish an article defending the benefits of colonialism – is a good example of swift disaffiliation (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2017). Nevertheless, while one could argue against a ‘rational choice’ interpretation of intellectual coordination purely because it presumes to have access to the intentions of individuals – and which it assumes are guided by a specific understanding of rationality – in this paper we make a stronger sociological case. We contend that collectives of intellectuals, while not being independent of their members and their actions, cannot be reduced to an aggregate of them. That is, these collectives can and often do have an existence of their own.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, we will argue that many common types of public intervention, whilst in concrete terms always made by individuals, cannot be understood without reference to the presumed existence of collectives and their capacity of being represented.

To substantiate this point, we rely on the concepts of ‘intervention’ and ‘positioning’ covered above, and on the broader idea of performance (Baert and Morgan, 2017). We argue that there is such a thing as the collective agency of intellectuals by reference to a common phenomenon: the existence of intellectual interventions that, explicitly and intentionally or not, reflect a position that is assigned to a collective. These collectives can be wide or narrow, but interventions made on their behalf are associated with a ‘name’

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<sup>2</sup> For a similar argument, put in a broader, philosophical context, see List and Pettit (2011).



that allow these collectives to attain a recognisable place in the public debate and, in some sense, to become agents. Thus understood, collectives of intellectuals exist inasmuch as they are linked to a social position and social relationships, expressed through linguistic devices – labels, names, brands – that bring together individuals. In that sense, we ground the notion of intellectual collectives in the concept of performance in two ways: in relation to the ‘dramaturgical’ dimension of social interaction – constituted of actors, frames, scripts, audiences, etc. (see Goffman, 1959); and concerning the capacity of language to constitute, reproduce, and reinforce social realities (Austin, 1957).<sup>3</sup>

From this perspective, not only do collectives of intellectuals emerge through performances, but they can only be achieved performatively, through constant interventions, even if this is not sought actively by the individuals concerned. For that reason, we claim collectives cannot be separated from their ‘name,’ as only through them are individuals and their interventions ‘collected’ into a whole.<sup>4</sup> Examples of these names are the ‘Frankfurt School,’ ‘Existentialism,’ ‘the University of Chicago,’ ‘the Brookings Institution,’ etc. From this view, collective positioning requires constant repetition by different actors, as it facilitates the reproduction and diffusion of ideas. In other words, the existence of an intellectual collective is linked to the continuous exercise of *prosopopoeia*, of interventions that are perceived to be ‘in the name of’ an abstract entity that can only intervene through individuals. For our purposes, *prosopopoeia* – literally from the Greek for the ‘making’ of a person or face – grants the possibility for an otherwise latent collective to garner a reputation, connections, and a solidity that it would otherwise lack. In the case of intellectual interventions in the name of collectives, however, the identity of those who speak and that which speaks through them is somehow entangled – the speaker ‘belongs’ to the group that he or she voices and may require some coordination with other ‘members.’ That is, not only does the individual act as an intermediary of an abstract entity, but he or she is also part of it (see Cooren, 2010:85-89).

To these points, one could add the fact that institutions have resources (research capacity, money, skillsets, venues, networks, etc.) that are often unattainable for lone individuals. Indeed, in the history of academic disciplines, one frequently finds that dilettantes from elite backgrounds tend to be replaced over time by specialists working under the aegis of larger institutions (Cosser, 1997). Furthermore, organisations can draw on a more extended history that connects the interventions of a particular intellectual with previous ‘interveners,’ endowing this intellectual with symbolic status (e.g. prizes and prestigious

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<sup>3</sup> See also Cooren (2016) for an analysis of how linguistic practices produce organisational realities.

<sup>4</sup> However, arguably this is true even of individuals, as their name (e.g., Sartre) allows them to collect their interventions and become recognisable across audiences.

fellowships not only recognise individual achievements but also reflect positively on the whole institution and the people that make up that institution) and providing him or her intellectual inspiration. Indeed, an intellectual within an institution can draw on the content of other interventions and on a broader perspective which may have developed over several generations. Once a certain 'label,' 'name,' or 'brand' attains a stable position within broader public debates, interventions made in its name are more likely to be recognised as being associated with at least part of the concerned collective. Examples of this include organisations with a long history, such that previous interventions position current members (e.g. the Fabian Society). This name-recognition also applies to intellectual currents (such as, for instance, Marxism), although one's identification with a particular strand may be contested by others.

