

Practicing Public Scholarship

Christopher P. Long
Michigan State University

In sowing the seeds of the *Public Philosophy Journal* at the intersection where philosophy encounters questions of public concern, we are caught in a daunting vortex of cross currents. From one direction, the prevailing winds of public sentiment bring an abiding wariness of academics in general, and of philosophers in particular. From the other, hot air rises from the academy, carrying its discourse high above the public upon which the academy too often looks down in disdain. Sowing, however, has always been a hopeful risk.

In this case, it is rooted in the enduring belief that the ground between philosophy and a democratic public can be fertile soil for ideas that enrich the earth we share. This play of hope and risk can be traced to the very origins of philosophy and democracy in ancient Athens. Socrates, of course, was sentenced by the people to death for his attempts to situate philosophy at the center of political life in Athens.¹ And yet, just before dying, Socrates himself enjoins his friends—and us—never to relinquish the attempt to seek the truth of things through words as a means by which to create a more just and beautiful world. He reaffirms the hope at the heart of a philosophical life pursued in community with others.²

This hope that our world might be made more just and our lives more fulfilling through shared attempts to seek the truth of things, by pursuing wisdom together in public dialogue, animates the seeding of the *Public Philosophy Journal*.

There are two dimensions of the *PPJ* as an endeavor. When combined these two dimensions make it at once unique and fragile. First is the conviction that practices of collaborative scholarship can enrich public life. Second is the recognition that practices of publishing are capable of creating publics animated by a shared vision of the common good. Both of these aspects of the *PPJ* are caught in cross-currents that threaten its success.

Practicing Scholarship

Let us begin with the idea that scholarship, when practiced in and with the public, can enrich both public and academic life. The very idea that we might blur the distinction between the academy and the broader public by inviting publicly active citizens to practice scholarship along with publicly engaged academics stands against two countervailing winds that trace their origins at least to 1950s America. From one direction blows the deep anti-intellectualism that took root in mid-century American life and continues to blow hard today. In *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, Richard Hofstadter suggests that American anti-intellectualism is rooted in the two main modes through which intellectuals have traditionally addressed the public:

In the main, intellectuals affect the public mind when they act in one of two capacities: as experts or ideologues. In both capacities they evoke profound, and, in a measure, legitimate, fears and resentments. Both intensify the prevalent sense of helplessness in our society, the expert by quickening the public's resentment of being the object of constant manipulation, the ideologue by arousing the fear of subversion and by heightening all the other grave psychic stresses that have come with modernity.³

Today being a “public intellectual” still means speaking publicly in one of these two modes. As experts, intellectuals often are sought to provide insight into the most pressing public problems of our time; as ideologues, intellectuals join the fray of partisanship that has long perverted politics from a shared effort to create conditions for fulfilling lives into a factional contest of self-interested expedience. Even as right-leaning media outlets from Fox News to *Breitbart* undermine the idea of expertise itself and demonize academia for its alleged preference for leftist ideologies, more mainstream popular press outlets, from *The New York Times* to

¹ Christopher P. Long, *Socratic and Platonic Political Philosophy: Practicing a Politics of Reading* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 120–27.

² *Ibid.*, 92–97.

³ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1963), 35.

The Huffington Post, continues to turn to intellectuals in one of these two registers; and intellectuals are very often willing to play the role of expert or ideologue in exchange for increased popularity and an elevated profile.

