

# PUBLIC SCHOLARS:

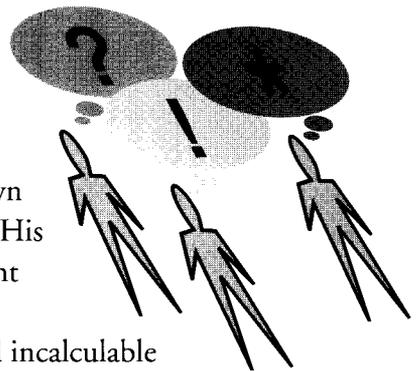
## In Search of a Usable Present — A Reply to Alan Wolfe

By Jay Rosen

In a 1932 essay, “The Scholar in a Troubled World,” Walter Lippmann pointed to a “special uneasiness which perturbs the scholar.” On the one hand, the student of human affairs “feels that he ought to be doing something about the world’s troubles, or at least saying something which will help others to do something about them.” On the other hand, “the voice of another conscience,” that of the scholar, urges “a quiet indifference to the immediate and a serene attachment to the processes of inquiry and understanding.” Lippmann continued:

Thus his spirit is divided between the urgency of affairs and his need for detachment. If he remains cloistered and aloof, he suffers in the estimation of the public, which asks impatiently to know what all this theorizing is good for anyway if it does not show a way out of the trouble. If he participates in affairs, he suffers no less. For it will quickly be revealed that the scholar has no magic of his own, and to the making of present decisions he may have less to contribute than many who have studied his own subject far less than he. But most of all he suffers in his own estimation: he dislikes himself as he pronounces conclusions he only half believes; he distrusts himself, and the scholarly life, because, when the practical need for knowledge is great, all the books in all the libraries leave so much unsettled.

While Lippmann acknowledged the lure of engagement — and, indeed, succumbed to it in his own career — in 1932 he came down on the side of “quiet indifference.” His reasoning is instructive. At “the point where knowledge is to be applied in action, there is a highly variable and incalculable factor.” This factor is “public opinion,” which



Lippmann held in rather low esteem. The need to figure in the “particular mixtures of understanding and ignorance, partisanship and propaganda, national, sectional, sectarian, and class prejudice, then prevailing among the people” lends an “immense uncertainty” to public life.

On a “foundation of merely transient opinions derived from impressions of the moment, undirected by any abiding conception of personal and social values,” no workable science of politics can be built. It takes a different kind of animal to cope with this unpredictable force, a “man of affairs” who understands the shifting moods of the masses. “Those who have this gift must be immersed in affairs; they must absorb more than they analyze; they must be subtly sensitive to the atmosphere around them; they must, like a cat, be able to see in the dark.”

Lacking this kind of animal sensitivity to the mind of the public-as-herd, the scholar must find the “courage to preserve that detachment which his instinct demands.” Thus, courage, long held to be among the political virtues, is here equated with a reasoned withdrawal from politics. Defending the enterprise of mind against the tyranny of the moment, the wise scholar “will build a wall against chaos, and behind that wall, as in other bleak ages in the history of man, he will give his true allegiance, not to the immediate world, but to the invisible empire of reason.” So ran Lippmann’s advice on how to live the life of the mind in the depths of the Great Depression.

I’m reminded of these thoughts of Lippmann’s in forming a reply to Alan Wolfe’s wise and challenging essay, “The Promise and Flaws of Public Scholarship.”

Not that Wolfe is heir to Lippmann’s dismissive treatment of the average citizen’s abilities. On the contrary, he wants scholars (and “public scholars”) to respect the public and its ideas in a way that Lippmann did not. And he has no use for the cult of expertise that is so sharply visible in *Public Opinion* (1922) and its sequel, *The Phantom Public* (1925), Lippmann’s classic works on the problems of modern democracy.

