

WRITERS AS PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS

LITERATURE, CELEBRITY, DEMOCRACY



ODILE HEYNDERS



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Writers as Public Intellectuals

Literature, Celebrity, Democracy

Odile Heynders

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palgrave
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Contents

<i>Series Editors' Preface</i>	vi
<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
1 Transformations of the Public Intellectual	1
2 Conscientious Chronicler, H.M. Enzensberger (1929)	26
3 Eastern European Voices, Slavenka Drakulić (1949) and Dubravka Ugresić (1949)	52
4 Public Man as Actor, Bernard-Henri Lévy (1948)	74
5 A Protean Public Figure, Ayaan Hirsi Ali (1969)	97
6 Public Intellectuals from Brussels, David van Reybrouck (1971) and Geert van Istendael (1947)	121
7 Responsible Satire, Hamed Abdel-Samad (1972)	139
8 Popular Fiction, Elif Shafak (1971)	160
<i>Notes</i>	182
<i>Bibliography</i>	201
<i>Index</i>	211

Series Editors' Preface

Many of the most significant European writers and literary movements in the modern period have traversed national, linguistic and disciplinary borders. The principal aim of the Palgrave Studies in Modern European Literature series is to create a forum for work that takes account of these border crossings, and that engages with individual writers, genres, topoi and literary movements in a manner that does justice to their location within European artistic, political and philosophical contexts. Of course, the title of this series immediately raises a number of questions, at once historical, geo-political and literary-philosophical: What are the parameters of the modern? What is to be understood as European, both politically and culturally? And what distinguishes literature within these historical and geo-political limits from other forms of discourse?

These three questions are interrelated. Not only does the very idea of the modern vary depending on the European national tradition within which its definition is attempted, but the concept of literature in the modern sense is also intimately connected to the emergence and consolidation of the European nation-states, to increasing secularization, urbanization, industrialization and bureaucratization, to the Enlightenment project and its promise of emancipation from nature through reason and science, to capitalism and imperialism, to the liberal-democratic model of government, to the separation of the private and public spheres, to the new form taken by the university, and to changing conceptions of both space and time as a result of technological innovations in the fields of travel and communication.

Taking first the question of when the modern may be said to commence within a European context, if one looks to a certain Germanic tradition shaped by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), then it might be said to commence with the first 'theoretical man', namely Socrates. According to this view, the modern would include everything that comes after the pre-Socratics and the first two great Attic tragedians, Aeschylus and Sophocles, with Euripides being the first modern writer. A rather more limited sense of the modern, also derived from the Germanic world, sees the *Neuzeit* as originating in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Jakob Burckhardt, Nietzsche's colleague at the University of Basel, identified the states of Renaissance Italy as prototypes for both modern European politics and modern European cultural production.

However, Italian literary modernity might also be seen as having commenced two hundred years earlier, with the programmatic adoption of the vernacular by its foremost representatives, Dante and Petrarch.

In France, the modern might either be seen as beginning at the turn of the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, with the so-called 'Querelle des anciens et des modernes' in the 1690s, or later still, with the French Revolution of 1789, while the Romantic generation of the 1830s might equally be identified as an origin, given that Chateaubriand is often credited with having coined the term *modernité* in 1833. Across the Channel, meanwhile, the origins of literary modernity might seem different again. With the Renaissance being seen as 'Early Modern', everything thereafter might seem to fall within the category of the modern, although in fact the term 'modern' within a literary context is generally reserved for the literature that comes after mid-nineteenth-century European realism. This latter sense of the modern is also present in the early work of Roland Barthes, who in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) asserts that modern literature commences in the 1850s, when the literary becomes explicitly self-reflexive, not only addressing its own status as literature but also concerning itself with the nature of language and the possibilities of representation.

In adopting a view of the modern as it pertains to literature that is more or less in line with Barthes's periodization, while also acknowledging that this periodization is liable to exceptions and limitations, the present series does not wish to conflate the modern with, nor to limit it to, modernism and postmodernism. Rather, the aim is to encourage work that highlights differences in the conception of the modern – differences that emerge out of distinct linguistic, national and cultural spheres within Europe – and to prompt further reflection on why it should be that the concept of the modern has become such a critical issue in 'modern' European culture, be it aligned with Enlightenment progress, with the critique of Enlightenment thinking, with decadence, with radical renewal, or with a sense of belatedness.

