

Public Intellectuals and Civil Society¹

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In the title to this conference we find the key words “public” and “intellectual.” Both refer to separation and universality, and to the capacity for judgment that emerges from the status of being separate and the capacity for universalism.

According to philosophical convention, the public is a space separated from the immediate, particularistic demands and also the resources of organizations. It is a space outside of them – in which people can, indeed are compelled to, exercise their reason, as Kant said, or, in Habermas’ terms, engage in unfettered critical discourse. The public is also the imagined and widely inclusive community that is both implied and constructed by such putative reasoners and discourses, the civil sphere evoked by critics and sometimes loyalists as a counterpoint to demands of the market, the state, religion, and family.²

Intellectuals are actors who can exercise judgment because they themselves are free floating, independent of particular commitments. They are defined as those motivated by such general categories as justice and truth. They make statements on behalf of humanity, in order to serve Rousseau’s general will, the real interests of which everyday actors, because they are prone to bias or irrationality, are not themselves consciously aware.

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² I am not entirely happy with the “public” as a sociological-cum-philosophical category, but I will not pursue these reservations here. In formal terms, however, I would prefer to employ the hyphenated term “civil-public” in any discourse about public intellectuals. See *The Civil Sphere*, Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

So it is clear that, in theoretical terms, “intellectuals” and “public” are concepts that go hand in hand. This is also true sociologically and historically. The emergence of the public sphere corresponds with the rise of intellectuals.

Structural Analysis: Origins in Ancient Greece and Prophetic Religion

Ancient Greece was where the polis first emerged and from which the term “public” first came into being. The polis was, literally, a separate sphere of activity, peopled by every adult male who was not a foreigner or a slave. It was held to constitute the “community” of the city state, whose activity was discourse, reasoning, rhetoric, argument, and, of course, voting and, via executive delegation, governing.

Once an actual place, since its demise the polis has been a myth, a regulating idea. At the center of this myth has been an intellectual, Socrates. Socrates was a real person, but we know him only through Plato’s construction. As we learn about him in the dialogues, Socrates is the man of truth, who speaks from total disinterest, as an individual with no attachments of a particularistic sort – friendship, oikos, city-patriotism, passion. He is the objective truth teller. He embodies, as such, the ethics of the public sphere. He died because he refused to stop speaking the truth against power, to buckle down to the particular will in a time of war. The story about the death of Socrates has always been at the heart of what the ideals of the public, and the obligations of an intellectual, should be.

This ‘republican’ tradition has exercised incredible power over the last 2500 years. It is surely something that the legacy we have received from our discipline’s greatest historical and comparative thinker, Max Weber, seems unnecessarily to slight.

We can, however, work out what the relation between the Weberian and Socratic understandings of what public intellectuals might be. What Weber provides is a broad religious-cum-cultural understanding of why the West has been so responsive to the myth of public intellectuals and rational-critical judgment. It has been so because of the new role of prophecy, which emerged with ancient Judaism and was institutionalized first in Christianity and later, and much more emphatically, in Protestantism.

The prophets were, in Weber's scheme, the religious equivalents of intellectuals. While, in purported contrast with public intellectuals, they were motivated by an apriori system of beliefs, the abstracted and transcendental status of this belief system allowed them independence and critical distance from the more particularistic institutions, organizations, and other belief sets of their day. Eisenstadt, of course, has explicitly made use of Weber's comparative theory to explain the historical rise of the intellectuals in the different civilizations of the Axial Age.

There seems little doubt that Weber implicitly, and Eisenstat explicitly, are right. The modern public intellectual is, in fact, also a prophet.³ The performative understanding of "intellectual" has depended, since the Christian and Roman mixing of the Jewish and Greek, on the background script of prophecy, especially the thundering Old Testament kind. This Weberian background helps explain why Buddhism and Confucianism have provided such a fertile background for denunciatory public intellectuals to arise in modern times.

