

Radical Public Intellectuals

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In their latest installment, Ioana Cerasella Chis and Justin Cruickshank (2014) were extremely generous in their praise for my work and my views, but only up to a point. Their concern over my “liberal conception of dialogue” and the elitist posture that would necessarily privilege the reproduction of power relations is couched in a demand for radicalism in and outside the university system. They end their essay with four questions they ask me to answer. So, I have my homework assignment, reminiscent of a comment a colleague of mine made to me decades ago that our reading lists are now dictated by colleagues instead of our professors. I’m grateful for the opportunity to respond, but before I move to their questions, let me say something about *radicalism* rather than intellectuals. I feel, perhaps wrongly, that I have provided an exhaustive enough list of putative public intellectuals in my book (2014) that it allows interested parties to pick and choose among them; so, I refrain from rehearsing this list here.

On Radicalism and Activism

Radicalism, though, is what is driving the latest exchange—my views seem too tame, even retrograde (though labeled “liberal”) in comparison to the radicalism suggested by my interlocutors. Here are some reflections on the notion of radicalism, not necessarily in order of importance.

First, one can always be “more radical” than someone else, just standing a bit to the left or the right of the espoused position. No matter how seemingly extreme, it’s possible to ratchet the intensity of the rhetoric if not the substance of the issue at hand. If we thought that Stalin and Hitler exemplified fascist extremism in slaughtering their own fellow citizens (in addition to millions of foreigners and enemies) that would be difficult to compete with, we only need to continue our historical search beyond World War II and unfortunately find numerous cases of genocide whose destructive proportions are as bad or worse than those of earlier offenders. Extremism is always around the corner, you just need to look for it, sometimes even not that hard. So, I doubt Chis and Cruickshank mean this sort of radicalism.

Second, there is philosophical radicalism and the radicalism of political activists. If we are interested in philosophical or intellectual radicalism, in Elie Halevy’s sense (1928), then what we find is that utilitarianism (Halevy’s chosen case) was ahead of its time in some sense, even though politically it was behind the age. Similar attributions can be assigned to 20th-century avant-garde movements in the arts. Philosophical radicalism means providing an idea or theory that doesn’t conform to the standards of the day; that defies or contradicts the views of the so-called establishment; and that is ahead of its time. This need not bring intellectuals to the literal barricades of their ivory towers, but still would require that they defend themselves while attacking the status quo, taking some risks. This of course sounds like arm-chair philosophizing, a preferred mode of radicalism associated with academics that seems safe by comparison to demonstrating in the streets with militarized police officers clubbing and gassing demonstrators to death. The United States has recently had its share of visible violence against peaceful

demonstrations. So, yes, in comparison to those protesting the latest racist behavior of white police officers in armored gear with military equipment, intellectual radicalism looks tame, even unimpressive. But is it?

My interlocutors are bound to corner my response here into the hallways of the privileged academy and say, you see, this is exactly what we mean! You can't even distinguish the silly mental quibbles of Kuhn-like puzzle solvers (as they call academic intellectuals) and slaves to tradition to the courage displayed in street protests. I guess my rejoinder will have to be, with all due respect to those risking their lives in the face of police brutality, the risks some academics undertake (emphasis on "some") can cost them their careers, their jobs, their livelihood. Oh, they may continue, these are the problems of first-world elites, so please don't compare their troubles with those of the unemployed or under-employed, or simply the exploited working classes, not to mention the millions living in military-controlled countries, such as Egypt, for example. True enough. I never meant to make these comparisons (pretty miserable to compare human suffering), only to suggest that there is such a thing as intellectual or philosophical radicalism characterized by courage and its own sets of risks.

Third (and related to the second), there is a naïve belief, perhaps under the influence of Weber and company, that ideas do matter, and that oppositional ideas do lead to wars and revolutions. This doesn't take away the centrality of the material conditions within or because of which revolutions erupt. On the contrary, the theoretical underpinnings and explanatory models of the exploitive conditions under which some operate and survive are useful, even an integral part of the call to arms (as Antonio Gramsci recognized). The organic nature of radicalism in my mind moves from the theoretical to the practical and back again in no particular order, contingent on this or that incident (Rorty comes to mind here), without the necessity of a preconceived meta-narrative (as the postmodernists suggest). So, what I'd like to propose—and perhaps this way defend only marginally those academic intellectuals that are radical enough to be worthy of public performances—is that intellectual radicalism deserves our attention after all.

Fourth, if what Chis and Cruickshank are after is some sort of activism, then my proposals are obviously bound to fall short of their expectations. Activism is commonly understood as a means for change, radical or not, and a form of incitement that is supposed to wake up the audience (whoever it might be) from its dogmatic or thoughtless slumber. Just as there are various kinds of radicalism, so there are various kinds of activism. The one we are talking about—we should admit that we are having this conversation under the auspices of an academic journal—is in fact intellectual and academic; we are not proposing a new political party, are we?

