

THE BUREAUCRATIZATION OF WRITING

Why so few academics are public intellectuals

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a writer must stand on the rock of herself and her judgement or be swept away by the tide or sink in the quaking earth: there must be an inviolate place where the choices and decisions, however imperfect, are the writer's own, where the decisions must be as individual and solitary as birth or death.

Janet Frame, *The Envoy from Mirror City*, p. 124

Professors Woods, Percy and Hocking are moderately talented and enterprising young men with whom philosophy is merely a means of getting on in the world . . . I do not respect them; I will not cooperate with them; and I am happy to be in a position now to wipe out the stigma of being even nominally one of their 'colleagues'.

Professor E. B. Holt, resigning from Harvard University in 1918. (Cited in Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals*, p. 141)

There are two necessary characteristics of a public intellectual: that the person's work is engaged with substantive social questions; and that the person actively attempts to communicate with a public. The general question that this essay addresses is why so few academics in the humanities and the social sciences are public intellectuals; why, for the most part, their work neither engages with substantive social issues nor reaches out to the public.¹

Books, pamphlets, essays and articles are the most important means of communication between intellectuals and their public, even when, as today, they are supplemented by various forms of audiovisual communication. A public intellectual must write well, and this very

few academics seem able to do. In *The Last Intellectuals* Russell Jacoby argues that, in America at least, academics are failing to provide the public with challenging, readable books on matters of broad public interest. The cause of this failure, as he sees it, is in the transformation of the intellectuals of the first half of this century, who made a living from their writing, into the salaried academics of today. Although Australia has never had many self-supporting public intellectuals, and probably has more people writing for an informed Australian public than ever before, Jacoby provides a devastating critique of the quality of most writing produced by academics in the humanities and the social sciences, one that I think is applicable to much of the writing done by Australian academics.²

That few Australian academics are good writers is a claim some readers may think needs supporting. May I suggest to any with such doubts that they spend some time reading through any Australian academic journal – *Australian Historical Studies*, say, or the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*; or perhaps that they read a sample of recent books published by academics, or that they try to name twenty Australian academics who are important writers. They may even be able to name twenty, but when one remembers the thousands of people employed in tertiary institutions in the humanities and social sciences, part of whose job is to write, twenty is not very many.

The first answer to the question of why so few academics are public intellectuals is that very few academics can write in ways that engage an audience outside their discipline. In Australia there are other possible answers, particularly in the difficulties posed for the formation of an Australian public by the lingering effects of the colonial cringe, and in a pragmatic immigrant society's lack of interest in ideas; but such explanations are outside the scope of this essay.³ My initial question has thus become: why are so few academics in the humanities and social sciences good writers? Or, conversely, why are so many of them such bad or indifferent writers?

The preconditions for good discursive prose are relatively simple: a fully imagined audience, a sense of urgency, something interesting and important to say. The biggest problem with most academic writing is achieving the first two. Many academics start out with important and interesting things to say, but very few feel compelled to say them in ways that engage an audience outside their discipline; and in the end this corrodes the importance of what they have to say.

The lack of urgency and the failure to imagine an audience are consequences of the role writing has come to play in the modern bureaucratic university. The organizational needs of a bureaucratic university interact with an empiricist understanding of truth and the production of knowledge to deflect the academic writer from imagining an audience and exploring the potential of language to shape reality and persuade others. Academics so rarely write convincing prose

because the bureaucratic organization of their working lives and the organization of knowledge into disciplines make it very difficult for them to take writing seriously. To do so is to go against the grain of the job.

In describing the modern university as bureaucratic I am highlighting certain features of its organization at the expense of others. The other major tradition that informs the position of university academics is that of collegiate co-operation. At present this is under attack from all sides – from staff associations' preoccupation with equity of job conditions and secure career paths; from governments' efforts to make academics more accountable to the society that pays them; from university administrators' ambitions to streamline universities' management systems. These various attacks are all, in different ways, attempts to bring the contemporary university into line with bureaucratic models of organization.

