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Daniel W. Drezner. *The Ideas Industry: How Pessimists, Partisans, and Plutocrats Are Transforming the Marketplace of Ideas.* Oxford University Press, 2017; and

Tom Nichols. *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters.* Oxford University Press, 2017.

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It has become common to bemoan the sorry state of our public conversation. Partisans on all sides hunker down in their ideological camps. Moralism supplants pragmatism. The sources that we once turned to for the news, dispassionate analysis, informed criticism, and other kinds of cultivated judgment no longer enjoy much credibility. Faced with this problem, two political scientists, Tom Nichols and Daniel Drezner have written books addressing the troubles with our public discourse and the role that experts play within it.

Nichols's *Death of Expertise* is less a work of scholarship than a jeremiad, an impassioned diatribe about the pathetic condition of our public life. A professor of national security affairs at the U.S. Naval War College, he waltzes through a familiar medley of complaints: Our militantly non-judgmental culture—every kid gets a trophy—nurtures the insidious idea that we are all equally competent at everything. Universities, abandoning rigor, dispense inflated grades to entitled students. Online reviewing—of books on Amazon, restaurants on Yelp, performances on You Tube—has debased the status of learned criticism. Contempt for science spawns crackpot ideas, like the distrust of vaccines. Time-tested blue-chip journalistic institutions lose readers to fly-by-night websites that purvey unreliable, opinionated garbage. Social media and partisan media hammer home claims that pander to our biases and insulate us from countervailing facts.

The Death of Expertise thus belongs to a recognizable genre. Critics have long been warning of the wrecking ball smashing pillars of cultural authority and teaching ordinary individuals to substitute their own unreflective, untutored, or autodidactic judgments for expert opinion. Nichols cites some of these precursors—notably *The Culture of Complaint*, by the legendary critic Robert Hughes—but there are others such as Susan Jacoby's *Age of American Unreason* and Andrew Keen's *Cult of the Amateur*.¹ Like these authors,

¹ Robert Hughes, *The Culture of Complaint* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason* (New York: Random House, 2009); Andrew Keen, *The Cult of the Amateur* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

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Nichols worries that the destruction of our shared foundation of agreed-upon knowledge—and a pervasive disregard for science, logic, and evidence—will impair our ability to solve urgent problems or even to conduct civil discussions.

Nichols's title pinpoints the "death of expertise" as the source of these maladies. In fact, the book's targets are varied and complex; the title phrase fails to fully capture the range of phenomena he laments. To corral those diverse complaints into a single conceptual pen is hard; the propensity to treat college as a consumer buffet and the elementary errors that routinely appear in online magazines like Vox.com do not fit neatly into single critique. Still, the book possesses a rough coherence. Nichols's culprit in the end seems to be not the death of expertise per se but the erosion of a widespread public esteem for professional expertise. Experts, in other words, are still with us. They just no longer command the deference they once did. Instead, a crush of rival authorities have sprung up, including, not least, the authority of the self. Shopping for sources of knowledge to trust, we are ditching venerable professional experts for upstarts.

Intelligent, clearly written, and often extremely funny, *The Death of Expertise* will no doubt please readers who share Nichols's dismay about our dumbed-down, crowdsourced culture. Though sometimes overdrawn, his observations largely ring true. Nichols has reasonable and moderate views, and he furnishes examples of intellectual sloppiness and willful ignorance from the left and the right. If he resorts to hyperbole and overgeneralization, he does so in the spirit of making a polemical point.

Yet the book is neither systematic nor rigorous. Nichols says that he has pinpointed the essence of the problem, only to leave that idea undeveloped and move on to something else. One moment he homes in on the pride people take in their ignorance; the next, he says that the real issue is the anger with which we voice our opinions. Instead of progressing methodically through an overarching argument with a clear structure, *The Death of Expertise* ambles and rambles.

A lack of rigor also weakens the force of Nichols's arguments. Some chapters include brief forays into the recent past—his section on the news media includes a nutshell description of the rise of talk radio—but no larger historical account underpins his argument. This omission is unfortunate, because some of the leveling trends that Nichols writes about have roots stretching back to the 1960s (the revolt against established institutions), or the 1920s (the acids of modernity), or the nation's founding (our deep-dyed egalitarianism), or even the Reformation (the primacy of individual over clerical authority). Nichols mostly presents his bugaboos as having seized us recently and suddenly, in the wake of the internet and its transformations.

Ironically, Nichols himself is not an expert on this subject. He does not much engage or even really acknowledge the academic literature on expertise. Nor is the book a work of journalism, exactly. "I have no training in journalism," Nichols admits (159), and most of his research seems to have come from surfing the web—one of the practices he faults for the sad state of our debate. He uses only occasional footnotes, and many of them direct the reader to online journalism articles, including from less-than-august sources like Gizmodo.com or The Huffington Post.