³ It is, nonetheless, a great misfortune that the Weberian tradition did itself connect its religious sociology to the origins of philosophy and reason in the Greek public sphere, and it is to Parsons great credit that he did, in fact, try to do so. That Weber did betrays, I think, his own ambivalence about the democratic tradition, as revealed by his understanding of prophets as the first demagogues and by his equation of modern mass democracy with plebiscitary caesarism – far from the Socratic ideal.

The Performative Dimension

Before discussing modern examples of public intellectuals and their relationship to the civil-public sphere, I need to table one more analytical consideration. What I've presented so far is a 'structural' analysis of the institutional and culture conditions for the emergence of public intellectuals. But the role of public intellectual must also be performed. To be a "public intellectual" is a matter of making, of performing, and of convincing others of the same. As John Austin would have said, the linguistic term "public intellectual" is not just constative, but connotative and subjunctive. Being a public intellectual is not only locutionary, a matter of linguistic definition, but illocutionary and perlocutionary, a matter of doing thing with words. It is a performative, not just a constative. It's not just role taking but role making.⁴

A good example of this distinction can be found in the life of the great French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Throughout most of his career, Bourdieu was content to be a sociologist-intellectual. He pursued the truth through empirical and theoretical studies, studies whose normative reference was, of course, the civil public sphere. In France, the audiences for many of Bourdieu's sociological works extended into the non-academic public sphere. According to the perspective I am developing here, however, Bourdieu did not become a "public intellectual" until, in the last decade of his life, he published *La Misère du Monde*, made regular appearances on French television, and ostentatiously associated with *Le Monde Diplomatique* and the "Gauchists" movement that opposed the French Socialist Party and its "neo-liberal" policies.

⁴ This is Ralph Turner's early symbolic interactionist distinction, which indicates the influence of Erving Goffman on his thinking, and in this sense the role of performance philosophy and theory *avant la lettre*.

So it is really, after all, not just a matter of telling the truth and of being separate and free floating, or of truly representing the universal. It is a matter of performing as if one were all these things. Being a public intellectual is symbolic action, a matter of becoming what Emerson called a “representative man.” To become exemplary in this manner is to dramatically embody the myth of universalism, the binary code of public versus private, and the narrative of progressive triumph.

We know, of course, that this is not how Plato wished to understand Socrates, and certainly it does not accord with the Socratic myth. According to Plato, and no doubt he was right, Socrates hated “rhetoric.” In the *Gorgias*, Socrates railed against rhetoricians as what we would now call “PR” men or “spin doctors.” He maintained that philosophers spoke truth, that only they had the courage to face facts, and that their influence rested entirely upon their ability to present rational and logical deductions and empirical inductions based on observations . As Detective Joe Friday used to say on the American television drama *Dragnet*, “just the facts, maam, only the facts.”

Plato distrusted fiction and hated mimesis. But here we cannot follow either Socrates or Plato. Did not Socrates himself have a “style”? Was he himself not dramatic and persuasive? On his daily trips throughout the Athenian marketplace, did he not want to grab and hold the attention of his fellows citizens, and to draw an audience around him, and was he not himself surrounded by a supporting cast? Rhetorical performance, in other words, was central to the very origins of the public intellectual. The teachers and schools of rhetoric emerged in Athens, after all, at the very same time as did the new philosophers of truth. Their aim was to allow speakers in the polis to be more persuasive,

and thus more effective, to supply them with the performative capacity to exercise more illocutionary and perlocutionary force.

How much more performative has been the status “public intellectual” in the millennia since the Greeks. As mythical figures, Socrates and the Old Testament prophets are the principal protagonists in a narrative script that has displayed an extraordinary reproductive power. In this script, the ancient republic is presented as a golden age, in relation to which public intellectuals measure the decline of the civil-public sphere in modern days.

