

***The Cost of Public Intellectuals: Reflections On Raphael Sassower's Call for Intellectuals To Influence Elites and Their Publics***

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We join with Raphael Sassower in [his enthusiastic support](#) for academics to be publically engaged and we share his optimism. In his [Popper's Legacy: Rethinking Politics, Economics And Science](#), Sassower counters the tired and inaccurate reading of Popper as a reactionary cold war ideologue, stressing his radical emphasis on criticism. That criticism should undermine the prevailing plutocratic elitism is made clear by Sassower's critique of Soros. Soros claims to be inspired by Popper's methodology, which is refuted by Sassower, and Sassower makes it clear that it is unethical to make billions 'at the expense of the multitude he claims to care for' (2006, 85). In his recent [The Price of Public Intellectuals](#), which is an excellent and nuanced account of the contested conceptions of intellectuals, and in his previous reply to us, Sassower argues for academics to be public intellectuals, changing the terms of the debate to make society a more equitable place to live in and to make democracy more than a mere box ticking exercise surrounded by empty rhetoric. He argues thus:

Our cultures are burning down, our values have vanished before our eyes, and as intellectuals we have the responsibility to bear witness and speak out. Although shunned by some popular media outlets, intellectuals should think of their education as a privilege paid for [in the US] to some extent by the public, and should therefore seek opportunities to be responsible gadflies. Hopefully their contributions will be appreciated enough by an informed and thirsty public that would pay handily for those activities, as annoying as they may be perceived sometimes (2014a, 122).

In order to allow public intellectuals to be 'gadflies' that annoy the 'sluggish republic', rather than 'apologists' making the public 'feel good about its choices' (2014a, 120-121), Sassower argues for institutional reforms to the US-American media and polity. He makes four points.

First, he suggests that public institutions spend one percent of their budget on hosting public debates. Second, he holds that publically funded media outlets be required to dedicate five percent of their time or print space to open ended debates and not the 'latest crisis or scandal'. He continues: '[w]e could stretch this idea and ask, not demand or require, privately owned media outlets to follow suit' (2014a, 119). The incentive here would be competitive advantage with audiences increasing. Third, the suggestion should be made that all politicians employ intellectuals. He argues that 'even if only a fraction of politicians were aided by thinking academics it may become a competitive advantage other politicians would want to emulate' (2014a, 199). Such intellectuals 'may change the terms of a debate, transform the debate completely, or suggest focusing on issues generally ignored by the campaign' (2014a, 199). Fourth, he holds that the US Govt. should spend a billion dollars to fund 10,000 public intellectual fellowships, giving each fellow a stipend of \$100,000 a year for five years, with fellows being able to re-apply after the five years were up. In return, fellows would do monthly public engagements and at least 4 TV or radio broadcasts per year. These suggestions are meant, as he states in his

reply to our previous piece, to be ways to start a dialogue about the role of public intellectuals which may be the ‘first step towards an eventual acceptance by the public at large’ (2014b, 43). To this he adds ‘we may wish to walk slowly and judiciously’ (2014b, 44).

Although there is recognition of the potential difficulty in engaging with public opinion and elites in Sassower’s work, he does tend to a classical pluralist conception of the liberal democratic state (Dahl 1961) and a conception of the public sphere as more or less open society, or free market of ideas (Popper 1945). Here the best ideas would ultimately gain traction *qua* best ideas and, in Sassower’s approach, intellectuals are the crafters of the best quality ideas, which will be recognised as such in the free market, and used to effect reforms.

We support Sassower’s key point that the existing plutocratic system needs to be challenged and that academics ought to play a role in this. We differ though over ends and means. We hold that the end of political change, which hopefully academics can be part of, is the creation of a more dialogic democracy that would move us away not just from neo-liberal plutocracy but ultimately from the existing liberal – capitalist system which allows economic and political elites unfettered freedom to pursue self-interest and exploit the population. We see the end goal of dialogic activity and change as a more radical structural change to the systems of class, race, dis/ability, sexuality and gender inequalities than the sort of change he envisages. As regards academics and the means for change, academics should seek to make students more fundamentally critical of society and eschew mainstream media outlets (which only serve elite interests) together with the rubric of ‘intellectual’, in order to work with non-academic activists.

We think there are three problems with Sassower’s liberal pluralist approach to intellectuals.

