

# THE PRACTICE OF THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

By Edward Royce

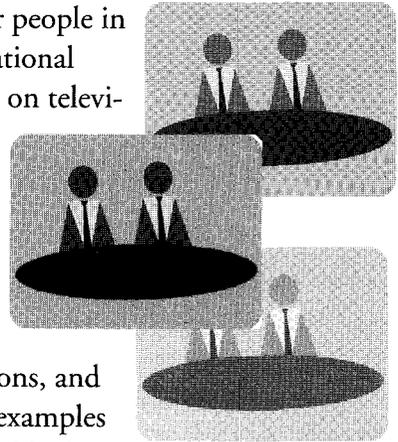
Numerous observers in recent years, critical of the relative isolation of academic intellectuals from the larger public sphere, have called for the revival of the “public intellectual.” This term typically refers to a well-known writer who publishes books and essays on topics of broad concern targeted to a general audience of educated readers. The “New York intellectuals” of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s are commonly cited as the exemplary public intellectuals. The preeminence of this example, however, obscures the variety of ways in which intellectuals might play a public role, implies a conception of the relevant public as consisting exclusively of serious readers, and engenders a limited vision of who public intellectuals are and what public intellectuals do.

This paper is part of a larger project intended to reconsider the idea of the public intellectual and recover its potential as a guide to combining academic scholarship and public activism. I have pursued this project by interviewing professors in the social sciences and humanities who have sought to make their knowledge and expertise more accessible, relevant, and available to nonacademic audiences, and who are otherwise actively involved as intellectuals in public life. One objective of this research, which offers a unique empirical vantage point on the work of publicly active academics, is to highlight the variety of ways of being a public intellectual. Instead of constructing an ideal image of the public intellectual or putting forward an exemplary figure as the one-best model, I set out to explore public intellectuals at work, to describe their practices and experiences, what they do and how they do it. This more empirically grounded strategy provides a picture of public intellectuals, so to speak, *from below*. The advantage of this approach is that it has the potential to yield some useful lessons and contribute toward a better understanding of how academics might engage in more publicly relevant intellectual work.

## Social Critics and Public Intellectuals

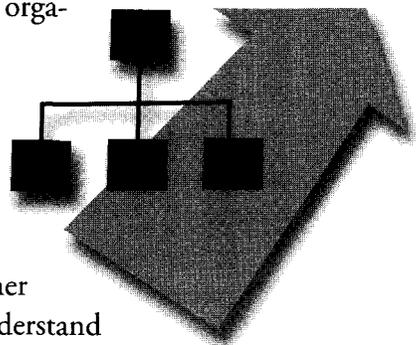
The conventional view typically equates the public intellectual with the prominent social critic. This conception has the disadvantage of limiting the role of public intellectual to famous writers and restricting the practice of the public intellectual to social criticism. While the social critic performs an invaluable role, there are many other ways to be a public intellectual; and most academics can more easily and effectively intervene in the public arena through other means. Social criticism, in addition, has the disadvantage of being addressed mainly to the highly educated segment of the public. Academics committed to reaching a broader audience, beyond just serious readers, will have to discover alternative ways to become publicly active. The people I interviewed, for example, engaged in a wide variety of practices, they participated in numerous forms of public outreach, and they targeted many different kinds of audiences. They wrote books and articles intended for a general public; they engaged in research, lobbying, and testifying in an effort to influence public policy; they set up classes or workshops for people in their communities and organized educational forums on topical issues; they appeared on television and radio talk shows; they spoke to or joined in formal discussions with nonacademic groups; they conducted activist or participatory research projects; and they supplied expert advice, information, and research materials to community groups, political organizations, and other lay constituencies. More specific examples include: a historian participating in a public history project in a predominantly Puerto Rican community with the intention of raising awareness about local housing problems; a psychologist conducting antiracism workshops for educators, church groups, and other organizations; and a historian using her skills as a writer and speaker and her connections to public health professionals and community organizations to turn the public spotlight on the high incidence of AIDS among African-American women.

