The Social Construction of the Public Intellectual: A Plea for the Humanities

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Abstract: The present study undertakes an analysis of the recent surge of interest in essayistic literature, hence shaping with stronger emphasis and raiding awareness in a powerful manner about the role of public intellectuals, generally in all types of societies—across time and cultures, and particularly in our age marked by an increased focus on the image versus the word, dominated by technological advancement to such an extent that it can no longer be called progress given the decreasing moral dimensions, the acceleration of speed to the disadvantage of attention, entailed by the digital turn, all taking place in the so-called "civilization of the spectacle" (Mario Vargas Llosa) "civilization of illiteracy" (Mihai Naidin) or a game of change and interplay between culture and civilization, advancement and decline subject to the force of the digital turning point which has impacted human behavior. The focal point of the present study is setting forth essayistic literature as the most effective vector and platform for artists, writers, academics as prominent public intellectuals, protecting, pursuing and promoting cultural values.

Keywords: literary elite, public intellectual, essayistic literature, humanities

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"The sciences alone cannot illuminate the entirety of human experience without the light that comes from arts and humanities." (Antonio R. Damasio, "The Strange Order of Things. Life, Feeling and the Making of the Cultural Mind")

"The humanities and arts play a central role in the history of democracy … Literature and philosophy have changed the world" (Ruth O'Brien, foreword to "Not for Profit" by Martha Nussbaum)

A prerequisite for our present study is to investigate, at this preliminary stage, the question set forth by Amitai Etzioni and explore the status of current public intellectuals faced with the potential challenge of being regarded "an endangered species"—the topic of an elaborate, thoroughly argumented and highly informed discussion in a relatively recent essay "Public Intellectuals. An Endangered Species" included in volume with a homonymous title, edited by Amitai Etzioni and Alyssa Bodwitch.[1] The thesis of the present study aims to be quite ambitious—due to the complexity of the topic, eluding accurate definition—and equally relevant for a much needed discussion and contemporary analysis of a topical issue nowadays: what is the role of public intellectuals and which are the most congenial forums for reaching out and interacting with audiences. It is noteworthy to recall some of the definitions selected by the same sociologist, in the aforementioned study, highlighting some characteristics of the public

1. Amitai Etzioni and Alyssa Bowditch, *Public Intellectuals: An Endangered Species* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Ltd, 2006)

intellectual as people who are "well-travelled and broadly educated men of letters who speak on a myriad of topics … shaping public opinion … addressing serious or grand issues "with exquisite depth of knowledge." And, above all, "the intellectual should be the moral conscience of his society" an opinion uttered by C Wright Mills quoted by the same source. Furthermore, we endorse the hypothesis that their mission is not so much about addressing "normative" statements but rather "engaging in moral deliberations because all major public and social policies that they routinely criticize have important moral dimensions"[2] even if their reliable opinions trigger disruption of comfortable or single-minded perspectives, sometimes in conflict with the ingrained attitudes or beliefs where scientific advancement might be in peril of losing value, depth; hence, the intellectual has the moral duty and public responsibility of restoring cultural essence and spiritual meaning. Mention should also be made here of the disquieting, daring and powerful analysis undertaken by Tony Judt on the prominent role of intellectuals, the French ones in this case, with a voice that turned out to be sometimes volatile, hesitant, prone to biases or influences, but at other times, found its resources and power, though to promote stability, balance particularly at times when society may seem to lose direction, caring for enduring truth over relative power.[3] Another terminological distinction stemming from structural differences, echoing the impact on and extent of the audience, related to the societal function of public intellectuals, refers to the two relatively opposite approaches: a scholarly one versus a more popular one, where the former stands for the academic type of intellectual—with a deeply theorized language—whereas the latter one stands for the so-called bohemian type of intellectual.[4] Mention should be made that public intellectuals are in a class by themselves, different in kind and quality from the proliferating category of "talking heads" or "pundits" on TV, despite the appeal of highly interactive contemporary media.[5]

