Thomas Mathiesen as a public intellectual

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Could Thomas Mathiesen be described as a public intellectual? What, after all, is a public intellectual? And does the label still carry any kind of relevance? Today, the meaning of the term public intellectual is far from clear. The notion of a public intellectual has moreover become controversial because of its connotations of academic elitism, and its gendered nature. However, its gradual decline also carries pressing concerns that academics are increasingly withdrawing from the public arena. Reflecting on these developments and ambiguities, the article explores the meaning of the term and uses it as a starting point for the discussion of Thomas Mathiesen's remarkable life and work.

Keywords public intellectual • Thomas Mathiesen • Pierre Bourdieu • Edward Said

Could Thomas Mathiesen be described as a public intellectual? What, after all, is a public intellectual? And does the label still carry any kind of relevance today? It is pertinent to open with these questions not only because the term will be a starting point for my discussion of Thomas Mathiesen's life and work, but also because the meaning of the term public intellectual is far from clear. In a lecture, and a subsequent article entitled Universal corporatism: the role of intellectuals in the modern world, Pierre Bourdieu defined an intellectual in the following way:

The intellectual is a bidimensional being. To be entitled to the name of intellectual, a cultural producer must fulfill two conditions: on the one hand, he must belong to an autonomous intellectual world (a field), that is, independent from religious, political, and economic powers (and so on), and must respect its specific laws; on the other hand, he must invest the competence and authority he has acquired in the intellectual field in a political action, which is in any case carried out outside the intellectual field proper. (Bourdieu et al, 1991:656)

In Bourdieu's account, an intellectual worthy of her name is a public intellectual who challenges the notion of science and arts as separate from the field of politics. In order to be defined as such, artists and scientists need to engage in the political field...
in their capacity as artists and scientists (and with the authority that these positions confer on them). In France, this position came clearly into relief in the second half of the 19th century, during the Dreyfus affair, which saw the intervention of prominent scientists and artists in the political debate of the time to protest against a miscarriage of justice and antisemitism.

Similarly, Edward Said (2012) described the role of the intellectual as speaking the truth to power. As an indefatigable defender of the Palestinian cause, Said famously argued that: ‘The role of the intellectual is to say the truth to power, to address the central authority in every society without hypocrisy, and to choose the method, the style, the critique best suited for these purposes’ (Said, 2012: 184). Both Said and Bourdieu espoused a positive view of public intellectuals as an independent critical voice, not only at the national level but also internationally – defined by Bourdieu et al (1991) as a transnational community of intellectuals. According to Bourdieu, the independence and autonomy of the intellectual is expressed not through the renunciation of politics, but rather through their intervention into the political field as intellectuals. This autonomous intervention becomes particularly relevant as an antidote to what he termed the ‘neo-liberal consensus’. He wished to ‘encourage and promote a reasoned and effective intervention by intellectuals in public life’ (Bourdieu et al, 1991: 656) in order to counter market thinking and economic rationalities.

Others, however, have been far more sceptical of the figure of the public intellectual and have accused Bourdieu (and others promoting similar views) of ‘political and cultural high-handedness’ and of promoting ‘false universalism of the West’ (Small, 2002: 11). In her edited book on the topic, Helene Small observes that the notion of a public intellectual has become controversial because of its connotations of academic elitism, ‘high culture’ and its gendered nature (Small, 2002). In this critical narrative, a public intellectual is a (male) self-aggrandising figure who stands for unmistakably Western (particularly French and American) traditions. However, contemporary discussions about the role of intellectuals are also, almost in the same breath, lamenting the decline of the intellectual as a figure of public life. As Small (2002: 1) points out, debates about the role of public intellectuals are often spurred by concerns that academics and cultural figures are increasingly withdrawing from the public arena. Considering the polarisation and animosity of public discourse in many countries, this withdrawal should not come as a surprise. This narrative is marked by a longing for a time when academics dared to have a more public and critical edge rather than retreating into their ivory towers, secluded from the general public.