First, the public will often not be able to map discrete interventions into their own outlook. Contrary to the liberal pluralist conception of dialogue, ideas are rooted in wider normative frameworks and these are influenced by elite interests. Ideas are not usually judged on their own merit, assuming they manage to get articulated if they run contrary to elite interests. Second, academics who tend to be Kuhnian puzzle solvers, may not craft the best ideas for progressive change. Third, real change requires radically altering the world and this will encounter problems with vested interests and normative horizons that delimit ‘critical dialogue’ ultimately within the confines of those interests; and Sassower’s conception of public intellectuals, which itself could be elitist, would not broaden those horizons to challenge elites and their interests.

The second problem was discussed in detail in our previous reply and here we can elaborate on the first and third problems. We fear the cost of public intellectuals, as conceived of by Sassower, is that privilege would be reproduced and vested interests left untouched by a horizon of critical dialogue that lacked radical vision and traction. This raises the question of what ‘radical’ means. Our perspective on this is that the existing problems with corruption, sustained deep inequality, sustained poverty and deep seated prejudices are not a series of discrete problems caused by discrete failures of policy or

discrete ethical failings on the part of politicians or capitalists. Rather, we hold that exploitation and inequality and oppression are intrinsic to the existing system of liberal democracy and, as we shall see, the same tendencies have been incorporated into the neo-liberal university which reproduces and advances an asymmetrical distribution of status and power. Therefore radical critique has to show the necessity of rejecting liberal democratic capitalism and not just neo-liberal plutocracy, for a more socialised approach to social, economic and political life.

On the first problem we can say the following. People are located into traditions which have emotional as well as cognitive traction. Liberalism is a tradition but one which denies that it is such in order to present the world, including the world of ideas, in an atomistic way: discrete individuals exchange discrete commodities or ideas. The social norms underpinning this are occluded. Some dialogic philosophies can reflect this world view. Although Sassower, like Popper, is critical of some of the injustices under liberal capitalism, we hold that he tends to this liberal conception of dialogue. The outcome of this is that if public intellectuals made highly critical statements, their discrete views may well fail to reach an audience that will absorb them and act on them.

We can turn for a moment to Bakhtin's (1968) discussion of the 'carnavalesque': with the carnival, the world was turned upside down and old order was inverted. However radical this seemed it only served a conservative end that was to reinscribe the inevitability of the old/established order. The turning of the world upside down only served to show people that any alternative to the existing order was a temporary moment of chaos that allowed a release and escape before the old order had to be restored. Now with the media people are passive spectators; having public intellectuals on the media may end up being a form of alienated carnival.

People could see Michael Moore, for example, as highly critical and entertaining in his delivery, but the passive consumption experience which pillories the existing order finds no hook into any existing normative-emotional framework and no collectively expressed problem. It lacks traction. Consequently the passive consumers of inversion forget it and go back to repeating their activities with no alternative or critical voice to join with others to develop an alternative. Thus the problem with Moore's films is that despite the viewing figures, people just remember 'bits' of his films with no wider narrative to locate them in, let alone any vision to act on them.

To this we may add that the political and economic elites would not wish to help such traction occur by allowing multiple progressive / radical activists to challenge the existing order when such elites run democracy in their interests. The world we live in is one that really is inverted in the sense that the tradition of liberalism denies it is tradition, that the tradition fails to deliver its core principle of equality of 'opportunity', and that liberalism depends on capitalism which in turn subjugates people in the name of formal, alienated freedom. This world needs to be turned onto its feet in terms of social and political practices as well as ideas.

As regards the third problem, we can note the intervention on banking by Justin Welby, a former banker and current Archbishop of Canterbury. Welby railed against payday loan

companies in the UK such as ‘Wonga’, only to find that the Church of England had shares in Wonga. He was unable to change this because those running the financial matters of the church were able to override his wishes. This structural need for exploitation rooted into capitalist practices did not deter him though from seeking to reform banking to make it more ethical. He called for young bankers to spend a year with the Church of England on prayer, helping the poor and studying philosophy and theology. To this he added ‘you’d be an idiot to stand in judgment on the banks’ (2014). Culture, he argued, ‘ate regulation’, so an ethical banking system was needed.

If this critical intervention had some impact, unlike the alienated carnival of criticism, it would itself be a part of the problem. Apart from the fact that the institutional matrix of banking is based on increasing plutocratic power, and the power of the City of London and Wall Street over their respective political class is enormous, any reforms would leave wider problems about exploitation, such as widening gap between rich and poor, untouched. Indeed, given his keenness to protect banking from sustained criticism and reregulation despite the catastrophic consequences caused by deregulation, we can say that Welby represents the limits of accepted criticism that Chomsky and Herman (1994) talk about: something needs to be done but neither the problem to be addressed nor the solution are to rock the foundations of the established institutional order. A tradition or culture of radical criticism cannot start with elites who ultimately have a vested interest in the status quo and who rely on other elites to publicise their ideas, but on grassroots activism, confronting problems and building an alternative view.