Turning to the question of the European, the very idea of modern literature arises in conjunction with the establishment of the European nation-states. When European literatures are studied at university, they are generally taught within national and linguistic parameters: English, French, German, Italian, Scandinavian, Slavic and Eastern European, and Spanish literature. Even if such disciplinary distinctions have their pedagogical justifications, they render more difficult an appreciation of the ways in which modern European literature is shaped in no small part by intellectual and artistic traffic across national and linguistic borders: to grasp the nature of the European avant-gardes or of high

modernism, for instance, one has to consider the relationship between distinct national or linguistic traditions. While not limiting itself to one methodological approach, the present series is designed precisely to encourage the study of individual writers and literary movements within their European context. Furthermore, it seeks to promote research that engages with the very definition of the European in its relation to literature, including changing conceptions of centre and periphery, of Eastern and Western Europe, and how these might bear upon questions of literary translation, dissemination and reception.

As for the third key term in the series title – literature – the formation of this concept is intimately related both to the European and to the modern. While Sir Philip Sidney in the late sixteenth century, Martin Opitz in the seventeenth, and Shelley in the early nineteenth produce their apologies for, or defences of, 'poetry', it is within the general category of 'literature' that the genres of poetry, drama and prose fiction have come to be contained in the modern period. Since the Humboldtian reconfiguration of the university in the nineteenth century, the fate of literature has been closely bound up with that particular institution, as well as with emerging ideas of the canon and tradition. However one defines it, modernity has both propagated and problematized the historical legacy of the Western literary tradition. While, as Jacques Derrida argues, it may be that in all European languages the history and theorization of the literary necessarily emerges out of a common Latinate legacy – the very word 'literature' deriving from the Latin *littera* (letter) – it is nonetheless the case that within a modern European context the literary has taken on an extraordinarily diverse range of forms. Traditional modes of representation have been subverted through parody and pastiche, or abandoned altogether; genres have been mixed; the limits of language have been tested; indeed, the concept of literature itself has been placed in question.

With all of the above in mind, the present series wishes to promote work that engages with any aspect of modern European literature (be it a literary movement, an individual writer, a genre, a particular topos) within its European context, that addresses questions of translation, dissemination and reception (both within Europe and beyond), that considers the relations between modern European literature and the other arts, that analyses the impact of other discourses (philosophical, political, scientific) upon that literature, and, above all, that takes each of those three terms – modern, European and literature – not as givens, but as invitations, even provocations, to further reflection.

*Thomas Baldwin
Ben Hutchinson
Shane Weller*

Preface

This book is about writers as public intellectuals critiquing in their work the state of affairs in Europe. As such, it is about how literature is expanding and transforming today, due to the call on writers to interfere in the public sphere, either by formulating an opinion on relevant issues or the things going on, by creating stories and scenarios to confront readers with critical ideas and new perspectives, or by writing discursive essays and delivering public lectures to engage the ordinary citizens. Since its new constellation in 1989, Europe has faced rapid social transformation and political and economic struggles. The EU, as constructed by the Maastricht treaty in 1992, has taken measures to overcome the difficulties and to become more meaningful and responsible. This book investigates critical ideas on Europe and the European Union – two separate yet related entities – by studying the rhetorical strategies and performances, and the visibility and cultural authority of writers as public intellectuals across various national public spheres.

The theme of public intellectuals has become a familiar feature in discussions on contemporary societies and the transformation of public spheres. Questions about the cultural authority, social commitment, responsibility and activism of particular figures (philosophers, artists, novelists, academics) have been central in these debates. The first objective of this book is to reflect on the power of current public intellectuals writing literature or using literary techniques and devices. The second objective is to consider the work of a number of representative public intellectuals from different public spheres within Europe. This book examines the writings and the performances of public intellectuals in their (trans)national contexts, and discusses their ideas and the persuasiveness of their words, with a special focus on the ‘literary’ imagination used. Some of these intellectuals are considered canonical writers, making use of the prestige of literature to get their ideas across, others have taken on the role of media celebrity or are celebrated for writing popular fiction. Yet, all of them are aware of the power of identification and make believe – what Jürgen Habermas (2009) calls ‘the avantgardistic instinct’ – needed in order to understand and critique the political, social and cultural context of Europe. As such, these public intellectuals are dedicated to democracy in their modest and careful engagement. Or, in the words of Danish novelist Jens Christian Grøndahl,

In a democracy, writers are just citizens like everyone else; providers of a slightly more sophisticated sort of entertainment. And I would gladly resign myself to that, having seen the hopes of 1989 go up in flames on 9/11, were it not for the restlessness taking hold of me; a ridiculous but persisting defiance on behalf of this art of making people real to themselves with words. Every time I meet with readers, I am reminded that as writers, even as writers in postmodern democracies, we still have a different perspective to offer ('News and the Writer', 2014).