Occasionally, Nichols's lack of expertise in a subject yields errors. He writes, "None of us is a Da Vinci," he writes (x)—even though we normally refer to figures like Leonardo and Michelangelo by their first names, not the cities they came from. Minor flubs like these may not undercut Nichols's arguments, but they lend the book a slapdash feel.

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“A hobby is not the same thing as a career,” Nichols points out. “The enthusiasm of interested amateurs is not a consistent substitute for the judgment of experts.” (125) This book is the product of a pursuit of a hobby, not a career; it reads differently from Nichols’s books on nuclear strategy.² But it still merits attention. Amateurs, after all, can enrich our knowledge, too, as Nichols himself notes. He even includes a well-done chapter about experts getting it wrong—starting with the case of an eighth grader who, through her own primary research in newspapers, refuted a senior academic historian’s peer-reviewed article claiming that “No Irish Need Apply” signs never existed. That was research she conducted as a labor of love. The Latin root of “amateur” is *amare*, to love.

Daniel Drezner’s book, *The Ideas Industry*, is also a labor of love. Or at least it falls outside his usual zone of expertise. A well-respected scholar of international relations at Tufts University, Drezner here ventures into the sociology of intellectual life. Of course, in a different sense, this subject *is* an area of expertise for Drezner—but expertise obtained through personal experience, not academic study. Early in his career Drezner made a name for himself as a prolific and influential blogger, and ever since he has written columns and essays for leading newspapers and magazines. Accordingly, *The Ideas Industry* deals with intellectuals like himself who shuttle between the ivory tower and the public sphere. Like *The Death of Expertise*, it relies less on the methodological tools of academic political science than on native intelligence and insight—along with, in his case, careful journalistic research and engagement with other published works that similarly occupy a middle space between scholastic specialization and popular journalism.

The development Drezner seeks to understand is the recent emergence of an “ideas industry”—his phrase for the high-flying world of posh conferences, lucrative speaking gigs, and prominent media platforms to which a select number of intellectuals now enjoy access. These lucky few are those thinkers Drezner calls “thought leaders,” (9) a name that connotes something slightly different from the old-fashioned “public intellectuals,” (9) whom these new thinkers are displacing.

Everyone romanticizes public intellectuals. The term evokes those brilliant midcentury figures who wrote for ‘little magazines’ like *Partisan Review* and *Commentary* (though also, we tend to forget, for the better-paying *Time* and *New Yorker*); they expounded with equal confidence on modernist literature and the Cold War. As a political scientist, however, Drezner focuses mainly on a thinner slice of luminaries within his own field (or related social-science fields like economics) in which scholars aspire to shape public policy. His discussion of public intellectuals is thus a bit narrower than Russell Jacoby’s, in his 1987 classic *The Last Intellectuals*, or even Richard Posner’s in his notoriously sloppy *Public Intellectuals: A Study in Decline*.³ Drezner spends little time on historians, literary critics, art historians, or philosophers, even though many of the most celebrated public intellectuals of mid-twentieth-century America came from those fields. He shows less interest in figures like Leon Wieseltier, Mark Lilla, or Paul Berman—writers as likely to be found reviewing a novel as a foreign policy treatise—than in the stars of the international relations firmament such as Joseph Nye and Anne-Marie

² See, for example, *No Use: Nuclear Weapons and U.S. National Security* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

³ Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); Richard Posner, *Public Intellectuals: A Study in Decline* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

Slaughter. Tellingly, his paradigmatic twentieth-century intellectual is not Irving Howe or Daniel Bell but Walter Lippmann.

But if he departs slightly from the standard definition of “public intellectual,” Drezner’s focus on foreign policy thinkers still represents a legitimate way to study his topic. Among its other virtues, the choice allows Drezner to draw a clear contrast between his two categories of thinkers. (Few humanists get described as “thought leaders.”) So what is the difference between a public intellectual and thought leader? Members of the former group, which includes both academics and journalists, participate in public debates on a broad gamut of issues. Further, Drezner proposes, their work consists mainly of criticizing those in power. They are, in Isaiah Berlin’s famous distinction, more likely to be foxes than hedgehogs.⁴ As the saying goes, “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.”

Thought leaders, in Drezner’s scheme, are usually hedgehogs. They storm into the intellectual arena with a grand insight, hoping to capture the fancy of foundation heads, venture capitalists, or others ready bankroll a hot new idea. Not necessarily trained in academic programs, they may hail from Silicon Valley or elsewhere in the business world. Their entrepreneurial zeal, talent for self-promotion, and “sheer unflagging will” (21), as much as the intrinsic value of their ideas, propels them into the empyrean realms of Davos and Aspen and beyond. The TED talk, rather than the *New York Review of Books* essay, is their forte.

One can quibble with this dichotomy, but Drezner has identified a useful if imperfect distinction and elaborates it persuasively. He notes, too, that the same person can be both public intellectual and thought leader, depending on context or career stage. Most of his case studies spotlight people who have graduated from the former category to the latter, such as economist Jeffrey Sachs, historian Niall Ferguson, and political scientist Fareed Zakaria. In today’s ideas industry, it is the thought leader, not the old-style public intellectual, who thrives.

