

The Philosopher as Public Intellectual¹

Patrick Baert

In: *Public Intellectuals in the Global Arena; Professors or Pundits*, Ed. M. Desch, University of Notre Dame Press, 2016, pp. 163-181.

“Right from the beginning of the street the crowd were pushing and shoving to get into the hall where Jean Pulse Heartre was going to give his lecture. People were using all kinds of tricks to needle through the eagle eye of the chastity belt of special duty policemen who had cut off the district and who were there to examine the invitation cards and tickets, because hundreds and thousands of forgeries were in circulation. (...) Others got themselves parachuted in by special plane. There were riots and fighting at Orly too to get on to the planes. (...) Others, in a desperate attempt, were trying to get in through the sewers. (...) The sewer rats took over from there. But nothing could dampen the spirits of these aficionados. (...) In the great hall on the ground floor (...) more and more people were gathering, and late-comers found they had to resort to standing on one foot at the back – the other being required to kick away any neighbours who got too close. (...) Heartre was getting ready to read his notes. An extraordinary radiance emanated from his ascetic athletic body and the throng, captivated by the overpowering charm of his slightest gesture, waited anxiously for the starting signal. Numerous were the cases of fainting due to intra-uterine exaltation which affected the female section of the audience in particular (...) Jean Pulse opened his mouth. (...) The audience which had been fairly well-behaved until then began to get worked up and showed its admiration for Heartre by repeated shouts and acclamations after every word he said – which made perfect understanding of what he was saying rather difficult.”²

This passage of Boris Vian’s novel *L’Écume des jours* is a thinly disguised critique of the furore around French existentialism at the end of the war, with the characters Jean Pulse Heartre (Jean-Sol Partre, in the original French) and the Countess de Mauvoir (la Duchesse de Bovouard, in French) obviously based

¹ This text is based on my presentation at the Annual Conference, “Public Intellectualism in Comparative Context: Different Countries, Different Disciplines”, Institute for Advanced Studies, University of Notre Dame, 22-24 April 2013. I also presented a shorter version of this paper at “Economic Reason: Intellectuals and Think Tanks in the Late Twentieth Century”, 28 June 2013. I would like to thank the participants of both conferences for their comments, in particular Michael Desch, Katherine Brading and Kenneth Miller. I would also like to thank Josh Booth, Marcus Morgan, Emma Murray and Alan Shipman for their feedback on an earlier version of this chapter.

² This extract is from Boris Vian’s *L’Écume des jours*. The passage is based on the English translation by Stanley Chapman: Boris Vian, *Froth on the Daydream*, 93-96.

on its main protagonists. The depiction of the scene of Jean-Paul Sartre's talk acts as an ironic commentary on Sartre's conference 'L'Existentialisme est un humanisme', which was held at the Palais des Congrès in Paris on a cold autumn night just after the war. But it is more than just a parody. For all its absurdity and grotesqueness, this passage captures something of the frenzy and excitement surrounding Sartre's lecture of 29 October 1945. Indeed, in the actual lecture, people also struggled to get in and to get a glimpse of the new prophet; and Sartre, like the character in the novel a charismatic speaker, managed to captivate his audience. Sartre spoke authoritatively without notes about a wide range of subjects. Leaving aside the slapstick of Vian's depiction, it reveals the exhilaration and exaltation which Sartre's lecture generated.

Indeed, the philosopher as public intellectual brings up images of, say, Jean-Paul Sartre and Bertrand Russell, speaking to huge crowds of students and affecting the politics in their respective countries and beyond. It is my contention that this type of public intellectual, epitomized by those two iconic characters, is no longer as viable today as it was in the middle part of the twentieth century. But this is not to say that there is no scope today for philosophers as public intellectuals, or that there is less space for public intellectuals in general. As I will explain later on, too often commentators have mistaken the decline of a *particular* type of public intellectual for the fall of the public intellectual *in general*. It will become clear that the current climate encourages a type of public engagement, whether from philosophers or non-philosophers, which is of a very different kind from the one exercised by the likes of Sartre and Russell. In what follows, I will try to outline this shift and provide some tentative explanations. I draw mainly on examples from France and the UK, but I would argue that my main points are applicable more broadly. Whilst I recognise cultural and national variations exist, the aim of this paper is to present the broader picture.

