

CONTINUING STUDIES PROGRAM
European Roundtable VII

The Europe of the Intellectuals:
Europe's Key Problems in the Eyes of its Cultural Elite

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Introduction

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In the past, the European Roundtable has dealt with the development of the European Union, with the problems of the European welfare state, with the role of the past in European politics, and with Anti-Americanism in Europe.

Today, we will be dealing with a rather peculiar species called “public intellectuals”. Among ourselves on this podium, we are not entirely sure whether this is an endangered species (and maybe should be), or whether it is even threatened by extinction; whether it's migratory or not; whether it's concentrated in one part of the world, e.g., Europe, or a worldwide phenomenon; whether it's the product of evolution over the ages, or a sudden appearance. But we do agree that it's a fascinating and colorful species, well worth talking about for an afternoon.

The legacy of St. Paul's

Just three weeks ago tomorrow, a remarkable annual event took place at venerable St. Paul's Church in Frankfurt/Germany. As has been the case every year since 1950, the Association of German Book Publishers solemnly awarded its annual Peace Price, one of the most coveted awards in the national and international literary and artistic community.

This is no ordinary event, and it takes place at no ordinary site either. St. Paul's Church in Frankfurt was where, in 1848, the first democratic parliament in German history convened – a national assembly born out of the liberal spirit of the 1820s and 1830s and designed to bring parliamentary democracy to a Germany still firmly in the hands of kings, dukes, and other nobility. It was a courageous and fascinating undertaking, and the debates of the St. Paul's assembly belong to the finest prose that the democratic discourse over the centuries has produced.

But as we know, the quality and the passion of the democratic discourse at St. Paul's turned out not to be quite enough. Having drafted a new democratic

institution for a united Germany, the deputies offered the emperorship of a new constitutional monarchy to King Frederic William IV of Prussia who promptly declared, in full disdain of a popularly elected national assembly, that he would not accept “a crown from the gutter”. Thus ended the first serious attempt to establish a democratic order in Germany – an attempt that was to be truly successful only a hundred years later, in the wake of WW II and under the tender loving care of the American occupation.

Still, St. Paul’s in 1848 remains a symbol of a valiant effort at civil revolution. Among the brave men (I don’t think there were any women there) in the St. Paul’s assembly were a number of renowned German scholars of the time, including four from the famous university of Göttingen:

Friedrich Christoph Dahlmann, a historian
Wilhelm Eduard Albrecht, a professor of public law,
Georg Gottfried Gervinus, a literary scholar, and
Jacob Grimm, a professor of German and one of the Brothers Grimm to whom we owe, among other things, the definitive collection of German fairy tales.

I am mentioning these four because they had demonstrated their engagement for the public good already a few years earlier, as part of the “Goettinger Sieben”, the Göttingen Seven, seven eminent scholars from the faculty of Göttingen university who, in 1837, vigorously protested the suspension of a relatively progressive constitution by the new King of Hanover, Ernest August I. The king had thrown out the Constitution on the grounds that it curtailed his powers unduly. In response to the protest, the king dismissed the seven scholars summarily from their professorships at Göttingen – which, besides the raw display of royal power, seriously damaged the academic reputation of Goettingen University for at least the next two generations.

The point of this little excursion into history is that the public role of intellectuals in Europe did not begin with Jean Paul Sartre, or Bertrand Russell, or Günter Grass. There is a tradition of public engagement of distinguished scholars, writers, and artists that goes back much further and is an important part of the 19th century and, indeed, one of the striking features of the European enlightenment of the 18th century. It is very much connected to the names of the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), the writer and critic Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), or the universal genius Voltaire (1694-1778) – all highly influential in shaping the public culture of their times – even though the latter, Voltaire, as Sepp Gumbrecht has shown, was quite undeservedly celebrated as the patron saint and ultimate cause of the French Revolution.

My distinguished colleagues here know much more about this tradition and will have to say something about it as we move through this afternoon’s proceedings. For my part, I want to return where I started, namely, to what happened in Frankfurt’s St. Paul’s Church three weeks ago. As I said, the occasion was the

annual ceremony of the Peace Prize of the German Publishers Association – sort of a German Pulitzer Prize, but with much more of an activist connotation in that it rewards particularly those writers, thinkers, and artists who have made, through their work, a special contribution to peace in today's world – in the words of the Prize Statutes: the prize honors a person who has made an outstanding contribution, through his or her work in literature, scholarship and the arts, to achieving the ideal of peace.

