

The Public Intellectual

Edited by Helen Small

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Contents

List of Contributors	vii
Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction <i>Helen Small</i>	1
1 The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals <i>Edward W. Said</i>	19
2 Pre-modern Intellectual Biography <i>Rita Copeland</i>	40
3 Humanism, Slavery, and the Republic of Letters <i>David Wallace</i>	62
4 Hamlet the Intellectual <i>Margreta de Grazia</i>	89
5 Deaths of the Intellectual: A Comparative Autopsy <i>Jeremy Jennings</i>	110
6 New Art, Old Masters, and Masked Passions <i>Linda S. Kauffman</i>	131
7 Apathy and Accountability: The Challenge of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission to the Intellectual in the Modern World <i>Jacqueline Rose</i>	159

Contents

8	The Sweatshop Sublime <i>Bruce Robbins</i>	179
9	“Every Fruit-juice Drinker, Nudist, Sandal-wearer . . .”: Intellectuals as Other People <i>Stefan Collini</i>	203
	Index	224

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Contributors

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Helen Small

Introduction

Helen Small

The word “Clercs,” which occurs throughout the book, is defined by M. Benda as “all those who speak to the world in a transcendental manner.” I do not know the English for “all those who speak to the world in a transcendental manner.”

(Translator’s note to Julien Benda, *The Treason of the Intellectuals* [1928])¹

The terms “public intellectual” is a fairly recent addition to the vocabulary of cultural debate. It is a not unproblematic one, as both Edward Said and Stefan Collini point out in their essays for this volume: close to, if not quite, a pleonasm. (What kind of intellectual would not merit the adjective “public” – even if only by dint of being published, or of speaking to others?) Having first gained currency in the United States a little over a decade ago, the phrase caught on in Britain comparatively slowly and has only really entered common usage within the last two or three years. It has signally failed to make an equivalent impression to date on the French and other European participants in what is, in most respects, an increasingly transnational conversation. It reflects, in other words, a new and predominantly American anxiety about the viability of what is still sometimes called “the profession of thought” – a concern that, in a society often thought of as peculiarly hostile to the intellectual life, most of those who might be expected to take responsibility for its cultivation seem, in the late twentieth century, to have withdrawn altogether from the public arena. As Joyce Carol Oates puts it, in a recent interview on the subject, “The term ‘intellectual’ is a very self-conscious one in the United States. To speak of oneself as an ‘intellectual’ is equivalent to arrogance and egotism, for it suggests that there is a category of persons who are ‘not-intellectual’.”² To speak of the “*public* intellectual,” then, would appear

to be a defensive manifestation of that self-consciousness: a deliberate decision to assert, in the face of perceived opposition, not just the continuing serviceability of the word “intellectual,” but to protest (too much?) that those to whom it is applicable, including perhaps oneself, have a role to play in public life.

But if the term “public intellectual” is the product of a specifically American cultural and historical context, the concerns it formalizes are in no way confined to the United States. Among the numerous clichés which have taken hold in writing about intellectuals in the West during the past several decades, two seem more persistent than any other: that public intellectuals are in serious decline, if not absolutely extinct, and (as contentiously) that we are at a point in history where the need for their re-emergence is particularly acute. The level of alarm differs, of course, as does the sense of what, if anything, needs to be done, but there is some agreement that an explanation is to be found in a series of structural changes across the course of the twentieth century which have fundamentally affected the ways in which we conceive of the public domain and the kinds of influence that the public intellectual can therefore wield. The increased power of the media and development of new information technologies; the expansion of higher education; greater state regulation of the universities and, simultaneously, their penetration by commercial and corporate interests; a widening gap between the fragmented and complexly interrelated nature of the public realms we inhabit and the simplified ways in which “being a public” still tends to be thought of³ – all these appear to have contributed to a diminution in the perceived legitimacy and felt responsibility of those few writers and academics still willing to define themselves as intellectuals.

They have also led to more evident tensions between the terms “intellectual,” “writer,” and, especially, “academic.” A much higher proportion of the individuals who attract the label “intellectuals” now are tenured academics rather than the freelance writers or journalists who were prominent a generation or so back (though the shift is nowhere near as pronounced as some writing on the subject would lead one to believe). Given the changes outlined above, many have doubted whether the academic can plausibly be an intellectual, especially when the institution providing him or her with financial support seeks in some measure to define the kinds of work undertaken.