Before I do this, I would like to make three qualifications. Firstly, I would like to clarify that I will be talking here about public engagement as in engagement *outside* the *formal* curriculum of the university structure. Of course, professors employed in universities, through the teaching of students, engage with wider society. This also applies to professional philosophers who simply by teaching their undergraduates and postgraduates can influence the broader societal and political realm. But when we mention public intellectuals, we are not talking about academics simply addressing a student audience within the contours of their regular courses. We are referring to primarily political engagement that goes beyond the limited setup of academic courses. This might involve engagement with students

outside the normal curriculum, as in the case of Herbert Marcuse who in the late 1960s became the guru of the student movement. It might even involve political interventions outside the academy altogether. The two public intellectuals who I just mentioned – Sartre and Russell – typically addressed a broader audience well beyond the formal setup of the university structure. As a matter of fact, Sartre never held an academic position as such; he was a high school teacher for a while until the mid-1940s when he decided that he could live off his royalties. Russell had to resign his fellowship at Trinity College Cambridge because of his stance towards the First World War and subsequently taught sporadically at universities in the States until that was cut short too because of his political stances. In sum, in what follows, I am talking about this broader engagement, often political.

Secondly, I would like to introduce briefly the theoretical framework which underpins what I am going to say. In what follows I will be drawing loosely on positioning theory.³ According to this perspective, intellectuals use various devices to position themselves within the specific arenas in which they are operating. They position themselves through their books, lectures, newspaper articles, television and documentary film appearances or blogs. What is positioning? It refers to the process through which intellectuals, like other people, attribute characteristics to themselves. For example, they might locate themselves as situated with the progressive pragmatist heritage of the United States, as Rorty did in *Achieving our Country*.⁴ Or they might position themselves as somehow Marxist-inspired critics of the contemporary constellation, like Alain Badiou or Slavoj Žižek. Self-positioning often goes hand in hand with the positioning of other people or entities: Rorty's positioned himself politically in juxtaposition to the American New Left and the Cultural Left, and Badiou and Žižek's self-positioning rests on their fierce criticisms of capitalism today. Positioning is an ongoing practical achievement which requires considerable rhetorical skills and resources. Take Sartre, Camus and Beauvoir, for instance, who used their journal *Les Temps modernes* to position themselves as dealing with issues of contemporary significance; indeed they used the preface of the first issue to position themselves in opposition to those writers in the past who had failed to engage with the present.⁵ The underlying thread in this paper is that intellectuals, including public intellectuals, are constantly involved in various forms of positioning and crucially that new societal conditions encourage novel forms of positioning whilst discouraging

³ See also Baert, "Positioning Theory and Intellectual Interventions."

⁴ Rorty, *Achieving our Country; Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America*.

⁵ Sartre, "Présentation."

others. Whilst I do not aim to elaborate on positioning theory in what follows, my arguments will draw on the theory implicitly.

Thirdly, it is worth mentioning that I will be using a rather restrictive notion of what it is to be a philosopher. Sometimes the notion of philosopher is used loosely to refer to scholars or writers who make broader theoretical claims. I will be talking instead about intellectuals who are formally trained within the discipline of philosophy and who in addition position themselves at least partly in relation to this formal training. The advantage of this more restrictive notion is that it allows me to identify more clearly who counts as a philosopher. Of course, the discipline of philosophy, and the training provided within it, differs from society to society and it also changes over time. This means that some of the people I will be talking about, in particular Sartre and Russell, might *prima facie* not have much in common. But I will try to argue that at some level those two *do* share certain characteristics – features which are rarer now for reasons which I will explain.

So let's return to the transition within public engagement which I mentioned earlier. Let's start with Sartre, the quintessential public intellectual in the eyes of many. Sartre came to public prominence just after the liberation. He was known beforehand but mainly to a specialized public. Between middle of 1944 and the end of 1945 Sartre made a meteoric rise and managed to turn his dense philosophy into a digestible product for a mass-audience. The autumn of 1945 was particularly crucial. Later portrayed as the 'existentialist offensive', it was during this period, September and October of 1945, that Sartre turned himself into a public figure. The publication of the two volumes of *L'Age de la Raison*, the launch of his flagship journal *Les Temps Modernes* and his famous public lecture *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* – all contributed to his new persona as a public figure. But becoming famous as an intellectual does not make you a public intellectual. To be a public intellectual, you also need to be able to engage with broader issues of societal significance well beyond your specialized expertise. Sartre managed to do this straight away. Between 1944 and 1947 he would write extensively on social and political issues relevant to the French at the time and help them assimilate and come to terms with the recent past: he tried to portray the Resistance spirit, he made sense of what it was like to live under German occupation, or he depicted the mindset of collaborators and anti-Semites. These writings and interventions were mainly reflecting on the recent past. They did so in ways which resonated with the

public, which, as I have argued elsewhere, partly explains his sudden public status.⁶ But very soon Sartre would leave behind the experience of the Second World War and tackle present concerns, commenting on the post-war political situation in France and later on the Cold War, Algeria, the student movement, and so on. And it is these interventions, rather than the popularization of existentialism, which made him the public intellectual we still remember today.

