

ARTEFILOSOFIA

Revista do Programa de Pós-graduação em Filosofia da UFOP

ISSN: 2526-7892

ARTIGO

INTELLECTUALS, PUBLIC AND PRIVATE¹

*Miguel Tamen*²

Abstract:

The essay addresses the definition and status of public intellectuals in relation to the work of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. Accepting the definition of Richard Posner, it suggests that (i) most people in the humanities are not, and need not imagine they are, public intellectuals and that (ii) Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has gradually become a public intellectual.

Keywords: Public intellectuals; Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht; universities

Resumo:

O ensaio discute a definição e o estatuto dos intelectuais públicos em relação à obra de Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. Aceita a definição de Richard Posner e sugere que (i) a maior parte dos professores de humanidades não são, e escusam de imaginar que são, intelectuais públicos, e que (ii) Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht se tornou gradualmente um intelectual público.

Palavras-chave: intelectuais públicos; Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht; universidades

¹ Intelectuais, públicos e privados

² Miguel Tamen is Professor of Literary Theory and Dean of the School of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon. His most recent book (with António M. Feijó) was *A Universidade como deve ser* [*The University as It Should Be*] (2017). Endereço de email: mtamen@letras.ulisboa.pt

Like Cordelia, the patron saint of public displays of affection, I notoriously have trouble heaving my heart into my mouth. Fortunately I am saved by the context. Most of us are already gathered here to celebrate the long and brilliant career of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. Like most of you, and like many who couldn't make it here for this occasion, I call him Sepp. I won't pretend I don't.

I suspect almost all of us here would describe ourselves as intellectuals. Sepp I suppose would. At any rate *I* would, and without any need for special apologies or qualification. The question is, what kind of intellectual? Intellectuals come in many kinds. Some are academics, though not all. And, at least in my experience, not all academics are primarily intellectuals. I thought a good idea would be to talk a little bit about the kind of intellectual I believe Sepp is; to be more precise, the sort of intellectual he has become.

The obvious answer to our question would be: Sepp is a professor, a teacher and a scholar with an academic affiliation. That should suffice to call him an intellectual. He is of course all of the above. This however, as we shall see, only covers part of Sepp's intellectual activities. A second less obvious answer would be: Sepp is all that but also a *public* intellectual. The phrase should give us pause. It was first used only as recently as thirty years ago. Richard Posner, in his book on public intellectuals, suggests that the species is in decline. He connects this decline to the now ubiquitous academic capacity of those people who, as he puts it, "[participate] actively in public debate over a tumultuous issue"³. For a very long time, he remarks, most public intellectuals "were *not* professors and did not write primarily for professors"⁴.

Judge Posner had in mind a long and illustrious lineage that was only given the name 'intellectuals' on or about the time of the Dreyfus Affair, but that long predates that affair. It includes Machiavelli, Voltaire and Dr. Johnson, but also Mill, Mencken and Marx, Emerson, Hume and Nietzsche. Important twentieth-century authors such as Orwell and Freud, not to mention less important ones such as Gore Vidal and William F. Buckley, are also part of the list.

Posner remarks then, that most people who currently debate tumultuous issues in public are academics. He correctly surmises that none seems to show the intellectual vigor of Marx, or Dr. Johnson. Thus, perhaps, the decline. More to the point, he further notes that they are *senior* academics. "The untenured," he says, "dare not spend time writing for popular journals"⁵. "When academics operate outside their areas of specialization... [i]n the public intellectual arena they operate

³ POSNER, Richard. **Public Intellectuals**. A Study of Decline. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001, p. 20.

⁴ POSNER, Richard. **Public Intellectuals**. A Study of Decline. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001, p. 27.

⁵ POSNER, Richard. **Public Intellectuals**. A Study of Decline. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001, p. 33.

without *any* significant constraints; there is nothing to call them to account”⁶. Public intellectuals for Posner can thus be defined as older academics writing about tumultuous issues and mostly not required to give reasons in support of their claims. Could Sepp be like that?

As I have intimate, I don't think Sepp has been the same kind of intellectual at all times. Like many of us, he was educated under the assumption that he was to become an academic; and he gloriously has. He carries what one could only call the apostolic succession of a long lineage of Romanists. He has written about that lineage and about some of the greatest of all Romanists, in what I think is one of his best books: “Vom Leben und Sterben der großen Romanisten”, published in 2002. His list comprises Vossler, Curtius, Spitzer, Auerbach, and Werner Krauss. But he also has expressed powerful, principled, dissent, namely when a number of extracurricular activities by his Romanist advisor Hans Robert Jauss became more widely known in the mid-1990s.

