

AGAINST BULLSHIT

Christopher Hitchens and the Public Intellectual

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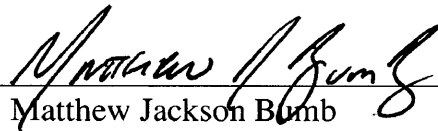
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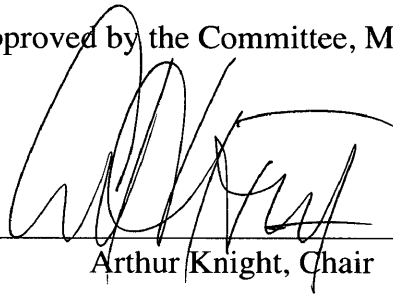
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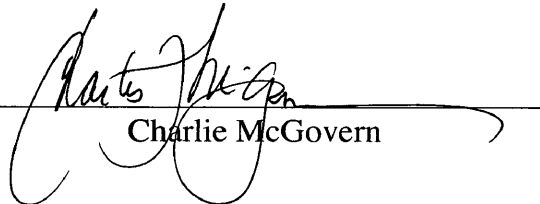
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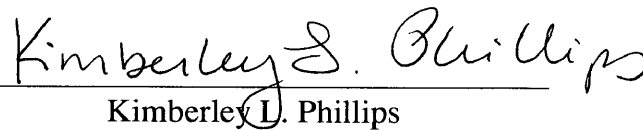

Kimberley L. Phillips

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ABSTRACT

Of the many things Christopher Hitchens has been called—and there is no shortage of epithets or compliments—one of the most consistent is a “public intellectual.” Whether the term is thought apposite or wildly inaccurate (Hitchens is by trade a print journalist), it demands investigation—not only as a way to grasp his work but also as an opportunity to conceptualize the problems and possibilities inherent in the term itself. From understanding what “public” the intellectual serves and how to balance public persona concerns against intellectual ones, the recent currency of the term “public intellectual” represents a major moment in the history of American intellectual self-definition and self-reflection. What’s at issue in the “public intellectual,” I want to argue, is a conflict between the professionalization of knowledge and how that knowledge is produced and controlled within the centrifugal cultural dynamics of an outwardly expanding intellectual labor market.

This essay, then, is an attempt to interrogate and to chronicle literature that has addressed the *public intellectual*, and develop it further. Animated by the desire to salvage the term from bargain-bin oblivion, this essay seeks to situate Hitchens—as a public figure, a working “public intellectual,” and an exemplary case study—among the complexity of issues he (implicitly) has raised: if public intellectuals even exist and, if so, where they come from; if “public intellectuals” now constitute their own marketplace, susceptible to commodification and the vicissitudes of celebrity culture; and what it means to be, in the words of Hitchens himself, “against bullshit.” This essay should be read as part of a process of characterizing the contours of public-intellectual work. In short, it aims for a developing dialogue rather than a definitive delivery; it treats the public intellectual less as a diagnostic description than as a site of continuing contention.

AGAINST BULLSHIT

Christopher Hitchens and the Public Intellectual

Introduction: The Case of Christopher Hitchens

The problem with being a public intellectual is you get more and more public and less and less intellectual. —Jean Bethke Elshtain¹

... in the third-world situation the intellectual is always in one way or another a political intellectual. —Fredric Jameson²

One of the more illustrative stories about the public persona of Christopher Hitchens contains many of the elements—talking-head face-off, establishment grandee, and a whiz-bang comeback, all wrapped into a polarizing topic on cable television—that have by now become so customary to political discussion, but at the time might have even been considered novel. The story has Hitchens, on CNN during the Gulf War, insisting that Charlton Heston, future president of the National Rifle Association, list what countries border Iraq. After botching the answer, Heston admonished Hitchens to stop “taking up valuable network time giving a high-school geography lesson.” Not missing a beat, Hitchens shot back: “Oh, keep your hairpiece on.”³

Unexceptional by the standards of Hitchens’s normal repartee, that exchange is nevertheless significant because it locates Hitchens—intellectually and temperamentally, if not geographically—within the broader framework of *publicized* debate in America, even if, or especially if, it’s made by an import. Born in Portsmouth, England and educated at Balliol College, Oxford, where he received a

¹ Cited in Richard Posner, *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 167.

² Fredric Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” *Social Text* (Autumn 1986), 74.

³ Taken from Rhys Southan, “Free Radical: An Interview with Christopher Hitchens,” *Reason* (November 2001): <http://reason.com/0111/fe.rs.free.shtml>.

degree in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics, Hitchens worked until 1981 for the *London Times*, the *New Statesman*, the *Evening Standard*, and the *Daily Express*. In 1981, he emigrated to New York and, later, Washington D.C., where he now resides. From 1982 to 2002, Hitchens wrote the “Minority Report” column for *The Nation*, and today writes the “Fighting Words” column for *Slate.com*. He is also a contributing editor to *The Atlantic* and *Vanity Fair*. Along with his innumerable television and radio appearances over the years, he has been a visiting professor at the University of California, Berkeley, the University of Pittsburgh, and the New School of Social Research. Presently he also contributes, among others, to *The Daily Mirror*, *Critical Quarterly*, *Foreign Policy*, *Free Inquiry*, *Granta*, *Grand Street*, *The London Review of Books*, *Harper’s*, *The Los Angeles Times Book Review*, *New Left Review*, *Newsweek International*, *The New York Observer*, *The New York Review of Books*, *Dissent*, *The Weekly Standard*, and *The Washington Post*.

Aside from being prolific and seemingly omnipresent, Hitchens has worked to bill himself as a known quantity: as an advocate of atheism (he notoriously said the real “axis of evil” is “Christianity, Judaism, Islam”); of socialism (his sympathies are decidedly leftist); and of contrarianism (one need only scan his output to glean the importance he places upon “opposition”).⁴ Of the many things Hitchens has been

⁴ Even a sample of his book titles—along with his “Minority Report” and “Fighting Words” columns—show how Hitchens has staked his career on “opposition”: *A Long Short War: The Postponed Liberation of Iraq* (New York: Plume Books, 2003); *Why Orwell Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); *Letters to a Young Contrarian* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); *The Trials of Henry Kissinger* (London: Verso, 2001); *Unacknowledged Legislation: Writers in the Public Sphere* (London: Verso, 2000); *No One Left To Lie To: The Triangulations of William Jefferson Clinton* (London: Verso, 1999); *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* (London: Verso, 1995); *For the Sake of Argument: Essays & Minority Reports* (London: Verso,

called—and there is no shortage of epithets or compliments—one of the most consistent is a “public intellectual.”⁵ Whether the term is thought apposite or wildly inaccurate (Hitchens is by trade a print journalist), it demands investigation—not only as a way to grasp his work but also as an opportunity to conceptualize the problems and possibilities inherent in the term itself. From understanding what “public” the intellectual serves and how to balance public persona concerns against intellectual concerns (with respect to the foregoing epigraph), the recent currency of the term “public intellectual” represents a major moment in the history of American intellectual self-definition and self-reflection. What’s at issue in the “public intellectual,” I want to argue, is a conflict between the professionalization of knowledge and how that knowledge is produced and controlled within the centrifugal cultural dynamics of an outwardly expanding intellectual labor market.

This essay, then, is an attempt (while certainly not exhaustive) to interrogate and to chronicle literature that has addressed the *public intellectual*, and develop it further. Animated by the desire to salvage the public intellectual from bargain-bin oblivion, this essay seeks to situate Hitchens—as a public figure, a working “public intellectual,” and an exemplary case study—among the complexity of issues he

1993); *Blood, Class and Nostalgia: Anglo-American Ironies* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990). The quotation is taken from Christopher Hitchens, “You ask the questions,” *The Independent* (6 March 2002): <http://news.independent.co.uk/people/profiles/story.jsp?story=271283>.

⁵ His behavior and distinctive tone have generated enough ire (from conservatives and liberals alike) to constitute a subculture in its own right. His departure from *The Nation*, in particular, caused a volume of liberal outrage. See <http://www.counterpunch.org/mccarthy1022.html>: “Letter to a Lying, Self-serving, Fat-assed, Chain-smoking, Drunken, Opportunistic, Cynical Contrarian (AKA C. Hitchens).” Excepting “lying,” however, Hitchens would probably disagree with none of the charges.

(implicitly) has raised: if public intellectuals even exist and, if so, where they come from; if “public intellectuals” now constitute their own marketplace, susceptible to commodification and the vicissitudes of celebrity culture; and what it means to be “oppositional,” both to what and for whom. This essay should be read as part of a process of characterizing the contours of public-intellectual work. In short, it aims for a developing dialogue rather than a definitive delivery; it treats the public intellectual less as a diagnostic description than as a site of continuing contention.