In contrast to well-known social critics, most of the academics I interviewed are oriented toward local or specialized audiences. They are more likely to be involved with people in their own com-



munities than a putative national public; and they are more likely to work with groups interested in or organized around specific issues (e.g., the environment, homelessness, inequality, etc.) than be known to the readers of the *New Yorker*, the *Village Voice*, or the *New York Review of Books*. In one case, for example, a sociologist initiated a “community-based” research project in a poor Latino neighborhood bordering her university. In the course of her research, community residents urged her to focus on local housing conditions, referring to this as “our biggest problem.” In collaboration with colleagues, students and community residents, she designed and carried out a housing study. She helped produce a video on local housing conditions; she organized a conference at her university that brought together academics, community people, lawyers, and political activists; she and her colleagues prepared several technical reports on local housing conditions, which they forwarded to relevant government agencies; and she distributed “fact sheets” to residents in the community to assist them in their own political organizing efforts. “My purpose,” she says, “is to use what skills I have to bring the concerns of Latino community members — who don’t have a forum to do it themselves — to bring that to policymakers, to people who will make decisions at a local level.”

For many of my respondents, as this example illustrates, the objective of their efforts is less to engage in conventional social criticism than to use their intellectual capital to inform, educate, and empower ordinary citizens. One economist, for example, is involved in a program established to help political activists and other people in the community better understand current economic issues. What participants gain from this, she says, is “a sense of some empowerment, some self-confidence about economics,” which they can then apply in their own political efforts. She describes, for example, how “there’s been a big increase in organizing around international issues like NAFTA.” But “international economics is pretty technical — strong dollar, weak dollar, interest-rate politics, balance of payments deficits.” She and her colleagues assist people to understand



this “tricky stuff.” What they get out of it is “a better sense of how to pick their way through the conceptual minefield.” In another case, a political scientist, who does a lot of public speaking, explains that while he always tries to convey certain ideas, represent a standpoint and persuade his audiences, he also has the more modest ambition of simply stimulating people to “think critically about things. One of the values I try to embody in this act itself [as public intellectual] is to raise people’s ability to disagree with me on rational grounds and to agree with me on rational grounds.” Another economist tries to support the political efforts of lobby groups, community organizations, and advocates on diverse issues. For a while she focused on issues of tax equity. Along with colleagues and activists, she put together written material, gave talks, engaged in educational efforts, “translated” technical economic articles into understandable English, and supplied useful data.

These examples illustrate the point that academics can play a valuable public role and can make worthwhile political contributions through means other than social criticism. They show that the role of public intellectual is not confined to famous writers addressing a national audience of serious readers. And they suggest that public intellectuals can work *with* those subject to power as well as *against* those who exercise power. One economist articulates this alternative vision of the public intellectual. While she has written articles for national periodicals, she emphasizes the value of being engaged in community work with local publics, where intellectuals play a supportive role, outside the national limelight.

Having been engaged in this kind of activity for roughly 20 years, I most appreciate the people [academics] that have kind of settled down in one community and had kind of a long-term relationship to that community. I think that those are the people that have a real constituency, that can really make change. Those are the people who are really holding the line.

While sometimes functioning as social critics, the public intellectuals in my study, as these cases illustrate, participate in a variety of different public activities. In general, they seek to establish a more visible intellectual presence in the public sphere; but more specifically they try to support the efforts of local community activists, to promote specific political policies and reforms, and sometimes just to encourage people to consider information,

ideas, and perspectives that rarely gain a serious hearing in the dominant public discourse. The conventional model of the public intellectual, narrowly defined to include only prominent social critics, overlooks the variety of public roles available to academics.

