

# Public intellectuals and their publics

*Speaking Truth to Power: Public Intellectuals Rethink New Zealand*

Edited by Laurence Simmons

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*Edward Said: The Legacy of a Public Intellectual*

Edited by Ned Curthoys and Debjani Ganguly

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*Speaking Truth to Power: Public Intellectuals Rethink New Zealand* sets out to establish and investigate the current intellectual climate, both academic and public, in New Zealand. Over the last 20–30 years, this western country has undergone extensive free market reform and, along with Australia, corporatisation of its tertiary education sector. Edited by Laurence Simmons—an Associate Professor in Film, Television and Media Studies from Auckland University who has an impressive breadth of expertise (post-structuralist theory, psychoanalytic theory, New Zealand art, photography, film and Television, and Italian Cinema)—the book features three long essays by academics and 10 interviews with eminent New Zealanders, all of whom have spoken out publicly on New Zealand social issues. The essays are by Roger Horrocks (Film and Television studies), Stephen Turner (Literary criticism) and Ian Sharp (Political Studies). Those interviewed have made an often controversial impact in the academic as well as the broader public sector. For example, the collection includes Brian Easton, a well-known newspaper and television journalist and Lloyd Geering, an Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies, who faced charges of doctrinal error and heresy in the courts after he wrote two extremely controversial articles on ‘The Resurrection of Jesus’ and ‘The Immortality of the Soul’. There is also Jane Kelsey, author of arguably the most devastating critique of Rogernomics and passionate critic of free market trade, Marilyn Waring, a professor of public policy and a former National Government MP who entered parliament at the age of 22 and later published books on feminism and human rights, leading historian and biographer Michael King, James Belich a Professor of History who wrote *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict*, the celebrated poet and novelist Ian Wedde, former Professor of Maori Studies and author of books on Maori politics and activism Ranganui

Walker, feminist investigative journalist Sandra Coney and Nicky Hager, the investigative journalist who exposed several recent Government cover-ups.

The first essay is Horrock's sombre yet incisive account of the profoundly negative treatment that those who work in the university sector and the art world have historically received in New Zealand at the hands of one of its ancient but still 'ruling repressions'—anti-intellectualism. This vision is followed by Turner's immensely witty but also cutting account of the 'dog-like' status that, as he sees it, is the lot of academics and some intellectuals today. This piece cleverly teases out the contradictions that underlie the discourse of the anti-intellectual establishment in New Zealand while along the way coining some handy terms such as 'the new university' and 'the anti-intellectual intellectual'. The third essay is Ian Sharp's more measured and informative account of Bruce Jesson, arguably New Zealand's most dedicated Marxist intellectual. While not denying the embattled state of New Zealand intellectuals, Sharp nevertheless reminds readers of Jesson's observation that the neo-liberal revolution that began around 1984 and which saw the emergence of right-wing governments, also gave birth to a class of intellectuals who were prepared to remain silent. This is how Sharp describes Jesson's position:

This, too, was the fundamental flaw he saw in the intellectual classes of New Zealand. The politically committed knew and cared little about the alien forces that were controlling them. The rest—in the universities, the professions, and the civil service—were mere technicians ... They kept their heads down and sustained the status quo... Jesson's charge against New Zealand's intellectuals was even more serious. They gave their compatriots *nothing at all*: no idea of what the vibrant political life of a republic of equals could be; no respect for intellectual systems of any kind; above all no understanding of the economic relationships that made a life of republican equality so difficult and the triumph of free market dogma so easy. When the neo-liberal revolution arrived they were silent (82-83).