The Socratic sense of truth-telling as purely constative, as non-performative rational judgment, is a form of philosophical false consciousness which has created problems of self-understanding for modern public intellectuals, and thus, in some instances, for ability to have public effect. It is often suggested that the rational presentation of objective and unbiased knowledge can, and should, be the basis for effective entry into the public sphere. Nothing could be further from the truth. Public intellectuals need to connect with, and speak on behalf of, the great narrative myths of our time, to sing about the possible triumph of progress, to strike the chords of national, regional, and ideological myths about equality and democracy. They must strive to become symbolic icons who can embody rationality and universalism in the present day.⁵

⁵ This is a major problem in Michael Burawoy’s understanding of public intellectuals, which is informed, and deformed, by the Enlightenment, or “modernist,” idea of intellectuals as legislators, as truth carriers of expert knowledge. As Bauman as suggested, there is at the core of such a perspective a rather “vanguardist” idea of a closed scientific system. While Burawoy’s embrace of such an image of the public sociologist is thoroughly well-intended and public spirited, taken literally his particular approach carries some of the elitist dangers that bedeviled left-wing and right-wing revolutionary social movements of in the 20th century.

The Cry for Civil Repair: Modern Traditions of Public Intellectual Performance

In relation to the civil-public sphere, the role of the public intellectual is to offer not only the hope but the the road map to institutionalizing its ideals. Ever since their reception, these ideals have been in trouble. They were undermined in Ancient Greece, in the Roman republic, in the Renaissance city states. Even as the civil-public sphere first became institutionalized in a national form, by law and democratic procedure, it was accosted on every side, by markets and classes, parties, states, families, religions, regional chauvinism, ethnic and racial ties. To sustain even the semblance of a differentiated and voluntary association of cooperative and deeply identified human beings has been no easy thing. To maintain formal democracies, let alone social democracies, has been perilous, and this is only to speak of conditions inside the nation-state. It has been utterly impossible between them.

Such difficulties, and their fateful and often fatal consequences, that have created audiences eager for public intellectual performance. Demanding that the fragmented solidarity of the civil sphere be repaired, public intellectuals defend the integrity of, and outline the possibilities for, a more civil society. Their performances have two parts. The first identifies “destructive intrusions” to the civil ideal. The second recommends how the rents in the fabric of civil solidarity can be repaired.

The Revolutionary Tradition

Walzer describes the post-Marion exiles, the Puritans, as the first public intellectuals of the revolutionary tradition. Inheritors of Weber’s prophets, they also created modern empirical science, were strong believers in truth telling, and intensely committed to democratic and participatory politics. They framed the English revolution

in terms of demands for a more level society, denouncing “Popist” hierarchies, magic and mystery, and what public intellectuals today might call bullshit of all kinds, except, of course, their own. In Puritan literature these dangers were constructed as destructive intrusions to civil solidarity.

The first liberal democratic theory, such as Locke’s, came out of this Puritan tradition, and the English and Scottish democratic theorists of civil society informed what later became French Enlightenment thought. The *Philosophes* were the first group of secular public intellectuals in the revolutionary tradition, presenting empirical truth as highly corrosive of corrupt kinships, social divisions, and dogma. In the name of rationality they performed denunciation, and created at least the ideological conditions for the first secular and violent social revolution, which began in France in 1789.

By the 1840s, the revolutionary prophecy carried by public intellectuals became translated into the idioms of socialism, symbolized and stimulated by the publication of *The Communist Manifesto*. The fundamental reference of this version of the prophecy remained the same. It was to abolish unequal social divisions, on the one hand, and repressive domination, on the other, so as to stitch back together a more thorough-going solidarity. According to this socialist version, such a natural and spontaneous association could be achieved only if economic life were freed from the destructive intrusion of the market.

This originating moment of anti-capitalist public intellectual performance drew from both the Socratic and biblical traditions. The “young Hegelians” group from which Marx emerged drew on their master’s belief in a god-like and immanent reason, which, while historicizing Kant, was also steeped in spiritual understandings of a life-altering

other-worldly force. The émigré communist workers who commissioned Marx and Engels to write their *Manifesto* in London were themselves a chiliastic religious brotherhood, rooted in a version primitive Christianity. In their eloquent and stirring manifesto, Marx and Engels combined all this with the highest truth-telling social science of his time, British political economy.

