

Intellectuals and Society

THOMAS SOWELL

Author of A Conflict of Visions

INTELLECTUALS
AND
SOCIETY

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PREFACE

There has probably never been an era in history when intellectuals have played a larger role in society. When those who generate ideas, the intellectuals proper, are surrounded by a wide penumbra of those who disseminate those ideas— whether as journalists, teachers, staffers to legislators or clerks to judges, and other members of the intelligentsia—their influence on the course of social evolution can be considerable, or even crucial. That influence has of course depended on the surrounding circumstances, including how free intellectuals have been to propagate their own ideas, rather than being instruments of state propaganda, as in totalitarian countries. There would of course be little point in studying the ideas expressed by prominent writers like Ilya Ehrenburg during the era of the Soviet Union, for these were simply the ideas permitted or advocated by the Soviet dictatorship. In short, the study of the influence of intellectuals is here a study of their influence where they have been freest to exert that influence, namely in modern democratic nations.

For very different reasons, this study of patterns among intellectuals will pay less attention to such an intellectual giant as Milton Friedman as to any number of intellectuals of lesser eminence, simply because Professor Friedman was in many ways very atypical of the intellectuals of his time, both in his scholarly work that won him a Nobel Prize and in his work as a popular commentator on issues of the day. A “balanced” general intellectual history of our times would have to give Professor Friedman a far larger amount of attention than a study which focuses on general patterns to which he was an outstanding exception. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was another landmark figure in the intellectual, moral and political history of his age who was likewise too atypical of contemporary intellectuals to be included in a study of the general patterns of the profession.

Many books have been written about intellectuals. Some take in-depth looks at particular prominent figures, Paul Johnson's *Intellectuals* being an especially incisive example. Other books on intellectuals focus on the ideas

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of particular eras. Richard A. Posner's *Public Intellectuals* is about those intellectuals who directly address the public, while the focus in *Intellectuals and Society* is about intellectuals who influence— sometimes shape— public attitudes and beliefs, whether or not they are widely read by the population at large. As J.A. Schumpeter said, "there are many Keynesians and Marxians who have never read a line of Keynes or Marx."¹ They have gotten their ideas second- or third-hand from the intelligentsia.

Among the many things said by those who have studied intellectuals, a comment by Professor Mark Lilla of Columbia University in his book *The Reckless Mind* is especially striking:

Distinguished professors, gifted poets, and influential journalists summoned their talents to convince all who would listen that modern tyrants were liberators and that their unconscionable crimes were noble, when seen in the proper perspective. Whoever takes it upon himself to write an honest intellectual history of twentieth-century Europe will need a strong stomach.

But he will need something more. He will need to overcome his disgust long enough to ponder the roots of this strange and puzzling phenomenon.²

While *Intellectuals and Society* is not an intellectual history of twentieth-century Europe— that would be a much larger project for someone much younger— it does attempt to unravel some of the puzzling phenomena in the world of the intellectuals, as that world impacts society at large. Rather than simply generalizing from the writings or behavior of particular intellectuals, this book will analyze both the vision and the incentives and constraints behind the general patterns found among contemporary members of the intelligentsia, as well as what they have said and its impact on the societies in which they said it.

Although we already know much about the biographies or ideologies of particular prominent intellectuals, systematic analyses of the nature and role of intellectuals as a group in society are much less common. This book seeks to develop such an analysis and to explore its implications for the direction in which the intelligentsia are taking our society and Western civilization in general.

Preface

Although this book is about intellectuals, it is not written *for* intellectuals. Its purpose is to achieve an understanding of an important social phenomenon and to share that understanding with those who wish to share it, in whatever walk of life they might be. Those among the intelligentsia who are looking for points to score or things at which to take umbrage will be left to their own devices. This book is written for those readers who are willing to join with me in a search for some understanding of a distinct segment of the population whose activities can have, and have had, momentous implications for nations and civilizations.

Thomas Sowell
Hoover Institution
Stanford University

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Chapter 1

Intellect and Intellectuals

Intelligence is quickness to apprehend as distinct from ability, which is capacity to act wisely on the thing apprehended.

