

A Better Time and A Better Place: Global Political Consciousness and New Forms of Public Intellectualism

In 1999 Arab and Israeli musicians were brought together in the German city of Weimer to play in an orchestra as a part of cultural program that celebrated the 250th anniversary of the birth of German writer Johann Wolfgang Goethe. Organized by American Palestinian public intellectual Edward Said and his Israeli friend, musical director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Daniel Barenboim, the orchestra played music which celebrated Goethe's passionate interest in Islam. The experiment was based upon Goethe's "West-East Divan" poems which Said believed was utterly "unique in the history of Western culture" (Guzelimian 2002) because the poems celebrated other cultures during a time when Europe dominated the world.

Music and political action have long been associated but the orchestra was not producing songs of protest or ideological inspiration. Rather the experiment was an effort to deploy the "ethical potential" of music (Etherington 2007) to create a social impact and "embody an ideal." Said wanted to draw an analogy with contemporary society in which the globalization of Western culture had created a suspicion and distrust of other cultures, casting them as inferior or threatening. Said believed that by bringing young Israeli and Arab musicians together to play in the orchestra music could be used as a part of a voyage to understanding and representing each other's cultures (Guzelimian 2002). The intention of the orchestra was not to find a political solution to conflict in the Middle East but rather to foster the individual understanding necessary to the formation of a "community of civilizations" in a globalised world. The orchestra was to provide "a metaphor quite removed from politics" (McKenzie 2003) that could demonstrate the way differences can co-exist peacefully, in the same way orchestra's play many different notes and still produce harmony. "Music then became the common framework, the abstract language of harmony" (McKenzie 2003).

Said's use of music as a form of critical consciousness flowed from his belief that the critical theory that underpinned the "universal framework of comparative literature" (Etherington 2007) had become limited. He thought of this critical consciousness as "kind of consciousness that was aware of the non-textual (and) worldly affiliations of ideas to

power.” He saw music as a counterpoint presented an “atonal ensembles” could reveal the “spatial, geographical and rhetorical practices” that was necessary to “elucidate a complex and uneven topography” of relationships and forces. In other words Etherington (2007) suggests that the shift to atonal rather than the notion of the symphonic music reveals Said’s understanding that a “coherent arrangement of national identities” was not possible.

Whilst focused upon using music as a way of bringing people together, the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra was also an exercise in “cultural politics” that sought to intervene in the cultural process of representation to produce certain ideological values and beliefs (McGowan 2002). By facilitating conversations amongst the members of the orchestra, Said hoped to challenge, at a local level, the political agendas and national cultural identities of the Arabs and Israelis that contributed to the ongoing conflict between the two nations. Said wanted the conversations to be a part of a process that fostered a transnational political consciousness, which was a mode of thinking that Foucault (Rabinow 1994) had described as the new subjectivity in which citizens could change “ourselves, our way of being, our relationship with others, with things, with eternity, with god”. This collective global consciousness would define humans as more than citizens of a particular country, cultural group or political ideology and produce discussions that could lead to what Amartya Sen called a “globalised approach to basic ethics and political and social procedures” (Lawrence 2006).

Said recognized that in an increasingly fragmented, conflicted and globalised world, citizens needed to find new ways of working together to address transnational social and political concerns. He also saw that the formation of a global political consciousness required an understanding of the “other” and this was a function that he had theorized as central to public intellectualism during this 1993 Reith Lecture. For Said, intellectual practices had been co-opted to an “extraordinary degree” by power and thus public intellectuals had a responsibility to disturb the status quo and break down the “stereotypes and reductive categories that are so limiting to human thought and communication” (Said 1993). This included exploding fictions like East and West. It was intellectuals Said argued who as a part of their articulating and organizing role in society “should be the ones to question patriotic nationalism, corporate thinking, and a sense of class, racial or gender privilege” (Said 1993). In his later years Said, together with Pierre Bourdieu (2002) came to see that central to contemporary public intellectualism was also the need to

challenge the dominance of neo liberalism and marketplace fundamentalism and the way it alienated the citizen from his or her personal sovereignty and consciousness.