Context and its Discontents

Although the term “public intellectual” is of recent vintage—it wasn’t officially christened until the late 1980s—historians and theorists have long grappled with what intellectuals are, where they operate, and what they should do with their time.⁶ In 1837, for example, Ralph Waldo Emerson famously delivered “The American Scholar” to a captive audience at Cambridge, where he outlined the “office of the scholar” whose duties were “to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances.” The scholar’s function, said Emerson, “is to resist the vulgar prosperity that retrogrades ever to barbarism, by preserving and communicating

⁶ The amount of literature on these topics is miles wide and fathoms deep, encompassing everything from Michel Foucault’s “specific” and Jean-Paul Sartre’s *engagé* intellectuals to the ink devoted to the nineteenth-century Russian *intelligentsia* and the Enlightenment example of Benjamin Franklin. For recent introductions to the subject, see Ron Eyerman, *Between Culture and Politics: Intellectuals in Modern Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994) and Bruce Robbins, ed., *Intellectuals: Aesthetics, Politics, Academics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), especially Stanley Aronowitz’s “On Intellectuals,” 3-56. To understand historically what “intellectual” may *not* mean, see Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962).

heroic sentiments, noble biographies, melodious verse, and the conclusions of history.” As for the scholar’s lifestyle, Emerson urged him to be “free and brave. Free even to the definition of freedom, ‘without any hindrance that does not arise out of his own constitution.’”⁷ In a somewhat more ecumenical vein, the Italian Antonio Gramsci argued that “each man ... carries on some form of intellectual activity, that is, he is a ‘philosopher,’ an artist, a man of taste, he participates in a particular conception of the world.” Thus Gramsci concluded that “all men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals.” From there he distinguished between “traditional” intellectuals, who serve “the immediate social function of the professional category of the intellectuals,” and “organic” intellectuals, who shape and direct the class constituency to which they belong. Gramsci’s “organic” intellectuals, unlike the traditional sort, are not necessarily “given by the man of letters, the philosopher, the artist.”⁸ They might, for instance, be factory workers who organize a union. For his part, the British cultural critic Raymond Williams embodied intellectual praxis, acting as an agent over his long career, in his own words, “to make learning part of the process of social change itself.”⁹

Given the three previous formulations, juxtaposed as much for their dissimilar authors as for their similar approaches, “public intellectual” would appear to be a lead-pipe tautology. Discourses concerning intellectual endeavor have always incorporated

⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Essays, Lectures and Poems*, ed. Robert D. Richardson, Jr. (New York: Bantam, 1990), 92-94.

⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 9.

⁹ Raymond Williams, “Adult Education and Social Change,” in *What I Came To Say* (London: Hutchinson-Radius, 1989), 158. For a representative overview of his work, see *The Raymond Williams Reader*, ed. John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001).

considerations of the public and how to effect change in it. Indeed, as John Patrick Diggins has written, one can look back—starting with the Founding Fathers—to find that the “role of intellectual as a public figure has far deeper roots in American history, so much so that one might suggest that in the beginning American history and the American mind were inseparable.”¹⁰ Yet the rise of the modern university in the twentieth century, coupled with the increase and variety of media outlets, have conspired to create a wholly different grouping to intellectual work.¹¹ What “public intellectual” does signal—and the reason it has picked up colloquial currency over the last decade—is a tension in how intellectuals produce, acquire, and communicate with audiences. In fact, the very genesis of the term presumes that today’s intellectuals—those, to take the jaundiced view, of cloistered academia—have somehow abandoned the public. Interestingly, the “public intellectual” has failed to

¹⁰ John Patrick Diggins, “The Changing Role of the Public Intellectual in American History,” in *The Public Intellectual: Between Philosophy and Politics*, eds. Arthur M. Melzer, Jerry Weinberger, M. Richard Zinman, M. Richard (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 92.

¹¹ The rate at which the university expanded and then diversified is indeed startling. As Louis Menand explains in his essay, “The Marketplace of Ideas” (<http://www.acls.org/op49.htm>): “Between 1945 and 1975, the number of American undergraduates increased by almost five hundred percent and the number of graduate students increased by nearly nine hundred percent. In the 1960s alone enrollments more than doubled, from 3.5 million to just under 8 million; the number of doctorates awarded each year tripled; and more faculty were hired than had been hired in the entire 325-year history of American higher education to that point. At the height of the expansion, between 1965 and 1972, new community college campuses were opening in the United States at the rate of one every week.” As for today’s media environment, especially over the last ten years, see David Foster Wallace, “Host,” *The Atlantic* (April 2005), 54: “Never before have there been so many different national news sources—different now in both terms of medium and ideology. Major newspapers from anywhere are available online; there are the broadcast networks plus public TV, cable’s CNN, Fox News, CNBC, et al., print and Web magazines, Internet bulletin boards, *The Daily Show*, e-mail newsletters, blogs. All this is well known; it’s part of the Media Environment we live in.”

make an impression in Britain, France or other European countries.¹² As a particularly American concept, Helen Small has said, “it reflects a predominantly American anxiety about the viability of what may be called ‘the profession of thought’—a concern that, in a society often thought of as peculiarly hostile to intellectual life, most of those who might be expected to take responsibility for its cultivation seem, now in the twenty-first century, to have withdrawn altogether from the public arena To speak of the public intellectual would appear to be a defensive manifestation of that self-consciousness: a deliberate decision to assert, in the face of perceived opposition, not just the continuing serviceability of the word ‘intellectual,’ but to protest (too much) that those to whom it is applicable, including perhaps oneself, have a role to play in public life.”¹³

Nowhere was that anxiety more apparent than in January 2001, when *The Nation* hosted a panel discussion in New York portentously titled “The Future of the Public Intellectual.”¹⁴ The moderator of the forum, John Donatich, also the publisher of Basic Books, prefaced the roundtable discussion with a battery of questions, some astride generations-old black holes but most germane to pinpointing what a “public intellectual” is:

How does [the public intellectual] reconcile itself with the venerable tradition of American anti-intellectualism? What does a country built on headstrong individualism and the myth of self-reliance do with its people convinced that they know best? How do we reconcile ambition and virtue, expertise and accessibility, multicultural sensitivity and the urge toward unified theory? Most important,

¹² See “Introduction” in *The Public Intellectual*, ed. Helen Small (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁴ The participants were: John Donatich; Russell Jacoby; Jean Bethke Elshtain; Stephen Carter; Herbert Gans; Steven Johnson; and Christopher Hitchens.

how do we reconcile the fact that disagreement is a main catalyst of progress? How do we battle the gravitation toward happy consensus that paralyzes our national debate? A new generation of public intellectuals waits to be mobilized. What will it look like?¹⁵

Those questions, while panoptic in their focus, are especially remarkable, for they try, among other things, to picture a future for something that's never really had a stable past. What past the "public intellectual"—loaded with hushed reverence, larded with puffed-up nostalgia—has enjoyed from books and articles has mostly been premised on what I'd like to call the Doberman Directive: the vague expectation that the public intellectual marks his or her territory as does a doberman on a leash—that is, as often and as widely as it can. I use the Doberman Directive neologism to articulate how public-intellectual discourse has avoided explicating its own phenomenon. Very little has been done to limn the characteristics of the public intellectual, besides quasi-Romantic notions of solitude (or at least without institutional affiliation or support) and madness (in the sense of prolific output) that usually elide over socio-economic factors, educational background, or ideas as fundamental as intention and self-promotion. In 1990, for instance, Thomas P. Hughes and Agatha C. Hughes edited a tome adorned with the title, *Lewis Mumford: Public Intellectual*. In March 1995, the *Yale Law Journal* ran a lengthy essay on Argentinean freedom-fighter Carlos Santiago Nino, headlined "The Death of a Public Intellectual." On June 29, 1998, *The Nation* wrote a brief article entitled "Kazin: public intellectual," on the death

¹⁵ From transcript of panel discussion provided by *The Nation* (12 February 2001): <http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20010212&c=1&s=forum>.

of Alfred Kazin, who was, we are told, “the very model of a public intellectual.” But we are never told exactly *why* these individuals were, or how they became, “public intellectuals”; instead, the term is employed through slogan and catchphrase—writing “accessible” prose, constrained by nothing, and sanctioned by constantly declaimed independence—to lionize their deceased subjects. It is the rather abstract and ill-defined nature of the Doberman Directive that has led Joseph Epstein to remark that he “cannot recall when I first heard or read the term ‘public intellectual,’ but I do recall disliking it straightway.”¹⁶

One finds the Doberman Directive latent if not explicit in much of the public-intellectual discourse today. Cornel West, for example, in the widely read *The Future of Race*, polishes this nugget, half-defensively and half-promotionally:

The fundamental role of the public intellectual—distinct from, yet building on, the indispensable work of academics, experts, analysts, and pundits—is to create and sustain high-quality public discourse addressing urgent public problems which enlightens and energizes fellow citizens, prompting them to take public action. This role requires a deep commitment to the life of the mind ... Intellectual and political leadership is neither elitist nor populist; rather it is democratic, in that each of us stands in a public space, without humiliation, to put forward our best visions and views for the sake of the public interest.¹⁷

While West (rightly) conflates the public intellectual with a quality of “leadership,” he does not indicate how such leadership can “create and sustain high-quality public discourse.” He does seem to premise that leadership on simply interacting with the public. Put alternatively, just by writing often for and communicating often with the “public,” one automatically “enlightens and energizes,” and thus becomes a “public” intellectual. West’s idealized public intellectual combines a wide circumference of

¹⁶ Joseph Epstein, “Intellectuals—Public and Otherwise,” *Commentary* (May 2000).