*Alfred North Whitehead*¹

Intellect is not wisdom. There can be “unwise intellect,” as Thomas Carlyle characterized the thinking of Harriet Taylor,² the friend and later wife of John Stuart Mill. Sheer brainpower—intellect, the capacity to grasp and manipulate complex concepts and ideas—can be put at the service of concepts and ideas that lead to mistaken conclusions and unwise actions, in light of all the factors involved, including factors left out of some of the ingenious constructions of the intellect.

Karl Marx’s *Capital* was a classic example of an intellectually masterful elaboration of a fundamental misconception—in this case, the notion that “labor,” the physical handling of the materials and instruments of production, is the real source of wealth. Obviously, if this were true, countries with much labor and little technology or entrepreneurship would be more prosperous than countries with the reverse, when in fact it is blatantly obvious that the direct opposite is the case. Similarly with John Rawls’ elaborate and intricate *A Theory of Justice*, in which justice becomes categorically more important than any other social consideration. But, obviously, if any two things have any value at all, one cannot be categorically more valuable than the other. A diamond may be worth much more than a penny but enough pennies will be worth more than any diamond.

INTELLIGENCE VERSUS INTELLECT

The capacity to grasp and manipulate complex ideas is enough to define intellect but not enough to encompass intelligence, which involves combining intellect with judgment and care in selecting relevant explanatory factors and in establishing empirical tests of any theory that emerges. Intelligence minus judgment equals intellect. Wisdom is the rarest quality of all—the ability to combine intellect, knowledge, experience, and judgment in a way to produce a coherent understanding. Wisdom is the fulfillment of the ancient admonition, “With all your getting, get understanding.” Wisdom requires self-discipline and an understanding of the realities of the world, including the limitations of one’s own experience and of reason itself. The opposite of intellect is dullness or slowness, but the opposite of wisdom is foolishness, which is far more dangerous.

George Orwell said that some ideas are so foolish that only an intellectual could believe them, for no ordinary man could be such a fool. The record of twentieth century intellectuals was especially appalling in this regard. Scarcely a mass-murdering dictator of the twentieth century was without his intellectual supporters, not simply in his own country, but also in foreign democracies, where people were free to say whatever they wished. Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Hitler all had their admirers, defenders, and apologists among the intelligentsia in Western democratic nations, despite the fact that these dictators each ended up killing people of their own country on a scale unprecedented even by despotic regimes that preceded them.

Defining Intellectuals

We must be clear about what we mean by intellectuals. Here “intellectuals” refers to an *occupational* category, people whose occupations deal primarily with ideas—writers, academics, and the like.* Most of us do not think of brain surgeons or engineers as intellectuals, despite the demanding mental training that each goes through, and virtually no one

* For those few people whose wealth enables them to pursue a career that is not the source of their livelihood, “occupation” need not mean a paying occupation.

regards even the most brilliant and successful financial wizard as an intellectual.

At the core of the notion of an intellectual is the dealer in ideas, as such— not the personal application of ideas, as engineers apply complex scientific principles to create physical structures or mechanisms. A policy wonk whose work might be analogized as “social engineering” will seldom personally administer the schemes that he or she creates or advocates. That is left to bureaucrats, politicians, social workers, the police or whoever else might be directly in charge of carrying out the ideas of the policy wonk. Such labels as “applied social science” may be put on the policy wonk’s work but that work is essentially the application of general ideas only to produce more specific ideas about social policies, to be turned into action by others.

The policy wonk’s work is not personally carrying out those specific ideas, as a physician applies medical science to particular flesh-and-blood human beings or as an engineer stands in hip boots on a construction site where a building or a bridge is being built. The output— the end product— of an intellectual consists of ideas.

Jonas Salk’s end product was a vaccine, as Bill Gates’ end product was a computer operating system. Despite the brainpower, insights, and talents involved in these and other achievements, such individuals are not intellectuals. *An intellectual’s work begins and ends with ideas*, however influential those ideas may be on concrete things— in the hands of others. Adam Smith never ran a business and Karl Marx never administered a Gulag. They were intellectuals. Ideas, as such, are not only the key to the intellectual’s function, but are also the criteria of intellectual achievements and the source of the often dangerous seductions of the occupation.