Drezner is too polite in his tone, too open-minded in his thinking, and too nuanced in his judgment to deliver a full-blown screed. But his general thrust is skeptical, even critical, of the ideas industry. He notes that it allows someone like Sachs to amass enormous amounts of funding for an undertaking like his “Millennium Village Project,” which sought to infuse development aid into poor towns, even though experts (that is, real experts) saw little merit in the idea. The ideas industry also elevates figures who never had to do the demanding work that achievement in an academic discipline demands. And it encourages brilliant, charismatic figures like Ferguson and Zakaria to take on too much, perhaps at a cost to their work and reputation: Zakaria was found to have plagiarized in many of his writings, while Ferguson’s standing among scholars has fallen as many have come to regard him as a “hack” (188). On the flip side, the ideas industry doles out some amazing perks. Thanks to its coffers, Drezner reports self-deprecatingly, he and his wife could fly to Portugal, be chauffeured to a luxury hotel, and mingle with the likes of Francis Fukuyama and Nouriel Roubini. In the ideas industry, that must feel like going to Vanity Fair’s Oscar after-party.

Drezner cites three main trends that have contributed to the rise of thought leaders at the expense of public intellectuals. The first is the “eroding confidence in authority and expertise.” (46) Because the populace at large has lost its respect for these thinkers, their influence has waned. But while the phenomenon of declining

⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy’s View of History* (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1953).

faith in experts is real—as Nichols’s book establishes—it strikes me as a bit suspect as an explanation for the public intellectuals’ plight. For one thing, although public intellectuals may have acquired their status through “expertise,” their cultural authority rests on something closer to insight or wisdom. At least using the standard definition, these are people worth listening to even on subjects outside their specialties. Moreover, their influence stems from their standing not with the public as a whole or even with people who follow the news, but with a rarefied stratum of the intelligentsia and other well-educated readers—and unlike the general populace, that audience is not necessarily losing its esteem for public intellectuals.

Still, Drezner is right that thought leaders fare better than public intellectuals in our anti-expert era. Today’s regnant anti-intellectualism has upended the criteria for getting one’s ideas noticed. Many thought leaders attained their perches by bypassing the normal paths of intellectual ascent. Instead, they parlayed the skills of self-promotion into para-academic careers. One choice example Nichols provides is that of Parag Khanna, “a nondescript graduate student when he pitched the New America Foundation for a grant,” (182) who then landed a cover story in the *New York Times Magazine*, and—bafflingly, to the many intellectuals who find his work pedestrian—was catapulted into the world of well-remunerated, highly publicized thought leaders.

Drezner also makes a strong case that increased partisan polarization has limited the reach of public intellectuals. In the current climate, conservative thinkers struggle to get a fair hearing from liberals, and vice versa. He tells the story of the decline of Dinesh D’Souza, who began his career in the 1990s writing books like *Illiberal Education* that, while conservative in their politics, sought to speak to a broad public.⁵ Now he aims his books at true believers, knowing that their purchases will make the books commercially successful.

Perhaps most important in Drezner’s account is the arrival of “a class of patrons hungry for new and interesting ideas,” (68) who, thanks to rising inequality (or at least to the emergence of a well-heeled overclass), can mint and reward thought leaders regardless of their academic pedigrees. “The rise of the private sector for intellectuals,” as he puts it (169) has made intellectual arbiters out of management consultants and investment bankers.

Despite these trends, Drezner notes that ordinary academics, even those who stand no chance of getting tapped as thought leaders, are venturing out into the public realm. Many academics today still frown upon colleagues who write too much for the public or who go on TV; and academic life still rewards scholarly more than popular achievements. But Drezner shows that blogs, Twitter, and other new forms of reaching a wide readership have brought about a change. “Many of the trends toward pure scholasticism,” he writes, “seem to have peaked around the turn of the century” (93). The situation he finds in political science also seems to be occurring in my own field of history. More academic historians than ever now retain literary agents, for example, and write for trade presses. So perhaps it is not all bleak for public intellectuals after all.

Public intellectuals and thought leaders alike often seek out the wider arena because they find the world of academia a bit constricting. Ironically, though, the university may offer the best solution to the problems that Nichols and Drezner identify. Some of the undergraduates may be impertinent, some of our colleagues may be narrow in their research, and the caliber of academic writing may at times induce fantasies of joining the circus or the French Foreign Legion. But professors also get to interact every day with many eager and curious students and to share our work with and learn from hard-working, original-thinking scholars. If our voices do

⁵ Dinesh D’Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race & Sex in Campus* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

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not carry as far or resonate as loudly as they did before the advent of Twitter and CNN and the luxe conference circuit, we still exert a significant influence the generations to come, and over time our ideas can help to forge lasting intellectual frameworks. Even a simple good book can go a long way.

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