Although ostensibly about the status of contemporary New Zealand intellectuals, these three opening essays provide us with a rich understanding of the history of intellectualism in New Zealand and its historical relation to the democratic values that were originally advanced by the country's early statesmen, themselves considered leading public intellectuals in their day. It is therefore ironic that in reading these accounts one is continually struck by the amount of sheer vitriol that is regularly and systematically showered at intellectuals, especially by self-acclaimed spokespeople for the broader community, the so-called 'ordinary bloke in the street'—and by many leading figures in the media. As Horrocks observes, much of this can be explained by 'The traditional strain of egalitarianism in New Zealand culture', a culture that has 'constantly linked

intellectual activity with social “elitism”, such that ‘decades of left-wing thinking have made intellectuals very prone to guilt feelings on that score’ (36). But if this is the case, then it would seem that between 1900 and the present day something happened to drive a wedge between the intellectuals and the broader community, and that something has to do with a perceived elitism. In his introduction, Simmons points to what he sees as the main culprit behind this change, namely the growing specialisation of knowledge and expertise which culminated in the sharp cultural turn toward theory that was a feature of the 1970s and 80s. This process—a world-wide phenomenon—led to a feeling of public disempowerment and consequent feelings of resentment and a demand for a language of ‘common sense’.

If the essays tend to give the reader a rather gloomy vision of intellectual life in New Zealand, then the interviews are more uplifting. This is the case even though several of the interviewees (Ranganui Walker, Marilyn Waring, Jane Kelsey, and James Belich) are academics. This is especially true of the history writers and Maori intellectuals and this, perhaps, also reflects a more widespread receptivity to these groups in the current, bicultural climate. The more upbeat nature of the interviews may also be to do with discussion of activism. Several of the interviewees are involved in community programs designed to better the lot of Maori and other minorities. This sector comes across as more optimistic than the grim environment of the corporatized university, where there are now fewer publishing outlets for discussion of pedagogic practice and critical debate (New Zealand’s *The Listener* was the last journal to publish cultural criticism that was aimed at a broader audience and that was recently purchased by the Fairfax group with the consequence that it now publishes only television programs). Creating some confusion is the lack of definition regarding who does and does not count as an intellectual, especially given the mix of academic and non-academic interviewees. Further, while in many of the essays and interviews, terms like intellectual and academic are elided, Jesson makes a clear distinction between the terms in his essay.

On the other hand, Simmons succeeds in imparting coherence and cohesion to the collection by having his subjects reflect on the experiences that have made them want to speak out on public issues, together with their views on the forces both contributing to and detracting from healthy public debate. In addition, he asks them the following three questions. Firstly, why do so many of the country’s public intellectuals find it difficult to admit that they are intellectuals? Secondly, what effect do they think the increasing corporatisation of the University and the arts sector is likely to have on the democratic freedoms of New Zealanders? And thirdly, why has there been such a strong historical resistance to intellectualism in New Zealand? While each of his subjects responds differently, it is possible to detect an emerging pattern in their answers. All of the respondents seem to agree that the greater their involvement in the broader

community, the more optimistic their feelings about the status of intellectual work in New Zealand.

This brings me to my final observation about *Speaking Truth to Power*, which is that its focus is predominantly pragmatic and is perhaps rather inward-looking. There are few references to non-New Zealand theorists and none of the essays refer to international examples of intellectual practice. Moreover, all of the situations described in the essays are based on local or national events. In some ways, this represents a real strength—the text has a clearly demarcated constituency of readers who are familiar with the names and the events described. In addition, the non-jargonistic style of writing and the minimum number of allusions to international intellectual figures, such as Foucault and Benjamin, means that the book will be read and enjoyed by those both inside and outside academia. Conversely, and despite the fact that writers like Horrocks, Turner and Sharp have made a valiant attempt to inform readers who may not be familiar with the events described and some of the local issues at stake, it also suggests that the book may not travel well. The risk is that readers in other countries, including nearby Australia, will fail to see the universal applicability of many of the problems and dilemmas that New Zealand intellectuals are presently facing.