¹⁷ Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Future of the Race* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 71.

knowledge and a frequency of public interaction to spotlight important or neglected issues so the “public interest” may take “public action” (these two constructs of which later sections will address).

It is fair to say that West’s apologia—and those like his—amounts to an overdetermined occupation whose very *seriousness* of task manifestly hopes to fell what doubts anxiety has left standing. What West expects of public intellectuals would seem to put them at risk of collapsing under the weight of their own aspirations. Such an expectation-laden occupation may help explain why the concept of the “public intellectual” was born out of crisis—it was, from the start, exalted inversely to the degree that its decline was lamented—and why constant crisis has attended its development ever since. Here I want to map out some of the central historical and theoretical underpinnings concerning the public intellectual, and then apply those presumptions and preoccupations to Hitchens himself.

Like a Drawbridge Over the Public Moat?

Though it’s difficult to pin down the first utterance of the term, we can identify the point after which it circulated widely. In 1987, Russell Jacoby introduced the notion of the “public intellectual” in *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*. In those pages, Jacoby identifies what he sees as a singular phenomenon of “last intellectuals” before the 1960s, treating the rise of the modern university system in the last half of the twentieth century as the crucible during which

some intellectuals became “public” and others, by comparison, private.¹⁸ Jacoby outlines the public intellectual as “an incorrigibly independent soul answering to no one” who “contributes to public discussion” and is committed “not simply to a professional or private domain but to a public world—and a public language, the vernacular.”¹⁹ It was, then, Jacoby who originated the Doberman Directive, and fitting his mold were scholars—whom I will label collectively the Old Public Intellectuals—like Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling, Irving Howe, C. Wright Mills, Alfred Kazin, Daniel Bell, and Lewis Mumford. They were nearly all bohemians, as Jacoby relates, living in pre-gentrified Greenwich Village during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, moving like sharks from topic to topic, periodical to periodical, without academic affiliation. They were, to Jacoby, self-sustaining and self-serving. They were independent contractors attentive to the pulse of America.

¹⁸ For additional books on this era, see Steven Biel, *Independent Intellectuals in the United States, 1910-1945* (New York: New York University Press, 1992); Harvey M. Teres, *Renewing the Left: Politics, Imagination, and the New York Intellectuals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America 1889-1963: The Intellectual As a Social Type* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997); and Hilton Kramer, *The Twilight of the Intellectuals: Culture and Politics in the Era of the Cold War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999).

¹⁹ Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 235; hereafter cited in the text. Jacoby’s tone and definitional parameters have changed little since that publication. See also *Dogmatic Wisdom: How the Culture Wars Divert Education and Distract America* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), especially “Journalists, Cynics and Cheerleaders,” 160-191 and *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), especially “Intellectuals: From Utopia to Myopia,” 101-124. For a similar, Jacoby-inflected analysis, see Eugene Goodheart, *The Reign of Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), especially “The Abandoned Legacy of the New York Intellectuals,” 82-98. For the flip side—how cultural politics have since affected the university system—see Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).

Taking Karl Mannheim's idea of the "free-floating" intellectual quite literally, Jacoby rhapsodizes about that era (and the *luftmenschen* of old) in a neat encapsulation of generational exceptionalism, as though giants once walked the Earth. Since the 1960s, however, Jacoby claims that those cultural omnivores have been suckered by universities, intoxicated by tenures, and seduced by specialization. In a nutshell, Jacoby bends academia-at-large over his knee:

[T]he habitat, manners, and idiom of intellectuals have been transformed within the past fifty years. Younger intellectuals no longer need or want a larger public; they are almost exclusively professors. Campuses are their home; colleagues their audience; monographs and specialized journals their media. Unlike past intellectuals they situate themselves within fields and disciplines—for good reason. Their jobs, advancement, and salaries depend on the evaluation of specialists and this dependence affects the issues broached and the language employed (6).

Essentially, university life created a vacuum in which all the public intellectuals have since been placed: "The generation born around and after 1940 emerged in a society where the identity of universities and intellectual life was almost complete. The missing intellectuals are lost in the universities" (16). Again and again, Jacoby returns to this type of "missing intellectual" who "sought and prized a spare prose" and wrote for a "public world" (7). Here Edmund Wilson and Lewis Mumford most closely approximate Jacoby's view of the ideal public intellectual, unaffiliated with the university; later "fifties intellectuals" like Lionel Trilling and C. Wright Mills, although they were professors at Columbia University, were still "publicists: they wrote to and for the educated public" (26).

The real concern of Jacoby's study, then, is that intellectuals write "to and for the educated public," whether equipped with university positions or not. Invented only

in contradistinction to the “private” intellectual of academia, the “public intellectual” implies that *all* intellectual endeavor until the expansion of higher education functioned successfully, in the words of Jacoby himself, to “address a general and educated audience” with “graceful prose” and “elegant and accessible essays directed toward the wider intellectual community” (5, 17). The increasing danger to Jacoby is a majority of “college teachers who lived conventional lives and thought conventional thoughts” (73). Only with great difficulty could we compare the efficacy and frequency of public interaction between Jacoby’s roving, pre-academicized intellectual with those “conventional” college teachers who cooped up in colleges during the 1960s. Thus the university emerges as a confounding factor for Jacoby. On the one hand, it becomes the marker for intellectual endeavor and, in doing so, absorbs his prior generations of public intellectuals. On the other hand, as Jacoby even concedes, the “newly opened and enlarged colleges allowed, if not compelled, intellectuals to desert a precarious existence for stable careers. They exchanged the pressures of deadlines and free-lance writing for the security of salaried teaching and pensions” (14). Indeed, given the “industrial development and urban blight” that gentrified Greenwich Village and contributed to the general decline of the bohemia that sheltered Jacoby’s public intellectuals through the 1950s, the conditions which accompanied the post-World War II expansion of higher education all but demanded the “stable careers” of university life (7). And the place for the “incorrigibly independent soul” who “contributes to public discussion” was no longer available as universities,

corporations and governments specialized and academicized (creating more “stable” locations to fill) the frontier of knowledge.

One cannot argue with the basics of Jacoby’s history. It is true that the university, in a sense, kidnapped the “last intellectuals” Jacoby so exalts. But his evidence is cumulative rather than substantiative: the Doberman Directive pathologizes the ills of academia while not recognizing its own built-in nostalgia of a bygone era. This nostalgia has blinded Jacoby to several important realities. The most salient is that the Old Public Intellectuals were dependent on a particular social and economic geography that, once dismantled by the growth of a university-state complex, could not support “independent” intellectuals any more. The second is that, as Andrew Ross has remarked, the academy constitutes “a massive public sphere in itself, involving millions of people in this country alone, and so the idea that you break out of the academy in the public is rather a nonsense.”²⁰ And the third is that, despite Jacoby’s visceral fear of the university, all of the intellectuals he names in his study were educated and trained at universities: while the university may absorb public-intellectual endeavor, it is also crucial to the production of public intellectuals.

Part of the problem in evaluating whether public intellectuals still exist—Jacoby would say they’re deader than disco—is that there is no real process of accreditation and certification. Before the expansion of higher education, of course, the importance of diplomas and institutional recognition mattered much less as a point of intellectual signification. If, like Edmund Wilson, one wrote frequently on an array

²⁰ Cited in Stanley Fish, *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 117.

of subjects, then one could be considered, absent any other outside laurels, a public intellectual (even if institutional recognition was *initially* needed for entry into public intellectualland). There was no axis of difference between “intellectual” and “public intellectual”—every writer was, in a sense, “public.” How one “becomes” a public intellectual has never been codified insofar as operating outside the academy and writing often for different publications—in essence, the Doberman Directive—have acted as markers of a public intellect. As Alan Wolfe writes in *An Intellectual in Public*, his quasi-autobiography of 2003, “in the years in which [Wolfe was] an intellectual in public—from the 1960s to the present—there have not been many models to follow. During those years, the academic world engaged itself in forms of professionalism so strictly defined that little room remained for those willing and able to reach a larger audience with their view.” Moreover, the fact that Wolfe solicited mass-circulating magazines for his output—mostly book reviews—rather than the “scholarly journals” of cloistered academia anoints him *de facto* an “intellectual in public.” Lest one, however, want to follow Wolfe’s well-hewn path, we are warned, by book’s conclusion, that “there can be no guidebook on how to become an intellectual in public. There can be only the desire to make sense out of the world one issue at a time.”²¹

If the problem then resides in a professional “guidebook,” one might turn to Florida Atlantic University’s recently established “doctoral program for public intellectuals.” The program—otherwise named “the Ph.D. in Comparative

²¹ Alan Wolfe, *An Intellectual in Public* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 1-3 and 380.

