

Introduction: Ideas, Intellectuals and the Public

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The relationship between intellectuals and the public is an awkward one. To play their traditional role, intellectuals certainly need the public. But does the public need intellectuals? If so, what kinds of intellectuals? The discussion about public intellectuals is based on the premise that intellectual life is not just about universities. To take the idea of the public intellectual seriously is to assume that ideas can have a profound effect on society as a whole, and that intellectual life is therefore inextricable from politics, and the question of how society is organised. To use Marx's memorable phrase: 'theory becomes a material force when it grips the masses'. Indeed, the Institute of Ideas was established by Claire Fox while she was publishing *Living Marxism* magazine, and its work continues to explore some of the themes developed in that political tradition. The leading think tank Demos, meanwhile (as Gregor McLennan and Thomas Osborne remind us in their article), was founded by thinkers associated with *Marxism Today*. And, of course, there is no shortage of think tanks and research institutions established by the political right.

While there is a great deal of disagreement between the contributors to this volume, there is no single area of disagreement, and no simple division between conflicting political positions. In this sense, the discussion about intellectuals captures an important shift in public life, a certain ambiguity about the role of ideas. In fact, one major fissure that is apparent in the discussion is precisely over the question of intellectual decline. There is a well-established account which holds that while intellectuals once thrived, they are now in decline or indeed non-existent. Much of the literature on the subject, notably Russell Jacoby's *The Last Intellectuals* (2000), endorses this idea at least implicitly. Nevertheless, many writers

are suspicious of the decline narrative, and cast doubt both on the intellectual vibrancy of the past and on the supposed dearth of intellectuals in the present. Indeed, there is a counter-narrative according to which we have simply moved from an authoritarian and elitist model of the intellectual to a more open and fluid, even democratic model, a 'knowledge society' in which everyone can participate on equal terms. These ideas are discussed in various ways in the articles that follow, but the contributors make it clear that the situation is more subtle than either caricature allows.

Jeremy Jennings argues in his essay that our image of the intellectual is largely mythical. His own academic specialism concerns perhaps the most heavily romanticised example, that of French intellectual history. Jennings sketches a more prosaic account of the *salons* and the *philosophes*, drawing attention to the limitations of the French intellectual tradition as well as its achievements. Indeed, even a more celebratory account of the intellectuals of the past militates against nostalgia. Sabine Reul shows in her contribution that the Frankfurt School, comprising some of the most celebrated public intellectuals of the twentieth century, was established in far from accommodating circumstances. Reul describes the postwar West German universities as 'immensely inhospitable to radical thought'. Moreover, following the wreckage of the war and the Holocaust, the intellectual tasks facing the Frankfurt School were formidable. Despite such inauspicious circumstances, this handful of intellectuals resolved to bring together the remnants of the European intellectual tradition with empirical social research to generate a new intellectual field that would offer the key to changing the world. Given this account, one has a choice between simply marveling at the heroism of the intellectuals of the past, or thinking about how one might emulate their ambition and their achievements in the present. Jennings suggests that the former tendency, to see intellectuals as belonging to another era, or indeed another culture, expresses 'a reactionary and dangerous elitism'. At the very least, then, Jennings's contribution challenges those who do want to criticise contemporary intellectual life to clarify exactly what they think the problem is, and what they intend to do about it.

In this spirit, Alan Hudson's article suggests that the current discussion about intellectuals reflects a genuine peculiarity of contemporary public life: the absence of serious political alternatives. Whereas Russell Jacoby accounts for the alleged decline of the public intellectual in quite technical terms – the professionalisation of academic life and the atomising effects of suburbanisation – Hudson sees the diminishment of politics, rather than a decline of the intellectual as such, as the defining characteristic of

contemporary intellectual life. Sketching the development of the intellectual over the last several hundred years, Hudson argues that the public role played by intellectuals in previous periods does not resonate in the present, because the political imagination is too restricted.

It isn't that the intellectuals of the past were necessarily radicals committed to developing revolutionary ideas. Hudson shows that it is the threat of social change that forces conservatives to make their own intellectual case too (a phenomenon Jennings also notes in French intellectual history). When there is a broad consensus about the fundamentals of how society is organised, or at least a grudging acceptance that there is no alternative, intellectual life takes on a very different complexion. For Hudson, then, the problem is not that academics have become overly specialised and technical out of caprice, but that as a society we can only imagine a technical role for intellectuals. Certainly it is worth asking what qualifies as a proper concern for intellectuals. Many dispute the idea that intellectuals need to deal with big ideas, and indeed more modest, sometimes even ludic, models are beginning to emerge.