Fifth (and related to the fourth), the kind of radicalism that interests me—not as a "liberal" which I doubt I'm qualified to be, and not as an activist which is limited to my classroom and committee work—is the one pointed out by Steve Fuller (2004) when comparing Popper and Kuhn. There are moments when even privileged and elitist professors have to make choices, have to decide whether or not to speak out. The Cold War and McCarthy era in the US bred a certain bunker mentality among academics that savored their insulation from the political pressures or realities of the day. Few rose to the

occasion and refused to name communists among their ranks, and some even went to jail for a brief time. Fuller is right on the mark when he applauds Popper and chides Kuhn for their opposite responses to the politics that surrounded them. He is so right that I readily generalize from what he says to suggest that these kinds of tests are not only moral tests of character but are also indications of one's intellectual or philosophical orientation and its critical radicalism (or lack thereof). Going against the fashion of the day, rising above the Nietzschean herd mentality, is to be lauded from the rooftops. And if this brings the privileged, elitist, and power-hungry academy down to earth, so to speak, and forces some (once again, hopefully more than just one) of its members to get out of their comfort zone, then we can celebrate this small feat of courage.

Overall, it seems that Chis and Cruickshank ask for more than mere intellectual radicalism of the exclusive academic club. They want more radical changes in the very structure of the world—from politics to economics, from personal to institutional power relations. They are worried that social and epistemic advantages “create a condition of collective amnesia.” I acknowledge their concerns and agree that we are prone to collective amnesia (and hysteria as well!) more often than we are willing to admit to ourselves—taking for granted that the rich will get richer or that those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds or young men of color are bound to find themselves arrested and incarcerated in disproportionately higher numbers as compared to those higher up the food chain. Yes, we should pay attention to fundamental structural issues. Elsewhere (2013) I have tried to square the political-economic circle of capitalism and socialism, obviously drawing the ire of both neo-liberals (already defined by us in previous exchanges) and devout communists. My notion of *postcapitalism* draws on the best both systems can offer while mitigating their shortfalls. Perhaps this topic can be at the center of our next exchange—under what political-economic conditions can we transform the existing status-quo and ensure greater equality and freedom?

Chis and Cruickshank's Four Questions

In the meantime, let me turn to the four questions and answer them in turn.

1. What would prevent public intellectuals becoming apologists?

I'm not a policy wonk, so I didn't offer much detail about how public intellectuals were to be selected. The fact that they were distinguished from think-tank experts was in order to ensure they weren't paid hacks or apologists. So, perhaps the question is twofold: how can we ward off apologists from the application process of becoming paid public intellectuals? And, once in place, how can we guarantee that the chosen few won't turn into apologists to retain their public positions (as so often happens with political pundits on television talk-shows)? The first part of the question is relatively easy to answer, because we can weed out those who aren't critical (read radical) enough—this can be done by reviewing their published work or attending their lectures, and definitely by examining the topics they intend to speak about. The second part is more difficult because it requires us to divine what mind-set and attitude one displays once in position of privilege and power.

Perhaps there is another way to tackle this question: we can set up the public agenda to which public intellectuals should respond in critical terms. We can ensure that debates over the use of drones or torture by the US military or the use of force by police departments or the love-fest of gun owners is couched critically rather than neutrally. This can occur when we carefully phrase the questions, load them up, so to speak, to ensure that their critical edges are not sawn off before the conversation has begun.

2. Would \$100,000 tempt people to pursue self-interested career capital and become ‘celebrity academics’?

Once again, one is hard pressed to divine what will or will not tempt academics. We also must be careful to distinguish between the full-time, part-time, and adjunct members of the faculty—their decision-making horizons are radically different and therefore would yield different results. The amount I proposed seemed extremely generous to me, because after almost 30 years of teaching full-time in a tenured position of a professor at a state university I still don’t earn that much per year. I thought it would tempt the old-guard to try something different for a year or two, and definitely entice young radical academics to become “public” for a while in this sense of the term. I also thought that this amount would indicate a commitment by the state to having public debates--\$1,000 would be a cheap gesture that is marginalized in comparison to other state expenditures. Since these positions are terminal, they are supposed to extricate the academic intellectual from the ivory tower into the streets, so to speak, and keep the flow of different intellectuals on the public stage in our town squares.

Will some of those fortunate to vie for this honor or service make themselves “celebrity academics”? Of course some would. But this isn’t the only platform for them to do so in the Digital Age of social media. As I mentioned in my book, celebrity intellectuals come in different stripes, some are “court jesters” whose prime aim is to entertain and keep the “king/queen” and his/her entourage distracted from the painful issues of the day, while others are “amateurs” (in Edward Said’s sense) who are committed to engage the public in issues that aren’t necessarily part of their professional expertise (in the case of Said it was the Palestinian conditions under Israeli occupation).

