

# Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Spring 2018

Volume 44 Issue 3

- 359 *Rodrigo Chacón* Philosophy as Awareness of Fundamental Problems, or Leo Strauss's Debt to Heidegger's Aristotle
- 379 *W. Julian Korab-Karpowicz* Why a World State Is Unnecessary: The Continuing Debate on World Government
- 403 *Laurence Lampert* Reading Benardete: A New *Parmenides*
- 425 *Ronald Beiner*  
431 *Charles U. Zug* **An Exchange:**  
*Nietzsche's Final Teaching*  
by Michael Allen Gillespie
- 439 *Michael Allen Gillespie* On *Nietzsche's Final Teaching*: A Response to My Critics
- 447 *Charles U. Zug* Developing a Nietzschean Account of Musical Form: A Rejoinder to Michael Gillespie's Response
- 451 *José A. Colen* **Review Essay:**  
What Is Wrong with Human Rights?
- 471 *Marco Andreacchio* **Book Reviews:**  
*For Humanism*, edited by David Alderson and Robert Spencer
- 475 *Bernard J. Dobski* *Tyrants: A History of Power, Injustice, and Terror*  
by Waller R. Newell
- 483 *Jerome C. Foss* *James Madison and Constitutional Imperfection*  
by Jeremy D. Bailey
- 487 *Raymond Hain* *The Virtue Ethics of Levi Gersonides*  
by Alexander Green
- 493 *Richard Jordan* *Public Intellectuals in the Global Arena: Professors or Pundits?*, edited by Michael C. Desch
- 501 *Mary Mathie* *Fate and Freedom in the Novels of David Adams Richards* by Sara MacDonald and Barry Craig
- 507 *Tyler Tritten* "Philosophie und Religion": Schellings *Politische Philosophie* by Ryan Scheerlinck

# Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

- Editor-in-Chief* Timothy W. Burns, Baylor University
- General Editors* Charles E. Butterworth • Timothy W. Burns
- General Editors (Late)* Howard B. White (d. 1974) • Robert Horwitz (d. 1987)  
Seth G. Benardete (d. 2001) • Leonard Grey (d. 2009) •  
Hilail Gildin (d. 2015)
- Consulting Editors* Christopher Bruell • David Lowenthal • Harvey C.  
Mansfield • Thomas L. Pangle • Ellis Sandoz • Kenneth  
W. Thompson
- Consulting Editors (Late)* Leo Strauss (d. 1973) • Arnaldo Momigliano (d. 1987) •  
Michael Oakeshott (d. 1990) • John Hallowell (d. 1992)  
• Ernest L. Fortin (d. 2002) • Muhsin Mahdi (d. 2007) •  
Joseph Cropsey (d. 2012) • Harry V. Jaffa (d. 2015)
- International Editors* Terence E. Marshall • Heinrich Meier
- Editors* Peter Ahrens Dorf • Wayne Ambler • Marco Andreacchio •  
Maurice Auerbach • Robert Bartlett • Fred Baumann • Eric  
Buzzetti • Susan Collins • Patrick Coby • Erik Dempsey •  
Elizabeth C'de Baca Eastman • Edward J. Erler • Maureen  
Feder-Marcus • Robert Goldberg • L. Joseph Hebert •  
Pamela K. Jensen • Hannes Kerber • Mark J. Lutz • Daniel  
Ian Mark • Ken Masugi • Carol L. McNamara • Will  
Morrisey • Amy Nendza • Charles T. Rubin • Leslie G.  
Rubin • Thomas Schneider • Susan Meld Shell • Geoffrey  
T. Sigalet • Nicholas Starr • Devin Stauffer • Bradford P.  
Wilson • Cameron Wybrow • Martin D. Yaffe • Catherine  
H. Zuckert • Michael P. Zuckert
- Copy Editor* Les Harris
- Designer* Sarah Teutschel
- Inquiries* ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***  
Department of Political Science  
Baylor University  
1 Bear Place, 97276  
Waco, TX 76798
- email* [interpretation@baylor.edu](mailto:interpretation@baylor.edu)

---

Michael C. Desch, ed., *Public Intellectuals in the Global Arena: Professors or Pundits?* South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016, 424 pp., \$55 (cloth).