In what follows we respond to the three problems of the liberal pluralist approach to public intellectuals by: criticising the elitism of the concept of intellectual and holding that academics need to engage with the broader community to avoid elitism; questioning whether neo-liberal universities can produce critical audiences open to a holistic and radical re-framing of problems; and considering how universities may become sites of struggle, to help undermine the neo-liberal commodification of education and reduction of learning to consumption ‘satisfaction’. If academics engaged with their communities, they could work with others to develop a critical world view, avoiding the mainstream media definition of problems, avoiding their own form of elitism and challenging vested interests from the bottom up. Changing the politics of universities could assist the creation of a more engaged public.

### **Who is an Intellectual?**

Sassower’s liberal pluralist approach to public intellectuals seeks top down change with a salaried class of intellectuals engaging with other elites through the media and hopefully influencing policy formation and debate about policies. The problem here is that in a world of deep seated inequality, a privileged group of academics, often produced from an education system that serves to reproduce inequality, would only become more privileged, and would not speak truth to power.

The method of selection for the role of public intellectual is not explained in Sassower’s book. We are concerned with who would have the power to select and possibly re-select these candidates, who may well want to stay in post for \$100,000 a year. The type of

people seen as ‘suitable’ for the role of public intellectual may be well-established white, heterosexual, middle class, cis-gendered able-bodied men, as it would reflect success in gaining funding and tenure in higher education; all of which mirrors the selection process for those engaged in party politics, who would be the intellectuals’ audience. Sassower explicitly mentioned his desire to see young PhD graduates becoming public intellectuals, arguing that \$100,000 per year for the fellowship would not ‘tempt those who are already earning more than that, but entice younger scholars to take a break from their research to become public intellectuals’ (2014a,120).

We think that \$100,000 would certainly tempt even those who are earning more. The privilege of being a paid ‘intellectual’ can give such people a platform to promote their own academic career and have the possibility to become a ‘celebrity academic’, selling books widely – and profitably - on their name not content, thus adopting an instrumental rationality rather than speaking truth to power for its own sake. A very long sabbatical with the possibility to become a celebrity would be tempting to many academics. As for young academics who managed to get selected when those doing the selection may prefer ‘bigger names’, we can say that paying a young academic, who is likely to come from a privileged background, \$100,000 a year to speak truth to power is unlikely to produce much uncomfortable truth in the ‘sluggish republic’, especially if they want to become a celebrity academic.

An illustrative example of ethnic privilege in academic selection and the delimiting of thought and debate is provided by the NUS (National Union of Students) Black Students' Campaign [\*Why is My Curriculum White?\*](#) which challenges the lens of white supremacy through which the curriculum in British universities is filtered. It puts into question the normalisation of the absence of black scholars’ work on reading lists, which leads to the marginalisation, delegitimation and invisibility of non-white academics within academia (UCLTV 2014). The [\*Just 85 Professors\*](#) campaign, which highlights black professors’ absence from academia puts it very concisely: ‘Eurocentric teachings telling half the story, with the educational gaze fixed on white male glory’ (Johnson 2014). This critique of whiteness and monoculturalism asks for racist narratives of the legacy of historical events to be destabilised and reconsidered in order for previously silenced voices to be given the attention they deserve, and for non-Eurocentric knowledge to be respected and accessible within academic settings.

Sassower accuses think tank employees of being apologists for the ideas they are paid to promote (2014a, 4; 10). However, the same problem of ‘intellectuals’ supporting vested interests would occur with Sassower’s conception of salaried public intellectuals. To be sure, they are not linked to any funder directly but, as Chomsky and Herman (1994) argue, the best way to support the status quo is to allow critical dialogue to occur only on a strictly delimited horizon. Would someone arguing about the drone murders by the US in Pakistan, the need for gun control and the injustice of private health care be selected by people looking out for their careers (whoever they were), paid \$100,000 a year from public funds, and taken seriously; or would they and those who selected them be pilloried on Fox News; or would the selectors avoid such people in the first place, preferring to maintain the elitist neo-liberal consensus?



Sassower does mention bloggers, amateurs and rappers as potential intellectuals which could run counter to the claims about privilege (2014a, 51-57). However, it is unlikely that critical voices will escape the problem mentioned above with Michael Moore concerning traction and it is also possible that commercialisation will mute criticism. Additionally, he does not discuss whether and how non-academic public intellectuals should be paid which raises the question of whether academics only are worthy of remuneration as public intellectuals.

