



HOW PESSIMISTS,  
PARTISANS,  
AND PLUTOCRATS  
ARE TRANSFORMING  
THE MARKETPLACE  
OF IDEAS

# The Ideas Industry

DANIEL W. DREZNER

# THE IDEAS INDUSTRY





# THE IDEAS INDUSTRY



DANIEL W. DREZNER

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

# OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

© Oxford University Press 2017

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form  
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

CIP data is on file at the Library of Congress  
ISBN 978-0-19-026460-4

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2  
Printed by Edwards Brothers Malloy, United States of America

*This book is dedicated to the teachers at Avon High School and Williams College who nudged me into something resembling a writer:*

*Evelyn Blitzler, Robert Buckley, Roger Dennis, Renata Kadden, Ken Lukasiewicz, Janet Schwartz, Alicia Willet, Sam Crane, Robert Whitesell, and especially Jim Shepard.*

*The idea is not a substitute for work; and work, in turn, cannot substitute for or compel an idea, just as little as enthusiasm can. Both, enthusiasm and work, and above all both of them jointly, can entice the idea.*

— Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation”

# CONTENTS



Acknowledgments ix

## PART I

*Introduction: The Transmogrification* 3

1. Do Ideas Even Matter? 20
2. How Pessimists, Partisans, and Plutocrats Are Changing the Marketplace of Ideas 43

## PART II

3. The Standard Indictment Against the Academy 75
4. The Disciplines: Why Economics Thrives While Political Science Survives 102
5. This Is Not Your Father's Think Tank 123
6. The Booming Private Market for Public Ideas 146



**PART III**

7. The Promise and Perils of Intellectual Brands 173

8. Is the Ideas Industry Working? 196

9. Tweeting Ideas: Or, the Requisite Chapter on Social Media 215

*Conclusion: The Dark Knight* Theory of the Ideas Industry 233

Notes 251

Bibliography 317

Index 331

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



This was a fast, nerve-wracking book to write. It was fast because soon after starting I realized that I had been mulling over *The Ideas Industry's* core themes for well over a decade. The arguments, evidence, and anecdotes contained in these pages emerged from over two decades of experience navigating the modern marketplace of ideas. It was nerve-wracking because, halfway through *The Ideas Industry's* first draft, I recognized that this was only nominally a book about international relations. Although the subject of this book has been the marketplace of foreign policy ideas, the arguments made herein are really about changes in American politics. Like a traditional public intellectual, I am making arguments a bit afiel from my principal area of expertise.

This new terrain leaves me even more grateful than usual to the many people who have assisted me during the writing of this book. I first must thank David McBride and Niko Pfund at Oxford University Press for their early encouragement and enthusiastic support when I had merely a vague proposal. I am also grateful to Kathleen Weaver, Cat Boyd, Rob Wilkinson, Mary Harper, and the copy editor Heather Hambleton for shepherding this book from computer files to print.

I have been the beneficiary of considerable institutional support while writing this book. At the Fletcher School, Dean James Stavridis

and Academic Dean Steven Block have created a vibrant space for me to think about intellectual affairs. I am also grateful to my Fletcher colleagues Zeynep Bulutgil, Nancy Hite-Rubin, Kelly Sims Gallagher, Sulmaan Khan, Michael Klein, Eileen Babbitt, Ian Johnstone, Bhaskar Chakravorti, and Jette Knudsen for their feedback and insights. Rachel Brown, Sheri Callender, Paulette Folkins, Meg Guliford, Aaron Melaas, Estefania Marchan, Emily Morgenstern, Melanie Reed, and Mohannad Al-Suwaidan all provided invaluable administrative and research support. As a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, I profited greatly from the feedback of Bruce Jones, Tom Wright, and Tamara Cofman Wittes. At the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Dina Smeltz held my hand through some of the public opinion discussions.

Foundation support, a key driver behind the Ideas Industry, was also a key driver behind the writing of *The Ideas Industry*. The Michael and Andrea Leven Foundation provided crucial financial support during the research and drafting of this book. The Carnegie Corporation's Rigor and Relevance Initiative provided a grant to the Fletcher School and helped inform my thinking as I was revising the manuscript. The Rockefeller Foundation provided me a residency at their Bellagio Center to put the finishing touches on the book.

Between 2014 and 2016 I organized a series of four Ideas Industry conferences at Fletcher on various dimensions of the marketplace of ideas. The conferences themselves, as well as the informal conversations surrounding the panels, were invaluable to me as I was getting a grip on what made the modern Ideas Industry tick. I am grateful to everyone who participated and assisted in those conferences. I also inflicted an embryonic version of the book manuscript on my Spring 2016 Politics of Statecraft students. I am grateful for their feedback, particularly the trenchant points made by Denise Baltuskonis, Jon Cheatwood, Kate Jordan, Ian Kapuza, Matt Keller, Kerney Perlik, Seth Turner, and Mike Wackenreuter.

Many of the ideas, notions, and actual paragraphs in the text had their origins in blog posts and essays for other outlets. I thank Benjamin Pauker at *Foreign Policy*, Susan Glasser and Blake Hounshell at *Politico*, Evan Goldstein at the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and Mike Madden and Adam B. Kushner at the *Washington Post* for their editorial guidance. They all made me look like a better writer than I

actually am. A nascent and condensed version of Chapter 5 appeared in the December 2015 issue of *International Journal*. I am grateful to the editors of that journal for releasing their copyright.

I talked, in formal and not-so-formal interviews, with a variety of participants in the Ideas Industry to get a better grasp on my subject matter. I am indebted to Gideon Rose, Fareed Zakaria, Niall Ferguson, and Joseph Nye in particular for setting aside time to answer my many queries. I appreciate the correspondence and conversations I had with Franklin Foer, Nicholas Kristof, Jeffrey Sachs, and Nassim Taleb. The 209 respondents to my elite survey also made this project much, *much* easier, and I thank those very busy people for taking the time to answer my questionnaire.

