The Market Colonization of Intellectuals[1]

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In many fora over the past decade, public intellectuals seem unable to talk about pressing social issues without performing the equivalent of an academic literature review. Although reasons range from trying to inform their audiences of relevant debates to efforts to demonstrate erudition, that many public intellectuals present their work as the basis for rewards in academe and the entertainment industry suggests influences tantamount to the colonization of intellectuals by the ever-expanding market.

There was a time when the divide between academic intellectuals and those whose primary vocation was the common weal was marked by location. The former worked in universities, colleges, professional schools and seminaries. The latter worked in public organizations, advocacy groups, civic and religious associations, political parties and given the consequences of dissent, a good number of them produced their work from prisons and the trenches in times of war.

These two spheres offered communities for intellectual development and, crucially, they offered, albeit in the past, modest employment. To think, everyone needs also to eat.

Along the way, some academics became public figures and some public figures became academics. But the political legitimation of either depended on the impact of their work on public institutions and social movements. Then came a wave of reactionary policies in the 1980s into the past decade in an effort to push back the achievements of the 1960s. Accompanying these efforts was a war against left-oriented intellectuals.

In an ironic development, the anti-left quickly took advantage of at least one Marxian insight, well exemplified in Ayn Rand's 1957 novel "Atlas Shrugged": Attack the material conditions of the opposition. Right-wing think tanks, bloated with funding, waged war on social policies and institutions that offer safety nets for dissenting and creative left-wing and even centrist intellectuals. As public intellectuals became more academic, they increasingly relied on academic institutions for employment. So, the right hit them where it hurts.

Increased pressures in the academic job market began to affect every aspect of academic life, while the shift to neoliberal and neoconservative policies dried up government support once enjoyed during the cold war, where the public image of capitalist countries mattered as much as the demand for technical mastery over implements of war. Privatization became the mantra against humanistic projects and the shift, familiar to all, is to a corporate and consumer model of higher education. This change affected the sociology of academic institutions. One outcome is the emergence of an academic managerial class. In many universities, a consequence is administrators outnumbering faculty, a development rarely discussed as a factor in the rising costs of higher education. Administrators are more expensive than faculty.

Not all administrators fit this portrait. But the exception to a rule does not eliminate the explanatory force of the rule. It only shows that the rule has limits. In the past, an administrator was a scholar motivated by civic commitment to her or his institution. Today, there are administrators who skip over scholarship beyond achievement of the Ph.D. or comparable degree. Their relationship to academic management becomes, then, instrumental, the way managers with M.B.A. degrees learn the techniques of business without necessarily grasping its larger social problematics.

This academic managerial class consists of a mixture of academics, accountants, lawyers and business people (often serving on boards of trustees and on different levels of administrating universities). They are generally without goals short of imitation. Thus, their avowed purpose is to align the university with the sociology and norms of the market. This alignment brings along an accompanying rationality with market-driven social practices. The hegemony of those practices, which also assert themselves as the bases of intellectual and professional legitimacy, is a form of colonizing rationality. Since it has an impact on how academics behave and aims to determine what and how academics think and what they produce, I call it the market colonization of the academy. Its correlate is the market colonization of knowledge.

The managerial academic class works with a logic governed by quantitative models of assessment and consumption. Thus, knowledge is constantly measured and so, too, are its modes of assessment: the ranking of journals and the number of publications a scholar achieves in those of the highest rank. The result is the prevalence of more conservative models of assessment, where prestige of publishing houses and establishment auspices prevail over ideas.

Content falls sway to form and abrogated reasoning emerges, where judgment is supposedly reserved while only access to certain markers dominates. A weird circular logic results, in which work is praised by its appearance in distinguished places. In other words, a scholar or a public intellectual is important if her work appears in distinguished places determined by distinguished people appearing in them.

These developments have an impact on knowledge at the level of content in the following ways. As institutions become more consumer driven, interest in research declines as consumers seek degrees and predictable markers of appearing educated instead of the critical and difficult achievements of an actual education. As more scholars apply for fewer jobs, risk aversion develops and creativity declines.

