

Barbara A. Misztal. *Intellectuals and the Public Good: Creativity and Civil Courage*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 277 pp. \$89.00 (hardback). ISBN: 978-0-521-84718-6.

Reviewed by Kathryn J. Brasier

The premise of Barbara Misztal's *Intellectuals and the Public Good: Creativity and Civil Courage* is that the contribution of "public intellectuals" is essential for supporting and promoting democracy, by contributing to discourse within the "public sphere." For those with specialized knowledge—usually gained through academic or professional training—participation in public discussions can contribute to all participants' understanding of political issues, thus enhancing the ability of individuals to participate in public debate and to enrich the content of that discussion. Professional knowledge and practice provide the background, the skills, and the scientific knowledge to engage productively in public discourse; public intellectuals also have the personal values to guide participation in the debate and the morals to guide judgments about preferred actions.

Having established the importance of public intellectuals for social well-being, the author creates a sociological account of the development and activities of public intellectuals through an examination of Nobel Peace Prize winners. She begins by thoroughly examining the notion of a public intellectual and the philosophical and scientific literature that speaks to a definition. A public intellectual, in Misztal's analysis, is someone who has specialized knowledge and/or training and has a willingness to engage in public discourse that engages with fundamental issues of the human condition, issues that bring the intellectual to extend their specialized knowledge to nonspecialized audiences. Public intellectuals may be "authors, academics, scientists and artists who communicate to the general public outside their professional role on the basis of their knowledge and authority gained in their specific disciplines" (27). Throughout this summary, Misztal highlights key tensions and debates, including the need for intellectuals to be "detached" from society, the class location of intellectuals, the role of intellectuals in political activism, the impact of institutionalization of academics over the past century, and the relative roles of experts versus that of public intellectuals.

Misztal's conclusions from this review emphasize that (1) public intellectuals function in an "intellectual field" that requires consistent re-establishment of legitimacy and authority, and (2) this establishment occurs through recognition by the scientific

community of the intellectual's credibility as well as by the public of the intellectual's authority to speak. Misztal argues that this authority emanates from intellectuals' creativity and civil courage. Public intellectuals are a category of individuals beyond that of scholars or topical experts because they use their creativity to employ their knowledge in new ways that address issues of human concern. "Such a conceptualisation allows us to move away from a rather narrow perception of the function of public intellectuals as people who simply inform the public and, instead, to view their task as one of enhancing political thinking . . ." (32). In public intellectuals this creativity is matched with a value system that supports democratic engagement: ". . . public intellectuals' successful engagement with public issues depends, by definition, upon their civic concern with justice and other matters of human significance and upon their democratic imagination . . ." (33). This movement into the public sphere, to engage in discussions and actions based on values, requires civil courage. This courage is necessary because of risks that may be felt in both repressive and democratic social systems, including physical threats, economic sanctions, and social marginalization from the scientific community.

To define creativity and courage, Misztal draws on social, psychological, philosophical, and political thought, as well as cultural depictions in literature, poetry, movies, and popular media from ancient Greece through recent times. Misztal concludes these chapters by providing definitions and typologies that reflect the combination of subjective perception of the situation and the objective social system in which the individual intellectual functions. These matrices describe the degree of pressure on the individual to conform to existing practices and the amount of risk they face when challenging the existing situation. These two typologies are then integrated into a single matrix of engagement patterns of public intellectuals that similarly depict the objective and subjective aspects of their sociohistorical context. The engagement typology reflects the national civic context in which the intellectual works and describes the types of networks through which intellectuals are able to engage public audiences. From this typology, Misztal constructs four categories of public engagement—dissidents, heroes, champions, and pioneers. She illustrates these categories with "group biographies" (122) in which, through extensive historical and biographical information, she constructs the types of engagement practiced by twelve Nobel Peace Prize winners. While informative, all three typologies (creativity, civil courage, and types of engagement) do not seem to flow from the rich literature reviews,

an issue that creates difficulty for the reader trying to comprehend the distinctions among the engagement types.