I am far from the only person interested in this subject. In the process of writing this book I received extraordinarily useful feedback from a variety of close readers. Bethany Albertson, Deborah Avant, Nada Bakos, Bear Braumoeller, Josh Busby, Kristin Butcher, Stephanie Carvin, Charli Carpenter, Brad DeLong, Steve Del Rosso, Michael Desch, Rob Farley, Henry Farrell, Justin Fox, Suzanne Fry, David Gordon, Heather Hurlburt, Leslie Johns, Sulmaan Khan, Ron Krebs, Michael Horowitz, Michael Levi, Jacob Levy, Jonathan Kirshner, Kate McNamara, Jeffrey Isaac, Jonathan Monten, Daniel Nexon, Milena Rodban, Mary Sarotte, Elizabeth Saunders, Laura Seay, Randy Schweller, Erin Simpson, Dina Smeltz, Mike Tierney, Jill Ultan, Lynn Vavreck, and Diana Wueger provided comments that made this book much better. Any remaining faults are strictly my own.

Finally, I must thank my family. Being a participant and an observer of the Ideas Industry often meant being away from home at this conference or that symposium or another workshop. Figuring out the equilibrium between attending such functions and attending to my family was learned through the painful process of trial and error. I will never be able to thank Erika, Sam, and Lauren fully for the patience and kindness that they showed me every time I left on a trip or holed myself up to revise. They have taught me what is obvious to most people but is fuzzy to most academics: there is far more to life than ideas.



# PART I





## Introduction: The Transmogrification

Nothing, in my opinion, is more deserving of our attention than the intellectual and moral associations of America.

— Alexis de Tocqueville

THE MARKETPLACE FOR FOREIGN policy ideas in the United States has changed. Foreign affairs intellectuals are constantly trying to insert new notions about American power and purpose into public debates. The best recipe for propagating new ideas, however, is evolving in ways that can affect even the most powerful people in the world.

To get a sense of these changes, consider the foreign policy musings of presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump. It would be safe to say that these two people treat ideas *very* differently. What is interesting is how similarly the marketplace of ideas has treated both of them.

When Obama was elected, the first African-American president was heralded as the rare politician who was also a true intellectual.<sup>1</sup> He was a law professor and respected author before running for national office. A cornerstone of his first presidential campaign was a powerful critique of existing foreign policy. He called for “a new vision of leadership” in foreign affairs, “a vision that draws from the past but is not bound by outdated thinking.”<sup>2</sup> He was nonetheless receptive enough to opposing points of view to espouse a “team of rivals” approach to his administration. He retained Robert Gates, George W. Bush’s last secretary of



defense, to serve in his cabinet. He appointed Hillary Clinton, his fiercest party rival, to be his secretary of state. Beyond his cabinet, Obama made a concerted effort to reach out to opinion columnists and foreign policy experts—including those who were not ideological soulmates.<sup>3</sup> As an incoming president, Obama wanted to engage with the marketplace of foreign policy ideas.

During his time in office, however, the president grew increasingly frustrated with his attempts to affect the dominant foreign policy narrative. The phrase that seemed to encapsulate his first term's foreign policy was "leading from behind," used by an unnamed Obama advisor to describe America's role in the 2011 Libya intervention.<sup>4</sup> It invited considerable scorn within the foreign policy community. The foreign policy phrase that went viral during his second term was Obama's own: "Don't do stupid shit."<sup>5</sup> Critics derided the slogan as offering a blinkered message about American grand strategy.<sup>6</sup> Even Hillary Clinton criticized that mantra, saying in an interview, "Great nations need organizing principles, and 'Don't do stupid stuff' is not an organizing principle."<sup>7</sup> The president's continued wariness of military intervention—which the Libya aftermath only intensified—led him to spurn calls for a more robust military response to myriad crises in the Middle East. Obama's repeated assurances that all was well on the foreign policy front clashed with the rise of the Islamic State, a revanchist Russia, and a broken Middle East. Many critics responded to Obama's calm by loudly insisting that the world was on fire.<sup>8</sup>

The rising tide of criticism from the foreign policy community rankled the president and his national security staff. Throughout his time in office, Obama was a voracious reader of opinion journalism even if he disagreed with much of it.<sup>9</sup> This was particularly true in the area of foreign policy. And as one of his former National Security Council staffers observed, "whenever there is a wise man consensus in Washington, [Obama's] first instinct is to defy it."<sup>10</sup> His staff grew increasingly irritated with the animating ideas of Washington's foreign policy establishment. Obama's deputy national security advisor and foreign policy amanuensis, Ben Rhodes, vented, "The discourse in Washington just becomes like a self-licking ice cream cone of maximalist foreign policy. . . . That's what gets your think-tank paper read."<sup>11</sup> In

another interview, Rhodes referred derisively to the DC foreign policy community as “The Blob.”<sup>12</sup>

By the end of his second term, Obama’s frustrations with the marketplace of foreign policy ideas had boiled over. This was reflected in his comments to *The Atlantic*’s Jeffrey Goldberg on various aspects of American foreign affairs. What stood out in the president’s statements were the frustrations he felt when he dissented from the foreign policy community. In August 2013, as his administration edged closer to launching military strikes on Syria, Obama felt trapped by the foreign policy consensus that presidents must demonstrate resolve. His refusal to use force vexed many foreign policy observers—including some within his own administration. Goldberg concluded that “Obama generally believes that the Washington foreign-policy establishment, which he secretly disdains, makes a fetish of ‘credibility’—particularly the sort of credibility purchased with force.”<sup>13</sup> Obama was also candid about how he felt the foreign policy community’s dominant set of ideas constrained him as president:

There’s a playbook in Washington that presidents are supposed to follow. It’s a playbook that comes out of the foreign-policy establishment. And the playbook prescribes responses to different events, and these responses tend to be militarized responses. Where America is directly threatened, the playbook works. But the playbook can also be a trap that can lead to bad decisions. In the midst of an international challenge . . . you get judged harshly if you don’t follow the playbook, even if there are good reasons why it does not apply.<sup>14</sup>

In the end, Obama took great pride in ignoring the conventional wisdom on using force in Syria. But what is interesting is Obama’s acknowledgment to Goldberg that his defiance of foreign policy intellectuals cost him politically. Indeed, his Syria decisions revived an intense debate about the importance of credibility and reputation in international affairs that remains unsettled.<sup>15</sup> This might explain why moments like Syria were the exception rather than the rule during Obama’s presidency. More often than not, Obama followed the playbook when it came to the American use of force.<sup>16</sup> As president, he tried to shape

the marketplace of foreign policy ideas—but he also found his policies constrained by that market in ways he did not like.