The iconic figure of the revolutionary public intellectual became a myth, and it powerfully buffeted Western societies well into the later days of the next century. This new performative role became reconfigured in other religio-cultural orders that had emerged from the Axial Age. The revolutionary public intellectual became a hero with a thousand faces. He became Mao Tse Tung, the Leninist neo-Confucian scholar who emerged as the great prophet of the middle kingdom and exercised near god-like performative authority. He became Franz Fanon, the prophet, philosopher, and therapist of civil repair in its anti-colonial form. Fanon's belief in the transformative power of revolutionary violence to repair psyche and society was rooted not only in his experience as a psychiatrist but in the teachings of Sartre, which derived from, and itself reconstituted, some of the most esoteric, "separated," and universalizing intellectuality of the century we have only recently left behind.

From Mao and Fanon were derived the whole repertory of "third world revolutionaries," the hero prophets from Che Guevara to Subcomander Marcos. The populist leader of the Zapatista rebellion has been outed as having once lived as a privileged philosophy graduate student at UNAM, which explains his confident claims on secular truth. Yet, while his commitment to the civil repair of Mexico is genuine, so is the Subcommander's performative sense. This pipe smoking, mask wearing, and manifesto-

writing public intellectual is playing a familiar role. Osama Bin Laden presents the most recent incarnation of this revolutionary tradition. His aim is to repair the solidarity, not of the ancient Greek Republic but of the ancient Islamic one. Not only is the terrorism of Al Qaeda highly dramaturgical, but the organization has provided a whole series of videotapes and recordings performing denunciation, ever since they broke onto the global stage on September 11, 2001.

The public-intellectual performance of civil repair does not have only to be revolutionary. It is more democratic, if not nearly so exciting, when it is reformist. One thinks here of such great public intellectuals as Bentham and Mill in nineteenth century Britain, and later of the Fabian Society. Such reformist figures and organizations denounced the corruption, repressions, and exclusions of modern society and through their evocative and impassioned road maps laid claim to knowledge about how to repair it. John Maynard Keynes was perhaps the most influential reforming public intellectual of the 20th century. His performance combined brilliant truth telling with commitments to solidarity and its repair, and the high dungeon of moral denunciation with ethereal participation in an ideal aesthetic world far removed from everyday modern life. Keynes condemned capitalists for their demonic and irrational “animal spirits,” but he fervently believed in the singular power of capitalist economies to provide the material means that were necessary, in his view, to facilitate the good life.

Other Traditions

If I had more time, I would like not only to expound further on this reformist tradition of public intellectuals but to explore other sub-genres of the public intellectual role. Radical right-wing revolutionaries have been immensely influential public

intellectuals, although the *gemeinschaftlich* solidarities they would restore are definitely not of the civil type. Neo-conservatives are today perhaps the most influential public intellectuals of all. Denounced by their opponents as anti-civil egoists, as concerned only with wealth and power, this is an effort at effective rhetorical deconstruction rather than an empirical interpretation. Like those on the Left, neo-conservatives derive their power and authority from their defense of the civil sphere and their promise of its repair. They frame the threat to civil solidarity, however, as emanating, not from the market, but from the state and, indeed, from liberal and secular intellectuals themselves. Following such thinkers as Ludwig von Mises, Milton Friedman, and Ayn Rand, they see markets as all about freedom and reciprocity, as civil societies in miniature. Other neo-conservative public intellectuals have, more in the spirit of Burke and Oakeshott, assert that traditions and traditional authorities are essential if trust is to be restored to civil life.

