Thinking About Public Intellectuals


Let me begin with some disclaimers. The role of public intellectuals is a subject that I have an interest in but not a scholarly expertise in (that lies in multiculturalism, especially the accommodation and integration of recently settled Muslim minorities in western Europe and north America, in particular Britain). I do not study public intellectual engagement but aspire to practice it. My interest in the subject is not like a car engineer’s interest in cars but like someone who uses cars and seeks an upgrade. To state this at the outset is not just to be upfront about my limitations but also to alert the reader to the selective nature of my engagement with the book under review. I will review the book in terms of what it offers my aspiration-based interest in the topic, not a specialist’s.

Which Kind of Public Intellectuals? Where?

Having stated my own limitations and the focus that implies for this article, the book of course has its own foci, which equally informs the scope of this article. Two features of the book are particularly relevant here: one is the kind of public intellectual given most attention in the book, the other is its geographic priority.

There are many different sorts of public intellectuals, e.g., media, literary, religious, and so on. In relation to the last, in Britain one would think of Jonathan Sachs or Rowan Williams, the former Chief Rabbi and Archbishop of Canterbury respectively, figures not matched currently by a similar stature by those of any other faith. Other than a chapter on Arabs, the book has limited coverage of religious public intellectuals, but really only of one, Reinhold Niebuhr, identified as a Cold War realist, who features in a section of Chapter 1 and pops up in one or two other places within the volume. There is a chapter on public intellectual blogging, but otherwise little else is said about media personalities or on public intellectuals who are journalists/broadcasters. Nor does this edited collection contain much on public intellectuals based in political think tanks, though interestingly diplomats as intellectuals are considered.

The public intellectuals (forthwith, PIs) that are most extensively discussed in this
volume are university-based intellectuals. An exception is the chapter on Latin America in which Enrique Krauze argues how PIs located in academia seem to be less interested in ideas and public debates than in serving (rhetorically) left-wing authoritarian governments. Indeed, they are dismissed as an office-seeking intelligentsia compared to literary intellectuals, as in this quote from his hero, Gabriel Zaid: “Intellectuals are critics, intelligentsia are revolutionaries [located in academia and bureaucracies]... Intellectuals go from books to literary prestige, intelligentsia go from books to power” (146). The intellectuals described in Krauze’s chapter are reminiscent of the New York PIs as recalled elsewhere by Andrew Bacevich thinking about his younger self in the 1970s spending “nights at smoky cocktail parties eavesdropping as the two Normans, Podhoretz and Mailer, picked fights with all comers—for a time I confess, this defined for me the very essence of glamour” (64). He wistfully adds though that viewed “from a distance of several decades, the dominant attribute of the postwar intellectuals who once caused me to swoon was not ingenuity but a pronounced gift for self-promotion—that and a capacity for alcohol consumption” (64). Perhaps one of his Parisian counterparts might tell a similar story about the court of Sartre and Beauvoir at Café de Flore or another cafe on the Left Bank—though those particular authors will surely be read for much longer in academia.

In the US and Europe—unlike Mexico if Krauze is a reliable guide—however, even if it used to be the case that PIs were only partly based outside universities, now it is more or less the reverse: compare Sartre and Beauvoir with Edward Said, Stuart Hall, Noam Chomsky, or Cornell West. Interestingly, according to Willy Lam’s chapter, it seems that PIs in China likewise tend to be based at universities or institutes connected to universities.

The other important focus of the book that has to be noted before we delve deeper is geography. While, there is a chapter each on Latin America, China, and the Arab world (the latter being the shortest in the book), as well as one on a French diplomat, the remainder of the book—more than 75%—is about the United States (despite the title of the book). The discussion is at a national or regional not global level and most of the book is self-reflective of the US experience, beginning with the Cold War, much of it focused on the perennial questions of whether there has been a decline of public intellectualism in the US, and if so, to what extent and why?