It is fair to say that the notion of a public intellectual is today marked by ambiguity and ambivalence as well as discomfort. Its connotations in terms of gender, authority and deference make it at odds with contemporary sensitivities. At the same time as it seems to be somewhat incongruous in the contemporary zeitgeist where individual academics increasingly seem to be possessing ‘a specific or merely technical expertise in place of any general moral authority to speak on matters of cultural and social moment’ (Small 2002: 4). Rather than having as its main objective to pin the label of a public intellectual on Thomas Mathiesen (one that he might or might not have been comfortable with), this intervention aims to revisit the position and examine what kind of lessons and relevance it may still carry today. I will first shortly outline Mathiesen’s interventions in the political and public domain, particularly in Norway and in Scandinavia, and then examine the lessons that might lie in his approach for academics more generally, and those engaged in matters of penal policy and abolition in particular.
An academic activist

As testified by other contributions to this volume, Thomas Mathiesen left an indelible imprint on the field of academic criminology, in Norway and internationally. As Yvonne Jewkes observed, it seems almost ‘fruitless to try and categorise a body of work as conceptually innovative, theoretically nuanced and politically demanding as that produced by Thomas Mathiesen’ (Jewkes, 2009: 2011). Nor is it an objective of this text to give a comprehensive overview of this large body of work spanning more than six decades. However, any attempt at categorisation is all the more difficult because Mathiesen’s work transcends traditional divisions between academic publishing and political intervention. Although he produced highly acclaimed and influential scholarly works, such as The Defences of the Weak (Mathiesen, 1965/2012), Prison on Trial (Mathiesen, 2005a), and The Politics of Abolition Revisited (Mathiesen, 2014), his life as an academic is inseparable from his activity as a campaigner for penal abolition and prisoners’ rights and for more humane penal policy.

Since the beginning of his career in 1959 at the Institute of Social Research in Oslo, and inspired by engaged colleagues such as Vilhelm Aubert, Mathiesen was a proponent of action research. This approach challenges clear demarcations between a researcher and a participant in social phenomena and seeks actively to engage those subjected to the research process. For Mathiesen, political action and research became inseparable and demanded a constant intervention in public life. During his lifetime, he became one of the most recognisable voices of critical prison reform, in Norway and in Scandinavia, and was instrumental in the establishment and growth of KROM: the Norwegian Association for Penal Reform. Inspired by its Swedish counterpart (KRUM), the pressure groups had abolition of major parts of the penal systems as their original goal, but eventually morphed into well-established drivers of penal reform. Through KROM, Mathiesen was actively engaged in several reforms, such as dismantlement of vagrancy laws and the youth prison system in Norway in the 1970s, as well as numerous other penal policy initiatives and interventions in the following decades (see, inter alia, Mathiesen, 2017; Renland et al, 2020). An important ambition for KROM was, as Mathiesen (1974: 47) observed, that ‘in all of our activities, at our teach-ins, seminars and meetings, in our books and reform papers, ex-convicts have been active participants and contributors’.

This action-oriented and politically interventionist approach stands in stark contrast to the ‘depoliticized and aestheticized submission’ that, according to Said (2002: 34), mark academic production. By contrast, Thomas Mathiesen was not tempted to cultivate methodological prowess and theoretical virtuosity – or as Michael Ignatieff (in Small, 2002: 3) put it: ‘the language games people play when they have given up on contributing to public debate’. Although extremely well-versed in sociological and criminological classics, he did not primarily strive for theoretical sophistication, novelty and academic ‘coolness’. His influence and impact should, therefore, not be measured by methods that have become the fashion in the past decades: numbers of citations, H-index and alike. The ultimate objective of his research was to intervene in social life. He was, throughout his life, unapologetically critical of ‘research for its own sake rather than action oriented research for the sake of others’ (Mathiesen, 2017: 158). Knowledge was to be created for the sake of penal reform, not for its own sake.

In that respect, Mathiesen certainly meets Bourdieu’s definition of a public intellectual. For more than six decades he was actively present in the social and political...
life of Norwegian society, not only through his engagement in KROM, but also through other causes such as the Alta uprising,¹ the Treholt case² and the critique of the EU's Schengen Agreement, and the Schengen Information System. Most of these public interventions were guided by Mathiesen’s deep-seated suspicion of the state and its potential to abuse the power it holds over its citizens. The interventions also reveal the breadth of Mathiesen’s interests (in stark contrast to the often-lamented trend towards academic specialisation), his uncompromising vision, as well as remarkable perseverance and unfaltering determination. In one of his early articles, he cites Max Weber who ‘once made the statement that “Politics is like a slow boring of hard boards, performed with passion as well as with precision”’ (Mathiesen, 1974: 50). Mathiesen subscribed to this approach and later developed it into the theoretical notion of ‘unfinished business’ and a belief that ‘the alternative lies in the unfinished, in the sketch, in what is not yet fully existing’ (Mathiesen, 2014: 47).