Obama articulated his discontents at the same time that Donald Trump was bucking prognostications that he would fade away as a presidential candidate. In marked contrast to Obama, Trump reveled in running one of the most heterodox foreign policy campaigns in the last half-century. While the New York real estate mogul lacked command of foreign policy detail, he had forged a consistent zero-sum worldview on how international relations worked.<sup>17</sup> He adopted a slogan of “America First” to explain his foreign policy beliefs, despite its association with 1930s isolationism. Trump disparaged numerous US-created multilateral regimes as antithetical to the national interest, including NATO, the World Trade Organization, and the United Nations.<sup>18</sup> He argued that America’s allies needed to pay the United States more for security provision. He speculated that South Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Japan should develop nuclear weapons to combat their security threats—even as he decried nuclear proliferation as the world’s greatest threat. And he believed that the liberal international economic order needed to be radically revised in America’s favor.<sup>19</sup>

Trump engendered considerable blowback from a wide array of elites. In his initial interviews with the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*, Trump displayed little understanding of world politics; follow-up interviews on the topic suggested little in the way of learning.<sup>20</sup> His stumblings and fumbblings on questions of foreign policy during the campaign were legion and fostered a narrative of incompetence that he had to battle throughout the campaign.<sup>21</sup> Economists, political scientists, and historians spurned Trump en masse.<sup>22</sup> Foreign affairs analysts spanning the ideological spectrum panned his pronouncements.<sup>23</sup> Realists, the foreign policy experts who should have been the most sympathetic to Trump’s worldview, shunned him.<sup>24</sup> The Economist Intelligence Unit went so far as to label Trump one of the top ten geopolitical risks for 2016.<sup>25</sup>

Liberals within the foreign policy establishment were unanimous in their condemnation of Trump’s rhetoric. Conservative intellectuals, however, were equally vehement in their critiques.<sup>26</sup> Leading conservative outlets such as the *National Review* published issues dedicated to opposing Trump. Republican columnists such as David Brooks, Robert

Kagan, Charles Krauthammer, Max Boot, and George Will stated that they would never support Trump. Most conservative think tanks distanced themselves from his policies.<sup>27</sup> In March 2016 more than 120 GOP foreign policy professionals signed an open letter declaring unequivocally that they would not support Trump in the general election.<sup>28</sup> Similar GOP petitions followed over the next seven months. Even as the GOP's congressional leadership acquiesced to Trump, its foreign policy community remained implacably opposed to his campaign.<sup>29</sup> As Ross Douthat noted, "the conservative intelligentsia—journalists, think-tankers, and academics—has been conspicuous in its resistance."<sup>30</sup>

If America's foreign policy community judged Trump harshly, he judged them right back. During the Republican primary, his campaign rejected most outreach efforts by GOP-friendly think tanks to help tutor him on questions of world politics. In his own rhetoric, Trump explicitly disavowed the value of existing foreign policy expertise. In an April 2016 foreign policy speech, Trump argued, "It's time to shake the rust off America's foreign policy. It's time to invite new voices and new visions into the fold." He went on to state that his foreign policy advisors would not be "those who have perfect résumés but very little to brag about except responsibility for a long history of failed policies and continued losses at war."<sup>31</sup> By the end of the general election campaign, Trump had framed the foreign policy debate as one between populist nationalists and elite globalists, warning about "a small handful of special global interests rigging the system."<sup>32</sup>

In making these arguments, Trump openly questioned mainstream narratives about American foreign policy—with some measure of success. A few conservative commentators welcomed Trump's questioning of GOP foreign policy orthodoxy.<sup>33</sup> Senator Bob Corker, the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, praised Trump for "challenging the foreign policy establishment that has been here for so long." The *New York Times*' Maggie Haberman and David Sanger noted that "what made Mr. Trump's statements most remarkable was that the bedrock principles of American security were being debated at all."<sup>34</sup> Henry Kissinger concluded, "The Trump phenomenon is in large part a reaction of Middle America to attacks on its values by intellectual and academic communities."<sup>35</sup>

Politico's Michael Grunwald concluded, "When a major-party nominee calls Mexicans rapists, suggests a global trade war would be no big deal and argues that vaccines harm children, he's shorting the entire marketplace of ideas."<sup>36</sup> But Trump's rhetoric was more complicated than that. Zeynep Tufekci, a scholar studying social movements, argued that Trump's populist campaign had profoundly affected the contours of public debate. She concluded, "Mr. Trump doesn't only speak outrageous falsehoods; he also voices truths . . . that have been largely ignored, especially by Republican elites." Indeed, Trump's successful campaign led some to conclude that the dominance of neoconservative thought in Republican foreign policy discourse was coming to an end.<sup>37</sup> Many conservatives worried that the entire intellectual edifice of their party had collapsed.<sup>38</sup> While Obama keenly felt the constraints of the marketplace of ideas, Trump delighted in disrupting every norm and custom in the foreign policy playbook. Whether this will persist throughout the Trump administration remains a very open question.

The tales of Obama and Trump suggest two things. First, the marketplace of ideas can impose constraints on even the most powerful actors. Second, the marketplace of ideas for foreign policy might not be working perfectly.

We are at a curious moment in the marketplace of foreign policy ideas. It is the best of times for thought leaders. It is the worst of times for public intellectuals. It is the most disorienting of times for everyone else.