Since ideas can define, shape and change a society, it is imperative to consider the various arenas and generators of ideas (academics, journalists, novelists, scientists, artists), their audience, as well as the *role of the public intellectual* nowadays. Russel Jacoby was the first one to put into circulation, in the 1980s, the term "public intellectual" in his acclaimed book "The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe" still subject to ongoing debates and informative reviews since it publication in 1987, which "touched a nerve, a widespread feeling that intellectual life had shifted, perhaps contracted … *The Last Intellectuals* was less a lament than a call for intellectuals to reclaim the vernacular and assert themselves in public life."[6]

About three decades earlier, Isaiah Berlin—landmark in the history of ideas—published an essay "The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy`s View of History", which gained more popularity and fame than the author anticipated, providing the famous by now distinction between two types of intellectual. Originating from a statement attributed to the Greek poet Archilochus: "the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing", Isaiah Berlin further expands upon this idea in the sense that foxes "lead lives, perform acts, entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal", are fascinated by a variety of ideas, seize upon the essence of many experiences, pursuit many ends; whereas hedgehogs relate everything to a single central vision, an all embracing system to a greater or lesser extent coherent or articulate, they advocate universal principles.[7]

The major aim of the present study is to showcase the writer as public intellectual, a "disturbing moralist" and treasurer of humane values, as the writer "belongs to the realm of the history of ideas" however, each text is written to be addressed at a large audience, a public relying on their narrative authority, not merely a creative imagination.[8] It is relevant, at this stage, to include a reference to E. M. Forster`s reflection on the concept of public intellectual: "I am speaking like an intellectual, but the

2. Ibid., 1–3.

3. Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectual 1944-1956* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).

4. Amitai Etzioni and Alyssa Bowditch, 9–15.

5. Amitai Etzioni and Alyssa Bowditch, 18.

6. Russell Jacoby, "The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe," xvi, xx.

7. Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy`s View of History* (London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, 1953), 10

8. Odile Heynders, "Voices of Europe, Literary Writers as Public Intellectuals", lecture; and *Writers as Public Intellectuals: Literature, Celebrity, Democracy, Palgrave Studies in Modern European Literature* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

intellectual, to my mind, is more in touch with humanity than is the confident scientist, who patronizes the past, over- simplifies the present, and envisages a future where his leadership will be accepted" quoted in and mentioned by Odile Heynders book on writers as public intellectuals[9].[9] The foundation for the main thesis in the present study relies on a reappraisal of the literary essay as a prolific, vivid, enduring, genre enjoying a longstanding tradition in the area of intellectual preoccupation evinced by writers with utmost responsibility endorsed by their artistic ability to formulate ideas in appropriate and appealing ways that people could find congenial and thought provoking.

More recently, the reputed contemporary American novelist and essayist Jonathan Franzen very timely pondered and sagaciously commented on the state of essayistic literature nowadays—and particularly in critical times—epitomized as: "Should we be morning the essay`s extinction? Or should we be celebrating its conquest of a larger culture?"[10] Despite the gloomy title of his volume of essays—*The End of the End of the Earth*—as well as the disheartening title of opening essay—"The Essay in Dark Times"—the message throughout the entire study is written on an encouraging tone evinced by a series of statements contributing to shaping the prominent role of this particular literary genre and testifying to the reality that "we might seem to be living in an essayistic golden age" thought we be very careful and take the aforementioned statement with a grain of salt for fear of not mistaking the essay as a "light" genre, a mere attempt to touch upon an issue, a piece of text for popular reading, in fact the essay`s intellectual stamina and powerful endurance is fully grounded in a topical connection to contemporaneity and the author`s expertise and intellectual acuity. The literary essay proves to be a most generous form of shaping experience, creating coherence, inviting dialogue and providing food for thought particularly in a culture fragmented by many narrow voices and conflicting approaches, favoring intellectual debate and accommodating an exchange of ideas.[11] Truth to tell, Jonathan Franzen also admitted to the fact that certain dimensions of the essayistic literature like "the personal essay itself—the formal apparatus of formal self-examination and sustained engagement with ideas—as developed by Montaigne and advanced by Emerson and Woolf and Baldwin—is in eclipse."[12]