The historical chapter on the Arab world by Ahmad S. Moussalli includes secular intellectuals as well as theologians, but is a survey in which too many people are mentioned in too little detail. Using a binary of heritage-modernity he argues that liberals are simply dazzled by Western-thinking and that traditionalists are conversely attached to repeating the old tropes. Each is caught in defending ways of thinking of another time or another place and so neither has properly made their perspectives relevant to the Arab world (148-149). This is a major and exciting—though not entirely novel—claim, but Moussalli does not offer an intellectual elaboration, confining himself to a fairly pedestrian list-making of Arab intellectuals of the last 150 years or so, who fall into one or the other of these two camps. He equally despairs of the traditionalists who treat the Arab heritage as “a sacred text” and the liberals—i.e., modernizing Arabs—who fail to engage with tradition. He exhorts that this heritage “should be studied, absorbed, and then transcended in a process similar to what the West did with its Greek heritage” (157). He is silent, however, on how this is to be done and what is the distinctive role of the PI in this task.

Willy Lam “sets out to examine the factors that have hindered public intellectuals in China from satisfactorily fulfilling sociopolitical goals, ranging from scrutinizing and critiquing the CCP administration to pluralizing and liberalizing the political system,” though he thinks they have “laid the groundwork for more radical changes in the future” (92). He
concludesoptimisticallythatPIs today“seemdetermined to contest authoritarianpersuasion by ushering in their own version of China’s future” (119). Indeed, “for the first time since 1949, the possibility is real that the balance of power may slowly shift toward China’s increasingly active and bold intelligentsia” (118)—which is great to hear but not sufficiently substantiated by his chapter.

University Public Intellectuals

Notwithstanding that some authors included in the book use a very wide understanding of what a PI is—as in Paul Horowitz’s use of Russell Jacoby’s definition of PIs as “writers and thinkers who address a general and educated audience” (217) or Krauze’s derivation from the hispanophone Zaid for whom an “intellectual is a writer with moral authority among the elites who opines on matters of public interest” (130)—, the book in the main explores today’s (American) university PIs—“university” here in reference to both its institutional relation and in terms of the kind of intellectual with particular disciplinary credentials, accomplishments, and recognitions. PIs from disciplines ranging from philosophy, history, economics, international relations as well as the natural sciences are discussed. While a narrow, mono-disciplinarity is to be eschewed (a point not sufficiently made in the book), our starting-point here does have to be the fact that we are talking about intellectuals rooted in the ways of thinking, conserving, and researching that take place in and is distinctive of universities. While this is the source of their intellectualism it can also be a constraint upon the ambition to be a PI.

For an academic to have any chance of success as a PI (the rest of the review article is about academic PIs only unless otherwise specified) they must be influential within university circles first. They must influence fellow academics, their own discipline(s), students, and so on over a period of time and across the generations if they are to have any credibility beyond those circles. In that sense the university is not just a perch or the day job that pays the bills, it—meaning not of course just one’s employer but the relevant academic communities and networks—is the workshop for forging ideas and conducting research for PIs no less than for any other kind of academic. PIs must achieve a certain level of accomplishment within their discipline(s) and the reputational standing that goes with it. Hence as the book’s editor, Michael Desch, in a helpful Introduction, says, “the fate of public intellectualism is inextricably linked with developments within American [and other] universities” (15).

It is generally agreed that the dominant trend across universities has been academic specialization and increasing professionalization reinforcing the inward-looking ivory tower tendencies within academia as academics increasingly write for fellow-disciplinary specialists, are read by fewer and fewer people (many papers that are published are never cited and some never read, though online access may be reversing this), and are often unintelligible to those in other disciplines let alone across faculties or to the general reading public. Desch evokes Herman Hesse’s dystopic chronicle of The Glass Bead Game “as a warning of the danger of intellectuals becoming an inward-looking and self-referential class of mandarins with no connection to the larger world” (25). This tendency was—oddly and probably unintentionally—reinforced in Britain by successive governments from the late 1980s through a national research audit (initially called the Research Assessment Exercise [RAE], later the Research Evaluation Framework [REF]) in which academic journal articles and academic monographs were particularly prized as a basis for calculating future university
research funding. After decades of the resulting scholasticism, some crude efforts were made to evaluate the “impact” of academic work on the wider world, measures of which are being gradually refined and expanded over time, and so are beginning to capture and value public intellectual engagement to some degree. Yet, these have been the contexts in which (British) PIs have had to establish themselves, prove their worth to fellow academics, whilst at the same time seeking to be not trapped by it. As the US based Patrick Deneen nicely puts one side of it:

The public intellectual must therefore consciously and even willfully resist the deepest currents of academic intellectual formation that stress specialized knowledge, publication in narrowly focused academic journals and imprints, and the professional imprimatur of a small coterie of colleagues in specialized fields of study. (344)

The other and prior side of it is that the PI must—like any other academic—swim in these currents; but she must also go beyond these currents in ways that her colleagues may not. Desch quotes Ira Katznelson on this point: the aspiring PI is left with having to balance “a university career and a public voice, against odds, without lapsing into media glibness or scholarly hypercicumscription” (18).

Moreover, in the US, no less than in Britain, the neo-liberalization of universities continues to advance. That is a real worry about the public character of universities, though one should not overlook that the universities that nurture and support public intellectualism the most are those with the largest private endowments and the highest student fees such as the Ivy Leaguers, Oxford, and Cambridge. The best known American PIs in my own fields of sociology and politics are (or were) at the most expensive schools, say, Edward Said (Columbia), Robert Putnam, Michael Ignatieff, and Michael Sandel (all at Harvard), Noam Chomsky (MIT), Michael Walzer (Princeton), and Anthony Giddens (LSE). A feeling sometimes expressed at my own university, Bristol University, (public and receiving £9,000+ student fees like nearly all in the UK), ranked around 6th – 12th in the UK and 40th – 70th in the world, is that we don’t do public intellectualism, that is the business of Oxbridge and the LSE. So as a sociologist I would have to say, whatever my normative preferences and internal naggings in my own university, PIs are disproportionally creatures of elite, prestigious universities.

As to the kind of influence PIs can hope to have Desch quotes James Q. Wilson, one of the most prominent PIs of recent years, who said that his influence “was not to be found in the details of policy.” In his view, “intellectuals provided the conceptual language, the ruling paradigms, the empirical examples (note I say examples not evidence) that became the accepted assumptions for those in charge of making policy” (14). This is surely right, but it is mistaken to think that PIs are simply trying to influence policymakers. What Jeremi Suri says of the post-war Sovietologist, George Kennan, namely that he was “more committed (and inspired) to influence public thought rather than internal government deliberations” (49), is surely true of probably most PIs. Moreover, they can often be very influential with certain publics, as for example Sartre, Chomsky, or Stuart Hall were or are but not with those in charge of making policy. There is thus a range of indirect roles that can be chosen such as “building the frameworks, what Thomas Sowell calls the ‘general set of presumptions, beliefs, and imperatives’ that structure how we think about policy. Another indirect role might involve the selection of alternatives… [such as] independent critic…[or] ‘gadfly’…[or] persons whose intellectual work moves large segments of society” (14). Of
course an individual may have more than one role. In these different ways the influence on policy may be indirect: over time, by contributing to the general climate of opinion or by creating, shaping, or contributing to social and political ideas and movements. Even while keeping her feet on the ground, Vittorio Hösl dryly states that a public thinker could have a major effect at a particular time and then be entirely forgotten; certainly there is “no obvious correlation, either direct or inverse, between the magnitude of the short-term impact and the long-term impact of a public intellectual” (392).