Nor are the genres of public intellectual performance exclusively political. There is a psychoanalytic tradition of therapist as public teacher that orients itself to the interactional level of civil society. From Freud and Jung to Erik Erikson and Jacques Lacan, these therapist-prophets have tried to restore the subjective capacity for feeling, balance, confidence, and rationality. Through their intellectual performances as public therapists, they have tried to save civilization.

Exposing the Public Intellectual as a Private Person: The Dialectic of Denunciation and Repair

Public intellectuals are not as free-floating and universalizing as they, or we, think they are or would like to be. The civil sphere is instantiated in real time and space, and it is concerned as much with exclusion as inclusion. Civil discourse is binary, promoting

not only liberty but also repression. As iconic figures of the civil sphere, public intellectuals have reflected its imbeddedness in race, nation, religion, ethnicity, gender, sex, and civilization. Their cries for civil repair have not only extended solidarity by humanizing others, and thus allowing emancipation. These cries have also constituted rhetorics of demonization, constructing certain groups as unworthy of inclusion into civil society and thus as candidates of annihilation.

I do not advance this slightly heretical, and perhaps even perverse, argument as itself an objective and free-floating proposition. Rather, I am putting into a general and sociological form the actual language of public intellectuals themselves, who are forever denouncing one another, and the putative groups and interests the other represents. They paint their opponents as uncivil, and thus as unattractive, so as to undermine their effectiveness in the performances of public life. Napoleon did this famously for the French revolutionaries and radical men of letters, calling them not philosophers or intellectuals but ideologues, chastising them for promoting dogma rather than truth, and accusing them of thinking not about the public but about themselves. Since that time, to call somebody an ideologue has been to accuse them of particularistic self-interest, and to strip from them their publicness.

The denunciation of the public intellectual as neither universal nor truthful but as particularistic, self-interested, and dogmatic is a universal trope that can take on many different forms. The Marxist left denounced civil reformers as middle class and bourgeois, as merely coopting the indignation of the lower classes, or even as trying to rise to rulership themselves. Conservatives and reformers, for their part, have “exposed” revolutionary public intellectuals as actually concerned with class or party rather than

with the civic body as such, and as insensitive to the corrosive effects of violence upon their utopia of civil society.

The most sweeping and effective contemporary deconstruction of public intellectuals has been the postmodern. Radicals, reformers, and conservatives alike have been condemned as modernists, and thus, whether knowingly or unknowingly, restricted by whiteness, maleness, homophobia, orientalism, and, above all, by their own commitment to universalizing rationality. Presenting modernism as narrow, violent, and anti-civil, postmodern public intellectuals make the claim that flexibility, humor, and a sensitivity to the particular and concrete can restore the trust and reciprocity upon which civil community depends.

The self-proclaimed “new cosmopolitans” might perhaps be said to represent public intellectuals of a post-postmodernist kind. Speaking on behalf of an imminent global civil sphere, Ulrich Beck accuses all social science hitherto of methodological nationalism, evoking a newly energized discourse of civil idealism on a world-wide scale. Other global public intellectuals, such as David Held and Mary Kaldor, develop road maps for global civil repair of a more practical but just as anti-nation state. The performance of these new cosmopolitans is closely related to the public intellectuals of the new Europe, whose civil and Socratic public aspirations have been sharply highlighted by the recent countermovement of anti-constitutional backlash. But the dialectic turns. Volker Heins has recently accused Habermas and other avowedly cosmopolitan European public intellectuals of “orientalizing America,” of engaging in a

particularistic discourse that divides and ranks the world's civil societies and privileges Europe as more worthy and pure.⁶

Conclusion

Despite these rather sobering considerations, let me say that I deeply believe in public intellectuals. They are among the most important carrier groups for the discourse of civil society, and, despite its fragmentation and weakness, the ideals and partial institutionalizations of the civil sphere are the closest that human societies have yet come to making the universal concrete. Civil repair is a project, and public intellectuals participate in it in a critical, if often highly ambiguous, way.

⁶ Volker Heins, "Orientalizing America," *Millenium*, forthcoming, July, 2005.