Studies”—splits into two: the Public Intellectuals Program and the Program in Literatures, Literacies & Linguistics. The goal of the former, according to its website, is “to combine theoretical with concrete analysis, preparing students who are theoretically confident and knowledgeable about the world they hope to understand ... and change.” The areas of pedagogic inquiry—everything including “public policy, mass media, literature, aesthetics, ethics, gender, culture and rhetoric,” and then some—is avowedly interdisciplinary, but with a twist: it seeks to goose with a broad social imperative students “whose work defines, shapes and influences public issues.”²² In offering a “unique focus,” according to Dr. Teresa Brennan, the lead designer of the program, the probative value here is less a *vade mecum* for public intellectuals than a gesture toward a specialization of function apart from, yet attentive to, other forms of intellectual labor like rote analysis or purebred punditry. So too does the “unique focus” gesture toward a “change,” which, while nebulous in meaning, is far removed from Jacoby’s Old Public Intellectuals, whose importance wasn’t so much in serving or affecting the public (since it was already “educated”) as it was in their ability to serve themselves without any entangling alliances. But as a move toward institutionalization never before afforded to such an historically marginalized and conceptually embryonic activity, Florida Atlantic’s degree begs some thorny questions. Can a university matriculate a profession—for that, it appears, is its objective—that has long, at least in Jacoby’s rendering, premised itself against

²² All information taken from <http://www.publicintellectuals.fau.edu>.

credentialized academia? If so, does that undermine if not neutralize the public intellectual's ability to define, shape and influence public issues?

To be sure, applying the academy's disciplinary structures and dimensions to the public intellectual is a conflicting proposition. The nostalgia embedded in Jacoby's study is allergic to such credentializing—the Doberman Directive has never had any method per se except to be perpetually “going public.” What Florida Atlantic's program does accomplish, if nothing else, is the creation and regulation of a profession united by common teaching and purpose. By offering a well-rounded education on a variety of topics that terminates with a degree, Florida Atlantic makes apparent that “public intellectuals” have always been united by a corpus of coursework which enabled their work in the first place. Contrary to Jacoby's potted history, the public intellectual was never an autodidact who sort of appeared out of the blue, like a moon rock on your front porch; he—and Jacoby's public intellectuals are all men—was trained by a university system that could find its modern-day counterpart in Florida Atlantic's. If Jacoby's indictment of the university system rests with its professional absorption of public intellectuals, one must see Florida Atlantic's program as attempting to produce public intellectuals with professional qualifications that would compensate for any reputed extinction. Indeed, as Ellen Willis has written, “the real question ... is not whether public intellectuals belong in the academy, or whether the univeristy can have a role in educating them, or whether they can contribute to the vitality of graduate study. All of these propositions are true. The real question that needs to be asked is: what role is the academy going to have in supporting the work of

public intellectuals?”²³ No more, then, can location be said to determine function: by which I mean the collegiate institution can either sterilize or it can fortify one’s ability to perform as a public intellectual.²⁴ That is a rule that has always provided many exceptions (beginning with Mills and Trilling), and it has invariably arrived at a location-driven either/or impasse (if you’re in the ivory tower, you languish; if you’re outside the moat, you thrive), all of which is deadly for intellectual theory and even worse for everyday discussion. The issue is, then, not a matter of establishing a drawbridge between the two. Rather, the issue is how to deploy public-intellectual work within social and cultural realities that demand a professionalized specialization, something which has initiated contention in its own right.

Packaged, Bow-tied, and Available for Comment

Since Jacoby’s post-mortem of public intellectuals, discussion has developed that not only presumes public intellectuals exist but that there is a discrete and identifiable *market* for them. In *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline*, Richard Posner argues for such a market composed mainly of “public academic intellectuals,” who have, by virtue of their day jobs at universities, muscled out the “independent”

²³ Ellen Willis, “Who Will Support the Intellectual’s Work?” *The Minnesota Review* (ns 50-51, 1999), 191.

²⁴ See Anthony Grafton, “The Public Intellectual and the American University,” *American Scholar* (Autumn 2001), 41-55.

intellectuals prominent in Jacoby's study.²⁵ Even so, Posner's idea of the public intellectual is one of redundancy:

[T]he intellectual writes for the general public, or at least for a broader than merely academic or specialist audience, on "public affairs"—on political matters in the broadest sense of the word, a sense that includes cultural matters when they are viewed under the aspect of ideology, ethics, or politics (which may all be the same thing). . . . The intellectual, so defined, *is* the public intellectual.²⁶

If we audit this statement, we find nothing so much as the Doberman Directive swaddled in personal concern for "public affairs." Even so, recognizing the political nature of public-intellectual work, Posner further says that "before there were universities in which serious intellectual work was done, and even later when universities were becoming important centers of the production of knowledge, no one would have thought to draw a distinction between public (with reference to audience) and nonpublic intellectual endeavor" (27).

And yet, Posner argues, a market has been created for them. The demand, according to Posner, comes from population and governmental growth, extended schooling for the average American, and "the vast expansion of the electronic media, and in particular in the number of radio and television talk shows, with their insatiable demand for expert commentary on matters of public concern" (26). This is the domain of infotainment including programs like *The Charlie Rose Show* and Ted Koppel's *Nightline* as well as public radio and magazines like *The New Republic* and *The New Yorker*. This market—"derived from the demand of the educated general public for

²⁵ More than being fortified with academic positions, some colleges have actively urged—if not demanded—that professors market themselves to gain visibility for their respective school. See, for example, G. Jeffrey MacDonald, "Colleges push professors into media spotlight," *The Christian Science Monitor* (25 June 2004): <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0625/p11s01-legn.html>.

²⁶ Posner, *Public Intellectuals*, 22-23; hereafter cited in the text.

intellectual information” and facilitated by the media—is “awash” in a steady supply of public intellectuals (67). The only shortage Posner sees is “of unaffiliated, and specifically of nonacademic, public intellectuals” (68). Measured by an alchemical combination of “media mentions, Web hits, and scholarly citations” (194) from 1995 to 2000, Posner’s market not only ranks the top 546 “public intellectuals,” but he breaks down the “media mentions” pack (Henry Kissinger edges out Daniel Patrick Moynihan with 12,570 “mentions”) as well as the “scholarly citations” group (here Michel Foucault wins in a landslide with 13,238) (209, 212).²⁷ He metes out demographical information, too, most notably an 84/16 percentage split between males and females.²⁸ Many of the listed “public intellectuals”—from Timothy Leary to H.L. Mencken—are deceased, and have been for quite some time.

Aside from imparting compiled statistical data, Posner’s main concern is explaining the “decline” in his subtitle—in this case, of quality. Though the “market is competitive in the superficial sense”—because of so much demand and supply—it operates “without any rules or norms, legal or customary ... and, unlike some other information markets, with little in the way of gatekeeping consumer intermediaries” (75, 76). But the “chief culprit” to the quality problem “is the modern university. Its rise has encouraged a professionalization and specialization of knowledge that, together with the comfortable career that the university offers to people of outstanding

²⁷ For good or ill, Hitchens is not numbered in either of the lists.

²⁸ Though beyond the scope of this essay, it would be worth exploring why there is such a large gender divide—and whether, in fact, it is true—and why, regardless of its factuality, the discourse surrounding the public intellectual is almost invariably put in masculine terms (see especially the later section, “‘Against Bullshit’: The Vocational Practices of Christopher Hitchens”) or else typically employs male case studies (this essay included).

intellectual ability, have shrunk the ranks of the ‘independent’ intellectual. That is the intellectual who, being unaffiliated with the university (or, today, a think tank)—an outsider to the academic community—can range broadly over matters of public concern unconstrained by the specialist’s attitude that a university career breeds” (388).²⁹ To Posner, then, the modern university has bred a cultural environment that has generated academics who become “public” intellectuals in the sense that they acquire celebrity through the media (which demands expertise and credentials), but has not generated—in fact, has sidelined—authentic “freebooters [who] range across different fields” (54). It is this kind of “freebooter”—here Posner discusses George Orwell for a chapter—who, without the constraints of “specialization and professionalization,” is most attuned to the “charismatic calling” of the public intellectual: “It isn’t primarily a matter of being intelligent and well informed and writing clearly, but of being able through force of rhetoric or the example of one’s life ... to make fresh, arresting, or heterodox ideas credible to the general, or at least the educated, public” (85). Armed with communication skills, an entertainment dimension, and authority, it is these charismatic public intellectuals—academic or not—who most successfully blend the “celebrity and commitment” required to gain and keep a public (46, 57).³⁰

²⁹ He continues: “Specialization of knowledge reduces the ability of academic intellectuals to speak clearly to general public issues, of nonacademic intellectuals to get a public hearing, and of the general educated public to understand arguments about public issues” (52).