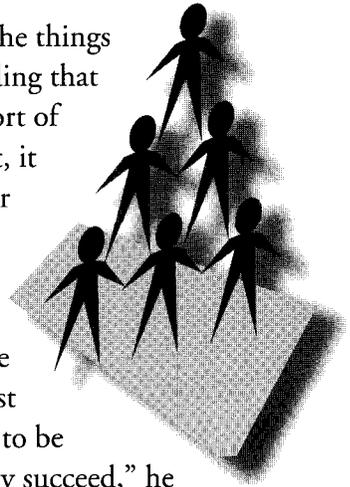
### **Independent Intellectual and Public Intellectuals**

Social critics typically relate to the public in one direction only, as writers to readers, making use of their knowledge and critical skills to enlighten and instruct. Their connection to the public is distant, impersonal, and highly mediated. The work of public intellectuals other than social critics, however, often entails a different relationship to lay audiences, a more reciprocal connection to the public. Such public intellectuals perform their roles, as do many of my respondents, in settings that permit or necessitate face-to-face encounters and involve interaction and collaboration with nonacademic groups. They are participants in a more open-ended conversation, teaching others, trying to inform, persuade and mobilize, but learning from them as well. To be a public intellectual, one economist says, “it takes the work of working with people.” Some of the academics I interviewed, for example, are involved in participatory or activist research projects. They seek to bring in, as coparticipants in the research process, the people being studied, and to employ the research experience and its findings to educate participants, both academics and lay people, and to promote social change.

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In contrast to the conventional image of the public intellectual as an independent scholar, an outsider or marginal figure, many of the people I interviewed emphasized the importance to their efforts of a collective context, consisting of connections to other intellectuals as well as to community groups, nonacademic organizations, and political activists. Their public interventions consist less of the weighty missive of the solitary individual, than, as one of my respondents puts it, “the work of ants.” What sustains their efforts is not so much their individual victories nor certainly national recognition, but the supposition that their public interventions are part of a larger, collective project. “You’re always struggling from a marginal position,” one economist observes. “The way I’ve always approached my work is to say, obviously, if I take what I’m doing by itself, it doesn’t matter, it’s a waste of time. So I have to assume that I am one part of something bigger. And, of course, that is a correct assumption.” A

sociologist explains, similarly, that “one of the things that kept my spirits up” was the understanding that “I’m part of a larger group, and we’re just sort of keeping the fires going.” For one economist, it was a matter of preference to “operate under collective structures.” But for the kind of public work undertaken by many other academics, the position of independent intellectual was not a feasible option. “Some sort of collective framework,” one economist argues, is crucial for intellectuals who want to be publicly active. The “only way you can really succeed,” he insists, is by having “a social support network of people trying to do the same thing.”



You can’t by and large do it by yourself. It isn’t the force of your ideas that’s going to carry you through. It’s some sort of group involvement, whether that is a group involvement with other people like yourself, that is other economists, sociologists, whatever you are, or connections to a political movement. Ideally, one has both.

That’s what you need.

A political scientist also emphasizes the value of being closely involved with other people, “both inside and outside academia, organized in some way.”

It’s just, I think, very important to have like-minded people with whom to exchange experiences and get suggestions that are on the spot and react to immediate situations or difficulties you may be having, and that kind of thing. To do it all by oneself is very hard. I don’t know what I would have done without that organization. It really helped me a lot.

For an economist, similarly, being involved in communities and groups of various kinds serves to “counterbalance” institutional and professional pressures, making it easier to pursue a career path that departs from the academic mainstream. His work with community activists and other politically engaged academics, a political scientist stated, “just reminded me of what the hell I was in all this for.”

Intellectuals who work closely with nonacademic groups have to establish trust and rapport in order to be effective; they have to demonstrate some level of commitment to the relevant communi-

ties; and they have to negotiate the divide that often exists between academics and lay people, especially when status differences are also evident. Public intellectuals who are determined to maintain intellectual independence and critical distance cannot be successful at this kind of work. A more complete involvement in the community is typically required. As one economist observed, to be an effective public intellectual, one cannot “come on as if ‘I know everything and you know nothing.’” She tried to get fully involved in the groups she worked with and not just participate in her role as expert authority. “I become a member of groups. And I volunteer to help them stuff envelopes. You have to be a participant. You have to be part of the community.” A sociologist makes the same point, declaring that “you have to build credibility by being part of that community. You have to be able to speak in their language.” People, one respondent states, “do want what professionals can give them, if they know those professionals are really dedicated, if they’re not opportunists, if they’re really believers in the movement.” Another sociologist, who helped set up a conference on the global economy for community residents, recalled that local people were “a little intimidated” coming to the university. But they subsequently discovered that the academic organizers “were user-friendly types who were willing to share information and give out their phone numbers and say ‘If you want to pursue this further, call me, we’ll do something about this.’” This helped build trust and solidify ties between academics and publics, resulting in the creation of “permanent bonds,” such that residents felt comfortable about calling on participating academics for further information and expert opinion.