Like many academics, though not all, Sepp has published copiously. We can ask: for whom? And where? When we are not teaching, or attempting to persuade deans, or being that very animal, we academics write books published by university presses and publish in academic journals; only very occasionally do we issue general-interest pronouncements. We are essentially read by peers and students, or very sporadically by spouses. We celebrate our betters in conferences such as this; many of our conferences are as memorable as this one; or we at any rate tend to remember them.

A certain sense of claustrophobia is nevertheless occasionally voiced among the profession. Towards the latter half of our careers, safely on the north side of tenure, some of us may feel tempted to publish things aimed at larger audiences. This might explain Posner's astute intuition. Most attempts to cater to the larger crowds remain as obscure as our previous academic papers and books, which is not necessarily unfortunate. We normally blame the larger audiences, who tend to be impatient by nature, and ungrateful. We resent the scores of non-academics who succeed effortlessly at being read, and rarely about tumultuous issues. However, in our soberer moments we also know how senseless it would be to imagine that any large audiences could be interested in what we do. Mind you, I am not saying that what we do is pointless. Could the wish to be universally understood be pointless?

I don't think we need any further descriptions of the role of public intellectuals, thank you very much. The Posner book does, to my mind, a good job at that. And certainly there isn't much to understand in the fact that some grown-ups might want to consider fame and fortune, even at the risk of becoming public intellectuals. However, we perhaps need to understand better the attempts and the temptation (no attempts without being tempted) of academics to engage in a career, however late, of public intellectual intervention. Why would someone writing for very few people want to write for the many? This doesn't appear to come naturally to our guild.

⁶ POSNER, Richard. **Public Intellectuals**. A Study of Decline. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001, p. 397.

As it happens, academics are normally private intellectuals. They were for centuries very private agents. Universities were devised in part so as to ensure the privacy of their status. Many of the older ones began convent-like, wholly committed to separation from the secular world. Their scholars were not even subject to secular justice. This survives today, albeit in a truncated fashion. Many schools still retain special jurisdictions, special police, and special courts. Think of tenure, to be sure, think of campus police, and the many special extrajudicial committees on plagiarism, and faculty sexual mores. These are all likely survivals of a remote non-public mode of life.

The private mode of life of academics also depended and still depends to a considerable extent on certain distinctions between activities. Private mathematicians *do* mathematics. The place where you do mathematics is not the place where you talk about the pleasures of mathematics to those who don't; and where you do philosophy is not where you first experienced philosophical thrills and tinglings; and where you do physics is not where you protest the atom bomb. Also, despite some similarities, you can generally tell the difference between history and storytelling; between critique and criticism; between academic life and talking about yourself; between persuading your peers and persuading voters; and so forth.

Most of us would profess to admire Sepp's great Romanists; at least we would not openly admit to not admiring them. To be sure, an increasing number of us may increasingly admire their names rather than their books; or certain things they have done, or more likely that have happened to them. A disturbing thought that may perhaps have occurred to a number of us (or, at any rate, that has occurred to me) is that none of Sepp's great Romanists would be hired today by any of the departments comparable to those in which they often found shelter, nor indeed by those from which they were occasionally fired. I suspect their interests would not be deemed very interesting; and their talents and in one or two cases their genius would simply not be detected. This is not only due to the fact that what is done in literature departments has changed drastically since 1967; nor is it only a peculiarity of literature departments. What is disquieting is that many of the people whom we may recognize as our intellectual heroes would not be offered the sorts of jobs thanks to which they once came to be recognized as such.

I am not, I hope, merely putting forth the trivial counterfactual that Plato, like most contemporary graduates of Greek schools, would not get tenure now at any respectable place. Neither am I making the marginally less trivial point that a PhD-less Wittgenstein would not stand a chance at Cambridge or anywhere else (there is still a dwindling breed of PhD-less major philosophers: Saul Kripke, Alasdair MacIntyre and John McDowell come to mind; but it is a dwindling breed; and there are almost no comparable literary scholars left). I am also not claiming that great eccentrics like William Empson or Werner Krauss would end up today at where they eventually did end up. Rather, it seems to me that much of what we celebrate in older philosophers or literary scholars would not be recognized by us in younger strangers, not to mention in foreigners. Our intellectual heroes are mostly celebrated by us only insofar as they have already previously been recognized as

such by others, for instance, as they have been profiled or interviewed; we recognize them if and only if we can recognize their names.

So a serious question is: would someone like Sepp be offered a job today? Would we, were we to be in such a position, offer Sepp a job? The answer is, I fear, not, and on two counts. Contemporary departments would look with diffidence at somebody who had, up to 1989, published a book on Zola, translated the *Libro de buen amor*, written on middle German, and lectured on Galdós, sociology of literature and the French Revolution. Contemporary departments would also look with added diffidence at somebody who, to extend the scope, up to 2018, had written for boxing, against hermeneutics, on Curtius, about Kleist, and from his own life. Many Comparative Literature departments that for a generation were a haven for such types, now devote themselves to hyphenated matters (except in Germany, where no hyphens are needed to hyphenate). In truth the two Sepps (the 1989 one and the 2018 one) would be in good company. Very few if any of the greatest literary scholars of the 20th century would now stand a chance at the merest MLA.