---

RICHARD JORDAN

BAYLOR UNIVERSITY

*Richard\_Jordan@baylor.edu*

Michael Desch and a bevy of distinguished scholars have given us an engaging and useful volume on public intellectuals in a global context. Unlike similar works, the volume takes an international approach to its subject, and a reader benefits greatly from the tandem comparison of similar figures in widely different circumstances. The collection ranges from dissidents in China to novelists in Latin American to economists in the United States, and a reader gains a new perspective from seeing the same subject in so many milieux. The volume's contributions are often entertaining to read (as Andrew Bacevich on the early Cold War) and highly informative (as Gilles Andreani on French diplomats). Some delve into subjects of geopolitical significance (as Ahmad Moussalli on Arab intellectuals), and some cast old favorites in new lights (as Desch's exploration of Max Weber). Others (such as Patrick Deneen on the decline of universities) burn with righteous indignation, and a few (like Willy Lam's concise, sweeping tableau of public intellectuals in China) are sparkling gems of research and synthesis.

The first half offers a comparative treatment of public intellectuals. Jeremi Suri and Andrew Bacevich begin with American figures, emphasizing in particular intellectuals active during the Cold War. Willy Lam, Enrique Krauze, and Ahmad Moussalli follow with exhaustive, in-depth studies of intellectuals in China, Latin America, and the Arab world. The value of these three chapters is particularly high. The contrast with the Western experience

shows a reader what he might take for granted: I had not known that the PRC grooms “strategic intellectuals” (114) to influence its public, nor the extent to which many intellectuals were “stakeholders” in the communist system (100); our American intellectuals are usually critics of the party line, not bulwarks. On a more mundane level, all three summarize their subjects tersely and effectively for an ignorant reader. Thus, they not only help illuminate the American experience but also serve as useful introductions to those of other countries. Parts of these chapters are very encouraging—Krauze’s analysis shows how, despite the great follies of Latin American intellectuals, a few brilliant minds can cast long shadows over politics—yet on the whole I was unpersuaded by the optimism of either Moussalli or Lam: it is not clear to me how intellectuals in China or the Arab world will ever have the platform to reshape those regions for the better.

The next quarter of the volume studies intellectuals across different disciplines and media. Patrick Baert examines the decline of philosophers as our leading intellectuals, and Bradford DeLong explains their replacement by economists. Kenneth Miller gives an idealized vision of the role popular scientists might play in our society, and Gilles Andréani studies the possibilities and limits of diplomats in the public sphere. Between these chapters, Paul Horwitz offers a searching meditation on how the medium shapes the message, especially the effects of blogging and the Internet on public discourse. His chapter is stimulating and enlightening, and it ends on a convicting insight:

I wonder whether the experience of public intellectuals in the blogosphere does not ultimately say more about the virtues—but more especially, about the *flaws*—of public intellectualism itself....[It] may give us less reason to worry about public intellectual blogging as such—and more reason to doubt the public intellectual enterprise as a whole....The most successful public intellectuals are often the cleverest or most enjoyable writers and speakers. Whether they are accurate and whether their insights are meaningful and not just glib are incidental questions. (239)

The last quarter of the collection begins with Mark Lilla’s reflections on his earlier work, *The Reckless Mind*. He steps away from his previous fierceness, and he ends with a lament for the decline of public intellectuals. In conversation with Lilla’s piece, Michael Zuckert takes the opportunity to set the concept of public intellectual into a much larger historical context than any previous contributor; while sensitive to the great harm done by intellectuals in the twentieth century, he also forcefully argues for their continued

importance. Next is a contribution by Patrick Deneen, who pulls no punches in a strident critique of the modern university and its descent from coherent universals to a disparate multiverse. Still, Deneen comes not only to disparage: throughout his essay, he paints an inspiring portrait of the ideal public intellectual, someone like a professor to the people, a person whose broad learning and skills at communication make him accessible beyond the college classroom. Deneen thus confronts the decline of public intellectuals head-on, and he attributes their looming extinction to one cause: “There is no high-level generalism.’ . . . The result of the transformation of the university is the loss of both ‘public intellectuals’ and a ‘public’ who cares about intellectual questions” (343, quoting Allan Bloom).

