

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



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Anti-Elitism and the Civic Purposes of Higher Education

Articles

Maria Farland

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I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the *Higher Education Exchange* agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. *The Higher Education Exchange* is part of a movement to strengthen higher education's democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the *Higher Education Exchange* publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.

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ACADEMIC PROFESSIONALISM AND THE NEW PUBLIC- MINDEDNESS

Maria Farland

In her call for a “fundamental rethinking” of the role of academics in public life, Maria Farland anticipated what is now called citizen, civic, or democratic professionalism. In the essay that follows, she describes how scholars first focused on the history and culture of the public sphere and then on public issues and problems. Each was an “object of study,” framed within a particular disciplinary perspective and divorced from the everyday life of citizens and communities. Farland imagines a “new public-mindedness” that can liberate academics from these professional constraints. Working directly on public problems with the intention of developing solutions, Farland believes, would allow academic expertise to be used in ways that “restore intellectual and public life to their proper relationship.” Farland argues that civic-minded academics must move beyond “the specialized languages and frameworks of their disciplinary knowledge” and engage in “a more fundamental rethinking of their professional orientation.” While some movement has occurred, Farland’s vision of a public-minded academy has not been realized.

Twenty-five years later, the relationship between academia and the public is more strained than ever. Academic professionalism and its focus on specialization continue to foster a culture of isolation that blocks faculty’s meaningful participation in public life. One consequence is that citizens question the relevance of the type of knowledge that is so highly valued by scholars. While many institutions invoke their historical civic mission, and organizations such as the Association of American Colleges & Universities have generated an array of civic engagement initiatives, most are directed toward students. At the same time, faculty are guided by academic norms that prevent them from recognizing the value of developing and maintaining productive working relationships with citizens.

While many faculty believe it is important to educate students to be responsible citizens, too often they do not set aside time in their own lives to do the same. Civic professionalism is a relatively new way of describing how professionals, including academics, can work with people from all walks of life for the common good. It goes beyond applying one’s expertise to a problem of public concern. Civic professionals need to cultivate the commitment and skills to work collaboratively with others in their communities and to make decisions deliberatively and inclusively about how to address public problems. Although this work is often conflated with service learning or civic engagement initiatives that are student-oriented, the work of being a civic professional is also a faculty responsibility.

Working with others enhances our ability to address shared problems and builds relationships based on mutual trust, which in turn strengthens democracy. A quarter-century ago, Farland imagined what might happen if academics applied their expertise to solving public problems. These questions remain relevant today as we consider how academics and institutions of higher education might reconstruct their relationship with the public. This can be done not by convincing others of the value of higher educational institutions and the research produced by scholars but by a commitment to work with citizens for the common good. How might higher educational professionals learn to recognize the knowledge, insights, and assets possessed by citizens? How might working together in ways that further the common good breach the imaginary divide separating the ivory tower from the public sphere?

— Joni Doherty

In 1995, my department at Johns Hopkins University conducted a job search for an open-rank, interdisciplinary position in the humanities. Because the position was broadly defined, we received nearly 700 applications in fields that ranged from the history of medicine to sociology and from persons as diverse as department chairs at UC Berkeley to insurance adjusters in Florida. The sheer number and diversity of these applications was staggering. To some readers, the plethora of applications was evidence of a stagnant job market. As professional organizations such as the Modern Language Association and the American Historical Association convened special forums on the crisis in the job market, and many educators called for a reduction in graduate programs, job searches in which there were five, six, even seven hundred applicants were no longer unusual.

But as a reader of these applications, what impressed me most was the overwhelming number of applicants who stressed their interest in the public as a category. For example, one applicant, who was completing a PhD in history, wrote, “My commitment to liberal education in public life is evident in my participation in a new group of scholars, Educators for the Public Sector. Our work stresses the importance of the public sphere for educators involved in higher education.” He enthusiastically described the group’s work in New York City, raising awareness about the public in area colleges and universities. Another applicant, a PhD candidate in philosophy, wrote of her involvement in convening public forums and emphasized the importance of her involvement with the public to her role as a scholar and teacher. Viewing her professional

scholarship and her role as a citizen as compatible pursuits, this young woman cited the importance of preparing undergraduates for their future roles in public life. Across a wide range of disciplines, young scholars in particular had embraced a renewed interest in the public mission of both universities and academic scholarship.