Michael Ignatieff’s 1997 lament for an older, better, public life of the mind can stand as representative of one familiar strain of response. For Ignatieff, the prestige of an earlier generation of writers (he

Introduction

instances Sartre, Beauvoir, Camus, and, in the British context, Priestley, Berlin, Ayer, Gombrich) “depended on habits of deference which have rightly had their day. . . . But however deferential it might have been, it was a *public* culture.” What we have lost is not merely intelligence disinterestedly and visibly at work within public life (and therefore a good in itself), but a more active custodianship of our cultural values:

The information revolution has made the intellectual’s translation function more important than ever. [. . .] We know too much, understand too little, and when we turn to the humanities and social sciences for help, what do we get? The tenured radicals who went into academe after 1968 were supposed to free the university from the conformist functionalism of American social science. Instead, they set to work erecting new stockades of conformism: neo-Marxist scholasticism, deconstruction, critical theory – the language games people play when they have given up on contributing to public debate.⁴

Among the several points of incoherence which emerge in the course of this jeremiad, and others of its genre,⁵ is a high degree of uncertainty about where exactly today’s defaulting intellectuals have gone wrong in their interaction with the public sphere. Ignatieff’s most serious accusation is that the humanities and social sciences have reneged on their responsibilities toward “liberal and social democracy,” epitomized for him in the post-war Britain of the Reithian BBC, the Third Programme, and (to augment the list) Penguin Books. “Ashamed of their élitism,” the “tenured radicals” are cowards in the face of “a populist loathing of high culture itself.” But it is far from clear whether this “sullen populism which holds most forms of genuine intellectual expertise and authority in contempt” is a consequence of the failure of the intellectuals, as the apparent retributiveness of “sullen” would imply, or a persistent trait of the masses, against which intellectuals have always had to struggle: “From Zola’s ‘J’accuse’ to Havel’s ‘Letter of Husak,’ intellectuals used the power of the word to fight intimidation and prejudice.” In Ignatieff’s characterization of populism it is difficult not to suspect nostalgia for deference; in his characterization of true intellectuals, it is difficult not to suspect a more dubious nostalgia for the glory of persecution (“Now Havel’s voice is fading, and with it the myth he embodied risks being forgotten.”).⁶

One of the much remarked oddities of such declinist narratives is that they are as readily the reflex of those on the political left as those on the political right (or, indeed, pretty much any position in

between). So, Ignatieff's defense of liberalism produces an almost exact replica of Pierre Bourdieu's *attack* on a "neo-liberal consensus" among French intellectuals only too happy to play up to the media and subordinate their critical function to "the demand of economic and political powers."⁷ Moreover Ignatieff, for all his identification with the liberal tradition of Isaiah Berlin, is ready enough to endorse the title of Roger Kimball's paranoically conservative *Tenured Radicals* (1990), which claimed to uncover an organized conspiracy of left-wing university professors attempting to defraud the American public of its cultural inheritance. This concertinaing of the politics of intellectual debate has most often been observed in the American context, where it was particularly highlighted by the almost simultaneous publication in 1987 of Russell Jacoby's leftish dirge *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* and its conservative twin, Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*.⁸ Whether the critic in question takes his or her critical bearings from Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault,⁹ or from Leo Strauss and T.S. Eliot, the narrative tends to run along uncannily similar lines: intellectual life has become increasingly specialized and academized since the post-war expansion of higher education, and individual intellectuals now derive what compromised authority remains to them from the deployment of a specific or merely technical expertise in place of any general moral authority to speak on matters of cultural and social moment.