While Simmon's book creates strong connections between intellectual and broader community life, Ned Curthoys and Debjani Ganguly's *Edward Said: The Legacy of a Public Intellectual* situates the public intellectual in relation to the experience of exile. This book—unlike *Speaking Truth to Power*—is more explicitly aimed at an international coterie of scholars and uses a critical discourse that is exclusively academic. There are 14 essays in the collection. Eight of these focus on elaborating and critiquing Said's model of the public intellectual, while the other six address, respectively, Said's intellectual fascination with classical music, his importance to critiques of popular culture and the impact that his scholarship has had on analyses of contemporary settler-colonial relations. Significantly, all but two of its 14 essays are by Australian academics, some of who have reputations beyond the university sector. An important feature of the book is its combined breadth of knowledge. This is appropriate given Said's own intellectual legacy, and his reputation as an intellectual whose authority derived from his valuing of diverse and wide-ranging knowledge rather than narrow specialisation. As the editors' remark:

It is an extraordinary testament to the 'worldliness' of Said that our volume has crossed many borders in order to rise to the challenge of his textured *oeuvre*, with contributors assessing his impact on fields such as sociology, political activism, literature, humanism, philology, musicology, settler-colonial history, orientalism and popular culture, Internet and media studies, Judaeo-Arabic history and Zionism (Curthoys and Ganguly 1).

However, the fact that the essays span a broad range of disciplines and include questions about Said's relevance to the increasingly corporate model of the university that reigns today, can arguably also be seen as testimony to the editors' decision not just to celebrate the 'inspirational power of Said's legacy in an Australian settler-colonial context' (2), but also to interrogate the limits of the public intellectual model that Said represents.

Of the essays that explicate and critique Said's ideal of the public intellectual, Bill Ashcroft's 'Exile and representation: Edward Said as public intellectual' is memorable for the way it highlights Said's use of the interstitial cultural space of exile to produce a counter discourse that is at once a 'counter truth' and 'counterpunch' to the colonial forms of representation that continue to poison US middle Eastern relations today. As Ashcroft observes, representation as a concept may be currently unfashionable among intellectuals, but this is to ignore the main process through which colonial power historically operated and through which it still operates today, as demonstrated by the insuperable power of the US media.

While Ashcroft's essay is aimed at explicating and defending the model of the public intellectual represented by Said, Saree Makdisi and Gerald Goggin's essays are notably more equivocal. For Makdisi, a major point of contention with Said's model of the public intellectual hinges around what he sees as a fundamental contradiction between his 'high modernist invocation of "the amateur" intellectual fiercely at odds with institutions of power and embodying a unique personal aesthetic, a signature "style" as a romantic, charismatic genius' (10-11), and the desire to radically reshape society by engaging with the public sphere.

Similarly for Goggin, a major problem lies in the tension between Said's old-fashioned conception of the heroic intellectual figure and the changed nature of the public sphere. His main question, for example, is 'how does Said's work ... enable reflection on the Internet's central role in contemporary public intellectual practice?' (57) While on the one hand he finds that the internet at many points resembles the sort of public intervention that Said envisages, especially in the form of the casual, quixotic reporting method represented by the blog, there remains the question of how this new technology might be harnessed to the creation of new kinds of social relations.

Two further essays are worth mentioning for the especially valuable accounts they give of Said's philosophy of Humanism. Curthoys is particularly effective in explaining the pivotal part played by philology in the thinking of Vico, Spitzer and Auerbach—the intellectuals from whom Said claimed to have taken most inspiration. In addition to containing an excellent and detailed account of Auerbach's concept of *Ansatzpunkt*, this chapter provides a particularly lucid overview of Vico's heroic achievements, one which goes a long way towards

explaining what it was about the humanist tradition that caused Said to unfailingly place it at the heart of his own critical practice throughout his entire career. We get a glimpse of the extent of Vico's importance to Said's ideal of the public intellectual in sentences like the following: 'Vico inherited a rhetorical tradition that emphasises an erudite understanding and supple use of linguistic persuasion as a form of practical wisdom' (163); and, 'In this respect Vico's pedagogical and ethical responsibilities require him to revive the fading rhetorical art of prudent discourse and the sociality of topical reasoning in an age of constrictive rationalism.' (163)

Debjani Ganguly, by contrast, usefully assesses the relevance of Said's philological and comparative humanism from the vantage point of the post Cold War era, attending in particular to Said's posthumously published book *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. While the essay makes little or no attempt to explain why Said remained such a strong champion of high modernist literature and music, it does a very good job of suggesting the ways in which Said's revived model of humanism could form the basis of a new kind of translational and philological approach to the reading and study of canonical western texts that has the potential to replace the political dichotomies of Cold War and 9/11 rhetoric with a new rhetoric of global interconnectivity.

