

Appealing to Academics to Become Public Intellectuals: A Reply to Justin Cruickshank and Ioana Cerasella Chis

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As we discussed in the last couple of exchanges, the concept and reality of neoliberalism of the past few decades aren't limited to the marketplace or the political framing that engulfs and supports it. They are just as much a powerful rhetorical tool sharp enough to cut through centuries of debates over the moral foundation (or lack thereof) of public policies, including education ([which was so eloquently covered by Cruickshank and Chis](#)). If neoliberal ideology endorses the monetization of all decision making processes, and if it does so in the name of efficiency and value neutrality, we ought to step in. The question, of course, is who the "we" are.

It's clear that there is no direct and seamless overlap between academics and intellectuals, nor that all intellectuals are necessarily public intellectuals. The conditions for the latter aren't simply within the control of willing and courageous intellectuals, but the cultural environment that allows for and even invited participation. Moreover, for intellectuals to become public and for the public to be receptive to them, there is also a need for a deeper appreciation and acceptance of the critical dimension of public pronouncements. For example, when Cruickshank and Chis point the moral blind-spots of neoliberalism, conceding that "the consumer is an isolated individual acting in a purely instrumental way, with no distortion from external influences such as traditions or social norms," are they speaking directly to these consumers, their representatives, or to a smaller group of readers of our exchanges? To whom is the critique addressed? Who listens to it and might be awakened from his or her intellectual slumber? If they are correct in arguing that "this neo-liberal conception of democracy hollows out the public sphere because it seeks to replace any form of collectivism and value of public life as being good in itself with taut markets based on the pursuit of monologic self-interest backed up with the threat of exit," then is there a public sphere altogether, and if so, is it receptive to their insightful critique? Will the so-called receptive public, if found, not recoil from its characterization by scholars and experts and be even more hostile to the wonderful critical insights of academics willing to be public intellectuals?

To continue in this line of critical engagement, Cruickshank and Chis offer a vision of a democracy where "voice" has the highest priority so as to foster "a dialogue between groups in civil society, and between such groups and politicians, over ends as well as means." Unfortunately, as Charles Thorpe and Jane Gregory convincingly argue from their British experience ([2010](#)), even willing participation by involved citizens may become co-opted by or simply devolve into rubber-stamping government policies. The deep distrust citizens have of their government representatives is well deserved, as we all know, but yet, would there still be a role for public intellectuals after all?

Whether Popper or Rorty could offer something more concrete to further public dialogue is less relevant, on one level, because of the personal circumstances of their

own careers. Both were public intellectuals, even though their personalities were different and the cultural contexts of their contributions were different, too. It's true that I have argued that "academics should not just lament the state of affairs in the world but get involved in changing them, even if this entails the risk of losing their job," as Fuller argues as well in terms of risk taking, and that "if academics had learned nothing from their studies of use in this endeavor, then one may reasonably judge their efforts narcissistic (rather than wasteful or meaningless)" (2014, 53). This recommendation in no way privileges academics qua intellectuals nor finds all of them in the public domain. Instead, I expect that they view their contributions as public service, as a debt they owe the society that supported their education, offering advice whenever possible (and regardless if it falls on deaf ears).

With this spirit in mind, their recollection of Freire's warning that neutrality supports the dominant culture obviously calls for action. So, let's assume we can convince a subset of academics to become public intellectuals; let's also assume that they find their way in the different terrains of public dialogue—one-liners rather than long arguments, witty exchanges rather than ponderous reflections, self-mockery rather than defensiveness—what then? As Cruickshank suggests in an e-mail exchange, "neoliberalism, as we see it, is removing the conditions of possibility for a dialogic democracy by making it harder for academics to be intellectuals and preventing a wider public from being interlocutors with intellectuals. Given the state of institutional politics, the media and education, it is difficult for any critical person to find a public voice or an audience." Unfortunately, his assessment is correct. But what of social media? What of the power of blogging on the Internet? What alternative, and hopefully powerful and legitimate (however defined) alternative instruments are at our disposal at the dawn of the 21st century?

My book on public intellectuals (2014) offers a survey that chronicles all the different modes of such activities, from bloggers and rappers to court jesters and amateurs that set themselves outside the confines of power elites (because they create their own, under different circumstances, with smaller audiences perhaps) and can be effective. Perhaps more optimistic than others, I do believe that if the pressure is put on academics as one potential group of public intellectuals, we may have some hope for change. But of course questions of leadership come up as well—should public intellectuals retain their Socratic gadfly motto and remain on the sidelines, or must they become more organically engaged (Gramsci) in the political affairs of their local communities? Can some academics translate their intellectual capital into a socio-political one? Must they be outrageous or only witty when they do so?

Perhaps my optimism is misguided, because I think the potential is there. If we make a concerted effort to have this discussion about the role of public intellectuals within academic circles—as we are doing right now in this set of exchanges—then it can be a first step towards an eventual acceptance by the public at large (inspiring young students or scholars-in-the-making, that is, graduate students). But here, too, we may wish to

walk slowly and judiciously. It seems to me that the European environment is more inviting than the American—generalizing to the extreme. The utter disregard (if not outright dislike) of academics in the US is exemplified by the discussions we have over higher education here and its cost (and the neoliberal take on this that the investment isn't worth the debt). Our administrators are professional managers, and their financial balancing acts include the hiring of part-time slave labor who are paid less than 10% of the tuition revenue they produce (Marx would have had a field day with these staggering numbers of surplus value). It seems that poor working conditions for academics in the US is a reflection of the neoliberal epistemological hold on legislators and professional managers alike. Online teaching is the latest in this strategy of extreme exploitation and an eventual evisceration of the academic class. No, one needn't be a rabid Marxist to decry this state of affairs, merely a human being who respects the commitment to the life of the mind.

Is the UK context better? Is there some respect for the life of the mind? From across the Atlantic it seems that even British humor is more cerebral than its American counterpart, and that parliamentary debates have a modicum of intellectual wit absent from the name-calling so common among our uneducated politicians (especially when they brag that they are rich rather than smart). Things may look better from afar, I admit. But I have some hope that the very idea of having public dialogues, conversations, debates, and intellectual exchanges can be enhanced even under neoliberal terms. If anything, let's have the debates about neoliberalism itself and remind staunch capitalists, for example, that Adam Smith wrote *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* 17 years before his famous *Wealth of Nations*. That could be an interesting starting point, as I experienced only last night in a café where I gave a talk about this very point to young professional (and not students in a classroom). Unlike the Wall Street mantra of fear and greed as the only features worth mentioning about human nature, Smith discusses the virtues of prudence, justice, and benevolence—do Wall Street leaders and their politician-apologists even know that?

Should they? Who will inform them? We all should!

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