Hudson's observation that 'The celebrity intellectual markets ideas as soundbites in the same way that Nigella and Jamie market recipes or Alan Titchmarsh and Charlie Dimmock market plants and water features' is echoed in Gregor McLennan and Thomas Osborne's notion of the 'vehicular idea'. In their article, McLennan and Osborne describe the same situation as Hudson, but understand it very differently, drawing on the postmodern theory of Zygmunt Bauman. Bauman characterises the transformation of the role of the intellectual in recent decades as a shift from the role of 'legislator' (the authoritative, politically committed intellectual implied by Hudson) to that of 'interpreter' (a more modest, relativistic and 'conversational' type). McLennan and Osborne take the theory a stage further, positing the idea of the intellectual as 'mediator'. Whereas the interpreter is still interested in big ideas, however tentatively, the mediator deals in 'vehicular' ideas – not ideas to stake your life on, as McLennan and Osborne put it, but ideas that will get you from A to B. The examples offered, 're-branding Britain', 'joined-up government', demonstrate that this shift in the role of the intellectual by no means implies a withdrawal from politics, however. Indeed, such ideas are more closely associated with think tanks than universities (as they are traditionally conceived anyway), and the thinkers who come up with them are more likely to be criticised for being too narrowly policy oriented than for being disengaged.

It is sometimes suggested rather glibly that think tanks are taking over from universities as the generators of new ideas, and McLennan and

Osborne's work offers a more meaningful way to think about this. A further question their article raises, however, is what relationship exists, or could exist, between think tanks and the public. The substance of the complaint that think tanks are narrowly focused on policy is that they bypass the public, and even political parties, to influence government in an unaccountable and undemocratic way. While 'vehicular ideas' are a world away from the from the impenetrable theories sometimes associated with the academy, it is not at all clear whether they are any more open to public scrutiny.

For Alan Hudson, at least, the role of the intellectual should be to seek out the 'common reader', and to communicate in a way that can be understood by any intelligent person willing to make the effort to understand. The immediate task facing intellectuals, then, is the development of a 'strong vernacular' through which to engage the public. According to Robert Eaglestone, however, there is a fundamental problem with this. He argues in his contribution that writing for the 'general reader' is a genre with its own restrictive rules, heroes and villains. For example, Eaglestone points out that the 'postmodern relativist' is an easily identifiable 'folk devil' in such writing, and argues that sometimes 'the style controls and delimits what is sayable'. In other words, intellectuals too often let the genre do the talking, and fail to get to grips with their subject.

Clearly, this is the opposite of what intellectuals are supposed to do, but it at least creates the appearance of engagement with the public. As Eaglestone puts it, 'the plainness of the prose often "cheats" by assuming a world in which we all agree, which we all share'. Indeed, it is the surely the function of the vernacular to establish that agreement and sharing; it cannot take it for granted. Whether or not this is achievable is the crux of the matter. Eaglestone certainly casts doubt on the success of popular science in engaging the public with genuine scientific ideas, as opposed to quasi-religious sophistry.

While effectively dismissing the notion of a vernacular, however, Eaglestone ends by citing approvingly the celebrated scientist Lord Winston's call for the public to have greater input into science and its application, arguing that scientific knowledge is only one part of 'the wider, developing negotiation that is human society and culture'. In contrast, Bill Durodié argues in his article that the involvement of the public in science, at least as it is currently envisaged, is in fact counterproductive. Significantly, Durodié does not endorse the unscientific notion attacked by Eaglestone that science has the 'answer' to everything; rather he fears the inclusion of 'lay values' in the scientific decision-making

process institutionalises a narrow focus on science and its associated risks without addressing the broader political issues that have given rise to such concerns. In this view, public (that is, non-expert) participation in science undermines the unique contribution that science can make as science, while obscuring a more profound crisis of political, rather than scientific, legitimacy.

Indeed, the broader question of legitimacy is one of the more interesting aspects of the discussion about public intellectuals. The authority of intellectuals is problematic at a time when traditional elites and even professions are subject to questioning and indeed suspicion. The controversy surrounding the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine illustrates the problem. Overwhelming support for the vaccine among the medical community has done little to stem fears that it is linked to autism: instead, the professional consensus serves only to fuel suspicions of a cover-up. Andrew Wakefield, who proposed the link, has been presented as a maverick standing up to his establishment, and it is noteworthy that it was the suggestion of a 'conflict of interests' in his own work, rather than the strength of the case against him, that finally saw him discredited in February 2004 (Deer 2004). It is far easier for intellectuals, even maverick ones, to lose credibility than it is for them to gain it.

