

Review

Letters to Power: Public Advocacy without Public Intellectuals

Samuel McCormick. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011. 208 pp.

Russell Jacoby *

“Some of the smartest thinkers on problems at home and around the world are university professors, but most of them just don’t matter in today’s great debates.” So opens a recent *New York Times* column headlined, “Professors, We Need You!” (February 2014) Nicholas Kristof’s thoughts on the disappearance of the professoriate elicited heated responses, both irate and enthusiastic. The flap illustrates that the place of intellectuals in American life continues to generate controversy. Samuel McCormick, as assistant professor of communications at Purdue University, joins this on-going dispute with *Letters to Power*, a wide-ranging and historically informed study of intellectual dissent. His subtitle—*Public Advocacy without Public Intellectuals*—captures his larger argument. Inasmuch as the classic public intellectuals have declined or disappeared—and here he cites my own 1987 book, *The Last Intellectuals*—what avenues exist today for the oppositional professor? McCormick wants to find the strategies that an independent academic can employ in an era where direct attacks on established opinion are either not possible or too dangerous.

This is an issue which writers have struggled with for centuries. After all, Copernicus’s fear of reactions to his discovery delayed the appearance of his book till the end of his life. In his preface Copernicus lays out his doubts about publication and

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appeals to the Pythagorean tradition of secrecy. “I debated with myself for a long time whether to publish the volume...or rather to follow the example of the Pythagoreans...who used to transmit philosophy’s secrets only to kinsmen and friends, not in writing but by word of mouth.” Copernicus feared the “scorn” and “ridicule” his book would provoke. In more recent years, Leo Strauss, the German-Jewish refugee scholar, dealt with the plight of the independent thinker in his 1941 “Persecution and the Art of Writing.” For Strauss the unconventional scholar avoided persecution by a “peculiar technique of writing” between the lines, that is, by writing in an allusive way accessible only to the intelligent and initiated reader, but not to the state prosecutor. “It has all the advantages of public communication without having its greatest disadvantage—capital punishment for the author.”

Strauss appears now and again in the book of McCormick whose project might be seen as roughly similar: to consider the “persuasive techniques, resistant practices and ethical sensibilities” of pre-modern intellectuals who “contest, without directly challenging, established figures of authority” (2). McCormick emphatically anchors his book in the present; he wants to recover old forms of “learned advocacy” that would be of use to “the political predicament of late-modern academics” where the “modes of political contention” have shifted. To find something applicable he takes up the “epistolary rhetoric” of four historical thinkers: the Roman Stoic Seneca, the late medieval writer Christine de Pizan, the 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant and the 19th century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. As distant as these figures might seem from the quandary of the contemporary left-leaning professor, McCormick believes their use of the “lettered protest” may be instructive. “As the public sphere continues to dissolve into the blogosphere, few modes of political contention could be more relevant to American academics” than the model of these letter-writers. McCormick’s book consists of six chapters, the first introduces his argument and the next four each take up his protagonists one by one. His conclusion, “Oppositional Politics in the Age of Academia,” brings us back to the issue of dissent in the contemporary university, a subject that infuses the entire book.

McCormick has to be given credit for his ambition, range, and originality. He is plucking out individuals across two thousand years to find rhetorical strategies relevant for contemporary academics. To make this manageable he focuses on a few texts—for instance, in Seneca his *Letters to Lucilius*, in Christine de Pizan her 1415 letter to the

queen of France; in Kant his letters and prefaces about censorship, mainly incorporated in *The Conflict of the Faculties*. On these subjects McCormick is a thoughtful and fascinating commentator.