The Bureaucratization of Working Life

Max Weber described modernization as a process of increasing rationalization, and saw bureaucracy as one of the main agents of this rationalization.⁴ Through bureaucracies, various areas of social life could be made subject to rational and impersonal criteria. In their modern form bureaucracies developed to ensure the objective, impartial and equal treatment of individuals in their dealings with the state. They are opposed to the making of decisions on the basis of personal criteria – like considerations of friendship or kinship, or pecuniary reward. Ideally, the consideration of an individual's case is governed only by the application of rules and regulations worked out in advance of the case; ideally, every official will deal with the case in the same way.

The employment conditions of the bureaucratic official are designed to ensure that the bureaucratic organization carries out its functions with impartiality and rationality. Impartiality and rationality must also govern the organization's selection of its personnel – with procedures laid down for selection, appointment and promotion. Central features of bureaucratic office, such as security of tenure, ensured salary and pension, are there to protect officials from the temptation to use their authority to ensure their livelihood – by taking a percentage of the money collected, for instance, or by receiving bribes. They also ensure that the official will deal with all parties equally according to the regulations, and will feel secure in rejecting pressures for preferment from the rich and famous.

Such a form of employment is now widespread among white-collar workers, including tenured university academics. To qualify to become an academic requires long and rigorous training; people are appointed to academic positions by a senior authority and ideally they receive this position for life; promotion is orderly and governed by regulation. Like

the tenure of a government official, academic tenure is designed to protect academics from personal pressures that might deflect them from the proper performance of their duties – in this case, the pursuit of truth and understanding and the dissemination of knowledge.

Being an official in a bureaucracy has profound effects on the writing of academics in the humanities and social sciences, for it pushes their writing away from its proper goal – the contribution to culture and society – towards the need of the bureaucratic university for objective and impartial criteria on which to select and promote its personnel.

The PhD, a long piece of writing of up to 100,000 words, is now the standard qualification for serious consideration for an academic appointment; and subsequent movement through the ranks depends on published writing far more than on the quality of one's teaching. In so far as universities are bureaucracies, procedures must be designed to judge this writing in ways that seem impartial. The number of pages published is the most obvious criterion, supplemented by the place in which the writing is published. For purposes of selection and promotion, the best places are refereed journals, international if possible. Books are treated uneasily. Perhaps the book is just popularizing someone else's work? Perhaps it's too light, or derivative, or journalistic? The publisher may be used as a guide – and here a book published by a moribund Australian branch of a prestigious overseas university press is likely to fare better than a book published by a vigorous locally owned publisher. Articles in non-academic journals like *Meanjin* or the *Age Monthly Review* can be very difficult to deal with, though in the area of Australian literature they may be acceptable. These journals are not refereed, and acceptance depends on the decision of a single editor rather than the judgement of a number of peers in the field. Newspaper and radio reviews are not relevant at all – mere journalism. The rule of thumb seems to be that the more widely a piece of writing is read, the less use it is on an academic publications list. That a person is interested in reaching out to a public invites suspicion – here perhaps is the popularizer rather than the dedicated scholar.⁵ Recent surveys of promotions and tenure committees in the USA found that both brilliance and public contribution were viewed with suspicion as signs of a non-professional bent.⁶ In my experience, rules are more often used to argue dullards up than to keep the obviously talented down, reflecting perhaps a difference between the two cultures.

It is important in a bureaucracy that the promotions system operate fairly; the expectation of the impartial administration of incentives is part of the basis of bureaucratic organization and of individuals' performance within such organizations. The system of incentives and rewards thus needs to be public and to be administered in such a way that people can be confident that if they do what is expected they will be appropriately rewarded, however lacking in talent they may be. Because of its resistance to routinization, talent is viewed with suspi-

cion. The pressure is always towards devising and refining of rules to decide individual cases and away from areas of ambiguity where individual judgement is needed.