This book starts with discussing recent theoretical positions on public intellectuals, and subsequently offers seven showcases, as detailed analyses of the performances and writings of some typical public intellectuals from various European countries, scrutinising established conceptions of 'intellectual thinking', 'civil responsibility' and 'cultural authority'. It provides a critical evaluation of the aesthetic, social and political repercussions of intellectual agency and thinking in various European public spheres. The most poignant topics discussed by the several authors studied in this book are migration and cosmopolitanism on the one side, and nationalism, democracy and the history of the present on the other, while the transforming public sphere due to digitalisation and mediatisation is the umbrella of all discussions.

Acknowledgements

Seeds for this book were planted in a Liberal Arts course on *Rhetoric, Culture and Democracy*, which I developed and co-taught for several years (2008–12) at Tilburg University with my dear colleague Willem Witteveen. He died on 17 July 2014 in the Ukraine; I hope to keep the memory of his erudition alive with this book. With financial support from the KNAW (Royal Dutch Academy of Research), a student research group was formed in 2011, in which we started analysing the work of some European intellectuals: thanks to Tom van Nuenen, Claudia Egher, Anna Lohfink and Marjet van Loo for their participation. Many thanks as well to post docs Piia Varis and Sanna Lehtonen for the very inspiring discussions, and to the young PhD students from the TRAPS (Transformations in the Public Sphere) first-edition group: Merijn Oudenampsen, Caixa Du, Geertjan de Vugt, Fie Velghe, Mingyi Hou, Paul Mutsaers, and their (co-)supervisor Jan Blommaert. From 2012 on, I joined every April the *Harvard Conference on Public Intellectuals* organised by Lawrence J. Friedman, during which I met many public intellectuals and critical colleagues and discussed the first drafts and ideas of some of the chapters of this book: special thanks to Larry himself and to Mark I. West, Neil McLaughlin, Helen Fordham, John R. Lenz, Jim Clark, Michael Brown, Damon Freeman, Michael Keren, Lisa Szeffel, and all the others, and a very warm thanks to Pilar Damiao de Medeiros, who let us meet in Lisbon in the autumn of 2013 some Portuguese dissident writers as public intellectuals with an amazing and inspiring European track record. Parts of chapters from this book were presented as lectures at international conferences in Antwerp, New York, Seattle and Ghent. I found it inspiring to present European perspectives on American platforms. The material is here appearing in print for the first time. The one exception is Chapter 5, the greater part of which appeared in P. Thijssen (et al.), *New Public Spheres, Recontextualizing the Intellectual*, 2013. I thank my colleagues in the Department of Culture Studies at Tilburg University for joining me in many discussions on who is (or not) an intellectual and why: Ad Backus, Helma van Lierop, Leon Hanssen, Sjaak Kroon, Ico Maly, Paul Scheffer, Jan Jaap de Ruiter, and in particular Sander Bax.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for letting me have a room of my own; you know that writing a book is like preparing a slow food dish or training for the *Fausto Coppi* Classic; it is about making hours and enjoying it.

1

Transformations of the Public Intellectual

In order to provide a theoretical framework for the individual case studies presented in this book, this chapter offers a discussion of the concept of public intellectual and the contexts in which it has been used.

I am speaking like an intellectual, but the intellectual, to my mind, is more in touch with humanity than is the confident scientist, who patronizes the past, oversimplifies the present, and envisages a future where his leadership will be accepted. (E.M. Forster, 1972 [1946], p. 58)¹

Big thinker

On 27 April 2014 *The New York Times* published an article on Thomas Piketty's magnum opus *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014) characterising the author as a celebrity intellectual whose stardom reflects the fashions and feelings of the moment.² The French economist Piketty, who graduated from the London School of Economics, worked at MIT and later became director of the French National Centre of Scientific Research in Paris, wrote in *Capital* an extensive study on the inequality of wealth and income. Clearly referring to Marx's *Das Kapital* from 1867, Piketty brings together historical narratives and big data from 20 countries in a readable book, the main thesis of which concerns the unequal accumulation and distribution of capital in our age, generating discontent and undermining democratic culture. The economist writes well, apart from being an academic, he also is a columnist for the newspaper *Liberation* and occasionally for *Le Monde*.

