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Thinking in Public with Rhetoric

Steven J. Mailloux

Loyola Marymount University, Steven.Mailloux@lmu.edu

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Late in his career, Michel Foucault described himself as “show[ing] people that they are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes which have been built up at a certain moment during history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticized and destroyed. To change something in the minds of people—that’s the role of an intellectual” (1988, 10). Being widely recognized as a public intellectual, Foucault fulfilled the rhetorical function of his role—changing people’s minds—partly by connecting his political activity in nonacademic settings with the research he did as an academic scholar and theorist. In the same interview, after emphasizing that “all of us are living and thinking subjects,” Foucault went on to lament the gap between social history and the history of ideas. “Social historians are supposed to describe how people act without thinking, and historians of ideas are supposed to describe how people think without acting” (14). In declaring that a historian of thought attempts to bridge this gap, Foucault states his goal as a specific academic intellectual, as the Professor of the History of Systems of Thought at the Collège de France.¹

Academic intellectuals speak and write primarily for the professional disciplinary communities with which they identify. In contrast, *public intellectuals* not only rhetorically engage audiences beyond the academy but are recognized as doing so by both academics and nonacademics. As the example of Foucault demonstrates, academic intellectuals can become public intellectuals. Some of these hybrids build on their disciplinary expertise in making their public interventions (e.g., the literary cultural critic Edward Said), while others tend to separate their principal disciplinary work from their sociopolitical criticism in the larger public sphere (e.g., the linguist Noam Chomsky).

The preceding paragraph illustrates one way the terms *academic intellectuals* and *public intellectuals* get deployed within discussions inside and outside the university.² I find these definitions useful for understanding the similarities and differences among persons thinking publicly in various cultural

sites. Before fine-tuning that usefulness for rhetoricians, I should note that such definitions need to be justified on two different counts, descriptive adequacy and evaluative utility. Descriptive: Is my account a persuasive one? Do the definitions asserted cover the most significant usages of the terms? Do they usefully parse the different kinds of public thinking today? Evaluative: Even if the definitions are descriptively adequate—even if many people do in fact use the terms this way—should we continue doing so? Are there other definitions that provide better evaluative criteria for judging the quality and significance of intellectual work?

Stanley Fish, for example, defines a public intellectual as “someone to whom the public regularly looks for illumination on any number of (indeed all) issues.” Since “the public does not look to academics for this *general* wisdom,” academic intellectuals are “not candidates for the role of public intellectual.” Fish is quick to admit that academics do appear in various public forums outside the academy; however, he argues, these are not public intellectuals but rather “‘rent for a day’ intellectuals or ‘cameo’ intellectuals—persons brought in either because they are considered authorities on a particular issue (the media equivalent of an expert witness) or because they hold a position on that same issue that can be theatrically opposed to the position of another well-credentialed professor” (1995, 118–19). Fish’s definitions here seem rather limited for understanding who does or should count as an academic and public intellectual. Nevertheless, as often with his provocations, Fish’s account does foreground some salient rhetorical aspects of contemporary thinking in the public sphere.

Fish characterizes the media-staged appearances of academics as part of “the *Nightline* view of the world, a universe populated by people wearing glasses saying differently extreme things about every subject under the sun.” Though he means it as a putdown, this depiction does capture something of the radically changed rhetorical scene in which intellectuals work in public today. In his critical attitude, however, the rhetorical pragmatist Fish can’t be suggesting there was a time when public intellectuals somehow performed their function in nonmediated, nonmedia, nontheatrical circumstances. Do they now work within different media configurations? Certainly: current television coverage and Internet blogs differ from past newspaper reportage. But does this difference involve immediate, natural, unstaged social presentation? Of course not.

No doubt Fish would agree with these answers, so why does he insist on drawing the distinction between academic and public intellectuals the way he does? Most likely, Fish limits the domain of academics as intellectuals because of two points he continually makes in his practical philosophy. First, clusters of practices constituting a social activity are identifiably distinctive, relatively

autonomous, and task specific. A literary critic interprets and evaluates novels and poems; a federal judge reads laws and makes judgments; an elected politician manipulates public opinion and legislates social policy; and so forth. According to Fish, when literary critics advocate new legal interpretations or promote welfare reform, they simply are no longer acting in their role as literary critics (19–39). Second, academic humanists claim a political effect for their interpretations that cannot be substantiated in Fish’s view. That is, an academic political critique of Shakespeare does no real political work outside the academy (41–70). In his first point, Fish seems either to be stipulating a reductive definitional claim about how precisely to differentiate professions in terms of their core practices or to be overemphasizing the homogeneity of professional practices and downplaying the porousness of their boundaries. Similarly, in his second point, he seems either to be making a narrowly logical complaint about self-styled radical academics’ overweening claims for the necessary political significance of their work or to be ignoring the unpredictable, contingent rhetorical (and thus political) effects of academic interpretations when they circulate beyond the academy.³ Against Fish’s restrictive definitions and absolute distinctions, I recommend my initial definitions of academic and public intellectuals (as well as the possibility of their hybrid combinations) as being more useful in representing the current possibilities of thinking in public.