In keeping with the political sympathies and interests represented in this volume, this introduction focuses primarily on the ways in which certain strands of American writing about the public intellectual in recent years have encouraged (rightly in my view) a rethinking of the nature of professionalism, redefining the intellectual and the public sphere so as to allow for responsiveness to new, as well as older, forms of culture and for the intellectual as an active, rather than remotely adjudicatory, presence in political and cultural life. A particular emphasis will therefore emerge in what follows on how "action" itself might have to be reconceived in its relation to thought. This involves playing down – indeed resisting – another version of what might be called the public intellectual: those who influence public policy more directly by acting as advisers to governments and members of think tanks, government commissions, and policy committees. The introduction will also have relatively little to say about new information technologies and new forms of media, primarily because it is as yet far from clear what their effect has been on the role of the intellectual. "New media" such as the Net, electronic news, and e-mail have

Introduction

dramatically increased the speed with which information can be dispersed, and the quantity of information available to users, but they have not supplanted older modes of communication (official reports, government papers, radio, television, speeches). The choice offered by much recent writing on politics and technological change, between an entirely dispersed public (whether good or bad in its implications) and utopian new publics coming together irrespective of nationality and ethnicity, is surely a false one.¹⁰ It is more plausible (to take a lead from post-modernist writing about social spaces) that technologies such as the Web and e-mail increasingly permit people to move in and out of different “knowledge situations” in which they have widely varying degrees of expertise and influence. In short, they may operate as public intellectuals in some public contexts, while in others they will have no claim to intellectual authority at all. New technologies have not been the cause of this multiplying of roles and spaces, but they have served to make it much more evident.

It is certainly the case, as Edward Said points out, that new media require those who accept the title of public intellectual to be more than ever resourceful in their selection of different locations for speech and writing. But it is also the case (particularly with the Web) that the choice of forum is less than ever entirely theirs, since an article or speech given in one context will be quickly filleted and networked into any number of sites. And, as with the continuing presence of those who, even as they bemoan the loss of the public intellectuals of the past, seem to others amply to fulfill that role, there is no straightforward narrative to be found here of new modes of address taking over from and ousting old ones, new heterogeneous versions of audiences taking over from the old concept of the public sphere. Looked at from one angle, the question of the definition and viability or otherwise of the public intellectual is one way of examining the nature and consequences of social change much more broadly.

* * *

For those who take seriously the diagnosis that public life in Western democracies is no longer of a kind that permits claims to general intellectual authority, declinism, of whatever political coloring, is too plainly a posture rather than an answer. Much of the writing which came out of France on this subject in the 1990s, and which found a prominent venue in *Le Monde*, has taken the view that resistance is possible so long as one looks not to other people or to external social

structures for authentication, but within, to one's own sense of a fundamental ethical obligation entailed in thinking and writing. The danger, of course, is that writing in this vein quickly generates a new set of pieties, not so different from the old ones, about the duties one exercises when one no longer possesses powers or rights. As Zygmunt Bauman puts it (summarizing Lyotard), the "duty" of intellectuals to make themselves heard now becomes "a duty without authority": "in our post-legitimation era whatever we do cannot count on the comfort of supra-human truth which would release us from the responsibility for doing what we do and convince us and everyone else that we have the right to do it and that what we do is right."¹¹ Here a more discreet form of declinism, but declinism nonetheless, gets incorporated into a heroic individualist narrative which is, at base, remarkably little different from the stance taken by Julien Benda in *La Trahison des clercs*, his classic protest against the decline of the priestly intellectual in 1920s Europe (or, for that matter, from the implicit self-representation of Ignatieff). In the process, any force the word "public" might possess effectively disappears. The only notion of community allowed for is the purely notional community of writers and readers willing to be persuaded by such a concept of duty – though, to discriminate between Lyotard and Bauman, that community is more readily discernible in Bauman's emphasis on the possibilities for thought facing "the intellectuals" (plural, out there somewhere) than in Lyotard's references to "the writer" (singular) struggling to recognize what it is that "the Other demands."¹²

For anyone seeking a definition of intellectual labor as more than a private "taking of thought" about one's relations to the world, this is plainly not enough. One of the most persistent anxiety reflexes that Stefan Collini identifies, in his analysis of the literature on intellectuals, is a desire for intellectuals to be somehow clearer and more effective than (putative) non-intellectuals in their translation of thought into politically effective action – even as a counterwish is expressed for them to remain somehow untainted by politics and economics. That conflict of impulses lies at the heart of most, if not all, of the ambivalences and confusions that writing about intellectuals seems peculiarly prone to generate. Writers about intellectuals typically expect more from their subjects than from themselves, and expect it specifically in the gray zone (whose grayness is resented) where thought either does or doesn't issue into deeds. To urge that the intellectual go forth and act is, implicitly or explicitly, to want to espouse a notion of action informed and justified by thought (or the intellec-

Introduction

tual would degenerate into a mere politician or pundit). To urge, on the other hand, that the intellectual remain aloof from action, is to recognize, or perhaps to fear, that thought cannot possibly maintain its purity, its moral credibility, or – less romantically – a sufficient complexity when it “descends” to the marketplace or the television studio.

