After ‘The Last Intellectuals’

In *The Last Intellectuals* (1987) Russell Jacoby argued that the iconic crop of midcentury public intellectuals — Irving Howe, Dwight Macdonald, Edmund Wilson — had given way to a younger generation of scholars devoted to highly specialized knowledge, the obscure jargon of narrow disciplines, and the bureaucratic demands of university careers. They were, in effect, a "missing generation" — and led to a diminished public discourse and a diminished culture at large.

Now almost 30 years later, in a new academic climate — one marked by the rise of the Internet, demands for greater diversity on campus, and harsh economic realities — the question persists: What role does the university play in helping or hindering a culture of public intellectuals? Russell Jacoby, Jonathan Holloway, Claire Bond Potter, and Leo P. Ribuffo revisited that question at the annual meeting of the Society for U.S. Intellectual History, in Washington in October. These essays are adapted from their remarks.
To revisit a book I published almost three decades ago means navigating between the pleasure that the book still elicits response and the pleasure of "I told you so." I might lack the skill. One point of honor: For what it is worth — and it has been worth about two lattes at Starbucks — the now ubiquitous term "public intellectual" derives from The Last Intellectuals. As a phrase, it pops up a few times before my book, and appeared in passing in C. Wright Mills, but nowhere is it foregrounded. Google’s Ngram Viewer charts the frequency of "public intellectual" as a stand-alone term as near zero for centuries until the middle 1980s, when The Last Intellectuals is published, and the term’s usage takes off. The success of the phrase, of course, does not confirm my argument. It suggests, however, that the book touched a nerve, a disquiet about the fate of intellectuals and cultural life.

For some critics the phrase is redundant, if not pompous. As Christopher Hitchens remarked, "public intellectual" is something like "organic food." Is there inorganic food? Yet Hitchens found it useful — in the same way, perhaps, that "organic food," if not precise, accents certain ingredients or their absence. When the term "intellectuals" began appearing in English, the phrase "public intellectuals" would have been superfluous. Borrowed from the French, "intellectuals" already encompassed "public." The term referred to those novelists and writers who publicly came to the defense of Alfred Dreyfus, the Jewish army officer framed for treason in France. "Manifesto of the Intellectuals" ran the 1898 title of the petition of those supporting Dreyfus. For French critics, public interventions defined intellectuals. The definition stuck and became a badge. The Last Intellectuals was motivated by the concern that younger American intellectuals were trading in their badges.

My argument is historical, even generational, but not moral. The classic intellectuals existed in the United States, but the post-World War II situation altered their social and economic environment. The old urban bohemia of San Francisco, Chicago, and New York were disappearing. As the cities became more expensive and freelance work less remunerative, higher education expanded. Intellectuals, old and young, flowed into colleges and universities. What I called the transitional generation, those born around 1920, entered the universities, often late in their careers and without
Ph.D.s. The Irving Howes and Daniel Bells became professors but retained their allegiance to a world of readable essays and small periodicals. The next generation — my generation — came of age in the universities and never left them. The world became specialized journals, monographs, and grant applications. This generation wrote for colleagues. If they were intellectuals, they no longer were "public" intellectuals; rather, they were academic or professional intellectuals oriented toward one another and microfields. In the 1880s, political science could claim one journal; now more than 40 populate the discipline. The American Political Science Association recognizes more than 30 subfields. The larger culture, I believe, suffers when intellectuals turn inward.

'The danger is that we have entered the era of one-stop thinking and instant commenting.'

With some exceptions, the professoriate did not appreciate my book. Leo Ribuffo, of George Washington University, called it "glib, superficial and oracular," a "symptom of the intellectual slump" it purported to explain. Thomas Bender, of New York University, denounced it as "careless, ill-conceived, and perhaps even irresponsible." For many I was guilty of the primal sin called out by all forward-thinking people: nostalgia. I was romanticizing old white guys — the Lewis Mumfords and Edmund Wilsons. I failed to realize that things had changed and improved. Other critics rediscovered the oldest wisdom: Nothing changes. In this scenario, intellectuals were always disappearing and always existed — or never existed. Case closed.

In point of fact, I did not romanticize earlier intellectuals. (Nor did I exclude women: Jane Jacobs, Susan Sontag, and Rachel Carson surfaced in my text.) "If the intellectuals from the 1950s tower over the cultural landscape right into the 1980s," I wrote, "this is not because the towers are so high but because the landscape is so flat." The issue was not the brilliance of earlier intellectuals but the whereabouts of their successors.