Bourdieu's ideas are again relevant here. He distinguished between a 'space of positions' and a 'space of position-takings' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The space of positions refers to the volumes and types of capital at the disposal of an individual or group, which position them in relation to others within the fields in which they partake. The space of position-takings alludes to the relationship between different 'stances,' opinions, and preferences expressed through *prises de position* – akin to how we employ here 'public interventions' (see also Emirbayer & Johnson, 2009). While Bourdieu thought the space of positions shaped the boundaries of the 'space of position-takings' of agents, the latter can, in turn, mediate access to resources through the public recognisability that it can bestow upon individuals and organisations.

Still, the process of generating a collective identity is precarious, and collectives face many centrifugal pressures. These include those mentioned above concerning the possible disaffiliation of individuals, but also those associated with the often-fraught undertaking of settling what binds together the public interventions of a collective – in other words, what exactly is shared by those who share a 'label.' The next section delves into this issue.

### **The shape of collectives of intellectuals**

There are many possible types of intellectual collectives, and many ways of understanding them, varying in their size and cohesiveness. For instance, in the literature on public policy advocacy one finds several kinds of group that refer to a position or disposition on policy matters. These include, among many others, policy networks (Ball and Exley, 2010), intellectual fellowships (Denham and Garnett, 1998), thought collectives (Fleck, 1979[1935]), epistemic communities (Haas, 1989), policy paradigms (Hall, 1993), and discourse coalitions (Hajer, 1993). These differ significantly; some roughly correspond to

actual organisations and traceable social links, while others refer to less tangible ‘currents’ or widely shared ideas.

For the sake of analytical precision and to help untangle the shape of these formations, we argue that at least two variables shape collectives of intellectuals: the presence of a single, clear organisational basis and the degree of purported intellectual cohesiveness of the interventions made under the same ‘label.’ These variables, in turn, frame at least four types of intellectual collectives, summarised in the table below [Table 1]. In the following paragraphs, we detail the characteristics of these kinds of intellectual collectives, with an emphasis on who can speak on their behalf and on issues of accountability. We refer to the latter in two meanings: under what conditions a collective can be held responsible for the interventions of an individual, and to what extent it can enforce conformity to its members.

	<b>Presence of a single organisational basis</b>	<b>No clear single organisational basis</b>
<b>High purported intellectual cohesiveness</b>	Organised collectives (e.g. think tanks, scientific research teams)	Informal collectives (e.g. ideological currents, theoretical trends)
<b>Low purported intellectual cohesiveness</b>	Pluralist organisations (e.g. university departments, academic journals)	Informal pluralist collectives (e.g. disciplines, informal networks)

**Table 1. Types of collectives of intellectuals.**

Concerning the first variable, some collectives have a formal, legal status, and a concrete (often singular) organisational basis, whereas others do not. This basis is associated with certain advantages, as it allows collectives to gather and mobilise material and intellectual resources unavailable to less institutionalised groups. By way of illustration, only organised collectives can have official ‘headquarters,’ or access most forms of research funding. Also, an organisational basis allows for the emergence of hierarchies, chains of command, and a clearer structure that regulates who can perform as the official voice of the collective.