In Wolfe’s view, the scholar has no business trying to improve the people who are the public, or to “engage them round the clock” in deliberations they may not want or need. For to do so is to treat their understandings as somehow inadequate, merely on the scholar’s say-so; it is to interfere in their opinions because one does not favor those opinions; it is to reject people’s right to avoid

the public square when they choose to tend to their own lives. This is not respect, says Wolfe. It is condescending, or, worse, manipulative. It may even become “totalitarian” in the wrong hands.

Respect to Wolfe means two things: first, accept the public and its views for what they are, not as we wish them to be; and then, speak truth to the public — and simultaneously to power. The kind of truth he has in mind comes with patient study, scrupulous data, clear writing, and the determination to be heard. This, Wolfe says, is good scholarship, the kind we now need. But there is no need to label it “public” scholarship, a term that may lead in dangerous directions.

When Wolfe says, “as a scholar, I have only one principal obligation: to my quest for understanding,” I want to say: yes, but *with whom* is that quest to be shared? When Wolfe writes approvingly of “the rigorous clarity imposed by the need to make one’s ideas available to outsiders,” I want to ask: but what about making those “outsiders” available to one’s ideas? Similarly, when Wolfe describes public scholarship as “politics by other means,” I want to query him: what meaning of “politics” does he imply?

It cannot be the one Michael Sandel advanced in the majestic and final line of his book, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*: “. . . when politics goes well we can know a good in common that we cannot know alone.” For that is the kind of “political” work that scholars can, I think, start doing, without condescending to the public, imposing on it their utopian dreams, or losing all claim to independent and truth-seeking status.

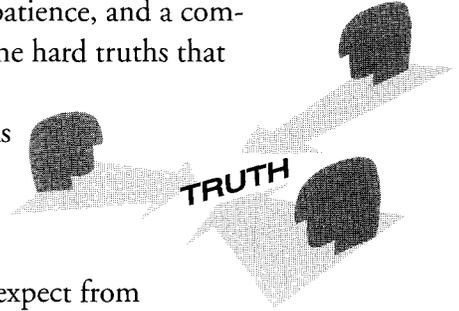
Wolfe seems to think that what we mean by “public” scholarship is *politicized* work. Thus, he writes:

As disastrous as it may have been, the scholarship that government officials used to justify the war in Vietnam was, in its way, public scholarship.

He anticipates that our objection to this provocative remark will show us taking up sides. “No, no,” he imagines our saying, “We don’t mean scholarly work that helps the government in prosecuting an unjust war. We mean work that aids the poor, the marginalized, the silent, and the oppressed.” In other words, public scholars are would-be liberals seeking liberal reforms, and the scholarship they propose is work that is politicized in service of “good” rather than “bad” causes.

That is far from the way I see it, although I have no automat-

ic objection to politicized scholarship save the mighty risks it entails when intellectuals lend their talents to a “cause.” What I mean by public scholarship is something different because “public,” for me implies something different than it does for Wolfe. A public scholar is neither a scold nor a servant of the polity. He or she is in the business of inquiry: trying to learn something that is hard to learn without investigation, patience, and a commitment to truth-telling, including the hard truths that politics and politicians may wish to avoid. But instead of seeing inquiry as a solitary venture, or a professional mission undertaken with academic colleagues, or the sort of truth-on-demand that policymakers expect from their hired hands, the public scholar views the work to be done as “public” work.



This means a number of things: first, the scholar’s work is made to be shared with others outside the professional domain of academic inquiry; second, the quest to know originates in some problem or challenge that could usefully be called “public” business; third, the others with whom one is inquiring are not limited to experts, policy professionals, academics, or government officials seeking technical advice, but may include all manner of people: neighborhoods trying to build their capacity to work together and achieve common aims; journalists seeking a stronger civic identity; communities facing mounting problems that require people to deliberate and cooperate in novel ways; parents, teachers, administrators, students, and concerned citizens wondering why the latest “fix” failed to solve the problems of their schools; police departments and the people they’re pledged to serve who want safer streets but no longer believe they can be bought with budgets; librarians who want public libraries to gain a more vital role in the life of the community.