In the humanities, for instance, employment safety means a return to scholastic forms of knowledge with the replacement of science instead of the god or gods around which past institutions were built. What this means today is that

a demonstration of two kinds of expertise become marketable in a consumer-driven academy – namely, mastery of technical knowledge (sometimes scientific, but more often science-like) and textual mastery, which is a correlate of the first.

Mastery of technical knowledge offers opportunities of securing precious grants from private foundations, for-profit corporations, and neoliberal or neoconservative government projects. As well, for the consumers who also seek employment with their degree, technical scientific or professional knowledge offers skills for those markets.

Textual mastery imitates, in the humanities and some areas of the social sciences, scientific technical knowledge. The job of teaching texts promises consumers the appearance of education through textual familiarity. Thus, research that challenges texts, produces new kinds, and may even transcend textual virtuosity is less marketable. The academic, in this sense, offers technique, which is marketable.

Should a budding young scholar object to this portrait, her or his peers, in addition to advisers and friends, offer a powerful corrective: "You want a job, don't you?"

Securing a job is the rhetorical trump that legitimizes the entire process. In the academy, it leads to a strange logic: The best way to get a job is to have one. Thus, many academics and by extension many public academic intellectuals are perpetually on the job market. Market potentiality governs everything they produce.

In the academy, nothing is more marketable than the reputation of being smart. This makes sense: No one wants dumb intellectuals.

The problem, of course, is how "smart" is defined. In a market-oriented society, that means knowing how to play the game of making oneself marketable. The problem here is evident if we make a comparison with ethics. I once asked an environmental activist, who argued that a more ethical ecological position is the key against looming disaster, which would bother her more: to be considered unethical or stupid? She admitted the latter. In a society that makes it stupid to be ethical, what should public intellectuals do?

The impact of this development of market-driven knowledge is evident in how many professional intellectuals with an avowed social critical project write and present their work. Although it is important to engage valuable research in presenting matters for the public good, the reality is that some scholars function more like the knowledge equivalent of brand names than ideas. The result is, as I initially protested, much cultural criticism looking more like academic literature reviews (textual marketability) in dissertations and professional journals. As the market gets more conservative, this becomes increasingly so in relation to canonical texts. The big boys of ages past offer marketable support.

The effect is that many well-meaning people no longer have the capacity to think, or at least formulate thought, outside of the rehearsal of the academic job talk. They present their marketability and this mode of presentation affects even those who are at first not academic. The nonacademic intellectual has "arrived," so to speak, when the academic post is offered in recognition of the supposedly nonacademic intellectual achievement.

Now, this concern about the market colonization of the academy and its impact on public intellectual life is not a criticism of individuals whose goals are primarily academic. It is not my wish to join the neurotic call of condemning academics for being part of a profession our civilization values, or at least used to value, greatly. What is crucial here is whether the underlying practices of academic assessment are, at the end of the day, academic at all. This consideration emerges not only from intrusive boards of trustees, who increasingly seem to want academics to lose spiritual remnants of their vocation and become the equivalent of automatons, but also from academics and public intellectuals who have learned how to play the market, as it were. Those academics and public intellectuals, having achieved the coveted judgment "smart", understand that there is nothing more marketable than becoming a "brand", and this is usually done at the level of phrases that become isomorphic with their authors.

To produce an idea that contributes to the advancement of human knowledge is a wonderful achievement. Yet, it could also leave its author out in the proverbial cold. To produce an idea wedded to the author in such a way as to make her or him the exemplar of the idea, the brand, so to speak, makes the presence of that author indispensable for the experience of the product. Even more effective is the transformation of the author's name into a product itself or at least an isomorphic relationship between the two. There are many examples. In recent times, can one think of deconstruction without Jacques Derrida or Jacques Derrida without deconstruction?

This is not to say there must be something nefarious about these associations. After all, the same could be said about relativity and Einstein, psychoanalysis and Freud, hegemony and Gramsci, justice as fairness and John Rawls or Orientalism and Edward Said. The list can go on, but I think the reader gets the point.