Furthermore, some among these collectives aim to be, to some degree, intellectually coherent, while others profess, within bounds, internal pluralism – if often mediating access through ‘vetoing’ mechanisms. This illustrates the second variable in our model, what we call the degree of purported intellectual cohesiveness. For the case of collectives with a clear, single organisational basis, this is well illustrated by the distinction between those for whom interventions by a part tend to position the whole (as in, for instance, a think tank), and those that are not automatically positioned by the interventions of its

individual members( for instance, a university department). Indeed, think tanks seek to occupy a specific position in the public debate and argue for a common case through a concerted 'voice' (which is often actively coordinated by communications and public relations staff). In contrast, interventions by academics who belong to the same university department do not necessarily have to be in accord with each other. Indeed, at times incoherence, discrepancies, and breadth of positions within the same university unit can be seen indicative of pluralism and academic freedom. There are, nevertheless, limits and exceptions to the reputation of pluralism and relatively low intellectual cohesiveness of universities: for instance, a university (or one of its departments) can become known for holding a particular intellectual position, or universities in general can be seen as restricting the space for dissenting opinions. Just to name one famous example of the former case, the Department of Economics of the University of Chicago came to represent for many a common intellectual position from the 1970s onwards, especially after forming the generation of economists that led the free-market reforms enforced by Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile (Valdés, 1995). To exemplify the latter case, it suffices to remember the common complaint by conservatives in the US and the UK that universities have a bias towards 'leftist' or 'liberal' thinking (see Gross, 2013).

The more a collective has an organisational basis, the clearer the formal sanctions imposed on those who are considered to undermine its reputation. Take, for example, academics who are employed by a research institute. Their position is legally codified in labour law, with a clear set of expectations towards both the institution and the employee. When intervening in intellectual or public matters, the individuals involved do not act solely on their own behalf. They also, in some sense, represent the institution in which they are employed, and the relevant authorities may wish to implement penalties if they believe that the reputation of the institution is at stake or if the individuals concerned are perceived to have overreached the remit of their role. A notable case of this is the dismissal of economist Robert Litan by the Brookings Institute after he, in breach of internal regulation, cited his affiliation to the think tank as a 'non-resident scholar' when testifying before the US Congress (Washington Post, 2015).

Conversely, whilst universities profess academic freedom, the authorities involved also take into account reputational damage. When Chomsky started to speak out against the Vietnam War and became involved in acts of civil disobedience, the President of MIT was concerned about its effects for his university and considered firing Chomsky (Barsky, 1977: 123-143). In the end, he stopped short of doing so, possibly because the firing in itself of a prominent academic could undermine the credibility of MIT even more. In this sense, while universities are expected to welcome a wide range of perspectives – and hence

associate their names to many types of interventions – they nonetheless implicitly set limits to intellectual freedom because their reputation might be at stake. The reputation of university not only depends on the interventions of its individual members, but also on what others do or say on their premises. Hence the controversy surrounding the eugenics conference held at the premises of University College London; there was a widespread perception that the university had been complicit in the promotion of a subject linked to racist tropes (The Guardian, 2018).

On the other side of the spectrum are collectives that have no discrete formal or legal status. These are characterised by the absence of institutional or legal constraints: the collective has no official representatives and there is therefore an ambiguity as to who can speak on its behalf. Indeed, at times these collectives can even be ‘conjured up’ by others – not by the purposeful action of those who claim to be part of it.<sup>5</sup> These unorganised collectives can be more or less cohesive, depending on how coherent the different interventions made under their label turn out to be. On the one hand, there are informal collectives that are thought to seek a degree of unity, although the intervenors may be part of many organisational niches, such as intellectual movements and currents. On the other hand, there are also informal collectives that allow for greater internal pluralism and disagreement; take, for instance, academic disciplines sharing a number of common preoccupations (see Turner, 2006). Generally speaking, public interventions made under the label of an intellectual movement are expected to be relatively coherent, at least in its most basic tenets, while those done under the name of a pluralist unorganised collective, such as a discipline, are not undermined to the same extent by public disagreements and inconsistencies.

