

We live in the age of performative academia, is this such a bad thing?

*It is relatively rare for social scientists as individuals to break through into the mainstream media. However, in recent weeks, two profiles of successful figures in the worlds of academia and academic publishing have featured in popular publications, in 'The editor who moves theory into the mainstream' the New Yorker profiled Duke University Press editor Ken Wissocker and in the New York Magazine, 'Galaxy Brain How the impeccably credentialed, improbably charming economic historian Adam Tooze supplanted the dirtbag left' provides a similar profile of the economic historian Adam Tooze. Reflecting on these two pieces, **Chris Anderson**, discusses what they say about the state of social science, the performance of intellectualism and its relationship to power.*

What would [Ken Wissocker](#) think of [Adam Tooze's](#) clothes? Judging by the photo of Tooze on the cover of the March 28 [New York Magazine](#), probably not much. While the Columbia University historian's sartorial choices might not be poor enough to get him banished to the realm of "[big conferences for sociology or political science](#)," they are unlikely to get him a book contract with Duke University Press, either. But that's probably fine with Tooze. As he told [New York Magazine](#), he [isn't likely to write another book for a while anyway](#); he's too busy tweeting.

If you are thinking of going into academia, there are a lot of places to go these days to try to understand what your day-to-day working life might be like should you ever manage to complete your PhD. You can scroll twitter for a daily dose of the "quitting the professoriate and going to industry" [subgenre](#). You can read the op-ed pages of the [New York Times](#) for stories of cancel-culture run amok and the various ways in which free-thinking college students are "cancelled" by their intolerant instructors. You can even log onto Netflix and watch the miniseries [The Chair](#), starring Sandra Oh. And yet, two stories about two incredibly successful intellectuals published the same day in the [New Yorker](#) and [New York Magazine](#) do more to tell budding academics what the pinnacle of their careers could look like if everything goes to plan than all the tweets in the world.

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What do these stories tell us about how social scientific and theoretical knowledge gets mediated in the 21st century, and what a public life of the mind might look like? At first glance, what seems clear to me in reading these two pieces is how little seems to have changed at the top of the academic pyramid. Despite the pandemic, an economic crash, fights about free speech, war in Europe, social media, and the increasing [precaritization](#) of the academy, both articles seemed reminiscent of the early 1960s and the early 1980s, respectively. In the 1960s, big thinking, synthetic economic historians capture the ears of the power elite through their mastery of the hard social sciences. In the 1980s, these manly quantitative arts are queered by a transgressive intellectual elite, who care less about what powerful people might think and more about carving out new spaces for the marginalized and subaltern, usually through something called "theory." And here we are in 2022. Can it really all be coming back? Or maybe it never left? With all that has happened, and is happening, is this still what intellectual success looks like?



On second glance, however, things are not all like they used to be. Or to the degree they are, the academic world has taken previous currencies of power and has intensified to an almost unfathomable degree. For in the end, what strikes me most about the Tooze and the Wissocker profiles is their combination of brilliance and almost unbelievably hard work, with as much “work” being devoted to the **performance** of intellectualism as the intellectualism itself. Both men are of course active on Twitter- the ultimate medium verbal of performance- which is not something I would have ever expected to see when I joined Twitter myself 14 years ago. But, more than that – their performance of theory (or in Tooze’s case, perhaps anti-theory) is inseparable from the creation of theory itself. Intellect is not surface level of course, but it is also an act, a form of dramaturgy in which “what intellectuals do” is mediated through clothing selection, Japanese art, guest appearances in the Financial Times, being worshiped by (mostly male) academics in training, podcasting ... None of this would surprise the two youngest generations now raised on the performative powers of social and digital media. And I doubt it would surprise Tooze and Wissocker themselves, both of whom make it clear, through their own academic writing and through the books they choose to publish at Duke that they deeply understand power as, in part, performance. In the end, a budding young scholar reading these two articles back-to-back is likely to be convinced, more than ever, that their gut feeling is right: knowledge is performance which is power.

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The United States has only recently emerged from four years of being governed by the most-anti intellectual and performative president in its 200+ year history, but we should not forget that before that it was governed by the most intellectual and second most performative president in its 200+ year history. Performative knowledge, and the power that goes with it, is everywhere, and is only challenged by the power of performative ignorance. Given all this, I actually finished both these essays with **more** respect for their protagonists, who in the end are fighting the good fight for performative intellect rather than ignorance, and who both know enough to use their boundless productivity and their fashion sense for good rather than evil. I was jealous, of course, as almost everyone reading these essays would likely be (and as Twitter shows us)- jealous of those who have published DUP books (I never will) or who pronounce sweeping historical and economic truth within the corridors of power (I have nothing to say to those people). But, I suppose that crankiness is *my* performance. Ultimatey perhaps we all have our performative part to play.

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