

The Ethical Academic: Academics as Public Intellectuals

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Abstract: Twenty-five years ago, American sociologist Robert Bellah Bellah (Bellah, et al., 1986: 303) critiqued the growing isolation of intellectuals within universities and called for a return to “social science as public philosophy.” Little seems to have changed. My thirty-seven year experience at the University of Alberta suggests that academics see self-isolation as key to career success. Today’s academic seems to work alone, engage in esoteric researching or theorizing, and publish single-authored articles in *high-impact* journals. At the University of Alberta, and I assume at other tier one universities, working to engage a wide public does not rank highly on Faculty Evaluation Committee’s (FEC) annual reviews of academic work.

This paper asks whether university-based academics are becoming irrelevant to wider publics and whether our intellectual leadership is waning. Here, I trace the history and importance of public intellectuals and make a case that ethically university-based academic leaders must become public intellectuals who engage the larger public through writing, speaking, or acting. Rooted in both Renaissance and Enlightenment, a *public* intellectual is a learned person shining a light on a public sphere. Although our post-modern *sense* has eroded many Enlightenment myths, I make the case that active ethical academic leadership should not be thrown to that wreckage.

Here, I discuss the tradition of public intellectuals - discussing who, where, how, and what they are. I review the tradition of some historic and more recent public intellectuals like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edward Said, Henry Giroux, and James K. A. Smith. I discuss why public intellectuals must speak fearlessly regardless of anti-intellectual traditions that might position academics as targets for ridicule. I discuss public

intellectuals as both teachers and outline a number of practical and collaborative ways that academics might engage the public. This paper is framed on the beliefs that a university is (1) a place where academics work to protect and extend the best of a society's culture and knowledge, (2) can be a living witness to how knowledge can positively infuse a culture and a society, and that (3) academics are meant to serve the general good.

Key Words: public intellectuals, public pedagogy, academic life, culture and the academy

Talking to one's fellow man in a language that he cannot understand may be the bad habit of some revolutionaries, but it is not at all a revolutionary instrument: it is on the contrary, an ancient repressive artifice, known to all churches, the typical vice of our political class, the foundation of all colonial empires. (Primo Levi in "On Obscure Writing")

Introduction

I recall the first time I became aware of someone who could lift knowledge to another level when I read W.H. Auden's *Forewords and Afterwords* (1973). In one literary essay in this huge collection, Auden illuminates political upheaval in medieval Europe on the macro-level, yet also gives advice for teachers to better control classroom behavior at the micro-level. My admiration for Auden and of well-written literary criticism has stayed with me. Auden demonstrates how learned people from any discipline might speak widely across subject areas in ways that inform contemporary social issues. Auden was my first thoughtful encounter with what I call a public intellectual.

I consider public intellectuals a treasure – a group of people whose core work undertakes a responsibility to speak and act freely, widely, and fearlessly. I have used *ethical* as a foundational concept in this paper because I believe academics should follow the Greek *ethical* ideal of adding “character” to a society. I also believe academics, by nature of their vocation, should help define the guiding beliefs or ideals that characterize a community, society, or culture by being or becoming responsible public intellectuals. Saying this does not suggest that all academics will act wisely or well. Furthermore, academics will disagree. At the same time that I encourage academics to engage the public actively, others suggest academics have too much influence with students and the public (e.

g. David Horowitz, *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*, (2006). But, as Karl Rove believed after the 2012 US presidential election, one person's voter suppression is another person's voter registration.

In a beautiful essay in *The Other Journal* (2009), James K. A. Smith discusses Michel Foucault's review of *parrhesía* (the Greek idea of free speech or, as Foucault translates it, "fearless speech"). Fearless speech helps define public intellectuals as those who use their intellects to work, study, consider, or ask and answer questions about ideas within a large public arena. We need public intellectuals like Smith, and I believe academics must consider how they can become public intellectuals who both engage and build public audiences. Such engagement and construction involves widening modes of address and establishing alternative platforms for speaking into the world. Such publics can become places where rich and active oppositional discourse and practice can be formed and engaged. With those public intellectuals who issued the Hartford Appeal in 1976, I see oppositional discourse from people of faith as a positive contribution to the public good; as they put it, standing "against the world for the world" (Berger and Nehaus, 1976).

Such a call for "oppositional discourse" for people of faith might seem a contradiction. We are all, I believe, people of faith; and, my contention in this paper is that hearing many faith-full insights on issues is a "positive contribution to the public good." It is possible, I believe, to accept without agreeing. I share my own ideas here. Others will disagree. Although I am Christian, I do not agree with all Christians or all conservative thinkers. Sarah Palin and Glenn Beck seldom speak for me; and, I tend to view them as anti-intellectuals. Similarly, I find leftwing Michael Moore's *Capitalism a Love Story* perhaps a bit too commercial. Furthermore, although no fan of the NRA or Charlton Heston, I found *Bowling for Columbine* rude. It might be difficult to embrace others'

oppositional thoughts as “positive contributions;” yet, this is my intent. Theory is never always practice; still, I believe it is possible to accept that people who surround an issue should weigh in on the issue without needing to agree with each others’ views or hold back one’s own. Sharing views is, I believe, the job of academics everywhere.

I am not alone in feeling that academics should be more public. Sam Wineburg, Professor of education at Stanford University, wrote a tongue-in-cheek article titled “Maintaining the Vitality of Our Irrelevance” in *Education Week* (4/6/2005). In this article, Wineburg satirically calls for academics to retain their irrelevance by becoming esoteric, isolated, and almost Gnostic approach to “scholarship.” In a similar vein, I was at a recent theological conference where a leading Christian academic called for people of faith to engage the world, but to do so within confined “strong confessional walls” (a phrase spoken by the keynote speaker so as to retain silos of faith that keep Christian academics from stepping into public discourse or engaging in thoughtful consideration of human issues from a unique perspective). I believe academics must become salt and light in the world and, in the words of the Prophet Jeremiah, to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city.”

Although this essay is an *opinion piece* rather than a research paper per se, the following questions were used to structure the work.

1. What is a public intellectual?
2. Who are well-known academic public intellectuals?
3. Why should academics be public intellectuals?
4. What keeps academics from being public intellectuals?
5. How can academics overcome the obstacles and become public intellectuals?

What is a Public Intellectual?

An intellectual is a person who has been trained in a particular discipline (linguistics, biology, history, economics, literary criticism, education) and whose work engages ongoing discourses of this chosen field. Intellectuals are found in universities and colleges, but not exclusively. Routinely, academic work is addressed to colleagues within the same disciplines. However, I believe myriad possibilities exist to speak more publicly and to suggest how one's findings might be applied in areas of policy and practice relevant to their work but across wider areas. In recent discussions with professors and administrators in medicine, I shared how my research findings in the area of leadership might apply across fields. I have also a friend who owns a Shoppers' Drug Store and whose leadership insights informed my own.

To be a *public* intellectual calls for transcending exclusive engagement with peers and works against speaking down to the those less qualified. My declaration is far from new. Twenty-five years ago, eminent American sociologist Robert Bellah and colleagues (Bellah, et al., 1986: 303) critiqued the growing isolation of intellectuals within universities and called for a return to "social science as public philosophy." Social science "is public not just in the sense of that its findings are publicly available or useful to some group or institution outside the scholarly world. It is public in that it seeks to engage the public in dialogue." Precisely when intellectuals seek through writing, speaking, or acting to engage the larger public do they become *public* intellectuals. Rooted in both Renaissance and Enlightenment, a *public* intellectual is a learned person shining a light on a public sphere.

My attempt to comprehensively define a public intellectual might seem difficult; however, the complexity of living out the role of public intellectual is certainly more difficulty yet. I believe the role of a public intellectual can be broken into three pieces:

- a. making research available to the public and across disciplines – leaving our silos;
- b. fearlessly speaking truth to power when necessary;
- c. clarifying issues when uninformed opinions hold sway – informing the general public(s).

Public intellectuals: who, where, how, and what?