These terms need to be unpacked. By "marketplace of ideas," I mean the array of intellectual outputs and opinions about foreign affairs, and the extent to which policymakers and publics embrace those ideas. When a scholar publishes a book explaining why American foreign policy needs a rethink, that book contributes to the marketplace of ideas. When a think tank issues a report evaluating some aspect of statecraft, that report adds to the marketplace of ideas.<sup>39</sup> When a global brand strategist gives a TED talk about how the country's climate change policy should be managed like a hedge fund, that argument will probably find its way into the marketplace of ideas.

For the purposes of this book, when I refer to "public intellectuals," I mean experts who are versed and trained enough to be able to comment on a wide range of public policy issues. As Friedrich von Hayek

put it, public intellectuals are “professional secondhand dealers in ideas.”<sup>40</sup> The public intellectual serves a vital purpose in democratic discourse: exposing shibboleths masquerading as accepted wisdom. Public intellectuals are critics, and critiquing those who hawk bad policy wares is a necessary function in a democracy. A public intellectual’s greatest contribution to the marketplace of ideas is to point out when an emperor has no clothes. When public intellectuals lose their prestige, it becomes that much easier for politicians or charlatans to advance an idea into the public consciousness, regardless of its intrinsic merits, through sheer, unflagging will.

The provenance of the term “thought leader” is far more recent than “public intellectual.” Nevertheless, a quick glance at Google Trends reveals that by 2012, the former term had eclipsed the latter in terms of usage.<sup>41</sup> How is a thought leader distinct from a public intellectual? *New York Times* columnist David Brooks—a man thoroughly steeped in this milieu—archly defined one as a “sort of a highflying, good-doing yacht-to-yacht concept peddler.”<sup>42</sup> Brooks’s wry description might be entertaining, but it is insufficient for our purposes. The private sector talks a lot about “thought leadership,” without ever being precise in its meaning.

For the purposes of this book, a thought leader is an intellectual evangelist. Thought leaders develop their own singular lens to explain the world, and then proselytize that worldview to anyone within earshot. Both public intellectuals and thought leaders engage in acts of intellectual creation, but their style and purpose are different. Public intellectuals know enough about many things to be able to point out intellectual charlatans. Thought leaders know one big thing and believe that their important idea will change the world.

Table 1 illustrates the differences between the two archetypes. To adopt the language of Isaiah Berlin, public intellectuals are foxes and thought leaders are hedgehogs. The former are skeptics; the latter are true believers. The former is a critic; the latter is a creator. A public intellectual is ready, willing, and able to tell you everything that is wrong with everyone else’s worldview. A thought leader is desperate to tell you everything that is right about his own creed. To the extent that they are intellectuals, Barack Obama functions as a public intellectual and Donald Trump is the brassiest thought leader in existence.

TABLE 0.1 Public Intellectuals vs. Thought Leaders

Public Intellectuals	Thought Leaders
Critics	Creators
Foxes	Hedgehogs
Skeptics	Evangelists
Deductive	Inductive
Prioritizes expertise	Prioritizes experience
Pessimists	Optimists

Public intellectuals and thought leaders are not completely different animals; both sets of intellectuals truck, barter, and exchange in the world of ideas. The dichotomy between the two categories is as much one of style as substance. Indeed, at different times and in different moments, the same person can function as a public intellectual and then a thought leader.<sup>43</sup> As Berlin acknowledged in his famous essay on foxes and hedgehogs, pushing a binary distinction too hard is unwise. But he also noted that, if true, it offers “a starting point for genuine investigation.”<sup>44</sup> Dividing people into public intellectuals and thought leaders clarifies our understanding of the modern marketplace of ideas. And this book will argue that the modern marketplace of ideas benefits all intellectuals, but it benefits thought leaders far more than others.

Why is this happening? What does it mean?

What is happening is that the marketplace of ideas has turned into the Ideas Industry. The twenty-first-century public sphere is bigger, louder, and more lucrative than ever before. This industrial revolution in the public sphere has been going on for some time now. David Brooks argued fifteen years ago that the intellectual class no longer stays aloof from the market, society, or the state, as the contributors to *Partisan Review* did in the 1950s.<sup>45</sup> *Foreign Policy* annually publishes a list of the top hundred global thinkers, sometimes throwing gala events to roll it out. A surge of high-level panels, conference circuits, and speaker confabs allows intellectuals to mix with other members of the political, economic, and cultural elite in a way that would have been inconceivable

a half century ago. There has been an explosion of American “Big Idea” events—TED, South by Southwest, the Aspen Ideas Festival, the Milken Institute’s Global Conference, anything sponsored by *The Atlantic*—that tap “provocative” thinkers to sate the curiosity of attendees. This parallels a global surge in big think confabs, ranging from the World Economic Forum at Davos to the Boao Forum for Asia to the Valdai Discussion Club. The number of platforms, forums, and outlets eager to broadcast provocative ideas has also exploded.

Obviously, the dizzying array of new outlets has played a role in turning the marketplace of ideas into the Ideas Industry. This surge in demand has benefited the entire intellectual class, but there has been another interesting effect. The Ideas Industry now rewards thought leaders far more than public intellectuals. This is due to three interlocking trends that configure the modern marketplace of ideas: the erosion of trust in authority, the polarization of American politics, and the dramatic increase in economic inequality.

There has been a slow-motion *erosion of trust in prestigious institutions* and professions for the past half century. The litany of fiascoes stretch back as far as the Vietnam War and continue through Operation Iraqi Freedom into the present day. After a post-9/11 spike in trust, the rest of the twenty-first century has witnessed a steady decline of trust in authority—and authority figures. This is particularly true in foreign affairs. This degradation of trust makes the Ideas Industry a more competitive environment. In a world in which authority figures are respected, the gatekeepers of intellectual guilds can restrict entry with prerequisites like degrees or books or relevant experience. As the power of those gatekeepers has declined, the ability of thought leaders to bypass traditional sources of authority has risen. The democratization of the marketplace of ideas has made it much harder for traditional public intellectuals to argue from authority. This allows for new concepts to emerge but also makes it more difficult to expose bad ideas.