Now, what kind of public intellectual was Sartre? He was what I call an ‘authoritative’ public intellectual.⁷ They rely on high cultural capital acquired from being trained in a high-profile discipline like philosophy and from being brought up in a very privileged background. They straddle neatly the inside-outside divide: they are so respected through privilege and intellectual achievement that they can oppose the establishment without ever substantially losing status or authority. They address a wide range of subjects without being experts as such. They speak from above – at, rather than with, their audience. And they have a strong moral voice, condemning, praising and spurring people on to act.

Sartre was the archetypal authoritative public intellectual. Brought up in a highly educated upper middle class family, he was raised partly by his grandfather Karl Schweitzer, a considerable intellectual in his own right who took it upon himself to educate his grandson when Jean-Paul’s mother moved back to the ancestral home after the premature death of her husband. His grandparents on both sides belonged to what one could, at least in the French context, legitimately call intellectual aristocracy. Not only did Sartre manage to gain entry at the *Ecole Normale* – the elite institution *par excellence* – he studied philosophy, which was at that point the most revered academic discipline in France. Sartre drew on all this cultural capital to speak authoritatively about numerous topics of which he was not really an expert.⁸ His book about anti-Semitism, *Réflexions sur la question juive*, was a case in point: relying on anecdotal evidence from his *entourage* and on his reading of anti-Semitic literature, Sartre not only generalized about the psychological dispositions of the anti-Semite, but centred the core of his argument in the remainder of the text around a dubious distinction between the authentic and inauthentic Jew. No systematic research or expertise underscored this book. But this dilettantism didn’t stop Sartre speaking authoritatively about what it would be like, as a Jew, to live life authentically.⁹ The

⁶ Baert, “The Sudden Rise of French Existentialism: A Case-study in the Sociology of Intellectual Life”; Baert, “The Power Struggle of French Intellectuals at the End of the Second World War: A study in the Sociology of Ideas.”

⁷ See also Baert and Shipman, “Transformation of the Intellectual.”

⁸ For an extensive study of Sartre’s background and formative years, see Cohen-Sohal, *Sartre*, 7-119.

⁹ Baert, “Jean-Paul Sartre’s Positioning in Anti-Semite and Jew.”

very same moral vigour – and, to a certain extent, lack of expertise – underscored his later interventions, whether about the Soviet Union or colonialism. Throughout his ‘public career’, Sartre would be particularly adept at straddling the inside-outside divide: part and parcel of the establishment, he styled himself unequivocally as in opposition to it. Nothing more exemplifies how the security of privilege enabled Sartre to choose the position of outsider than his refusal to accept the Nobel Prize.

Sartre was not an isolated case, nor was his type of public intellectual exclusively French. Bertrand Russell, the eccentric British gent, was as much an authoritative public intellectual as Sartre was. Like Sartre, he came from a privileged background, raised in a rare intellectual micro-climate within the otherwise anti-intellectual British aristocracy, with JS Mill as Godfather and an arsenal of private tutors at his disposal. Like Sartre he went through elite educational channels and made his name as an innovative philosopher, specialising in logic rather than the philosophy of existentialism. Just as Sartre’s existentialism was interwoven with the collective self-identity of the French intelligentsia, British intellectuals portrayed analytical philosophy as typically British, with its focus on logic and precision a necessary antidote against the purported intellectual and political dangers of German philosophy. Russell too spoke with great authority about a whole range of issues of which he had little professional expertise, from marriage and the family to religion and race. Like his French counterpart he gained worldwide recognition, which also included the Nobel Prize. And like Sartre he used his platform of public notoriety - amplified through the emerging communication channels of radio, television and televised public demonstrations - to take a moral stance and intervene in the politics of his day, from Vietnam to nuclear disarmament. Just like Sartre, Russell, the ultimate insider, managed to position himself as *the* anti-establishment figure, starting with his backing of conscientious objection during the First World War and culminating in his anti-Vietnam activities. In sum, Russell was as emblematic an authoritative public intellectual as Sartre was, equally successful in using his accomplishments within philosophy to legitimate his views on public and political issues that went well beyond it.¹⁰

If I mention these two pivotal figures, it is partly because commentators often invoke them when arguing that there are no longer public intellectuals today. The likes of Sartre and Russell are often used as yardsticks to judge the contemporary situation, in which, so it is argued, there is no longer space for public intellectual giants as there undoubtedly was in earlier times. I agree, but only partly. I will show

¹⁰ Regarding Russell’s family background, early upbringing and academic career, see, for instance, Monk, *Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude*; Monk, *Bertrand Russell: Ghost of Madness*.

that a changing socio-political landscape has indeed made it more difficult for authoritative public intellectuals to emerge and gain respect and attention, but crucially that this does not imply the fall of the public intellectual altogether. Rather new modes of public engagement have come to the surface. Before exploring what these forms of engagement entail, it is important to identify the possible sociological factors that have contributed to the decline of the phenomenon of the authoritative public intellectual.

