

# What is Intellectual Freedom Today? Deliberating the Absence of Emergency

Santiago Zabala

In order to respond to this important question it is first necessary to emphasize there isn't much difference between philosophers, theologians, scientists, or artists when it comes to intellectual freedom. Whatever the schools, traditions, or debates intellectually free theologians or scientists are the ones who know what frames their disciplines. For example, when scientist Laurent Ségalat criticized, in his book *La Science à bout de souffle?* how the management of funds has become more important than search for truth in his field, he was not simply pointing out what frames his discipline, but also exercising intellectual freedom. This is why only those who thrust us into the so-called "absence of emergency" are intellectually free today. But what does this "absence" refer to? When Martin Heidegger said in the 1940s that the "only emergency is the absence of emergency" he was referring to a "frame" ("*Ge-stell*"), a technological power, we would no longer be able to control. This power today is globalization where emergencies, as the German thinker specified, do not arise when something doesn't function correctly but rather when "everything functions ... and propels everything more and more toward further functioning." This is why he was so concerned with the specialization and compartmentalization of knowledge that would inevitably frame thought's independent and critical nature. In this condition to be intellectually free today is to thrust us into the absence of emergency, those political, technological, and

cultural impositions which frame our lives.

The recent passing of political philosopher Ernesto Laclau, musician David Bowie and filmmaker Ettore Scola ought to remind us how important intellectual freedom is. Their books, songs, and films have all resisted orthodox interpretations of Marxism, social stereotypes, and fascists's discriminations meant to frame differences. For example, in one of his most important books, *On Populist Reason*, Laclau argued that the left should not be embarrassed by charges of populism, while Bowie (as philosopher Simon Critchley recently pointed out in *The New York Times*), "spoke most eloquently to the disaffected, to those who didn't feel right in their skin, the socially awkward, the alienated." And in his films Scola often portrayed the lives of these "disaffected" or "socially awkward" as *Il Sorpasso* or *A Special Day* so well illustrated. But what does intellectual freedom have to do with these three very different thinkers and artist?

First of all, it is important to emphasize Laclau is not the only "intellectual" of the group. Intellectuals are not simply those who write academic texts or teach in the University. Quite the contrary. Often professors are unable to research freely given academic restrictions as the recent publication of *Who's Afraid of Academic Freedom?* illustrates through renown scholars as Akeel Bilgrami, Judith Butler, and Noam Chomsky among others. Instead, an intellectual is someone capable to disclose meaningfully ideas, feelings, or also differences to a variety of people. Whether this is done through philosophy or art is secondary. What is important are the effects it has. If "the duration of a work's power to speak directly is fundamentally unlimited," as Hans-Georg Gadamer explained, it's not due to "the source or origin of the work," but rather the effects and consequences "It continues to have." In the case of Bowie and Scola their ideas were expressed through music and films. And similarly to Laclau they had to make an effort to preserve their intellectual freedom, that is, autonomy to think and create differently from the frames of their time.

As some of you might have perceived my position is that we are not free intellectually as Laclau, Bowie and Scola were. I'm not saying there aren't significant thinkers or artists anymore, but simply how there are greater intellectual restrictions which frame our imagination now; these vary from publishers, record labels, and producer's policies which have to respond to a globalization designed to frame our lives. If Theodore Adorno, after the Second World War, was alarmed that music had to be cut in order to fit the temporal limits of the industrially produced LP as it would condition musician's creations, we ought to be terrified that contemporary philosophers are requested to cut books into articles to fit the requirements of the ranked journal industry or that musicians and filmmakers have trouble making music which is distributed

independently or movies which last more than two hours.

It's true: Laclau, Bowie and Scola have been productive until recently. But their latest works, as many others (think of Slavoj Zizek, Tom Waits, and Lars von Trier) often appear as events, that is, an emergency within the publishing, music, and film industry. This does not mean their work was better than their previous creations, but simply emerge as something distinct within the absence of emergency which merits our attention. But the problem today is that this attention is also being framed. The lack of a sense of emergency," as Heidegger explained, "is greatest where self-certainty has become unsurpassable, where everything is held to be calculable, and especially where it has been decided, with no previous questioning, who we are and what we are supposed to do." We have become accustomed to expect from philosophers, musicians, and filmmakers ideas and feelings which will not upset or alternate the status quo.

The launch of this new Journal is a symptom of how framed our times are. In an intellectually free world it would not be necessary, but given the condition we find ourselves, where the passing of philosophers, musicians, and filmmakers who opened new worlds is mourned as an emergency, it becomes vital for our future.