³⁰ He continues: “Often one will read an article by a public intellectual not to acquire information on which to rely but to be entertained or amused or to be reassured about or reinforced in one’s opinions. To the ends of entertainment and solidarity the quality of the public intellectual’s ideas may be secondary to his ‘star’ quality or his rhetorical gifts” (52).

There is, to be sure, a particular strain of careerism here absent from Jacoby's idealized Old Public Intellectuals, who became public intellectuals almost by accident. Nonetheless, Posner's *Public Intellectuals* is a major signpost on the road of the public-intellectual debate. It recognizes a market that has integrated and valorized intellectual endeavor (creating experts and professions) within a culture that has, historically, ghettoized intellectuals in favor, to employ Neal Gabler's phrase, of a "republic of entertainment."³¹ Gathered from the afterclap of book-tour promotion or the aftertaste of stale talk-shows, Posner's market suggests something inevitably opportunistic but also culturally necessary. It suggests the idea of a talking-head sermonizer as surely as it suggests a benign commissar of opinions adjudicating for mass consumption. And the main job of the public intellectual—as if by punching in a time-card, lunch pail in tow—is to publicize and organize those opinions. Perhaps less introductory icebreaker than white-coated documentarian, the public intellectual's function, it would appear, is simply to attune us to the submerged parallels and intersections that exist between and among bodies of texts and forms of culture. Myths and symbols, historiography and biography, laws and figures—all are components of the same clean-shaven doctrine which stakes out social bugaboos and cultural hang-ups as the stuff of the intellectual's turf.

And yet, when Posner describes the "credence goods" of public intellectuals, he is not only describing arguments and ideas that demand authority (meaning academic credentials), but also the wholesale commodification of intellectual

³¹ See Neal Gabler, *Life: The Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

endeavor. Craving expert knowledge, the market Posner describes sustains intellectual labor by demanding specialized bursts of knowledge that (academic) intellectuals are more than happy to supply. Such commodification yields what Stanley Fish has called “cameo intellectuals”—there equated with academic intellectuals—who “will only get a call when the particular issues with which they are identified takes center-stage and should that issue lose its sexiness, their media careers will be over.”³² Here Fish (like Posner and Jacoby) maintains that fissure between the university and the public. Jacoby had originally fingered academia *in vitro* as the prime suspect for the decline of the public intellectual; Posner and Fish, under the auspices of Jacoby’s schematic, have since applied Economics 101: those with institutionalized positions will, every time, elbow away the freelancers. But whereas Jacoby considers “independence” a key component to the public-intellectual make-up, Posner has deemed “independence”—those “freebooters” like Orwell—irrelevant given the realities of what the market today demands, even if it means a decline in quality.

Nevertheless, Posner’s public intellectual “obtains an audience by engaging with some matter that has the public’s attention” (32). Similarly, Fish’s public intellectual “is the public’s intellectual; that is, he or she is someone to whom the public regularly looks for illumination on any number of (indeed all) issues.” The public intellectual is “not someone who takes as his or her subject matters of public concern—every law professor does that; a public intellectual is someone who takes as

³² Fish, *Professional Correctness*, 118.

his or her subject matters of public concern, and *has the public's attention*.”³³ This interpretive intercession by Fish is important, for it both clarifies the realities of public-intellectual endeavor (one must, in this sense, be a “public figure” as well as write on “matters of public concern”) and points to the occupational hazards that lurk therein.

How one then *gets* the “public’s attention”—by being a public figure or engaging a public issue, or both—is another issue altogether, and one that reveals the problems of Posner’s public-intellectual “market.” By not differentiating between dead and alive public intellectuals, Posner in fact hamstringing the public intellectual’s function to speak on “some matter that has the public’s attention”—which, more often than not, involves something current and pressing. While someone like Orwell can speak from the grave on matters of literature and culture (and serve as a model for aspiring public intellectuals), he can’t exactly explicate the necessary particulars—unless, that is, the Soviet Union spontaneously reforms. Even then, Orwell—who can hardly “want publicity both for its own sake and as advertising for [his] books and public lectures” (61)—would be trading on his status as a “public figure” far more than his intellectual ability to engage in such a matter. Likewise, Posner’s market fails to truly take into account intellectual commitment and credibility (“the example of one’s life”), two qualifications which variously trouble many of those ranked, including Kissinger and Ezra Pound (who’s also long deceased). In effect, then, Posner offers no lodestar for the intellectual except celebrity for

³³ *Ibid.*, 119.

celebrity's sake.³⁴ His study is really descriptive rather than prescriptive. Even so, it is probably fair to say at this point that *selling* oneself—promoting oneself in a way that establishes “publicness”—is unavoidable.³⁵ But how one acquires “publicness” and commands the “public’s attention” are both central to the very meaning of the public intellectual itself and questions to which I now turn.

Making Opposition Functional

In *No Respect: Intellectuals & Popular Culture*, Andrew Ross shows how intellectuals (counting many of Jacoby’s sacrosanct *luftmenschen*) have increasingly endeavored to monumentalize popular culture—the expressions and products of a mass society—as an important site of our social construction.³⁶ Their work explicitly freighted popular culture with the weight of revelatory enlightenment and expressly assented to an abiding faith in, and an enduring obligation to, the descriptive examination of mass phenomena. As a reaction (in part) to culture industry critiques of the Frankfurt School, popular culture studies was an approach both welcome and

³⁴ See also Michael Bérubé, “Going Public,” *The Washington Post* (7 July 2002): in response to Posner’s book and his economics of measured celebrity, Bérubé says sarcastically, “A public intellectual in 2002, apparently, is simply an intellectual who generates a lot of publicity.”

³⁵ See Jeffrey J. Williams, “Spin Doctorates: From Public Intellectuals to Publicist Intellectuals,” *The Village Voice* (7 November 1995).

³⁶ See also Thomas Molnar, *The Decline of the Intellectual* (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1961), 278: “While the intellectual is called upon to perform the function of mediation between the groups of the pluralistic society, he is also enjoined to justify the existing or emerging mass values. ... they are never denounced ultimately and irrevocably since they are signs and symbols of social cohesion, of the efficacy of the democratic machinery of education, press and mass communication.” See also George Lipsitz, “Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen: Popular Culture, Cultural Theory and American Studies,” in *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline*, ed. Lucy Maddox (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 310-334.

warranted. The intellectual scale of ambition adjusted to decode the terrain of mass culture, where concepts such as race, ethnicity, gender, and citizenship are constantly negotiated and in flux. In this environment, though, as Ross concedes either by way of ringing endorsement or resigned admission, it has obviated the need for “opposition”:

the mantle of opposition no longer rests upon the shoulders of an autonomous avant-garde: neither the elite metropolitan intellectuals who formed the traditional corpus of public tastemakers or opinion-makers; nor the romantic neo-bohemians who shaped the heroic Nietzschean image of the unattached dissenter, committed to the lonely articulation of social truths; nor the organic party cadres whom Lenin shaped after the model of the “professional revolutionary.”³⁷

By the end of his study, Ross has described intellectuals so progressively steeped in popular culture—having charted them from allies of the governmentally demonized Rosenbergs to the gatekeepers of camp and pornography—that their viability is contingent upon their engagement with—and, one might say, justification of—popular or mass culture. John Seabrook has otherwise called this “nobrow culture,” where commercial culture, rather than what intellectuals define themselves against, is a source of status and where cultural value constantly shifts under the halo of “buzz.”³⁸

In the context of public-intellectual work, such a “nobrow culture” highlights the competing importance scholars have placed upon “opposition”—to governments and institutions of power—as a *modus operandi* for cultural critique. Edward Said, for instance, has said that the public intellectual is “someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to

³⁷ Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 210.

³⁸ See John Seabrook, *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing, The Marketing of Culture* (New York: Vintage, 2001).

produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations.”³⁹ Michel Foucault has spoken of the intellectual’s role as “to question over and over again what is postulated as self-evident, to disturb people’s mental habits, the way they do and think things, to dissipate what is familiar and accepted, to reexamine rules and institutions.”⁴⁰ Noam Chomsky positions intellectuals “to expose the lies of government, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions For a privileged minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities and the training to seek the truth lying hidden beneath the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology, and class interest through which events of current history are presented to us.”⁴¹ And Carl Boggs has sussed out the *critical* intellectual, who is oppositional in “a counterhegemonic subversion of dominant belief systems; the struggle for occupational autonomy and control of the workplace; a critique of specific institutional practices and policies; rebellion against the norms and routines of daily life; and the affirmation of new visions for the future.”⁴²

In essence, each of the above approaches don’t *engage* the “public” as much as they defiantly *oppose* it. The reasoning here speaks to a larger representational crisis—how to advocate and for whom to advocate—in the public-intellectual debate, all of which we can center around the notion of the “public sphere” as articulated by

³⁹ Cited in Posner, *Public Intellectuals*, 30.