Before I consider the work of past and present public intellectuals, I want to attend to the recent shift from Modernity to Post-Modernity because that shift impacts the prospect in which an intellectual might become *public*. The Enlightenment model of the West sought to situate and educate rational-critical subjects as citizens who occupied public space with equal rights and opportunities. The value of a person rested in that person's character, and such a person was expected to thoughtfully engage a disciplined social order. However, postmodernism has rendered the possibility of a unified culture impossible. First, expressed in literature that postured paradox and questioned narrators, postmodernism reacted against the Grand Narrative of Enlightenment's modernity. Without a working narrative, the modernist quest for unified meaning in a chaotic world became unrequited hope. In fact, postmodernism parodied the quest for totalizing narrative, even questioning an author's ability to be self-aware. Postmodernism undermined both the existence of narrative primacy within text and the idea of an efficacious authority to tell that story. Logic in narrative is out: pastiche – combining multiple cultural elements – is in.

With the emergence of a multiple narratives, the idea of a single *public* eroded. Today, we live inside societal fragmentation, with many publics. Interestingly, today publics seem to hang together within a market framework where *publics* are *demographics* and each citizen a *consumer*. In other words, economic life rules (Meeks, 1998). Murray Jardine (2004) in *The Making and Unmaking of Technological Society* notes that, while once the value of a person rested in that person's character, today a person's value rests in

that person's beauty. Why? Because, although one cannot buy character (although many sell it), one can buy (so ads tell us) beauty; and, the ability to buy beauty energizes the economy as people use Calvin Klein-like purchases to re-create themselves as "beautiful."

Jardine also draws attention to today's focus on entertainment as communication, and market as the mechanism of social control and identity creation. As a result, civic spaces that valued education are replaced by cults of celebrity or transformed into spaces of consumption and entertainment where critical insight is ignored. Thinking people have reacted, though not many. Gramsci (1999) believed marketing, advertisers, and journalists had become the new organic intellectuals of capitalism because society's teachers and priests had become, in his words, "repetitive." He challenged the power of capitalism by describing an "organic" model of an intellectual involved in production, but also in struggles and causes. Enlightened by Gramsci, I have seen even the "best" university academics become less engaged by public dialogue and more engaged in tenure and promotion – in individual academic rankings where journal impact scales have become a norm. Here, too, I detect a market focus. Recently, I used the Internet to look up the "Rankings of scientific journals and publications" "Home Page" and found Google ads on both the right and the left of the "information" and an invitation to "Find us on Facebook" at the top.

Such cultural and social changes have decreased the prospects that public intellectuals can imagine, and find, rational-critical public roles. Perhaps because of these shifting social sands, intellectuals tend to become detached iconoclasts officed within universities, who engage in destructing belief systems and images (to invoke the literal meaning of iconoclast). But the need for relevant critique remains unchanged. Public intellectuals must speak and write to power in ways similar to Schmitt's (Diephouse, 1999)

Quakers & Nazis: Inner Light In Outer Darkness that asks how one might stand in the face of those who have power – specifically, members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) who felt called to oppose Hitler’s rule in Germany.

Such are the tasks public intellectuals might play in mounting *public* opinion. Posner in *Public Intellectuals* (2001) states that a public intellectual is “a person who, drawing on intellectual resources, addresses a broad educated public on issues with political or ideological dimensions (p. 170). Posner defines the term *intellectual* as one who “writes for the general public,” or at least for a broader public than one’s academic specialty, on “public affairs” – political matters in a broad sense of the word (p. 23). Posner attributes the term “public intellectual” to Russell Jacoby’s 1987 book *The Last Intellectuals* (1987, p. 27).

The work of public intellectuals is shifting because today’s multiple publics are shifting and demand new identities and practices. Michael Warner (2002), discussing fragmenting *publics*, believes all publics have similar characteristics: they have addresses and locations, specific discourses, relations, and antitheses. Those within a public’s boundary are circumscribed by their opposition to something “other” and their community with “one another.” In a fragmented society, publics self-organize – a concept gaining audience as chaos theory is applied to organizational development in ways that incorporate principles of quantum mechanics to complex systems.

Self-organization means a dynamic re-calculation, re-invention, and modification within an organization where structures change and systems adapt, survive, and grow. Self-organization re-invents and creatively adapts when a perturbed equilibrium (chaos) is introduced. Self-organizing publics create strange bedfellows and publics form where members construct and posit themselves using modes of address and actions that address

and engage others in substantive ideas. That Michael Warner is both a professor of English at Rutgers University (rather than a professor of Education) and a well-known queer theorist does not alter the possibility of a connection with those of us in education. Despite chaotic publics, I believe we all have a dog in the struggle towards insight and positive change.

We are long past a time when a person like Thomas Young (1773-1829), an English scientist, researcher, physician, and sage, could be considered “the last person to know everything” - someone familiar with all the contemporary Western academic knowledge at a point in history. Because we now live in a time of multiple publics, the work of public intellectuals seems more crucial. Russell Jacoby’s *The Last Intellectuals* describes intellectual writers who wrote for both academic and broad audiences. Refusing to employ arcane language, they did not sacrifice intellectual rigor and still reached educated readers. Public discourse mattered, but not at the expense of theory or critical analysis. Rather than lower the bar of intelligent communication in the name of clarity, they elevated it by offering complex thoughts in accessible public language. To be sure, that generation of public intellectuals lived at a different time and worked under different conditions. Many drew from a highly heterogeneous and more questioning culture, were not dependent on jobs located in the academy, made a decent living from their publications alone, and engaged a population not seduced by a language-shaping (I am thinking here of *twittering*) new media, the imposition of multitasking in a time-deprived world, or the solipsistic gratification that can come with blogging¹.

In an essay from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* titled “On Stupidity,” Thomas H. Benton (2008) notes that, during the Enlightenment, a class of writers emerged who

¹ I do not here critique blogging per se – many sources used in this essay derived from blogs.

transcended books and assumed active roles in public and political life. These first public intellectuals included Voltaire, Rousseau, Johnson, Steele, and Goethe and were called “men of letters.” When Emile Zola’s “open letter” to protest the wrongful internment of Captain Dreyfus was signed by 1,200 academics and writers (1898), this act was termed by the French press a “manifesto of intellectuals.” The press used *intellectual* as a term of abuse. But Zola’s letter on behalf of Dreyfus was an act of speaking truth to power and began to build a more heroic sense of public intellectuals as the moral conscience of society and defenders of citizen rights. This identity has since defined public intellectuals.

Life has changed since 1898, but the task of public intellectuals remains provocative. People like Noam Chomsky, Stanley Fish, Steven Levitt (*Freakonomics*), and Thomas Friedman (*The World is Flat*) live outside the Ivory Tower and add to the public discourse. A number of public thinkers like Malcolm Gladwell and Christopher Hitchens have wide readership and sizeable influence². Edward Said noted that intellectuals are predisposed to be outsiders in their societies - their task being to equip readers in an effective democracy towards critical thinking. T. S. Eliot was an iconic artist/intellectual. George Orwell highlighted a tension between elitism and mass appeal. His plain style was itself a form of activism that theorized about rhetorical structures and about how ideas should be developed and legitimized. Orwell’s writing was its own “argument.” Jurgen Habermas also believed in the concept of argumentation, which he described as a competition with arguments to reach consensus.

The need for such competitive arguments is obvious. For example, when George Bush’s ironic “War on Terror” bent the rule of law to allow torture of prisoners, academic

² Russell Jacoby (*The Last Intellectuals*) and Richard Posner (*Public Intellectuals: A Story of Decline*) argue that academic specialists are taking over the function of generalist public intellectuals to the detriment of the integrity and relevance of public intellectualism in general. Russell Jacoby, in particular, lamented in 1987 that “nonacademic intellectuals are an endangered species” and that “younger intellectuals are missing.”

intellectuals like Michael Ignatieff (former leader of the Liberal Party in Canada) condemned the use of harsh interrogation practices. By voicing dissent, he raised important questions about ethics, human rights, and other matters that require debate and critical reflection - like *national security*, a recent political trump card of the far right.