Authoritative public intellectuals thrive in a very particular setting. They thrive in societies in which a significant section of the population value intellectual life and in which nevertheless the cultural and intellectual capital is concentrated within a small elite. They thrive in a hierarchical educational context, with 'hierarchical' referring to a clear distinction not only between elite institutions and other higher education establishments but also between high and low status disciplines. They can exist independently of academic appointments because of independent resources, gained from family wealth or successful exploitation of the media of the time (book-writing and print journalism in the first half of the 20th Century, broadcasting in the 2nd half and beyond). They tend to surface when the academic setting is more amorphous, with limited specialisation, and especially when the social sciences are poorly professionalised. It is in this very specific context that authoritative public intellectuals like Sartre and Russell have a field day. Steeped in a high profile discipline like philosophy and mathematics and with the confidence of the right *habitus* and an elite education, they can speak to a wide range of social and political issues without being criticised for dilettantism. The early part of the twentieth century, especially in parts of Europe, fits this ideal type remarkably well. It was the era of the philosopher as public intellectual.

What has changed since? Firstly, philosophy has lost to a certain extent its previous intellectual dominance. This is partly due to the rise, during the latter part of the twentieth century, of various philosophical currents, such as postmodernism and neo-pragmatism, which questioned, if not undermined, the erstwhile superiority of philosophy over other vocabularies. Within the Anglo-Saxon context, Rorty and Bernstein epitomise this strand, advocating Gadamerian hermeneutics and Dewey's pragmatism over epistemology.¹¹ But besides the developments within philosophy itself, other factors also came into play. The social sciences have emerged as a significant force and have professionalised,

¹¹ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*; Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*; Bernstein, *The New Constellation; The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity*.

making it more difficult for philosophers or others without appropriate training and expertise in the social sciences to make authoritative claims about the nature of the social and political world without being challenged. Massive expansion of the ranks of professional social scientists mean there are now life-long specialists in the areas that public intellectuals used to comment on, who are better-placed to contest such 'generalist' interventions as uninformed and superficial. For all its genius and perceptiveness, it would be difficult to imagine Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive* to have been met with such little critique when it came out if it had been published, say, twenty years later. Whereas this text was seen as a highly insightful piece of work in the 1940s, we now value it more as a quaint piece of French intellectual history rather than a valuable explanation of the phenomenon of anti-Semitism. Compare this with, say, *The Authoritarian Personality*, published only 3 years later and addressing related issues, but which still demands considerable respect, something not unrelated to its sociological outlook and methodology.¹²

Secondly, with high educational levels for larger sections of society, the erstwhile distinction between an intellectual elite and the rest does no longer hold to quite the same extent. With higher education also comes a growing scepticism towards epistemic and moral authority, an increasing recognition of the fallibility of knowledge and of the existence of alternative perspectives. Speaking from above and *at* their audience, as authoritative public intellectuals do, is no longer as acceptable as it used to be. Print and broadcasting media have become less deferential and more willing to challenge the statements of politicians and other public figures – a process assisted by the arrival of journalists with higher education and subject specialism. The rise of new social media in the 21st Century intensified this 'democratisation' of public intellectual interventions even further, partly because of the interactive nature of the technology involved, which means that no single party has intellectual monopoly, and partly because technically more people can enter the public sphere than they used to. Of course, we should not overestimate the dialogical and democratic potential of the new social media. The interactive potential of the technology does not always pan out in practice. The new social media have gatekeepers too just like newspapers and magazines, and we should keep in mind that very few bloggers have a large following. But the technology has made a difference, one which surely has further lessened the likelihood of authoritative public intellectuals.

¹² Adorno, et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*.

