

***PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS IN TIMES OF CRISIS:
WHAT DO THEY HAVE TO OFFER?***

- Symposium organised by the RIA Committee for Social Sciences -

Royal Irish Academy, Academy House, Dublin - 27th November, 2009

*Speaking notes of Donncha O'Connell,
Visiting Senior Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Human Rights, LSE
and Lecturer in Law at the School of Law, NUI Galway*

Vice-President, Chairperson, ladies and gentlemen...

When I was invited to take part in this event some months ago my instant reaction was to disclaim any attachment to the idea of being a public intellectual. All of my initial notes on the subject construed the idea of a public intellectual in pejorative terms which, in itself, was a 'finding' of sorts. I thought of academics who happened to be public intellectuals in the following terms:

- Escapees;
- Trespassers;
- Promiscuous talkers or 'pundits' (i.e. paid promiscuous talkers);
- Exiles from the specific seeking refuge in the general; and
- Credible 'notice-boxes' (this is a concept known only to those of us taught by nuns!).

The therapist inside my head – always alert to the dangers of self-loathing brought on by idle speculation – prompted me to do some

research on the subject on which there is a substantial literature, much of it American and sociological. There you will find the idea of the public intellectual discussed in terms of specialists speaking beyond their usual 'audience' and often beyond their fields of specialism. This is especially noteworthy when done by scientists when they talk about the ethical as opposed to the informational aspects of science, apparently. One commentator (Alan Lightman, *MIT Communications Forum* – <http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/papers/lightman.html>) writes in hierarchical terms about three levels of public intellectual – plainly named 'Levels 1, 2 and 3' – with people like Noam Chomsky and Edward Said in the Level 3 category. It is, for those of you who are interested, possible to progress 'slowly and even unconsciously' upwards from one level to the next so that you can die happily as a Level 3 public intellectual. Others (like Josef Joffe in "The Decline of the Public Intellectual and the Rise of the Pundit" in Melzer, Weinberger and Zinman (eds), *The Public Intellectual: Between Philosophy and Politics*, (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2003)) speak of public intellectuals as 'general practitioners of the mind'. Presumably, like other GPs, they self-medicate with books and, if they happen to be academics, treat students as surrogate patients! Richard Posner, a very prolific lawyer, characterises academic public intellectuals as 'peripheral insiders' or 'insiders pretending to be outsiders' and, on the basis of his own empirical analysis, is generally negative about their contribution in the United States (in *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (Harvard University Press, 2001)).

Of course, it would be wrong to proceed on the assumption that public intellectuals are often or even necessarily academics. In fact, it could be argued, for reasons to which I will return, that contemporary Irish universities are unlikely places in which to find public intellectuals. The world of journalism, inhabited as it is by columnists and freelance pundits of varied intellectual prowess, has an undeniable tradition of public intellectualism. People like Karl Marx, Mark Twain and George Orwell were undoubtedly public intellectuals but they were undoubtedly journalists too. A similar tradition has been maintained in Irish journalism by figures like Sean O Faolain, Desmond Fennell, Fintan O'Toole and others. It should, perhaps, be no surprise that media professionals are often better at mediated engagement with the public than those working in the comparatively rarefied atmosphere of academic institutions.

I would like to focus on the role of academics as public intellectuals. As professionals, we all live in and are defined by our professional context. Thus, if there is a reason why so few academics are public intellectuals it may have something to do with the university environments in which they work. Separating the academic dancer from the university dance has not yet been successfully accomplished by any experimental alchemist but (drawing on universal truths, as revealed so accurately in David

Lodge novels) we can ruminate productively. Academics exist professionally in universities and work within academic units, usually within one unit of primary affiliation like a Faculty, Department or Centre. Thus, when you tell someone that you are an academic the reflexive, almost existentialist, response is: 'What Department are you in?'. Immediately, one is defined by one's departmental specialism reflecting the organising principle of universities once memorably described (by someone whose name I forget!) as a series of independent sovereignties linked by a heating system. (In the case of my own university it is not a very good heating system but that is of no metaphorical significance!).

Universities have for some time embraced what Anthony T. Kronman (in *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*, (Yale University Press, 2007)) calls a 'research ideal' founded upon disciplinary specialisation having moved from a culture of 'secular humanism' which itself had replaced an 'age of piety' and the scholastic tradition. It is arguable that the embrace of the so-called research ideal has entailed an abandonment of scholarship or, at least, a diminution in status of individual scholarship that is not quantifiable as research. How many times have you read university policy documents with phrases like 'The University is committed to interdisciplinary, collaborative research on an inter-institutional basis while *respecting* individual scholarly endeavour ... going forward'. For 'respect' read 'tolerate' and note the unsubtle construction of a

new norm understandable by reference to the eccentricity that it replaces ... going forward!

It could, of course, be argued that this 'new' research ideal involving collaboration across disciplines and between institutions is exactly what is needed to turn academics into higher functioning public intellectuals ranging freely across disciplines without frontiers, although no one would be so naive as to say this. To make such an assertion would miss the point of such research, as orchestrated through competitive funding bids, and would also miss the point of what it takes to make a public intellectual.

