



## **Intellectuals and Society**

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### **About The Author:**

Thomas Sowell is a scholar in residence at the Hoover Institution, Stamford University. His articles and essays have appeared in academic journals, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, *Fortune*, and numerous other magazines and newspapers across the country. His book *Basic Economics* is one of the most acclaimed primers on the subject.

### **General Overview:**

The influence of intellectuals on modern society is much greater than in previous eras and this influence has been achieved not by shaping the opinions or directing the actions of the holders of power, but by shaping public opinion in ways that affect the actions of power holders in democratic societies, whether or not those power holders truly accept the general vision or the particular policies favored by intellectuals.

In *Intellectuals and Society*, Sowell not only examines the track record of intellectuals in the things they have advocated, but also analyzes the incentives and constraints under which their views and visions have emerged. One of the most surprising aspects of this study is how often intellectuals have been proved not only wrong, but grossly and disastrously wrong in their prescriptions for the ills of society – and how little their views have changed in response to empirical evidence of the disasters entailed by those views.

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## Introduction

Intellectuals make up a class of individuals who work with ideas. Historically speaking, intellectuals have not exerted much influence within their societies. Today, however, modern intellectuals in democratic societies play a decisive role in shaping public opinion and creating the climate in which public policies are debated and made.

In fact, intellectuals have shown a tendency to denigrate long-standing cultural norms, common sense, and the hard-won wisdom of experience. Instead, intellectuals believe novelty, cleverness, and individual ingenuity are necessary to solve social problems. Unfortunately, the social solutions peddled by intellectuals have generally proven disastrous.

Intellect and wisdom are not synonymous. Intellectuals are tremendously skilled at manipulating symbols, marshalling rhetoric, and creating conceptual systems. Their abstract formulations may possess great cleverness and originality, but their intellectual creations are all too often at variance with reality.

Intellectuals, for instance, have generally been inclined towards idealistic conceptions of mankind. As a result, they have been attracted to pacifism, peace treaties, and international organizations. However, history proves that pacifism is a dangerous luxury that civilized society cannot afford, not so long as the world is filled with murderous tyrants and terrorist thugs.

Pacifistic sentiment was widespread among the Western democracies prior to WWII, but legal treaties to ban war did nothing to stop Hitler from conquering more than half of Europe. Indeed, pacifistic sentiment proved especially pernicious in France. Intellectuals in France derided patriotism and demonized the arms industry. As a result, the morale of French troops and French society was decimated long before Hitler invaded. In fact, the German Army was militarily outmatched by the French forces, yet the Nazis managed to conquer France in only a month. Ironically, French intellectuals who had preached pacifism and accommodation were often the first to be sent to concentration camps.

Intellectuals see themselves as an elite fraternity possessing the cognitive skills necessary to imagine a reordering of society in accordance with their utopian vision. Tragically, their competence to intervene in social planning is dubious, to put it mildly. Time and time again, the social experiments proposed by intellectuals have proven misguided and socially pernicious.

For instance, the intellectual theory that “society” was somehow to blame for crime led to misguided policies that promoted rehabilitation of the supposed “root causes” of crime. As a result, the crime rate (which had been on a steadily downward trend for generations) exploded.

Intellectuals view themselves as reformers who are vastly smarter and better educated than the benighted masses. They believe that social justice depends on having their ideas and social schemes implemented. These intellectuals blame capitalism for poverty and the United States of America for most of the world's ills. They believe that their own intellectual prowess confers upon them the ability to envision the ideally organized society. These intellectuals do not pause to consider that no one individual or class of people can possibly possess even a fraction of social knowledge that is dispersed throughout society. The failure to recognize this fact is why central planning has always failed.

Intellectuals have an enormous emotional (and egotistical) stake in their idealistic visions. Intellectuals believe society and the masses cannot prosper without adopting and implementing their idealistic prescriptions. Unfortunately, the ideas intellectuals have peddled – unilateral disarmament, income redistribution, and moral relativism, for instance – have proven wrong and socially corrosive.

Intellectuals, by and large, have undermined objective standards. This is not surprising. After all, the ideas peddled by intellectuals rarely stand up to scrutiny, let alone reality.

In fairness, intellectuals in the United States did play a leading and constructive part in the Civil Rights movement. However, on the whole, their ideas have a rather dismal track record. For all their intellectual skills and verbal virtuosity, intellectuals often cannot see the forests from the trees or discern common sense. Instead, they seem to crave novelty, cleverness, and unnecessary complexity.

It has been said that genius can lead one down the path of error faster than mediocrity. All too often, intellectuals have steered society in the wrong direction. Society can tolerate a certain amount of corrosive elements. But at a certain point, society must resist the forces that consistently threaten it.