### **Problematizing 'the Intellectual'**

Here we shift our attention from the privileged background of putative public intellectuals and the low likelihood of them seeking to challenge vested interests beyond the neo-liberal consensus, to question the concept of the 'intellectual'. References to 'the intellectual' have traction in debates, but one should be wary of using such a term in relation to progressive social critique. On this, we want to make three points.

#### **I.**

Whilst not wishing to claim that all views are equal, it is the case that an intellectual – non-intellectual dualism can be mobilised to legitimise and privilege a particular type of knowledge in an elitist and exclusionary way. Rather than see academic specialist knowledge as useful in some domains, and lay knowledge of some problems as more insightful than those of other agents in other domains, it can often be the case that intellectual knowledge (and those privileged people who generate and consume it) is privileged. Those who possess it are seen to have a coherent and legitimate voice, with the rest having a 'lack' which denies them a voice in the public domain. In other words, the concept of the intellectual can very easily be part of the continuation of privilege and exclusion.

Collins and Evans (2002) present an interesting case here. They argue that whilst some scientists knew more about some of the effects of radiation on sheep than Cumbrian sheep farmers, the farmers had more knowledge than the scientists about some of the effects of radiation. Furthermore, the farmers knew more than non-specialist radiation scientists who thought that by being scientists they had superior knowledge of the problem compared to the knowledge of the farmers. Being an 'intellectual' does not guarantee that one is an expert. Rather than see people outside academia as having knowledge generated from experience of problems caused by government policies and structural inequality (remembering Dewey's (1954) comment about the shoe wearer knowing best where the shoe pinches), non-academics may be seen just in terms of lacking a type of knowledge often accessed by the more privileged.

The potential elitism and closure towards those taken to be defined by a 'lack' is illustrated by Furedi (2004) who asks 'where have all the intellectuals gone?' Furedi laments the decrease in the number and influence of intellectuals in the public sphere, which, he states, used to be part of public life in the 50s, as well as what he takes to be the decline in the standard of public debate. The problem with his approach is that instead of looking at the underlying factors of why more informed political discussions in general

do not exist, and why a perceived negativity towards ‘knowledge’ has emerged, he blames the public for wanting to be passive consumers of patronising pseudo-egalitarian policies. He contends that the dissatisfaction with an elitist view has corrupted society and people’s ability to think critically, resulting in a patronising ‘inclusive’ conservatism that uses a democracy of poor thinking to reproduce a society that fails intellectually and politically. Instead, we argue that it is elites, their control of the media, and a failure of academics to create ‘dissatisfied’ students ([Cruikshank and Chis 2014](#)) and engage with broader publics, that have undermined the potential for a dialogic democracy.

## II.

The connection between social advantage and epistemic advantage can create a condition of collective amnesia whereby structural socio-historical disadvantage is masked. A consequence of this erasure is the dehistoricisation and derecognition of social, economic and political acts of resistance from the bottom-up. People who are often privileged will study or teach world views that confine understanding to the neo-liberal consensus with this leading to people failing properly to grasp the history of inequality and the scope for non-elite agents to effect change.

This amnesia can be illustrated, for example, by looking at how the ‘Age of Enlightenment and Revolution’ has been widely depicted in Western thought: as a solely European project of white, European minds (Israel 2001, 140). In reality, the events surrounding the Haitian Revolution between 1791-1804 which led to the abolition of slavery and the independence of the country demonstrate the immense and fundamental contribution which former enslaved people had on transforming the organisation of the Haitian society, and the conceptualisation of liberty and equality. As Nesbitt argues,

[T]he Haitian Revolution might never have occurred had these former slaves simply followed the dominant order of knowledge, turning to a maître who would all-knowingly interpret a text such as the 1789 Déclaration to them (2008, 30).

The Haitian revolutionaries did not need the then-intellectuals or French *philosophes* to *explicate* freedom and equality, and how to achieve them. They put these ideas into practice themselves, asserting their equality and creating liberty. Still, apart from the scholarly work undertaken by decolonial and postcolonial scholars, not enough homage has been paid to the legacy of this Revolution and the ‘connected histories’ of individuals and nations, which are always in constant negotiation and development (Bhambra 2007:78-9). The understanding of history needs to be reconsidered if we are to know how to change society for the better, and see how putatively discrete problems are connected to wider systems of sustained privilege and vested elite interests. The past needs to be brought into the present in activism and teaching; privilege may preclude this.