Here, indeed, the anti-intellectualism so deeply ingrained in contemporary American culture is reinforced by academic professionalism to further alienate the academy from the public on which it has always depended. Nowhere has this professionalization had more pernicious effect than in the discipline of philosophy in twentieth-century America. As Richard Rorty has emphasized, during the 1950s, philosophy sought to professionalize in order to consolidate its legitimacy as a serious technical discipline. As a result, it turned away from the public and, even within the university, turned in upon itself⁴. This self-imposed exile, born at least in part of the toxic politics of the McCarthy Era in which the publicly engaged, critical practices of philosophy were recognized as a threat to the stability of culture and American dominance, gave rise to what Reiner Schürmann still in 1994 called the “pleading style” of philosophy:

Today, the most widespread philosophical style in the United States is that of litigation, and the most outstanding trait of how it is stated is sallying forth, standing out in the sense of attacking.⁵

If intellectual engagement with the public is marked by expertise and ideology, within the academy these modes often are translated into a combative form of litigation. Robert Nozick captures its signature when he characterizes philosophy as a “coercive activity”:

The terminology of philosophical art is coercive: arguments are *powerful* and best when they are *knockdown*, arguments *force* you to a conclusion.⁶

The culture of coercion had so saturated the profession of philosophy that in 1988, when Richard Bernstein addressed the American Philosophical Association as its president, he explicitly called for a “healing of wounds.” His address seeks to calm the winds of discord, and in so doing it opens a path to the intersection between philosophy and the public where the *PPJ* seeks to take root and grow.

In that 1988 presidential address, Bernstein calls us to nurture community and solidarity by practicing philosophy as “an engaged fallibilistic pluralism—one that is based upon mutual respect, where we are willing to risk our own prejudices, are open to listening and learning from others, and we respond to others with responsiveness and responsibility.”⁷ For Bernstein, to be engaged means to be open to the world and those we encounter in it; to be fallibilistic is to recognize the limits of our own capacities to understand; to be pluralistic is to respect and indeed embrace the diversity of perspectives that enrich our public life.⁸

Practicing philosophy as engaged fallibilistic pluralism means that we need to enter into dialogue with one another as learners. This requires us to cultivate habits of scholarship that nurture ideas, colleagues, and communities capable of responding with grace and nuance to the most complex and difficult problems of our time. Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber have called such problems “wicked,” not because they are evil but because they are so intractable that the very articulation of each as a problem is itself a problem.⁹ Addressing wicked problems, from climate justice to poverty to inequality to healthcare, requires a diversity of expertise from a wide range of fields, a deftness of imagination, and a generous willingness to set aside differences so that we are able to seek solutions together. To do this, we must learn to think together about wicked issues, respond to ideas in collegial ways, and develop practices of critique that help us refine our approaches rather than alienate us from one another as we seek to create a better life together.

The unique formative peer review process we have adopted for the *PPJ* is designed to cultivate just such habits of scholarship. At its core, formative review is a collaborative effort to enrich the work under consideration. This is decidedly not a coercive activity; nor it is a matter of evaluative litigation. Rather, formative review is a structured form of peer engagement rooted in trust and a shared commitment to improve the work by saying difficult truths in ways they might be heard. Rebecca Kennison speaks of “peer engagement” as a process designed “to

⁴ Richard Rorty, “Professionalized Philosophy and the Transcendentalist Culture,” in *The Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972–1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 62.

⁵ Reiner Schürmann, “Concerning Philosophy in the United States,” trans. Charles T. Wolfe, *Social Research* 61, no. 1 (April 1, 1994): 99.

⁶ Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 4.

⁷ Richard J. Bernstein, “Pragmatism, Pluralism and the Healing of Wounds,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 63, no. 3 (November 1, 1989): 18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3130079>.

⁸ For a more detailed discussion of Bernstein’s work, including a more extensive account of “engaged fallibilistic pluralism,” see Christopher P. Long, “Pragmatism and the Cultivation of Digital Democracies,” in *Richard J. Bernstein and the Expansion of American Philosophy: Thinking the Plural*, ed. Marcia Morgan and Megan Craig (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 37–59.

⁹ Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Sciences* 4, no. 2 (1973): 161.

encourage the best possible work by the best possible minds.”¹⁰ This captures well the spirit of the formative review process the *PPJ* seeks to nurture. To facilitate formative peer engagement oriented toward enriching the scholarship under consideration, each review is assigned to a review coordinator whose work it is to ensure that the review process unfolds in a collegial and caring way.