This trend is not limited to doctors or scientists. In her contribution, Catherine Scott examines the effects of the 'disappearance of trust' on all academics, specifically through the proliferation of university ethics committees. Starting from her own experience as an educationalist based in Australia, Scott argues that ethics committees are becoming increasingly burdensome, insisting on excessively bureaucratic procedures that prevent researchers from carrying out work that would previously have been considered unproblematic. Scott suggests that this is the result of important cultural changes that have occurred in the Western world in recent decades, culminating in a 'culture of fear'. In particular, Scott notes that anxiety about 'power differentials' has cast ethical doubt on academics both as researchers in relation to their subjects, and as teachers in relation to their students. If there is a general unease about the authority of intellectuals, then, this is all the more pronounced in a specific institution like the university.

Indeed, unsurprisingly, many of the themes that appear in the controversy about the role of intellectuals are reflected in discussions about the university and its role in society. A rare point of agreement here is that nearly everyone is keen to see academics play a broader social role, but as is indicated by the questioning of intellectual authority, there is less of a

consensus about what this actually means. Ronald Barnett suggests persuasively in his article that the idea of the ‘public intellectual’ is simply not an established part of academic life, certainly in Britain, and argues that it ought to be. While it is common for academics to complain that they are discouraged from playing a more public role, Barnett is unconvinced: ‘If some flak were not being engendered in the performance of the role, one might wonder if the role were being undertaken with seriousness.’ For Barnett, undertaking the role with seriousness means rethinking what it means to be an academic, and accepting responsibilities to the world beyond the university.

Both Dennis Hayes and James Panton take issue with Barnett’s approach in their contributions. In common with Barnett, Hayes is critical of the prevailing mindset among academics, but whereas Barnett locates the problem in the professional culture, ‘a disciplinary self-absorption’ or a donnish disinclination to engage in public debate, Hayes argues that such reticence expresses a deeper and more recent crisis of confidence, a lack of willing on the part of academics to fight their corner and make a case for the value of their work.

While for Barnett, then, the current transformation of the university – perhaps including even something as derided as marketisation – offers an opportunity to transform academic culture: ‘Engaging with the wider world in suitable and relevant ways has to be understood as part of the core responsibilities of the professionalism of being an academic’, Hayes sees the desire to be relevant as a failure of nerve. In this view, unless academics are prepared to argue for the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, they will have nothing to offer society anyway. Even within the university, Hayes sees the contemporary rhetoric of ‘teaching’ and ‘research’ as a disavowal of scholarship, with the narrowly instrumental justification of each undermining the proper role of the university, while a notion such as ‘student-centred learning’ renders the academic almost redundant, and certainly unfit to play the role of public intellectual.

James Panton takes this point further, arguing that the increasing pressure on academics to engage with society is positively counter-productive. ‘Paradoxically, the implication of an increasingly marketised and bureaucratic logic in the higher education sector is not the drawing of academics into a more engaged relationship with society, but a retreat back into the academy, and in particular, into academic specialisation, on terms which have little to do with the pursuit of knowledge’. While he shares Hayes’s dim view of current developments in higher education, however, Panton sees the university as an ideal battleground for those

interested in reinvigorating public life. For Panton, arguing about the role of the university is the first step in transforming the way we think about ideas and intellectuals.

Indeed, Sondra Farganis sees the contemporary notion of the public intellectual as stemming from the politicisation of the university by the social and political movements of the 1960s, arguing that the New Left established a particular model of what it meant to be an intellectual. In her article, Farganis makes a distinction between this public intellectual, with a clear democratic agenda, and the ‘dissenting intellectual’, who is less focused on political consequences, seeing his or her own role as distinct. The danger of the former, more politicised public intellectual role is a temptation to adopt partisan positions at the expense of a deeper commitment to truth. In contrast, the dissenting intellectual is as likely to challenge radical orthodoxy as to oppose the ideas of the conservative elite. There is an echo here of Robert Eaglestone’s critique of formulaic ‘public intellectual’ writing for the general reader, and its authors’ tendency to ‘cheat’ by assuming agreement. Farganis notes that in fact: ‘There are few if any agreed upon rules of what constitutes truth, or evidence, or, in some instances, reality.’

A pivotal question, then, is whether intellectuals are obliged to reach an accommodation with this lack of agreement, or whether they can create a common language and a common understanding through their work. Whether or not this is achievable, however, there is much to be said for engaging in debate about the possibilities, and about the proper role of intellectuals. Clearly there are various models of the intellectual, but it does not follow that these are all equally valuable.

In her introduction to a previous collection of essays on public intellectuals, Helen Small (2002) noted that there is a tendency to revere intellectuals, always seeing them as heroic others rather than people like us. I hope that none of the writers in this collection will be accused of excessive humility. Certainly, each has made a valuable contribution to the debate

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