The Bureaucratization of Knowledge

The bureaucratic university's use of writing to select and appoint its personnel is greatly assisted by the bureaucratization of knowledge in the modern university through its organization into disciplines. There is here a congruence between the university's organizational needs and its way of perceiving its tasks.

Australian universities are divided into departments: English, History, Political Science, French, Sociology and so on. There is some variation, but, whatever the names, the view of knowledge implied by the formal organization is that it divides reasonably easily into disciplines. Disciplines are organized across universities through their various professional associations, and the professional academic's career ideally takes place within these disciplines. One is trained as a historian, sociologist or literary critic, keeps up with the literature in one's field, attends and give papers at appropriate disciplinary conferences, and writes for the refereed journals run by these disciplinary organizations. At various points – when one is competing for scholarships, applying for grants, offering papers to conferences, submitting papers to journals – one's peers in the discipline judge one's work in terms of its contribution to the discipline; and one's position within an employing institution will partly depend on one's standing within the discipline's professional organization.⁷

The discipline is conceptualized in terms of shared subject matter, shared methods and techniques, shared conventions of writing and shared canonical texts. The picture is of scholars working together to build knowledge in their area, of work parcelled out, and of limits to what one needs to know in order to be effective. Disciplines offer some reassurance that, in the face of the overwhelming possibilities of human knowledge, a small field can be distinguished as being all that one really needs to know.

But knowledge, in the humanities at least, does not operate according to the model of organization embodied in disciplinary associations and university departments. The humanities are constituted through their joint endeavour – the interpretation of human culture. Their primary activities, reading and writing, are common; and despite passing fashions of technical jargon, they share a common language. Developments in one affect the others. Theoretical arguments about human nature, culture, society, language or interpretation will affect work across the humanities. For example, the waves of theoretical argument emanating from France since the 1960s and associated with people like Lévi-Strauss, Foucault and Derrida have transformed thinking across the humanities, particularly among younger scholars, who

often have far more in common with each other than they do with their older colleagues within the same discipline. Feminism is another example of a shift in thinking to which disciplinary boundaries are irrelevant. I would argue that the same is true of knowledge in most areas of the social sciences, but this is a more controversial claim that would be resisted by those still under the sway of positivist models of knowledge.

The power of bureaucratization can be seen, though, in the organizational responses to these theoretical challenges to disciplinary boundaries. Even when the theoretical challenges are such as to raise profound doubts about the very idea of disciplines, the scholars influenced by them become absorbed in fighting for their acceptability within the academy – arguing for new disciplines, forming new disciplinary associations. Whatever radical impetus the new ideas might have had is easily lost in the business of constructing the organization necessary to give legitimacy to new academic career paths – conferences, journals, networks of referees.

In the 1960s the New Left challenged the entrenched academic disciplines with the theoretical weapons of marxism. Now most disciplines in America have their dissenting journals – *Dialectical Anthropology*, *New Political Science*, *Radical History Review*. But, as Russell Jacoby points out, an influx of marxists into the academy has not transformed American universities and has had little impact on American culture. The threat of unemployment has kept one-time radicals busy ensuring their futures; academic politics has replaced the broad public politics of their youth.⁸ Similar fates threaten other intellectual challenges, where the impetus for change, though beginning outside the academy, becomes absorbed by the academy's organizational imperatives. Feminism, Australian studies and cultural studies are more recent examples of intellectual challenges from outside the academy that are in danger of becoming the basis of new careers and so losing their engagement with broad social and political goals. Bronwen Levy has remarked on the recent trend for the term 'gender studies' to replace 'women's studies', substituting a neutral term for one that has obvious connections to a political movement.⁹

Truth and Objectivity

The bureaucratization of writing and of knowledge within the academy is underpinned by the hegemony of empiricist and positivist models of truth as the goal of academic inquiry. This, rather than the need to have a means of selecting personnel, is what legitimizes disciplines' authority over the work of their members. Particular disciplines are seen as particular ways of approaching the truth, particular ways of ensuring objectivity. Commitment to truth and objectivity has a deep affinity with bureaucracy's ideal of the impartial application of rules and regulations. Both seek the ideal of a space in which any observer/

officer will see/do the same things. Both believe that if the method/rules can be got right, truth/justice will be guaranteed. Both are hostile to subjectivity's resistance to routinization. The ideal of objectivity is embodied in the notion of research that the humanities and social sciences have taken over from science. This, it must be stressed, may have very little to do with the way contemporary scientists actually operate; it is about the way a particular understanding of science is wielded against more subjective, language-based ways of knowing in struggles within the academy over the legitimacy of different forms of knowledge.