Piketty, according to *The New York Times*, is filling a void; he has written his book at the right time, capturing the *Zeitgeist* and personifying it in the right way. He is one of the two or three authors per decade who are receiving the intellectual *rock star* status, not (only) because of a grand idea or encouraging new argument, but rather because of their thesis and style of writing as well as their publicly performing the role of an intellectual. Piketty is fashionable, just like other public intellectuals were at the time: the 'curmudgeonly' Christopher Lash or the 'flamboyant philosopher-king' Allan Bloom.

Piketty's fame in the United States was immediately noted in Europe. *Liberation* published a piece with the headline 'Piketty, Superstar aux States' and remarked that the book sold better than *Game of Thrones*, although the author still preferred his modest Parisian bureau over an American university chair.³ *Die Welt*⁴ wrote about his success overseas, after which the article shifted to an in-depth analysis of the ideas on capitalist structures and the differences in various European countries. The prestigious Dutch publisher De Bezige Bij bought the rights for the translation of *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* for an exceptional amount of money,⁵ after which television programmes, newspapers and weekly journals covered the book in critical articles.⁶

Big thinkers are intellectuals as superstars, triggering an audience that in our media-overloaded era is not so easily seduced. As a big thinker, Piketty knows how to achieve and maintain the attention of his readers, combining economy with cultural history, and theory with narrative. He brings us back to the *belle époque* described in the novels of Honoré de Balzac and Jane Austen in which the aristocracy, the bourgeois and the proletariat had their own fixed positions, his message being that in the twenty-first century we have not left behind this system of social inequality.

Piketty's urgent and provocative study contradicts the observation of *The New York Times* that the Internet and social media favour bite-size thought over grand theses and sharp insights over the belles-lettristic narratives, underlining that this is more the age of idea-savvy journalists rather than of scholars and intellectuals. It is this contradiction that will be investigated in this book, by exploring the hypothesis that the position of intellectuals today has changed, and that strategies of celebrity behaviour and the subsequent responses of the public are transforming the traditions and modes of intellectual thinking and writing. There still are intellectuals today, but as public speakers and writers they are operating on various platforms using multiple rhetorical strategies. Writing and thinking have become part of a wide-ranging public performance, often characterised by theatricality.

Piketty, 'the new Marx' and at the same time posing as the charming Frenchman, had his big event in the sold out Amsterdam pop temple *Paradiso* on Wednesday 5 November 2014, after having informed Dutch parliamentarians of his book earlier that day, something that marks a relevant activity of the public intellectual: to inform politicians who have no time at all for a further reflection on all the complex subjects they have to discuss and form a serious and persuasive opinion about. One of Piketty's statements that evening was that he believes in the power of books, that books can contribute to a better future.⁷ Evidently, the audience thought so too, since many of them could be observed with the thick *Capital* in their hands.

Characterisations of the public intellectual

The public intellectual intervenes in the public debate and proclaims a controversial and committed and sometimes compromised stance from a sideline position. He⁸ has critical knowledge and ideas, stimulates discussion and offers alternative scenarios in regard to topics of political, social and ethical nature, thus addressing non-specialist audiences on matters of general concern. Public intellectual intervention can take many different forms ranging from speeches and lectures to books, articles, manifestos, documentaries, television programmes and blogs and tweets on the Internet. Today's public intellectual operates in a media-saturated society and has to be visible in order to communicate to a broad public.

The terms 'intellectual' and 'public intellectual' have a long history, fuelled by theorists from different disciplines. The specific term 'intellectual' was coined after the Dreyfus affair in France at the end of the nineteenth century, and was used to point at a collection of novelists, artists, journalists, university professors and other cultural figures who felt it their moral responsibility and collective right to interfere with the political process. The *Dreyfusards* organised themselves in a group and put their signatures to a petition to mark their independent critical position underscoring the innocence of the Jewish military officer Alfred Dreyfus, who was sentenced to life imprisonment because of alleged treason. Although the term 'intellectual' as such was not used before the nineteenth century, theorists have emphasised that many writers since the Renaissance have been in the position of the intellectual, expressing a similar independent and critical view on political, social and ethical issues in the public sphere (Melzer et al., 2003; Lacroix and Nicolaïdis, 2010).