It is not unusual for the kinds of intellectuals that we are talking about to be referred to as the conscience of a society. Suri refers to Niebuhr, whose “model for the public intellectual was a powerful and engaged conscience that helped citizens navigate as moral men in an immoral world” (46). This is a model commonly associated with outspoken or radical criticism, so it is interesting to learn from Lam that it was only in the twentieth century that Chinese intellectuals began to move away from “the quasi-Confucianist belief that they could best function as the ‘conscience of society’ by unquestioningly serving their emperors and promoting evolution within the system,” a view that was violently reasserted by the Communist Party during the Cultural Revolution (93, 95-96)—when intellectuals were actually told to stop intellectualizing and sent out to work in the fields—and continues to be the view of the Party today, even in its explicit Confucianism and suppression of dissent (118). Of course this aligns with the line from Zaid quoted above about left-wing academic intellectuals in Latin America supporting or working for authoritarian states. In case we should delude ourselves into thinking this is something that only happens in peripheral so-called Third World countries, Mark Lilla reminds us that support for such regimes can be a cause for PIs in liberal democracies. There have been celebrated intellectuals in ‘the West’ who “thought that the intellectual’s responsibility was to defend Stalinism, the Soviet Union’s domination of Eastern Europe, the Cultural Revolution in China, Castro’s repressive rule, even the genocide perpetrated by the Cambodian Khmer Rouge” (303). He does not mention PIs who have supported western imperialism, though he does note that the contexts were highly polarized and indeed that the existence of such thinking fired up Cold War intellectuals like himself and the absence of such intense ideological—perhaps even existential—confrontation makes him miss the good old days (304). A number of chapters take the American stance in the Cold War as their point of departure, with, as in the case of Lilla and Bacevich, a longing to take up arms again. Indeed, for some Islamism is the new Communism, equally capable of merciless apologetics and emboldening the warriors of a new Cold War. It is notable that Islamism does not feature in this way in this book. Lilla briefly refers to it as a contemporary challenge, but primarily to point out that in societies where Islamism is a force liberal democracy is not a realistic alternative (thus reversing the Neocron crusade to establish democracies by invasion).

Another point of convergence in the volume is the view that while a certain kind of public intellectualism is clearly much rarer now, in general it may be growing rather than declining. Patrick Baert offers a set of distinctions to make this argument. He distinguishes between three kinds of PIs. Firstly, there is the “authoritative” PI, figures such as Sartre and Bertrand Russell, who spoke from a great height, had a large public following and fame, and spoke on a wide range of matters, about most of which they lacked academic expertise (164-165). In an age of the growth of knowledge and specialization, this type of intellectualism is rather difficult. Baert mentions Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, and Cornell West as displaying some features of this type (176). In general he believes that the new conditions for PIs favor philosophy less and empirical disciplines more, hence the more prevalent PI today which he
calls the “expert”—often an economist or another social scientist (although he mentions Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Noam Chomsky). They “draw on the professional knowledge, derived from their research in the social or natural sciences, to engage with wider societal or political issues that go beyond their narrow expertise” (172). Finally, he refers to the “dialogical” PIs, who as democrats “present themselves as equals to their publics, learning as much from them as vice versa” (173). Here one might think of social scientists who seek “co-production” of knowledge; rather than designing their own research agendas and seeking respondents to study, they seek groups in society, especially relatively powerless or voiceless or stigmatized groups, as partners in deciding what should be researched, how it should be researched, how it should be framed, and how it should be disseminated. My own view is that this “democratic” model falls short of dialogical public intellectual engagement. The key thing that is missing is that social scientists lose their own voice. They may be contributing to democracy by assisting those who are under-represented in public debate and policy circles, but in terms of their intellectual character they are like those who are contracted to do research by a government or a corporate organization. A genuine dialogist must have an independent public voice of their own not just be an enabler for others to be heard.

Baert suggests that dialogue might be regarded as a notable addition to Michael Burawoy’s concept of public sociology, but he seems to interpret public sociology as dialogue in two different ways:

i) dialogue as “equal partners and equally responsible for producing knowledge”

ii) “partnership between the social researchers and the communities they serve, whereby both parties are willing to learn from each other and collaborate whilst striving for a common political goal.” (174, my emphasis)

Whilst (i) is a scientific partnership or co-production of knowledge, (ii) is a dialogue not primarily and only incidentally or sometimes not at all about the production of knowledge and engagement in research. Rather, it is an engagement about society or politics, a dialogue as citizens, of co-production in social change and political reform. Only (ii) is dialogue strictly speaking, whereas (i) goes beyond dialogue into partnership and co-production. Both may be regarded as democratic but they are so in quite distinct ways.