Despite these disagreements with Fish’s characterization of intellectuals, I do find helpful some of his formulations. For instance, he writes, “A 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 his or her subject matters of public concern, and *has the public’s attention*” (118). I would make a similar point that speaking or writing in nonacademic public spheres is a basic criterion for someone to function as a public intellectual. Rejecting this criterion leads to collapsing the distinction between public intellectuals and academic political philosophers in general. In such a view, anyone who theorizes “the public” becomes a public intellectual whether or not that theorist advocates his or her theory outside specialized academic disciplinary forums. This account erases the significant distinction between an academic professional who writes about publics only in scholarly journals and the intellectual who theorizes publics for multiple audiences, academic and nonacademic. Such a misguided definition of a public intellectual misses what is so remarkable about a major activist thinker like John Dewey compared to most of his fellow philosophers: he was both an academic intellectual speaking to his professional colleagues about technical topics in their discipline and a public intellectual advocating his theories within various sociopolitical debates in the broader culture beyond the academy.

A couple of clarifications might be useful at this point. In the distinction I am making between academic and public intellectuals, I do not mean to say that academics as scholars and teachers fail to have public import. I am not arguing that academic intellectuals in doing their specialized disciplinary research or teaching do not influence larger nonacademic publics. Indeed, classroom pedagogy is the most direct way that academics have short- and long-term effects, for better or worse, on the world beyond the university. Certainly the culture wars of the 1990s testify to this belief, shared by both the Cultural Right and Left, that teaching can significantly change the minds of students, who eventually become full members of a lay citizenry. And just as important as (and in conjunction with) teaching, academic scholars affect larger publics through their specialized research even if they are not the ones to bring the results of that research directly to those publics. Research results migrate, sometimes quickly but more often slowly, out of disciplinary communities, sometimes circulating first to other disciplines, and then from academic disciplines to other sites beyond the university. But to claim that such eventual public effects qualify academics as public intellectuals is to lose certain important distinctions. For example, there's the distinction between an influential academic social theorist and an influential public intellectual who theorizes about society: between, on the one hand, an academic scholar whose theories eventually affect social change by being disseminated and applied by others but who only engages directly with scholarly colleagues in specialized forums and, on the other, an academic scholar who becomes a public intellectual by disseminating and applying his or her own theories in lay public spheres beyond the university classroom and professional scholarly organizations. In other words, there are academics who are public intellectuals, but there are also academics (in political science, cultural studies, and the like) who are not public intellectuals (and public intellectuals who are not academics).

Academic intellectuals in their teaching and research do have public effects, but such effects do not constitute them as public intellectuals according to the distinction I am making. That distinction can be further described in explicitly rhetorical terms: academic and public intellectuals differ in their primary intentions, chosen styles, and immediate audiences. Academic intellectuals wish to produce and disseminate new disciplinary knowledge, using the tropes, arguments, and narratives of their respective disciplines and aiming at the specific disciplinary audiences with which they identify. Public intellectuals, in contrast, often translate their disciplinary knowledge in commenting on special topics and more general issues of concern to nonacademic publics, using a rhetoric accessible to those publics.

Now we can develop this distinction between academic and public intellectuals by elaborating an account more useful to rhetoricians of the public sphere.⁴ What are some of the rhetorical functions of the hybrid intellectual, the academic who goes public with his or her thinking? Four overlapping roles come to mind: translator, commentator, inventor, and metacritic. *Translators* provide the lay public with interpretations of specialized disciplinary knowledge, making accessible not only the research that has direct, immediate applications to social issues and technological problems but also the speculative thought and practical philosophy generated from within the scholarly traditions that have less calculable but still discernable relevance to people's lived experiences. *Commentators* present the public with specific critiques and general explanatory models of society and its culture. Hybrid intellectuals are most often seen in the mass media fulfilling this rhetorical role. *Inventors* are creative thinkers who move beyond analysis of current public controversies and present alternative ways of thought. Edward Said once described this strategy of the public intellectual in this way: "one invents—in the literal use of the Latin word *inventio*, employed by rhetoricians to stress finding again or reassembling from past performances, as opposed to the romantic uses of invention as something you create from scratch—[one invents] goals abductively, that is hypothesizes a better situation from the known historical facts" (2001, 27).⁵ *Metacritics* comment on the rhetorical work of the translators, commentators, and inventors.