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, “The Concern for Truth,” in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988), 255.

⁴¹ Noam Chomsky, *American Power and The New Mandarins* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 324.

⁴² Carl Boggs, *Intellectuals and the Crisis of Modernity* (New York: State University Press of New York, 1993), 162. See also Carl Boggs, *The End of Politics: Corporate Power and the Decline of the Public Sphere* (New York: Guilford Press, 2000).

Jürgen Habermas.⁴³ Defined as a sort of liminal space, the “public sphere”—“the sphere of private people come together as a public”—has since the eighteenth century been eroded and reduced to “administered” conversation of “professional dialogues”: “rational debate of private people becomes one of the production numbers Discussion, now a business, becomes formalized.”⁴⁴ For Habermas, the mass media—television, radio, print, now the Internet—has not only supplanted our need (and desire) to chew the critical fat (by presenting a salonish mock-up), it has also boiled down the pool of available topics to crusty chestnuts. Rather than seeing mass culture as participatory and multivalent, Habermas views it as repressive, an “impersonal indulgence in stimulating relaxation than to a public use of reason.”⁴⁵ In other words, mass culture—at least in matters of public policy—tends to loop the same story, sanitizing public opinion and marginalizing if not removing the disruptive arguments of intellectuals. As Boggs writes, this is precisely where “in a social order that dwells upon surface appearances and routinely depoliticizes public discourse, radical insurgency [of critical intellectuals] is forced not only to articulate counterhegemonic themes and possibilities but also to penetrate the dense world of

⁴³ For criticisms and elaborations of Habermas, see Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1992), especially Michael Shudson, “Was There Ever a Public Sphere? If so, When? Reflections on the American Case,” 143-163 and Michael Warner, “The Mass Subject and the Mass Subject,” 377-401. See also Bruce Robbins, ed., *The Phantom Public Sphere* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), especially Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” 1-32 and Stanley Aronowitz, “Is a Democracy Possible? The Decline of the Public in the American Debate,” 75-92.

⁴⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991), 27, 164.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

media manipulation. The time-honored purpose of critical intellectual activity is to challenge, probe, confront and disrupt—that is, to constitute a vital ideological counterforce to the power structure.”⁴⁶

This conception of the public sphere—where the media and the government collude to dispossess the “public” of political discourse and informed decision-making capabilities—creates what Walter Lippmann has otherwise called (if a little approvingly) “the phantom public.”⁴⁷ Where the public intellectual is thought to then stand—between public and power—is as a recuperative function of committed criticism. In this case, the critical capacity of a public intellectual is directed in the service of issues that most affect the public: the “power structures” that set policy. As an index of public-intellectual work, such an oppositional stance has also thawed the posterity enjoyed by the Old Public Intellectuals. As Michael Bérubé has argued in his essay “Cultural Criticism and the Politics of Selling Out,” they might just be considered plaster saints at best and negligent custodians at worst:

I want also to introduce into our discussions of the “public intellectual” the overdue recognition that the New York intellectuals were often the worst kind of armchair quarterbacks and fence-sitters, “activists” whose only activism consisted of essays in *Dissent* or *Partisan Review*. Time and again, when crucial social issues were on the table, the New Yorkers elected to pass: and when it came to taking stands on the Vietnam War, on school desegregation and decentralization, on the Women’s Movement, many of the so-called public intellectuals of the 1950s and 1960s compiled a deplorable record. (*The New York Review of Books*, for instance, largely opposed the women's movement but was a strong antiwar voice; Irving Howe, meanwhile, declined to oppose the war at all.)⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Boggs, *Intellectuals and the Crisis of Modernity*, 182.

⁴⁷ See Walter Lippman, *The Phantom Public* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1999) and *Public Opinion* (New York: The Free Press, 1965).

⁴⁸ Michael Bérubé, “Cultural Criticism and the Politics of Selling,” *Electronic Book Review* (19 September 2003): www.electronicbookreview.com/v3/servlet/ebr?command=view_essay&ess

The idea that Bérubé pinpoints here is something beyond the Doberman Directive. It requires not only frequent “public” interaction—writing often in magazines, journals, and books (all of which most public intellectuals do)—but also an active oppositional stance in pressing issues of the moment. This idea moves beyond Alan Wolfe’s book reviews and particularizes Cornel West’s notion of “addressing urgent public problems which enlightens and energizes fellow citizens.” The assumption here, I think, is that by indexing bytes of information and strands of thought, intellection is somehow spun into the episodic action which attends tangible change—change, in some measured form, being the end-game of any public-intellectual enterprise.

And yet, as Stuart Hall has noted, “there is all the difference in the world between understanding the politics of intellectual work and substituting intellectual work for politics.”⁴⁹ Put another way, to be an oppositional public intellectual does not necessarily effect, much less resolve, knotted political problems. What we can say about “oppositional thinking” is that its approach relies just as much on effort as principle—that, given the public platform of celebrity, it behooves intellectuals to intervene oppositionally as much as possible (rather than, say, offer expertise on pornography). And by taking for granted that “public opinion” is either completely wrong or inexorably manipulated, opposition not only guarantees the public

[ay_id=berubece](#). In a different form, this essay was also the keynote address at a conference on “Western Humanities, Pedagogy, and the Public Sphere,” for the Fourth Annual Cultural Studies Symposium at Kansas State University during March 9-11, 1995.

⁴⁹ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies,” in *Cultural Studies*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 286.

intellectual continued “publicity” (by deviating from the norm) but it also attempts, in its own way, to reinvigorate the public by opposing its opinion (which, as I’ve discussed, is really a composite of conventional wisdom and status quoism that is ritualized and perpetuated by the mass media). It is in this respect public-intellectual work hopes to have broad political effect by trying to generate a sense of a public community.

We must also consider this issue of “opposition” as centering the very particular kind of intellectual labor that “public intellectuals” are seen to provide. Lionel Trilling famously put forward the notion of an “adversarial culture,” where intellectuals operate as almost a separate critical stratum set against the cultural norms of society.⁵⁰ In *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class*, Alvin Gouldner further developed this notion, in which professionalized critics inhabit a “New Class as the paradigm of virtuous and legitimate authority, performing with technical skill and with dedicated concern for society-at-large.”⁵¹ This is a world run by experts and technocrats, who bear transformative values that will create what Gouldner calls elsewhere a “culture of critical discourse.”⁵² In this way, intellectuals become professionalized because knowledge becomes professionalized. The problem—or advantage—with the New Class, as other scholars have remarked, is that it entails a kind of embourgeoisement of cultural capital that institutionalizes

⁵⁰ See “Preface” to Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1965).

⁵¹ Alvin Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class* (New York: Continuum, 1979), 19.

⁵² Alvin Gouldner, *Against Fragmentation: The Origins of Marxism and the Sociology of Intellectuals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 30.

knowledge as power.⁵³ Here professionalized critics, who have historically operated on the periphery of American culture, are installed as a class of moral oversight and virtuous arbitration. By comparison, the importance placed upon opposition clearly strives to resist being consolidated into the structures (and strictures) of power, and it also explains the reluctance (starting with Jacoby) to professionalize the role of the public intellectual. Without professionalized duties, the public intellectual can escape a sort of ontological status—and a specialization of knowledge—that could pigeonhole its function.

Even still, the issue of “opposition” reveals how crucial professionalization has always been to public-intellectual work. While the decline in quantity and quality variously described by Jacoby and Posner has been blamed on university politics or economic markets, one might instead attribute those declines to a lack of a professional apparatus that would prioritize the public intellectual’s function. To separate and focus an *oppositional* function would mean, in a sense, to professionalize the public intellectual. In doing so, the public intellectual would be professionalized more by a specialization of function than a specialization of knowledge. Of course this oppositional function would involve celebrity status, but the celebrity would be an appendage to that professional obligation of opposition. It would also, at the same time, resist the institutional problem of the New Class by decentralizing opposition,

⁵³ See, for example, Alain G. Gagnon, “The Role of Intellectuals in Liberal Democracies: Political Influence and Social Involvement,” in *Intellectuals in Liberal Democracies: Political Influence and Social Involvement*, ed. Alain G. Gagnon (New York: Praeger, 1987), 8-11.

not consolidating expertise, within the public sphere, thus ensuring vigorous public debate that may prompt action.