In Ireland, third-level research funding initiatives have been preoccupied with establishing and building a research infrastructure and contributing to 'the knowledge economy' or, more recently, to 'the smart economy'. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this. In fact, it makes good business sense to blue-skies philanthropists and, perhaps, to hesitant state funders. However, there is an undoubted bias in favour of natural sciences and engineering of various kinds in such defining funding drives that confirms and embeds a pre-existing weakening of the Humanities, broadly understood, in the third-level sector. The implications of this for the intellectual life of a university are obvious.

Irish universities and ITs have bought into an emphasis on added-value research – with all of the connotations of 'excellence', in the

Orwellian sense, that this entails – leaving them open to the risk of becoming the R&D wing of the State. This is not as monopolistic as it sounds when one considers the emphasis on partnerships with industry, but that hardly lessens the cause for concern in terms of independence and the sharing of public benefits of such applied research.

Education, at all levels, must be more than an instrument of state industrial policy. Universities have a moral purpose beyond the imperatives of flexibility and institutional survival.

For those of us who work as academics in universities it is vital that an open and pluralist appreciation of what it is to be a good academic is re-established. By that, I do not mean that what passes for good teaching is patronised with awards or that the happenstance of wider community benefits that leak out of universities be branded or sold as commodifiable ‘civic engagement’. It should still be possible to be a good academic – and, therefore, a successful one – by inspiring others to learn through scholarship grounded in a genuine passion for one’s subject, whether broad or narrow. That should be the ‘key performance indicator’ and not whether, in a survey of opinions, nine out of ten student customers who expressed a preference said your course met their expectations or that they liked you. It is harder to measure, in numerical terms, the success or failure of an academic according to this more open and pluralist model of what it takes to be a good one, but it is an infinitely more meaningful

standard and, surprisingly, harder to manipulate than what passes for teaching evaluation now.

It should not be maverick or odd to say this although it can, at times, sound like special pleading. My argument is not one against change – a fairly predictable accusation – but in favour of preserving that which is good and threatened by the wrong kind of change.

The recent experience of Law Schools in Irish university re-structuring drives is instructive. In all NUI universities former Law Faculties were coupled with former Faculties of Commerce without any convincing explanation of the need to do this beyond the fact that it had been done elsewhere. (Obviously, UCD was to blame as it was the first to force such a marriage of administrative convenience!). The informing mantra of university re-structuring was that a smaller number of larger units would be more efficient (for which read ‘manageable’) making universities more ‘fit for purpose’, that purpose remaining somewhat ill-defined although knowable through some clever de-coding of strategic plans. This was, of course, a highly debateable engineering proposition that was only ever really debated in (small-p) political terms.

As someone who served a period as Dean during university re-structuring, and bears a commensurate level of emotional scars (visible only to other Deans!), I sympathise and agree with the desire to make academic units more manageable and more

connected to an agreed university mission. However, I remain unconvinced that this can be achieved by melding barely cognate units. The other reason put forward for mergers was that it would increase levels of inter-disciplinary academic activity. I always thought that this was both fanciful and disingenuous, especially in the cases of Law and Commerce.

Law is an ancient discipline that draws on and is open to other disciplines. It can be intellectually rich and is, undoubtedly, a source of monetary riches to universities and other institutions offering law programmes. It also attracts students who are often as animated by the desire to be rich as the desire to do justice. (In this it differs little from vocations like Medicine or Dentistry where the opportunities for doing justice are obviously weaker!). In a world where knowledge is (allegedly) power, legal knowledge can also be a ticket to power – the ideal of ‘a government of laws and not of men’ permitting distinct advantages or privileges to ‘legal men’ – a most apposite observation in the case of the US.

In fairness to legal academics they are no strangers to the public square but it does not follow that they are more likely than other academics to be public intellectuals, despite the utility of their discipline and its broad relevance to public affairs. The usual role for a legal academic commentator, whether in the written or broadcast media, is to explain or comment upon the outcome of a case or some legislative proposal. In the US this can earn you minor celebrity status depending on how ‘colourful’ your media

performances are and how controversial you are prepared to be (by, for example, articulating the appropriate measure of legal torture allowable to extract confessions from terrorists).

In Ireland, constitutional referendums are especially good for business, with lawyers – both academic and professional – adopting positions of inevitable prominence and sometimes even forming groups with titles (that would surely constitute nightmares for advertising experts) like ‘Lawyers for this’ or ‘Lawyers against that’. That is to say nothing of the deservedly controversial role performed by judges acting as Referendum Commissions of one or more, a topic for another day, hopefully.