As a way to explore the possible work of public intellectuals, a number of historical North American public intellectuals are worthy of mentioning specifically.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson, essayist, philosopher, and poet, is one of the first North American public intellectuals. Emerson's great essay "The American Scholar," a speech delivered to the Phi Beta Kappa society in 1837, should be required reading for any academic. In it, he considered the meaning and function of the intellectual in his day. Emerson theorized about the "One Man" – a person who embodied all dimensions of human potential and action. A "One Man" could come from any field of endeavor – a farmer, academic, pastor, politician, soldier, or artist.

To Emerson, it was fine to be intellectual, but action was the most important activity. In the face of human need, inaction is cowardly. An intellectual (including a academic) is a public intellectual (although Emerson did not use that phrase) who preserves great ideas, makes them public, and creates new ideas – a classic understanding of the work of a university-based academic. A "One Man" becomes an "eye" for others by communicating ideas to the world, not just to other intellectuals. Being a leader of transcendentalism, a protest against the culture and society of his day, the state of intellectualism at Harvard, and Unitarian church doctrine taught at Harvard Divinity School, Emerson believed an ideal spiritual state could only *transcend* the physical and empirical through individual intuition rather than through doctrines of established religions.

Thus, a public intellectual finds reasons for work within *obligation* itself, not in a primary obligation to society.

Edward Said

More than 150 years after Emerson's speech, Edward Said attached political insight to the concept of public intellectual. This Palestinian-American literary and post-colonial theorist from Columbia University (who died in 2003), in a series of lectures called "Representations of the Intellectual" (1993), noted that an intellectual's mission was to advance both human freedom and knowledge. To complete such missions, public intellectuals must often stand outside society's institutions and actively disturb the status quo. Said believed public intellectuals must balance private and public. Hermeneutically speaking, one always holds private, personal ideals; in fact, such ideals provide energy for engaging action. Yet, public intellectuals address the concerns of a wider public. Personal ideals must be relevant to all members of society. In this, Said challenges potential public intellectuals. How does an academic stand both outside and inside society? How does an academic find common ground in personal faith and public interest? Can an academic hold unchanging faith tenants?

Alan Lightman

Alan Lightman's (2010) essay "The Role of the Public Intellectual," organizes the actions in which a public intellectual might engage into levels. Level I is speaking and writing about one's discipline. Such discourse involves clear, simplified explanations of one's subject. Lightman notes that scientists, as 1960s public intellectuals writing for the general public, reversed the stigma that sharing knowledge with the general public was a waste of time against science's *proper job* (to penetrate the secrets of a physical world) and anything else *dumbed down* the discipline. For Lightman, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*,

James Watson's *The Double Helix*, Carl Sagan's *Dragons of Eden*, and Jacob Bronowski's *The Ascent of Man* legitimized public discourse as worthy scientific activity. Brian Green's *The Elegant Universe* about string theory in physics is a good recent example.

Level II includes speaking and writing about how one's discipline relates to the social, cultural, and political world. Level II includes glimpses into society, anthropology, and culture of science or literature. Steven Weinberg's essays about science and religion in *The New York Review of Books* or Steve Pinker's work in *The New York Times* about the deeper meaning of Clinton's language in the Lewinsky scandal are examples. Educators engaged in leadership research, for example, would find much overlap with organizational theorists from other areas.

Level III occurs when public intellectuals become icons who stand larger than the discipline from which they came. Einstein covered topics beyond cosmology or mathematics – addressing religion, education, ethics, philosophy, and world politics with a gentle rationality. Level III intellectuals sometimes even inhabit late-night talk shows and write and speak on a range of public issues not directly connected to one's original field of expertise. Noam Chomsky, E. O. Wilson, Steven Jay Gould, Susan Sontag, John Updike, and Camille Paglia embody public intellectualism.

Henry Giroux

Since 2004, Henry Giroux has held the Chair of Communication Studies at McMaster University and is one of a few working public intellectuals in Canada. His essay (April 2010) in "Truthout" about the work of public intellectuals laments his belief that progressive academics have become increasingly irrelevant because few intellectuals seem interested in sharing their ideas, research, and policy insights with a broader public. Giroux supports three unpopular positions: (1) academics should assume the role of critical public

intellectuals, (2) clarity is the litmus test for deciding whether a writer has successfully engaged a general educated audience, and (3) public intellectuals must consider matters of accessibility seriously and combine both theoretical rigor and communicate forcefully and intelligibly to a larger public about pressing issues of the day.

Giroux insists that language has become an ideological smokescreen for attacks on common sense and “simplicity.” He hopes to *scramble* the opposition between intellectual work and clarity and challenges public intellectuals to address important social issues by writing in accessible language without sacrificing theoretical rigor. He believes in a “larger political project” – that public intellectuals are responsible to build democratically inspired social movements. During the last 30 years, Giroux notes, a generation of intellectuals within higher education has offered a theoretical style at odds with traditional conventions of writing clear, jargon-free, generalist language. Similar to John Ellis, mentioned later, Giroux notes that high theory, close textual reading, and a commitment to the instability and multiplicity of meaning have invaded the university. Proponents of post-structuralism, deconstruction, literary theory, and postmodernism write in specialized, theoretically dense, and opaque language. Ironically, such scholarship attempts to expand possibilities of theory and politics within new and more complex meaning, writing, and criticism that undercut the totalizing, authoritarian ethos of modernism.

Giroux (2010b) suggests that a new form of pedagogy is emerging in higher education focused on market-driven competitiveness and even militaristic goal-setting. At the same time, critical pedagogy, with its emphasis on the hard work of critical analysis, moral judgments, and social responsibility (critical pedagogy that addresses real inequalities of power among faculty and administrators) is withering. Sadly, often-ignored in the demise of critical pedagogy are important questions such as: What is the role of

teachers and academics as public intellectuals? Whose interest does public and higher education serve? How might it be possible to understand and engage the diverse contexts in which education takes place? What role does education play in the public good? How do we make knowledge meaningful, critical, and transformative? How do we democratize governance?

Pundits

In the place of more broadly reasoned public intellectuals who ask Giroux's "big questions," a group of working pundits seems to have arisen. *Pundit* (it means *learned*) is a Hindi word borrowed by the English during the period of British colonial rule in South Asia between 1858 and 1947. Perhaps they have been shapers of public opinion for a long time; however, I first became aware of their work during the 2008 US Presidential election. I mention them in this essay because they seem to carry weigh-in power defining how people understand social issues. Any "news" television channel employs its own regular pundits to speak in five to ten minute time spots about issues deemed timely and crucial, usually directed by a host and often in an argumentative style.

Thussu (2007) claims that television news has been commercialized and the need to make it entertaining has become a crucial priority for broadcasters, who borrow and adapt characteristics from entertainment genres and modes of conversation that privilege a communicative style that emphasizes personalities, style, storytelling skills, and spectacles. Thussu also claims television news follows a tabloid approach, focuses on trivia, and blends fact with fiction in ways that often distort the truth. In such television, what passes for intellectual commentary tends to be shaped into punditry – as seen most viciously during the last two US Presidential campaigns and on shows that would seem to have intellectual possibilities but degenerate into argument for entertainment in ways not so

different from the hurtful activities of *celebrities* (Piers Morgan comes to mind) who exercise rudeness to humiliate (again for entertainment) the often less-than-talented people who appear on such so-called *reality* shows as *X Factor Idol* or *American Idol*³.

Although I noted that academics often disagree, argument-for-entertainment seems to generate more heat than light. Deborah Tannen, in a beautifully written essay (For Argument's Sake; Why Do We Feel Compelled to Fight About Everything? in *The Washington Post*, March 15, 1998), calls America an argument culture and talk shows one example of such culture. Her essay shares both content and example of the possibility and problems of public intellectuals. Tannen, herself a public intellectual, provides thoughtful commentary on society that speaks to what passes as intelligence and learning on television. Tannen (1998) notes Yugoslavian-born poet Charles Simic's reminder that "There are moments in life when true invective is called for, when it becomes an absolute necessity, out of a deep sense of justice, to denounce, mock, vituperate, lash out, in the strongest possible language." But, current television news-for-entertainment can confuse the public and pander to more prurient leanings. In the mirror of the responsibility Simic implies, to pander to thoughtlessness or cause misunderstanding and confusion seems irresponsible. Instead, public intellectuals should become, in a sense, public properties who represent foundational "big ideas" or "special insights" to the public.