It turns out they are everywhere. All my critics produced lists of public intellectuals, usually friends and acquaintances, whom I had slighted or overlooked. "Where are all the public intellectuals?" asked the historian Rick Perlstein. "A well-stroked three-wood aimed out my Brooklyn window could easily hit half a dozen." Ribuffo offered as examples Pat Aufderheide, David Garrow, Robert Reich, and Jeremy Rifkin. The Barnard College dance professor Lynn Garafola nominated her husband, Eric Foner,
as well as Rosalind Krauss, whom I was informed was "an art critic so well-known that a New Yorker profile (on someone else) opened with a description of her living room." I cherished this information but remained uncertain whether it was the living room ("Its beauty has a dark, forceful, willful character") or the New Yorker notice that mattered.

In any event, a book like mine depends on generalizations. These must be grounded in specifics, but the lists offered do not by themselves rebut my argument. Some individuals — and perhaps this includes Foner, Perlstein, and his Brooklyn neighbors — manage to swim against the current, but does this alter larger realities?

Some of my critics embraced these realities. Younger academics who challenged dominant disciplinary paradigms, I was told, replaced old-style intellectuals who catered to the phantom common reader. The general audience was gone and so were the intellectuals who addressed it. "I specialize in generalizations," Daniel Bell once remarked. That belonged to the past. Good riddance to the "romantic left narratives about the ‘decline of the public intellectual,’ " wrote the NYU professor Andrew Ross.

Now we have "professional intellectuals" schooled in Foucault and post-structuralism, who "examine their institutional affiliations" and "transform the codes of power which are historically specific to their disciplinary discourses." Such arguments — and they showed up throughout the university — opened the sluice gates to mighty rivers of bad prose and bad theory that flow unabated to this day.

In an updated preface to the 2000 edition of The Last Intellectuals, I considered some criticism and offered some revisions. I did not anticipate the emergence of a generation of black intellectuals — Henry Louis Gates, Cornel West, Randall Kennedy, and others. In one respect at least, I do not see this promising development as invalidating my argument. If addressed with passion and lucidity, the general audience has not vanished, which many of my critics supposed. I also missed the existence of what might be called the new and not-so-new science writers; Stephen Jay Gould, Carl Sagan, Steven Weinberg, Oliver Sacks, and numerous others. Their success, again, suggests that the common reader still exists, but it also raises a host of other issues. Where are the corresponding humanists? As the English professors championed clotted prose and rococo theory, the scientists stepped up to the plate with limpid books.
Nowadays controversy over public intellectuals underscores the impact of the Internet, which barely existed when I was writing *The Last Intellectuals*. The new arguments against my book reinforce the earlier ones and posit that classic public intellectuals vanished as iPads replaced manual typewriters; the old essayists became opinionated bloggers. With Internet-driven venues and opportunities, new intellectuals pop up everywhere, according to the Tufts University professor Daniel W. Drezner, who offers an ebullient account. "The growth of online publication venues," he argues, has "stimulated rather than retarded the quality and diversity of public intellectuals." The Georgetown University professor Michael Eric Dyson has recently offered a version of this scenario. He announced that a new "black digital intelligentsia," adept with blogs, Twitter, Facebook — people like Ta-Nehisi Coates, Marc Lamont Hill, and Melissa Harris-Perry — is supplanting his own generation of Ivy League-educated black public intellectuals. The future looks bright.

Does it? Perhaps not. The danger is that we have entered the era of one-stop thinking and instant commenting. Some critics of *The Last Intellectuals* charged that I was promoting "publicity" intellectuals, not public intellectuals. I disagree but take the point. As the essay makes way for the blog or tweet, something might be lost, the slow work of reflection. When the blog pioneer Andrew Sullivan surrendered his post, he wrote, "I yearn for other, older forms. I want to read again, slowly, carefully. I want to absorb a difficult book." No one suggests that it is an either/or proposition: either monographs or tweets. But a middle ground of serious writing directed at the common reader might be disappearing, and with them their authors, the last intellectuals.

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Is the Internet the Final Bohemia?