The three heroes described are Jane Addams, Fridtjof Nansen, and Elie Wiesel, all of whom lived within social systems that circumscribed their roles. They challenged these rules, and expanded the scope of their activities through charismatic personalities, moral visions, pragmatic approaches, and ability to unite their thoughts with their actions. These individuals constructed and mobilized extensive and differentiated informal networks that gave them credibility and resources to accomplish their goals. The three dissidents—Carl von Ossietzky, Andrei Sakharov, and Adolfo Pérez Esquivel—lived in nations with highly centralized authoritarian governments and a high cost of nonconformity. The dissidents were united in their courage to speak out on issues of human rights, peace, and justice in the face of significant personal risk. They worked with little public recognition, drawing instead on small personal networks and limited communication channels. They succeeded because of their ability to make their plights universal, illustrating how the persecution of a single person violates human rights and weakens democratic efforts globally. The three champions—Norman Angell, Emily Green Balch, and Alva Myrdal—drew on their reputations as scientists to advance a specific cause. They functioned within relatively open social systems, with low costs for nonconformity. Their work showed their belief in the ability of people, informed by science and reason, to reform and improve existing political systems. They were well-connected into formal political systems, and used these connections effectively to challenge powerful people and organizations. The pioneers—John Boyd Orr, Linus Carl Pauling, and Norman Borlaug—were scientists who made significant discoveries, inventions, or innovations, and believed that they had a responsibility to make science benefit humanity. The pioneers drew on their international reputations but reached beyond their extensive professional networks to effect change in political and economic institutions. They spoke out of a moral imperative, but voiced a policy vision that was supported by science and reason. Although the pioneers lived in relatively open societies, they did face personal and professional criticism as well as harassment during the McCarthy era.

Misztal's intention with this book is to contribute to a theory about the engagement of public intellectuals. The typology she creates effectively organizes her sample cases to generate significant insights into key conditions that affect how intellectuals engage the public, establish their credibility, frame and communicate their

messages, and reach their audiences to effect change. In addition to creativity and courage, the biographies reveal a number of personal characteristics—resourcefulness, charisma, ability to create and maintain relationships and link people across networks—that seem essential to public intellectuals’ effectiveness. Although there were a few loose threads for me—such as the connection between biography and the development of democratic values and the relationship between public intellectuals’ contributions and the role of lay or indigenous knowledge—Misztal’s book is a key contribution to a multidisciplinary understanding of public intellectuals and their role in fostering and contributing to discourse within the public sphere.

As a relatively young academic, in a faculty position that requires engagement with nonspecialized audiences, I find that *Intellectuals and the Public Good* raised key questions: to what extent are public intellectuals a distinctive category? The individuals Misztal profiles clearly represent an ideal type of public intellectual. Can there be gradations away from this ideal type, such that many professionals in science, art, and journalism may engage with the public on matters of substance (such as those that might enhance democratic practice)? It seems that Misztal’s answer in *Intellectuals and the Public Good* is that public intellectuals are indeed a separate category: public intellectuals act on their values in a way that is qualitatively different from those of experts or other professionals. Misztal clearly differentiates between experts and public intellectuals according to their engagement with matters that stretch beyond their expertise as well as their actions guided by moral values. However, there are examples of professionals who have engaged with such issues of public importance in more limited fashion. If there are gradations, can it be considered a quality that may be more or less found in the actions of most professionals in science, arts, and journalism? Further, what about those professional settings in which such engagement is part of the work, or is made to be part of the work, such as those identified in literature related to public scholarship (Burawoy 2005; Peters et al. 2005; Turner 2007)?

A final set of questions relates to Misztal’s identification of factors that influence public intellectuals’ engagement. Given that such engagement occurred in multiple types of regimes and professional settings, how do we differentiate factors that lead to greater (or lesser) public engagement? How can we create or develop institutional supports that encourage the development of public intellectuals? While Misztal does not address this question directly, she

does leave the reader with this thought in the last paragraph: “If we want to have an educated public and educated politicians, we need to continue to find among our ranks the successors—the contemporary reincarnations—of our exemplars” (241). I would argue that we also need to consider how we can consciously create social and political systems, institutions, and cultural environments that develop and reward publicly engaged behavior.

## References

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## About the Reviewer

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