

The price of public intellectuals: Controversial ideas expressed for benefit of fellow citizens deserve to be heard.

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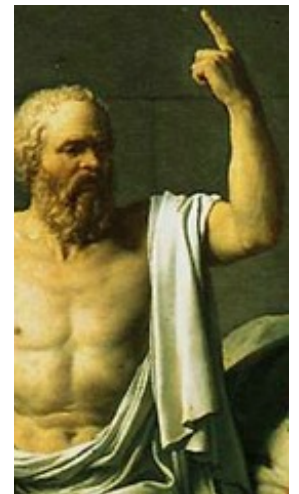
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In his new book, [The Price of Public Intellectuals](#), Raphael Sassower surveys the range of roles assigned to public intellectuals throughout history and across societies. Today public intellectuals remain overshadowed by the financial prowess of billionaire agendas and the popular tides of anti-intellectualism have further limited these voices. The goal of his book is to wake us up to the need for gadflies and jesters, critics and translators, whose intellectual insights can benefit society as a whole.



Motivated partially by my own experience as an academic who writes columns for a local business weekly, and partially by the puzzling lack of public intellectuals in the US, in my new book I draw from ancient Greek philosophy and from 20th century statements about the different roles of public intellectuals .

From Socrates' trial we learned that speaking truth to power is dangerous—it could lead to death. Being a gadfly would indeed wake up the sleepy body politic, but a change in policy about educating the youth or the sacredness of city's gods would not be the result. Plato's ingenious alternative model for altering the political structure was the philosopher-king who embodied the combination of philosophical wisdom and political authority. Truth is power, and the power of the republic is administered truthfully, if Plato gets his way. To some extent, Michel Foucault seems to agree with Plato's avenue for public intellectuals to assert themselves when arguing about the power of knowledge claims regardless of who advocates them. For him, there is no truth spoken to power, as if the two could be decoupled, but truths that are powerful in themselves and expressed in contestations in the public arena.



After an extensive survey of the different roles assigned to public intellectuals (or intellectuals who make their way into the public domain), it seems that two options remain alive today: the engaged intellectuals who are organically connected to their constituents (as envisioned by Antonio Gramsci, Michael Walzer, and Edward Said) and the detached ones whose distance allows a perspective from which to assess and judge (described by Karl Mannheim, Julien Benda, and Zygmunt Bauman). Yet just as the Greek models proved unsatisfactory, so are these two limited forms of public intellectualism. In fact, there are many more variants of how intellectuals are engaged in their communities and the different roles they undertake, and this variety must be explored in order for intellectuals to recover any semblance of public credibility and authority.

Intrigued by the public and political role of court jesters and the village fools of yesteryear, I include in my survey hacktivists as well as rappers and bloggers. Though engaged in the affairs of the state, it still remains an open question as to what extent they inform the public intellectually rather than socially, morally, or politically. Not only do such groups of activists refrain from overloading their audiences with hyper-intellectualized rhetoric, they are concerned with bringing about change rather than educating alone (or translating from the clouds of thinkers to the earthly existence of their communities).

The lines are blurred and the boundaries contested when distinguishing between academics who might be intellectuals and intellectuals who might be public figures. There are the celebrity intellectuals—from the French Bernard-Henri Levy to the Slovene Slavoj Žižek and the American-Brit Steve Fuller—whose personalities follow the lead of the Jean-Paul Sartre, for example. But their loud voices are routinely overshadowed by the sheer financial prowess of any billionaire who has an agenda, as is clearly seen from the impact the Melinda and Bill Gates

Foundation has had in Africa, for example, or George Soros' Open Society in Europe. Has money replaced ideas? Or rather, are only ideas that have a great deal of money behind them worthy of public attention?



Ernesto Che Guevara with Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, in Cuba. 1960 Image credit: [Alberto Korda \(Wikimedia, public domain\)](#)

The peculiarity of American anti-intellectualism, as outlined by Richard Hofstadter, has deep roots (dating as far back as the 18th century) and has been coupled with the escape of intellectuals to their insulated ivory towers, as described by Russell Jacoby. There they have been marginalized or they have marginalized themselves to the point of irrelevance so that their freedom of speech (with tenure) has become impotent—the public isn't listening. These circumstances seem quite different from the European and South-American landscape where the wise counsel of intellectuals is respectfully sought. The German Jürgen Habermas remains a faithful practitioner of the 19th century ideals of intellectuals as public servants (the Humboldt model) as he remains committed to the affairs of the state. This stands in opposition to the neoliberal model (George Stigler) that considers the marketplace of ideas to be just like that of other goods and services—the salability of an idea trumps its significance or societal benefits.

The goal of this book is to wake us up to the need for gadflies and jesters, critics and translators, whose intellectual insights can benefit society as a whole. Not only do their ideas and their public expression have the potential to help our communities, their very existence in our midst is a testimony to the strength of modern democracies. Where dissident voices have been silenced and purged (USSR, China, and Russia today), the ultimate weakness of totalitarian regimes becomes evident. Yet when public intellectuals are supported by a state apparatus, as glimmers are seen in parts of the EU, the hope for public debates and policy transformation can still be held out.

With this in mind, the book ends with recommendations to provide incentives for university faculties to engage in public affairs on the one hand, and for the state to provide financial incentives for intellectuals to become public figures on the other. Perhaps the outrageous demands of Socrates were right after all: he (and some of us who'd like to model ourselves today on his example) should be a warden of the state instead of a condemned criminal. Brilliant and controversial ideas expressed for the benefit of fellow-citizens and not just for self-aggrandizement deserve to be heard!

The Price of Public Intellectuals (2014) is published by Palgrave Macmillan and can be found on [Amazon here](#).

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