

Public Intellectuals and Public Intelligence

[Steven Connor](#)

A talk given at a seminar on *Public Intellectuals*, University of Utrecht, 11 April 2011.

I think the idea of the public intellectual is sad, bad and silly, and I would prefer to have nothing to do with it. Had I said this when Joanna Bourke invited me to participate in today's discussion, my wish could easily and without fuss have been granted. However, I didn't and so here I am to say this to you. And, as academic, with a craving for attention and lust for fame as immoderate as any other academic's, it is of course not enough for me to tell you what I think, I must also insist on telling you why I think it, and try to get you to think the same.

Intellectuals

The word 'intellectual' does not leap easily to the lips of people in Britain, who prefer the faintly mocking matiness of words like 'don', 'prof' or even, once upon a time, 'boffin'. We live in a country in which the expression 'too clever by half', and the frequent pairing of the word 'academic' with the word 'merely', indicate the discredit attaching to the work of the intellect. Somewhere in the Anglo-Saxon sensibility, knowledge and rationality are still felt to be on opposite sides, as they were at the beginning of the seventeenth century, with the experimental method set against the foppish or fantastical hair-splitting of the medieval Schoolmen, Newton, David Hume and Dr Johnson set against Descartes.

And what is an intellectual, that strangely adjectival noun, or nominalised adjective? In one understanding, an intellectual is one who devotes himself largely or exclusively to intellectual pursuits, such as thinking, analysing, arguing, evaluating and speculating. But we really must mean something more than this, for there are plenty of people who similarly devote themselves to such tasks and diversions – accountants, consultants, architects, engineers,

teachers, proof-readers, computer programmers; indeed, viewed in this way, there seem, at least in our part of the world, to be a sizeable majority of people earning their livings in what have to be called intellectual occupations over butchers, bakers or candlestick-makers. Yet we do not feel inclined to count such people as intellectuals

We mean by an intellectual somebody who is believed, or believes themselves, to have a special vocation, warrant and responsibility for the forming of ideas and arguments. An intellectual is thought to be, or, by some, thought to be meant to be, somebody who has both more distance from contemporary affairs than others, and greater expansiveness of view.

The phrase ‘public intellectual’ is not a neutral descriptor – it is turgid with desire and frustrated longing. Its users would like it to refer to persons of particular experience and discernment who are expected to bring these qualities to bear on questions of public concern. There can be different modalities of this – the public intellectual as public servant, humbly offering the resources of his expert knowledge or experience, or the public intellectual as gadfly, sybil or jeremiah, offering dark warnings or thunderous denunciations. There are of course two dimensions of the public intellectual – the topics with which such persons concern themselves (topics of public concern) and the audience to whom such persons address themselves. Being a public intellectual is not too bad, but striving to be one, or gnashing your teeth at not being recognised as one, is vain, posturing and self-serving.

The questions that relate to public intellectuals have tended to focus, as is often the case, when you come to think about it, around prepositions. What does the public intellectual speak about? Who does the public intellectual speak for? Who does the public intellectual speak to?

Foucault and Lyotard assumed that intellectuals should eschew the role of universal intellectuals, intellectuals assumed to be and accredited as the embodiment of humanity, or at least the nation (in France it still seemed to come as news to some in the 1970s that sometimes this might not be the same thing), and become intellectuals with only specific kinds of competence, commitment and responsibility. My view is that intellectuals should accept no limitation on the scope of their enquiries and intellectual interests, but not because they have special responsibility and competence to do so, as the special, advanced-driver sort of thinker that a public intellectual is supposed to be. The problem is the idea that they should be regarded as having a specific

responsibility and competence to address the various kinds of everything. It is an idea whose offensiveness is mitigated only by its risibility.

There is often a suggestion that a public intellectual is a kind of prophet, that is, the channel of a special kind of revelation, whether derived from personal communication with the godhead, or some other kind of philosophical afflatus. This is of course a religious idea, and to that degree and for that reason, not a good one. Intellectuals may well have particular insights to offer, about economic, political, historical and scientific matters, as it mayhap be. But they do not have those insights because they are intellectuals. They have them, if they do, contingently, as a result of the particular things they may happen to know, or be able to do.