Thirdly, there has since been a growing disquiet about ‘philosophical systems’ such as Marxism in whose name numerous authoritarian regimes have been established and legitimised. Although not all authoritative public intellectuals promoted a ‘system’ as such, let alone a Marxist one, the failure of the latter certainly put a serious dent in the status of philosophy within the wider public. Since the 1980s, those grand schemes, often the brainchild of philosophers, were gradually replaced by a rebranded free market ideology. Mark Lilla’s chapter in this volume explores at length the current state of liberalism, but it is worth pointing out here that free markets are as much a ‘grand narrative’ as Marxism was, equally fanatical about the desirability of its utopian vision and equally adamant that an inevitable march of history would sweep across the globe. No other publication epitomises this doctrine of liberal supremacy more than Francis Fukuyama’s *End of History and the Last Man*.¹³ But unlike Marxism which conceived a different society for the future, the new free market ideology ultimately re-invoked the distant past, celebrating the era of unregulated capitalism and arguing why, with some modifications, it was the only viable strategy for the present. Whereas speculating about desirable futures had always been the hallmark of philosophical and political thought, the free market ideology with its attendant focus on the present put economics, rather than philosophy, centre stage and presented a view in which freely-choosing individuals would generate a relatively open-ended future that intellectuals could not usefully shape or predict. Indeed, of all the social sciences, economics became particularly dominant from the 1980s onwards, acquiring credibility which has very little connection to its limited predictive power.

If various societal forces have worked against the authoritative public intellectual, then what has emerged in its place? In the first instance ‘expert public intellectuals’ have come to the forefront. These are public intellectuals who draw on their professional knowledge, whether derived from their research in the social or natural sciences, to engage with wider societal or political issues that go beyond their narrow expertise. When, in the 1970s, Michel Foucault introduced himself as a ‘specific intellectual’, he had precisely this form of focused and expert-driven engagement in mind, and indeed his own research on the history of punishment, including *Surveiller et punir*, tied in with his campaigning for prison reforms.¹⁴ Likewise, in the 1990s, Pierre Bourdieu drew on his research on poverty in France, including *La misère du monde*, to enter the public arena and embark upon a political crusade against neo-

¹³ Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*.

¹⁴ Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir*. See also Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, 237-251.

liberalism, in particular against the policies of the French government at the time.¹⁵ In some respects Noam Chomsky also falls in this category: although initially obtaining recognition for his theoretical contributions to the study of linguistics, he subsequently became a public figure as an expert on and critic of American foreign policy. Whilst Foucault and to a lesser extent Bourdieu have sometimes been depicted as philosophers, they did, just like Chomsky, a considerable amount of empirical research, and in particular the work that formed the basis for their public engagement was respectively historical and sociological in nature. Indeed, philosophers rarely make expert public intellectuals. More precisely, if they have any tangible expertise, it is difficult to translate this into public engagement. Social scientists, on other hand, are much better placed to act as expert public intellectuals, equipped as they are with well-rehearsed methods and specialised as they are in analysing contemporary social and political phenomena. Whereas authoritative intellectuals could exert influence outside their specialist subject entirely through demonstrated intellect and educational prowess, expert intellectuals' comparable influence relies on intellect *and acquired knowledge*, and mastery of the inductive technology (observational skill, statistical methods, lab machinery etc) to acquire or verify that knowledge.

There is secondly the rise of what I would call the dialogical public intellectual. Contrary to both authoritative and expert public intellectuals, dialogical public intellectuals do not assume a superior stance towards their publics. Rather, they present themselves as equals to their publics, learning as much from them as *vice versa*. In contrast with Marxists, Foucault already took a more modest stance, employing the past as he did to shed light on the present, but without dictating an ideological agenda or imposing a political direction. Still, he positioned himself as an expert on the genealogy of how things came to be the way they are. Today, increasingly, intellectuals engage with their publics in a more interactive fashion, partly because of the technologies which make this dialogical format now possible and to a certain extent blur the distinction between public intellectuals and their publics; and partly because, with higher educational levels, the publics are no longer willing to accept entrenched hierarchies as they once did. In this context, what is striking about Michael Burawoy's recent plea for a public sociology¹⁶ is not so much that it promotes critical engagement with the non-academic world - something which after all has been argued before - but that it advocates a dialogical model, whereby

¹⁵ Bourdieu, *La Misère du monde*. See also Swartz, *From Critical Sociology to Public Intellectual: Pierre Bourdieu and Politics*.