Formative peer review at the *PPJ* is designed to create a culture of shared scholarly practice between a composer-nominated reviewer who is publicly engaged with the work addressed by the submission, the composer, and a complementary reviewer identified by the peer review coordinator.¹¹ The reviews are structured around four basic concerns: (1) the relevance of the work to the public with which it is engaged; (2) the accessibility of the ideas advanced; (3) the intellectual coherence of the piece; and (4) the extent to which it is connected to the ongoing scholarly conversation within the academy. Reviewers are asked to bring their best selves to the process and to respond to the work as they would to that of a friend whose success they seek to foster. Structuring the review according to these four registers shapes the work in ways that might resonate with broader public and academic communities. The process cultivates a more responsive and responsible public intellectual activity. In this way, publicly engaged citizens beyond and within the academy partner in practices of scholarship and in scholarly publishing, collaborating in structured ways to ensure that publications enrich public life.

Making Publics

At its heart, publishing creates publics. The *PPJ* understands publication itself as a practice of public philosophy. Here the distinction Paul Boshears makes between publishing and publication is instructive:

Publishing is about making stuff knowable, publication is about public-making. Public-ation is a process, like saturation—the process of saturating—or maturation—the process of maturing.¹²

If the *PPJ* is to be a true public-ation, its process of public-making must cultivate and support habits of public scholarship that empower the creation of *articulated publics*. John Dewey introduces the idea of an articulated public in his seminal essay, *The Public and Its Problems*. There he suggests that the creation of a genuine public involves attaining a specific level of integration and coherence. Without which, he says, “publics are amorphous and unarticulated.”¹³

Drawing on the same horticultural metaphor that has shaped the work of the *PPJ* from its inception, Dewey describes how a public might come to articulate itself:

Dissemination is something other than scattering at large. Seeds are sown, not by virtue of being thrown at random, but by being so distributed so as to take root and have a chance of growth. Communication of the results of social inquiry is the same thing as the formation of public opinion.¹⁴

Inspired by Dewey’s suggestion that social inquiry is the distributed structure by which a public comes to articulate itself, the *PPJ* has adopted a structured formative peer review process that encourages engaged citizens from within and beyond the academy to work together through shared practices of writing and revising to redress wicked problems in public life. In this way, the *PPJ* aspires to be an ecosystem of scholarly communication responsive to and responsible for the creation of flourishing articulated publics.

In her essay, “Public Knowledge,” Noëlle McAfee identifies three interconnected ways by which a public comes to be articulated in the Deweyan sense. Articulated publics need, first, a deep understanding of the consequences and history of human action. Second, they need *public knowledge* “of where they want and are willing to move as a political community given all the constraints, consequences, trade-offs, competing values, aims, and necessary sacrifices they discover in their deliberations.” Third, they need to be able to reconnect this public

¹⁰ Rebecca Kennison, “Back to the Future: (Re)turning from Peer Review to Peer Engagement,” *The Association of Learned & Professional Society Publishers* 29 (2016): 70, <https://doi.org/10.1002/leap.1001>.

¹¹ Because the *PPJ* invites submissions in a diversity of forms from written pieces to podcasts and videos, we use the term “composer” to name the creator of the submission.

¹² Jamie Allen, “Discussions Before an Encounter,” *Continent* 2, no. 2 (January 8, 2012): 147, <http://continentcontinent.cc/index.php/continent/article/view/92>. Drawing on this rich understanding of publication, Eileen Joy eloquently writes: “not only as the primary vehicle for the dissemination of our thinking, but also as the production of actual publics, without which intellectual and cultural life cannot flourish nor be shared.” See Eileen Joy, “A Time for Radical Hope,” *Chiasma: A Site for Thought* 1, no. 1 (2014): 13.

¹³ John Dewey, *John Dewey: The Later Works of, 1925–1953, Volume 2, 1925–1927, Essays, Reviews, Miscellany, and the Public and Its Problems* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 317.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 345.

knowledge to local communities where it can take root in ways that enable the flourishing of public life.¹⁵ The *PPJ* nurtures all three interconnected dimensions of an articulated public by focusing its efforts on deepening public knowledge through structured practices of *formative* review.