The *polarization of American society*—and American political institutions—is another phenomenon affecting the marketplace of ideas. The creation of parallel, segmented audiences that will support ideologically pure intellectuals has led to the emergence of new kinds of thought leaders. It is now possible for conservative intellectuals to attend Hillsdale College, intern at The Heritage Foundation, work at



Breitbart, win a Koch grant, author a book for Regnery Publishing, secure a contract from a conservative speakers bureau, and then talk about it on Fox News. They can thrive in an information ecosystem devoid of contrary points of view. Replace the names—say, Soros for Koch—and liberals can do much the same. As more money gets funneled into advancing polarizing political agendas, the opportunities for partisans on both sides to profit from this part of the Ideas Industry will continue to grow.

The most important trend, however, has been *the growth in economic inequality* and the increasing importance of wealthy benefactors as a force in the marketplace of ideas. The massive accumulation of wealth at the top end of the income spectrum has created a new source of funding for the generation and promotion of new ideas. As America's elite has gotten richer and richer, they can afford to do anything they want. It turns out a surprising number of them want to go back to school—or, rather, make school go to them. A century ago, America's plutocrats converted their wealth into university endowments, think tanks, or philanthropic foundations. Today's wealthy set up their own intellectual salons and publishing platforms—and they are not hands-off about the intellectual output of their namesakes. They also attend high-profile Big Idea get-togethers. Intellectuals will fiercely compete to get on the radar of a wealthy benefactor, because of the financial resources potential patrons can bring to the table. Thought leaders will have an advantage over public intellectuals in pushing ideas that resonate with plutocrats.

These three factors have made it increasingly profitable for thought leaders to hawk their wares to both billionaires and a broader public. Successful intellectuals are superstars with their own brands, sharing a space previously reserved for moguls, celebrities, and athletes. Such a claim sounds like hyperbole—until one sees prize-winning authors Niall Ferguson and Ayaan Hirsi Ali supplanting celebrities on the cover of tabloids, Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman cameoing in big budget films, and political scientist Melissa Harris-Perry making headlines for leaving MSNBC.<sup>46</sup>

These forces help to explain how thought leaders are extolled at the same time that public intellectuals can be disparaged. In many ways, this shift has been a long time coming. The rise of thought

leaders plays into how human beings are hard-wired to process ideas. A stylistic element that matters greatly for success in the modern Ideas Industry is confidence. Cognitive psychology shows that human beings prefer confident predictions over probabilistic ones, even though all of the empirical evidence says that the latter approach yields better predictions and more resilient ideas. As Philip Tetlock and Dan Gardner, the authors of *Superforecasting*, note, “continuous self-scrutiny is exhausting, and the *feeling* of knowing is seductive.”<sup>47</sup> Thought leaders excel and public intellectuals suffer in projecting the supreme confidence that their ideas are absolutely correct. This confidence is cognitively satisfying to audiences; even critics of thought leaders acknowledge the seductiveness of their confident sales pitch.

What does all of this mean for the public sphere? Since none of these tectonic forces show any signs of abating, neither will the incentives of the new Ideas Industry. This does not thrill everyone. Many have decried the “corporatization” of intellectuals. In the intellectual argot of today, “marketplace of ideas” sounds better than “Ideas Industry.”<sup>48</sup> The former term evokes a skilled artisan, the latter a factory filled with mindless toil. Craftsmanship sounds better than industrialization. Thought leaders are mocked far more widely than public intellectuals.<sup>49</sup> It would be easy to infer that this transformation is a bad thing.

But to extend the metaphor, it is worth remembering that the real Industrial Revolution led to an explosion of mass affluence as well as Dickensian horror stories.<sup>50</sup> In the world of ideas, reality is far more complicated than “It was better before.” The notion that thought leaders cheapen public discourse is an odd critique. They are responding to a genuine thirst for new ideas—and valid reasons for the decline of trust in the foreign policy establishment. It is churlish for critics to complain for decades about the coarsening of American culture and then act all snippy when a subculture emerges that yearns for something more. Anyone who cares about the world of ideas should never be upset that interest is on the upswing.

There is a great deal of good that can come from the twenty-first-century Ideas Industry. It is surely noteworthy that a strong demand has emerged for new ideas and vibrant ways of thinking about the

world. But like any revolution, there are winners and there are losers. These trends also handicap more traditional purveyors of ideas housed in universities or think tanks. Public intellectuals rely more on sources of funding that have either plateaued or abated. Some of these institutions have not adapted as quickly to the new ecosystem of ideas, even though some individuals housed within these institutions have. The result—like previous revolutions in agriculture and manufacturing—is a massive churn in the intellectual class.

It is not surprising that some who suffer from this intellectual creative destruction lament the current state of affairs—but it doesn't mean that their criticisms are entirely wrong. There are some vaguely troublesome rumblings buried within this phenomenon. The most obvious issue is whether the Ideas Industry generates anything in the way of a critical rebuttal to the ideas being propagated. When one watches a TED video, for example, all one sees is the sales pitch. More than half the TED lectures end with a standing ovation; the reactions are all affirmation without any constructive criticism.<sup>51</sup> Yet it is how ideas survive the gauntlet of criticism that really matters. For foreign policy ideas in particular, it would be better to have a public sphere that pokes, prods, and generally stress-tests each New New Thing.

What is needed is a symbiosis—not just TED talks, but TED talks with discussants. The cure for what ails the Ideas Industry is not a return to more powerful gatekeepers—it is more discord and more debate. Indeed, public intellectuals are now needed more than ever. They serve a new and vital purpose. They need to analyze and criticize popular thought leaders. Public intellectuals are necessary to filter the quality thinkers from the charlatans.