The notion that higher education has a civic or public purpose is not new. Most college and university mission statements continue to include the goal

Across a wide range of disciplines, young scholars in particular had embraced a renewed interest in the public mission of both universities and academic scholarship.

of preparing their students for citizenship. Despite the fact that policies and curricular initiatives aimed at fostering civic education are rare, many would agree that it is in college that most young people will learn their most

decisive lessons about public life. Young academic professionals seem to have heeded Derek Bok's 1990 exhortation that we must ensure "our universities [are] strong enough to build . . . a strong sense of civic responsibility."¹

The view that institutions of higher education have a public purpose has a long history, as historian Thomas Bender has shown. According to Bender, the earliest US institutions of higher learning were viewed as civic and public in character. Even the first US professional and graduate schools were founded to "reform our public life, our civic life, our politics," as Bender argues. The founding committee of the Columbia University graduate school declared its intention to train men for "the duties of public life," believing that intellectual and civic leadership were synonymous. Likewise, Bender recalls that John Dewey urged early 20th century educators to "bring their intelligence and their findings into the public realm," and argued that democracy would be realized only when "inquiry" and the "art of full and moving communication" were brought together.²

Moreover, earlier generations of academic professionals saw their disciplines as vehicles for participation in public life, a conception of their professional identity that Bender calls "civic professionalism." Gradually, academic professionals grew to see the purpose of their knowledge exclusively in terms of their disciplines and the goal of furthering specialized knowledge, resulting in the "disciplinary professionalism" that dominates much of today's academic and

professional culture. But earlier, community-based conceptions of the role of the intellectual placed academic professionals squarely within the public sphere. As Bender shows, the idea that academic professionals have a public or civic role to play is a venerable one.³

Today's renewed interest in the public involves not only young scholars' views of themselves as professionals but also the content of their scholarship. In recent years, a number of groundbreaking works of scholarship have analyzed the public from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. In fields such as political science, where the interest in the public has so often been reduced to empirical devices such as polling, debates about the nature of the public sphere are resurgent. Such prominent scholars as Nancy Rosenblum and Iris Marion Young, taking their cue from Jürgen Habermas' trailblazing analysis, have produced important new analyses of the structure and composition of the public sphere.⁴ In literary studies, Michael Warner's important study *Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere* discusses the literature of the early American republic from the Declaration of Independence to Benjamin Franklin's autobiography in terms of the emergence of the public sphere.⁵ In the field of history, Kenneth Cmiel has shown the gradual waning of the importance of the public, deliberative side of oral and written expression in a variety of academic fields, including rhetoric, in his 1990 monograph *Democratic Eloquence*. Examining the history of teaching grammar and oratory in the 19th century, Cmiel shows that intellectuals gradually became less concerned with the public, deliberative aspects of rhetoric as they increasingly focused on the private, individual learner in isolation.⁶ Even architecture and engineering schools such as Michigan's School of Architecture, which convened a major public lecture titled "The Making of Public Space," have joined the critical conversation around "the public" as a topic for analysis.⁷ And with the publication of Bruce Robbins' anthology *The Phantom Public Sphere*, scholars initiated a vibrant debate concerning the public sphere among themselves and across the disciplines.⁸ They have also founded journals with such titles as *Public Culture*, which in 1995 convened a summit for humanities academics titled "Public Culture and Civil Society."⁹

What does it mean for a space—a building, a city, an exhibition, or an institution—to be "public"? In the years preceding 1995, interest in this question also prompted vigorous debate in art, architecture, and urban studies. Widespread interest in the question of "the public," as one architectural historian put it, was inspired by the "desire felt by many artists and critics to intervene in the massive economic privatization of art production and circulation" that had transformed the art world to challenge the "attacks on public funding and

growing corporate influence on exhibition policies and to interrupt the legitimating rhetoric of ‘the public good’ or ‘public protection’ that surrounded these events”¹⁰ Developments in the public sphere have sparked a new, interdisciplinary consideration of what it means for spaces to be “public” in fields such as geography and architecture in which the primary object of inquiry is space. Invocations of “the public” and “the public sphere” have been used to support a wide array of theories and critiques not only in the humanities but in professional fields whose practitioners consider themselves engineers.