The degree of purported intellectual cohesiveness, in turn, grants a certain ambiguity to who has the capacity to speak on behalf of an informal collective. This is often a thorny issue, as the prominence of these collectives in the public debate depends on the ubiquity of the interventions made under their label. Most intervenors who are identified as part of informal groups are likely to be only weak representatives of the collective. Particularly powerful (and sometimes very much contested) are the phenomenon of widely-known authorities, scholars, and popularisers, who are generally associated with a subset of the collective (e.g., David Harvey for the case of Marxism, Stephen Hawkins for theoretical physics, and so on). In most cases, members of looser informal collectives that are expected to harbour a certain internal diversity often find it difficult to speak with one

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<sup>5</sup> The very notion of intellectual is a good example of this labelling process. The word ‘*intellectuel*’ gained prominence in France after the Conservative writer Maurice Barrès chastised his political opponents with that moniker during the Dreyfus affair (Collini, 2006).

voice. Yet, attempts to speak on behalf of informal collectives are not uncommon. A memorable example of this is the letter written by 364 economists addressed to *The Times* in 1981, which argued that the policies of the Thatcher premiership were not supported by economic evidence (Norpoth, 1991). Such attempts remain difficult to defend; even organisations such as the Royal Economic Society can be challenged when attempting to speak on behalf of 'economics.' In such cases, sceptics are quick to appear, either claiming to represent more adequately the concerned discipline or simply discrediting said discipline altogether.

Contrary to those with a clear organisational basis, informal collectives are less likely to face direct challenges to their position based on the actions of one individual. While ill-judged remarks from staff may reflect poorly on a think tank or university department – and sometimes leave them exposed to public opprobrium or legal ramifications – there is no authority to which one can demand accountability in the case of informal collectives with self-ascribed members. There are exceptions to this rule: the whole of the collective can somehow be discredited if it is seen to be associated with a highly problematic position or with the pernicious actions of a prominent individual. For instance, opponents of the eugenics movement have argued that it is in its very essence racist and that the racist attitudes of its main figures are not merely accidental.

However, while accountability is harder to enforce for informal collectives, this does not mean that they have no hold over the individual, nor that sanctions and incentives are absent. Indeed, loosely coordinated networks of like-minded academics can still put pressure on its members to conform to a given methodology or theoretical perspective, and their non-compliance might be met with derision and rejection across formal and informal settings – they can veto *falsi scholares*. Intellectual history is littered with well-documented cases where deviation from the orthodoxy has made life difficult for the 'culprits' involved, with Walter Benjamin's uneasy relationship with other members of the Frankfurt School being a tragic example. These informal pressures are particularly hefty for junior academics, who are especially reliant on patronage to obtain a position or to secure tenure (see Camic, 1987), whereas their more senior colleagues might draw on a larger network to access jobs or to acquire symbolic or institutional recognition. In sum, even the most informal teams exercise a certain pressure to conform.

In addition, collective work is shaped by the political environment in which it takes place. The examples provided so far are mostly set in a context of liberal democracy. In more authoritarian settings, the nation-state as a whole (including the intellectual collective) is sometimes expected to act as a unit, and the sanctions are particularly severe for those

who fail to do so or appear unconvincing in their display of allegiance. For example, shortly after Carl Schmitt became entangled with the newly established Nazi-regime, he was subjected to repeated criticisms from more *völkisch* sections of the NSDAP. They used evidence of his past interventions to make the case that he was a mere opportunist – not a genuine member of the team. Schmitt feared for his life, and rightly so; by then, the Nazis had already murdered for lesser ‘crimes.’ He stepped up his anti-Semitic and pro-Hitler rhetoric (according to one interpretation, to show that he was the genuine article after all), before gradually withdrawing from the public eye (Bendersky, 2014). One way of interpreting such cases is that the state itself policed the limits of acceptable public speech; the nation was treated as a coherent collective.

However, not all collectives seek to expand their membership. Even in liberal democracies, and whether organised around an institution or not, collectives of intellectuals are often crisscrossed by power relations, in the form of both their internal hierarchy and of who they exclude. Some implicitly or explicitly vet access on the basis of race, class, or gender. For instance, recent work on the sociological canon (Bhambra, 2016) has highlighted such exclusions. As mentioned earlier, an advantage of belonging to a collective is the sanctioning of the limits of who is counted in, who is considered a *veri scholares*. In the vein of exploring the effects of these contextual variables on collectives of intellectuals, the final section of this paper will reflect on current tendencies that may affect the prominence and shape of these groupings.