Becoming an eponym for an intellectual achievement works, however, if the demand grows in the market place. Intellectuals thus face selling their knowledge goods in ways that many did not have to in the past. Prior intellectuals were subject to different criteria of assessment in a world with a very different relationship between the university and the market and the academic and the nonacademic intellectual. To illustrate this changed relationship, the discussion thus far can be made salient through consideration of the role of capital itself in modern times.

Capital refers to ownership over the means of production. This was the designation of the class known as the bourgeoisie. Correlated with the bourgeoisie was the production of mystifying modes of argumentation, knowledge practices whose purpose it was to create a labyrinth of rationalizations of the alienation of flesh and blood human beings. As Peter Caws, the famed English philosopher of science and culture, explained:

> One convenient way of escaping responsibility for unfortunate social facts (private property and wage labor, for example) is to regard them as relations between people and things: The capitalist is related to his property, so the expropriated worker vanishes from the equation; the worker is related to his work, so the factory owner similarly vanishes. Marx insists that both are disguised relations between people and other people: The owner of private property deprives and the wage slave is enslaved to, human beings in flesh and blood, not economic abstractions.[2]

The bourgeois academy maintains itself, in similar kind, through legitimating the practices of bourgeois society. Sometimes, this takes ironic forms, as we find in elite anti-elitism (witnessed on a nearly daily basis by many of us who have taught in first-tier institutions across the globe), where bourgeois society espouses also commitments to equality and freedom while demanding that the justice of inequalities should at least receive demonstration.

Although they may be critical of bourgeois society, many public academic intellectuals have bourgeois aspirations. What do those intellectuals do when they lack ownership of the means of material production – when the only type of capital they seem to have is the cultural one of their degree? Our brief discussion of branding suggests that they seek its epistemological equivalent: ownership over the means of knowledge production.

This ownership, governed by the social, cultural and legal institutions in contemporary, market-dominated society, brings along with it the correlative problems of colonization faced by material production. For example, the more mystifying knowledge capital becomes, the more linked is the relationship between the author and the product, making them one and the same and, since no one else is identical with the author and the brand, the reference point of the flow of profit becomes restricted. What this means is that the demand for the product becomes the demand for the author who has also become the product and, thus, an affirmation of market forces.

In recent times, what is even weirder is that the political identity of intellectual product has also become marketable. Thus, consumers seeking right-wing, centrist or left-wing intellectual products have an array of public intellectuals and academics offering also their politics as grounds of their marketability. Under the right circumstances, one's politics sells.

Together, these streams of market colonization – over academic institutions, academics and the squeezing of public intellectuals into the contemporary market logic of neoliberal and neoconservative academic life – inaugurate a claustrophobic environment for critical thinking and the production of new and revolutionary ideas.

Yet, this dismal picture has many lacunae. The list I offered of individuals associated with great intellectual achievements in the past and recent times is, for instance, a highly imperfect one. I simply included them because of their familiarity and also to encourage the reader to think through alternatives without taking a reactionary stand against the notion of an academic project. Many of the intellectuals on that list were and their proper heirs continue to be, correctly located in academic institutions, even with their clear impact on larger cultural knowledge.

But, yes, there are intellectuals who offered alternatives. For instance, W.E.B. Du Bois, the greatest of African-American scholars in the social sciences, had a tenuous relationship with the academy. He offered some of the most groundbreaking concepts through which to study racism, colonialism and modern political life. When fired from teaching because of his politics, he made a living through employment in alternative institutions and, of course, his writing. Anna Julia Cooper worked as the principal of the M Street High School, although she spent several years in alternative employment. She, too, had to seek alternative employment for a time after being fired because of her politics. Her work in black feminist thought continues to make an impact and she, along with Du Bois, was among the founders of the Pan-African movement. Aimé Césaire, who coined the term Négritude, was not mired in a permanent rationalization of the French academy. He will also be remembered in terms of his work as a political figure in Martinique, as the former Mayor of Fort de France, and a critical intellectual presence in the black Diaspora and concerns of postcolonial thought. The same can be said for Leopold Senghor, one of the other fathers of Négritude, in Senegal. And, of course, there is the work of Frantz Fanon, whose writings and biography, in spite of his formal role of training interns in psychiatry in Blida-Joinville Hospital in Algeria, remains an abiding testament to the struggle for freedom in the colonial and postcolonial worlds.