It was this struggle to challenge the assumptions that implicitly framed society's thinking that permanently exiled intellectuals and made them the "author of a language that tries to speak the truth to power" (Said 1993). It is the spirit of "opposition rather than accommodation, that grips me because the romance, the interest, the challenge of intellectual life is to be found in dissent against the status quo at a time when the struggle on behalf of under-represented and disadvantaged groups seems so unfairly weighted against them" (Said 1993).

Said could see in the contemporary "networked world" characterized by its commodified culture, knowledge economy and structural shifts of the public sphere, that it was social movements or groups of like-minded citizens focused upon particular objectives that increasingly provided the collective mechanism for resisting power, speaking for the disempowered and transgressing traditional borders. It is social movements that provide the: "public spaces for new thoughts, activating new actors, generating new ideas, in short constructing new intellectual projects" (Eyerman & Jamison 1991). It is social movements that are producing the "new values" (Stalder 2007), alternative visions and discourses that characterize the complex, fluid social relations of civil global society. It is also social movements that are expressing collective identities, forming new sites of resistance and generating and disseminating new knowledge that are most likely to bring about "fundamental social change" (Eyerman & Jamison 1991).

At the same time social movements and their collective political actors began to deploy intellectual practices to challenge the status quo and politically mobilize citizens, individual public intellectuals were widely reputed to be dead (Jacoby 1989, Bloom 1987, Furedi 2004). This tension between the individual public intellectual as a declining social category and the expansion of intellectual discourse as a political and cultural activity in social movements reflects the impact of transformations to the public, social and political spheres. Public intellectualism remains an adjunct to the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and is very much alive and is being enacted in social movements. Importantly these movements are providing the form and substance of transnational intellectual practices necessary for the formation of a global political consciousness which is central to the formation of a community of civilizations.

What is Public Intellectualism?

Public intellectualism is a function that has been historically, socially and politically contingent so it is difficult to totalize its operation. It has an ancient history related to philosophy and religion but its current form emerged during the European Enlightenment when Kant theorized rational intellectual and scholarly practices as an adjunct to democratic practices and public life. He positioned scholars and intellectuals as moderators of public debates about power, and defenders of liberal democratic principles and reason.

For this paper public intellectualism is defined not as an individual function or social category. Rather it is seen as a collective cultural activity that deploys intellectual practices to intervene in social processes to create cultural knowledge and generate political action. Public intellectualism across its many theorizations (Julien Benda 1927, Karl Manneheim 1929, Antonio Gramsci 1932, Edward Said 1993) is consistently defined by its commitment to mapping the terrain of power and documenting the changing social relations of society. Public intellectualism engages in this process as a part of creating social meaning and fostering progressive social change based upon a belief in the emancipation of humanity and that “a better time and a better place are possible” (Ochoa 2006). The public intellectual’s function remains associated with education and influence and the transmission and mediation of ideas. “The actions of the intellectual are creative and public and are intended to move others to a new awareness of being” (Eyerman, 1994). This definition of public intellectualism is broad enough to remain consistent with Kant’s 1784 theorization of intellectual practices as a mode of political intervention and state accountability, as well as accommodate its more contemporary expression as a part of social movements and the production of the spaces for new ideas, debates and struggle.

Reports of my death are premature.

Before I outline the characteristics of public intellectualism enabled by social movements like the West East Divan Orchestra, I will first overview the current debates around the death of public intellectualism.

The extent of the crisis confronting intellectual practices was reflected in the emergence of the term “public intellectual” in the early 1990s. The insertion of the word public in front of the word intellectual was an effort to remind academics and scholars, who had largely withdrawn from public commentary, of their obligations to society (Small 2004). Yet the term public intellectual has done nothing to make the function more visible or its function

clearer. Indeed, the term itself has become problematic, affecting citizens' understanding of the value of the function. Robert Manne declared it a "tautology" (Dunlop 2003) and Sylvia Lawson saw it "not a useful category" (Vistonay 2005). Epstein described it as a "phrase, in short, that absorbs no truth whatsoever" (Etzioni 2006) whilst Said (2001) admitted it was devoid of "any coherent and defineable separate meaning or existence."