Distinguished laureates

The list of laureates of this prize is impressive, and cuts across national, ethnic or denominational boundaries. You find among the earliest recipients

Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher (1953),
Hermann Hesse, the German writer (1955)
Thornton Wilder (1957), the American playwright,
Paul Tillich, the protestant theologian (1962),
Gabriel Marcel (1964), the French philosopher,
Leopold Sedar Senghor, the African writer and politician from Senegal (1968),
Alexander Mitscherlich, a German psychologist (1969),
Leszek Kolakowski, the Polish social theorist (1977),
Yehudi Menuhin (1979), the violinist –

To be followed in later years by the likes of

Ernesto Cardenal, the liberation theologian who inspired the revolution in Nicaragua (1980),
George F. Kennan of the U.S. (1982),
Teddy Kollek, the Mayor of Jerusalem (1985),
Vaclav Havel, the Czech writer and politician (quite appropriately honored in 1989),
György Konrad, the Hungarian writer and later president of the Berlin Academy of the Arts (1991),
Friedrich Schorlemmer, a protestant minister who was one of the inspirers of the democracy movement in Eastern Germany in the 1980s (1993),
Jürgen Habermas, the German philosopher (2001),
Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian novelist (2002), and (a year before her death)
Susan Sontag, the late American writer and social critic (2003).

Leaving for a moment aside those that emigrated to the US in the 1930s (like Paul Tillich, Hans Jonas or Fritz Stern), the share of Americans in this Hall of Fame of public intellectuals is relatively thin – Thornton Wilder, George Kennan, and Susan Sontag – three out of a total of 57, not much considering both the density and the quantity of intellectual talent in this country, and the decidedly international purview of this particular competition. We'll come back to this issue a little later.

Orhan Pamuk and Wolf Lepenies

Last year's recipient was Orhan Pamuk from Turkey who has just been awarded this year's Nobel Prize for literature, and this year – to finally come back to the event three weeks ago – it was a German intellectual again, Wolf Lepenies, a sociologist from the Free University of Berlin and a particularly interesting example of the species “public intellectual”. His writings are major contributions to the sociology of knowledge, especially his work on the emergence of modern scholarship in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries and his most influential book on what he calls “The three cultures” – on the position of sociology between literature and science. That would be enough of a reputation for any intellectual, but Lepenies has also played a key role in supporting emerging scholarship in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe by helping to set up small Institutes for Advanced Study in places like Warsaw, Budapest, and Bucharest where promising young scholars could be exposed to the world of scholarship beyond their own boundaries.

His acceptance speech three weeks ago begins, quite appropriately for a European public intellectual, with Kant. Kant has recognized, says Lepenies, that “peace and scholarship are no natural allies” but that they are, nonetheless, very much dependent on one another. Lepenies uses the current situation in the Middle East and the role of Islam terrorist threats as an instructive case in point for his thesis on how much scholarship and peace need each other. Neither the violent notion of a “war of cultures” nor the naïve wish for a harmonious “coalition of cultures”, he argues, does justice to the complicated realities of the historically close relationship between the West and Islam – a relationship that goes back many centuries. As he points out, that relationship includes the fact – not always fondly remembered in Europe – that medieval Christian Europe became reconnected to the legacy of ancient Greek philosophy essentially through the help of Arabic scholars – Aristotle may well have remained unknown to people like Thomas Aquinas without the help of Arab scholars like Avicenna or Ibn Sina and Averroes or Ibn Rushd. Indeed, the Enlightenment itself, that celebrated accomplishment of European thought, is unthinkable without its Jewish and Arabic roots. Whatever one may argue against the admission of Turkey into the EU, says Lepenies, one argument does not count: that Europe would thereby lose its Christian soul – Europe, he says, never had a pure soul. And it's from there that he comes up with a striking proposal: Given the lack of an appropriate space in today's Middle East itself for soberly and critically questioning some of the assumptions of Islamic identity and for engaging in a constructive interaction with other cultural and religious traditions, why doesn't Germany, right in the middle of “Christian Europe”, provide something like an exterritorial space for the dialogue between Jewish and Islamic scholars? One of the results of such a dialogue could indeed be the emergence of a kind of “Islamic modernity” that many thoughtful Muslims dream of – people who refuse to see a contradiction

between Islam and modernity and who are convinced of the viability of democratic life in Muslim societies.

It is interventions like these that are the trademark of the public intellectual – rooted in the traditions of solid scholarship and yet alert to the challenges of our times and ready to think outside the box. There are ivory towers, says Lepenies at one point in his Frankfurt speech, that give you a particularly wide view from the top.

