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## Introduction

This may be the most self-exemplifying of my books to date: the strands of thought and writing drawn together in these pages stem from my participation in the very roles, capacities and arenas that they examine. Their overall effect has led to me to conclude that an edifying life may be led by becoming the sort of person one writes about with favour. It amounts to a kind of method acting in which the author functions as both author and performer of the script. Thus, not only do I need to thank professional academics – Stefan Gattei, Ivor Goodson, Alan Haworth, Ian Jarvie, Ouyang Kang, Douglas Kellner, Gregor McClennan, Hugo Mendes, Tom Osborne, Raphael Sassower and Nico Stehr – for prompting my thinking in many useful directions, but also such decidedly extra-academic personalities and media represented by Julian Baggini (*The Philosopher's Magazine*), George Reisch (Open Court Press's Popular Culture and Philosophy series), Project Syndicate (a worldwide press organization associated with George Soros's Open Society Institute) and *The Times Higher Education Supplement* (London).

*The Sociology of Intellectual Life* is divided into four chapters guided by my own version of social epistemology. 'Social epistemology' is an interdisciplinary field concerned with the empirical and normative bases for producing and distributing knowledge. My own version has focused largely on the organized forms of knowledge associated with academic disciplines. The social epistemological thesis pursued in this book can be stated in a way that makes sense of the arrangement of the four chapters. Historically speaking, a specific institution has best promoted a form of intellectual freedom that has managed to serve as a vehicle for the progressive transformation of society. That institution is the university, especially in its nineteenth-century reincarnation as the seat of 'academic freedom', as theorized by 'philosophy', understood as both the foundation and the ultimate unifier of all specialized forms of knowledge. This idea was largely the invention of Wilhelm von Humboldt, who saw himself as applying the lessons of Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy, which formalized many aspects of the previous century's Enlightenment movement. Humboldt envisaged that as increasing numbers of people received a university education, they would become intellectually empowered, so as to take decisions of public import for themselves in democratic forums. Thus, this book has three main chapters, each devoted to a part of Humboldt's original vision: one to the university, one to philosophy, one to the intellectual.

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However, Humboldt's vision did not go quite to plan in many respects. Over the past 200 years academic life has become a victim of its own success. It has trained people so well and its research has become so socially relevant that it has constantly had to resist economic and political curbs on its spirit of free inquiry. This resistance has often assumed the sort of studied anti-disciplinary stance that characterizes improvisational forms of expression – that unholy alliance of plagiarism and bullshit by which clever academics routinely overreach for the truth. Hopefully once readers have considered the stormy 'career of the mind in and out of the academy' in the main body of the text, Chapter 4 will provide comic relief, if not an outright catharsis.