

# Global Public Intellectuals, Autonomy, and Culture: Reflections Inspired by the Death of Edward Said

Author(s): Neil McLaughlin, McMaster University

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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 media-saturated culture make the independent social critic a thing of the past. The autonomous public intellectual was disappearing, according to Jacoby. My research addresses the question of whether this is true by examining the case of literary scholar and social critic Edward Said in light of recent scholarly debates about globalization. Are we seeing the emergence of a new type of global public intellectual, and what can we learn about how intellectual life is being transformed by globalization by looking at the case of Edward Said?

Contrary to Jacoby's pessimism, my research suggests the possibility that we are 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, social criticism, or popular academic work for an audience outside both the boundaries of academic professions and the nation-state system. Earlier examples of Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell, Franz Fanon, and Erich Fromm suggest that global public intellectuals existed in the past. 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" outside the boundaries of *both* narrow professional discourse and national political processes and structures.

My research suggests that the context for contemporary public intellectuals 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. 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 new 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 led 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 role of the global public intellectual relatively delinked from traditional national publics and territorial space as in the examples of Noam Chomsky, Pierre Bourdieu, and Edward Said himself.

My research moves the literature on the career and ideas of Edward Said forward, while raising larger questions worth examination. Few intellectuals better exemplify the ideals of the autonomous social critic, free from the constraint of national state interest, political orthodoxy, purely academic professional discourse, and the fashions of the day. The controversies that emerged in the wake of Said's death, over and above the specifics of his life and political views on the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, involved questions on the proper role of the intellectual in relation to the state, political movements, and the professions in a newly global world polity. Said's death, after a decade-long battle with leukemia, is thus a "moment" in history that thus brings into focus a number of issues central to our research on globalization and autonomy.

The jury is still out on the question of the global public intellectual; further research is required on large-scale samples of intellectuals beyond the rather exceptional case of Said. It is possible that claims for the emergence of global public intellectuals are premature or exaggerated. While it is true that the Internet is creating new opportunities for intellectuals outside mainstream media and academic establishments, 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 to 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. Certainly the issues Said addressed in the Middle East involved a rather traditional territorial conflict even if the debate about the Palestinian/Israeli conflict is now a global one. 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 reinforcing American intellectual and cultural power as much as creating new possibilities for global public debate. And there are legitimate grounds to question whether, in fact, the emergence of global public intellectuals 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.