The recent banking crisis that is now an economic crisis has been a field day for economist commentators of various kinds but lawyers have been relatively less visible and vocal despite the centrality of legal issues as causal factors in the banking crisis and the undoubted relevance of law to what is proffered by way of partial solution in the form of NAMA. Whether or not the very public intervention by a group of academic economists in opposition to the NAMA proposals was well made, it was disappointing to see their views dismissed rudely as merely academic, especially by an academic now working directly as an adviser to the Minister for Finance. This was no better than the intemperate and dismissive approach adopted some years ago by the former Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, to the warnings of some economists and business journalists that the apparent economic

boom was perhaps more fragile and illusory than it seemed at the time.

Equally, it would seem that some economists show insufficient appreciation of the complexities of politics and the uniquely difficult job of being a politician. The same might be said of all public intellectuals operating at a safe remove from politics. Legal academics are adept at criticising judgments and legislative proposals without ever having been involved in a real case or experiencing the real difficulties of legislative drafting. This may partially explain the anti-intellectualism evident in Irish politics without validating it.

Much of what I have said, thus far, has been observational and critical leaving me open to the charge of being 'another useless academic' hurling on the rhetorical ditch. If making public intellectuals more relevant means making ideas more important I think there is a greater role to be performed by public intellectuals who happen to be academics, but not just in times of crisis. There is plenty of public engagement by specialist academics in their areas of specialism and, depending on their area of specialism and the manner in which their 'message' is mediated, this can sometimes be engagement of a public intellectual kind. More often than not it is reactive (e.g. to some 'crisis') by which time the more 'prophetic' nature of some academic or scholarly writing or

research, yet to be publicly amplified, is belatedly acknowledged (e.g. the controversy that erupted a number of years ago and endures since in relation to strict liability sexual offences involving minors) . This has its place and may be regarded by some as *the* appropriate public role for academics but it should not rule out a more active engagement by academics in public affairs whether controversial or not.

If we accept that universities, organised around narrow specialisms (even if now existing in larger administrative units) and driven by a funded research ideal are, in certain senses, constitutive of the behaviour of those working within them then certain consequences follow. It is more likely that one will realise one's professional ambitions by being a specialist in a favoured area doing value-added research in response to funding tenders or some kind of 'out-sourced' research function of a state body that is respected and income-generating. No matter how 'excellent' one is this does not leave much time for being a public intellectual. In certain situations, being a public intellectual may damage your standing as a potential earner of income for your employer by reason of a real or attributed undermining of rigour and independence. But that does *not* mean that academics with something to contribute cannot find some space for making a contribution of a public intellectual kind beyond the strictures of such 'core' research activities most favoured by academic institutions. Locating that space may be a problem and some

pragmatism may be in order as it's unlikely that there will be a radical reversal of the culture shift in Irish universities.

If we look to periods where ideas mattered a lot, and these were not necessarily good ideas or good periods, we find that 'think-tanks' of various kinds were pivotal. Although there are some think-tanks in Ireland (e.g. TASC and the Iona Institute) it could hardly be said that there is anything approximating to a think-tank culture in Irish politics or even in public policy discourse.

Academics who might contribute to the work of such think-tanks, whether on a full-time or associate basis, and, thereby, make a contribution of a public intellectual kind or an otherwise impactful contribution, would search in vain for such opportunities in Ireland. As for popular awareness, you would be hard-pressed to find members of the Irish public who could name one Irish think-tank apart from, perhaps, the ESRI.

In the United Kingdom, the Thatcher period was demonstrably influenced by the work of the Centre for Policy Studies and its guru, Keith Joseph, among others. Now we perhaps await a Conservative resurrection personified by the nice Mr. Cameron suitably informed by the values of what sounds like the ultimate post-Blair triangulating nightmare of 'Red Toryism', a case of 'Colour Me Beautiful' if ever there was one! This seemingly oxymoronic 'big idea' is championed by a working class theologian called Phillip Blond who happens to be the real-life step-brother of Daniel Craig (aka James Bond) and his new and

well-funded (for three years anyway) think-tank, *ResPublica*. The Right has no monopoly on think-tanking and even the period of quite centrist politics, personified by Blair and Brown, was preceded by intense activity on the part of influential left-leaning think-tanks like the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) and *Demos*. Interestingly, these are now 'reaching out' to Tories in a manner that may indicate the direction of the political wind in the UK right now.

From the way in which I have characterised the UK experience of think-tanks it might seem that I do not take these bodies too seriously. That is not the case. I think that they perform a useful catalytic function that links the world of ideas to the world. They might also function pontifically to allow good ideas that are developed in the academy (through research and publishing of various kinds) to travel beyond that space and become 'translated' into action and change by political processes. That is not to say that all academics should be seconded to think-tanks or to political parties but a more developed think-tank sector that engaged seriously with politics and public policy, drawing on the intellectual capital available nationally and internationally, would at least provide a space in which public intellectualism might flourish. Academics would surely have something to contribute to this.

This may be of minimal utility by way of response to the current 'crisis' but it might help anticipate future crises with a view to

avoiding them or minimising their impact. It might also allow for a democratic amplification of ideas – good and bad – resulting in more informed decision-making grounded on a healthier respect for the value of creative and critical thinking. Who knows, it might even allow for some real added value.

© Donncha O'Connell, 2009.