Who is a pundit and who is not? The term pundit has been applied to popular media personalities – in certain cases, in derogatory ways. In late 2009, the *Washington Post* held a contest to choose "America's Next Great Pundit." The winner was "white guy," "Teach

³ Ironically, while such television fodder is occurring to a cheering, participating salacious public (I picture gladiators in Roman arenas and cheering and jeering publics), the actions of teachers from those somehow harmed people for life by thoughtless missteps are remembered publically as reason to defame a profession.

for America” executive Kevin Huffman. Huffman, who seems to be a solid public servant, speaks about a number of topics. Then there is Richard Gere, for example, who uses public forums to speak about China’s relationships with Tibet; or Hollywood “bad boy” Sean Penn who sees HBO’s Bill Maher show as a forum for a ranting defense of Venezuelan dictator Hugo Chavez, suggesting prison time for *lying* American journalists who call Chavez a dictator. Pundits – valuable as they might be – are not public intellectuals. They are private citizens who, leveraging celebrity, have access to public mass media to make points.

My point is not that Gere should not have a stance on the erosion of human freedom anywhere on Earth; nor that Oprah’s opinions on books lack value. Their insights merge with those who have thought, imagined, and struggled before them. However, the work of public intellectuals differs in intensity and devotion, and should be leavened with cautious respect and great responsibility. When public intellectuals speak about things beyond their immediate areas of expertise, they must be aware of their limitations and must acknowledge personal prejudices when addressing broad ideas.

Public intellectuals also must accept the enormous power to influence and change, a power that must be wielded with care and respect for others. In the intellectual and academic community, we should not forget that scholarliness is not always clear thinking. As historian Robert Conquest notes, many thinking people demonstrated a lack of moral clear-sightedness by being *soft* on Stalin (including George Bernard Shaw and Jean-Paul Sartre); Christopher Hitchens once saw Lenin as a “great guy;” Paul Ehrlich incorrectly predicted consequences of overpopulation; Noam Chomsky seems to twist political motives; and even venerable Richard Rorty predicted glory days for the USSR. We can easily fall victim to Rudyard Kipling’s critique against those who perpetually mocked

“uniforms that guard you while you sleep.” The work of a public intellectual must be done with consideration.

For these reasons, learning, insight, and honestly challenging ideas matters. Christopher Hitchens, in *Why Orwell Matters* (2002), outlines Orwell’s intellectual honesty and willingness to occasionally anger his allies on the left. Neither Orwell nor Hitchens might be to everyone’s taste, but both are examples of public intellectuals who spoke to a wide public by engaging in political observation, polemic, and historical judgment. Plus, humans do learn and change. Once a left-wing intellectual, Hitchens was stunned by the “tepid reaction” of the European intellectual community with the Ayatollah Khomeini’s death *fatwā* against Salman Rushdie and, after 9/11, came to criticize Islamic fascism.

Pressures in the Academy

A public intellectual’s work is not without difficulties. Steven Pinker’s (2005) essay “Some Remarks on Becoming a ‘Public Intellectual’” written on Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s (MIT) Communication Forum is a good read about how one negotiates academia by accepting the internal and external challenge of writing for a larger group than one’s academic colleagues. Pinker believes public intellectualism can bring a loss of esteem within one’s own discipline, perhaps the result of professional jealousy or academic arrogance that equates explaining with weakness. Carl Sagan, known for his television series *Cosmos*, was never elected to the National Academy of Sciences.

Pinker’s remarks illuminate my own experiences. At the University of Alberta, I recently shared a panel with colleagues from other faculties on writing and publishing and encouraged graduate students to publish in Open Source venues. An academic from another faculty noted that such actions were *below* one’s status as a working academic. Fortunately, within my own Faculty of Education, no such judgment seems leveled against open source

publishing or collaborating with other faculties, and I regularly work with colleagues in the Faculty of Medicine. Obviously, however, some academics feel pressure within their own sites to minimize wider public engagement or more general audiences – fearing this work might carry academic cost. At a recent conference, I met an academic who did not include what he called “non-academic” books (designed to help his students better understand concepts and processes) on his resume because he believed they were given little value. My own Faculty of Education’s Faculty Evaluation Committee (FEC) recently flew a policy balloon that de-valued certain kinds of publications⁴ or using one’s own texts when teaching. If these pressures and policies truly represent academic life, we all seem to be missing opportunities to be engaged in public intellectual work.

Fearless Speaking

Prudence should not inhibit sharing ideas. In *The Other Journal* (2009), James K. A. Smith discusses Michel Foucault’s beliefs that free speakers are frank, direct, and sincere about what they think and where they stand. Free speakers are compelled to tell the truth. For Foucault, facing danger confirmed that speakers were truthful because, if one continued to speak against power, such courage was telling. One might risk loss of friendship, influence, popularity, wealth, or even life. *Parrhesia* means courage in the face of danger: hence, free speech might be better understood as *fearless* speech. Telling the truth about trivialities has little value. Smith notes that fearless speakers have epistemic confidence, moral authority, and courage. He also notes the asymmetry of speaking from positions of vulnerability. For example, an academic criticizing a President or a student criticizing a teacher may both speak the truth *to* power. But here Smith notes the

⁴ To self-publish makes one a sort of academic pariah; yet, Ben Franklin was an incredibly powerful self-publisher. William Blake published his own work. Virginia Woolf had her own press, and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *House of the Seven Gables* was published by Virginia Woolf.

discrepancy between an egalitarian system where anyone *can* speak and a system where citizens *earn the right to speak* based upon their academic and personal qualities.

Only insights truly benefit society, and the authority awarded to public intellectuals derives from their insights. In *Fors Clavigera*, (Monday, January 16, 2006), Smith's essay titled "Scholars, Public Intellectuals, and the Challenges of Finitude" conceptualizes public intellectuals as bringing critical, analytic, and synthetic theoretical skills to issues of public concern and believes public intellectuals should articulate and express critique and vision in provocative, winsome, insightful ways. Smith specifically hopes a public intellectual might also be persuasive. Public intellectuals might be credentialed scholars impelled by their public trust to use their skills and expertise beyond the narrow (but legitimate) discussions of the academy. Smith names a small number of examples - Cornel West, Noam Chomsky, Richard Dawkins, and French thinkers such as Sartre and Derrida.

Smith believes public intellectuals face unique challenges, and he enumerates three:

1. Guilt. Smith notes that an honest public intellectual must face the lust for fame that lives in one's soul. Although fame and power are complex and messy, Augustine counsels that the solution is not withdrawing from acting for the public good. The work of a public intellectual must be accompanied by self-examination and honesty about being hooked on "public interest."

2. Time. The work of a public intellectual requires attention to "the times." Smith believes a public intellectual by nature reacts to unfolding cultural events. But, such reactions need time for voracious reading and writing - newspapers, magazines, and books (both non-fiction and fiction and a healthy dash of liberal arts and classics). It is a challenge to find time to write. If one is fortunate, one's academic "scholarly" work overlaps with the

work of a public intellectual. But, writing for the public is dynamic and must be done quickly.

3. A multiplication of publics. For a public intellectual, the public reads periodicals and monthlies. But public intellectuals include other institutions (with their own *canons*) that are themselves diverse publics with different education levels, political orientations, and a broad sense of important issues. Keeping abreast means a public intellectual has two worlds to understand and must read widely from diverse interests. Such reading takes time, and Smith values the work of public intellectuals such as Cornel West or George Weigel who seem able to manage such challenges without sacrificing what matters.

However, as important as these are, academics as public intellectuals face stiffer difficulties in other global locations. In their book, Currie, Petersen, & Mok (2006) explore the unique situation the tiny jurisdiction of Hong Kong, where there is active protection for freedom of expression despite close proximity and relationship with mainland China. Hong Kong scholars and intellectuals assume a responsibility as public critics, within the shadow of crisis.