The crisis that led to the emergence of the term public intellectual has been extensively documented. (Hofstadter 1964, Bloom 1987, Jacoby 1989; Said 1993, Furedi 2004, Dessaix 1989, Michael 2000, Posner 2001, Jones 2007, Etzioni 2006). There are several reoccurring and related narratives about the death of the function, particularly as a coherent social group. The decline has been attributed to the loss of its elite, privileged and authoritative status in modern society. This narrative constructs public intellectuals as an anachronistic elite social group who are no longer necessary in contemporary democratic mass modern society life. Those who subscribe to this story argue that intellectuals in response to their loss of privilege have abandoned their responsibilities to civil society as mediators between power and citizens and taken refuge in university careerism and professionalism (Jacoby 1989, Hofstadter 1963).

Another narrative links the decline to the emergence of a knowledge economy which has commodified intellectual practices, aligning them with various ideological interests and producing them as a range of partisan, scientific and expert content. In this story technology has expanded the distribution of cultural content at the same time that it has also undermined the deliberative components of public intellectualism necessary to political action. Public visibility and popularity have become the distinguishing characteristics of contemporary public intellectualism, which requires the producers of the content to comply with entertainment values as a part of persuading and influencing public opinion. In this context public intellectuals have been reconstituted as celebrities and publicists whose credibility is associated with their popularity. *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Michael Vistonay discovered this during his 2005 efforts to compile a list of Australia's 100 top public intellectuals. He noted that it was popularity related to name visibility that determined the final selection.

Related to this story about the impact of technology of the production of intellectual labor is the argument that public intellectuals have been transformed into Gouldner's (1979) "knowledge workers" and portrayed as self-serving elites who produce content to further

their own agendas. This characterization of intellectuals was well deployed by right-wing conservatives in the last decades, in which the rise of political populism has made it difficult to legitimate claims to represent others. In contemporary society the authoritative-hierarchical aspects of democracy have been made transparent and elites and publics now confront each other “in conditions of diminished social capital” (Higley & Pakulski 2006). This has contributed to a loss of trust in the representative institutions of public life and created a belief that unmediated public opinion is more authentic and representative of citizen requirements than Parliamentary debate (Hindess & Sawyer 2006). Consequently claims by intellectuals to have specialized knowledge or to speak on behalf of the common good have been labeled as the moralizing of an elite privileged few. In a similar vein the critical components of public intellectualism have also been challenged by what Frederic Jameson called the “corporate, collectivized, post individualistic age” (Rorty 1998) which has increasingly found little charm in critical evaluations and political deconstructions of collective society. Intellectuals who undertook the critique function were seen as members of the “parasitic class of critics” and “nasty niggling beasts incapable of little more than carping and pedantic word-mongering” (Said 2001).

The perception of a decline in the credibility and relevancy of public intellectualism has also been related to the failure of democratic modern governments to meet the demands of their constituents and the loss of political choice created by the world-wide bipartisan adoption of marketplace fundamentalism. Historically left-wing ideologies served to justify a scholar’s critique of power as a process of defending universal values and the progress towards an alternative vision of society. With the triumph of conservative political forces in the last half of the 20th century, however, these left wing ideologies have lost the potency their ability to politically mobilise. According to C. Wright Mills who wrote in 1955 the “political rhetoric (of) liberalism’s key terms have become the common denominators of the political vocabulary and hence have been stretched beyond any usefulness as a way of defining issues and stating positions” (Etzioni 2006). The words freedom and equality have become symbols disassociated from any real understanding and therefore able to be randomly appropriated by various political ideologies. Global capitalism has created new notions of equality, justice and the common good by suggesting that market forces are the only legitimate mechanism for revealing the greatest benefit for the greatest number (Chompsky 2006, Dymond 2006). A consequence of this is a widespread belief in the decline in the quality of public life.

The decline in public intellectualism has also been related to broader shifts in culture. Antonio Gramsci (1971) defined culture as “the conquest of a superior consciousness whereby it becomes possible to understand one’s own historical value, function in life, rights and duties” (Adamson 1980). He argued that culture was used by power to control the expression of a collective political will (public opinion) and political leadership through the creation of models of moral and intellectual leadership (Mouffe 1979). Thus public intellectualism was seen as an effort by power to create hegemonic control. Political and social actors in modernity understand intellectual practices in this way and struggle “over symbolic, informational and culture resources” (Edleman 2001). In the recent US election people voted upon the basis of cultural ideas and values rather than class affiliations (Murphy 2008). Similarly, [I]en Ang (2008) argued that with the wide divisions in labour, knowledge and class, and coupled with uneven communication makes “people cluster around particular perspectives, ways of managing meanings and making sense of the world.”