### **Experts, Specialists, and Public Intellectuals**

While it is typically assumed that only generalists are eligible to play the role of public intellectual, my research shows that expertise and specialization rather than hindering academics from performing as public intellectuals, has a number of practical advantages. First, the expertise derived from specialization enhances the ability of intellectuals to gain public access. The generalist option, after all, is typically available only to the most

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prominent figures. Noam Chomsky, for example, can attract a public audience willing to listen to him talk about almost anything. Most other academics, however, lacking name recognition, require the credibility and visibility that is conferred by expertise; their credentials are their only ticket into the public arena. “If you have an expertise,” one of my respondents observes, “you can be called upon by different groups, and this includes some of the church groups, or labor groups, or citizens’ action groups. It’s useful to have an arena in which you’re recognized as a so-called expert.” Several of the people I interviewed, in fact, pursued their Ph.D.s precisely because they believed that by certifying themselves as experts they could more effectively play a public role. As one historian states: “I saw getting my Ph.D. as a way to have more influence as an activist, to have more credibility, as opposed to my views being seen as just sort of ‘my opinion.’” An economist makes a similar observation: “It was clear that people looked to experts; expert required becoming a Ph.D. I think my project was to do the work I’m doing [popular economics education] and the Ph.D. was a vehicle to do it.” Having specific areas of expertise, she believes, opened doors for her into the public arena and improved her ability to act as a public intellectual.

Second, specialists, precisely because of their expertise, may also be better able to convey ideas, impart information, communicate clearly, and make a persuasive case to nonacademic groups. Several of the people I interviewed saw themselves, at least in one of their public roles, as popularizers, trying to translate technical ideas for a public audience. One economist, for example, writes regularly for a popular economics magazine that is read by, among others, educators, students, political activists, and people in the trade union movement. He describes what he does as “making theory for public use.” The challenge, he says, “is to take ideas and write about them in a way in which they make sense to most people and are digestible to most people.” Through such popular writing he hopes to help create something of a counterweight to conventional economic ideas. Writing about economics for a popular audience, to be done well, requires an ability — which this economist found difficult to learn — to express oneself clearly about issues that are often complex and technical, and it requires a deep knowledge of both mainstream economics and the writings of its critics. Good translators have to be well versed in the language from which they are translating. This work of popular

translation, which is difficult enough even when one has the requisite expertise, is not something that most generalists are in a position to carry off effectively.

Third, intellectuals with expertise on matters of public relevance possess a valuable resource; they have something that is potentially useful and interesting to lay audiences. This, too, increases opportunities to participate in the public sphere and to make a public contribution. Because of their expertise, specialists are able to intervene and be helpful in ways that generalists cannot. A sociologist trained in epidemiology, for example, was able to lend his expertise to community groups in support of their claims against businesses charged with illegal dumping of toxic waste. He saw himself as “pushing what I thought was a solid, well backed-up position based on good empirical evidence, but also based on political action.” In another case, an economist wrote a book that was widely reviewed in the popular press, as well as in academic journals. From “being a person of basic obscurity,” she found herself “thrust onto the public stage.” Her book included technical material and sophisticated analyses of quantitative data. But it was reasonably readable, targeted by her publisher to the “educated layman”; it addressed timely issues concerning work in American society; and it “hit a nerve, it just exploded.” She, subsequently, did numerous radio talk shows; she appeared on national television programs; she received more requests for interviews than she could manage; she was frequently called by reporters of major newspapers to comment on economic issues; and she regularly got invited to speak before nonacademic groups. What gave her the opportunity to play this public role, to emphasize, was precisely her demonstrated technical competence on a specific issue of public importance.