Critics have previously raised the question of Said's intellectual relation to Derrida before but never, as far as I know, in quite the same way that John Docker poses it in his essay 'The question of Europe: Said and Derrida'. The essay ranges across a number of themes that embrace these two thinkers including the significance that their different disciplinary groundings have had upon their political impact. In addition, Docker examines their relations to the concept of carnivalesque and to popular culture. More controversially, however, he notes that both men were Arabs, but only Said rose to the challenge of championing the Arab at a time of Middle-East/US conflict, and this leads him to ask the startling question: was Derrida in fact Said's betrayer?

Less provocative but no less thoughtful is Peter Tregear's essay on Said and Adorno as public intellectuals who were also musicians. In addition to explaining Adorno's and Said's contrasting positions vis à vis the political uses of classical music, the essay offers up detailed insights into the way music has the potential to function as a boundary defying, transgressive force that is averse to hegemonic and monolithic political categories like nationalism. In addition, Tregear presents a clear and incisive account of the analogous circumstances surrounding Said's conception of the public intellectual and his setting up of the West-Eastern-Divans Orchestra with the Jewish pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim.

Patrick Wolfe's and Lorenzo Veracini's essays on the comparative history of settler colonialisms represent a stimulating extension and development of the views of Said. Wolfe's call for a relational interpretation of settler colonial history

looks forward to the possibility of Israel and Palestine becoming a single state founded on longstanding cultural and racial ties. This essay is especially worth reading for the striking way it follows the logic of Said's teachings concerning the value of transnational and intercultural ways of thinking over and above political solutions based on the oppositions that sustained colonialism.

The focus on Said, a single public intellectual with immense international appeal, will no doubt result in this collection travelling well. On the other hand, readers might wonder at the significance of having so many Australian contributors when the topic would clearly benefit from international input. Readers might also be forgiven for noticing that as a study of Said's legacy, it contains a few gaps. For example, none of the essays grapple with the wholly masculinist nature of Said's intellectual model. Said is notorious for his ignoring of feminism and his accounts of colonialism that elide gender differences, so why isn't this subject addressed? Also disappointing is the fact that, although the collection carefully positions itself as issuing from a country where the legacy of settler colonialism is particularly strong, there are no essays by Aboriginal scholars. Again such a perspective would have enhanced our understanding of Said's limitations as well as his legacy as a public intellectual. Furthermore, it would have been valuable to have included critical commentary encompassing Said's recently published (and much ignored) autobiography. Among other things, this includes important information about Said's experience growing up in formerly British occupied Lebanon and Cairo, about his profoundly ambivalent relationship with both of his parents and his newly adopted homeland of America.

Finally, one is tempted to ask what Said himself would have made of a book like this, especially given his avowed commitment to scholarly work that engages with real world inequities and injustices and his excoriation of those in the academy and elsewhere who renege on this responsibility. Would he conceive of it as a valuable contribution to the attempt to keep the figure of the modern intellectual alive? Or would he interpret it as another exercise in intellectual specialisation and career advancement? In attempting to answer this question myself, I have been guided by the highly reflective tone of the individual essays themselves and the editors' introductory comments, and the overwhelming impression I have received is of a book dedicated precisely to perpetuating the legacy of the politically 'engaged' intellectual that Said himself stood for, while at the same time asking how might the model that he embraced be adapted to the situation of Post Cold War and 9/11 politics and the 'New University' that so triumphantly rules today?

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