By Claire Bond Potter  NOVEMBER 29, 2015

In 1987, I was in graduate school at New York University, living among the "milk-toast professors" who, in Jacoby’s words, "turned purple" with rage at his book’s arguments. When they turned purple, like all good graduate students, I did, too.

However, I was also already a feminist. This put me in another kind of tension with a book that mentioned a few women but failed to recognize anything that had happened in feminism after the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, in 1963. More important, the first missiles of the culture wars were beginning to whiz over university walls by 1987, and we feminists were in the cross hairs. That same year, Allan Bloom wrote that feminism had "triumphed over the family as it was once known," something that did not bode "well for the family as an institution." Three years after that, Roger Kimball classified academic feminism as "in collusion" with a "cult of theory" being promoted by tenured radicals.

Yet Jacoby misses something beyond feminism’s recent history — he misses the intellectual ferment of queer New York. Graduate students, artists, and workers were still flocking to the East Village in the 1980s for its bargain-basement rents, cheap ethnic food, and performance spaces carved out of abandoned buildings. Recognizing ourselves not as the gentrifiers we were, but as the queer and feminist descendants of Malcolm Cowley, Audre Lorde, Allen Ginsberg, James Baldwin, and Shulamith Firestone, East Villagers like me presumed, as Jacoby correctly notes, that our intellectual lives would be supported by universities, and that we would make universities different. We wrote for zines and community newspapers and we also wrote dissertations; we aspired to write big popular books and we submitted seminar papers to *The Radical History Review*, *The Journal of Social History*, and *Feminist Studies* for double-blind review. What I resented most about Jacoby’s schema back then was its diagnosis that "university intellectual" was a contradiction in terms.

The Cold War expansion of the universities, as well as the centrality of the humanities to the Cold War project, altered expectations about what public-intellectual work was for. Suturing the university to the future of intellectual life has had unforeseen consequences that are far more obvious a half-century later. The thousands of precariously employed contingent academics who neither function as public intellectuals nor support themselves adequately by teaching are one good argument
against allowing universities to govern intellectual life. A second is the emergence of soul-killing routines of faculty governance and the gatekeeping rituals that fill the lives of well employed faculty members, time that might otherwise be devoted to public writing, talking, blogging, even Facebooking.

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Yet social media and the Internet point us to the continuing possibilities of public-intellectual work. What Jacoby touched on, but failed to develop, is the historic importance of networks and networked knowledge in sustaining intellectual life. This is vital for those of us who, perhaps in addition to our more traditional scholarship, write and publish electronically. Media networks, Katie King has argued in *Networked Reenactments* (2012), had become central to intellectual work and knowledge creation by the 1990s. However, the cafes, little magazines, friendships, and bohemian social life that, as Jacoby notes, marked the first half of the 20th century were important networks as well.

What Jacoby dubs the mid-century "Hofstadter compromise" illustrates how the cultural geography of New York, functioning as a network, promoted one historian’s career. A historian still regarded by many as a defining public intellectual and leading scholar, Richard Hofstadter spent a lifetime establishing his brand, as my students would say. In his early career, he was reported to have seen the *Partisan Review* set as so crucial to his success that he sank into a deep and inconsolable depression every time an issue was published without his byline. He apparently attempted to secure his place in Ivy League circles through anti-Semitic humor, and obscured his presence in other networks (for example, Communist Party circles and the Popular Front) when they threatened to drag him down professionally.

If identifying with the university secured Hofstadter’s legacy, later generations would find higher education an increasingly closed culture. Not tenured radicals at all, Jacoby argues, Ph.D.s leave behind the Technicolor world of public ideas for careers sponsored by Benjamin Moore paints, exchanging the world of ideas for salaries, health care, and job security. What he misses is that by the 1970s, new networks had emerged to challenge university complacency: women’s studies, African-American studies, ethnic studies, lesbian and gay studies. Roger Kimball is correct that these activist scholars promoted "a kind of blueprint for special interests that want to
appropriate the curriculum in order to achieve political goals. In many ways they still do, but by 1990 they, too, were ingrained into the academy as the price of admission to intellectual work.