Scientists do their research, and then write it up. The writing is seen as ancillary, after the fact, and in no way constitutive of the research itself. The adoption of this way of talking about research masks the centrality of language and writing to the humanities and social sciences. The fiction is of reality apprehended prior to language and of the act of writing as a simple one of reporting on or describing that apprehension. The true work is thus seen as collecting the facts, the arguments, the findings, and the writing is simply the report, written in the plain, impersonal style characteristic of reports, as if the author were absent. The role of language in shaping and probing reality is denied and all questions about style are avoided.

The humanities do not seek truth but understanding, and while the concern with objectivity is an important value, it can easily become an end in itself, replacing the true end of work in the humanities, which is its contribution to living human culture, to a society's sense of a cultural context and to the understanding of its possibilities for freedom. Without that ultimate end, and without the engagement with a public it implies, the work becomes meaningless. I would argue that the same is true of the social sciences, but again this is to invoke a very complex and bitterly fought battle over the nature of social knowledge.

In a recent essay on Australian history-writing, Stuart Macintyre points to the connection between commitment to objectivity and the loss of any sense of a public amongst Australian historians.¹⁰ Whereas the earliest writers of history in Australia were men of affairs, writing the history of the recent past to argue for the policies that should direct the present, present historians are academics concerned with thorough research and documentation, exactness in references, and sound, unbiased interpretation. The writing of Australian history is now professionalized, and while there have been many gains, there have also been costs. Ideally, professional historians are detached from particular social groups and interests that might affect the objectivity and impartiality of their interpretations. But in detaching themselves from contemporary social goals and interests, they have detached themselves from the public.

The picture Macintyre draws of contemporary writing in Australian

history, particularly by younger historians, is gloomy indeed. He describes the way university historians have lost the ability to instruct or entertain a reading public, the way the huge increase in the volume of research has stifled historians' confidence in bold hypotheses, the development of narrow specializations and closed forms of communication, and the lack of conviction amongst many historians that they have anything to say. Macintyre points to Geoffrey Blainey and Manning Clark as exceptions among contemporary Australian historians. Both are conscious stylists, addressing themselves directly to the reader without the encumbrance of weighty scholarly apparatus; and both are convinced they have something to say. But, he says, their colleagues view their popularity with suspicion. 'Similarly, the flight from academia of Humphrey McQueen, among the most gifted of the next generation, is symptomatic of professional constraints.'

The processes Macintyre describes in history can be seen in other disciplines. Few of the young academics working in philosophy, political science, literary criticism or sociology write for a public, even though they are all working in intellectual traditions that once had close and vital connections with public life.

This is not to say that it is impossible for academics to write well. Many of our most important books are written by people who at some time during their lives have occupied academic positions. One thinks of Bernard Smith, Manning Clark, Bob Connell and Hugh Stretton. Some academics are able to develop and retain their sense of commitment to a general culture against the pressures of bureaucratization; some academics are able to retain bases of identification and experience outside their academic careers. Important for the ability to do this is a deep commitment to extra-academic goals and values – to political or religious beliefs, for example, that give meaning to the writer's vocation beyond the service of a career and that give a basis from which to develop something to say.

To return, then, to the two absences in academic writing that I am trying to explain – the absence of a fully imagined audience and the absence of any sense of urgency. These two absences can be understood if we look at the institutional and discursive practices in which the writing of academics is embedded. The bureaucratic university combines with the organization of knowledge into disciplines to disconnect writers both from a public and from their own subjectivity, the two traditional sources of energy for good writing and good books.