The concept of the unfinished reveals Mathiesen’s long-term (in his case lifetime) commitment to the struggle for prisoners’ rights, and his opposition to defining a set of goals that might make that struggle final. Instead of calls for a radical overhaul of the system, with a clear set of goals, this approach puts emphasis on the nurturing and maintenance of critical opposition. Through its seminars, public meetings and numerous publications KROM has built a tradition for critically thinking about prisoners’ rights in Norway, which involves not only civil society but also reaches deeply into the state. In addition to attracting prisoners and academics, KROM’s yearly winter seminars also involve members of parliament, criminal justice officials, law students and providers of free legal aid, and has thus planted the seeds of critical penal policy thinking that continue to produce multifaceted results at the level of practice (Renland et al, 2020).

The intellectual, the media and the platform

In addition to prison reform, one of Mathiesen’s central and most influential scholarly interests was the media. His critical twist on Michel Foucault’s famous concept of the panopticon – the synopticon – is, despite radical changes in the media landscape, still widely read by students and researchers alike (Mathiesen, 1997). His numerous works on media sociology (see, inter alia, Mathiesen, 2002), and books such as Silently Silenced (Mathiesen, 2005b), reveal his interest in ‘publicness’ and the nature of the public space. Nevertheless, like with prisons, Mathiesen’s academic work on the media is intimately connected to his political involvement. He viewed the media, especially television, as producing public acquiescence which enabled more punitive penal policies and the growth of the prison population. He argued that ‘television facilitates prison growth in the sense of opening up for it, dismantling defenses that might otherwise be mustered against escalation. It corrodes values like civil rights, the rule of law and humanity’ (Mathiesen, 2001: 35).

It may, therefore, seem paradoxical that as one of the most stringent critics of television and the media, Mathiesen was also a very active participant in them. In 1968, he participated in the first television debate on crime policy in Norway and became, in the following decades, alongside his colleague Nils Christie, a recognisable critical voice in television debates on penal policy. Unlike many academics who refrain from participating in public debates, Mathiesen certainly did not seem too burdened by concerns ‘that thought cannot possibly maintain its purity, its moral
creativity, or – less romantically – a sufficient complexity when it “descends” to the marketplace of the television studio (Small, 2002: 7). Rather than being overly self-conscious and concerned with image and self-presentation, his focus was firmly on achieving political results. This is not to deny that he had serious reservations about participating in certain types of television programmes and, ultimately, aspired towards creating a media sphere independent of commercial interests. In his media encounters, Mathiesen aimed to inform the public and policymakers about the corrosive effects of imprisonment and prison's inefficiency as a crime-preventive measure. Although striving for more knowledge-based crime policy, and thus taking part in a ‘what works’ discourse, his objective was not to provide evidence to policymakers in relatively closed corridors of power. He always aimed to keep the state at arm's length and addressed the public, aiming to shape politics through influencing public discourse, by invariably concluding that 'nothing works'.

Like Nils Christie, Mathiesen spoke in a manner that the general public could understand; Christie famously said that he aimed to be comprehensible to his distant aunts and uncles, ordinary members of the public without academic education. Mathiesen, moreover, often stressed the need to create an alternative public sphere which would not be defined by commercial and state interests. It is difficult to estimate the direct impact that Mathiesen’s and Christie’s interventions had on penal policy at the time. What might be more fruitful is to ask whether their position is still possible or tenable today. Although strongly critical of the media and public sphere of his time, Mathiesen came into being as a public intellectual when there still was a public sphere. This is in stark contrast to the growing fragmentation of the public sphere that we are witnessing today. The rise of social media and digitalisation are contributing to a fragmentation of the public sphere into homosocial filter bubbles and echo chambers at the same time as globalisation is creating transnational public spheres and broadening the spectrum of participants (Seeliger and Sevignani, 2022: 11). Faced with a radically different media landscape, akin to a third structural transformation of the public sphere (Seeliger and Sevignani, 2022: 11), some chose to stress the liberating potential of these transformations (see, inter alia, Della Porta, 2022). However, several prominent intellectual voices of Mathiesen’s generation are more sceptical and have advised caution in the choice of forum for intellectual expression (Said, 2002).