Among colleagues of my generation who completed PhDs in the mid-1990s, there has been overwhelming interest in the public as a topic of scholarship. One young scholar of American literature and culture, Michael Szalay, has examined the transformation of the role of the public in the arts, focusing on the period of the New Deal and the Federal Arts Project. In response to the economic crisis of the Depression, Szalay argues compellingly, the US government took an active role in supporting the arts, thereby making the role of the artist or writer a more “public” one.¹¹ Another scholar, Sharon Marcus, traces the emergence of the apartment building in the 19th century and argues that this new form of housing meant a reconfiguration of the relationship between public and private. Combining public and private space, the apartment was a hybrid form whose emergence influenced the way we think about the relationship between the public and private in the 20th century.¹² For many emerging scholars in the 1990s, movements for democratization in Eastern Europe and Latin America have led to a rethinking of how civil society and publics around the world work. One scholar’s new research on ancient Greek culture has brought these concerns back to the context of fourth- and fifth-century Athens, observing that “Athenians supposed that the democratic *politeia* would imbue future citizens with its values through exemplary decisions by its deliberative . . . institutions,” and stressing the “Athenian emphasis . . . on equal access to deliberative assemblies.”¹³ And finally, feminist scholarship has continued to show how spaces, occupations, and identities often considered private actually impact the public sphere. For example, Gillian Brown, in *Domestic Individualism* (1992) has argued that values such as order, enclosure, and interiority, associated with the home, came to define the model citizen in the public sphere.¹⁴

Amidst the enormous diversity of approaches that characterize the new public-mindedness among today’s academic professionals, there is ample evidence that “the public” has emerged as a common concern in fields as diverse as urban planning and English literature. Academic professionals who align

themselves with a variety of disciplines—history, literary criticism, the social sciences, architecture—share a common interest in ways that public spaces and cultures have evolved, emerged, and transformed in a variety of places, times, and societies. Perhaps the new public-mindedness marks a kind of new common ground where today’s academic professionals, despite the predominance of the culture of specialization and disciplinary professionalism, can escape their specific professional affiliations and begin to examine what it means to be public and to create public spaces. That examination brings the opportunity for a resurgence of civic professionalism. As academic professionals come together to examine the history and nature of the public sphere, they inevitably begin to involve themselves in the issues and problems that the public faces.

But even as today’s scholars have turned increasingly toward the public as a focus of intellectual debate and inquiry, the public image of their institutions has come under attack. As the 1990s decade opened, story after story depicted the shortcomings of higher education; as one *New York Times* article summarized, “the splendid seclusion of the university has been shattered by a barrage of criticism.”¹⁵ The Carnegie Foundation warned that “acts of incivility weaken the integrity of many institutions”¹⁶ of higher learning. The debate over the purpose and function of higher education in American society has made higher education the center of a number of larger societal controversies about issues such as cultural pluralism, and the university has emerged as the focus of noisy and often heated debate about public problems.

Like it or not, the university has gone public, becoming the focal point for a number of questions of broader interest to the public. But by making the university the subject of such debates, the wider public was also pointing out that US college and university campuses were themselves spheres of public activity. The public and the media complained that public life itself had broken down at US college and university campuses, and many scholars seemed to agree that lack of civility had become a problem at their institutions. Prominent scholars such as Harvard’s Henry Louis Gates urged academic professionals to renew their attention to the public, “to forge, for once, a civic culture that respects both difference and commonalities.”¹⁷ The public has looked to universities for solutions to public problems and has found academic communities to be dysfunctional public spheres. Many have become convinced that higher education is inattentive to public problem-solving and to the issues and concerns that shape public life and debate. Even worse, academic professionals seem unable to address the problems plaguing their own academic and campus communities.