Pressure has come from several quarters in recent years to move the terms of debate on past the modes of elegy and vituperation (from the outside), melancholy renunciation or equally melancholy heroism (from the inside), and toward a definition of the intellectual which includes the possibility of meaningful action. One of the more helpful forms it has taken involves resisting the assumption that affiliation of intellectuals to universities necessitates a diminution of their claim to *be* intellectuals or to remain politically credible. Significantly, that impulse has come from within the American academy, where writers on intellectual and cultural life (particularly those on the political left) have been conscious of a higher degree of separation from their national public life than academics in other countries, and have had to find their audience in a transnational rather than a transoccupational community. Bruce Robbins’s Introduction to the 1990 collection of essays, *Intellectuals: Aesthetics, Politics, Academics*, anticipated the fuller statement of his defense of the academic profession (as opposed to its administration), in *Secular Vocations* (1993):

the conceptual relocation of intellectuals *within* rather than outside occupations, which is an essential step in their grounding, is also an ethical demand to achieve vocationally “contented lives” without sacrificing political consistency. . . . If the intellectual is a figure of the political imagination, a character who cannot be separated from the various political narratives in which he or she appears, grounded in the emergences and declines of successive oppositional forces and institutions, then we must not call for a return of intellectuals to an illusory state of prior autonomy, but must reconsider the political narratives whose peripeteias and dénouements have left the intellectual hanging or unraveling. That is, we must consider the intellectual as a character in search of a narrative.¹³

Any such narrative would involve (as Andrew Ross argues in the same volume) an end to the commonplace post-1968 equation of professionalization with political apostasy, and of an expanded definition of culture with loss of cultural values. It might also involve letting go the characteristic conviction of academics on the political left that the job of the intellectual is always and necessarily to be a voice of opposition:

New intellectuals . . . are likely to belong to different social groups and have loyalties to different social movements. . . . In the face of today's uneven plurality of often conflicting radical interests it is quite possible that they will be leading spokespersons, diffident supporters and reactionaries at one and the same time – that is, legitimists in some areas of political discourse and action, and contesters in others.¹⁴

This helps, but it still leaves unanswered the question of whether the intellectual has a role to play in defining those groups and movements and interests, or whether those groups and movements and interests take on their own existence, without help or patronage from outside. Much recent writing has been rightly skeptical of an idealization of “the people” implicit in assuming the latter position – as if “[r]eality just happens in factories, asylums, and prison houses; and the expressions that emanate from those sites are not ‘about’ . . . experiences; they *are* those unmediated meaning-events.”¹⁵ But it is not so easy to decide what can or should be done if writers' public interventions are not simply to be confined to the professions and institutions in which they work. For Cornel West what is required is an active redefinition of the publics to whom we speak (as well as redefinition of ourselves) through a “prophetic pragmatism” which owes something to Gramsci's notion of the organic intellectual, but which also moves beyond it. In order to fulfill (what West takes to be) the intellectual's task of trying “to preserve a sense of the whole,” he or she must be alert to the multiple constituencies of today's public:

What I actually mean by organic is a much more fluid and constructed notion of participating in the organizations of people. So when I think of my own organic link with the black community, it's not that I am somehow thoroughly immersed in the black community, in some pantheistic way. Rather, I'm simply contesting among ourselves how we can best generate visions, analysis, and forms of political action. I want to say “be organized,” rather than “be organic.”¹⁶

This kind of organized, and organizing, intellectual does not just speak to or for these constituencies, but gets involved in struggles between different interests and alliances which will, inevitably, be divisive at times as well as co-operative. He or she turns thought to action, but modestly (or not immodestly) seeks to let both thought and action be responsive to pressure from others.