### **Intellect and Intellectuals**

Intellectuals are individuals whose end products consist of ideas. Engineers, scientists, and physicians work with real things in the objective world. For instance, engineers build bridges. Intellectuals, in contrast, work with ideas and conceptual systems that are validated only by other intellectuals. This means that intellectuals are peculiarly unaccountable in ways that most other professionals and workers are not.

Intellectuals are adept at manipulating symbols, organizing ideas, and building conceptual systems. However, the mistake many intellectuals make “is assuming that superior ability within a particular realm can be generalized as superior wisdom or morality over all.” For instance, we don't expect individuals with exceptional skills in one area – say, grandmasters in chess or musical virtuosos – to be experts in all fields. But this is just what intellectuals do; they believe their specific academic training gives them the ability to pontificate on all manner of public matters and social policies.

## **Knowledge and Notions**

At best, an intellectual may possess one percent of the total knowledge possessed by society as a whole. More succinctly, no single individual can possibly possess as much knowledge as is dispersed throughout society. Why, then, should we assume that the opinion of a small class of intellectuals is preferable to the practical know how, spontaneous decision-making, and collective wisdom expressed by millions of ordinary citizens every day?

Central planning has a disastrous track record. In the former Soviet Union, for instance, central planning led to food shortages and economic collapse. The central flaw was this: central planners were incapable of being experts on everything under their control. Similarly, top-down forms of social engineering have a troubled and unsuccessful track record.

## **Intellectuals and Economics**

Intellectuals, by and large, tend to be ignorant about the fundamentals of economics. Of course, this hardly dissuades them from pontificating on the subject. In particular, intellectuals have tended to focus on “income distribution” and the supposed injustices of capitalism.

Intellectuals insist that the gap between the rich and poor is widening. This assertion, however, is misleading since it assumes that individuals within a statistical social category do not have social mobility. In fact, individuals move in and out of statistical categories all the time. This creates the confusion between “what is happening to statistical categories over time and what is happening to flesh-and-blood individuals over time, as they move from one statistical category to another.”

The bottom line: the intellectual sleight of hand regarding the supposed gap between rich and poor obscures the fact that most lower-income earners move up the economic ladder. In other words, the statistical category “the poor” is more of a transient cohort than an enduring class.

Intellectuals have long peddled the myth that capitalism is responsible for poverty. A prominent historian once insisted that “capitalism created masses of laborers who were poverty stricken.” This assumes, fallaciously, that the laborers were well-off before the advent of capitalism. However, intellectuals frequently assume axioms without evidence. Indeed, they tend to proffer their axioms without argument and maintain them in the face of contradictory evidence.

Intellectuals generally favor government intervention in the economy. This assumes that distant politicians, academic social planners, and bureaucrats are better suited at decision-making than business owners and individuals operating directly in the market place. At the very least, it is immediate market participants – not third parties – who have a direct stake in the decisions they make.

“Why the transfer of economic decisions from individuals and organizations directly involved – often depicted collectively and impersonally as ‘the market’ – to third parties who pay no price for being wrong should be expected to produce better results for society at large is a question seldom asked, much less answered.”

### **Intellectuals and Social Visions**

Intellectuals believe that social problems are caused by society and flawed institutions. They argue: if social injustices can be remedied, then mankind can transcend its tragic past. The French philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau articulated this view when he wrote, “Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains.” Once again, the presumption here is that civilization deforms and corrupts human beings.

The ancient Greek philosopher, Thucydides, painted a more convincing picture of mankind – namely, “the tragic vision” of the human condition. According to the tragic view, civilization is a thin and tenuous barrier to the barbarism latent in all mankind. The tragic vision does not mean humans are inherently evil, or that life is mostly miserable. But, the tragic vision *does* insist that there are always tradeoffs and limitations when it comes to overcoming the human condition. For instance, the tragic vision insists that pacifistic movements can make war more likely; another case in point, the War on Poverty, which engendered a culture of dependency.

Those who subscribe to the tragic vision believe that weak nations invite aggression, and that good intentions and compassionate social programs can lead to unintended consequences.

### **Optional Reality in the Media and Academia**

Intellectuals may have flawed visions of life and society, but they are determined to maintain their assumptions and convictions despite the evidence. One way they do this is by filtering reality. In essence, intellectuals have a conception of how life ought to be, but they filter out information that contradicts this vision.

Intellectuals, for example, generally support stronger gun control laws. In particular, intellectuals point out that the UK, which has much stricter gun control laws than the U.S., also has a much lower murder rate. However, the comparison intellectuals make here is selective. In fact, Russia and Brazil also have stringent gun control laws, but their murder rates are astronomically high. Conversely, Switzerland and New Zealand have relatively lax gun control laws, but also low murder rates. In short, intellectuals filter out evidence that contradicts their preconceptions.