The marketplace of ideas affects far more people than just intellectuals. Despite loud laments about the anti-intellectualism of American society, ideas matter a great deal to US policy and politics. As *Washington Post* columnist George Will noted once, “although many intellectuals consider American political theory unsophisticated, it is more central to political practices than theory is in other countries.”<sup>52</sup> One could argue that foreign policy is where ideas have mattered the most. From the Cold War doctrine of containment, to the constant tug of war between liberals and realists, to the rise and fall of neoconservatism, to the

effect of neoclassical economics on foreign economic policy, ideas have profoundly affected the conduct of foreign affairs. One recent academic assessment concluded, "From the beginning of the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first, the United States has had the most intellectual foreign policy in the world."<sup>53</sup>

Intellectuals have played a vital role in the development of American foreign policy, and will continue to do so into the future. Even the most erudite officials are hard-pressed to think deep thoughts; the daily grind crowds everything else out. Sandy Berger, Bill Clinton's last national security advisor, noted, "Washington is a town in which the urgent always overtakes the important."<sup>54</sup> Berger's successor at the job, Condoleezza Rice, once told me that a policymaker's intellectual capital stock starts depreciating the moment after taking office. As a candidate, Barack Obama was able to challenge dominant foreign policy narratives; as president, Obama was more constrained. For good or for ill, policymakers need the marketplace of ideas to replenish, articulate, and challenge the reasons why they do what they do in world politics.<sup>55</sup>

Big ideas and the intellectuals who articulate them are especially worthy of scrutiny as they get closer to those who wield power. The possibility of officials using or abusing the marketplace of ideas is very real. George W. Bush's administration became such a forceful promoter of the democratic peace that one of the theory's leading scholars admitted, "Many advocates of the democratic peace may now feel rather like many atomic scientists did in 1945. . . . Our creation has been perverted."<sup>56</sup> Realists expressed similar dismay at the Bush administration's appropriation of realpolitik rhetoric.<sup>57</sup>

When those in power are not exploiting ideas to justify their actions, some intellectuals are eager to do so in the service of power. Some have defended the intellectuals' alliance with the powerful. These arguments range from the utility of offering expert counsel on thorny policy questions to the more critical task of speaking truth to power.<sup>58</sup> These are powerful arguments, but history offers a sobering rejoinder. As Richard Hofstadter acknowledged in *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, "there is no way of guaranteeing that an intellectual class will be discreet and restrained in the use of its influence."<sup>59</sup> There is an entire genre of work consisting of intellectuals bashing other intellectuals for a catalog of political sins.<sup>60</sup> In the twentieth century, intellectuals justified the

most heinous actions imaginable when they got close to power.<sup>61</sup> This century is little better. In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, many conservative intellectuals resuscitated arguments in favor of American empire. Intellectuals can cause just as much harm as good in the world of foreign policy; the closer one is to power, the more tempting it is to justify or excuse immoral actions. As Janice Gross Stein has warned her fellow international relations scholars, “we will be seduced by the proximity to power and shade what we say in order to retain access.”<sup>62</sup> It is precisely because the Ideas Industry is intermixed with the rich and the powerful that it merits explication.

One of the difficulties with dissecting the marketplace of ideas is that our analytical tools are limited. Even in a world of big data, assessing trends in the public sphere remains a rudimentary and impressionistic endeavor. I will focus on the areas that I know best—the world of American economic and foreign policy discourse. To describe the evolution and effects of the Ideas Industry, I will rely on extant commentary about the state of the public sphere, peer-reviewed research into the drivers behind the modern Ideas Industry, public opinion data, and accounts of particular public intellectuals and thought leaders. I also surveyed more than four hundred participants in the Ideas Industry on a welter of issues and interviewed a variety of participants in the modern marketplace of ideas.<sup>63</sup>

My empirical support will also include one other source of data—my own experiences. The changes wrought by the modern Ideas Industry—the academic search for “impact,” the mushrooming of “Big Idea” conferences, the development of online platforms, the rise of billionaire benefactors, the growth of the for-profit sector of the foreign policy community—are all phenomena I have witnessed firsthand. I have taught at universities for twenty years, but I’ve also developed my own online course.<sup>64</sup> I have published more than fifty peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters, but I have also blogged for more than a decade, half of that time at *Foreign Policy* and the *Washington Post*. I’ve presented at numerous academic conferences and published many university press books, but I’ve also given TEDx talks and participated in Comic-Con panels. I’ve drifted away from a more conservative worldview, but also received grants from conservative foundations. When it comes to the Ideas Industry, I know something of what I write.

My own experiences are not a substitute for actual ethnographic research. The danger of drawing upon one's own background is that personal experience might not be generalizable to the rest of the phenomena being described. Indeed, this is a common flaw among thought leaders. A caveat comes with that acknowledgment, however. There are certain kinds of inside information that Michael Polanyi labeled as "tacit knowledge."<sup>65</sup> This is knowledge that can be best gained through experience. In writing about the transformation of the marketplace of ideas, I will be informed by the tacit knowledge that comes with participating in the public sphere.

One last point: although I will be concentrating on the marketplace of foreign policy ideas in the United States, I would suggest that the forces shaping that particular Ideas Industry also exist in other policy arenas and in other countries. This book focuses on American foreign policy because it is the arena I know best and it is intrinsically important. But public intellectuals and thought leaders exist in the world of domestic policy as well. Similarly, the erosion of trust, increase in polarization, and rise of economic inequality are not limited to the United States. Other countries' marketplaces of ideas are not carbon copies of the United States. Nonetheless, these structural forces are powerful enough to suggest that what I am describing here might also be taking place across the globe.

The rest of the book is organized as follows. Part I sets the table. Chapter 1 makes the case for why we should care about the marketplace of ideas. It is convenient for cynics and social scientists to assume away intellectual affairs as exercises in sophistry. While easy, such an assumption is also silly and self-defeating. *Of course* ideas matter; otherwise pundits and social scientists would not be writing in the first place.<sup>66</sup> A functioning marketplace of ideas is necessary for a dynamic democracy. Chapter 2 takes a closer look at the three systemic forces that have shaped the new Ideas Industry: the erosion of trust in established authorities, the political polarization of the audience, and most important, the rise of economic inequality that empowers plutocrats. Combined, these three trends have increased demand for all intellectuals—but it has been particularly good for thought leaders.