Jürgen Habermas (2022: 160) thus points out that although seemingly offering the fulfilment of the egalitarian-universalistic claim of the bourgeois public sphere to include all citizens equally, the new media landscape is deeply fragmented and ‘counteracts the integrating power of the communication context of the nationally centred public spheres established by the press, radio and television’. Through powerful commercial platforms such as Facebook, Google and Twitter (now X) ‘social media also foster a further advance towards the commodification of lifeworld contexts’ (Habermas (2022: 163). Critical observers have pointed out not only the intense commodification of data and knowledge that characterise this new media landscape, but also the rise of ‘fake news’ and the increasingly difficult conditions of rational discourse in the ‘post-truth democracy’. Reflecting on the changing role of the intellectual, Zygmunt Bauman observes the relativity and constant changeability of knowledge, the ‘horrifying signs and prospects of things durable falling apart, and of the whirlwind of transient ephemera filling the vacancy’ (Bauman in Dawes, 2011: 135). The current conditions of public discourse are, therefore, far from fostering the possibility and hope of rationality that animated Thomas Mathiesen’s policy
interventions. As Habermas (2022: 163) points out, the old media also are under pressure to adapt to the commercial exploitation logic and produce ‘texts and programmes whose form and content must satisfy cognitive, normative or aesthetic standards’ of the new media. There is ‘a pull towards self-referential reciprocal confirmation of interpretations and opinions’ (Habermas, 2022: 165) and the blurring of distinctions between public and private.

A question can be asked: what kind of intellectual discourse is possible under such conditions? What kind of arguments can be conveyed by the short messages, formed in a way to catch public attention in the cacophony of voices? Does this mean that the role of public intellectual comes closer to being part of the ‘commentariat’? Interestingly, even some dictionary definitions of a public intellectual today describe someone ‘who has become well-known to the general public for a willingness to comment on current affairs’, therefore, a commentator rather than an independent thinker. Although often quick to respond to requests by journalists, what Thomas Mathiesen was promoting was certainly not commentary on daily events, or a debate for the sake of debating, but rather a message that was unmistakably his. Nor were his messages combining the private and personal with the political, and thus adjusted to the emerging conditions of the ‘semi-public sphere’ (Habermas, 2022). Always firmly planted in the public domain, Mathiesen’s interventions were not attention-seeking nor primarily focused on his persona, but rather on the message. And although trying to speak to a broad section of the public, his message was not adjusted to please the audience and was remarkably similar when speaking to students, in television debates, or even at a private dinner.

This mode of communication fostered a different role of an intellectual from what we see, and what seems to be possible, today. It would be misleading to conclude, though, that the contemporary media landscape necessarily brings a declining influence of academics on public policy. At least in Norway, the ideal of rational policy, guided by science, is far from obsolete – quite the opposite. Findings by Christensen and Holst (2020), for example, show the growing influence of various kinds of experts on public policy formation and suggest that Norwegian democracy is far from being divorced from scientific discourse and may be, in fact, in danger of becoming an ‘expertocracy’. Yet this kind of academic influence is qualitatively different from the one exerted by Christie and Mathiesen. It is taking place in close proximity to the state and its primary vehicle is not public debate, but rather more closed and specialised modes of discourse. The purpose of criminal justice reform may often be better served with these closer forms of direct engagement between professionals and researchers (Smith, 2015) and, arguably, the key to KROM’s influence in Norway may lie precisely in its ability to penetrate into the state and the legal profession. However, as an intellectual, Thomas Mathiesen is probably best described by Loader and Sparks’ label of ‘social movement theorist/ activist’, one who is defined by his distance from the state and whose task is ‘to raise problems for government not solve problems of government’ (Loader and Sparks, 2011: 33).

