

Global Public Intellectual

Concept: Global Public Intellectual

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Description The "public intellectual" is one of the most widely debated concepts among academics, journalists, and intellectuals in the United States and increasingly throughout the world. The term originated in a book written by American historian Russell Jacoby entitled *The Last Intellectuals* (1987). Jacoby argued that the specialized and professionalized American university has undermined general intellectuals who write well on issues of broad public concern. A public intellectual can be defined as someone who writes or speaks clearly on issues of culture, politics, morality, or economics to publics outside narrow professional academic or policy circles in a capacity outside their own particular professional and occupational roles whether that be academic, journalist, lawyer, media professional, or politician. For Jacoby, this type of public intellectual is an endangered species, as academic professionalism, corporate and government sponsored think tanks and a mass media saturated culture make the independent social critic a thing of the past.

Since the late 1980s, the public intellectual debate has been lively and has spread globally, even though the discussion is different in distinct national contexts. A large part of the debate has centered on the state of intellectuals in the United States — the nation with a resource-rich higher education system that can be seen as being responsible for the high level of professional specialization that undermines the existence of the type of general social critic and public academic one sees as a matter of course in the rest of the world. In China, the public intellectual is a term often applied to or claimed by dissidents, just as intellectuals more generally played a central role in the opposition to communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. There is also a lively debate about public intellectuals within the European Community, lead first and foremost by the German sociologist Habermas but extending throughout the continent.

The argument that public intellectuals are declining as a social type has not been uncontroversial. Jacoby has been widely criticized for underestimating the importance of race and gender in the dynamics of public intellectuals, for viewing only "famous" intellectuals as being public intellectuals, for being excessively critical of academic scholars, for presenting a romantic view of the New York intellectuals from the 1950s era, and for exaggerating the alleged "death" of the public intellectual today. The American conservative judge Richard Posner has taken the public intellectual debate one step further, gathering data on the media fame, academic status, and Internet influence of various public intellectuals. Unlike Jacoby, however, Posner argues that academics

should generally stay out of public intellectual work since social and political questions are best left to experts. More recently we have seen the spread of various newspaper and magazine run "contests" to identify the most influential public academics in Canada, Europe, Australia, and globally. The term "public intellectual" has clearly captured people's imagination even if its meaning remains contested.

Contrary to Jacoby's pessimism, however, we may be seeing the creation of new types of "global public intellectuals," as the digital revolution and emergence of global social movements and political institutions challenge traditional notions of what an intellectual is and how political publics are constituted. The notion of the global public intellectual can be conceptualized as an individual who writes intellectual commentary and social criticism for an audience outside both the boundaries of academic professions and the nation-state system. The contemporary examples of Edward Said, Naomi Klein, Salman Rushdie, Vandana Shiva, Benjamin Ferencz, and Arundhati Roy suggest ways in which academics, journalists, activists, lawyers, and novelists can contribute to public debate on important issues of the day with a "global reach" beyond the boundaries of both narrow professional discourse and national political processes and structures.

There is a history, of course, to this type of intellectual. The examples of Bertrand Russell, Erich Fromm, and Franz Fanon suggest that global public intellectuals are not a new phenomenon. The political perspectives promoted by these earlier global public intellectuals made the case for politics, policy, and movements that assume a world conceptualized as one place. The philosopher Bertrand Russell's tribunal on war crimes in the wake of the American war in Vietnam, for example, was an early example of attempts to hold nation-states accountable to a new global conception of human rights. Psychoanalyst and humanist Erich Fromm's writings on the threat to the global community posed by the nuclear arms race dealt with the need for global political institutions to address a problem created by the military pursuit of the "national interest" in the context of an outmoded nation-state system. And radical psychiatrist and writer Franz Fanon's account of the effects of French colonialism and Western cultural and psychological dominance was a call for a "post-colonial" consciousness that went far beyond the boundaries of Algeria. Global public intellectuals, from Russell in the early part of the twentieth century to the more recent examples of Edward Said and Naomi Klein, argue for policies and ideas from outside the framework of the national political interests of the states and societies in which they hold citizenship rights.

The context for public intellectuals today, however, has changed dramatically since the time of Russell, Fromm, and Fanon. Globalization has created more post-territorial space where ideas can be discussed, debated, and engaged with, outside of national political cultures and publics than was the case during the time of earlier intellectuals. Globality, for globalization theorist Jan Aart Scholte, suggests that the historical

moment we are living in involves a new sense of the world as a single social space, involving two central components: transplanetary relations and supraterritoriality. Transplanetary relations involve, for Scholte a dramatic increase in the extent to which people are able to "physically, legally, culturally and psychologically" engage with each other in "one world" (Scholte 2000, 14). In the new world we live in, Scholte argues, "more people, more often, and more intensively engage with the world as a single place. Volumes of transworld communications, diseases, finance, investment, travel and trade has never been as great" (Scholte 2000, 16). Scholte's notion of "supraterritoriality" represents a more radical break with the past, as it implies in the world that is being created today relations are "relatively delinked from territory, that is, domains mapped on the land surface of the earth, plus any adjoining waters and air spheres" (Scholte 2000, 17). Whereas the "older trend towards a shrinking world occurred within territoriality," Scholte suggests that in the new world of "supraterritoriality ... place is not territorially fixed, territorial distance is covered in no time, and territorial boundaries present no particular impediment" (Scholte 2000, 19).