As is argued in this book, the recent addition of the term 'public' to intellectual, interchanging with 'celebrity' or 'media', points to the activities of translation, mediation and the popularisation of ideas, aimed at a wider outreach and communication. Significantly, the public intellectual sometimes makes compromises with regard to the intellectual content of ideas in order to address a larger audience. The *public intellectual* addresses an audience beyond intellectual peers, whereas the *intellectual* mainly interacts with other intellectuals (Baert and Shipman, 2013). 'Public' originally was an American, instead of a European addition, as we can read in Posner's *Public Intellectuals, A Study of Decline* (2004 [2001]) analysing public intellectuals as they appeared in the media in the United States in the period between 1995 and 2000. Posner emphasises that the terms mark the fact that the intellectual makes a serious contribution to the improvement of public communication. There is a strong need for that since the universities in the twentieth century have specialised too much and academics have become university specialists only and have lost interest in a general audience and public debate. Posner and others (Debray, 1981; Jacoby, 1987; Bauman, 1989 [1987]; Furedi, 2006) thus point to the decline of an academic intellectual impact in late modern societies. It is the assumption of this book, however, that public intellectuals today have a different position since they address the public, or fragmented counter-publics, while at the same time they have become part, and often consciously play to be a part, of the audiences themselves. The position from which the intellectual could present a general, independent, rational overview has definitely changed in our media society into a position from *within* the audience, which implies the managing of strategies of visibility, participation, critiquing and the bringing in of new ideas. The alleged decline of public intellectual intervention has more to do with a transformation of rhetorical strategies rather than with a lack of insight, courage or influence. Furthermore, we have to be aware of the 'knowledge transfer' that is becoming more and more of a default strategy of academics. European governments have made it an explicit agenda for public funding that writers and academics bring their work out of the academy and make it accessible and relevant to wider audiences. Before further elaborating on this, I will briefly take a route along definitions and characterisations in order to make clear in which sense the terms public intellectual are used here.

From the outset, the thinking about intellectuals was based on dichotomies. Almost all theorists place one type of intellectual in opposition to another. In 1927, the French critic Julien Benda was the first

to offer, in *The Treason of the Intellectuals* (2009 [1927]), quite a pessimistic perspective on the intellectual as 'clerk' rather than a 'traditional thinker'. The clerk was reacting out of impulses and passion, while the traditional thinker – *the* intellectual as such – was considered to be capable of making a rational analysis based on universal Enlightenment values.⁹ Benda argued that emotional response had become the ground of politics and disturbed a more contemplative critique, the result of which was nationalism and xenophobia.

We observe how in Benda's exposé a dichotomy is constructed, which is repeated in various discussions on public intellectuals at the end of the twentieth century. Michel Foucault (1980 [1972]) discusses general and specialist intellectuals, Antonio Gramsci (1971) introduces the traditional and organic intellectual, Zygmunt Bauman (1989 [1987]) categorises the legislator and interpreter. The change of accents in regard to these dichotomies is related to the alternation of cultural paradigms. Bauman for instance, distinguishes between intellectuals as 'legislators' representative for modernity, and as 'interpreters' representative for the era of post-modernity. The legislator – akin to Benda's traditional thinker – makes authoritative statements, underlining moral power and universal knowledge as the structural elements in a society, whereas the interpreter emphasises the different positions and perspectives, thus facilitating communication between diverse participants in a society.

No objective measurements can prove that someone is an intellectual, since the intentional meaning of being an intellectual is 'to rise above the partial preoccupation of one's own profession or artistic *genre* and engage with global issues of truth, judgement and taste of the time' (Bauman, 1989 [1987], p. 2). Yet, the intention of having something to say to an audience, of teaching it something, is only part of the story and does not instantaneously legitimise the intellectual position. As is argued in this book, we also have to consider and qualify the medium and style of writing, the visibility of the intellectual persona, the specific issue discussed, and the addressed public or the participants in the debate accepting (or not) the intellectual's authority. More than before, the current public intellectual is functioning in a media context that can amplify or devalue his position. The intellectual can become a 'collision point', as Paul Berman (2010) correctly observed in his book on Swiss intellectual Tariq Ramadan, implying that various audiences could project their own ideas upon the intellectual. The public intellectual thus becomes a sort of empty vessel for publics to inhabit with their own ideas. Ideas lead to responses, and these again to other reactions, while serious points can become more controversial once the discussion

is taking place and the media coverage on the Internet is getting faster and wider, and in a way is spinning out of control. Rumours and insinuations can turn polemics into nasty debates resulting in sceptical judgements and spectacle, in which intellectual assumption and rational arguments seem to have disappeared completely.