Here our approach diverges from a long tradition of journal publishing in which peer reviewers served largely as gatekeepers. This tradition grew in the nineteenth century out of a desire to protect publishers from publishing anything embarrassing; but by the twentieth century it had devolved into a set of practices that served to advance the career and consolidate the authority of the editor behind a façade of wider academic legitimacy.¹⁶ This gatekeeping approach to peer review, which focuses primarily on evaluating the quality of completed work to determine if it is worthy of publication, has cultivated debilitating habits of severity and critique that often inhibit attempts to enhance scholarship and advance knowledge.

Our approach to peer review at the *PPJ* moves in a different direction. Rather than orienting peer review toward evaluation and gatekeeping, we adopt a formative engagement approach in which all participants enter into dialogue with one another as learners committed to enriching the quality of the submission under consideration. This formative orientation is grounded in the recognition that we learn to think together and refine our ideas by providing feedback to one another and revising our work based on the feedback we receive.¹⁷ By shifting the peer review process from evaluation and gatekeeping to formation and shared learning, we hope to transform the practice of peer review into a catalytic activity that promotes intellectual growth and discovery. Formative peer engagement is thus rooted in capacities of collegiality through which we work together to improve the work and enrich public life.¹⁸ Here the credibility of the review depends not on how a clever critique prevents a submission from being published but rather on how a helpful suggestion makes the publication richer and more responsive to the questions with which we are concerned.¹⁹

The *PPJ* formative peer review process is thus designed to advance all three interconnected dimensions of what Dewey called an articulated public. By bringing publicly engaged colleagues together in a structured formative review process oriented toward making the work more relevant, accessible, coherent, and responsive, we integrate an understanding of the consequences of human action into the publication process itself. By holding ideas accountable to what is discovered together through the formative review, we cultivate habits of public knowledge. And by collaborating with colleagues doing public work in local communities as reviewers, curators, and co-composers, we ensure that the most urgent and pressing questions of our time emerge from communities, are refined by communities, and ultimately reconnect with communities.

Thus the *PPJ* thus attempts to articulate publics through its practices of publication. As we put it in "Public Philosophy and Philosophical Publics: Performative Publishing and the Cultivation of Community," an essay that tills the theoretical soil in which the seeds of the *PPJ* have been sown:

we believe that inchoate publics will become articulated publics only when the practices of public scholarly communication are thoroughly infused with a spirit of collaboration and participation, so that authors and readers can engage in productive dialogues and ultimately become collaborators with regard to issues of public concern.²⁰

Even as new modes of open peer review in a digital age emerge and develop, peer review itself continues too often to be understood in instrumental terms as a means to the product of publication. Publicly practiced formative peer review, however, is critical to the discovery, development, and refinement of ideas that animate public life. To invite publicly engaged citizens into this vital and, when practiced in the spirit of an engaged fallibilistic pluralism, revitalizing scholarly practice is to begin to nurture articulated publics capable of responding in nuanced and imaginative ways to our most wicked problems. This is the hopeful risk we take in sowing the seeds of the *Public Philosophy Journal* in this maelstrom where the public need for wisdom is as urgent as the academic need for relevance. Perhaps

¹⁵ Noëlle McAfee, "Public Knowledge," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 30, no. 2 (March 1, 2004): 147-48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453704041241>.

¹⁶ Cynthia Cummings, "In Referees We Trust?," *Physics Today* 70, no. 2 (February 1, 2017): 44-49, <https://doi.org/10.1063/PT.3.3463>.