“Against Bullshit”: The Vocational Practices of Christopher Hitchens

As a public figure and working journalist, Hitchens complicates many of the presumptions and preoccupations of the public-intellectual debate. For one thing, he’s independent—that is, he freelances for many different publications, operates outside the academy very much like Edmund Wilson or Irving Howe and thus fulfills the basic demands of the Doberman Directive. The architecture of Hitchens’s career, though he was educated at a university, has never really included a university—while he certainly shows the educational background common to most public intellectuals, he has not used the university as an institution to support his work. On the surface, Hitchens at once disproves that independent intellectuals are extinct (according to Jacoby) and reaffirms that academic public intellectuals have cornered the public-intellectual market (according to Posner, Hitchens is among a dwindling breed). So too has Hitchens confirmed that even the “freebooters” are susceptible to the lures of the punditocracy (remember his vamping with Heston) and media celebrity culture: on the cover of *Letters to a Young Contrarian*, for example, Hitchens wears a trench coat and a bewhiskered scowl, while holding a cigarette as a puff of smoke corkscrews into the air. It is a book cover, after all, but the level of postured affectation bespeaks a sort of commodification—here, the book cover suggests, is someone bent on controversy

(or else shadowy Cold War-era espionage) to the exclusion of all else—one would expect only to befall “cameo intellectuals.”

Yet Hitchens has also gone to great lengths to define what qualities—both intellectual and temperamental—must attend public-intellectual work. In fact, the qualities Hitchens has introduced during his career represent one of the most significant interventions to the public-intellectual debate, both elaborating and problematizing the evolution of such an (un)profession. Amidst what Seabrook had labeled “nobrow culture,” Hitchens has attempted to forge what I will call “vocational opposition” as a litmus test for the public intellectual.⁵⁴ To get a sense of what I mean by his “vocational opposition,” I first offer a long quotation by Hitchens taken from “The Future of the Public Intellectual” panel in New York:

I’ve increasingly become convinced that in order to be any kind of a public-intellectual commentator or combatant, one has to be unafraid of the charges of elitism. One has to have, actually, more and more contempt for public opinion and for the way in which it’s constructed and aggregated, and polled and played back and manufactured and manipulated. If only because all these processes are actually undertaken by the elite and leave us all, finally, voting in the passive voice and believing that we’re using our own opinions or concepts when in fact they have been imposed upon us.

....

Now, to “consider the alternatives” might be a definition of the critical mind or the alive intelligence. That’s what the alive intelligence and the critical mind exist to do: to consider, tease out and find alternatives. It’s a very striking fact about the current degeneration of language, that that very term, those very words are used in order to prevent, to negate, consideration of alternatives. So, be aware. Fight it every day, when you read gunk in the paper, when you hear it from your professors, from your teachers, from your pundits. Develop that kind of resistance.

⁵⁴ I have derived the “vocational” part of this expression from Bruce Robbins, *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture* (London: Verso, 1993), whose explanation of a “secular vocation” is consonant with my meaning: “not an unearned sense of self-importance, not an unquestioned or unaccountable authority, but that part of professional discourse which appeals to (and helps refashion) public values in its effort to justify (and refashion) professional practice” (25).

....
 I think it would be a very sad thing if the word “intellectual” lost its sense that there was something basically malcontent, unsound and untrustworthy about the person who was claiming the high honor of the title. In politics, the public is the agora, not the academy. The public element is the struggle for opinion. It’s certainly not the party system or any other form whereby loyalty can be claimed of you or you can be conscripted.

...
 I would say that because the intellectual has some responsibility, so to speak, for those who have no voice, that a very high task to adopt now would be to set oneself and to attempt to set others, utterly and contemptuously and critically and furiously, against the now almost daily practice in the United States of human sacrifice. By which I mean, the sacrifice, the immolation of men and women on death row in the system of capital punishment. Something that has become an international as well as a national disgrace. Something that shames and besmirches the entire United States, something that is performed by the professionalized elite in the name of an assumed public opinion. In other words, something that melds the worst of elitism and the absolute foulest of populism.

People used to say, until quite recently, using the words of Jimmy Porter in *Look Back in Anger*, the play that gave us the patronizing term “angry young man”—well, “there are no good, brave causes anymore.” There’s nothing really worth witnessing or worth fighting for, or getting angry, or being boring, or being humorless about. I disagree and am quite ready to be angry and boring and humorless. These are exactly the sacrifices that I think ought to be exacted from oneself. Let nobody say there are no great tasks and high issues to be confronted. The real question will be whether we can spread the word so that arguments and debates like this need not be held just in settings like these but would be the common property of anyone with an inquiring mind. And then, we would be able to look at each other and ourselves and say, “Well, then perhaps the intellectual is no longer an elitist.”⁵⁵

Here Hitchens calls attention to several issues that contrast sharply with previous conceptualizations of the public intellectual given by Posner, West, and Jacoby. Where Posner’s market features many dead “public intellectuals,” Hitchens shows that concept to be oxymoronic. The “great tasks” for Hitchens are always *present* ones that require, quite literally, an “alive intelligence.” And whereas “opposition” figures nominally for West and Jacoby (“leadership” could be opposition for West; as for Jacoby, the word “opposition” hardly appears in *The Last*

⁵⁵ Christopher Hitchens, “The Future of the Public Intellectual,” *The Nation*.

Intellectuals), Hitchens foregrounds his conception of the public intellectual with opposition (to “set oneself and to attempt to set others, utterly and contemptuously and critically and furiously”) and with vocation (to speak “for those who have no voice” as “the sacrifices that I think ought to be exacted from oneself”). This is where Hitchens complicates the matter of opposition by showing it to be more a temperamental prerequisite than a professional attribute. In an interview, for example, Hitchens said that “the oppositional character, I am certain, is innate in some people. I’m not sure if it’s innate originally in all people and only manifest in some; I couldn’t say. But I do know for certain that it was innate in me, and that I seem to have found going through life that I naturally meet other people who feel the same. It’s very difficult to explain, but you recognize the symptoms of a fellow sufferer when you encounter one.”⁵⁶ And in the dedication page of his hagiographic study, *Why Orwell Matters*, Hitchens tips his hat to the Soviet Union historian Robert Conquest, “premature anti-fascist, premature anti-Stalinist, poet and mentor, and founder of ‘the united front against bullshit’.”⁵⁷ In other words, while Florida Atlantic’s doctorate may gesture toward professional regulation by board-certified study, it cannot necessarily teach the “oppositional character”—very much an uncommodifiable quality—that directs the knowledge gained from that program. If opposition indicates public-intellectual work for Hitchens, it emerges as something that demands more than professionalization. It demands a vocation.

⁵⁶ Harry Kreisler, “A Dissenting Voice: A Conversation with Christopher Hitchens,” *Conversations with History* (Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley): <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/Elberg/Hitchens/hitchens-con2.html>.

⁵⁷ See Christopher Hitchens, *Why Orwell Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

Thus in Hitchens's world, elitism is contrarian, it is malcontent, and it is almost gladiatorial. It is, above all, oppositional to public opinion that is "constructed and aggregated, and polled and played back and manufactured and manipulated" by the "professionalized elite." This *attitudinal* elitism against the "professionalized elite"—here institutions of powers and the state—is more than mere criticism: it considers "opposition," again, less a professional qualification than a vocational bearing with long-term goals. As such, Hitchens acts *both* elitist and populist: by opposing "public opinion" formalized by the "professionalized elite," he hopes to invigorate the eroded public (sphere) and, as he said during the panel discussion, to "spread the word so that arguments and debates like this need not be held just in settings like these but would be the common property of anyone with an inquiring mind. And then, we would be able to look at each other and ourselves and say, 'Well, then perhaps the intellectual is no longer an elitist.'" (In the context of critic Christopher Lasch, Peter Augustine Lawler has called this "therapeutic elitism."⁵⁸) Thus the public intellectual demands a oppositional capacity, or an attitudinal elitism, to "public opinion" as well as a vocational commitment, or an aspirational populism, to under-represented "publics" like death-row inmates.

Three of Hitchens's major books demonstrate how he has applied his "oppositional character" to public opinion generated by the "professionalized elite."⁵⁹

⁵⁸ See Peter Augustine Lawler, "Moral Realism Versus Therapeutic Elitism: Christopher Lasch's Populist Defense of American Character," in *Postmodernism Rightly Understood: The Return to Realism in American Thought* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999), 157-178.