Rousseau, Diderot and Heinrich Heine can be considered as historical forerunners of public intellectuals. Thomas and Heinrich Mann, George Orwell, Czeslaw Milosz, Václav Havel, Simone de Beauvoir, and Hannah Arendt are twentieth-century ones. And today's public intellectuals are for example Timothy Garton Ash, Martin Amis, Jens Christian Grøndahl and Zadie Smith. But not only canonised writers, historians and philosophers are intellectuals; filmmakers (Werner Herzog, Heddy Honigmann, Bruno Ulmer), visual artists (Donald Rodney, Marlene Dumas), and journalists or television makers (Henryk Broder, Sabrina Guzzanti) can be considered public intellectuals as well, influencing the public debate with critical statements and provocative ideas expressed in cultural practices providing imaginary scenarios. And although public intellectuals might earlier have had their roots in the humanities, many of them today derive from the natural or technical sciences. An evolutionary theorist such as Richard Dawkins is a public intellectual, as is astrophysicist Stephen Hawking, just as are economist Milton Friedman making television documentaries, and Dutch scientist Robert Dijkgraaf doing 'academic' public lectures on television. Today's public intellectuals often appear on various platforms, accentuating that the public sphere is a space of differentiated discourses. They have their own circles and national habitat within Europe as well as elsewhere on the globe; in the United States, in Latin America and India, and even in China, where dissident writers as public intellectuals are making use of the Internet or Weibo (the Chinese Facebook/Twitter hybrid), critiquing the political authoritarian regime and pleading for an alternative social order.¹⁰ Traditions of thinking and writing are rooted in local and cultural contexts but often cross boundaries and attain global relevance.

Not everyone likes to identify as a public intellectual. Historian Stefan Collini argues in his outstanding *Absent Minds, Intellectuals in Britain* (2009 [2006]) that the denial of the existence of real intellectuals has always been a prominent aspect of national self-definition in Britain. The word intellectual evoked pretentiousness, arrogance and *hubris*. By presenting a careful historical analysis of the main debates in the past two centuries, however, Collini demonstrates that there definitely does exist an intellectual tradition in Britain. He distinguishes three senses of the noun intellectual as it is used in the United Kingdom: the

sociological sense, in which intellectuals are considered as those whose occupations are involved with ideas and not with practical issues; the *subjective* sense, having to do with an individual's attitude towards ideas, reflectiveness and truth-seeking; and the *cultural* sense, focusing on those individuals regarded as having an acknowledged intellectual position (Collini, 2009, pp. 46–7). Intellectuals with cultural authority have acquired a certain standing that provides them with the opportunity to address a wider public than that at which their occupational activity is aimed. A fourth, *political* sense, is not as clear in Britain as it is in France. In France *les intellectuels* are recognised by their attempt to constantly intervene in the political sphere. An example in this respect is the appeal by the French 'new philosopher' Bernard-Henri Lévy to free Libya from the Ghadaffi regime in the spring of 2011.

The cultural sense is the most relevant in the context of this book (as it was in Collini's), since the main focus will be on the public intellectual with a certain artistic prestige and writing career, who tries to convince an audience beyond his main readers or followers, and in doing so deliberately uses various media platforms, styles and genres. An example, to be discussed in the following chapter, is German literary author, H.M. Enzensberger, who has written poetry, novels and documentaries as well as the critical essay *Brussels, The Gentle Monster or the Disenfranchisement of Europe* (2011), and who is taken seriously as an authority on issues regarding the European Union. Enzensberger thus addresses people beyond his literary audience. His case confirms that there is no intellectual without his 'own' public, but also that an intellectual moulds himself on the basis of his idea or perception of the public. The interaction between the audience and the intellectual is fundamental when discussing the transformation of the public intellectual in the late modern public sphere.

