

Book Review

Jeffrey J. Williams

How to Be an Intellectual

New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2014

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Books about literature, literary criticism, the internal machinations of university English departments and the habits of mind needed to be recognized as card-carrying intellectuals are unlikely to win immediate favour among public sector managers, practitioners and advocates for innovation—or at least not in their professional capacities. I nonetheless beg your indulgence for commenting on this recent collection of short and mainly pithy essays by a person with considerable credibility in the humanities, cultural studies and the politics of American higher education. He might have a larger message.

These thirty-two excursions may seem a trifle remote from the day-to-day labours of practical public servants, administrators and theorists as well as from substantive discussions of public policy initiatives and innovative administrative methods. If nothing else, however, they at least have the virtue of brevity. The average length of each item is about five pages. So, if a particular piece seems unduly obscure, arcane or inane, the next one will pop up quickly. And, I (almost) guarantee that, in short order, something will soon engage the attention of any open-minded sceptic.

I

The iconic Keynesian economist, John Maynard Keynes (1936: 383-384), put it well. Even as Adolf Hitler was consolidating his position and preparing for war, Keynes said: “Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas.”

While I am not as inclined as Keynes to grant autonomy and determinative power to ideas alone, it is not easily deniable that “the ideas which civil servants and politicians and even agitators apply to current events are not likely to be the newest.”

So, an exploration not only of the history of ideas themselves, but also of what lies behind the methods of intellectuals is surely worth the effort.

Even for practical people for whom the abstruse language and the woolly-headed preoccupations of the *literati* may seem unworthy of significant investments in time and energy, *How to Be an Intellectual* bears some remarkable gifts. It is written in lively, appealing and straightforward prose. The bulk of its subject matter concerns not merely questions of interest to

creative artist, writers and teachers. It deals critically, yet responsibly, with issues of money, politics and the evolution of higher education as it has been shaped over the past half-century within institutions that have been no less and often more devastatingly affected by the larger political economy and the corporate culture it imposes on almost every sector of (post)modern life. Colleges and universities, after all, are the products of extensive public debates, torn this way and that by funding priorities, and subjected to the same stresses as any other basic instruments of contemporary public service delivery.

What's more, because we have certain expectations of higher learning that involve both research (the pursuit of such truths as it may be known to us) and the practical task of preparing young people for gainful employment, the role of the scholar has been recast several times over.

Professors are no longer hermetically sealed within the walls and confined to the halls of academe (not that such an image was ever remotely realistic). Nor are intellectuals—in or out of the academy—committed mainly to the production of books, articles and conference papers of interest mainly to their disciplinary colleagues. They no longer enjoy the privilege of detachment, rarefied academic debate and a respectable level of genteel poverty.

Faculty no longer constitute the core of the university. They are more commonly service providers for hire, and the central figure has become the manager of the academic multiplex, who assures the experience of the student consumer. – Jeffrey Williams

On the contrary, they are subjected to constant assessments, demands for accountability and a host of quantified metrics of performance, and they are increasingly expected to become entrepreneurial in their quest for external financing. Whatever its (in)accuracy as a description of past practice, the image of a kindly Mr. Chips or a somewhat befuddled (if not “nutty”) professor is not merely a distortion, but a brutal misreading of life in the so-called “ivory tower.” And, besides, almost three-quarters of them are currently “precarious” educational workers as full-time Associate Professors are reinvented as the academic equivalents of Walmart Associates.

The results of this forced involvement in the political economy of scarcity and the demands of governments, industries and the general public to respond to frantic calls for vocational relevance in an increasingly competitive global economy are having their effects. Jeffrey Williams' slim volume acquaints the lay reader with many of these pressures and gives some sage advice about how to understand the role of the intellectual, empathize with it to a degree and, most importantly, learn a few lessons about how the dilemmas of the intellectual mirror those of practical public servants who are buffeted by the same or similar forces and social trends.

II

Among the themes that Williams pursues is the dominance of the language of liberalism. Ours age is besotted with the language of individuality, personality, choice, market mechanisms and consumerism—both as the desire for accumulating tokens of wealth and as the moral calculus that says that the customer is always right. It takes him a while, but Williams eventually makes clear that an alternative vision is available that may provide a tonic for our current social malaise. We are (or we are told that we are) collectively suffering from more personal stress,

mental disorders and patterns of social alienation than previous generations. We (or many of us) live frantic, frenetic, fragmented and fractured lives. We use an astonishing array of prescribed mood-altering pharmaceuticals and we self-medicate in a host of unhealthy ways. We are, it seems, in need of some constructive collective therapy.

To address such disturbing matters, Williams reaches back to the mid-twentieth-century French philosopher, Christian mystic and political activist, Simone Weil. She is not much in fashion today, but she was of considerable importance to writers as diverse as Canada's beloved conservative philosopher George Grant and New York culture critic Susan Sontag.