If other intellectuals have not rushed to embrace these “micropolitical” and “multicontextual” versions of who and what they should

be, either in America or elsewhere – and Bernard-Henri Lévy’s recent collection of interviews with prominent writers, *What Good Are Intellectuals?* (2001), provides ample evidence that they have not¹⁷ – it may be because thinking in such strategic and dispersed terms makes it difficult to articulate recognizably coherent statements of allegiance and purpose, let alone general propositions of theory.¹⁸ The nature of that contradiction, or at the very least that competition of needs, has been perhaps most fully analyzed and politicized in the course of post-colonial criticism’s engagement with Foucault, and with post-structuralism more generally. There, the impulse to reject the possibility of political (and symbolic) representation altogether and to declare the obsolescence of the whole category of “the intellectual” – as Foucault and Gilles Deleuze did in their much cited conversation “Intellectuals and Power”¹⁹ – all too evidently closes the door on those many political movements for whom representation is, or would be, a new, hard-won, historically overdue means to a better life, not the tainted residue of imperial or class or masculinist power.²⁰

But, having diagnosed the failure of post-structuralism sufficiently to take account of who is announcing the death of the intellectual (and on whose behalf), post-colonial theory has often found itself struggling for a vocabulary which will give expression to a concept of intellectual commitment that can be more than a merely context-led and hectic shuttling between the specific and the general, the local and the global, the active and the renunciative. “Praxis” is, by tacit consent, too theory-led a term, too static, and associated too closely with forms of Marxism which have, themselves, fallen foul of the “no imperialistic generalizations” rule. But some of the most conceptually promising metaphors for rethinking the public sphere so that intellectuals might more viably engage with it have proved pretty remotely utopian to date, even when selected with the explicit intention that they be more than just prophetic or idealizing.²¹

The importance of multiculturalism as a spur to the redefinition of the intellectual as political agent, or would-be political agent, is – like the term “public intellectual” – a recognizably American emphasis (though one which is becoming stronger in other Western contexts). It has the effect of pressing the terms of the debate in a significantly different direction from the forms it currently takes in France – even as France remains, for many commentators, the natural starting point for any analysis of the public intellectual. France’s significance in the history of intellectuals – its exemplarity and, at the same time, its exceptionality – are themselves in need of more skeptical analysis than

they generally receive, as both Jeremy Jennings and Stefan Collini argue here. But in so far as French accounts of the decline of the intellectual, and his (almost always “his”) potential for re-emergence, are different in tenor and explanatory framework from their American and British counterparts, it may be, as Jennings argues, because French intellectual culture has so far been reluctant to come to terms with the implications of multiculturalism – and even, more fundamentally, to endorse the “reality” of social groupings.

Here, to take a provocative example, is Jean Baudrillard in a 1985 essay announcing the illusory function of the intellectual in a world where “the real” has been entirely absorbed into “its statistical, simulative projection in the media.” In such a context,

... the masses are deeply aware that they do not have to make a decision about themselves and the world; that they do not have to wish; that they do not have to know; that they do not have to desire.

The deepest desire is perhaps to give the responsibility for one’s desire to someone else. A strategy of ironic investment in the other . . . Clerks are there for that, so are professionals . . . Publicity, information, techniques, the whole intellectual and political class are there to tell us what we want, to tell the masses what they want – and basically we thoroughly enjoy this massive transfer of responsibility because perhaps, very simply, it is not easy to know what we want; because perhaps, very simply, it is not very interesting to know what we want to decide, to desire. Who has imposed all this on us, even the need to desire, unless it be the philosophers?²²

Here the intellectuals play a double role. On the one hand they are merely fictive authorities: psychological projections of the masses who thereby get rid of the burden of choosing what may or may not matter out of the welter of information in the world – a burden the masses know it is not in fact necessary to accept (hence the “ironic” nature of their investment). On the other hand, the intellectuals’ authority is more than just a fiction, in so far as they have been historically responsible for exerting upon the masses the pressure to desire. In all this, they are (in a characteristically Baudrillardian twist to more conventionally left-wing narratives) merely part of a much larger system: aligned with the politicians and the bureaucratic functionaries, the media, and the opinion polls, and all the other means by which the public is invited to see itself, illusorily, as a public. In this account of the masses, there is no place for an articulation of social groupings, let alone ethnicities (which get no mention at all) which will not be just

as “unreal” as any other version of the public. The only source of power imagined for “the people” is one of attitude, not action: the “radically” silent antagonism of the ironist.²³