Those who are in favour of the idea of the public intellectual sometimes point to the significant or decisive role taken by certain intellectuals, who are held to have been usefully influential in certain political moments – Emile Zola and his role in the Dreyfus affair will usually get mentioned sooner or later, and one might think also of those who took a stand on the Vietnam war, or the Iraq war, for example. But on every such issue, there are likely to have been just as many public intellectuals speaking in public and elsewhere whose views turned out not to have been in the least helpful or desirable, whether it be H.G. Wells on eugenics, George Bernard Shaw on the admirable economic efficiency of the Soviet Union, Michael Ignatieff on the response to 9/11, etc.. You would have to have a highly selective view of recent political history to feel that the track record of public intellectuals is one that encourages confidence in their prudence or powers of prediction or judgement, Not that they are any worse than any other kind of commentator, prediction not being our strong suit when it comes to things other than lunar eclipses or the likelihood of showers in the next 24 hours.

Critique

It is often said that the principal role of the public intellectual is to provide critique. I scarcely know where to begin with this. For a post-humanist liberal utilitarian pragmatist, or PHLUPPY, like me, no sense can attach to the idea of critique in general, or on principle. There are certainly some ideas and beliefs that can do with a good dressing down from time to time, but in those cases critique is only valuable as and where it actually is.

The idea of maintaining a standing army of intellectuals, ready to bring the razor edge of their critique to bear on every settled prejudice sounds good only as long as you maintain the unhelpful belief that prejudice is always bad and the unsettling of prejudice is always good. Prejudice is just a prejudicial name for principles to which others adhere, unthinkingly, as we like to think. I have a strong and frankly unshiftable prejudice in favour of the idea that racial and sexual discrimination are among the greatest forms of systematic stupidity that human beings have ever allowed themselves – actually even more stupid than they are wicked. I don't have to argue myself back into this way of thinking every morning when I get up, any more than I have to bone up again every morning on how to tie my shoelaces or ride a bike. There is a distinct limit to the utility of critiques of the basis of this prejudice of mine, however radical or interesting they may be. The authoritarian fulminations of contemporary ultra-left sages show how easily antihumanism of the left can slither across into antihumanism of the right.

But, even more than this, in most cases where people could do with rethinking their ideas, critique is one of the least effective ways to get them to do it. The PHLUPPY line is that people believe what they believe because it gives them pleasure and advantage to do so – it has utility, in the jargon of my philosophical sect. They can be got to believe other things only if they can be assured of the likelihood of there being more utility in the new beliefs than in the old. People almost never give up beliefs because they think they might be mistaken; but they routinely and reliably throw them over without a murmur if they start to imagine the pleasure or advantage they might get from entertaining other beliefs, ones that make them feel subtle, or sensitive, or large-minded, or audacious. This is not something to sigh or tut over; in the long run and in the largest terms, people are right to think like this.

The idea of the public intellectual is undesirable not because it can lead to public intellectuals having undue influence, but because it is a kind of pompous and flatulent fantasy, and there is (even) more pleasure and advantage to be had from abandoning fantasy than from incubating it.

Public

We live in a world in which the domain of 'the public' has been made over more and more into what in France is called 'le pub', that is, of publicity, the world of representations circulated through the print and electronic media. This

means that being a public intellectual will always to a large degree mean being an intellectual in public. Surprising as it may seem, I prefer this understanding of the term, and am about to try to defend it.

Being an intellectual in public means not knowing for sure or in advance what your relation to a public is, while yet being willing to tolerate the condition of exposedness that comes from moving outside the comfortable consensus of your peers. The public is never simply there, in place, panting to be led into enlightenment or to lend an ear to its leaders or prophets. Every now and again circumstances conspire to allow the production of a visible embodiment of 'the public' – a mass demonstration, for example, or some strongly convergent media event. But though there are many forms of public address system and surrogate public that assume the existence of the public, we do not actually know what the public is, or what its address might be. Michel Serres once invented something called a quasi-object. Let us call the public is a quasi-subject. The public is precisely the assumption and production of a public address system. It is an imaginary audience, the force of whose audition is not in the least diminished by the fact that it only comes into view in glimpses – indeed, it is very likely increased.