Grant wrote that "of all the twentieth-century writers, she has been incomparably my greatest teacher. (Forbes. 2007:180). Sontag (1963) said that Weil "is rightly regarded as one of the most uncompromising and troubling witnesses to the modern travail of the spirit." Those are good enough endorsements for me.

Like few other contrarians in our liberal bourgeois civilization, Weil forced us, through her own self-imposed martyrdom to reexamine what we mean by reason and sanity and to revisit the relationship between freedom and obligation.

Williams quotes her thus: "The notion of obligations comes before that of rights, which is subordinate and relative to the former." Applied to his own work as a critic, he understands that, unconnected to a commitment to something worthy and external, criticism is merely a "self-interested hobby." So, to be anything other than a personal indulgence, criticism must be understood to "[confer] an obligation to those with whom we live in our time and place, and an obligation to that time ... [If] history is what hurts, criticism is what tells us which parts of it hurt and why, and what we should do about it."

It is this higher, public role of the critical intellectual that Williams gives voice. It is the very opposite of self-indulgence. It is an invitation to politics in the finest meaning of the word.

The ideas of [intellectuals], both when they are right and when they are wrong are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else. – John Maynard Keynes, 1936
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For all its anxiety and complaint, our society is remarkably intolerant of informed and reflective criticism. We indulge resentment, to be sure, and sometimes even elect to high office people whose main skill is embodying irrational anger and fear; but, when it comes to practical thinking and doing, to formulating and administration of public policy, our default position remains one of promoting "positive thoughts," "hope and change," and "sunny ways" with all the consideration and sincerity of an Amway sales convention. Williams asks us to be more thoughtful.

Though we may lack what Sontag calls the "acute personal and intellectual extremity" of a Simone Weil whose self-destructive and passionate witnessing of the pathology of our age helped bring us back to our senses in the midst of the crime scene of the previous century, Williams nonetheless calls us to account. To be an intellectual, it turns out, is to have a moral sensibility and a moral calling.

III

Williams takes pains to emphasize that his interests are dominantly “intellectual,” but this emphasis need only describe the context of his comments. Their importance is much broader. He is not at all disconnected from life as we live it—either as people engaged with the public sector or as private citizens.

Some of the most compelling parts of his book concern, for example, the concrete question of student debt. This is surely of interest as a matter of public policy regarding such issues as human resource management, the effect of personal debt on the future economy and overall financial planning. It matters to us public sector professionals and as individual taxpayers, students and parents of students.

The neoliberal mantra holds that the best inducement to human activity is competition, so public services should be privatized and on a market basis; accordingly, higher education has morphed into “the corporate university,” “academic capitalism,” or as I have dubbed it, “the post-welfare state university.”
— Jeffrey Williams

Williams contrasts an earlier era of reform from about 1950 to 1980 when education was regarded less as a *personal* investment intended to build up an individual’s employability assets to be marketed as saleable skills, but more as a distinctly *social* investment intended to promote both socio-economic mobility and the quality and success of entire societies. How else, after all, could we explain the massive public investment in colleges and universities and the extraordinary public commitment to affordable tuition that began with the American *Servicemen’s Readjustment Act* of 1944 (commonly known as the “G.I. Bill”), which provided unprecedented stipends for returning World War II veterans that subsidized the cost of postsecondary education and jump-started the transition from elite to mass higher education in the United States. Despite the long-standing American antipathy to words such as “socialism,” the G.I. Bill and Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Social Security” legislation remain the most successful “socialist” experiments in US history!

Even setting aside the long-forgotten fact that immense public investments in North American postsecondary education were, like the extensive systems of interstate superhighways, mainly motivated by Cold War concerns about maintaining national defence against potential Soviet aggression, let us not forget that the centerpieces of post-war American educational development were intended to contribute to the store of “human capital” needed to harness the economic potential of returning soldiers under the *National Defense Education Act* (1958).

Explicitly designed to counter early Soviet success in the “space race,” the fact also remains that the colossal welfare-state measures that built prosperity in peacetime were created to complete the recovery from the pre-war depression, to prepare for impending technological and economic change, to build a new middle class and to ensure the viability of the larger community and not just to promote personal ambition and facilitate credit card debt and housing bubbles. Now, as Edmund Burke (1790: 128) anticipated, “all is to be changed. All the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light

and reason.” The substance and trappings of higher education, he understood, “are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.”

So, too, might be the ethics of public service be extinguished as the call is made to run government like a business; or, as Marx, following up upon Burke’s sentiments, said: there will remain “no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment.’”

What happens in the groves of academe, now being clear-cut like a commercial forest, is (or ought to be) worrisome to anyone who imagines that authentic education is crucial to the maintenance and enhancement of our civilization. What happens in all of the public sector—as long as it remains public—is likewise of concern. Reflecting on the university, but with words that are equally applicable to international trade, money and banking, natural resources, health care, human rights, criminal justice or any of the many domains in which citizens put their trust for a more commodious society, Jeffrey Williams poses a critical question: “What good is innovation if it brings a more inequitable world?”

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