### **Conclusion: Current trends in intellectual collectives**

Based on the reflections above, we surmise that, as a general rule, the more an intellectual collective is structured under a particular organisation, and the more it seeks its public interventions to be coherent, the more likely it is to operate as a cohesive ‘team.’ However, stronger intellectual and institutional coordination has disadvantages: the miss-steps of a member can ever more readily be ascribed to the whole. Further, the larger the number of those intervening under a label – and numbers are, after all, a measure of success – the more laborious it becomes to maintain coherence and adherence to internal rules. This tendency is especially problematic for large, complex organisations with many members and publics, as “the likelihood that conflict replaces integration increases as the number of audiences increases” (Hallett, 2003:135).

Despite these risks, organised collectives have considerable advantages over individuals. As an illustration, Medvetz (2012) has argued that organisations such as think tanks have become adept at summoning capitals from different social fields as they intervene in the public domain. According to Medvetz, think tanks can wield resources and skills of a

volume and variety inaccessible to individual intellectuals. In his account, these include academic credentials, political acumen, media savvy, and economic assets, to which we could add social networks (Tchilingirian, 2015). While this may require ever more coordination, it also shields these organisations from challenges by those with a more specialised profile. Medvetz contends that in their expansion, think tanks have crowded out more independent scholars and intellectuals from the US public debate.

A common trope in the 'declinist' literature on the downfall of public intellectuals is that uncoordinated individuals who seek a public role and who value novelty and creativity are unlikely to mount a successful challenge to a better-organised opposition (Misztal, 2012). Indeed, whether inside or outside universities, the research and resources that underpin many of the most salient public interventions are increasingly gathered and carried out by large groups of people under the auspices of recognisable institutions. The history of the social sciences is itself evocative of this growing institutionalisation and 'division of labour.' From an amateurish affair carried out by *dilettantes*, they have become ever more reliant on the work of teams of specialists. Further, impelled by challenges from outside actors, academic departments have increasingly engaged in the co-production of knowledge with external stakeholders in fields such as business and policy (Holmwood, 2014). In countries such as the UK, these pressures on universities are compounded by the requirement to demonstrate 'impact' and 'excellence' through measurable criteria, giving birth to an associated apparatus of internal audit and governance. The public interventions that are likely to emanate from this form of organising knowledge have thus become more regulated, more mediated by risk-assessments and public relations strategies, and hence more likely to face isomorphic pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991).

Thus understood, the growing prominence of public interventions by collectives entails at least two risks. Firstly, while organisations allow for the coordination and mobilisation of more substantial resources, they are also more expensive to maintain. This cost generates pressures for funding that the authoritative intellectuals of yore did not have to face, and it may to some extent help elucidate the central role of benefactors in the shaping of the public debate. Needless to say, access to resources may create asymmetries in which type of interventions are more likely to be repeated across channels, contexts, and audiences.

Secondly, there is the risk of homogenisation. The more organised groups monopolise the public debate, the more likely it is that the shape of public interventions will face isomorphic pressures, tending to share similar topics, formats, language, and ultimately, tropes. This means that as organised collectives become more commonplace, they may also become more vulnerable to accusations of intellectual dependency and sterility. While



they may garner more resources than individuals, they are also more likely to be accused of simply representing vested interests. In the gap left by this impending crisis of legitimacy and aided by technological developments such as the rise of social media and the multiplication of sources of information, independent intervenors who position themselves as ‘mavericks’ or representatives of informal collectives are likely to find a hearing, as we have seen, for better or for worse, in the past few years.

Indeed, recently we have witnessed an increasing mistrust of specialised experts (e.g. economists with regard to Brexit) and of large organisations (e.g. the challenges of climate change deniers to the IPCC). These criticisms are often led by individuals who position themselves as independent sceptics, although they themselves might rely on substantial organisational and financial resources to get their message across, and they may depend on and strengthen the formation of informal, mercurial groups (such as, for instance, what has come to be called the Alt-right). Here, we encounter a core paradox of intellectual life: various forces have led to the prominence of coordinated, collective interventions, whilst the homogenisation that accompanies these collective endeavours might in the long run undermine their legitimacy.

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