

Intellectuals and Public Responsibility

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The contemporary use of the term “intellectual” can be traced back to the petition signed by more than a thousand French writers, teachers, and students in protest of the 1894 arrest of Alfred Dreyfus. This event became known as “the protest of the intellectuals,” and the word “intellectual” came to describe a person who combined learning and public engagement. Some have also suggested that the response to the Dreyfus Affair set the characteristic mode of intellectual engagement—protest. This fits a certain picture of the intellectual, that of a prophet challenging the status quo, revealing hypocrisy, and skewering falsity. Martin Luther, Enlightenment pamphleteers, and student revolutionaries come to mind as classic protesting intellectuals. But this description is only partial—not all intellectuals are radicals. What is crucial to intellectual identity is not a particular location in political conflicts, but the ability to bring into view what is at stake in these conflicts. Intellectuals attend to the moral depths of public life. While they sometimes turn arguments into political conflicts, they usually turn political conflict into argument, making contests of power into contests of authority.

Classic Perspectives on Intellectuals

Perhaps the most sustained and historically significant reflections on the intellectual as a disruptive force come from Marxism, though not from Marx himself. While Marx did not seem to be troubled by the thought of being an intellectual in a material world, Marxist intellectuals since have struggled to find a role for their work in the Marxian scheme. This struggle has sometimes been a fruitful one. Some of the most important Marxist reflection on this topic has stemmed from Marx’s note on Feuerbach, unpublished in his lifetime, in which he writes: “The philosophers have only interpreted the

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world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.”¹ Georg Lukács, in his commentary on this sentence, saw the effort to bring theory into practice through the proletariat as the heart of Marxism, ennobling Marxist intellectual work as revolutionary practice. Gramsci, like Lukács, saw that Marxist intellectuals must somehow articulate and guide the revolutionary class, but he also tried to learn from bourgeois cultural dominance. Gramsci developed the concept of cultural hegemony to describe a specifically intellectual form of dominance, one that is distinct yet ultimately dependent on control of the means of production.

Romantic fascination with great men and novelty made possible another kind of disruptive intellectual, one guided not by reason, but by creative impulse. Not a slave to convention, this intellectual is, as Nietzsche put it, a “genius,” who “merges with the primal architect of the cosmos.”² Thomas Carlyle developed a similar notion of the intellectual as a kind of “hero” who stands above the masses and makes the world of the future with his words.

Alexis de Tocqueville was more attuned to the variety of intellectuals. While not discussed at great length, the relationship of intellectuals to political life figures centrally in Tocqueville’s account of French and American democracies. Leading up to the first revolution in France, the monarchy had systematically eliminated opportunities for political involvement at the local level. As a result, the utopian ambitions of intellectuals were not tempered by an awareness of political reality as they were in the United States. Tocqueville also argued that the participatory political culture of the United States shaped its intellectual life as well, making American intellectuals less inclined to general theorizing. Tocqueville’s comparative perspective suggests how democratic intellectuals can be agents of disruption or agents of order depending on their context. Karl Mannheim, one of the founders of the sociology of knowledge, expanded on these Tocquevillian insights in his comparative studies of intellectuals, especially in *Ideology and Utopia*, which elaborates a distinction between ideological (conservative) and utopian (disruptive) intellectuals.

- Carlyle, Thomas. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. 1841. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. New York: International, 1971.
- Lukács, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. 1922. London: Merlin, 1971.

¹ Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978) 145.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956) 42.

- Mannheim, Karl. *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*. 1929. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1936.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*. 1871. New York: Doubleday, 1956.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. 1840. New York: HarperPerennial, 1988.
- ———. *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*. 1856. Garden City: Doubleday, 1955.

Intellectuals and Writing

Inexpensive printing, expanding literacy, and leisure in Europe created a new market for writers and with it the real possibility of intellectuals beholden only to that market. This was something quite new. As Thomas Carlyle wrote in 1839,

Never, till about a hundred years ago, was there seen any figure of a Great Soul living apart in that anomalous manner; endeavouring to speak forth the inspiration that was in him by Printed Books, and find place and subsistence by what the world would please to give him for doing that.³

Such an intellectual did not live entirely apart, however, as publishers and journals emerged as gatekeeping authorities to define what was worth reading. The changes in printing technology and associated shifts in the institutions of reading and writing are discussed in the works by Eisenstein and Johns. John Gross traces the history of the reviewer and critic in literary journals as bearers of intellectual authority in nineteenth-century England.

- Eisenstein, Elizabeth L. *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- Gross, John. *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters: A Study of the Idiosyncratic and the Humane in Modern Literature*. New York: Macmillan, 1969.
- Johns, Adrian. *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Morton, Peter. *"The Busiest Man in England": Grant Allen and the Writing Trade, 1875–1900*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Zaret, David. *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions, and the Public Sphere in Early-Modern England*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

³ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 133.

Professionalism and the University

The billion dollar endowments, swelling enrollments, and expanding campuses of major research universities would suggest that ours is a golden age for university-based intellectuals. Universities do continue to play an important public role; however, that role is complicated by the fact that, while research universities encourage methodological and analytical rigor, they also tend to create enclaves insulated from the public by esoteric language and methods.

William Clark's fascinating book traces the early history of the research university and its reward system, which favored, as a matter of bureaucratic convenience, published discoveries. As the low-hanging fruit of new discovery was plucked, the search for new knowledge required a narrowing focus. "The professor" emerged as a new kind of charismatic "hero." Not upsetting the existing order, defending it, or entering public debate in the way of an intellectual, Clark's heroic professors are holed up in a library or lab; poring over obscure, ancient documents or Petri dishes; forgetting to eat and sleep while churning out their groundbreaking volumes or peer-reviewed articles.