Michael Desch concludes the section with a plea to scholars to rejoin the public discourse. To help them do so, he offers a thorough and highly engaging account of Max Weber—this chapter quintupled my knowledge of the man and his political activities—all while drawing lessons for the modern academic. These last few chapters, while among the briefest in the book, are also among the most stimulating. I do not believe they can be read without raising the reader’s interest or, at the least, his blood pressure.

The volume brings together scholars of diverse and fervent opinions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is plenty of disagreement across the book’s four hundred pages. In fact, the contributors do not seem to agree on the meaning of “public intellectual,” especially what constitutes the *public*. (A variety of definitions are offered, e.g., on 4, 91, 130, 217, 321, 333.) In his concluding piece, Vittorio Hösle clarifies the concept through a series of succinct illustrations (387–89), insisting that a public intellectual must “write both on public issues and for the public . . . [and] must succeed during his lifetime in garnering public attention” (389). Hösle’s standard seems straightforward enough, but it is not clear how many people could meet it, especially in modern America. Consequently, other contributors define the word differently. For Krauze, public intellectuals speak to *elites* about matters of public interest (130); for Horwitz, they address “a general *and educated* audience” (217, emphasis added), and Zuckert seems to agree (321). Other contributors’ definitions fall somewhere in between.

Alongside these definitions, the volume offers a cornucopia of paradigmatic public intellectuals: Cicero, Kant, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, Edmund Burke, Cardinal Newman, George Orwell, Keynes, Friedrich Hayek, Reinhold Niebuhr, Raymond Aron, Paul Krugman, Noam Chomsky, Thomas Sowell, David Brooks, John Mearsheimer, and Cornel West, to name

a few. And here arises a problem. I consider myself a well-informed citizen, reasonably well-read and reasonably up-to-date on the current fashions of our discourse. But before attending Princeton, I had never heard of Cornel West. I still have to google his name to ensure I have spelled it correctly. If he is among our leading public intellectuals, then we have expanded our definition of “public” rather widely. I would be shocked if even two percent of the American people know his name. It was not always so: most Romans knew Cicero, and all Americans knew Jefferson. To add my own example: when Fulton Sheen spoke on religion, patriotism, or communism, he reached over thirty million souls. But who commands such a public now?

I think these broad definitions betray a blind spot common to academics: we forget that the public is not like us. (How many academics go to monster truck rallies?) We think we reach more than we do. The most striking example in the text is entirely unconscious: justifying George Kennan’s place as an exemplary public intellectual, Jeremi Suri observes that *American Diplomacy* “sold better than anything else he ever wrote.’ It became his ‘long telegram’ to the American academy” (50). And there’s the rub. How many Americans read Kennan? I do not know the number. Perhaps a great many; perhaps very few. What I do know is that being popular in the academy does not make you a public intellectual. If every academic knows your name, but you have never reached an American without a college degree, then really—how *public* are you? So, while I sympathize with the various authors’ tweaks to the definition, I think Höslé has the right of it. Better to acknowledge the problem, the decline of intellectuals, than to redefine the word. Doing the latter only hides the malaise.

So, across the volume’s contributors there is little agreement on the *public* part of “public intellectual.” In the rest of this review, though, I want to expose a deeper quandary. Setting aside what we mean by “public,” what do we mean by “intellectual”?

I could not help noticing that the book fails to address its subtitle’s question: *professors or pundits?* In fact, I believe the word “pundit” does not appear after the title page. The oversight is a shame, as the question underpins themes running throughout the essays by Desch, Suri, Baert, Horwitz, Zuckert, and Deneen: What does an intellectual offer that is valuable, and that is more valuable than mere expert advice? Let me put it another way: though disputed across the authors, each has a pretty settled idea of when an intellectual ceases to be public; but when does a public commentator cease to be an intellectual? Or, as Höslé asks (379), when does an intellectual become “a media minion

with show business talent—that is, a postmodern equivalent of the sophist?” I cannot find anywhere that the volume addresses that challenge.

A pundit, after all, is not a public intellectual, in much the same way that a Yorkshire Terrier is not an Irish Wolfhound: at some point they might have shared a common pedigree, but no matter how much the one yammers during dinner, it’s the other who commands our attention. We all hear the talking heads on television. Modern man cannot help walking past them at the airport or on his way to a sandwich shop. But that is just it: we walk past them. We do not heed them. We might read or listen to a few favorite commentators, people who share our views and have done us the service of predigesting our news, but they do not enlarge our minds nor, if we are honest, do they enlarge our understanding. A pundit is an ideologue, and as such, he is predictable. You can guess most anything he will say before he opens his mouth. In fact, in this age, you do not even need to know who is speaking: it will suffice to know which network is paying him.