Public Intellectuals As Targets

It would be nice if public intellectuals were treated respectfully everywhere. But that has not been the history of North America. Richard Hofstadter argues that American dislike for educational elitism stems from a cultural legacy of religious fundamentalism, populism, pragmatic business values, science, and the cult of the “self-made man.” Americans distrust and even resent “intellectuals.” Noam Chomsky (1988) offered a critical mirror by showing how Ronald Reagan’s American ‘remake’ was instead a market-driven ideology designed “to ensure that isolated individuals face concentrated state and private power alone, without the support of organizational structures that might help them think for

themselves or enter into meaningful political action and with few avenues for public expression of fact or analysis that might challenge approved doctrine” (*The Culture of Terrorism*, 21). Chomsky noted that the optimism implicit in Reagan’s rhetoric came at an intellectual cost as people grew to believe that following Reagan’s doctrine assured the rewards of power and privilege. Thinkers were unfavorably compared to Reagan’s crafted persona of decisive masculinity, and were looked upon as radical subversives – eggheads without power. “Eggheads” mistakenly retreated to dense language – a choice grounded in logic, but wrong nonetheless.

As Giroux suggests, many academics hoped to raise the intellectual bar, engage complex ideas and critically analyze democratic thought to counteract the political culture they saw sweeping North America. But, by becoming arcane, these academics made themselves irrelevant to their publics. Philosopher Judith Butler was targeted by Martha Nussbaum who insisted that Butler’s dense language disengaged nonacademic publics and lacked public commitment. Butler became an example of turning away from practical politics to hide behind “a firewall of jargon” that, Nussbaum believed, produced a dangerous “quietism” with little hope of addressing oppressive power structures.

Public intellectuals: Acting the part

Off and on I’ve read stories with this motif: act the part to become the part. The oldest story I know of this kind comes from the Old Testament. Numbers 22-24 tells us the story of Balaam, the seer hired by Moab’s King Balak to curse the people of Israel. Instead, Yahweh puts words in Balaam’s mouth, words of blessing, to the King’s consternation. But Balaam retorts, “Even if Balak gave me his house full of gold and silver I could not go against the order of Yahweh and do anything of my own accord, good or evil; What Yahweh says is what I will say” (24:12-13). Staying with biblical narratives, Jesus picks up

this motif in the parable [Matthew 21:28–32] of the father who wants his sons to work in the vineyard. The first one says no, but feels bad and does it. The second son agrees, but doesn't do it. And, Jesus agrees with those who say that the first son was the better one.

Some modern stories circling this motif concern the advice concerning the difficulty of almost any action: “Persist in doing it, and you will become it.” I read Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan's advice (although I cannot find it again to cite) to “act your way to a new way of living.” Islamic teaching works to habituate charity: for example, Chapter 218 of the Qur'an talks about “The Excellence of Spending out Charity during Ramadan.” Behavior modification relies on the same motif. Few people are trained as a parent; but, parents who act responsibly with their own children are likely to become a better at it. The notion of apprenticeship is grounded in this motif. I believe becoming a public intellectual becomes possible by simply acting the role. Assuming we are not personally slothful or dealing with debilitating insecurity, our training and position as academics helps ready those who work in the academy to become public intellectuals. We should have insights to share. And, although some colleagues suggest they were trained or mentored to speak and write in an arcane and highly specialized way, I believe there is value in unlearning or, as Hargreaves & Fullan (2012) suggest *reculturing*. I believe we simply need to start doing it.

There are barriers to engaging as a public intellectual – some of them institutional. Some institutional cultures are more accommodating than others. The Dutch have a saying about preferring the devil to arrive in wooden shoes: in other words, it's easier to deal with brazen evil. In universities, the devil may well *clog* down the halls in two wooden shoes – reward and *ratio*. Some activities are rewarded more than others and the culture of some disciplines (as Carl Sagan's experience suggests) is less hospitable to being a public intellectual than others. Some public intellectuals must work without many illusions about

success, acceptability among our colleagues, and recognition of our efforts as public intellectual.

Public Intellectuals as Teachers

William May believes public intellectuals should be teachers. In *Beleaguered Rulers: The Public Obligation of the Professional (2001)* he argues for expanded notions of teaching. He reminds us that *doctor* comes from the Latin *docere* [to teach] and regards teaching and persuasion *essential ingredients* in one's academic identity. May believes professionals have come to act more like technical service providers than critical thinkers. Such *professionals* offer instrumental services, but seldom consider why they do their work. May names the goals of both liberal arts colleges and what he calls positivistic research universities "narcissistic" and "self-preoccupied" because they fail to contribute to public life. Preparing students for public life is a task institutions of higher educational have not done well. Furthermore, May believes academics should be public intellectuals as well as help prepare their graduate students to become public intellectuals.

To be a public intellectual, one must attend to the problems of society and intervene in public conversations that disrupt powerful interests that deform democratic life and debate. To be a public intellectual, one must utilize a mode of political discourse that goes beyond knee-jerk posturing. One must write and speak with clarity and rigorous analytic thought. Simplistic clarity becomes sound byte. Arcane language drives people towards cynicism and resentment. Public intellectuals must use intelligible language accessible for nonacademic audiences, without sacrificing rigorous theory.

The answer is not to make life simple, but to create spaces where readers find opportunity to struggle with meaning. Readers may well resist. My cynical side sometimes believes "Everyone is waiting to be told what to do." Using an authoritarian style that

postures certainty as truth can be seductive. Although I hope I am wrong, such 21st century *twitter*⁵ seems to align too easily with corporate and institutional thinking – dumbed-down culture and a network of sometimes vacuous media with little insight, creativity, or critical insight. Society seems wired to make the *Faustian* bargain of trading thoughtfulness for clarity without lucidity. Public discourse has hardly flourished under new media’s abundance of platforms. Information is one thing, but water boarding a society into MacWorld thoughtlessness under a tsunami of trivia is another. Print culture simply seems to demand a focus too sustained in the face of Twitter, and no longer holds public primacy for a generation hooked on immediacy and interactivity that audio and visual media happily supplies. The work promises to be difficult.

So, public intellectuals like Noam Chomsky, Angela Davis, or Stanley Aronowitz are excluded from mainstream media or treated as marginal because their theorizing either takes too much thought or is too intense in “Web Two” culture. Academic life seems to push one more towards grappling with “lines of research” honed over several years and away from up-to-date insights that respond to current conditions. We learn, as academics, to be reluctant to speak without sufficiently addressing necessary considerations such as “burdens of proof.” In other words, writing for a wide public often seems foreign to the demands of academic work that calls one to (1) highly-specialized, professional language few people can understand to meet one’s academic standards and away from (2) under-theorized thoughts that meet a public’s need for immediacy. Academic journal publishing formats that are excessively process-centric might also contribute to a lack of deep theorizing.

⁵ Twitter might have huge opportunities for knowledge sharing, but my first taste of twitter finds me believing it is generally trivial and self-focused.

In an essay titled “Fear and Loathing in the Academy” (Stelmach, Parsons, & Frick; 2010) suggest why potentially significant theoretical rigor detaches itself from viable notions of accessibility and the possibility of reaching a larger audience outside one’s academic discipline. Many intellectuals live in hermetic bubbles cut off from the larger public and important issues that impact society. To no small degree, we are complicit in letting the university slide toward the worst nuances of the Ivory Tower. We spend time within our own academic walls unable to challenge cultural illiteracy with critically engaged discourse, complex ideas, or considered public engagement. We forget that, without the intervention of public intellectuals, a reign of simplicity establishes prominence and cancels public accessibility to rigorous language and ideas that would inform a public hearing.

Edward Said urged academic colleagues to develop intellectual rather than professional vocations and believed that confronting the social suffering that blemished society and threatened democracy was an intellectual’s central concern. He believed academics should work to form pedagogical conditions and cultures that promoted critical awareness, thought, and dialogue: these, he believed, were the ingredients of a literate culture needed by any democracy. Said also believed in the power of language to change reality. For him, language carried values and, unless language “performed” services, would become passive. The best language was active self-reflection and self-consciousness, rather than *vocabulary delivered*. I believe Said would remind those who watch CNN or Fox News not to believe they know the world. CNN or Fox are only two versions of a postmodern world. A public intellectual understands and helps others understand and choose between alternative versions and then change the world.