### III.

All academics should be concerned with public affairs - our scope is to celebrate the engaged academic, and persuade the non-engaged to resist the commodification of their work. Academic labour has a meaningful value which needs to be used for social, not economic purposes. Alongside academics we place those such as the ‘dissatisfied’ student ([Cruikshank and Chis 2014](#)), the asylum seeker asking for their universal rights to be recognised and protected (BBC website 2014a), the twenty-nine young mothers who occupied Focus E15 Hostel in Stratford to protest against their eviction and the closure of its mother and baby unit (Webb 2014), the firefighters who held a four-day strike over pensions (BBC website 2014b) and so forth. The identity of the current academic is flawed, due to it being privileged and isolated from epistemologies which have not permeated academic discourse. This is why the knowledge outside of academia needs to permeate the academic institution: the creation of knowledge occurs through collaboration, discussion and critique. The commonalities between academic and non-academic knowledge production need to be recognised in order to dismantle presupposed and narrow claims which do not represent the real experiences of society.

By acknowledging the social value of the contribution of academics and non-academics to knowledge, we could conceptualise a more cooperative, reflexive and egalitarian relationship amongst individuals. This relationship would be based on the recognition of the commonalities between the forms of oppression which affect society as a whole, and the particular ways in which each group or individual is subjected to oppression. It follows that through collaborations between academics and people outside of academia, a break with the institutionalised commodification of knowledge can be achieved. Also, the isolated identities of academics ought to be ‘undone’ to blur academic exclusivism, subverting institutional impositions and creating new spaces for cooperation. There are possibilities for escaping the constraints of the marketised university by developing new forms of resistance and transformation by connecting knowledges for mutual support. Labelling academics ‘public intellectuals’ would not help this search for commonality and putting public intellectuals on the mainstream media would further distance them from the publics they could work with rather than talk to.

#### **The University as a Site of Struggle**

Some academics may follow Epstein who argued that she became ‘an academic in order to become a better activist, rather the other way around’ (Gamboa 2013). We would not argue that being an academic necessarily means being a ‘better’ activist because of its elitism; and nor would we argue that activism has to be the prime motive for someone to become an academic. However, those who chose an academic life, in the social sciences, humanities or natural sciences, could and should be motivated to engage in change in three ways. First, they could seek to make students ‘dissatisfied’ - that is, critical - and not position them as passive customers in the neo-liberal university. Second, they should resist marketisation by seeking to make academia available to all by campaigning for free education and creating alliances with ‘dissatisfied’ students and university support staff to challenge privatisation and the attack on wages: we need to challenge the reduction of education into a commodified positional good, and challenge the increased exploitation



of all staff. One university, for instance, tried to increase its profit by removing extra pay for night work and weekend work, from already poorly paid support staff, with the consequence that many were at risk of running into arrears on their rent or having exacerbated ‘fuel poverty’.

Such forms of exploitation should not be ignored by academics only concerned with chasing the next piece of career capital but should be engaged with, so that protest comes from all employees in the university, with employees linking up nationally to fight privatisation and marketisation. Third, academics should become involved in activism off-campus with this activism then informing, if they work in the social sciences or humanities, their teaching. Ideally this should extend to academics getting students involved in activism on and off campus and in academics supporting student groups that challenge the commodification of education and marketisation of universities.

A good university would help overcome the ‘alienated carnival’ by using the educational experience to help create a public of graduates more receptive to hearing critical ideas that fall outside the neo-liberal consensus, and able to locate them in a holistic understanding of systemic inequality and exploitation. Part of this has to entail working with all groups on campus to fight exploitation and marketisation.

Sassower argues that:

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 neo-liberal 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 neo-liberal 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 ... [L]et’s have the debates about neo-liberalism 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? (2014b, 44)

We entirely agree with the sentiment here about universities becoming grossly exploitative. However, we are concerned that public intellectuals appearing in the media

would be unable to challenge this or influence the elites. Even Welby wanted deregulation.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In his previous reply to us ([Cruikshank and Chis 2014](#)), Sassower (2014b) asked us who we are addressing. In this paper, we (a student and an academic) are using the academic and free channel of Social Epistemology Reply Collective to offer an alternative vision to knowledge and collaborative action for any reader to consider taking a stand against the privileging of particular types of knowledge.

Reaching the end of the reply, we would like to invite Sassower to address the following questions:

What would prevent public intellectuals becoming apologists?

Would \$100,000 tempt people to pursue self-interested career capital and become ‘celebrity academics’?

Would a flourishing dialogic democracy really need intellectuals?

How can media debate avoid becoming a passive consumption experience by many people?

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