Many academic professionals, heeding the call to reassert their relevance and to recapture their public function, seemed to respond with a new public-mindedness as I have argued here. Unfortunately, much of that new public-mindedness has taken place largely within the disciplines, remaining within the framework of the old disciplinary professionalism. Academic professionals have made the public an object of study, examining its history, its

Ironically, the academic turn toward the public has taken precisely the form of the hyperspecialized, disciplinary mode of inquiry that first disconnected academic professionals from their public mission.

relation to other categories and its unending diversity and multiplicity. They have made the public an object for intellectual analysis and, as I have suggested, *public* has become a keyword for academic journals and conferences: an academic buzzword with all the prestige and cache of traditional aca-

ademic theories. Where the public, the news media, and politicians have demanded that academic professionals be more responsive to their public function, intellectuals have responded by making publicness yet another opportunity for academic business-as-usual. Rather than reexamining their disciplinary or professional affiliations to consider in what sense their work might engage questions and concerns that are public in nature, they have often continued in the mode of specialization, bringing the expertise of their disciplines to bear on the abstract concept of “the public.” At a moment when the public itself is less and less satisfied with what is going on in universities and more and more convinced that academic scholarship is irrelevant to the problems most people face, the recent academic turn toward the public hardly represents the fundamental rethinking of academic professionalism that the occasion seems to demand. As their profession suffers from what might be called a severe crisis of legitimacy, most humanities academics are continuing to operate according to assumptions about their own professional identity that seem increasingly inadequate. Ironically, the academic turn toward the public has taken precisely the form of the hyperspecialized, disciplinary mode of inquiry that first disconnected academic professionals from their public mission. Even as the public recaptures attention in current intellectual debates, intellectuals remain largely disconnected from the very public that captivates them,

insulated within the specialized languages and frameworks of their disciplinary knowledge.

If the new public-mindedness is to be anything more than an academic fad and if intellectuals are to resecure their legitimacy in the eyes of the public on whose support they will continue to depend, their turn toward the public must involve a more fundamental rethinking of their professional orientation. Recognizing that the institutions that organize intellectual and cultural life in the United States have origins that are civic and public in character, they must redirect themselves away from rarefied, specialized segments of society toward the broader public realm. As recent debates about higher education have demonstrated, the public sphere is a vital context in which intellectual knowledge can be brought to bear. When the culture of academic life and its professional practitioners are brought into contact with the problems and issues that confront the public, and when intellectuals themselves are based not only in their disciplines but in a vibrant relation to the public realm and its problems, only then will the new public-mindedness restore intellectual and public life to their proper relationship.



NOTES

- ¹ Derek Bok, *Universities and the Future of America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 7.
- ² Thomas Bender, *Intellect and Public Life: Essays on the Social History of Academic Intellectuals in the United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 130, 137.
- ³ Bender, *Intellect and Public Life*, 3-15.
- ⁴ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Nancy L. Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism: Romanticism and the Reconstruction of Liberal Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); Nancy Rosenblum, "Civil Societies: Liberalism and the Moral Uses of Pluralism," *Social Research* 61, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 539-562.
- ⁵ Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).
- ⁶ Kenneth Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1990).
- ⁷ Rafael Viñoly, *The Making of Public Space* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996).
- ⁸ Bruce Robbins, ed., *The Phantom Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
- ⁹ "Public Culture and Civil Society" (editorial retreat of *Public Culture*, Blue Mountain Lake, NY, June 8-11, 1995). The *Public Culture* initiative was the precursor of the later *Public Books* initiative; see www.publicbooks.org.

- ¹⁰ Rosalyn Deutsche, "Art and Public Space: Questions of Democracy," *Social Text* 33 (1992): 34-53, 41.
- ¹¹ This research later appeared in print as Michael Szalay, *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).
- ¹² This research later appeared in print as Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth Century Paris and London* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).
- ¹³ Josiah Ober, *The Athenian Revolution: Essays on Ancient Greek Democracy and Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 180, 185.
- ¹⁴ Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth Century America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992).
- ¹⁵ Anthony Depalma, "Clash of '91; Higher Education Feels the Heat," *New York Times*, June 2, 1991.
- ¹⁶ Quoted in Robert D. Reason, Ezekiel W. Kimball, and Jessica Bennett, "Crisis in Student Community," in *Ernest L. Boyer: Hope for Today's Universities*, eds. Todd C. Ream and John M. Braxton (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015).
- ¹⁷ Henry Louis Gates, *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), xv.

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