On the basis of the points I have been making I would say that a university PI has these three aspects:

i) an intellectual/academic expertise, a knowledge base or an understanding, located in, learning from and contributing to an intellectual community; in order to have something new to say, they are likely to be at the cutting-edge in relation to their expertise; moreover, they are likely to interpret their discipline in a broad, expansive or interdisciplinary way

ii) ability to go beyond that expertise; this is likely to mean addressing topics on which they have some knowledge but not enough to be an expert, as

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well as topics on which they are recognized as an expert by the relevant intellectual communities; and/or the ability to express themselves in ways which make them more intelligible to non-experts than their co-academics

iii) engagement with “a public,” not just offer some knowledge to policymakers, though that too can be part of the portfolio of activities and forms of engagement; this does assume the presence of a vibrant (and probably internally plural yet overlapping) “public sphere” of debate and action.

Some intellectuals might primarily manifest i, ii, or iii. A PI in my sense of the term must have a combination of all three.

Values, Science, and Commitments

The final substantive chapter (before Hösle’s “Concluding Thoughts”) is by the collection’s editor, Desch, and has a resounding title: “The Ethical Imperative for Some Scholars to be Public Intellectuals and for The Rest to Let Them Do So.” It is a discussion and endorsement of Max Weber’s position as Desch understands it. Weber famously thought that social science had to be value free; Desch takes him to mean that we cannot derive values from science. “In his view, the tools of modern social science could only establish internal consistency among values and clarify the relationship between their means and ends. But they could not tell us which ends we should prefer” (352). According to Desch’s reading of Weber this does not mean that values are unimportant, rather they drive everything. We do science because we value the Truth. We choose our topics of study on the basis of our values and how we think society can be bettered. Moreover, Desch argues Weber also thought that scholars have a duty to engage ethical issues in the political realm, even though when they do they go beyond the limits of science (350-351). What united all of these different positions on science and scientists was a deep commitment to certain values, broadly speaking, a certain ethical nationalism such that “liberalism and Germany’s great power status were thus inextricably linked in Weber’s mind” (362). Hence, there was for Weber a unity between science and politics, namely an ethical commitment that could not be sufficiently justified or critiqued by science, but gave a deeper meaning and purpose to each. Scientists should not be dismissive of values and public engagement about values, rather, “because the conflicts among competing values could not be resolved in the scholarly realm, scholars had no choice but to engage value debates in the political realm. That was the root of Weber’s vocation for not only science but also politics” (367).

Desch argues well and with some passion for this position. Leaving aside whether it is true to Weber or not I think it is mistaken in two ways. Firstly, it is far too skeptical of normative reasoning “in the scholarly realm.” Such reasoning is what we call moral and political philosophy. Perhaps normative questions cannot be fully resolved there; it seems inevitable that there will be a variety of schools of thought in those normative inquiries but some reason-giving and elimination of some bad arguments is possible; and it is not clear that social science can itself do better than that.

This leads me to my second point. Values enter social science not simply in the choice of subject matter, say employment rather than the family, or poverty rather than racial
inequality. All social science presupposes frameworks/perspectives because any inquiry must have a frame. Different research programs and frameworks can put questions of family or equality in one way or another, at the center or not—and this is not just about adequate explanations of what is or the means of maintaining or changing it but rather about how we are to conceptualize, say, equality. The conceptualization is not the result of knowledge or a set of explanations, it is what directs us to a productive line of inquiry or knowledge accumulation. As the inquiry builds up a dynamic, the initial framing can be reviewed and adapted and thus there will be a dialectal relationship; but debates about different frameworks, different ways of conceptualizing society, conceptual arguments, are never reducible to questions of empirical knowledge. Such frameworks however are likely to have some normative character—should equality only be about income levels or should it also be conceptualized to include questions of respect and recognition? Social science must therefore encourage engagement with normative questions for the sake of the quality of science rather than draw positivist boundaries around itself and treat values as merely personal choices. In sum, there must be a bridge between social science and normative inquiry.