Academic writers in the humanities and social sciences so often fail to imagine a public audience because they are never trained to think of one. University academics do not write to persuade but to impress and gain approval within a hierarchy. They are trained to write for approval. From their student essays to their PhD theses, they are writing work to be submitted for examination. And, even when they have received their PhDs, they must submit work to refereed journals

in order to accumulate the publications necessary for appointment and then to accumulate the publications necessary for promotion and so on. At every point their writing is subject to external criteria – approved topics, accepted methods of research and styles of writing, the norms and conventions of the discipline.

Never in this process need academics think about an audience outside the hierarchy of authority within the discipline, never need they think about the relationship of their work to a public; as I have indicated, to think about this relationship may very well jeopardize one's career. The use of technical language or jargon, which is so characteristic of academic prose, has its origins here – in the need to indicate to higher authorities that one has mastered the current literature. Once, such technical language was motivated by the positivist dream of a language that would describe rather than constitute reality. That dream has long since faded, but the technical language persists and proliferates.

The institutionalization of disciplines within the bureaucratic university and the continuing power of positivist models of knowledge also disconnect academic writers from their own life and subjectivity as a source for their writing. This is not to argue for the primacy of autobiographical writing, but for a deep connection between one's intellectual preoccupations and one's human experience. Academic writing unfolds within the concerns of the institution, the discipline and the career, rather than the lived life. To follow one's intellectual life where it leads is almost impossible within the academy; it can blur one's disciplinary identification to the point that one may no longer be recognizable by the institution. And the awareness of mortality, which can be so important to a writer, has no place within a bureaucracy. Bureaucracies map the futures of their personnel in terms that serve the organization's needs to have trained and willing officers available at all times – its needs to recruit, to provide incentives, and to maximize its investment in its human resources. As the organization must assume its own immortality to be able to operate effectively, so the mortality of its members fades. Death does not continually illuminate the bureaucrat's working life, but has its proper place, outside the institution, in retirement.

Academic writing is writing that never leaves school, that never grows beyond the judging, persecuting eye of the parent to enter into a dialogue with the society and culture of its time, as an adult amongst other adults, with all the acceptance of mutual imperfection which this implies. Always seeking the approval of a higher authority, the academic writer endlessly defers responsibility. I write in this way because I have to pass the exam, to get my PhD, to get a job, to get tenure, to get promotion. I write like this because it is what *they* want. I don't write in the way best suited to what I have to say, or to win people to a cause, to change the world, to humiliate my opponents, to

help people understand their lives, to please my readers, or even to please myself. Never is the academic writer in that inviolate place described by Janet Frame where the choices and decisions, however imperfect, must be the writer's own, as individual and solitary as life and death.

NOTES

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¹ This makes the class of public intellectuals much smaller than the class of intellectuals, according to the very broad definition of intellectuals in James Walter and Brian Head's *Intellectual Movements and Australian Society* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1988). They define intellectuals in societies like Australia as 'all those who engage in the production, transmission and adaptation of ideas about society and culture'.

² Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (Basic Books, New York, 1987).

³ See particularly Walter and Head for some discussion of these questions.

⁴ H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1948), chapter 8.

⁵ These remarks are based on my observations while a member of the University of Melbourne's Promotions Committee in 1984, 1985 and 1986, and my membership of various selection committees.

⁶ Jacoby, p. 144.

⁷ For a much more thorough account of the operations of academic disciplines see Harry Redner, *The Ends of Science: An Essay in Academic Authority* (Westview Press, Boulder and London, 1987), pp. 116 ff.

⁸ Jacoby, chapter 5.

⁹ Bronwen Levy, 'Writers and Critics: Recasting an Opposition', *Arena*, 5, 1988, pp. 75-6.

¹⁰ Stuart Macintyre, 'The Writing of Australian History' in *Australians: A Guide to Sources* (Fairfax, Syme & Weldon, Sydney, 1987), pp. 1-29.