We can draw a line of argument from Benda to Collini, based on the configuration of the intellectual as someone having cultural authority. The intellectual has knowledge and prestige, and addresses an audience while cultivating a position of detachment, that increases his awareness of the things going on. We have to go to Italy, again in the 1920s, to see the development of another line of argument, starting (once more) from the idea that there are two dichotomous categories of intellectuals, the traditional and the organic. This idea was introduced by the philologist Antonio Gramsci, who, during the 11 years of his imprisonment under Mussolini's fascist regime, wrote in *Prison Notebooks* (1926–37) that all men are intellectuals though not all of them have the function of intellectuals in society (Gramsci, 1971). He distinguished between

the traditional intellectual (the teacher, priest or literary writer ‘independent’ of a social class) and the organic intellectual (the organising and reflective element in a particular social class or group.) The organic intellectual criticises the claims of objectivity and performs the role of the spokesperson for a specific social group formulating interpretations of their identities, interests and needs. As such, Gramsci was the first to emphasise that organic intellectuals have an essentially mediating function, and thus the capacity to be an organiser of a group of individuals with effects on society in general.

Edward W. Said took up exactly this Gramscian idea in the Reith Lectures delivered on the BBC radio in 1993, and connected the concept of the organic intellectual to current practices of broadcasters, consultants, experts and mass journalists in Western societies. Everyone working in any media field associated with the production or the distribution of knowledge is, according to Said, an organic intellectual in giving voice to certain ideas and groups. All these different media participants have become members of a culture of critical discourse. As such, they are part of the audience they address, and this makes their authority self-evident but also more subjective. This organic or practical performance of the intellectual is also pointed at by Arthur M. Melzer (Melzer et al., 2003), defining the intellectual as a generalist, who has a vital concern for the application of ideas. In contrast to Benda’s traditional clerk, the public intellectual – it is here that the ‘public’ element is again significant – writes opinion pieces and magazine articles, his ‘practice’ being the deliberative balancing of opinions and analyses. The public intellectual is committed and takes a stand, and is *not* ‘the enlightened or intellectual statesman ... for he holds resolutely to a posture of detachment’ (Melzer et al., 2003, p. 4). Melzer’s ideas however, can be contrasted with the example of public intellectuals such as Václav Havel, the dissident absurdist playwright who after years of writing critical pieces, became the first president of post-communist Czechoslovakia, or Mario Vargas Llosa, critical opinion maker, writer and candidate for the presidency in Peru in 1990. As public intellectuals they also accepted a role in the political arena.

Cultural authority and popularisation

At this point, we are confronted with what can be considered the fascinating paradox in the discussion on public intellectual thinking and writing, connected to what Patrick Baert and Josh Booth (2012) have called the tensions within a set of contradictions when examining

intellectuals and their public engagement.¹¹ While the unique and defining characteristic of intellectuals is that they take a stand and deliver critique from either a universal (Benda) or a more private (Said) point of view, public intellectuals by the very fact of their having to present their ideas to a broader public are also forced to popularise ideas in order to make them accessible to the audience as well as attractive to the media. Public intellectual is not a modish term as Collini suggested (2009, p. 470) but it carries a specific connotation since public implies the translation and mediation of knowledge to the audience(s) to which the intellectual feels committed.

It was French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu,¹² who defined the intellectual as both 'a paradoxical being' and a 'bi-dimensional being'. In his view, the paradox involves the classical distinction between pure culture and political engagement. The intellectual grounds his authority and independence in the autonomous world of art or philosophy, but on the basis of his prestige he can also interfere in political life. The intellectual is a bi-dimensional being, because he has to fulfil two conditions: to belong to an autonomous intellectual field, while at the same time investing competence and authority in political action that is carried out outside that field. He reinforces autonomy from temporal powers and resists the temptation of withdrawing to the ivory tower for too long by creating institutions or mechanisms to interfere in politics in the name of a specific authority. The solution to the paradox lies in what Bourdieu provocatively calls a collective intellectual, that is: individuals, who, through research and participation on common subjects constitute a sort of ad hoc collective.¹³ Intellectuals should work together in defence of their specific interests and the protection of their independence. The present time, according to Bourdieu, seems to be calling for a conscious and organised mobilisation and cooperation of intellectuals. Hence, the paradox of the intellectual is that he is in fact sending a *double* message: leave me alone so that I can stay detached and autonomous, and let me create opportunities to engage in politics with other intellectuals.