Public intellectuals are responsible for unsettling power, troubling consensus, and challenging common sense. It is surprising that more academics are not public intellectuals, because the work of engaged public intellectuals is neither foreign to nor a violation of what it means to be a scholar. In fact, it seems central to any definition of scholar. A recent memo from the President of the University of Alberta listed for University of Alberta faculties what would be evaluated as important work. Number one was “community involvement.” In this, the President of the University of Alberta mirrors Said’s belief that academics should enter the public sphere.

Perhaps our University of Alberta President (burdened with a task of raising funds) would not have gone as far as Said, who recommended fearlessly taking positions, generating controversy, witnessing to and pointing out social injustice, raising political insight, and connecting the power and politics often hidden from the public. Perhaps Said’s notion of helping the public turn over the stones of ethical questions that remain hidden might not be the “spin” a present-day university leader wants from her professors; but, why not? Perhaps it is time, as Said (2004, p. 70) encouraged, to criticize academics who, like bears full after a summer of feasting on berries, retreat into academic dens of slumbering specializations that hibernate them “from the public sphere but from other professionals who don’t use the same jargon.” Similar to Giroux, Said inferred that complex language and critical thought came under societal assault because so many academics had retreated to uber-esoteric jargon.

Engaging the teaching aspect of being a public intellectual might find a difficult audience. Whether from a dominant media or in institutions shaped by market-driven values, society is relentlessly offered prepackaged, feckless fast food discourse in lieu of sustained thought or substantive critique. Media has become *The View* of talking trivia

masked as commentary and Jerry Seinfeld-like spectacles of entertainment snippets about nothing much, all of which relentlessly work to infantilize an increasingly dulled public. In the face of such blah, academics have a commitment to engage critical thought, self-reflection, research, and reason. We live in one of a few sites where engaged and caring criticism might be nurtured. Facing such obvious need, cults of professionals tongue-tied by jargon simply don't speak clearly enough. As Said noted, and I agree, the academy remains a viable site for struggling with ideas, and academics retain the opportunity to merge intellectual work and public life. Academics have a responsibility to create and engage in wider educational exchanges; and, given the possibilities of media now present – lectures, conferences, radio and television, journals, Internet blogs and podcasts, and interviews – there might be no end to where academics might assert themselves as public intellectuals.

We need to aim for a middle road between infantilism that turns its back on critical thought and theorizing and jargon-ridden arcane language that befuddles issues so as to retain power and status. Complexity can be translated clearly to the public, bashing binaries in favor of discourse that accessibly addresses issues for the public in ways that both challenge and engage. It seems time for academics to assume responsibility for how we engage the public with our ideas. We need to overcome what the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1996, p. 35) called “‘fast thinkers,’ specialists in throw-away thinking.” Bourdieu especially critiqued *public relations intellectuals* who offer “‘cultural fast food - predigested and pre-thought culture,” (p. 29) who talk in sound bytes that debase complex issues, insult readers, and drain issues of complex substance.

Such academic actions are worse than ineffective, because they feed the aforementioned anti-intellectualism that sees academics as antithetical to *American* values. As

Richard Hofstadter (1963) wrote in his monumental *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* and Susan Jacoby added in *The Age of American Unreason* (2009), anti-intellectualism has cemented itself into North American history, embodied by celebrity obsession, education seen only as a path to a good job, and fashionable social candies that de-legitimize struggles over meaningful ideas by creating facile oppositions between complex and clear, that deny the political motivations that drive differences and restrict possibilities for expanding cultures of deep conversation by refusing to develop multiple literacies that allow people to understand depth of meaning. Sometimes twittered parsimony simply isn't enough.

A case in point has been made in Benton's "On Stupidity" (2008). Benton is no cheerleader of our youth, believing students hold themselves in such high self-esteem that they are impervious to criticism. Benton finds plenty of blame to go around and notes Bauerlein's (2008) list of popular culture, educational pandering, and culture wars. Benton heaps special blame on digital technologies, which he believes deeply immerse students in echo chambers of peer obsession, entertainment, and fashion rather than reasoned politics, history, science, and art. It is not that the young are actively anti-intellectual; it is more that they don't care. For Benton and other academics on the political left, the George W. Bush years represented a "sleep of reason" that produced McMansions, Hummers, triple-bacon cheeseburgers, reality television, and the Iraq War – all vestiges of American hubris. In "On Stupidity, Part 2" (2008), Benton notes that he is convinced that the growth of "stupidity" has occurred over "the past several decades" – which only suggests that, as much as I find the Reagan/Bush hegemony particularly culpable, the apathy, desire to allow others to think for them, attraction to simple answers, and easy exploitation Benton talks about is neither Red or Blue. Democrats Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton also share ignominy.

Many theories for the growth of anti-intellectualism exist. In *Just How Stupid Are We?: Facing the Truth About the American Voter* (2008), Richard Shenkman believes political culture has been “dumbed down” because organizations that kept members politically in the know – organized labor and local parties – have declined in status. Shenkman outlines how the political right defined itself as populist even as it pushed policies that worked against the economic and social interests of average voters. John M. Ellis, in *Literature Lost* (1997), critiques the academy – especially his colleagues in the humanities and literature – for its belief that political power is the most important dimension. For Ellis, two errors exist: (1) the acceptance of Foucault's conflict of powers thesis that seeks evidence of oppression everywhere and misses “good” literature and (2) the error of believing all knowledge is socially constructed and lacks objective validity. This leaves academics seeking only personal, predetermined, political content in literature – in other words, academics take away from their study only what they bring to their study. The fact that no one bells this academic cat, for Ellis, also adds to the academy’s anti-intellectualism.

Al Gore’s *The Assault on Reason* (2007) argues that fundamental principles of American freedom carried forth from the Enlightenment have been corrupted by the politics of fear, the abuse of faith, the power of an increasingly centralized media culture, and a degradation of political checks and balances that favor imperial presidencies. However, Gore is optimistic that the Internet will help democratize information and build community by connecting citizens and by restoring rationality. In *Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World* (2008), Naomi S. Baron disagrees: she believes the proliferation of electronic communication has impaired students’ abilities to write, has discouraged direct communication, has created isolation, self-absorption, and has ruined relationships. Worse,

Barron notes, a multi-tasking society is always *partly distracted* because it has learned to do several things at once, which diminishes the quality of thought, reflection, self-expression, and productivity.

Nicholas Carr's (2008) "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" argues that daily use of the Internet is rewiring our brains for skimming rather than the sustained concentration required by books, listening to lectures, and writing essays. If so, university classrooms might soon be populated by completely rewired "digital natives." Mark Bauerlein (2008) in *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future* agrees that young Americans come to post-secondary education with diminished verbal skills, impaired work ethics, inability to concentrate, and lacking knowledge.

As noted, Susan Jacoby's *The Age of American Unreason* (2009) argues that American anti-intellectualism has grown under the influences of junk science, identity politics, urban-gang culture, political correctness, declining academic standards, moral relativism, and political pandering. Jacoby agrees with Bauerlein that technology has damaged our ability to think. The result is a nation unprepared for global challenges. She sees, in her own words, too many students (1) focused on their own emotions and the primacy of their "feelings" rather than evidence; (2) uncertain what reliable evidence is and willing to accept sources uncritically; (3) convinced that opinions are relative and that all views are equal; (4) unable to follow sustained arguments; (5) skeptical that spelling and punctuation and writing skills matter; (6) hostile to anything not directly relevant to their careers; (7) interested in the social over the academic, yet "needing" to receive unearned high grades; (8) too easily accepting their own lack of knowledge and skills; and (9) certain that academic failure is their professor's fault – not theirs. Although she doesn't speak of it

directly, she implies that a renewal of public intellectuals might benefit a ground-less young.