¹⁶ There is a whole cottage industry surrounding public sociology, but the canonical text remains Burawoy's 2004 Presidential address for the ASA, subsequently published in the *American Sociological Review*. See Burawoy, "For Public Sociology."

sociologists and their publics are, theoretically at least, equal partners and equally responsible for producing knowledge. Burawoy's utopian vision for sociology conceives an intellectual and social partnership between the sociological researchers and the communities they serve, whereby both parties are willing to learn from each other and collaborate, whilst striving for a common political goal. Anthropologists, having been forced to confront their colonial heritage, have adopted this dialogical stance much earlier, with the early traces going back to the 1970s.¹⁷ The critical turn in cultural and social anthropology not only introduced reflexivity at the heart of this academic discipline, but also tied it to a different notion of knowledge acquisition in which anthropologists no longer positioned themselves as superior to the people who are being researched. More recently, intellectuals who use the new social media to get their message across often position themselves in contrast to those who rely on 'traditional' media by emphasising how the new technologies permit frequent and intense interaction with the audiences. Of course, as Paul Horwitz explains in his contribution to this collection, the situation is often more complex than the bloggers themselves tend to acknowledge. They are likely to continue to write for newspapers, magazines and other outlets, and their blogs might even simultaneously appear in print version. But the point is that they position themselves as 'democratic'; that is, in dialogue with their audience and ultimately blurring the distinction between themselves and that audience.

Dialogue, to be sure, is not antithetical to philosophy. In his *Philosophy and the Mirror Nature*, Richard Rorty's revival of Gadamer's hermeneutics, pitched against epistemology, famously elevated the notion of dialogue to the heart of philosophy.¹⁸ It is, however, more difficult to see how, within the new cultural landscape of expertise, dialogue and declining aura, philosophers can still make the kind of public inroad which they used to make. If they manage to do so, it is more likely that their interventions will be of a hybrid kind, part philosophy and part empirical research. Philosophy, as practised in the realm of the academy, has become quite removed from the rough and tumble of contemporary society. It is telling that in the current economic crisis very few philosophers have intervened in ways that have resonated with the wider public. This is, as I pointed out earlier, partly because, in the wake of the collapse of communism as a project with global aspirations, the general public has become more wary of theoretical schemes about what a future society should look like. But it is also partly because the way in which philosophers are being trained, especially within an Anglo-Saxon setting, is not really conducive

¹⁷ See, for instance, Clifford, James, and George Marcus, eds. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*.

¹⁸ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

to a critical and constructive engagement with issues that currently concern the wider public. In this context, philosophers are most likely to be successful in retaining a public profile when dealing with questions for which there is no obvious empirical resolution, including issues of faith or ethical choices. Some of Michael Sandel's interventions have been of this kind; they have struck a chord with their audience, as can be gleaned from the success of Sandel's recent Reith Lectures. Peter Singer's reflections on animal rights and world poverty provide another example.

Concluding comments

I would like to conclude by clarifying the arguments spelled out in this paper.

Firstly, the arguments developed in the above are partly directed against what I call the 'declinist' perspective on intellectuals.¹⁹ Contrasting the current situation with a presumed golden age of the public intellectual situated in the first half of the twentieth century, declinists hold that there is no longer much space for public intellectuals today. The declinist argument is as simple as it is ubiquitous: whether as recent Jewish immigrants in Greenwich Village or as chain-smoking existentialists on the Left Bank, intellectuals once felt a duty to speak to a broader public and acted on this. They were engaged intellectuals. Once domesticated within the sheltered offices and employment contracts of the academy, intellectuals have lost that edge, retreating into their specialised circles and writing opaquely. My argument presented in this chapter only partly concurs with this perspective. I agree that the public intellectual of the type that was dominant in the first half of the twentieth century is now rarer than it was sixty years ago. Yet, I have also demonstrated that this does not imply the fall of the public intellectual altogether. On the contrary, other types of public engagement have emerged and are now more plausible than the earlier type: the expert public intellectual and the dialogical public intellectual. Crucially, philosophy is less compatible with those new types than it was with the authoritative public intellectual. This brings me to the next point.

Secondly, there is an elective affinity between the authoritative public intellectual and philosophy as a discipline. Indeed, at the beginning of the paper, I emphasised how in the early and middle twentieth

¹⁹ See, for instance, Jacoby, *American Culture in the Age of the Academy*. Jacoby's declinist tale, first published in 1987, was highly influential when it first came out. In the second edition, Jacoby qualified his perspective. See also Posner, *Public Intellectuals: A Study in Decline*; Furedi, *Where have all the Intellectuals Gone?: Confronting 21st Century Philistinism*.

century public intellectuals often had a philosophical background. It is easy to see why this might have been the case. Philosophy had considerable status and it was not uncommon for people to see it as the overarching discipline to which other academic fields were subjected. Also, philosophy provided the rhetorical tools and levels of abstraction that enabled one speak out about a wide range of topics. Now, I did not want to suggest that philosophers in those days had the strict monopoly of public engagement. Indeed, some people trained in other fields became authoritative public intellectuals. In England, Aldous Huxley and George Orwell came close to the ideal-type of the authoritative public intellectual, but neither had training in philosophy: the latter studied English at Cambridge and the former did not attend University. The argument that I have developed above refers to patterns or trends and could be put in probabilistic terms. Authoritative public intellectuals *tended* to be philosophers, but they were by no means the only ones.