3. Would a flourishing dialogic democracy really need intellectuals?

Of course not, if we use Chis and Cruickshank’s definition of “dialogic democracy” rather than the more familiar (and perhaps somewhat outdated) notion of liberal democracy. If intellectuals are merely experts, then they can provide their services under any political arrangement—called to testify, and that’s all. But if by public intellectuals we mean those who go beyond their proscribed expertise and use their critical and as I understand the term, radical faculties to consider matters of public interest and insert an “inconvenient truth” to the dialogue, then their services should be always welcomed. Perhaps the sticking point is that I distinguish between experts and intellectuals and also claim that not all intellectuals would qualify as public intellectuals for obvious reasons. So, using my liberal (in the sense of expansive) definition of public intellectuals as critical citizens concerned to share their intellectual gifts for the benefit of the commons, as it’s now fashionable to call the public square of yesteryear, their contributions should

remain valuable and not apologetic. This, to be clear, isn't in order "that privilege would be reproduced and vested interests left untouched" (as Chis and Cruickshank suggest), nor is this an endorsement of abusive and exploitive practices of market-capitalism or the bankruptcy of American democracy in the hands of the rich. Instead, this may bring about alternative views and the voices of those not commonly heard on the platforms of CNN, Fox, or the BBC. Al Jazeera, for example, is making headway even in the commercialized US media-market.

4. How can media debate avoid becoming a passive consumption experience by many people?

I don't know how to answer this question. The fact that cognitive activities have fallen prey to one kind of consumerism or another is a structural issue—pedagogical as well as institutional, as Chis and Cruickshank correctly identify in their article. Is the academy indeed the proper battle-field for re-conceptualizing political arrangements on larger scales? I'm not convinced. There is part of me that has already conceded the conservative nature of the academy, based on its millennia-old history of association with church authorities and the state. But they ask about the media and not the academy. Some media debates bring about "intervention" as they label it, and as such should be celebrated. For example, documentaries about food production and distribution in the US ("Fast Food Nation") have changed some eating habits of some of the public. Fast-food chains have been responsive to complaints about trans-fats and the sources they use. True, not all of them, and also true, not all consumers are sensitive to these debates and the call to action they attempt to provoke. "Meat-free Monday" has been a response by some to the frightening details documented in "Cowspiracy." Surely more can and should be done. But I refuse to think that no media exposure brings about any action—see, for example the withdrawal of funds from large banks after the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations—or that therefore all debates are a waste of time. If this were true, I'd resign my tenured professorship tomorrow.

I am in full agreement with Chis and Cruickshank when they argue that "radical critique has to show the necessity of rejecting liberal democratic capitalism and not just neo-liberal plutocracy, for a more socialized approach to social, economic and political life." I may quibble with some of the terminology at hand, even contest the overthrow of democracy, however flawed its current performance. Despite the bad reputation "liberalism" has for them, Chis and Cruickshank must admit to be the fortunate beneficiaries of some of its gifts, such as the open-minded and open-ended conversation in which we have been participating for some months now. It all depends, at the end of the day, what exactly we mean by these historically-loaded terms, and how we intend to use them in our dialogic democracy. Here, too, we may learn from the flawed legal system that reminds us to watch out for "intent" above all when deciding on one's guilt. We might be sloppy here and there, we might even be ignorant of something we ought to know by now, but if our intentions are to genuinely bring about a better world with less suffering and inequalities, with greater opportunities to all, then any critical attempt should be considered, and the learning process must continue.

Do I expect a “neo-liberal consensus,” as has been intimated? Not at all! This is why I’m suspicious of some of Jurgen Habermas’ proposals for communicative rationality, the kind that ought to bring about consensus. But neither am I a fan of paralysis of the sort we currently experience in US politics. And here, once again, Popper’s piecemeal engineering makes perfect sense to me: trial and error is a method worth pursuing. One can only see what’s happening with the legalization of recreation marijuana in my home state, Colorado, to appreciate its eventual proliferation in the rest of the US (at least for medical use). The same has been true of gay marriage which was contested locally and gradually has made its way to the US Supreme Court. Similarly, police brutality incidents that outraged local communities in Missouri and New York have eventually made their way to the White House. Would I prefer that a wholesale erasure of injustice will be brought about in one fell-swoop? Of course! But however naïve I may seem, the reality is that the cost of revolutionary upheavals is higher than incremental changes that become solidified locally before they can be accepted globally. It’s slow and painful, even maddeningly so. But the alternative is either complaints without action (as we see in the reactions to the *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision of 2010) or over-reaction with oppressive results (as we see in so-called democratic Russia or post-Arab Spring repressions).

Conclusion

In the spirit of the last exchange, let me reiterate publicly my interest in continuing this conversation in political-economic terms more than in radical intellectual ones, so that perhaps we may provide a more solid intellectually radical platform for policy reforms that will transform our worlds. With this in mind, let’s pay special attention to the Digital Age (as I did in 2013) and the potential for its destructive and constructive applications. What may become more radical than any leftist critique is, for example, the transformation of young Americans’ (and probably Europeans and others as well) views and commitments to private property. It seems, as we can discuss in further detail later, that they are more concerned with “access” than with “ownership,” and thereby contribute to a changed consumption landscape when it comes to their residence, transportation, and entertainment (Rifkin 2014). Now this has a radical potential to transform our worldviews and the ways we interact with each other!

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