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Fourth, expertise can also have strategic value, helping intellectuals to position themselves so they can influence public policy. In one case, for example, a political scientist chose to specialize on Latin American politics because he thought it was an area where “a relatively small number of well-informed people can actually make a difference, in terms of building a bridge between Latin America and the more general U.S. public.” He had been studying Nicaraguan politics, too, but subsequently opted to focus exclusively on Mexico. “That was a time when almost no U.S. intellectuals had any idea what was going on in contemporary Mexican politics. If you look for an analysis of what’s going on in

Mexico, there were just a handful of people at that time.” He had been “very impressed by the strategic role that a few people, who were at the head of the curve in the late seventies, played” in the debate over U.S. intervention in Central America and in what became the Solidarity and anti-intervention movements of the 1980s. His objective, by cultivating his expertise on Mexican politics, was to carve out a similar role for himself.

An empirical examination of public intellectuals at work reveals that academics with expertise in specialized fields can make an important public contribution. Most of the people I interviewed managed to influence public policy, gain a hearing before nonacademic audiences, and otherwise play a public role precisely because of their technical competence and expertise. They became public intellectuals on the basis of their training and knowledge in such specialized areas as, for example, welfare reform, environmental policy, immigration, housing discrimination, tax policy, campaign finance reform, election systems, and labor issues. There is nothing inherent in specialization that precludes academics from serving as public intellectuals; and for many professors the expertise that comes from specialization provides them with a valuable resource and a passport for gaining entrance into the public arena.

## **Conclusion**

Empirical research into the practices of publicly active academics might help divert thinking about public intellectuals onto a more constructive track. The benefit of inquiring into examples of public intellectuals at work comes from their practical relevance: they reveal possibilities, model courses of action, and stimulate thinking about alternatives to an insular professionalism. Empirical research on publicly active professors can serve to illuminate opportunities available for other academics also to become public intellectuals. For those interested in the relationship between intellectuals and the public, there is no better place to begin than by examining the experiences of academics who are already traveling back and forth between the ivory tower and the public sphere.

# TOWARD A PUBLIC SCIENCE:

## Building a New Social Contract between Science and Society

By Scott Peters, Nicholas Jordan, and Gary Lemme

American higher education at the close of the 1990s is showing signs of a civic awakening. A new vision of the public role and value of scholarship, the central work of the professoriate, is beginning to emerge. This vision was put forth in the late Ernest Boyer's call for a "scholarship of engagement," where academic institutions seek to become "more vigorous partner[s] in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems" (Boyer, 1996: 11). It has also surfaced in calls published in the Kettering Foundation's *Higher Education Exchange* for a "public scholarship," where scholars stand as partners with other citizens in producing knowledge of value in addressing a variety of public issues and problems.

At least one institution, Oregon State University (OSU), has embraced this emerging civic vision. In 1995, OSU adopted a completely new definition of scholarship, along with an extensive revision of its tenure and promotion policies (Weiser, 1997). A central aim of these changes, which encourage and reward a more publicly engaged form of scholarly work, is to increase the institution's relevance and efficacy in helping Oregon's citizens to address important public issues and problems. OSU's aim reflects Boyer's strong assertion that "at no time in our history has the need been greater for connecting the work of the academy to the social and environmental challenges beyond the campus" (Boyer, 1990: xii).

OSU's experience — recently featured as the centerpiece of "Scholarship Unbound," a national conference cosponsored by OSU, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, and the American Association for Higher Education — adds weight and momentum to the call for the development of a public scholarship. While this kind of scholarship is appealing to many in the humanities and social sciences (Veninga and McAfee, 1997), it is also capturing the interest of faculty in the so-called "hard" or "natural" sciences. One who has exhibited such interest is Jane Lubchenco, a professor in the Department of Zoology at OSU, who recently served as president of the American Association for the Advancement of