Thirdly, moving onto the present day, I did not argue that there is no longer scope for authoritative public intellectuals, nor did I want to imply that contemporary philosophers cannot have a public profile. Indeed, some writers and critics exhibit characteristics of the authoritative public intellectual: Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek and Cornell West show aspects of this ideal type, although none exhibits all its features quite as Sartre and Russell did. Likewise, some contemporary philosophers, analytically trained and housed in comfortable academic institutions, have a public presence and have managed to acquire a broader appeal beyond the safe contours of the academy. Whilst acknowledging the validity and significance of these observations, they should not be seen as counter-examples which would somehow undermine the general picture outlined earlier. Rather, my sociological argument is centred round ideal types and trends: the societal changes have made it *less likely* for privileged generalists to be taken seriously and to have an impact, just as it has become *increasingly difficult* for rigorously trained philosophers to enter the public sphere. The argument has, ultimately, an evolutionary bent: given the changing societal conditions, I am arguing that certain forms of positioning are more likely to be successful than others and more likely to lead to the further diffusion of the ideas propagated. And some academic disciplines, as they are practised today, are more compatible than others with these new forms of positioning.

Fourthly, each type of public intellectual – the authoritative, the expert and the dialogical one – incorporates its own contradictions. I mentioned earlier how authoritative public intellectuals struggled to retain credibility in an era of increased specialisation and expertise, while expert public intellectuals

sometimes found their legitimacy challenged once facing more educated and sceptical audiences.²⁰ Dialogical public intellectuals have their own unique contradictions. Positioning themselves as equals to and in conversation with their publics, they inevitably lose some of the charisma and aura which surround the authoritative and expert public intellectuals and which, as Weber famously pointed out, were essential to the existence of the ancient prophets. Whether relying on elite education or expertise, both authoritative and expert public intellectuals were able to keep a symbolic distance *vis-à-vis* their audiences even when mingling and engaging with them, but for dialogical public intellectuals this would be more difficult to achieve because equality and responsiveness are interwoven with their positioning. The arrival of the dialogical public intellectuals can be seen as yet another step in the process of *Entzauberung*. This loss of charisma and aura might eventually erode their existence altogether for it is difficult to see how it is possible to maintain a recognisably central and influential position within the intellectual or political sphere without being acknowledged as exhibiting certain qualities which sets them apart from the rest of society.

Fifthly, the notion of positioning is crucial in my analysis. In this sense my approach has affinities with Jeffrey's Alexander's performative take on public intellectuals which draws attention to the rhetorical and dramaturgical devices upon which intellectuals draw to stake their claim.²¹ It would be a mistake to see the developments depicted in the above as first and foremost 'technological' or 'structural' transformations rather than changes in positioning. For instance, it might perfectly plausible to argue that, with the new technologies, communication is becoming more dialogical. Blogging, for instance, might be intrinsically more interactive than text in print, regardless of whether bloggers wish to position themselves as interactive. Nevertheless, what really matters for my analysis is how these changes affect positioning. As one of the researchers on the new social media points out, the opposition of bloggers to journalism "... is raised largely by channelling the voice of the people..." and offering "... a more intimate, personal kind of authority in place of the impersonal authority of journalists. (...) What the bloggers asserted through use of readers' messages was that there was no difference between themselves and their audience."²² In this new context a 'democratic' form of positioning is more likely to provide intellectuals with the necessary credibility and to help the dissemination of their ideas. This strategic

²⁰ See also Baert, and Booth, "Tensions within the public intellectual: political interventions from Dreyfus to the new social media."

²¹ Alexander, "Public Intellectuals and Civil Society", 21-22. See also Alexander, *Performance and Power*.

²² Park, "Blogging with Authority: Strategic Positioning in Political Blogs", 265.

advantage of the dialogical public intellectual in the current constellation explains his or her recent rise in various domains. So the notion of positioning is a significant component of the story.