**Conclusion**

Edward Said once observed:

In far too many years of appearing on television or being interviewed by journalists, I have never not been asked the question ‘What do you think the
USA should do about such and such an issue?’ I take this to be an index of how the notion of rule has been lodged at the very heart of intellectual practice outside the university. And may I add that it has been a point of principle for me not to reply to the question. (Said, 2002: 22, emphasis in original)

Thomas Mathiesen, undoubtedly, chose a different approach. He was passionately engaged in questions about how Norwegian society, particularly the prison system, should be ruled. His autobiography (Mathiesen, 2017: 350) passes a clear judgement on Norwegian ministers of justice in the past four decades, partly exonerating only one. One could also argue that there is a potential tension between a commitment to activism and the cause of social reform, and Said’s intellectual stance of ‘speaking truth to power’ – a tension on which Mathiesen offers little reflection.

Thomas Mathiesen was a product of his time: a time which was not only marked by the impulses for radical reform of the 1960s and 1970s, and a considerable level of deference to the voices and opinions of prominent (mostly male) academics and cultural figures, but also by a radically different nature of the public sphere. However, the message that Mathiesen was trying to convey has had a lasting appeal. His uncompromising abolitionist stance has in the past decade gained a renewed actuality. Visible not only in the growing critique of mass incarceration in the US and the international resonance of the Black Lives Matter movement, but also in the critique of detention centres and other forms of state control, abolitionism as an intellectual and political endeavour is experiencing a remarkable resurgence (see also Canning, 2024). Although to a large extent facilitated by the power provided by the social media mobilisations, this resurgence of abolitionism is not built around individual academic figures that might fit the definition of public intellectuals but can be better described as a social movement. Consequently, it might appear that what seemed to be Thomas Mathiesen’s rather naïve belief in the ‘rationality’ of political change, if the media landscape opened up for ‘alternative public spheres’ (Mathiesen, 1998), is gaining a fair amount of credence. However, the picture is far more complex than that. While the current media landscape undoubtedly creates a multitude of alternative public and semi-public spheres, which are bringing forth more critical perspectives on crime policy, it has also amplified more punitive impulses and strengthened the far right as well as the critical left.

More importantly for the purpose of our discussion, the current fragmented media landscape makes the position of a public intellectual – one that speaks to the public as a whole – more challenging, if not impossible. This is a position that Mathiesen (and many of his contemporaries) inhabited throughout much of his active life, and perhaps took for granted as a natural mode of intellectual existence. It was guided by a view of academia and politics, action and thought, as inseparable and thus demanded of criminology and criminologists that they take an active role in public life and debates about criminal justice policies. Trying to revive this position may be beyond the point. Not only because of the changed structural conditions of the public discourse, but also because the blurring of lines between academic work and political action had its costs in terms of scientific autonomy, objectivity, theoretical nuance and creativity. Reflecting on the role of sociologists, and academics more generally, Bauman (in Dawes, 2011) observes that contemporary conditions create the need to move away from the intellectual as a god-like, monotheistic figure, speaking, or more precisely declaring, his prophecies through monologue. By contrast, making
sense of the contemporary fragmented condition calls for the art of the dialogue and offers 'the chance of shifting morality from conformity to ethical command to the unconditionally individual responsibility for the well-being of others' (Dawes, 2011: 142). This leaves us, as academics, with less clear guidance as to what to do and how to inhabit our public roles. Yet it also opens up for a greater variety of voices, visible, among others, in the growing prominence of feminist, queer and antiracist movements, which question the seemingly universal subject of political thought and thrive in the blurry distinctions between the public and the private sphere (Butler in Seeliger and Villa Braslavsky, 2022: 72).

Notes
1 Alta controversy refers to a series of protests in Norway in the late 1970s and early 1980s concerning the construction of a hydroelectric power plant in the Alta River in Northern Norway. The mobilisation put the rights of the Sami, as an indigenous people with distinct rights over the lands in Northern Norway, onto the national political agenda. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alta_controversy. See also Mathiesen (2017).
2 Arne Treholt was a Norwegian diplomat who was convicted of treason and espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union against Norway during the Cold War and sentenced to 20 years in prison, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arne_Treholt. See also Mathiesen (2017).

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