Social Movements and the Sites of New Ideas

Despite the persistence of these stories of crisis, the function of public intellectualism is not dead. Rather globalization, the radicalization of democracy, the expansion of education and the communications revolution has changed the conditions which create intellectual practices. The intellectual labor that speaks for others and produces political agency as a part of the emancipation of humanity has been democratized and now occurs in a range of sites including the public spaces of social movements.

Social movements or groups of individuals who share similar values and ideologies have always existed, and provided public spaces for intellectual discourse and political action. Antonio Gramsci (1971) saw intellectual practices embedded in specific functions including “educators, organizers, leaders” (Forgacs 2000). Brian Head (1988) reinforced the idea of intellectual discourse as a socially situated practice in his scrutiny of political parties, religion, culture and trade union movements as the sites of intellectual content and political mobilisation. The importance of site and location to intellectual practice and its visibility was highlighted by Robert Dessaix (1998) when he noted the “the fragmentation of the public for intellectual discussion” contributed to the belief that public intellectuals were dead. In the intervening 10 years this has changed with Ideas Festivals being held in Adelaide and Brisbane.

Whilst it has been the collective action of traditions social movements like unions, feminists and environmentalists that have helped to establish the agendas of public life in the past, in the technologically-enabled “networked world” conceptualized by Manuel Castells (2000) modes of affiliation and association have been extended and the sites for public debate expanded.

This has affected the operation of public intellectualism in a variety of ways. New political actors have been introduced who Laclau and Mouffe (1985) observed “whose multiple social positions complicate interpretations of political agency based on a single, privileged principle of identity” (Edelman 2001). These new actors are therefore less visible and do not necessarily conform to the celebrity model of intellectualism established by the mass media. The intellectual practices of these new multi-dimensional, networked political actors are based upon the changing “space and flows” of social life which have created new identities and modes of communication and action that do not conform to the existing “understandings of deliberative, rational, disembodied public spheres” (McDonald 2006).

In these transnational social networks political agency is related to the construction of identities. Intellectual practices produce discourses that “embody power” in the way they form collective identities, create meaning and encourage political action or social change through the expression of shared values and new thoughts and ideas (Eyerman 1991). This is complicated because collective identities involve “acts of perception and construction as well as the discovering of preexisting bonds, interests and boundaries” (Polleta 2001). A range of mechanisms must be deployed to forge commonality including law, political status, nostalgia and imagined futures.

The intellectual practices of social movements have also expanded the construction of knowledge. Social movements rely upon relationships amongst its members to provide a basis for action and this has generated other forms of socially-grounded knowledge not restricted to modernist notions of absolute truth, universal principles or a “linear trajectory of history” (Said 2001). No single view is privileged in social movements because no single person holds all the answers. Many participate in knowledge production and so knowledge is created in a dialogic and discursive way. The resulting praxis-based mode of knowledge-creation transcends existing knowledge boundaries. Public intellectualism in social movements focuses upon connections, identity construction and fostering understanding. It therefore seeks to express the stories, narratives and goals of local contexts and to expand the commonality of these experiences across traditional

geographic, political and social boundaries. This is why Said was able to position the West East Divan Orchestra as an exercise in public intellectualism.

Other Forms of Public Intellectualism

Social movements therefore produce public intellectualism as a situated social practice enacted in a “series of critical networks” in a variety of collective sites (Oslender 2007) and grounded in action. The objectivity and impartiality traditionally associated with scholars and academics has been firmly rejected by social movements and it is Pierre Bourdieu (2002) who argued that if citizens were to break the stranglehold of the marketplace on human affairs, and restore their political agency, then scholars needed to intervene in the world of politics. He called for “new forms of organization capable of bringing together researchers and activists in a collective work of critique and proposition, leading to novel forms of mobilisation and action.” Bourdieu (1998) suggested that these new forms of association would create “new forms of communication between researchers and activists in which academics do not stand out as symbolic figureheads” but operate as “collective intellectuals seeking common ground . . . with resisting others in a nonhierarchical manner” (Oslender 2007). It is this form of collective intellectualism that creates sites of discussion and debate for “democratic, negotiation, and articulation of new constellations of project identities, decoupled from national, ethnic, or religious moorings” (Langman 2005). For some like Oslender (2007) the value of public intellectualism should be assessed not by the number of highly visible individuals but by “the proliferation of public spaces for the practices of critical, intellectual interventions.”