The quintessential intellectuals of the academic world, for example, are those in fields which are more pervaded by ideas, as such. A university’s business school, engineering school, medical school, or athletics department is not what usually comes to mind when we think of academic intellectuals. Moreover, the prevailing ideologies and attitudes among academic intellectuals are usually least prevalent in these particular parts of an academic campus. That is, sociology departments have generally been found to be more one-sidedly to the left politically compared to medical schools,

psychology departments more to the left than engineering schools, English departments to the left of economics departments, and so on.³

The term “pseudo-intellectual” has sometimes been applied to the less intelligent or less knowledgeable members of this profession. But just as a bad cop is still a cop—no matter how much we may regret it—so a shallow, confused, or dishonest intellectual is just as much a member of that occupation as is a paragon of the profession. Once we are clear as to whom we are talking about when we speak of intellectuals—that it is an occupational description rather than a qualitative label or an honorific title—then we can look at the characteristics of such occupations and the incentives and constraints faced by the people in those occupations, in order to see how those characteristics relate to how such people behave. The larger question, of course, is how their behavior affects the society in which they live.

The impact of an intellectual, or of intellectuals in general, does not depend on their being so-called “public intellectuals” who directly address the population at large, as distinct from those intellectuals whose ideas are largely confined to others in their respective specialties or to other intellectuals in general. Books with some of the biggest impacts on the twentieth century were written by Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud in the nineteenth century—and seldom read, much less understood, by the general public. But the conclusions—as distinguished from the intricacies of the analyses—of these writers inspired vast numbers of intellectuals around the world and, through them, the general public. The high repute of these writings added weight and provided confidence to many followers who had not personally mastered these writings or perhaps had not even tried to.

Even intellectuals whose very names have been little known to the general public have had worldwide impacts. Friedrich Hayek, whose writings—notably *The Road to Serfdom*—began an intellectual counter-revolution later joined by Milton Friedman, reaching a political climax with the rise of Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States, was little known or read even in most intellectual circles. But he inspired many public intellectuals and political activists around the world, who in turn made his ideas the subject of wider discourse and an influence

on the making of government policies. Hayek was a classic example of the kind of intellectual described by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes as a thinker who, "a hundred years after he is dead and forgotten, men who never heard of him will be moving to the measure of his thought."⁴

The Intelligentsia

Around a more or less solid core of producers of ideas there is a penumbra of those whose role is the use and dissemination of those ideas. These latter individuals would include those teachers, journalists, social activists, political aides, judges' clerks, and others who base their beliefs or actions on the ideas of intellectuals. Journalists in their roles as editorial writers or columnists are both consumers of the ideas of intellectuals and producers of ideas of their own, and so may be considered intellectuals in such roles, since originality is not essential to the definition of an intellectual, so long as the end product is ideas. But journalists in their roles as reporters are supposed to be reporting facts and, in so far as these facts are filtered and slanted in accordance with the prevailing notions among intellectuals, these reporters are part of the penumbra surrounding intellectuals. They are part of the *intelligentsia*, which includes but is not limited to the intellectuals. Finally, there are those whose occupations are not much impacted by the ideas of the intellectuals, but who are nevertheless interested as individuals in remaining *au courant* with those ideas, if only for discussion on social occasions, and who would feel flattered to be considered part of the intelligentsia.

IDEAS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Because of the enormous impact that intellectuals can have, both when they are well known and when they are unknown, it is critical to try to understand the patterns of their behavior and the incentives and constraints affecting those patterns.

Ideas are of course not the exclusive property of intellectuals. Nor is the complexity, difficulty or qualitative level of ideas the crucial factor in

determining whether those who produce these ideas are or are not considered to be intellectuals. Engineers and financiers deal with ideas at least as complex as those of sociologists or professors of English. Yet it is these latter who are more likely to come to mind when intellectuals are discussed. Moreover, it is the latter who most exhibit the attitudes, beliefs, and behavior associated with intellectuals.

Verifiability

The standards by which engineers and financiers are judged are external standards, beyond the realm of ideas and beyond the control of their peers. An engineer whose bridges or buildings collapse is ruined, as is a financier who goes broke. However plausible or admirable their ideas might have seemed initially to their fellow engineers or fellow financiers, the proof of the pudding is ultimately in the eating. Their failure may well be registered in their declining esteem in their respective professions, but that is an effect, not a cause. Conversely, ideas which might have seemed unpromising to their fellow engineers or fellow financiers can come to be accepted among those peers if the empirical success of the ideas becomes manifest. The same is true of scientists and athletic coaches. But the ultimate test of a deconstructionist's ideas is whether other deconstructionists find those ideas interesting, original, persuasive, elegant, or ingenious. There is no external test.