However, the taming of one network seems to promote the emergence of new ones. By the 1990s, networked computing promised to liberate intellectuals from physical space and even from publishers. Did the Internet spark the emergence of a social-media bohemia, one that aspired to even greater inclusiveness and freedom than the intellectual movements that Jacoby documents? Do these networks degrade intellectual life by their resistance to gatekeeping, or did the new freedoms — represented by what Finn Brunton, a media scholar at NYU and author of *Spam: A Shadow History of the Internet* (2015), calls the "utopia of loving-kindness and cybernetic anarchism" — reimagine bohemia by offering a virtual space for intellectual exchange and innovative knowledge production?

Like Jacoby’s bohemian cafes, the Internet is a politically anarchic space. There, people like Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning have emerged as organic intellectuals who theorize critical questions about power, human agency, and ethics. Along with Internet collectives like Anonymous, they are fighting for a new bohemia that promotes a radical vision free of institutional constraints. If success inevitably renders physical bohemias fragile, the networked virtual bohemia operates in reverse. As it gets cheaper and more ubiquitous, the space available to the knowledge workers of the Internet expands, and the networks through which they exchange and realize ideas become less regulated.

Internet bohemians need neither neighborhoods nor universities. They work from anywhere they can. Indeed, it is in Internet bohemia where we can listen to and document the emergence of a new generation of "surplus intellectuals" (Jacoby’s words) — the many Ph.D.s functioning as academic pieceworkers, not unlike late-19th-century glove turners on the Lower East Side who picked up packages of goods to finish at home for pennies an hour.

On the Internet, the precariously employed make common cause with one another in their opposition to the bourgeois formations that are the neoliberal university, the Modern Language Association, the American Historical Association. Bohemias and surplus intellectuals organizing in opposition to an intellectual establishment are, in Jacoby’s formula, codependent variables in the emergence of a recognizable
generation of innovative knowledge workers. If "the human material is not available," he writes, or if surplus intellectuals are Hoovered up into universities, then bohemias cannot sustain themselves; and when bohemias succumb to blight, development, chain stores, or their own popularity, intellectuals fail to cohere as a generation. They "do not disappear, but disperse; they spread out across the country."

But do these networks dissolve, leaving nothing behind? This is the history of electronic intellectual networks that we are only beginning to write. The good news is that Internet bohemia is, by definition, dispersed. The bad news is that successful Internet bohemians also sell out: Think Nate Silver; think The Daily Kos. Think Tenured Radical. Write a successful blog and you, too, can end up selling ads for the University of Phoenix or pretty furniture made in Scandinavia. The expansion of spaces designed to promote intellectuals can lead to their undoing. As Jacoby notes, the expansion of universities in the 1960s, with their pernicious salaries, health benefits, quiet campuses, and lifetime-guaranteed employment, had a particularly corrosive role to play when intellectuals ceased selling ideas and sold the idea of themselves instead. The Internet is not immune to this.

Yet flexible, voluntary networks in virtual space offer other political and intellectual possibilities, and we should imagine them before it is too late. Jacoby has said that even though he was wrong about a few things, he was right about most things. I’m glad he did. We may disagree about the importance of intellectual movements anchored principally by women, people of color, and queers, but we don’t disagree about how quickly these movements have been sucked into the academy — the barbarians at the gates becoming gatekeepers in turn. Internet bohemia, with its disdain for credentialing, and its networks that form, dissolve and form again according to new needs and desires, could, in fact, be different.

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My critique of *The Last Intellectuals* boils down to three related complaints. First, Jacoby’s method is Christopher Laschism at its weakest. That is, he drew broad and unwarranted conclusions from a relatively small number of life stories, books, and articles.

Second, he defined public intellectuals much too narrowly. American thinkers publicly disagreed about ideas long before C. Wright Mills apparently coined the term — indeed, long before there was a United States — as the rival Puritans Anne Hutchinson and John Cotton would attest if they were here. So would the Indian converts who tried to mesh Christian doctrines with their indigenous beliefs; Enlightenment republicans; enemies and friends of slavery; cohorts of awakened Protestants; Catholics, and Jews trying to figure out their place in the de facto Protestant republic; and, finally, two generations of original thinkers, the most impressive of whom were William James and Thorstein Veblen.

Starting the story 250 years too late, Jacoby defined public intellectuals as the ostensibly independent critics and journalists who played a disproportionately large role in intellectual life from the 1890s to the 1950s. Only a few academics made the cut, notably Veblen, Mills, John Kenneth Galbraith, and an impressive trio of Jacoby’s associates from the University of Rochester: Lasch, Eugene Genovese, and Herbert Gutman. Indeed, the chief problem for Jacoby in 1987 was that the intellectual life of baby boomers and near baby boomers was increasingly centered in predominantly conservative colleges and universities.