At the other end of the spectrum of debate, and far more influential within France at present, is Pierre Bourdieu’s defiant defense of universalism. His concept of “a corporatism of the universal,” a collective “*Internationale des intellectuels*,” reasserts the political and moral importance of a transnational community of autonomous intellectuals as defenders of universal cognitive, aesthetic, and ethical values in the face of post-modernist “irrationalism” and “nihilism.”²⁴ Unsurprisingly, even his most sympathetic critics have found it difficult to defend this stance against charges of political and cultural high-handedness. As a recent commentator puts it, a little wanly: despite Bourdieu’s defense of France’s immigrant populations against racism and his “exemplary sensitivity” to issues of sexuality, his universalism “remains in the final instance strangely exclusive,” vulnerable to charges that it is, at heart, yet “another example of the ‘false universalism of the West’.”²⁵

If differences in openness to multiculturalism and in the perception of “the people” are in part responsible for current disparities between French and other Western accounts of the intellectual, there is nevertheless an evident desire in both contexts for a language of political and cultural life that can be in some measure holistic or at least coherently generalizing. That desire may, I am suggesting, be one reason for the curious persistence of the old narratives of decline and/or imminent revitalization of the intellectual – and the difficulty for the critic of that literature in getting beyond the merely diagnostic. Another, and simpler, may be that even some of those most articulate about the need for better ways of conceiving of “the public intellectual” at some level prefer the old ones. Talk of the decline of intellectuals or (its rhetorical counterpart) assertions that the time is ripe for a re-emergence of the intellectual, in however compromised or qualified a form, have in common a desire to raise an ideal standard over what we do (or think we once did). Put bluntly, they make us feel good about ourselves. Speaking about intellectuals has, in other words, been a way of posing the perennially troubling question of how much what we say matters.²⁶ To which the answer will always, inevitably, be “not as much as we might wish” – but perhaps also, in most cases, as much as we ought to wish.

* * *

The essays in this volume attempt – of course – to identify, and avoid repeating, the clichés. Taken together, they shift the focus of writing about intellectuals in several ways. The geographical reach of the collection is broad, though by no means inclusive. All its contributors are American or British (or both), though several have other national affiliations as well. Most of their essays are geographically comparative, none more so than Edward Said’s opening essay, which returns to the topic of his 1993 Reith lectures in order to consider what the effect of the major political and economic transformations of the last eight years has been on the definition of the writer and intellectual. In his widely comparative analysis, it is now no longer possible, if it ever was, to avoid politicization of the intellectual’s work, but it is also more than ever difficult for intellectuals to define their own audiences. The urgent tasks of today’s public intellectual are, he argues, to keep the past visible, and to construct fields of political and cultural co-existence as the outcome of intellectual labor. In order to do so, he or she will have to be unprecedentedly resourceful in taking advantage of the range of platforms available for speech, and, perhaps, unprecedentedly alert to the dangers of “depoliticized or aestheticized submission.” Taking a cue from Adorno’s account of modern music as unassimilable to its social setting, Said’s version of the intellectual is, finally, at home only in an equivalently “exilic” mode of art: painfully aware of the impossibility of finding an adequate solution to political and cultural conflicts such as that between Palestine and Israel, but nonetheless committed to the labor of trying.

Perhaps a more striking difference between this volume and most other writing about intellectuals (and one also exemplified by Said’s article) is that it elasticates by several centuries the historical time span usually felt to be pertinent to the debate. Rather than taking their bearings from the Dreyfus Affair, the essays by Said, Rita Copeland, David Wallace, and Margreta de Grazia seek to uncover much deeper roots to our ways of thinking about how intellectuals have historically been defined and redefined in public consciousness. Copeland’s account of the centrality to that process of intellectual biography, from Hellenistic late antiquity, through the university culture of thirteenth-century Europe, to the heresy trials of fifteenth-century Oxford and Prague, provides an important corrective to any assumption that the “grounding” of intellectuals is a late nineteenth-century phenomenon. Her analysis of the shifting nature of individual intellectuals’ relationship to their institutions, and, especially, to the concept of the *techne*, or systematization of education, is also a vital reminder that the terms and