This difficulty with employment requires that we consider in more detail the form of Sepp's academic career. Sepp's career has an obvious caesura: his moving from Bochum to Stanford in 1989. In 1989 it was still possible to be offered a job such as he then was, and where he was so offered. By sheer coincidence I had come through Stanford that summer as a tourist. As I was a recent Comp Lit PhD, I inspected the Comparative Literature department roster (something I haven't done in a long time). I recognized Sepp's name from an essay I had read in my undergraduate years, in the French journal *Poétique*. I still remember the wonderful title: "Persuader ceux qui pensent comme vous", "Persuading those who think like you". Respect for Stanford immediately began to form.

The caesura between Bochum and Stanford however is not intellectual in nature. Serious differences notwithstanding, what Romanists do in either place is not substantially different. What most Romanists do is teach and write, mostly about what they teach. And when they are not being listened to they are being read by their own species. In Bochum, in Montevideo, in Stanford, or even one suspects, in Pyongyang, Romanists great and small all lead private intellectual lives, not in this respect very different from life in Bologna 1088. Departmental budgets may vary, and salaries, but little else. I submit that the true caesura in Sepp's intellectual life came about a little later, when in the mid-90s he started, tentatively at first, and then methodically and abundantly, writing for a large number of newspapers.

It is the measure of an important difference between Europe and America that almost all of these newspapers were based in Europe, or at least that none were in this country. In Europe, as some of you may know from experience or perhaps by hearsay, there is a long and not always distinguished tradition of interest for what takes place behind closed doors. A professor is thus more likely to become there an interesting animal to the non-professors. At the same time, the European branch of our species is less sheltered from forms of public inquiry and political disputation; certain political effects are invariably presumed of private activities. We

European professors of course know better. We know that what follows from what we write, on either side of the Atlantic, is very little; as little indeed as if we were in Pyongyang; and a few of us are even glad for that.

To give you an idea of the depth and importance of what I will now call a true intellectual caesura in Sepp's life, let me just say that since 1995 he has led what truly amounts to a double intellectual life. Aside from his normal teaching and writing duties, from the classes he has taught, the countless lectures he has given, the books he has published, the students he has advised, and the letters of recommendation he has churned out, Sepp has literally published many hundreds of articles, essays and reviews, at least one a week, in dozens of newspapers: in Germany, in Switzerland, in France, in Brazil, only to name a few countries. To these, one would have to add the interviews. Given that most of these also have online versions, it is possible to say without exaggeration that Sepp is read every week by tens of thousands of people. Let me provide you with a sampler. I began timidly thinking about this paper in mid-December 2017. Since then I only managed to come up with a paltry under-4,000 word middlebrow keynote, whereas Sepp has written and published at least

- (i) Installments # 266, 267, 268, 269 and 270 of his bimonthly blog column in the "FAZ", respectively on the survival of humankind, on anti-Semitism in contemporary Germany, on happiness rankings, on Mr. Trump, and on long books.
- (ii) An article on the future of culture or on whether Bildung is still to be saved.
- (iii) A piece in "Die Zeit" on a fictional football player
- (iv) An obituary of a Brazilian colleague
- (v) A 5,000 word response to a number of interview questions by Brazilian and European colleagues.
- (vi) An article on temporality for the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung"

And counting. All are, in the apt words of Carlyle, of the "extensive, close-printed, close-meditated sort, which, be it spoken with pride, is seen only in Germany". Put together they amount to what most normal human beings call half-a-book. I say this with admiration though also not without a measure of rancor. There is indeed an important dimension to Sepp's intellectual life that goes well beyond the obvious irony of his having become a public intellectual in Germany only after having moved to the United States. I hasten to say that he is fully aware of the irony. "Stanford," he acknowledged in the recent interview I mentioned, "gave me the freedom of becoming intellectually German in a more decided and personal way." (3) This is, to be sure, a great compliment paid to Stanford. It contains moreover implications about Germanic intellect. But it is mostly an implicit description of the humanities as they were practiced circa 1989, in California.