My third complaint is that Jacoby viewed these issues from the perspective of a nostalgic ’60s leftist. *The Last Intellectuals* ignored many important developments in American intellectual life even if we join Jacoby in limiting our discussion to the period since the 1890s. He needed to get out more — or at least to turn on the television set he disdained.

Like other inhabitants of the post-’60s-left intellectual bubble, Jacoby failed to notice that the United States in 1987 remained the world’s most religious big rich country. For 50 years, conservative Protestant thinkers had been trying with mixed success to
remain faithful while adapting to modernity. Molly Worthen’s *Apostles of Reason* offers a good introduction to these intellectuals and their conservative Protestant public. In our generation, the historians George Marsden, Mark Noll, and D.G. Hart tried to persuade this public to transcend what Noll called the "scandal of the evangelical mind."

Many playwrights, directors, and screenwriters should also count as public intellectuals. My shortlist includes D.W. Griffith, Frank Capra, Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Stanley Kubrick, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Spike Lee, Larry Kramer, and Tony Kushner. We should pay attention to some comedians: Finley Peter Dunne, Will Rogers, Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, Dick Gregory, and the *Saturday Night Live* crew whose satire helped to defeat President Gerald Ford in 1976. My current favorite comics, Chris Rock and Sarah Silverman, are more transgressive than Dean Holloway would allow any of us professors to be in a Yale classroom.

'A prospects are brighter for public intellectuals than for public scholars.'

Network television is important and sometimes even good. During the "long ’50s," for example, *The Twilight Zone* creator Rod Serling noted that Martians could say things that Democrats and Republicans couldn’t.

My reaction to *The Last Intellectuals* has been affected by my residence in Washington. Economists, lawyers, and international-relations theorists can be intellectuals, too, and *Foreign Affairs* is as much a "little magazine" as *Dissent* (though its readers are much more numerous and influential). Without attention to disputes about economic theory, important parts of Daniel T. Rodgers’s notable book, *The Age of Fracture*, could not have been written. On the liberal side of those disputes, the baby boomers Robert Shiller and Paul Krugman write lucidly for a general audience.

As Bruce Kuklick demonstrated in *Blind Oracles*, international-relations and military theorists have influenced American decisions about war and peace since the early Cold War. The ranks of war wonks march on with Michael O’Hanlon, David Ignatius, Robert Kagan, and Fareed Zakaria.

Perhaps most important, as radical historians in their intellectual bubble belatedly began to discover two decades ago, the United States contains many conservatives, neoconservatives, and libertarians with ideas of their own.
Jacoby identifies as an intellectual, and I call myself a historian or scholar.

Intellectuals tend, as Daniel Bell observed in *The End of Ideology*, to begin with their own experience and then work outward to the universe. I am convinced that this approach encourages the groupthink and superficial moralism rampant in the historical profession. Therefore I make a concession to Jacoby: When I critically reviewed his book in 1988, I naïvely thought that the intellectual liveliness which, in different ways, had characterized the academy in the ’50s and ’60s would last indefinitely. He was right, and I was wrong.

Nonetheless, as a public scholar, so to speak, I have tried to address as wide an audience as possible. I reached my peak during the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. I was able to tell some radio and television audiences that President Clinton’s frivolous impeachment trial was not a replay of Andrew Johnson’s, when comparable Congressional partisanship nonetheless meshed with intelligent debate about the Constitution and Johnson’s appalling failure to protect newly freed slaves during Reconstruction. Today, with rare exceptions, public scholars are excluded, especially from the nonprint media, in favor of paired partisan officials, political strategists, and war wonks rebranded as national-security consultants.

When opportunities arise, the role of public scholars and public intellectuals is not ethically complicated. We should try to tell the truth as best we can, to as wide an audience as we can reach, while acknowledging the tension between truth and audience size. Perhaps prospects are brighter for public intellectuals than for public scholars. My 25-year-old former student Bhaskar Sunkara publishes *Jacobin*, a lively magazine of neo-Marxist thought. I’m no actuary, but it looks as if we won’t be running out of public intellectuals for at least 50 or 60 years.

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