For it is the fact that, more than ever, the public is an imaginary entity that gives it its importance. But it should also make us suspicious of the claims of those who think they have a direct connection to the public, through certain media. Having the capacity to transmit a lot of information to a lot of people at once does not mean that you are addressing the public. In fact, I am minded to think that public address is a rhetorical rather than a practical or political fact – that is, it is a relation embodied and embedded in a discourse, rather than merely the circumstances of that discourse. One of the things that addressors of the public do is to construct a particular kind of addressee public for their discourse, a sort of consensual hallucination which, while always ideal, may also be quite specific in many respects. Success or effectiveness in public discourse of this kind may be measured in terms of how much consent to this hallucination the discourse produces in its listeners. So one addresses the public in order to conjure it into being, to get potential members of this public to identify themselves with the kind of public you are assuming you are addressing. The correct answer to this question 'is this public discourse?' must therefore always be 'Wait and see'.

The idea that a public intellectual should act as a kind of embodied conscience or source of moral-political guidance is embarrassing, arrogant and barmy. This is not, God knows, because there is no need for bold and clear-eyed enquiry

about matters of public concern, or no need for such enquiry to be made available to a broad public. It is because it is embarrassing, arrogant and barmy for us to think that there is a special class of vicarious thinkers-by-proxy to whom we should devolve this function, and it is specially vain and pompous for academics like me to assume that they are the ones to whom it should naturally be devolved. I hope that many, if not most, of those who think of themselves as intellectuals feel a responsibility to denounce cruelty, stupidity, ignorance and oppression and to praise love, justice, mercy and intelligence, wherever they see them, but they do not have any special responsibility for this. If they do feel such responsibilities, this is good, but it is only good because everybody should feel them.

Perhaps, you will say, public intellectuals have a special responsibility precisely because they have opportunities to do their pronouncing and denouncing in public. I would agree with this, but this is a responsibility that everybody should feel under similar circumstances, not a burden that weighs uniquely and essentially on academics. The idea of being an intellectual in public is defensible not because intellectuals have a special responsibility in public affairs, but because they should, like everybody else, be glad to argue what they argue and affirm what they affirm in public, that is to say, in the expectation of an audience equipped to access, understand and dispute their arguments and affirmations.

The apparent decline in the standing of public intellectuals has often been lamented as the consequence of a failure of nerve or commitment, as though an intellectual had only to decide to enter boldly into the public sphere and unburden themselves of their views on public matters in public to honour their vocation. But public intellectuals are not so as a matter of conviction and purpose, but by a mixture of accident, error, and expedience. Public intellectualism is not something you could easily just go in for, even if you wanted to, and if every academic decided to go in for it, it would become harder than ever, the inclination of the public to pay heed being a finite commodity.

So we should perhaps prefer a concern, not with the fostering of public intellectuals, considered as a certain class of person, but with the fostering of public intelligence, a word that I'd like to think might combine communication, intelligibility, intelligence and education. We should seek more public intelligence, and more intelligence in public, rather than more, or more powerful public intellectuals. How do we do this? By dribs and drabs, ruses, resourceful opportunism, by trying to make intelligence more interesting and

seductive than dumbness and good luck. Not, I think, by any kind of theoretical programme.

Not even this trumps everything, however, for the simple reason that nothing is always and in principle desirable all of the time. There is no doubt, for example, that recent years have seen the rise of much more interesting, intelligent and intelligible debate about religious belief. While these are certainly to be preferred to ignorant, bullying and bigoted debates about religion, neither of them are as good as a situation in which none of us could find anything interesting at all to say about religion, apart from the intriguing historical fact that lots of people used to believe in it.