Scholte's analysis has enormous implications for thinking about public intellectuals. Global public intellectuals can be seen, from this perspective, to be now read in the virtual space created by the Internet and discussed in the newly global public spheres forged by global social movements and the modern global research university. In the non-territorial political space of the Internet, at the World Social Forum meetings, in and around newly emerging global institutions such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international financial organizations as well as in the context of global social movements, global public intellectuals are debating new ways of envisioning politics in a world with more porous borders, quicker travel, and instant communication. New technologies and cheaper travel have also lead to a globalization of the research university, creating new flows of intellectual debate between academics across national borders. Some of this new intellectual production enters into public debate and dialogue in the form of academics that play the global public intellectual role relatively de-linked from traditional national publics and territorial space as in the examples of Noam Chomsky, Edward Said, and Pierre Bourdieu.

There are important and complex political and intellectual questions at stake in the ways we conceptualize the global public intellectual. To restrict the notion of the public intellectual to famous intellectuals as Jacoby and Posner tend to do, seems to be excessively restrictive and misses some of the ways in which globalization is challenging business as usual in contemporary intellectual life. Under globalization, there now exist thousands of intellectuals who bypass mainstream academic and media outlets and discuss politics, culture, and economics with mass publics outside professional discourse in global ways. Some of these globally oriented public intellectuals will be known throughout the world in the networks of activists and mobilized publics, but will have little visibility within the status hierarchy of the academic world and mainstream media

and professional organizations in their own nation-state. Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, the leader of the Mexican-based Zapatista movement, is one important example of a global public intellectual. Marcos is not part of the Mexican intellectual elite or global professional academic discourse, but contributes in important and new ways to global public intellectual debate. The French farmer and globalization activist Jose Bové is another example of a global public intellectual whose influence comes from outside traditional national channels of political debate and credentialed expert knowledge.

In addition, some local-based global public intellectuals organize, speak, and write globally through the Internet or approach politics with a global vision while remaining unknown outside their local community. This second broader definition rejects the dominance of fame as a criteria for being a global public intellectual and calls for scepticism towards media run "contests" to identify the most influential public intellectuals. There are many local based global public intellectuals, whose names we do not know, who contribute on a daily basis to emerging debate about the world as one place in ways that help us imagine a new world beyond the present.

Global public intellectuals are politically diverse. Some global public intellectuals promote a cosmopolitan conception of a new global world to come, as in the case of Salman Rushdie. Others such as literary scholar Timothy Brennan are extremely sceptical of this kind of liberal cosmopolitanism, seeing it as contributing to more Western dominance of global intellectual and cultural life. From my perspective, political differences regarding the content of public intellectual discussion should be set aside in our definition of the global public intellectual. We need to see the expansion of a global public sphere alongside more political and cultural debate, irrespective of political and social positions. There are, however, legitimate questions to be raised as to whether intellectuals like Samuel Huntington, for example, could qualify as a global public intellectual given his close institutional and ideological links to the national interests of the United States in the context of a nation-state dominated world polity. The Islamist political leader Osama bin Laden is another complicated case, since he is clearly involved in global political writing and speaking. It is difficult to conceptualize bin Laden's conspiratorial politics and violent activities, however, as being part of any serious global dialogue in the public sphere.

Perhaps our claims for global public intellectuals are premature or exaggerated. While it is true that the Internet is creating new opportunities for intellectuals outside the mainstream media and academic establishments, the issues are complex. Conflicting evidence suggests corporate institutions and the global dominance of both the United States and the English language will limit truly global democratic possibilities. In addition, while the World Social Forum suggests new global political possibilities for intellectual debate, the continuing power of nation-states and the cultural dominance of Americans and Europeans over the Global

South is not be underestimated. In addition, much intellectual debate remains firmly rooted in particular places and political institutions, despite the emergence of moments of transplanetary and supraterritoriality relations. Furthermore, the globalization of the research university may, in fact, simply create more celebrity academic intellectuals and a competitive and highly professional global academic labour market. This would do as much to reinforce American intellectual and cultural power as it would to create new possibilities for global public debate. The jury is still out on whether global public intellectuals are emerging in the present moment of world history. And there are legitimate grounds to question whether, in fact, this is even a positive development for global democracy and social justice given continuing concerns about Western and English language cultural dominance throughout the world. Nonetheless, global public intellectuals have made many important contributions to efforts to create autonomy for people throughout the world. And the debate about the global public intellectual remains among one of the most provocative questions scholars face in the early years of the twenty-first century.

Suggested
Reading:

Brennan, Timothy. 1997. *At home in the world: Cosmopolitanism now.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Jacoby, Russell. 1987. *The last intellectuals: American culture in the age of academe.* New York: Basic Books.

Posner, Richard. 2001. *Public intellectuals: A study of decline.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Royce, Edward. 1996. The public intellectual reconsidered. *Humanity and Society* 20 (1): 4-21.

Scholte, Jan Aart. 2000. *Globalization: A critical introduction.* New York: St. Martin's Press.