Schweizer (2008), writing about twentieth-century writers as public intellectuals, suggests that public intellectuals operate within multiple tensions, including those between theory and practice, between elitism and mass appeal, and between academic specialization and generalist inclusiveness. Although public intellectuals often excel in one discipline – such as literary criticism, science, or medicine, they transcend the narrow confines of their specialty by addressing general audiences about matters of economics, education, science, and politics. Although they might not be formally trained in these fields, they have read widely enough and are synthetic enough in their considerations to pull insights together.

Today, public intellectuals tend to affiliate with academic institutions where specialization is a necessary condition of professional work, advancement, and promotion. Few knowledgeable generalists synthesize disparate fields of knowledge to produce broad insights. The consequence of the rise of specialist intellectuals at the expense of generalists comes, Richard Posner (2001) suggests, with a decline in the quality of the public intellectual's value. Contemporary academic public intellectuals have little power. By contrast, many historic public intellectuals have been great figures in American public life. This includes people such as Walter Lippmann, Dorothy Day, John Dewey, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Christopher Lasch – all people who wrote with clarity and passion and informed the public about broad issues.

Posner suggests that one reason academic public intellectuals' work is poor is that they seldom face public critique. Academic work is normally evaluated only privately during (1) anonymous manuscript evaluations or (2) annual work reviews by a committee of peers. Writing for a public, rather than for a few close colleagues, becomes a sideline. As

a result, one's thinking narrows and academics become both too sensitive in some areas and insensitive in others. In my area (education), writing seems derivative; conference papers come nothing close to thoughtful essays and tend to follow trails of citation breadcrumbs towards preconceived biases loosely structured by the concept *theoretical framework*. Few readers consider the accuracy of descriptions or insights, but instead accept cultural understandings already agreed on by initiated insiders from whatever "club" they are devoted to and presumably disciplined by.

On the other hand, George Orwell (on the left), Ayn Rand (on the right, who championed capitalism and looking after number one), Aldous Huxley, and perhaps even more recently literary critic Robert Adams have influenced socio-political thought using rhetorical skills and writing styles that engaged the public. Their public essays rode on the fame created by their fictional works and were powerful exposés of socio-economic and political issues such as the implication of scientific and technological development, the suffering and exploitation caused by historical events, and ideological clashes. Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* (1967), the earlier satirical *Animal Farm* (1945), or the dystopian picture in *1984* (1948) engaged readers emotionally and intellectually about the political ills of ideologies. Such work combined entertainment and education with didactic rigor that inspired public consciousness.

The picture of public intellectuals as noble subversives (in the ilk of Ralph Nader) or as outsiders to the status quo and ramparts against society's tendencies toward totalitarianism were reinforced by Edward Said's 1993 Reith Lectures that insisted public intellectuals work best as outsiders whose lives unsettle others. Said was saying that, when public intellectuals speak truth to power by openly exposing suffering, they become adversarial. Public intellectuals can never be comfortable with power and must remain

vigilant towards celebrity or easy acceptance by those in power. One must keep a clear head about domestic and international politics and maintain critical distance from utopian schemes without becoming cynical. The lessons of the Reagan era cannot be lost, and one must desire to build a socially just, well-adjusted society with room for public subversives to insist on improvement, change, and corrections.

Some public intellectuals have done well as political leaders. Most recent was artist-intellectual, poet-playwright, Vaclav Havel, the first President of the Czech Republic. A writer as an expert in human affairs – what makes better sense? Who better to intersect fact and fiction, reality and promise – especially someone moving to create a narrative of harmony in a multi-ethnic nation emerging from Communism into democracy and capitalism? Havel was far from the first 20th century public intellectual interested in the state, although most have been writers like George Orwell, Albert Camus, Gunter Grass, or Norman Mailer – not to mention artists who express ideas in music – Bono perhaps being the most fluent thought bridge from art to politic. Such thinkers have not always been welcome as a voice in state politics. Plato believed poets should be banned from the ideal republic because they were subversive. Perhaps our society could do with a bit more subversion – a few more people speaking out about contemporary issues such as WikiLeaks' founder Julian Assange. Perhaps the jury remains out on Assange – although commentary has demonized Assange and labeled those who worked for WikiLeaks as naïve souls working for “all the right reasons,” yet erring by exposing patriots and holders of the liberal values we all cherish.

In the face of news as politic (MSNBC vs. Fox) and/or entertainment, the need for people who speak the truth clearly and wisely seems irrefutable and the expectations seem high. Public intellectuals are expected to possess intellectual powers and rhetorical skills.

They are expected to practice an intellectual command and cognitive grasp of complex matters of policy, history, and other ideas. I also believe they should write and speak in language accessible to a broad public – a task not always easy. How does one explain global economic hegemony to a public with a weak sense of history and economics?

Public intellectuals tend to value literature because it blends sociology, economics, politics, history, and sometimes even science into accessible narratives (think Charles Dickens or Mary Shelley). Story can address the public about things that matter – e. g. identity, ideology, or power. When Harold Bloom outlines issues in Shakespeare, one gets to see how much the Great Bard has to say about human predicament. That Bloom credits Canadian Northrup Frye as his muse – and not fellow American Kenneth Burke – brings a smile to me as a Canadian academic. Bloom, even if one does not agree with his conservative literary cannon, writes with engaging idiomatic clarity and directness in a way similar to George Orwell. I experienced that power as I taught *Animal Farm* to Louisville, Kentucky, seventh graders during the bussing of the early 1970s; Orwell illuminated the conflict for some students. Bloom also brought literature to the public by writing and editing *his* “classics” for general readers. Such public intellectuals help make literature relevant to large audiences by exorcising jargon, building literary context, and addressing human issues in ways a wide public can comprehend. As Michael Holquist notes, academics must work to change the landscape below the Ivory Towers.

The decline of public intellectuals goes hand in hand with their isolation in institutional, disciplinary, and discursive prisons. The more public intellectuals become bound with academic institutions, Posner (2001) argues, the more they lose status and impact. Perhaps, even accepting their possible shortcomings, new media technologies offer opportunities for blogging and self-publishing. Today’s public intellectuals – Henry Giroux

or James K. A. Smith, for example – both blog. Previously, the time needed to produce books and journals and the financial constraints of traditional publishing hindered public intellectuals from sharing their thinking with larger audiences. Such constraints and the *publish-in-important-journals* ethos of academic institutions kept public intellectuals writing for narrow academic audiences and ignoring wider *markets* like magazines and newspapers that provide few career advancements. As noted earlier, large-circulation media often ignored academics with, in reality or rumor, little ability to write appealing and accessible text. Today, when post-modern or post-structuralist theorizing seems almost requisite within the academy and more “complex” styles mirror excellence, academic writing is even less attractive to wider audiences. The ability to publish widely is an opportunity for academics as public intellectuals to have one’s voice heard.

Public Intellectuals as Participants

Perhaps the most fearless act for a public intellectual, especially one based in the relative safety of a university, is to leave the Ivory Tower, to bridge theory and practice, and to work to implement ideas on the ground. American presidents have often pressed members of the intelligentsia into just this kind of service. President Kennedy, for example, brought historian Arthur Schlesinger and other intellectuals into his White House and Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford leaned heavily on the advice of former Harvard Professor Henry Kissinger who served in a number of roles in those administrations. More recently, George W. Bush enticed Condoleezza Rice from Stanford University to act as his National Security Advisor and then Secretary of State⁶ and President Obama lured Lawrence Summers from Harvard to direct the National Economic Council. In these positions,

⁶ Dick Cheney’s book *In My Time* (shades of Reagan) critiques Rice by “sadly” noting that Rice’s eyes once welled up with tears and that she actually had to admit that she might have been wrong – all heinous acts of pretend leaders.

intellectuals subject their ideas to the fire of policy debates and public scrutiny and risk both failure and loss of public esteem.

One example of an academic who works in government is Canadian educator Ben Levin. Levin, a well-known academic with expertise in educational policy and educational change, twice left the academy to work as deputy minister (the senior educational bureaucrat) of education in different Canadian provinces – Manitoba and Ontario. In both cases he was charged with managing significant reforms for new governments with very different educational agendas from the ones they replaced. Levin (2005:6) was willing to personally put his ideas to the test in the context of the “conflicts, ambiguities, sudden changes, short timelines, and endless pressures” of government work. He then wrote two accessible books on the subject that provide invaluable reflection on theories of educational change in the light of this kind of practical experience (Levin 2005; 2008).