¹⁷ For a discussion of the importance of peer review in the learning process, see Melissa M. Patchan and Christian D. Schunn, "Understanding the Benefits of Providing Peer Feedback: How Students Respond to Peers' Texts of Varying Quality," *Instructional Science; Dordrecht* 43, no. 5 (September 2015): 591-614, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11251-015-9353-x>.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the thick collegiality we hope will take root and grow in the *Public Philosophy Journal*, see Christopher Long, "Thick Collegiality," *Christopher P. Long*, October 23, 2014, <http://cplong.org/2014/10/thick-collegiality/>.

¹⁹ William Hart-Davidson et al., "A Method for Measuring Helpfulness in Online Peer Review," in *Proceedings of the 28th ACM International Conference on Design of Communication*, SIGDOC '10 (New York, NY: ACM, 2010), 115-121, <https://doi.org/10.1145/1878450.1878470>.

²⁰ André Rosenbaum de Avillez et al., "Public Philosophy and Philosophical Publics: Performative Publishing and the *Cultivation of Community*," *The Good Society* 24, no. 2 (2015): 138, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5325/goodsociety.24.2.0118>.

here at the intersection where philosophy engages questions of public concern and the public collaborates in the practices of philosophical scholarship, we might begin to reap a more fulfilling life together by creating articulated publics capable of cultivating a more just and beautiful world.

Bibliography

- Allen, Jamie. "Discussions Before an Encounter." *Continent* 2, no. 2 (January 8, 2012): 136-47. <http://continentcontinent.cc/index.php/continent/article/view/92>.
- Bernstein, Richard J. "Pragmatism, Pluralism and the Healing of Wounds." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 63, no. 3 (November 1, 1989): 5-18. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3130079>.
- Cummings, Cynthia. "In Referees We Trust?" *Physics Today* 70, no. 2 (February 1, 2017): 44-49. <https://doi.org/10.1063/PT.3.3463>.
- Dewey, John. 1925-1927: Essays, Reviews, Miscellany, and the *Public and Its Problems*. Vol. 2 of John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953, edited by Jo Ann Boydston, 235-372. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008.
- Hart-Davidson, William et al. "A Method for Measuring Helpfulness in Online Peer Review." In *Proceedings of the 28th ACM International Conference on Design Communication* New York: ACM, 2010: 115-21. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1878450.1878470>.
- Hofstadter, Richard. *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. New York: Knopf, 1963.
- Joy, Eileen. "A Time for Radical Hope." *Chiasma: A Site for Thought* 1, no. 1 (2014): 10-23.
- Kennison, Rebecca. "Back to the Future: (Re)turning from Peer Review to Peer Engagement." *The Association of Learned & Professional Society Publishers* 29 (2016): 69-71. <https://doi.org/10.1002/leap.1001>.
- Long, Christopher P. "Pragmatism and the Cultivation of Digital Democracies." In *Richard J. Bernstein and the Expansion of American Philosophy: Thinking the Plural*, edited by Marcia Morgan and Megan Craig, 37-59. Lanham: Lexington Book, 2016.
- . *Socratic and Platonic Political Philosophy: Practicing a Politics of Reading*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- McAfee, Noëlle. "Public Knowledge." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 30, no. 2 (March 1, 2004): 139-57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453704041241>.
- Nozick, Robert. *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Patchan, Melissa M. and Christian D. Schunn. "Understanding the Benefits of Providing Peer Feedback: How Students Respond to Peers' Texts of Varying Quality." *Instructional Science; Dordrecht* 43, no. 5 (September 2015): 591-614. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11251-015-9353-x>.
- Rittel, Horst W. J. and Melvin M. Webber. "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning." *Policy Sciences* 4, no. 2 (1973): 1610-196.
- Rorty, Richard. "Professionalized Philosophy and the Transcendentalist Culture." In *The Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972-1980*, 60-71. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.

Rosenbaum de Avillez, André et al. "Public Philosophy and Philosophical Publics: Performative Publishing and the Cultivation of the Community." *The Good Society* 24, no. 2 (2015): 118-145.

Schürmann, Reiner. "Concerning Philosophy in the United States." Translated by Charles T. Wolfe. *Social Research* 61, no. 1 (April 1, 1994): 89-113.