Renown sociologist and academic, Davis Swartz, in the chapter "Intellectuals and Intellectual Fields" from his widely cited and largely referred to book on *Culture and Power. The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* ", elaborated on the role of public intellectuals in modern societies grounded on Bourdieu`s philosophy and enriched by numerous debates on the role of ideas as vector of shifting paradigms in society in addition to the prominent role of writers and academics as representative public intellectuals in culture, arts and humanities. "In contemporary French academic life, Bourdieu (1988b) sees this opposition between the 'curators of culture' and the 'creators of culture', between those who reproduce and transmit legitimate bodies of knowledge and those who invent new forms of knowledge, between teachers and researchers, between professors and independent intellectuals."[13]

As early as 1987, Russel Jacoby noted the shifting intellectual context and—by means of his landmark book *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* reprinted in 2000—addressed "a call for intellectuals to reclaim the vernacular and assert themselves in public life" particularly as an informed, articulated, sage and canny response to the luring and glittering "public sphere" most often lacking substance, in an attempt to replace media exposure with intellectual nurture. "Intellectual life, which includes books, articles, magazines, lectures, public discussions, perhaps university teaching, is obviously subject to market and political forces but cannot be reduced to them. The impact of network television or national newsweeklies on cultural life can scarcely be underestimated, but this is not the whole story … My concern is with public intellectuals, writers and thinkers who address a general and educated audience."[14] Another important distinction was set forth, with sound arguments and compelling metaphors, by Isaiah Berlin, British philosopher, historian of ideas, essayist and educator,—in his famous essay *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy`s View of History*—between

9. E. M. Forster, "The challenge of our time," in *Two Cheers for Democracy*, ed. E.M. Forster (London: Edward Arnold, 1972 [1946]), 58.

10. Jonathan Franzen, *The End of the End of the World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 4.

11. Ibid., 3.

12. Ibid., 4.

13. David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 226.

14. Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), xvi, xx, 5.

two types of intellectuals, the hedgehog and the fox, where the former "knows many things", but the latter "knows one big thing", furthermore, foxes "lead lives, perform acts, entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal", are fascinated by a variety of ideas, seize upon the essence of many experiences, pursuit many ends; whereas hedgehogs relate everything to a single central vision, an all embracing system to a greater or lesser extent coherent or articulate, advocating universal principles.[15] Since the present study, setting the theoretical background, will benefit from a sequel providing a more applied analysis on the same topic, I believe it is important, at this stage, to mention a series of relevant texts, with affinities to essayistic literature, with an impact on the literary context and intellectual life alike: Alessandro Baricco, *The Game. A Digital Turning Point*; Roger Scruton, *The Soul of the World*; Philip Roth, *Why Write*; Stephen King, *On Writing. A Memoir of the Craft*; Ian McEwan, *Lessons*; Paul Auster, *4 3 2 1* ; Mario Vargas Llosa, *Conversation in the Cathedral*; Mario Vargas Llosa in conversation with Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Two Solitudes*; Umberto Eco, *Confessions of a Young Novelist;* Orhan Pamuk, *The Naïve and the Sentimental Novelist;* Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*; Karuki Murakami, *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running. A Memoir*; Julian Barnes, *The Only Story, Levels of Life*; T S Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*; Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation. The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*; David Fiedler, *Breakfast with Seneca. A Stoic Guide to the Art of Living*; Irene Vallejo, *Papyrus. The Invention of Books in the Ancient World*; Noreena Hertz, *The Lonely Century*; Matt Haig, *Notes on a Nervous Planet*; in addition to the enduring and masterful volumes of essays authored by Montaigne, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius.

Currently, there is a growing number of examples testifying to a revival of the essay as a literary genre enabling the public intellectual to create a forum of enlightening debate between academics or writers and engaged readers. In this respect, mention should also be made of Richard Posner`s study on *Public Intellectuals* where he assigns a distinct chapter to the literary critic performing the role of public intellectual for at least three reasons: "first, the general educated public [...] is also the audience. Second, many works of literature deal with political, social or economic questions [...] Third, the cultural significance of literature [...] is itself an ideological issue."[16]

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15. Ibid., xvi, xx.

16. Richard Posner, *Public Intellectuals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 223.