All three contributors to the present forum—Nathan Crick, Steve Fuller, and I—are rhetorical metacritics providing accounts of what it means to be a public intellectual today. But in writing for this specialized scholarly journal, we function as academic rather than public intellectuals. As academic scholars, each of us writes about the rhetorical relation between intellectual work within our professional disciplines and that within public spheres beyond the university. Our different accounts of that relationship center on our differing definitions of what constitutes a "public intellectual."

Here's one way to characterize our differences: Crick turns "public intellectual" into an honorific for all academics who produce ideas with significant effects beyond the academy, while Fuller uses the term to recommend that all academics should perform as critics of society, as agents of distributive justice for ideas. My definition is narrower on both counts, as a description of how the term is used and as an evaluation of how it should be used. I suggest that "public intellectual" be reserved for those thinkers who directly engage with and are engaged by nonacademic publics. Contra Crick, this usage means that only some academic scholars with effective ideas count as public intellectuals. Furthermore, there are only a limited number of academic scholars capable of

making the transition to acting effectively as public intellectuals, and therefore I would emphasize less than Fuller the requirement that all academics go public as translators, commentators, inventors, or metacritics. Many scholars simply have neither the sociopolitical desire nor the rhetorical skills needed to work as public intellectuals. Thus I would qualify Fuller's otherwise persuasive argument for academics-as-public-intellectuals by saying that his argument applies only to whole academic disciplines or interdisciplines and not to each individual member.⁶ Academic disciplines and their professional scholarly organizations, as collective bodies, should strongly support public engagement of their fields with various nonacademic publics. Rhetorical studies especially should continue both to analyze the cultural rhetorics permeating the public sphere and to support those academic rhetoricians who are actively engaged as public intellectuals.

Rhetoricians have a special role to play as metacritics in their role as public intellectuals. They can analyze the audience specificity of the translation process, the persuasive success or failure of various commentaries, and the tropes, arguments, and narratives used in strategies of invention. More generally, they can trace the rhetorical paths of thought in the public sphere.⁷ Rhetoricians can produce for various audiences analyses of how academics and nonacademics think in public and their shared and different rhetorics of thought, as well as what they appear to think about rhetoric itself. This rhetorical self-consciousness, so crucial to a deliberative democracy, remains the major contribution rhetoricians can make as academic intellectuals who go public.

Department of English
University of California, Irvine

Notes

1. For his distinction between "specific" and "universal" intellectuals, see Foucault (1980, 126–33).

2. See, for example, Bender (1993) Dean (1994); Michael (2000); and Melzer, Weinberger, and Zinman (2003). Cf. Said (1994); Robbins (1993); and Fuller (2005).

3. For a less dismissive argument that acknowledges my substantial rhetorical pragmatist debts to Fish, see Mailloux (1998).

4. For a range of such rhetoricians, self-identified and otherwise, see Wells (1996); Eberly (2000); Hauser (1999); and Warner (2005).

5. See Mailloux (2003) for further discussion.

6. Given the full and wide-ranging nature of Fuller's project, it is probably not surprising that I find a few other points with which I disagree. However, they seem less central to Fuller's general argument about the proper role of intellectuals. Those points range from his curious proposal to reduce tenure-stream hiring requirements (from a Ph.D. to an M.A.) to his more serious objections to the pragmatist tradition's neglect of evaluating ideas in relation to their material conditions of production (see Fuller 2003). On the latter point, I would simply say that I am much less certain than Fuller that neopragmatism automatically separates judgments of an idea's consequences from its material conditions of production. If "material conditions" of an "idea's transmission" include,

as Fuller rightly suggests, “who said it, when and where it was said, and for what reason and to what end it was said” (2003, 28), then at least *rhetorical* pragmatism would take such material factors of production into consideration in critiquing an intellectual’s ideas. For a pragmatist of almost any stripe, a criticism of past ideas as they functioned in the past is both a judgment situated in the present and a part of that present’s evaluation of how those ideas might work in the future. The past context will be judged more or less relevant to future contexts; and thus the material conditions of past ideas may or may not turn out to be a significant predictor of how those ideas will work in the present and future.

7. For elaboration of this cultural rhetoric project, see Mailloux (2006).

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