Viadrina European University on the German-Polish border which I helped found and directed for a number of years in the 1990s gives an award each year to honor people who have contributed significantly to German-Polish understanding (a relationship that still needs all the help it can get). A few years ago, the recipient of the award was Günter Grass, whose acceptance speech I remember quite vividly as it very skillfully wove the history of his own upbringing in Gdansk/Danzig into the issue of contemporary German-Polish relations. He concluded with a similarly striking proposal of creating, right on the German-Polish border, a permanent museum that would bring together all the “Beutekunst”, i.e., the countless works of art that were confiscated, stolen, or otherwise displaced at the end of WW II.

Public intellectuals in Europe

Whether or not Lepenies’ or Grass’ proposals will see the light of day remains to be seen, but one thing is quite striking: Europe has had, over its history, an unusually large population of these kinds of “public intellectuals”. We have met some of them in the list of recipients of the Peace Prize; when we look at France, a more complete list would certainly have to include the likes of

Emile Zola, the famous novelist of the late 19th century, whose public engagement for the liberalization of French society came to a dramatic climax when he accused the French government of anti-semitism in the Dreyfus affair in his famous front-page piece in L’Aurore entitled “J’accuse”,

Jean Paul Sarte and Simone de Beauvoir, influential philosophical and literary figures of the 20th century – after a stormy life resting together peacefully on the Montparnasse cemetery, as well as

Michel Foucault, the influential philosopher of post-modernism,

Jacques Derrida, the father, godfather or stepfather of deconstruction and, especially in his later years, an active participant in a variety of political debates, most notably those directed against the U.S.,

Pierre Bourdieu, a leading sociologist and an activist participant in the opposition to globalization,

Jean Baudrillard, cultural theorist and political commentator,

Joseph Lacan, one of the influential voices in the recent history of psychoanalysis –

In addition to Gabriel Marcel and Alfred Grosser, who have already appeared on the list of winners of the Peace Prize.

For Italy, the search for public intellectuals comes up with a rich and varied list that would at least include three radically different types:

Niccolò Machiavelli, the influential political theorist and practitioner of Renaissance Italy,

Antonio Gramsci, one of the more important theoreticians and political activists in the Marxist tradition of the 20th century, and

Umberto Eco, author of *The Name of the Rose*, a leading figure in the field of semiotics and medieval studies and an influential figure in contemporary cultural politics in Europe.

And the list of public intellectuals in Germany (or originating in Germany) would not be complete without mentioning

Ralf Dahrendorf, now Lord Dahrendorf, a German-British sociologist who wrote classic book on class conflict in modern societies and became the founder of the University of Konstanz, a Parliamentary Secretary of State in the German Foreign Office, a member of the European Commission, Director of the London School of Economics, a Warden at St. Anthony's at Oxford and a member of the House of Lords – still at 77 a vigorous debater on European integration and critic of the European Constitution, but also

Heinrich Böll, winner of the Nobel Prize in literature and a persistent and very public critic of the tendencies of restoration in post-war West Germany,

Walter Jens, a professor of literary history, president of the Berlin Academy of Arts in the crucial years following German unification and a lifelong public critic of conservative tendencies in Germany,

Hans Küng, the catholic theologian whom the Vatican deprived of his permission to teach in the name of the Catholic church, but who has remained one of the most authoritative voices on modern religion and values, and, to balance the scales as it were,

Josef Ratzinger, K ung's adversary in the Vatican, now better known as Benedict XVI, a theologian of rare talent, who now has had a very public role thrust upon him, and last not least

Joseph Beuys, arguably the most creative and public artist in recent German history who pretty much single-handedly redefined the relationship between art and the public.

He belongs on any list of public intellectuals, but It seems inappropriate for any one country to claim Albert Einstein, a public intellectual in his own right with very strong and publicly expressed views on peace, on Mahatma Gandhi's legacy to the world, and on civil rights in the United States.

All of these and many others, each in their own and often inimitable way, have made their scholarly and artistic insights the basis for getting involved in the issues of their times, be they German re-armament after WW II, European integration, the role of the Catholic Church, nuclear energy and the environment, the plight of the Third World, or – in ever new variations – United States policy in Central America, Vietnam, Iraq and elsewhere.

Public intellectuals in trouble

This is – intellectually and politically – a remarkably rich tradition, but it's not been an undivided blessing. Because by the very nature of the public stance they take, public intellectuals become not only visible and audible, but they also become exposed and vulnerable – vulnerable both to the buffeting and often unpredictable winds of the Zeitgeist, but also vulnerable to their own contradictions.

E. O. Wilson, the distinguished biologist at Harvard and one of the not too many public intellectuals that this country has known in recent years, learned that the hard way when a huge controversy erupted over his work in Sociobiology.