I should spell out briefly what I mean by this. Two things seem to me characteristic of the ways in which many scholars in the humanities such as ourselves like to talk about what they do. The first, as I have mentioned before, is that we tend to express few illusions as to the general interest of what we do. This is not a peculiarity of the humanities per se. It happens in an even more acute form in the sciences. No astrophysicist would presume widespread astral interests. The second thing is that, despite having few illusions, and even less experience of being recognized in public, we often drop innuendoes hinting at the larger impact of what we do. In this respect there is an obvious difference between the humanities and the sciences. Whereas there is of yet no known way to plausibly turn strongly correlated electron systems into a topic for polite conversation, and so of suggesting that general discussion on the issue is at all desirable, many ways of suggesting the demotic relevance of the study of the literatures from the medieval period have developed. The most arcane provinces of the humanities have all developed ways of appealing to what their practitioners believe are recognizable forms of general conversation.

There is nothing inherently wrong about suggesting a larger social impact to what we do. The idea that what we do is of general interest may seem even irresistible. But there is something disappointing in the fact that most such suggestions never elicit any interest, unless it is that of a few peers. The world however is not composed by our peers. It does not resemble a department, a professional association, and certainly not a university. The public relevance of what academics write is rarely the effect of what they say or believe about the relevance of what they write. This is why the social contortions of many of our colleagues remain hopelessly inept. Might the concepts 'political effect' and 'social impact' have become the Procrustean bed for the humanities, as they often have for the sciences?

I suppose the only way of affecting a general conversation is to participate in that conversation, and to be recognized by larger numbers of people as a partner in that conversation. This requires that we of the schools do things out of school. These are things that very few of us are willing to do, and certainly things that none of Sepp's great Romanists would have considered doing. It requires that we write constantly, that we try out many intellectual avenues, that we address all sorts of fugitive concerns, and perhaps that we appear in talk-shows. Sepp has often praised what he calls riskful, risky thinking. The concept had long eluded me, but now I believe I finally understand it. What is really risky about risky thinking is not that by such thinking you put yourself in any life-threatening situations; it is instead that our friends from the schools would no longer recognize what we do as thinking at all. Nowhere is thinking more risky than when it becomes something else.

If so, there is a likely connection between risky thinking and something that Sepp has been doing for the past twenty years. Take for instance Sepp's open interest in sports, most prominently football (Engl.) and football (U.S.). As such his interest would be unremarkable. Many of us have comparable interests. However, there is no in-principle reason why our private interests should be declared; we mostly assume they would not be interesting enough; and do so mostly with good reason. In the case of Sepp the test is how interesting his interests have become to people who otherwise care little about Heidegger, Niklas Luhmann, and Diderot. In Europe and South America, at least, the group includes most sports journalists.

None that I know of would contemplate sampling out the first part of “Sein und Zeit”, let alone the second. And yet they merrily devour *Sein und Sepp*.

In an interview to the otherwise obscure “Westfälische Nachrichten” (November 2015), in the World Sports section, Sepp is matter-of-factly introduced as “the football expert Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht.” To get a sense of the situation consider the unattested phrase “*the football expert Erich Auerbach”. Granted, Sepp has also written about “the existential beauty of football”. This sounds philosophical enough, and perhaps even Heideggerian. It appeared in one of his columns, in the opinion pages of the “Neue Zürcher Zeitung”. And yet his series was presented there as “Gumbrecht on the ball” (pun intended). A third example: the page of the German Football Museum, mostly not known for its contributions to philosophy, has recently reported on a public debate between Sepp and the Borussia Dortmund former football coach Thomas Tuchel. Tuchel is a remarkable coach and clearly a very clever man. The headlines however do not suggest Hegel, Husserl or Hölderlin: “Football-talk: Tuchel and Gumbrecht shine.” “The German Football league debate”, they add, “went on for 2x45 minutes and was as exciting as any top game”. The German term was the unremarkable *Spitzenspiel*. No Spitzer seminar, indeed no Spitzerspiel, was ever quite described in this way. A picture of Tuchel, intently looking at Sepp talking, is presented there with the telling caption: “Thomas Tuchel listens to the philosophical thoughts of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht”. This is sobering enough for those of us who complain that no one listens to our own philosophical thoughts; and also for those who elsewhere complain about the mindlessness of sports.

I suppose that what I mean is that Sepp is listened to by people who wouldn't dream setting foot on conferences such as this one. Which raises the question: could Sepp be *both* one of us and one of them? Could this be a case of intellectual schizophrenia? I don't think so. There are, to be sure, many connections between what Sepp does in class and what he does outside class. He always remained and after all is the same person. However, the attempt to engage vast unknown audiences is something that after all defines his difference vis-à-vis most of us. It is a difference that many of us would quickly grant as a measure of Sepp's trademark as an intellectual, both public and private, an intellectual for whom the private/public distinction does not quite obtain. In claiming that Sepp is an intellectual both public and private I am thus claiming that he is unlike most of us. In my Cordelian book this is a very high compliment indeed.