A public intellectual should not be predictable. He should surprise his audience. He should broaden their minds with insights that provoke thinking and rethinking an issue. He commands our attention precisely because we expect to hear from him something we do not already know: in some ways, Solzhenitsyn might have been predictable, but when he stood before a sea of Harvard graduates he shocked them all. In this collection, I think Michael Zuckert comes closest to addressing the challenge: he suggests there is a continuum stretching from *public* to *intellectual* (234), so that the more you speak to the public, the less intellectual you tend to become. In light of the book’s titular question, we might replace his scale with one from pundit to professor. As an added benefit, this scale dramatizes the gap between the ideal intellectual and our contemporary public sophists.

So, to collapse public intellectuals into pundits will not do. Indeed, a pundit seems the very kind of chattering expert the book’s contributors deplore. Suri taps into this theme: when discussing Niebuhr, he praises the need “for a deep historical discussion about policy purposes that escaped the false simplicities of standard historical narratives. The role of the public intellectual, as exemplified by Niebuhr, was to encourage more complex and relevant historical debates, inspiring the critical thinking of citizens and policymakers” (46). Well then. Who today could fit Suri’s description? Is Paul Krugman a pundit or a public intellectual? I think an honest assessment must conclude that he is the former: his competence is very limited, and to the extent that he offers sound advice, it derives purely from his expertise; no

one, to my knowledge, looks to Paul Krugman to learn wisdom, let alone something about the good life. He brings no humanistic vision, let alone any historical vision, to his analysis.

This wider vision is precisely the generality Patrick Deneen longs for. In fact, I dare say Deneen would argue that the Krugmans and the Mearsheimers are not even intellectuals, at least not in any healthy sense of the word (340): their narrowness has made them merely experts. But our problem is more than a lack of generality; after all, there are some liberal minds still among the commentariat (such as David Brooks). The problem must run deeper. Deneen pins the blame on universities, whose narrowness has shriveled the audience that might listen to public intellectuals (344). Yet there were public intellectuals long before higher education was widespread. Therefore, I think Horwitz's diagnosis rings truer: "The blogosphere is no place for an idle or contemplative writer" (224)—nor, we might add, is cable news. There are some genuine minds among the jabbering geese on CNN, Fox, and MSNBC, but setting a few intellects among pundits will not dignify the pundits any more than taking your cats to the zoo will make them a pride of lions.

I want to end this review on a point raised throughout the volume. Either implicitly or explicitly, most of the contributors seem to agree that public intellectuals are a product of the Enlightenment; only Zuckert (321) and possibly Desch (5) dissent. Much like prophets and priests, a public intellectual is trying to provide a historical narrative, a vision uniting the present with the past and giving them both a purpose. Before the Enlightenment, a shared religion provided this vision; afterward, suggest the contributors, we turned to philosophy and ideology. Thus, Miller stresses the need for natural scientists "to spread the culture and the values of science" (259), and DeLong stresses the inescapable need to listen to economists (209). Even realists, whom we might expect to resist the lure of historical narrative still command attention based on "the ability of [their] narrative to explain contemporary affairs" (52). Both Lilla and Zuckert wonder, "is it really a bad thing that liberalism does not have a grand historical narrative?" (327)—and yet both ultimately desire just that, or, at the least, a set of ideas that can make sense of past, present, and future (307, 328–29). And so do most Americans: is it any wonder that so many of us, from presidents to journalists, all reach for the trite refrain: "the arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice?" Human beings seem to need this sort of narrative, and this need has become only more pronounced, as Desch notes, with the obvious failure of science to answer the question, "How shall we live?" (353). Public intellectuals are the only sorts of people,

argue most of the contributors, who can fulfill this role—who can fit together the past and the present to make sense of both. They alone can offer this sort of unifying narrative, or coherent vision, for modern society. Perhaps. But if it was in fact the transition from medieval Christendom to Enlightenment that gave us public intellectuals, then we might wish to bear in mind that a professor is a very poor substitute for a saint.