Introduction: a Special Issue on Public Intellectuals

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This special issue is devoted to the contemporary phenomenon of the public intellectual. Since the 1980s, historians and social scientists have lamented the alleged decline of the public intellectual in the course of the twentieth century (e.g., Jacoby 2000), but more recent commentators rightly contend that there is little empirical evidence to support this “declinist” argument, at least in its rudimentary fashion (e.g., Collini 2006; Baert and Shipman 2012). Of course, compared to the era of Sartre or Russell, there is no longer as much scope for the authoritative public intellectual—that is, a generalist who speaks out with moral vigor about a wide range of disciplines and who is steeped in a high profile discipline like philosophy. However, it would be wrong to treat the decline of the authoritative intellectual as the fall of the public intellectual altogether (Baert and Shipman 2012). As some of the contributions in this issue argue, new possibilities for public engagement have emerged, thereby creating new relationships between intellectuals and their publics.

Some of the contributions to this issue pay attention to the role of new institutions and new technologies in the motives and means by which intellectuals engage publicly. The papers by Peter Dahlgren and by Patrick Baert and Josh Booth both explore the effect of online media and blogging which have become prevalent especially in the last decade. Dahlgren explores the potential effects of the “digital age” for democratic institutions and the public sphere, whereas Baert and Booth analyze in detail the changing nature of the relationship between the public intellectual and his or her publics. Whilst both contributions acknowledge that the new technologies are rapidly evolving and can be used for different purposes (which makes the future an unknown quantity), they are also keen to emphasize the genuinely democratic or dialogical potential of online media and the extent to which this potential has been incompletely realized. These two papers also draw attention to the continuities with earlier periods: for instance, Baert and Booth show how deep-seated tensions within the notion of the public intellectual, which go back as far as the late nineteenth century, reappear—perhaps with renewed force—in its current manifestations.

Whereas those two papers analyze the new media, Barbara Misztal pays attention to novel institutional formations, in particular think tanks. As research centers devolved from

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universities and government, these think tanks have been part of the intellectual landscape for several decades and have taken on a significant role, especially in the USA. But with some notable exceptions (e.g., Medvetz 2012), they have been relatively unexplored. Misztal is possibly less optimistic than Baert and Booth, pointing out the intricate links between these new organizations and powerful political fractions, which necessitate caution when social scientists and other commentators herald knowledge brokers as the new public intellectuals. She argues that think tank experts might limit the political relevance of academic public intellectuals and that their monopolization of the public forum could present a threat to the quality of public debates.

If Misztal refuses to define public intellectuals too broadly, Jeffrey Goldfarb consciously stretches the meaning of the concept by promoting US television comedians such as Jon Stewart and Steven Colbert into their ranks. He shows how their subversive humor counteracts the television and radio performances of conservative intellectuals like Bill O'Reilly and Glen Beck, encouraging viewers to reflect on what they conceive to be the reigning right-wing orthodoxy. In Goldfarb's view, Stewart and Colbert are democratic intellectuals because they perform both a subversive and a civil role: whilst the former consists of asking uncomfortable questions, the latter is about facilitating discussion amongst those who disagree. Stewart's and Colbert's performances may lack a coherent theory normally associated with public intellectuals, but there is certainly no doubt that, as Goldfarb points out, they manage to question the dogma of the day and have galvanized a significant audience in the USA. After the explorations by Dahlgren and Baert and Booth of the potential of online media for public engagement, Goldfarb shows the ongoing significance of "traditional" media such as radio and television, propagated rather than replaced by newer channels.

Whereas several contributions to this issue focus on the media or technologies which public intellectuals use to communicate with their publics, Steve Fuller studies the content of what is said or written, arguing that there has been a dramatic shift. Whereas Goldfarb's essay draws heavily on the opposition between the political left and right, Fuller's provocative piece contends that this juxtaposition, in spite of its long pedigree, has become increasingly obsolete in the new sociopolitical climate. He holds that a new political duality has emerged, opposing precautionary (or risk-averse) attitudes on the one hand to proactionary (or risk-seeking) attitudes on the other. This new division cuts right through any traditional left–right opposition: precautionary attitudes incorporate both conservatism on the right and communitarian principles on the left, whereas proactionary attitudes involve both economic liberalism and socialist planning. Fuller argues that the dividing lines between public intellectuals have been retraced accordingly.

One of the themes in Baert and Booth's paper is that public intellectuals have always straddled between a number of opposing values, one of which is the opposition between critical distance and passionate involvement. As can be inferred from Misztal's contribution, people employed in or commissioned by think tanks often face the same fine balancing act, trying to maintain scientific neutrality whilst knowing that their research will be put to social or political use. Charles Gattone's paper explores the extent to which this particular tension—between neutrality and engagement—permeates the professional practice of those social scientists who aim to make a public impact. Whilst remaining loyal to the rigor, precision, and objectivity of their profession as social scientists, they also want to act politically and ensure their work is socially significant. Gattone carefully explores the ethical dilemmas and potential pitfalls involved, arguing for a reflexive social science. Reflexivity was of course the hallmark of Bourdieu's sociology, and Bourdieu was foremost among those who in the course of the 1990s tried to merge a commitment to sociology as a science with a foray into the

public sphere (see also Swartz 2003). It is indeed not surprising that Gattone's reflections are close to Bourdieu's in this regard.

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