In short, among people in mentally demanding occupations, the fault line between those most likely to be considered intellectuals and those who are not tends to run between those whose ideas are ultimately subject to internal criteria and those whose ideas are ultimately subject to external criteria. The very terms of admiration or dismissal among intellectuals reflect the non-empirical criteria involved. Ideas that are "complex," "exciting," "innovative," "nuanced," or "progressive" are admired, while other ideas are dismissed as "simplistic," "outmoded" or "reactionary." But no one judged Vince Lombardi's ideas about how to play football by their plausibility *a priori* or by whether they were more complex or less complex than the ideas of other football coaches, or by whether they represented new or old conceptions of how the game should be played. Vince Lombardi was

judged by what happened when his ideas were put to the test on the football field.

Similarly, in the very different field of physics, Einstein's theory of relativity did not win acceptance on the basis of its plausibility, elegance, complexity or novelty. Not only were other physicists initially skeptical, Einstein himself urged that his theories not be accepted until they could be verified empirically. The crucial test came when scientists around the world observed an eclipse of the sun and discovered that light behaved as Einstein's theory said it would behave, however implausible that might have seemed beforehand.

The great problem—and the great social danger—with purely internal criteria is that they can easily become sealed off from feedback from the external world of reality and remain circular in their methods of validation. What new idea will seem plausible depends on what one already believes. When the only external validation for the individual is what other individuals believe, everything depends on who those other individuals are. If they are simply people who are like-minded in general, then the consensus of the group about a particular new idea depends on what that group already believes in general—and says nothing about the empirical validity of that idea in the external world.

Ideas sealed off from the outside world in terms of their origin or their validation may nevertheless have great impact on that external world in which millions of human beings live their lives. The ideas of Lenin, Hitler, and Mao had enormous—and often lethal—impact on those millions of people, however little validity those ideas had in themselves or in the eyes of others beyond the circles of like-minded followers and subordinate power-wielders.

The impact of ideas on the real world can hardly be disputed. The converse, however, is not nearly as clear, despite fashionable notions that major changes in ideas are generated by great events. As the late Nobel Prizewinning economist George J. Stigler pointed out, "A war may ravage a continent or destroy a generation without posing new theoretical questions."⁵ Wars have all too often done both these things in the course of many centuries, so this hardly presents a new phenomenon for which some new explanation is required.

While one might regard Keynesian economics, for example, as a system of ideas particularly relevant to the events of the era in which it was published—namely, the Great Depression of the 1930s—what is remarkable is how seldom that can be said of other landmark intellectual systems. Were falling objects more common, or more fraught with social impact, when Newton's laws of gravity were developed? Were new species appearing, or old ones disappearing, more often or more consequentially when Darwin's *Origin of Species* was written? What produced Einstein's theory of relativity, other than Einstein's own thinking?

Accountability

Intellectuals, in the restricted sense which largely conforms to general usage, are ultimately unaccountable to the external world. The prevalence and presumed desirability of this are confirmed by such things as academic tenure and expansive concepts of "academic freedom" and academic "self-governance." In the media, expansive notions of freedom of speech and of the press play similar roles. In short, unaccountability to the external world is not simply a happenstance but a principle. John Stuart Mill argued that intellectuals should be free even from social standards—while setting social standards for others.⁶ Not only have intellectuals been insulated from material consequences, they have often enjoyed immunity from even a loss of reputation after having been demonstrably wrong. As Eric Hoffer put it:

One of the surprising privileges of intellectuals is that they are free to be scandalously asinine without harming their reputation. The intellectuals who idolized Stalin while he was purging millions and stifling the least stirring of freedom have not been discredited. They are still holding forth on every topic under the sun and are listened to with deference. Sartre returned in 1939 from Germany, where he studied philosophy, and told the world that there was little to choose between Hitler's Germany and France. Yet Sartre went on to become an intellectual pope revered by the educated in every land.⁷

Sartre was not unique. Environmentalist Paul Ehrlich said in 1968: "The battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970's the world will undergo famines—hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now."⁸ Yet, after that