What Can Public Intellectuals Contribute to the Public Square?

Arthur, Gearon, & Sears (2010) note that the seventeenth century arrest and muzzling of Galileo by the Inquisition of the Roman Catholic Church has become the iconic example of religious suppression of dissent in Western societies. Dissent, it is argued, is important for scientific and social progress, whereas religious restraints threaten the common good. Democracy does not simply tolerate dissent, it thrives on it; in fact, many people we celebrate as models of democratic citizens were or are dissenters. The Civil Rights movement or Chinese dissident and recent Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo are examples.

The irony is, however, that some proponents of democracy now find themselves in the position of the seventeenth century Catholic Church seeking to squelch dissent. For Loren J. Samons II (2004), contemporary democracies have raised principles of individual

freedom, choice, and popular opinion to unquestioned articles of faith. He writes, “In a land that continually praises ‘diversity’ is it not somewhat odd that there is virtually no popular political opposition to the principle that whatever “the American people’ want is an appropriate goal for our society?” (p. 177). “In essence, we may already have enshrined democratic political ideals as the tenets of a new religion” (p. 14. Witte (1993:13). Samons argues that democracy has created many idols in its short political life – proud cults of progress and freedom, blind beliefs in materialism and technology, and faithful adherents to agnosticism and nihilism. Samons believes such *democratic* values have become powerful because they admit no philosophical opposition - a supreme irony.

For Samons, this key difference separates modern democracies and Athenian democracy. Athenians could go to the theatre or places of public dispute to regularly hear the foundations and resulting structures of their system of government questioned: such questioning virtually never happens in contemporary democracies. To paraphrase Socrates (a key critic of some aspects of Athenian democracy), the unexamined democracy is not worthy of its name when worldviews and systems of thought that could promote continuous re-examination of the premises of democratic systems are avoided. Avoiding critique does not serve democracy well. As Chaput (2009: 9) writes, nothing is “more empty headed in a pluralist democracy than telling citizens to keep quiet about their beliefs. A healthy democracy requires exactly the opposite. Democracy requires a vigorous public struggle of convictions and ideas.” Meeks (1998: 51) adds, “Democracy assumes a degree of conviviality and life resources among citizens but has no power itself to bring them into being.”

Samons (2004) argues that, for the Athenians, democracy was a means to an end, a way to provide public goods, and not an end in itself. It played an important role in

Athenian society but balanced other areas of life including religious and family commitments. Ignatieff (2000: 23) argues the same limits ought to apply to contemporary democracies. There is more to the good life, he contends, than rights and laws.

Codes of rights cannot be expected to define what the good life is, what love and faithfulness and honour are. Codes of rights are about defining the minimum conditions for any life at all. So in the case of the family they are about defining the negatives: abuse and violence. Rights can't define the positives: love, forbearance, humour, charity and endurance. We need other words to do that, and we need to make sure that rights talk doesn't end up crowding out all the other ways we express our deepest and most enduring needs.

No matter how solid our constitutional frameworks, we will still depend to some degree on "extra political values" (Samons 2004: 181) such as those outlined by Ignatieff to undergird important aspects of our common life. Arthur, Gearon, & Sears, 2010) cite Neuhaus (2008: 82), who drew on the work of C.S. Lewis, and provides an example of the wealth of resources that might engage conversation about the public good in *The Tao*, or public philosophy that supports religious and moral traditions by inculcating certain rules "such as general beneficence toward others, special beneficence toward one's own community, duties to parents and ancestors, duties to children and posterity, and the laws of justice, honesty, mercy and magnanimity." Whether from the Torah, Chinese *Analects*, Cicero, the New Testament, or the *Baghavad Ghita*, such truths constitute the "civilizational circle." It is this "civilizational circle" that public intellectuals from all walks might best engage.

Summary

In 1976, my first year as a working academic, a group of American clergy, theologians, and religious scholars issued the Hartford Appeal. They called the church to stop compromising with modernity, stand apart and be the different community it was. Sociologist Peter Berger (1976:1), a key author of the Appeal, wrote that it was “directed against the cultural or political accommodation of *ity* in any form, left as well as right.” Their work was less an act of isolationism than a continuing point of contrast to the contemporary zeitgeist. The title of the book they produced to explain and contextualize the Appeal summarizes this message: “*Against the World For the World*” (Berger & Neuhaus 1976). University academics should be no less engaged in offering public points of contrast to contemporary hegemonies of ill-considered thoughtlessness.

Yet, for as obvious and opportune such a task might be, we university academics have seemed not to engage it. This lack of engagement seems as true today as when Howard Dickman (1993) edited a book titled *The Imperiled Academy*. There has been little systematic writing about academics as public intellectuals, although Nagy-Zekmi & Hollis’ (2012) edited book *Global Academe: Engaging Intellectual Discourse* is a welcome addition. Nagy-Zekmi & Hollis agree with Edward Said that academics can and should provide dissenting voices that conflict with authority and defend academics as producers of knowledge rather than just teaching professionals who transmit knowledge. They also suggest using the Internet and digital media to promote conversations between academics and open up conversation in the face of obstacles. Marc Lamont Hill’s (2012) recent article titled “Beyond ‘Talking out of School’: Educational Researchers as Public Intellectuals” also talks about researchers working as public intellectuals; however, such explorations seem uncommon.

One might, at this juncture in the essay, make any number of recommendations about specific topics about how young or even older academics might engage as public intellectuals. Questions about our academic work are far from fully asked or answered, and further work could be done to determine (1) whether academics are engaging the public discourse, (2) how and in what ways they might be engaging that discourse, (3) whether their engagement is effective, or (4) what policies within the academy might encourage or discourage public intellectualism. After almost forty years in the academy, I have my own ideas. I trust there will be disagreement; and, I invite others to share their own insights.

Perhaps, quite simplistically, an easy way to begin to engage the work of a public intellectual is to do it in partnership – two or more scholars working and talking together through issues they see as important for input. There is something quite scholarly about engaging academic community (common unity) in intellectual work. In addition, working together staves off some fear and loneliness. The idea is not a new one, however: the prolific American Pulitzer Prize winner Garry Wills, in writing one of his several books about Augustine (although I do not recall which book) noted that Augustine loved *graduate study* because he appreciated discussion among colleagues.

Although my work (because I have cited numerous people who have engaged public intellectualism as a topic of consideration) suggests that many have written on the subject of public intellectuals in the past fifteen years or so, in my own university or in my meetings with colleagues from other universities, I have never heard or entered a conversation with other academics about our work as public intellectuals. The closest I can recall is a conversation with former University of British Columbia now Stanford professor John Willinsky about the need of professors to write, publish, and share their intellectual

ideas in open access journals. I am convinced from my personal N of 1 that the topic of academics as public intellectuals is seldom discussed among academics. Specifically, I have heard many discussions about how and why academics should be strategic in publishing their work – citing Journal Impact Factors as keys to success. I doubt these conversations share many foundational beliefs.

My intent in this paper has been to appeal to my academic colleagues to both hold to what distinguishes us as scholars and to participate in public conversations about who we are and might be as people and ideas. We stand in a grand tradition of voices advocating for human justice around the world. As Lynch (2006) suggests in her article on the marketization of higher education, there are many issues we might address. If, as she specifically suggests, the rise of Europe's "New Right" is able to offload the cost of education to individuals and re-vision it as a private service citizens must buy at market value, such neo-liberalism might become normalized policy discourse. In her mind, it is no accident schools are run as businesses with increasing expectations to supplement budgets from private sources (including unhealthy food and drink). So, Lynch wades into the public arena to critique neo-liberal market education. By doing so, she challenges academics to work as public intellectuals both individually and within civil society to develop a counter-hegemonic discourse against neo-liberalism in higher education. May we all join her and others as public intellectuals who work to bring insight to society.

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