In all of these cases, scholars seeking a more “public” role for themselves may prove invaluable to various publics — if they can use their skills to name and frame problems so that others can “own” them; if they can translate among civic dialects and find a shared language that all can profitably speak; if they can lend to the discussion a conceptual clarity that excludes no one while adding to the intellectual capital all can draw on as they grapple

with civic challenges; if they can share their deep understanding of the roots of public problems in a manner that speaks to everyday experience without trivializing the difficulties involved; if they can exercise their civic imaginations in a way that nourishes the “possibility of Possibility,” without which no public can labor for long; and if they can undertake all of these tasks with a decent respect for the views and interests of others with whom they may disagree on many things.

Now these are challenging tasks for which scholars are well equipped. Or rather, they can begin to equip themselves for such work if they see it as central, rather than peripheral, to their identity as intellectuals in a democratic society. None requires the learned mind to cave in to public prejudices, or climb aboard the bandwagon of this or that politician. None is equivalent to the forms of address favored by those we call “public intellectuals,” who write for a general audience on matters of the moment. And none will seem important to the scholar who, with Lippmann, builds a “wall against chaos” and gives allegiance, “not to the immediate world, but to the invisible empire of reason.”

To be sure, we need people who can withdraw to a life of serious contemplation, and return with the advanced forms of understanding by which scholarly knowledge develops. We need civic-spirited intellectuals like Alan Wolfe, who feel they owe the public their best estimate of what’s happening and why. But we also need people ready for a different kind of work — done, not *for* the public or its elected officials, but *with* people who are trying to become a public, a community able to know in common what its members cannot know alone and to imagine the possibilities their democracy may yet afford.

And this other kind of work — which we have called, in the spirit of inquiry, “public scholarship” — over time does its work upon the scholar, who may find that what seemed like an adequate understanding (when the understanders were fellow professionals) is in need of a revision and renewal that is ultimately personal. It is personal because it involves the meaning of one’s life and work as a trained mind among other minds, trained by their own experience — fellow citizens, in other words, struggling, in their diverse ways, to grasp and treat the problems of a shifting and troubled world.

“My obligation to the public is to offer it what I know,” says Alan Wolfe. But I believe we are speaking less of obligation than of

opportunity: to begin knowing in a way that offers the scholar a broader field for understanding than the understanding of one's "field" that now prevails in the American university. Public scholarship, by whatever name it comes to be called, partakes of the grand tradition of experiment on which the country was founded. It asks scholars to experiment on themselves and their ways of knowing, to see if they can't become more useful to a nation that is still in search of usable present.

Call it "political" work if you wish; but to assume that it must be *politicized* is to end the experiment where it properly begins.

# PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP AND THE LAND-GRANT IDEA

By Scott J. Peters

In a brief article in the 1996 issue of the *Higher Education Exchange*, William Sullivan calls for a new kind of expertise, more civic than technical in orientation, which will seek to tap new energies, insights, and knowledge through engaging people in creating together a new definition, analysis, and evaluation of key issues and problems. This new kind of expertise, Sullivan writes, will require a “reinvention” of a public orientation to intellectual life within higher education. It will require moving beyond the insularity of the “applied research” model of the post-World War II era technocratic university, toward a new model of “active partnership and shared responsibility in addressing problems whose moral and public dimensions are openly acknowledged.” Given the entrenched nature of the applied research model, this will, as he notes, not be an easy task. Yet recent efforts at civic engagement, both inside and outside higher education, are helping to make the environment fertile for such a move.

Sullivan and others who are calling for “public scholarship” as one means for addressing America’s current civic crisis have struck on a powerful idea with deep but mostly forgotten roots. The seeds of a model of active partnership and shared responsibility in higher education were planted in the late nineteenth century in the rich soil of America’s land-grant colleges and universities. These institutions were once understood, in Charles Kendall Adams’ words, as “creations and possessions of the people.” Resting on something called the “land-grant idea,” they emerged from a conscious shift in American higher education toward public rather than private purpose: toward the ideal of a higher education “of, by, and for the commonwealth.”

The land-grant idea carried with it an important democratic