Of course, academic and intellectual ideals are not entirely exclusive of each other. Individuals, universities, and disciplines often pursue one and then the other, or both at the same time. Attending to these boundary crossings between the academic and the intellectual can shed light on both. Pierre Bourdieu wrote extensively about the honor systems of esoteric elites and the risks that popularity poses to this elite honor. In *Homo Academicus*, Bourdieu examined how French academics and intellectuals negotiate the tensions between elite prestige and popular influence at the moment of the 1968 Paris protests. Cornel West's *The American Evasion of Philosophy* examines the disciplinary sources of the separation of academic and intellectual, arguing that American pragmatism has resisted professionalism and as a result has maintained resources for speaking to issues of cultural import.

- Bender, Thomas. *Intellect and Public Life: Essays on the Social History of Academic Intellectuals in the United States*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Homo Academicus*. Trans. Peter Collier. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988.
- Clark, William. *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Geiger, Roger L. *Knowledge and Money: Research Universities and the Paradox of the Marketplace*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Michael, John. *Anxious Intellectuals: Academic Professionals, Public Intellectuals, and Enlightenment Values*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.
- West, Cornel. *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.

The Fate of the Intellectual

One persistent question in the literature on intellectuals focuses on their continued existence. Collini documents the history of British intellectuals, asking whether, compared with France, there are any real intellectuals in Britain. Bell and Fukuyama suspect that the range of political ideology will diminish, shrinking the palette of intellectuals. Jacoby argues that the specialization and safety of the university have done away with the kind of intellectual who once offered authoritative opinions on matters from art to politics. The future of such a figure remains very much in doubt.

If the intellectual disappears, what will guide public opinion? One possibility suggested by the great economist Friedrich von Hayek is the market. Hayek's classic on the dangers of economic planning argues that freedom depends on intellectual humility before the superior intelligence of markets in determining prices.

The internet has facilitated efforts to tap collective intelligence in other ways. News websites select stories for their "front page" based on votes or popularity. Wikipedia.org attempts to realize something like the great Enlightenment hope of collecting all knowledge in a single encyclopedia, but instead of being written by experts, articles can be written and edited by anyone. The hope in all of these projects is that, given the proper market conditions, the conclusions of group opinion will be superior to those of the experts. The success of these projects remains to be seen. However, it is worth remembering Karl Polanyi's observation, in his writing about an earlier era of radical free market thinking, that the idea of markets—and, by extension, internet collaborations—achieving optimal outcomes simply by being protected from so-called experts is itself a kind of utopian ideal promoted and defended by intellectuals.

- Bell, Daniel. *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*. 1962. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Collini, Stefan. *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free, 1992.
- Furedi, Frank. *Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone?: Confronting 21st Century Philistinism*. New York: Continuum, 2004.
- Gouldner, Alvin Ward. *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class: A Frame of Reference, Theses, Conjectures, Arguments, and an Historical Perspective on the Role of Intellectuals and Intelligentsia in the International Class Contest of the Modern Era*. New York: Seabury, 1979.
- Hayek, Friedrich August von. *The Road to Serfdom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944.
- Jacoby, Russell. *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*. New York: Basic, 1987.
- Polanyi, Karl. *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. 1944. New York: Beacon, 2001.

- Posner, Richard A. *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

The Intellectual Vocation and Public Life

It may be a sign of our heroic conception of the intellectual that so much of the literature on intellectuals consists of biography and autobiography. This is especially true of books about the chief responsibility of intellectuals—truth-telling. Yet, the real interest of these stories lies in the way that this simple responsibility is made complex as it runs up against particular times and places. Some of those featured here, such as Václav Havel and Adam Michnik, were faced with clear tests of moral will. Often, however, the moral challenge for intellectuals is not prison and the police, but ambivalence and ambiguity. Many of the “heroes” featured here were not known for their radical stands, but for their discerning judgments in the midst of extremism. See, for example, Raymond Aron’s critical engagement with French Marxism, detailed in Judt’s *The Burden of Responsibility*.

Other vocational questions raised by these readings concern representation and audience. For whom and to whom does an intellectual claim to speak? A minority, outsider position allows certain insights into dominant culture that are lost on those for whom identity in the dominant culture is easy and unproblematic. This creates the often-noted situation that many Jewish intellectuals understand their culture so well precisely because they remain, in some sense, strangers to it.

The expectation that intellectuals should engage in public life is another theme of these readings. This responsibility takes its source not only from scholarly self-importance or Romantic respect for heroes. The notion that reason should rule is central to democracy. As such, debate and the refinement of political arguments is a constitutive part of a democratic culture. The writings below illustrate the intertwined relationship of democratic politics and intellectual engagement.

- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-Modernity, and Intellectuals*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987.
- Benhabib, Seyla. *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996.
- Espiritu, Augusto Fauni. *Five Faces of Exile: The Nation and Filipino American Intellectuals*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.
- Eyerman, Ron. *Between Culture and Politics: Intellectuals in Modern Society*. Cambridge: Polity, 1994.
- Goldfarb, Jeffrey C. *Civility and Subversion: The Intellectual in Democratic Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Havel, Václav. *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965–1990*. Ed. Paul Wilson. New York: Knopf, 1991.

- Judt, Tony. *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron, and the French Twentieth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Lilla, Mark. *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics*. New York: New York Review of Books, 2001.
- McGowan, John. *Democracy's Children: Intellectuals and the Rise of Cultural Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002.
- Michnik, Adam. *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*. Trans. Maya Latynski. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.
- ———. *Letters from Freedom: Post-Cold War Realities and Perspectives*. Ed. Irena Grudzińska Gross. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
- Miłosz, Czesław. *The Captive Mind*. Trans. Jane Zielonko. New York: Octagon, 1981.
- Wolin, Richard. *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.