

**Thomas HABINEK**  
**Political Intellectuals and the Limits of Expertise**

This paper considers three case studies of distinguished academicians' engagement with the public sphere and the consequences thereof. The political/intellectual careers of Theodor Mommsen, Sebastiano Timpanaro, and Pierre Bourdieu illustrate a range of ways in which the relationship between profound academic work and significant political intervention has been negotiated. Mommsen's depiction of Julius Caesar as prototype of the longed-for leader who would break the power of the reactionary Prussian aristocracy is well known. Perhaps less familiar, however, is his impact, directly and indirectly (especially through Max Weber) on anti-democratic movements in nineteenth century Germany. The philologist Sebastiano Timpanaro provided intellectual muscle for certain branches of the Italian communist movement while also leaving an unparalleled scholarly legacy. Yet his most widely read "political" writing, *On Materialism*, makes virtually no reference to classical antiquity and consists instead of a careful reading of Lenin with an eye to recuperating his thought in preference to "Stalinist dogmatism" and "Western Marxism." Bourdieu, although not a classicist by profession, received early training in the field, which seems to have shaped not only his influential concepts of "symbolic capital" and "theory of practice," but also, perhaps, his political resistance to the "disenchantment" and "disembedding" that accompany the onward march of post-industrial capitalism and globalization. Yet Bourdieu was also strongly committed to the autonomy of academic disciplines, to their need to insist upon rigorous standards of professional review.

These three case studies give some reason for skepticism about any move to embrace the figure of the "public intellectual" as distinct from that of professional classicist. If anything, they suggest that perhaps the best course of action for the political classicist is to take seriously Walter Benjamin's call to dialectical engagement between past and present or Nietzsche's invitation to practice a "critical philology" that would illuminate the present by "the bright light of antiquity." But work of this sort requires a clear-headed analysis of both past and present, something that scholarly and pedagogical habits of identification, as well as academicians' class allegiances, still militate against. And so it may turn out that one good way to be a public intellectual is to strive to become a better classicist.