Reflections on the market colonization of public intellectuals and academics and the mystifying practices they occasion are perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the critical literature on some of the intellectuals I have offered as exemplars of alternatives. Their critics often offer celebrity academics as politically superior alternatives to intellectuals of the past who were, suspiciously, known as revolutionaries. An example among the more mainstream intellectuals is the presentation of Martin Heidegger (a celebrity philosophy professor who was formerly a member of the Nazi Party) over Jean-Paul Sartre (a celebrity philosophical writer and anti-imperialist who rejected being an academic and who aligned himself with nearly every left-wing revolutionary movement from his middle age to the end of his life) on supposedly political grounds.

This is not to say that there isn't much in Sartre's biography that would not be embarrassing instead of inspiring to a market-colonized academy. Sartre was offered all the prestigious academic prizes in French and the wider European society, including a post at France's premier institution, the Collège de France, and the most prestigious one for a writer, the Nobel Prize for Literature. He rejected them all.

Although Sartre himself became a signifier for existentialism (a major branding if there ever was one), his decisions consistently suggested that he held himself to a standard beyond ordinary models of assessment. He knew he was a bourgeois writer, but he prized writing and the question of public commitment, with his notion of the politically engaged writer, to the point of living more modestly than he could have and dying much less wealthy. His godson John "Tito" Gerassi summarized him well when he eulogized:

Sartre was an enormously generous man and very modest. Though he earned a great deal of money with his plays, novels essays, philosophic al works and biographies of Baudelaire, Genet and Flaubert, he died in debt, having given away most of his fortune to political movements and activists and to an untold number of struggling intellectuals. To this day, five young writers are receiving monthly checks from Sartre's publisher not knowing their true source.[3]

Gerassi added:

> Sartre's philosophy is difficult to live. Perhaps because of that, most Anglo-Saxon commentators and teachers, raised on an escape-crammed philosophical tradition of pragmatism, pre-

> ferred to praise the moral message propagated by Sartre's existential rival, Albert Camus. Since all organized actions lead to doctrinaire authoritarianism, said Camus, all we can do is shout, No!
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> Bad faith, replied Sartre. What we must do instead, he said, is commit ourselves over and over again. No act is pure. All acts are choices, which alienate some. No one can live without dirty hands. To be simply opposed is also to be responsible for not being in favor, for not advocating change. To fall back on the proposition that human actions are predetermined is to renounce mankind. No writer can accept the totalitarianism implied by "human nature." If he writes, he wants to change the world – and himself. Writing is an act. It is commitment (Gerassi 2009:275).

These are certainly admissions that would make many contemporary academics and public intellectuals (most of whom are academics) squirm. Gerassi himself is an academic at Queens University of the City University of New York and public intellectual. His admiration for Sartre is not that Sartre was somehow better than the rest of us with the choices he made, but that he truly reflected his commitments in those choices. Being critical of being an academic, Sartre gave up being one and found a way to live as a writer without academic affiliation.

Critical of being a bourgeois, Sartre attempted to live, as best he could, a life that exemplified his commitment to freedom. Sartre's life, as was Fanon's, places upon all of us the question of the kinds of decisions we would make if we were in his situation. What are we willing to reject or embrace for our avowed commitments?

For many, it's impossible to imagine intellectuals like Fanon and Sartre as anything short of holier than thou, even though neither of them argued that academics should not have academic pursuits and seek academic rewards. They simply asked for the rest of us not to pretend that the world is somehow better off by our being rewarded for such pursuits and especially so in the most prestigious representations of establishment.

There are intellectuals out there who are struggling for alternatives. And even within the academy, there are those who labor, work and act according to commitments through which they hope to transcend the powerful gravitational pull of market forces. They offer inspiration for many who echo that powerful, historical search for what is to be done. Forgive me, then, as I here end by resisting the marketing seduction of offering their names.

Notes

1. This article was first published in *Truthout*, April 2010.
2. Peter Caws, "Sartrean Structuralism?" in The Cambridge Companion to Sartre, ed. Christina Howells (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 296.
3. John Gerassi, "Talking with Sartre: Conversations and Debates" (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 274.