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2019

EDITORIAL: Public Intellectualism and the Call for Grounded Speculation

Ben Anderson-Nathe

Portland State University, banders@pdx.edu

Grant Charles

University of British Columbia

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Citation Details

Published as: Ben Anderson-Nathe (Editor) & Grant Charles (Editor) (2019) Public Intellectualism and the Call for Grounded Speculation, *Child & Youth Services*, 40:4, 329-330, DOI: 10.1080/0145935X.2019.1693010

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Author manuscript

Published in final edited form as: *Child & Youth Services*, 40(4), 329-330

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0145935X.2019.1693010>

Authors:

Ben Anderson-Nathe and Grant Charles

Public intellectualism and the call for grounded speculation

We have a colleague whose background in social theory and expertise in child welfare make her an exceptional scholar. She is a deep thinker with a critical mind and much to say about the state of her field. Our faculties are rich with similar exceptional scholars. And yet, as our child welfare colleague continues to raise in meetings across our School, our voices are often far too silent on issues of principal social importance. We conduct our research, in our areas of focus, and we diligently report our findings, to and for other similar scholars, in our customary academic venues – venues most often restricted from the public eye by the firewalls of the academic publishing system. Our work's reach, its transformative potential, is therefore limited. It rarely reaches practitioners, even less often families, and almost never the young people whose lives it concerns. And our fields move forward at a glacial pace in spite of the rapid changes taking place around us in the lives of young people and their communities.

We take seriously our colleague's challenge: where are we as public intellectuals? Where is our best theorizing, our most tentative but potentially revolutionary thinking, our sharpest social criticism? Whom does our academic pursuit serve? In child and youth care, we have some public platforms at our disposal (CYC-Net being primary among them), and this is good. Nevertheless, the rules of engagement in our shared academic game too often demand certainty, not speculation. We are coached to not report findings until we are certain of them, at least within our conventions of reliability and validity. This mirrors broader social trends informed by neoliberalism and increased anti-intellectualism across the global North and West. Our dominant ways of thinking reflect and reinforce White ways of knowing born from the Enlightenment, in which we seek answers over questions and finality over uncertainty. Our pursuit of *knowledge* leads us to silence critique unless that critique also presents viable, tested, and certain recommendations for action.

We have all heard colleagues say in meetings some version of the following: “don't just say what's wrong; offer solutions for fixing it.” Of course, this solution-focused and certainty-oriented approach has merit. Without some view of where we might go moving forward, some proposed action, stagnation is inevitable. But this orientation is also a powerful tool in silencing imagination, invalidating the experiences of the most marginal among us who can see the problems with clarity the dominant lack but have restricted agency in terms of offering solutions to the structures that marginalize in the first place. And it stands in stark contrast to what we otherwise may value – in the classroom as well as the public square – in terms of dialogue and debate.

Perhaps another thread in this conundrum has to do with the fear (largely though not exclusively on the political left) of being labeled idealistic, or even worse, radical. In the current era of “fake news” and the so-called “Sokal squared” hoax aimed at discrediting critical discourse in certain corners of the Academy, pressure has mounted for academics to privilege certainty over inquiry. Maybe we retreat from our potential public platform in part out of self-protection. In doing so, however, we must consider whether and how we abdicate responsibility for speaking into the public square, for assuming, as Hannah Arendt argued throughout the 20th Century, the challenge of public intellectualism. This is a responsibility rooted in the transformative power of dialogue.

We have examples of ways to engage differently. In Jewish tradition, a tradition steeped in a clear and persistent value for knowledge, *knowing* is secondary to *asking*. Very little is accepted as true, no matter how thorough its methods or how defensible its evidence. Other evidence, other perspectives, are always invited into the conversation. The Talmud, for instance, constitutes a tentative yet passionate centuries-long conversation across generations of thinkers, each offering commentary on not only their own questions but also speculative answers to those questions that have come before. There is no end point, no finality, only discussion and debate that moves the larger conversation forward. And of course, this is also the principal task of research: to join into and further along the conversation in our literature. Still, too often, we join that conversation only when we are certain of our own answers – and even then, the conversation takes place largely outside the public eye and only tangentially connected to the day-to-day experiences of that same public.

In very real material terms, the world of young people calls out to us to respond differently, more expansively, than we largely have done to date. Young people’s lives are surveilled and regulated to a staggering degree. Their use of technology – the same technology they have employed to bring down governments and facilitate social movement organizing around the climate crisis while adults largely sit idle – is pathologized and manipulated as a signal that youth have lost the ability to relate “in the real world.” Their sexualities are rendered problematic both by popular media and by professions with the power to sanction and punish. The conditions of economic uncertainty, widespread cultural cynicism, and degraded social safety nets across the globe have left them in even more precarious positions than in the 19th-Century when adolescence was created; and yet in our public discourse, they – not these social realities – are constructed as lazy, apathetic, and self-centered.

We have commented on these and other conditions in the pages of this editorial column for the better part of a decade. We have invited critical scholars of youth to engage these questions, through commentary and research, to help advance our thinking about the social conditions in which young people live. Here we extend that invitation again, in the spirit of our colleague whose example opened this editorial: let’s take up speculation, let’s invite one another into discussion about ideas, let’s offer commentary about the conditions of children, youth, families, and their communities in the current moment. The irony is not lost on us that this call for public intellectualism comes in the pages of an academic publication that resides for most of us behind precisely the firewalls described earlier. Nonetheless, we believe this venue may offer an opportunity for critical scholars of children and youth to practice speculation, to invite discussion, and hopefully to then carry that speculation into the public beyond the Academy.

Ben Anderson-Nathe
banders@pdx.edu
Grant Charles
Grant.Charles@ubc.ca