Rolf Hochhuth, the German writer, discovered similar hardship for different reasons when he wrote his play *The Deputy* in which he criticized the role of Pope Pius XII in the Nazis' rise to power.

Martin Walser, another German author and recipient of the Peace Prize in 1998, used (of all things) his acceptance speech in St. Paul's to utter some fairly convoluted criticisms against the constant invocation of the holocaust in the German public discourse, and thereby unleashed a bitter and often shrill controversy on whether he indeed had argued for denying the significance and incomparability of Auschwitz and the Holocaust.

Now, as of a few months ago, this distinguished assembly of public intellectuals coming upon hard times has a new and prominent member in G nter Grass. In

his latest, autobiographical book “Die Häutung der Zwiebel” (The Skinning of the Onion), Grass reveals what, for all his usual loquaciousness about his life’s story, he had carefully kept to himself, namely: That in November of 1944, at the tender age of 17, he had been recruited into the Waffen-SS, the Nazis’ military elite corps – only to be taken prisoner shortly thereafter by the American forces in May of 1945. The way he tells the story is that when it was clear that he was going to be drafted – all 17-year olds were fair game those days – he had wanted to join the submarines, but was shuffled into the SS instead. Not an extraordinary story in and of itself; similar things have happened to a lot of young people in those days. What made the Günter Grass story such big news was the fact that here was one of those public intellectuals who had, for a lifetime as an author and a self-appointed moral referee, admonished Germans to face up to their Nazi past – while hiding for sixty years his own attachment to that regime, however harmless and trivial that attachment may have been.

Such is the vulnerability of the public intellectual. If Grass had stayed out of the public limelight and written his novels, this “revelation” would probably have remained a minor matter. As someone who had made a career not only out of writing great novels, but also of serving as some kind of a national conscience, it was bound to become a cause célèbre.

There still is, I maintain, an important place for Günter Grass in the Hall of Fame of the public intellectual. Not only is and remains he one of the great writers of our time. The artistic skill and the political sensitivity with which he, from ever new angles, deals with the way our past shapes our lives and our futures remains one of the great examples of civic pedagogy in modern times – even if the pedagogue himself turns out not to be infallible.

Public intellectuals and the issues of the times

Let me return once more to the general theme. Intellectuals are an important part of the political and social discourse in Europe, more so, it seems to me, than in the U.S. It’s impossible to do a week’s reading of any of the leading European newspapers – the FAZ or Le Monde or the weekly Die Zeit – without running into some piece by Peter Sloterdijk or Klaus Staeck or Régis Debray or, for that matter, Sepp Gumbrecht.

The major debates

on the future of the welfare state,

on the further integration and/or expansion of the EU (including the question of Turkish membership in the EU),

on multiculturalism in European societies,

on the future of the relationship between religion and state,

on Europe and Islam, or

on the future of the Atlantic relationship and its place in a new international order – they all are being conducted in Europe with the very active and public

participation of a sizeable and, with notable exceptions, reputable group of scholars, writers, and artists who consider that participation a genuine and an integral part of their role as intellectuals.

A different situation in the U.S.?

That, I submit, is different on this side of the Atlantic. To be sure, we have Noam Chomsky, but he is almost one of a kind. Beyond him, and particularly with the departure of Susan Sontag, the field of true public intellectuals in this country is remarkably thin, and their presence is little noted outside of the pages of the New York Review and the occasional op-ed page of the NY Times.

I am not sure I know why this is so, and I pass the question on to you and to my distinguished colleagues on this podium. Maybe I just don't pay enough attention, and maybe Paul Krugman, Norman Mailer, Tom Friedman, Robert Kagan, Michael Ignatieff and Harold Bloom are the American equivalents of Ralf Dahrendorf, Wolf Lepenies, Anthony Giddens, Jean Baudrillard, Eric Hobsbawm, or Vaclav Havel.

Or maybe, as in Europe, many of the public intellectuals who established the species in years past are gone, and there is an acute shortage of new recruits (Sepp Gumbrecht has written an interesting essay about this)?

I am delighted that I do not have to deal with this question, and with the many other questions that I have touched upon, all by myself, but that I have the help of two outstanding scholars who, each in their own way, could well lay claim to the designation of public intellectuals.

Russell Berman
Professor of German Studies and of Comparative Literature
Walter A. Haas Professor in the Humanities
Senior Fellow at the Institute of International Studies and the Hoover Institution

Hans Ulrich (Sepp) Gumbrecht
Albert Guerard Professor of Literature and Professor of French and Italian