Finally, it might be useful to point out the limitations of my discussion in this chapter. I focused on how social scientists have increasingly taken over the public role of philosophers. This is, however, only part of the story. It would be a mistake to see social scientists as the only ones who have taken over the mantle of philosophy. More recently, natural scientists have taken on a public role, and in doing so are clearly encroaching upon the domain of philosophers. As can be gleaned from Kenneth Miller's contribution to this volume, they often use their scientific authority and specialised expertise to speak out about a wide range of issues traditionally considered to be part of a philosophical repertoire. Stephen Hawking was an early example, speculating as he did on black holes and the beginning of the universe as a prelude to his philosophical reflections on the nature of time.²³ Richard Dawkins', similarly, used his specialist expertise in biological natural selection to speculate on Darwinian processes in other realms, notably the possible selection and replication of social phenomena as 'memes'. Dawkins' recent barrage against religion is a particularly striking example of this phenomenon because the realm of faith was commonly considered to be subject of philosophical reflection and beyond scientific reason, whereas he explicitly used the latter to criticise and delegitimise the former.²⁴ The scientists' foray into the public realm and the media attention they receive ultimately will affect the public visibility and public perception of the social sciences. Indeed, there are signs that the natural sciences, in particular biology, are encroaching upon the domain of the social sciences, especially with the rise and popularity of genetic explanations for social phenomena. It is perfectly possible that this new development will have repercussions in the public realm. After the demise of the public philosopher, it is not inconceivable, therefore, that we will be witnessing in the not so distant future the decline of the public social scientist.

References

Adorno, *et al.*, *The Authoritarian Personality*. New York: Harper, 1950.

²³ Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to the Black Holes*.

²⁴ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*.

Alexander, Jeffrey. "Public Intellectuals and Civil Society". In *Intellectuals and their Publics*, edited by Christian Fleck, Andreas Hess and E. Stina Lyon, 19-27. Farnham: Ashgate.

Alexander, Jeffrey. *Performance and Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011.

Baert, Patrick. "The sudden rise of French existentialism: a case-study in the sociology of intellectual life." *Theory and Society* 40, no. 4 (November 2011): 619-644.

Baert, Patrick. "The Power Struggles of French intellectuals at the End of the Second World War: A study in the Sociology of Ideas." *European Journal of Social Theory* 14, no. 4 (November 2011): 415-435.

Baert, Patrick, "Jean-Paul Sartre's Positioning in Anti-Semite and Jew," *Journal of Classical Sociology* 11, no.4. (November 2011): 378-397.

Baert, Patrick. "Positioning theory and Intellectual Interventions." *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 42, no. 3 (September 2012): 304-324.

Baert, Patrick and Alan Shipman. "Transformation of the Intellectual." In *The Politics of Knowledge*, edited by Fernando Rubio Dominguez and Patrick Baert, 179-204. London: Routledge, 2012.

-Baert, Patrick, and Josh Booth. "Tensions within the public intellectual: political interventions from Dreyfus to the new social media." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 25 no.4 (September 2012): 111-126.

Bernstein, Richard. *The New Constellation; The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity*. Cambridge: Polity, 1991.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *La Misère du monde*. Paris : Seuil, 1993.

Burawoy, Michael. "For Public Sociology." *American Sociological Review* 70, no 1 (February 2005): 4-28.

Cohen-Sohal, Annie. *Sartre*. Gallimard: Paris, 1985.

Clifford, James, and George Marcus, eds. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. London: Bantam Press, 2006.

Eribon, Didier. *Michel Foucault*. Paris : Flammarion, 1989.

Foucault, Michel. *Surveiller et Punir; Naissance de la prison*. Paris: Gallimard, 1975.

Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992.

Furedi, Frank. *Where have all the Intellectuals Gone?: Confronting 21st Century Philistinism*. London: Continuum, 2004.

Jacoby, Russell. *American Culture in the Age of the Academy*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.

Hawking, Stephen. *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to the Black Holes*. London: Bantam, 1988.

Monk, Ray. *Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1996.

Monk, Ray. *Bertrand Russell: The Ghost of Madness*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2000.

Park, David. "Blogging with authority: Strategic positioning in political blogs." *International Journal of Communication* 3 (2009): 250-273.

Posner, Richard. *Public Intellectuals : A Study in Decline*. Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 2001.

Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Oxford; Blackwell, 1980.

Rorty, Richard. *Consequences of Pragmatism*. Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992.

Rorty, Richard. *Achieving our Country; Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998.

Sartre, Jean-Paul . "Présentation." *Les Temps modernes* 1, no. 1 (October 1945) : 1-21.

Swartz, David. From Critical Sociology to Public Intellectual: Pierre Bourdieu and Politics. *Theory and Society* 32 no 5/6 (December 2003): 791-1823.

Vian, Boris. *Froth on the Daydream*. London: Quartet, 1967. Translated from the French by Stanley Chapman with an introduction by Adrian Searle.