Part II of the book considers how the emergence of the modern Ideas Industry has affected some of the marketplace's key suppliers. Chapter 3 looks at the oldest source: the academy. Universities find themselves accused of myriad sins, including obscurantism, irrelevance, and political homogeneity. The truth is more complex. Many professors within the ivory tower have managed to survive and thrive in the Ideas Industry. The forces that have shaped the modern marketplace of ideas have nevertheless made the intellectual climate for higher education more challenging. Chapter 4 compares and contrasts the fortunes of two social science disciplines. Economics has thrived in the modern marketplace of ideas, whereas political science has only survived. This is not due to the superiority of economic models or methods. Rather, it is because the intellectual style and substance of economists sync up better with the new drivers of the Ideas Industry. Chapter 5 moves from the detachment of the ivory tower to the fevered Foggy Bottom swamp of think tanks. Developments within the Ideas Industry have created new pressures on think tanks to maintain their status as a bridge between abstract theory and concrete policy. While think tanks are quickly adapting to the changes wrought by the Ideas Industry, they are doing so in ways that compromise the practices that gave them legitimacy and autonomy in the first place. Chapter 6 looks at the private market for public ideas. Whether based in corporate think tanks like the McKinsey Global Institute, political risk consultancies like the Eurasia Group, or hybrid structures like Jigsaw, the private sector has inculcated thought leadership as a business strategy. The Ideas Industry has made that strategy a potent option.

Part III of the book examines how well the Ideas Industry functions as a market, and whether that market can be improved. Chapter 7 considers the "superstar" intellectual. The modern marketplace of ideas rewards intellectuals who are able to brand themselves. The Ideas Industry has turned a lot of idea entrepreneurs into titans. That said, in the world of ideas and criticism, becoming a brand leaves one vulnerable to overexposure. How well have superstars like Fareed Zakaria or Niall Ferguson survived their stumbles in this world? In part, it depends on whether they self-identify as thought leaders or public intellectuals. Chapter 8 argues that the modern marketplace of ideas is just as prone to bubbles as is the financial sector. The waning influence

of public intellectuals enables thought leaders to expand the influence of their ideas far beyond what would be appropriate. Like asset bubbles, intellectual fads will bloom from the germ of an interesting idea, expand rapidly, and then crash. Chapter 9 considers the relationship between the Ideas Industry and the online world. In the twenty-first century, all intellectuals have to engage with social media to promote their policy ideas. The toxic aspects of the digital landscape, however, have made it easier for intellectuals to reject online criticism. Regrettably, this creates a slippery slope where it becomes easier to reject more substantive critiques as well. The final chapter is more personal, reflecting on my own experiences as I've navigated through the world I describe. It also proffers some advice for individuals interested in navigating the Ideas Industry, and considers whether the modern marketplace of ideas can be improved.

Before considering what makes the modern Ideas Industry tick, however, it is worth asking a simple question: does any of this really matter?



# I

---

## Do Ideas Even Matter?

Experts in international relations, one of the fungible intellectual industries credentialed during the cold war, inhabit by professional necessity a cloud-cuckoo land of fantasy and speculation.

— Pankaj Mishra

JEFFREY SACHS IS A brilliant economist, a fact that he is happy to tell you himself. Anyone who writes, “As a young faculty member, I lectured widely to high acclaim, published broadly, and was on a rapid pace for tenure, which I received in 1983 when I was twenty-eight,” does not suffer the curse of modesty.<sup>1</sup>

That boast was not the most audacious thing he wrote in *The End of Poverty*, however. Sachs’s faith in his own analytical abilities enabled him, a relative newcomer to development economics, to declare that he had unearthed the formula for ending extreme global poverty. He proposed that the wealthy countries of the world increase their combined foreign aid budgets to \$150 billion annually for the next two decades. Sachs argued that a properly allocated surge in development aid would eliminate extreme global poverty—people living on less than one dollar a day—by 2025.

That Sachs suggested such an audacious plan is hardly out of the ordinary. Plenty of academics, think tank fellows, and policy entrepreneurs propose ambitious programs for making the world a better place. A few things made Sachs stand out, however. First, he offered the possibility that development aid could make a difference. This contrasted with the consensus view in the mid-2000s: government corruption was

the primary roadblock to development and so boosting aid was a futile move. This view was “a deeply pessimistic mindset that also stymied fresh thinking on the matter,” in the words of *Foreign Policy*.<sup>2</sup> Hope is a powerful elixir in the world of development economics.

Second, Sachs had the intellectual cachet and political capital to force people to listen. When he published his anti-poverty manifesto, Sachs was working as an advisor to the United Nations Secretary-General, tasked with devising an international response to poverty. Furthermore, Columbia University had recently poached Sachs from Harvard. The university gave Sachs four different titles, including director of the university’s Earth Institute, with an operating budget in excess of \$10 million.<sup>3</sup> The good professor went on to serve as an advisor to multiple countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda.<sup>4</sup>

Third, Sachs possessed the self-confidence and sheer unflagging will necessary to proselytize his ideas to anyone and everyone who would listen. Nina Munk ably chronicled Sachs’s campaign to implement his policy ideas in *The Idealist*:

Day after day, without pausing for air, it seemed, Sachs was making one speech after another, as many as three in one day. At the same time he lobbied heads of state, testified before Congress, held press conferences, attended symposiums, advised government officials and legislators, participated in panel discussions, gave interviews, published papers in academic journals, wrote opinion pieces for newspapers and magazines, and sought out anyone, anyone at all, who might help him spread the word. The only time he seemed to slow down was when he was sleeping, never more than four or five hours a night.<sup>5</sup>

His publicity and marketing efforts bore considerable fruit. For example, *The End of Poverty* made the cover of *Time*. This was an unusual occurrence for books about development economics, or even books in general.