⁵⁹ As books involve more sustained criticisms, I have elected to use them as examples. There are, however, numerous articles that are similar in approach. See, for examples, Christopher Hitchens, "The Dalai Lama: His Material Highness," *Salon* (13 July 1998):

In his broadside of Mother Teresa in *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*, Hitchens judges “Mother Teresa’s reputation by her actions and words rather than the actions and words by her reputation.”⁶⁰ He argues that Mother Teresa is “a religious fundamentalist, a political operative, a primitive sermonizer, and an accomplice of worldly secular powers,” as well as “the emissary of a very determined and very politicized papacy” (56). According to the Hitchens, she treats the poor not so much as people in need but as the instruments of her work in “a fundamentalist religious campaign” and “on occasion for piety” (41). He continues: “The decision not to [fund a proper hospital], and to run instead a haphazard and cranky institution which would expose itself to litigation and protest were it run by any branch of the medical profession, is a deliberate one. The point is not the honest relief of suffering but the promulgation of a cult based on death and suffering and subjection” (67). Without an oppositional agenda, one might argue, such a “cult” might have never been investigated. After all, who would dare, as Hitchens writes in the foreword, “to pick on a wizened, shriveled old lady, well-stricken in years, who has consecrated her entire life to the needy and the destitute” (1) except someone avocated to do so?

Witness also Hitchens’s apostasy during the Clinton/Lewinsky imbroglio. Despite his leftist sympathies, he tackled the former president with the for-the-sake-of-argument brio characteristic of his type of public intellectual: “I thought at one point

<http://www.salon.com/news/1998/07/13news.html> and Christopher Hitchens, “Unfairheit 9/11: The Lies of Michael Moore,” *Slate* (21 June 2004): <http://slate.msn.com/id/2102723>.

⁶⁰ Christopher Hitchens, *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* (London: Verso, 1995), 24; hereafter cited in the text.

that I might have to resign from [*The Nation*]. That was over, in general, its defense of Bill Clinton in office, which I still think was a historic mistake made by left-liberals in this country. It completely squandered the claim of a magazine like *The Nation* to be a journal of opposition. By supporting Clinton, *The Nation* became a journal more or less of the consensus.”⁶¹ In his book on the former president, *No One Left To Lie To: The Triangulations of William Jefferson Clinton*, Hitchens writes of Clinton’s use of public money and tactics to intimidate people—mostly women with whom Clinton had liaised—who might embarrass him. Hitchens also suggests Clinton launched missiles into the Sudan, Afghanistan and Iraq for the purpose of “distract[ing] attention from his filthy lunge at a beret-wearing cupcake.”⁶² Conservatives and Republicans, of course, were no stranger to character attacks, yet it was Hitchens’s opposition that attempted to demonstrate how, as even conservative columnist David Horowitz admitted, “this mattered to the policy issues the public cares deeply about In making his own powerful case against Clinton, Hitchens has underscored how Republicans botched the process by focusing on criminality that flowed from minor abuses of power—the sexual harassment of Paula Jones and its Monica Lewinsky subtext—while ignoring a major abuse that involved corrupting the presidency, damaging the nation’s security and killing innocents abroad.”⁶³ *Triangulations* was the

⁶¹ Southan, “Free Radical: An Interview with Christopher Hitchens,” *Reason*.

⁶² Christopher Hitchens, *No One Left To Lie To: The Triangulations of William Jefferson Clinton* (London: Verso, 1999), 87.

⁶³ David Horowitz, “Hats off to a condemned man,” *Salon* (1 March 1999): http://www.salon.com/col/horo/1999/03/nc_01horo.html.

essential work of the “vocationally opposition” public intellectual: railing against the popular consensus with criticism steeped in public policy.

The last and latest of the three, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*, launches a kitchen-sink blitzkrieg against President Nixon’s former secretary of state, accusing him of “the deliberate mass killing of civilian populations in Indochina” and “the personal suborning and planning of murder of a senior constitutional officer in a democratic nation—Chile—with which the United State was not at war.”⁶⁴ The suggested rap sheet also includes Kissinger’s part in prolonging the Vietnam war and other felonies in Bangladesh, Cyprus, East Timor and Washington, D.C. Failure, for Hitchens, to issue a warrant for Kissinger’s trial “will constitute a double or triple offense to justice. First, it will violate the essential and now uncontested principle that even not the most powerful are above the law. Second, it will suggest that prosecutions for war crimes and crimes against humanity are reserved for losers, or for minor despots in relatively negligible countries. This in turn will lead to the paltry politicization of what could have been a noble process, and to the justifiable suspicions of double standards.”⁶⁵ With some notable exceptions, the charges Hitchens levied were fairly new.⁶⁶ By compiling them as an *indictment* for a trial, Hitchens in effect spoke for those butchered in Chile, Bangladesh, Cyprus, East Timor and even Washington, D.C.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Christopher Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* (London: Verso, 2001), x.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Anthony Summers and Robbyn Swan, *The Arrogance of Power: The Secret World of Richard Nixon* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000).

⁶⁷ Says Hitchens (in Christopher Hitchens, “You ask the questions,” *The Independent*): “With Kissinger, you can tell how many people he killed. With Mother Teresa, who only preached

And yet, given what Hitchens has chosen to write about, one must ask what effect this “vocational opposition” even has. Despite Hitchens’s calls for arrest, neither Kissinger nor Clinton, much less Mother Teresa, have been to date hauled into The Hague for prosecution. Effectiveness—or widespread popular adoption—is not necessarily the point; the hope, I think, behind “vocational opposition” is not to have immediate solutions (though that would be nice) but rather to show how good-faith religion can turn bad and how bad-faith imperialism can turn worse. “Vocational opposition” is very much a *felt* obligation to the problems which, caused by government or institutional powers, affect (or have the potential to affect) a large majority of people.

But as a member of the mass media, the oppositional function Hitchens has sought to practice has necessitated the *publicity* he needs—or enjoys—in order to acquire and maintain that function and the audiences for his work. Hitchens’s pose on the cover of *Contrarian*—in fact, the way he usually comports himself—surely seeks to maintain, as he said at the panel discussion on “The Future of the Public Intellectual,” “something basically malcontent, unsound and untrustworthy about the person who was claiming the high honor of the title [of intellectual].” No doubt Hitchens markets himself—essentially, selling himself as product with expected attributes and axes-to-grind—in an environment of increasing media specialization and competitiveness. In this way, Hitchens shows that commodification is now inevitable if not a necessary evil, whether one has credentials or not. Given his

surrender to poverty, disease and ignorance and against family planning, we can’t be sure of the figures. But together they certainly make two out of the four pale riders of the Apocalypse.”

previous statements and work output, I would argue, however, that Hitchens has sought to make opposition and a commitment to it *the* index of the public intellectual (its specialization, as it were) and any following publicity (or visibility) a by-product (rather than a signifier) of the “public” designation. Put alternatively, opposition is more than a pose—it is, for Hitchens, the practical essence of his vocation.

Conclusion: Between Obsolescence and Acceptance

It is often said that, as a subject, the public intellectual exceeds in always inviting interpretation but resisting explanation. Invoked at a dinner party, reactions run from knowing nods and furrowed brows to visceral hostility and guarded suspicion, like turning your nose at something in the refrigerator that’s spoiled. Because it has been continually used by academics, columnists, and critics alike to take their own temperatures (and the temperatures of each other), its discussion usually attends a frisson of self-regard and a shakedown for a bottom-line answer: “Are intellectuals doing enough for the public?” I would reply, simply, that this question cannot be answered like some arithmetical equation—few can, for that matter.

One of the aims of this essay has been to describe and suggest the field of accomplishment and system of recognition by which the concept of the public intellectual has developed and how Hitchens has sought to demarcate and further refine its purpose. This purpose, I hope to have shown, is not the result of mandarin tastemakers spinning webs of their own significance; it is the result of an intellectual taxonomy that attempts to prioritize authority within a constellation of competing

critical fiefdoms. Questions of who speaks for whom and how one speaks are proximate to the very notion of identity politics today. By no means does Hitchens represent the *ideal* public intellectual, but he does emphasize that the cultural formation of public intellectuals requires not only institutional training at universities and professional regulation but also (at least in his case) a vocational commitment to opposition. The “vocational opposition” Hitchens offers is more than knee-jerk adversarianism: it is a production of knowledge based on a division of intellectual labor that demands a specialization of function directed at public policy issues of which popular opinion is often the most ignorant. That function, I have argued, would signify the public intellectual less as a celebrity (though it certainly recognizes the conspicuous level of performance endemic to this labor) than someone legitimated by a sense of constituency with public debate that nourishes a healthy liberal democratic society. Only by approaching the public intellectual from this angle, I think, can we begin to reconcile and come to terms with a discourse that name-drops Christopher Hitchens and Henry Kissinger in the same breath.

If there is a new challenge here, it is in developing a more textured history for those who have mainly operated outside the print medium and asking if their contributions, balanced against the pull of celebrity, pass muster as public-intellectual work. After all, intellectual labor has always been strongly tied to writing, but that shouldn't stop us inquiring if, for example, Michael Moore—with his documentary exposés on corporate America and the “war on terror”—is a bodement for future public-intellectual cinema. One could argue that print, by its very nature, is less open

to the criticisms of demagoguery that afflicted Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and is therefore more capable of preserving a needed credibility. Then again, Moore's controversial status, as much as Hitchens's, might indicate the lasting fate of public intellectuals, always stranded between obsolescence and acceptance.

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