Yet even the most brilliant scholar might have difficulty in adducing some contemporary rules from these disparate and complicated figures—and McCormick does not make the slightest effort to explain why he has chosen these particular authors. The career and writings of Seneca alone give rise to a series of vexed issues—at the very least how Seneca reconciled his Stoic philosophy with his support of the crimes of Nero, who had been his student. Seneca's *Letters to Lucilius* are in part an argument justifying retirement from politics in the wake of a falling out with Nero. From a practical point of view they failed inasmuch as Nero commanded Seneca to commit suicide because of his apparent support for a plot to assassinate the Emperor. The plot and Seneca's suicide hardly affect McCormick's interpretation. "These [rhetorical] maneuvers allow Seneca to insinuate himself in a hazardous political conflict, and yet in such a way that separates him from the ideologies in dispute...Only by enfolding himself in publicity, cloaking his dissent in claims of deference, could Seneca distance himself from Nero without appearing to do so" (49).

A problem surfaces here: McCormick often covers up joints and cracks in his argument with a thick paint of academic jargon. It hardly seems accidental that he closes this chapter with citations from Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault, as if these iconic figures will bail him out. Things do not improve with his discussion of Christine de Pizan in which he analyses "the rhetoric of exemplarity." He explains: "The rhetoric of exemplarity is a site at which moments of ambiguity necessarily arise. Rather than disposing of this ambiguity, I would like to study and clarify the example as a *strategic resource of ambiguity*" (54). He concludes his chapter by telling us that Christine de Pizan's "rhetorical achievements allow us to read and recuperate her letter as an acute historico-political basis for the ongoing feminist commitment to identifying, valorizing, and extending the contributions of learned women to public life."

The relevance of yesterday's rhetorical strategies for today's oppositional academic drives McCormick's book. But he gives us both too much and too little: too much because he circles around this subject excessively, but too little because he leaves us with unhelpful generalities. Hence, Seneca's "rhetoric of withdrawal counteracts the politics of desertion implicit in the specialized, disciplinary language of the late-modern

academics” (143); or Christine de Pizan’s “rhetoric of exemplarity” challenges the “linear, abstract and hyperrational forms of argument” that today’s professors tend to use (144). Kant in turn upends the clichéd tale derived from the Dreyfus Affair of bold intellectuals attacking the state. Kant reminds us that “learned political rhetoric can and often does emerge from within the firewalls of academic jargon”; and that it is possible “to contest without directly challenging” the state.

All this is intriguing, but what does it mean? How does it hang together? Again Seneca’s “withdrawal” from a messy political situation ended in his suicide, not an especially promising model. Kant waited until King Friedrich Wilhelm II died before returning to religious subjects, which he had been enjoined to avoid. Is this equally a model? Moreover, how does McCormick at once hold up Seneca and de Pizan as breaking with specialized academic language and recommend Kant for utilizing it? Nor do things get clearer when in his concluding chapter he discusses the contemporary political plight of “left-leaning” academics and Bertolt Brecht, who looms larger and larger in his discussion. Populist right-wingers attack professors for their lectures. What is to be done? McCormick plumps the “open educational resources” movement—the posting of professor’s lectures on-line—as the apt response of dissenting academics to conservative critics. “By sublimating their political agendas in lectures fit to become educational resources,” leftist professors can become a presence in cyberspace. “And we need look no further than the rhetorics of withdrawal, exemplarity, obedience, and identification for the political resources needed to initiate this transformation” (160). Some of us may indeed have to look further because McCormick gives little sense of what this “transformation” entails for the online lecture poster. Nor does he convince us that these postings will allow liberal professors “to rival in publicity and popular appeal the conservative advocacy groups.” He does name one professor, whom he says exemplifies the general suspicion of online forums: Henry A. Giroux, the radical pedagogue. But this is a strange example, since Giroux is a forceful and regular presence online, appearing regularly in Truthout (truth-out.org).

Letters to Power is a smart and engaging study of great scope. The issue McCormick raises is urgent: What is or should be the role of the academic intellectual today? And he answers with originality and industry. However, his efforts to rope together his four disparate figures and illuminate the path forward are not entirely successful, often petering out into murky jargon. Yet I might be failing to see that his

book is a perfect example of his thesis. He writes in the introduction that “the learned political agents envisioned by this book occupy a zone of indiscernibility between academic professionalism and the tradition of the intellectual” (143). By the measure of indiscernibility McCormick has succeeded—perhaps too well.