Fourth, Sachs was adroit at collecting allies, particularly celebrities and philanthropists. U2’s frontman Bono wrote the foreword to *The End of Poverty*, characterizing Sachs as “my professor.” On an MTV

documentary, Angelina Jolie described him as “one of the smartest people in the world.”<sup>6</sup> He befriended and secured funding from George Soros and Tommy Hilfiger to attempt to put his development theories into practice with the Millennium Villages Project (MVP).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Soros was so convinced by Sachs that the billionaire overruled his extremely skeptical board of philanthropic advisors. Sachs attracted hundreds of millions of dollars in funding from a variety of international organizations and private foundations. His Earth Institute then attempted to implement his plan in a series of villages in east Africa.

As Sachs pursued his quest, he faced tremendous pushback from a welter of sources. The development aid community, used to its standard operating procedures, thought Sachs’s messianic goal was at best naïve and at worst counterproductive.<sup>8</sup> He proved able to bulldoze through those bureaucratic impediments. The criticism from development economists was more severe. William Easterly made his name with a series of books arguing that development aid suffered from a “technocratic illusion” that poverty was a purely technocratic problem amenable to purely technocratic solutions such as fertilizers, antibiotics, or nutritional supplements.<sup>9</sup> Easterly argued that Sachs’s aid proposal was worse than useless without institutions of good governance. Esther Duflo, the head of the MIT Poverty Lab and the co-author of *Poor Economics*, worried that Sachs’s arguments were simply the latest fad to pervade development economics. She warned that without comparing Sachs’s interventions with a control group of villages that would not receive any interventions, there was no way to determine if his efforts would be the cause of any improvement.<sup>10</sup> Nancy Birdsall, the head of the Center for Global Development, concurred with Duflo’s critique and urged Sachs to use a control group.

Sachs dismissed these objections as effortlessly as those from the development bureaucracy. He explicitly rejected the idea of measuring progress in comparison villages.<sup>11</sup> He and the Earth Institute plowed ahead, and the initial results seemed promising. Sachs has argued that the MVP program inspired the widespread adoption of free antimalarial bed nets, which in turn reduced the spread of that disease.<sup>12</sup> In a 2012 paper published in *The Lancet*, Sachs and his coauthors claimed that his villages were reducing the child mortality rate three times faster than the overall rate in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>13</sup> Sachs hailed the “scientific

results” in an editorial for CNN, proclaiming, “We can end the deaths of millions of young children and mothers each year by building on recent innovations.”<sup>14</sup>

By 2013, however, the luster had worn off the project. Sachs and the Earth Institute tried to manage the project from New York. This left key decision makers uninformed about conditions on the ground when they proffered their advice to the villages. Inevitably, this management style frustrated local representatives.<sup>15</sup> Sachs ignored his own board of advisors, improvising responses to adverse outcomes or negative publicity, at times contradicting previous plans. External assessments concluded that there was no way to determine if the MVP villages were any better off than other villages, because Sachs’s team never compared their villages to ones that had received no aid. Sub-Saharan African economic development was robust during this period, and infant mortality rates across the continent had fallen dramatically.<sup>16</sup> There was simply no way to determine if the positive effect in the MVP villages was due to Sachs’s interventions or to strong economic growth. Indeed, according to one measure, the drop in the MVP infant mortality rate was less than the national average in the host countries.<sup>17</sup> This problem, as well as other methodological errors, forced the lead author of Sachs’s paper to acknowledge in a letter to *The Lancet* that the “three times faster” claim on child mortality was “unwarranted and misleading.”<sup>18</sup>

Sachs responded by trying to retroactively demonstrate such a significant effect from his villages, and he brought in outside experts to assist him. Still, the effort was unlikely to restore credibility to the project. One of Sachs’s researchers told *Nature*, “I expect that the authors will conclude that, although we cannot prove that MVP works, we also cannot rule out that it works.”<sup>19</sup> Compared to Sachs’s soaring rhetoric a decade prior, this was quite a scaling back of ambition. A health expert brought in by Sachs acknowledged that it would be impossible to assess any past effect from the Millennium Village Project. One of Sachs’s former research assistants, now an economist at Berkeley, told *Foreign Policy*, “No one takes the Millennium Villages seriously as a research project—no one in development economics.”<sup>20</sup> Bill Gates, who resisted funding Sachs’s project, concluded that, “Sachs seems to be wearing blinders.”<sup>21</sup> When I asked Sachs what he thought the Earth Institute’s

greatest accomplishments were, he did not mention the Millennium Village Project in his response.<sup>22</sup>

Sachs's later books did not sell as well as *An End to Poverty*, and his subsequent quest to become president of the World Bank failed to get any traction. Sachs himself seems to have moved on somewhat. When asked by Munk about all of this, Sachs replied, "It is what it is . . . You can have a firm conviction even in an uncertain world—it's the best you can do, actually—and that is the nature of my conviction."<sup>23</sup> His post-2014 syndicated columns focus less on development economics than they used to. Instead, he has written more about macroeconomics, foreign policy, and theories to explain the Kennedy assassination.<sup>24</sup> It would seem that he has transitioned back from thought leader to public intellectual. Sachs might have been the most successful thought leader in the history of development economics. A decade after he started, however, the real-world results appear to be disputed at best.

The rise and fall of Jeffrey Sachs raises a troubling question for intellectuals: Does any of it matter? There are four ways to argue that intellectual debates in the United States right now are irrelevant. The first argument is materialist: ideas are meaningless in a world in which deeper material forces rule the roost. It was therefore silly of Sachs to push against the powerful inertia of the status quo. The second argument is defeatist: the proliferation of media platforms renders it impossible for any intellectual to be heard. Even if the MVPs yielded successes, that news would be drowned out by an avalanche of uninformed criticism—as has been the case with contrived controversies about vaccines, climate change, or genetically modified foods. The third argument is populist: big, abstract ideas are doomed to failure. The failure of Sachs's project demonstrates the ways in which intellectuals can only make things worse. The final argument is nostalgic: compared to the past, the current crop of superstar intellectuals is so depraved that ideas have lost their meaning as anything other than the rationalizations of the rich or the reactionary. According to this argument, there simply are no great intellectuals any more. Sachs achieved his celebrity in part by consorting with musicians and starlets. Surely this is something that the heralded New York intellectuals of the mid-twentieth century would have disdained.