That a PI will champion certain values is not in doubt; my point is that to see Weber as a model for PIs is not good enough if it leaves such values without any intellectual grounding and if it obscures that intellectual normative argument is part of framework construction and critique in social science. Indeed, the utilization of such frameworks to advance empirical knowledge will reflect the normative-conceptual character of those frames. Nevertheless, a PI will have certain personal commitments which will flow not out of argument as such but of “who they are” or “where they stand.” This is perhaps hinted at in the term “engaged intellectual.” It suggests “partisanship” but that is not a necessary condition. It is better understood as indicating that a PI is engaged in a particular time and place, engaged with this public. This comes out in Weber’s liberal nationalism, which was not just a commitment to an abstract ethic or set of values but was a commitment to Germany. Perhaps not to Germany as it was (he was, for example, very critical of German strategy in the First World War: 362) but to Germany as it could be. Of course it included reference to ideas and elaborated values—he would hardly be a PI if it did not—but it was not just a commitment to an “ism,” to liberal nationalism or, say, to social justice, but to a liberal Germany. One might think this is because a PI must engage with the here and now, but my point is larger than that. The commitment is not just to justice here and now but to justice for these people. Beyond a spatial-temporal location is an identifiable public, a polity or a group of people, and it is a concern with the well-being or moral shortcomings of such a social body or on whose behalf that the PI is “engaged.”

Lest this seems obvious it is worth reminding ourselves that this is not the common view held of PIs or by PIs. Edward Said, discoursing on PIs, argues that their aim is to uphold universal “standards of truth about human misery and oppression…despite the individual intellectual’s party affiliation, national background, and primeval loyalties”

Of course this kind of integrity is what one requires not just from PIs but from all professionals such as academics, doctors, judges, engineers, and so on. It is neither distinctive of PIs nor does it mean that those with such responsibilities have to be less members of their society, that they share less understanding and concerns with their co-ethnic, co-religionists, or co-nationals, or do not care for the well-being of their groups (including protesting when they think injustice is being done by their groups). Yet, Said describes PIs as, and indeed exhorts them

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to be “outsiders and exiles” and admiringly quotes Adorno: “It is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home.” This is perversely or, at best, an overstatement. It is better to say the PI has to have a home but this commitment must not be blind or incompatible with an equally strong commitment to intellectuality, just as, of course, there must not be a blind commitment to certain intellectual points of view and theories. The public intellectual endeavor is to engage in and lead the moral, ethical, and political conversation that any society has with itself and while some “outsider” features can offer some epistemological advantages (and no doubt some blind spots) one needs to be part of the society that one seeks to engage.

The point is that commitments to groups, people, causes, institutions, one’s country, and so on are not incidental to an engaged PI or a nuisance it would be best did not exist. Said’s motto of “Never solidarity before criticism” does not seem to apply to his own passionate lifelong commitment to the Palestinian people. Of course he never gave the PLO blind loyalty and more often than not was a public critic of it. But underlying it all was an unwavering commitment—solidarity— with the Palestinian people. That is the kind of commitment I am referring to. We should add that when it comes to multiculturalist PIs they are likely to belong to more than one group and so are unlikely to be either wholly insiders or outsiders; again something that describes Said as an eminent American. The PI, then, has to negotiate critical outsiderness and epistemological insiderness and belonging, solidarity and rootedness. The PI does not need to give up entirely on her social roots, indeed to do so is to risk losing an important understanding and sympathy for her group(s) or society as well as trust and standing within the group and/or society. The PI needs to develop multiple belongings and possibilities of dialogue rather than exile or aloofness from the concerns of one’s group or society. The quality needed is an enlarging of sympathy rather than a distancing. In such a context one of the important roles for a PI, and which an ethnic minority PI may be better able to fulfill, is a bridge-building role, fostering intercultural understanding and seeking greater inclusivity—and less exclusion and forced exile.

I profited much from this book as I hope is evident from the review. Beyond helping me to develop my own understanding of PIs—a category that in Europe, indeed in most parts of the world, one associates with the Left, it was illuminating to be reminded that anti-Communism was at one time a moving force amongst academic public intellectuals. While this was by no means confined to the US, it was interesting to read a book that largely works within American conceptual-normative framings neither reflecting nor challenging, nor even considering the “clash of civilizations” perspective which is currently shaping public and intellectual life and may prove to be a dominant feature of the twenty-first century. Similarly, it was disappointing that at the moment when the US has become a diverse country in which non-hispanic white people are no longer the majority in several states there was no reflection or example of multiculturalism or intercultural public intellectual engagement.

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3 Ibid., 51.
4 Ibid., 57 (emphasis in the original).
5 Ibid., 32.