The relationships in social movement networks are created through shared values and ideologies, not hierarchical structured models of organization. Mohagadam (2000) has suggested that this is a more feminist model of networking which supports understanding between different located activists and encourages the political awakening of others (Langman 2005). This shift in social relations has structured public intellectualism differently. Intellectual practices are no longer focused upon critiquing existing modernist structures and processes, but also about imagining new ones. It is this step away from the rational and empirical to focus on the imagined possibility of things that enables public intellectualism to be produced creatively as history, novels and music. Indeed, for Edward Said public intellectualism became increasingly about not just focusing upon differences but also in finding sites of co-existence and reflecting a “global sensibility, a critical but sympathetic and felt awareness of an inhabited and cohabited world (Biswas 2007). Said saw the role of public intellectualism as understanding the contemporary global relations

as the product of particular histories and that the artificially constructed divisions created by history can be overcome as public intellectualism seeks to “universalize” any crisis in order to “give greater human scope to what a particular race or nation suffered, to associate that experience with the suffering of others” (Biswas 2007).

Public intellectualism in social movements is directed to individual citizens to “free their minds to alternatives by highlighting the way in which power within systems subjugate them” (Brocklesby & Cummings 1996). This shift recognises two things. First that human emancipation must be achieved via individual liberation, and two, that collective societal change is not the responsibility of one or a few intellectuals but rather in modern mass society it relies upon the concerted efforts of many engaged in public debate in many sites operating in a whole series of networks. The public are reconceptualised as participants in the conversation with power.

Public intellectualism in social movements is deployed to orchestrate progressive social change. In the past change was linear and “expressions of evolutionary logic” that could be “mapped out and projected out into the future” (McDonald 2006). This construction of change influenced how intellectual practices created knowledge. In the networked world, however change is fluid and shaped by “tipping points” that cannot be predicted. Change takes the “form of complex social systems reorganizing themselves in ways that cannot be predicted” (McDonald 2006). The idea of societal progress is still an ideology and whether “society is improving or decaying is a matter of whose values” are privileged when answering the question (Stalder 2006). Yet, the networked society still has the ability to “alter its own path of development” and it is the global social movements who have the power to foster the political agency necessary for change.

Public intellectualism in social movements is also defined by its resistance to global capitalism and the new inequities that it has created which threaten peace and individual political agency (Said 2001, Bourdieu 2003). Clive Hamilton (2006) documented the impact of capitalism on individuals and communities in Australia and he concluded that consumerism has created more insidious forms of inequity including a false consciousness that has led to the alienation of the individual’s sovereignty. Eva Cox (1995) similarly saw capitalism as a threat to the social inclusion which lies at the heart of civil society. At a global level the growing gap between the world’s richest and poorest nations has implications for global stability and political accountability, according to former United Nations Assistant secretary-general Hans Von Sponeck (2008).

Conclusion

The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra demonstrated how intellectual practices could be deployed to foster understanding and peace between conflicting identities. It demonstrated the way public intellectualism could operate as a socially-situated and collective form of ethical intervention (Bourdieu 2002) grounded in action, discursive practices and enabled by culture (Oslender, 2007, Eyerman 1994).

The orchestra also revealed how social movements can be the sources of new values, ideas and political agency that are not based upon concepts of uniformity but the value of differences. It is these cultural projects created by social movements that are best placed to produce the transnational consciousness that defines crucial components of contemporary public intellectualism.

Political theory has produced several views about the viability of a global world. Whether you believe Francis Fukuyama's (1989) prediction of the death of history and culture as a result of the homogeneity created by the world wide of adoption of market capitalism, or whether you subscribe to Samuel Huntington (1993) "clash of civilizations" and radicalization of minorities created by the threat of western hegemony to traditional cultural and religious identities, there is no doubt that Said's efforts to conceive of a global political consciousness grounded in shared values and a commitment to the formation of a peaceful "community of civilizations" is a more enticing third way.

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