Significantly, autonomy and independence, as Bourdieu argued, are threatened by journalism and its mundane criteria: legibility, topicality and novelty. The ability to come across well on television is considered a criterion of intellectual effectiveness. To Bourdieu this was unacceptable. In the third millennium, however, this situation has become even more strong and complex, since social media have opened many platforms for intellectual discussion and visibility, on which responding adequately and quickly is demanded. More requirements have to be

fulfilled by today's public intellectual, due to the variety and speed of the media debates. Detachment and autonomy do not seem adequate qualifications anymore. In this book, Bourdieu's pessimistic view on the participation of intellectuals in various media is confronted with a more optimistic perspective on the new opportunities and activities that are performed by public intellectuals, in online as well as offline environments. This concerns, as we will see, the philosopher using radio and television programmes to ask attention for specific topics and stances, as well as the literary author participating in a discussion on the Internet to defend democracy, the sociologist participating in a television satire, or the novelist promoting her popular fiction on Facebook and Pinterest while at the same time writing intellectual pieces in blogs on *The Guardian* website. No public intellectual today sticks to one genre or just one platform.

The role of the intellectual in a mediatised public sphere was also questioned by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who in his acceptance speech on receiving the *Bruno Kreisky Preis*¹⁴ spoke quite negatively about the position of intellectuals in the age of the Internet and television. In Habermas's view, intellectuals on television are more interested in self-promotion than in putting their knowledge to work for a public goal. He argues, in line with his famous dissertation *The Structural Transformation of The Public Sphere* (1991 [1962]), that intellectuals in the modern liberal society are supposed to influence the formation of opinions through rhetorically pungent arguments. In doing this, they depend on a responsive, alert and informed liberal-minded and well-educated audience. The ideal type of intellectual is supposed to take normative stances and express them in novel perspectives, and it is important that he resists the lures of power and remains an observer from the sideline. The intellectual is supposed to speak out only when current events are threatening to spin out of control – but then promptly, as an early warning system. This constitutes the most interesting characteristic that distinguishes intellectuals from other actors in the public sphere: 'an avant-gardistic instinct for relevances' (Habermas, 2009, p. 55). It is this notion that could help us to further gauge the paradox of the intellectual. The avant-gardistic instinct involves

- a mistrustful sensitivity to damage to the normative infrastructure of the polity;
- the anxious anticipation of threats to the mental resources of the shared political form of life;
- the sense for what is lacking and 'could be otherwise';

- the spark of imagination in conceiving of alternatives;
- a modicum of the courage required for polarising, provoking and pamphleteering. (Ibid., p. 55)

Sensitivity, anticipation, the thinking through of alternatives, imagination and courage are thus the main conditions for taking up the role of the public intellectual. The subsequent question then is, why Habermas considers these intellectual virtues as not applicable to television. The answer could be that his idea of the public sphere is still based on a modern and liberal society with clearly separated venues for rational discussion on the one hand, and pleasure on the other, while television obviously belongs to the sphere of late modernity in combining information and entertainment, seriousness and popularisation. Though Habermas is sensitive to the current societal changes, his perspective – at least in his Bruno Kreisky lecture from March 2006 – still is a modernist one, in particular when he points to the recalibration of communication from print and press to television and the Internet, resulting in an expansion of the public sphere in which the exchanges between the public and the intellectual become more intense and informal. The price to be paid for the increase in technological egalitarianism, Habermas argues, is a blurring of roles:

the horizontal and informal networking of communications diminishes the achievements of traditional public spheres. For the latter pool the attention of an anonymous and dispersed public within political communities for selected messages, so that the citizens can address the same critically filtered issues and contributions at the same time. (Ibid., p. 53)

Television and the Internet provide intellectuals with opportunities that were unavailable earlier, including the ability to reach a huge (trans) national audience, but the fact that these audiences can be reached does not mean that the public will be receptive to intellectual ideas and will accept the authority of intellectuals. Filters are lacking, and in consequence, according to Habermas, it is more problematic for the audience to decide upon the relevance of an opinion. Furthermore, the mixing of the rational discourse and self-promotion of the intellectual leads to a loss of differentiation and to the assimilation of public and private roles that the intellectual in a modern society consciously kept apart.

Bourdieu's and Habermas's rather nostalgic perspectives, I argue in this book, can be nuanced when taking a closer look at the various and