Intellectuals will go to great lengths to maintain their idealistic vision. For example, a popular trend in academic circles holds that reality is “socially constructed.” This fits with the standards intellectuals set for themselves. Namely, that acceptance by one’s peers confers validity. Needless to say, this perspective undermines the notion of objective truth and objective standards.

The idea that reality is socially constructed has a grain of truth in it; reality *is* represented and constructed by human brains operating within a culture. However, the belief that *all* objective standards are arbitrary has led to all manner of nonsense. This helps explain why so many ideas peddled by intellectuals have proven disastrous. Put simply, their beliefs and conceptual systems crash and burn the minute they contact reality.

Eric Hoffer once said of intellectuals: they “cannot operate at room temperature.” By this he meant that intellectuals have a psychological need to feel exceptional. Too often, this leads them to adopt a condescending attitude towards the public. As a result, intellectuals have a tendency to eschew common sense in favor of idiosyncratic idealistic visions that bear little relationship to reality.

Intellectuals often only see what they want to see. For instance, it is hardly surprising that a great many intellectuals were drawn to socialism and defended Soviets and other communist regimes even though these systems failed their peoples and violated human rights on a gross scale.

### **Intellectuals and the Law**

The law, in essence, consists of rules known in advance and applied as written. However, intellectuals generally find this conception of law too confining. In fact, intellectuals invariably want to use the judicial system to remake society according to the image of their idealistic visions. When a judge substitutes his or her own vision of what the law ought to be – instead of just interpreting the law as written – they are engaging in judicial activism.

When judges make law (rather than interpreting the law) they are usurping power that presumably rests in the Constitution or with lawmakers. In contrast, the philosophy of judicial restraint is summed up by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes when he said the role of a judge “is to see that the game is played by the rules whether I like them or not.”

### **Intellectuals and War**

Intellectuals disdain war, but their methods for preventing war often backfire. Those who subscribe to the tragic vision believe military strength is the best way of deterring war. Intellectuals, on the other hand, invariably emphasize disarmament, international treaties, and negotiation as the surest path to peace.

Ironically, it was an idealistic intellectual, President Woodrow Wilson, who led the United States into World War I. Wilson claimed the Great War was necessary to save the world for democracy. However, WWI never accomplished what progressive intellectuals believed it would: namely, that it would be the war to end all wars. Instead, WWI merely set the stage for the Second World War.

The carnage and futility of WWI convinced many intellectuals that pacifism and disarmament were essential to avoiding war. Intellectuals led disarmament campaigns that demonized arms manufacturers. This trend was particularly acute in France, where French educators indoctrinated young students with pacifistic notions that derided patriotism altogether. This “moral disarmament” campaign in fact contributed to a pervasive sense of demoralization within French society and in the French military in particular.

Adolf Hitler exploited the moral disarmament taking place within the European democracies. Hitler violated international agreements limiting Germany’s military, he remilitarized the Rhineland and he annexed Czechoslovakia while France and Britain appeased the German dictator. France and Britain could have prevented WWII had they stood up to Herr Hitler early on. Tragically, the tanks that rolled into France in 1940 were built in German-occupied Czechoslovakia.

The intelligentsia in Britain and France were especially slow to recognize the existential threat that Nazism represented. Many intellectuals painted Hitler as a moderate and a reasonable fellow. The poster child for idealistic naiveté was British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, who infamously guaranteed peace in our time while waving an agreement signed by Adolf Hitler.

The Axis powers started WWII on the assumption that the democracies lacked the fortitude to fight aggression. The Axis powers nearly succeeded in their strategy. In fact, “intellectuals played a major role in creating the military weakness and political irresolution within democratic nations, which made a war against those nations look winnable to the leaders of the Axis dictatorship.”

Intellectuals repeated similar errors during the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and the two Gulf Wars.

For instance, intellectuals helped turn U.S. public opinion against the Vietnam War, a war the U.S. military was on the brink of winning. Similarly, intellectuals were bent on appeasing the Soviet Union, but Ronald Reagan’s bold characterization of the Soviet Union as an “Empire of Evil” was a catalyst that helped bury Communism.

Finally, intellectuals condemned and tried to discredit President Bush’s surge in Iraq, insisting it would never work. However, the surge did indeed turn the tide of battle in Iraq. Once the surge succeeded in stabilizing Iraq, of course, the media stopped covering the war because the outcome of that war no longer fit their narrative that Iraq was another Vietnam.

## **Conclusion**

What intellectuals say and what they do are two different things. Intellectuals believe their visions for a better society are necessary for improving society. In reality, all too often intellectuals help corrode the moral and spiritual fiber of society.

“The vision of the anointed [i.e., intellectuals] is not just a vision of society; it is also a very self-flattering vision of the anointed themselves.” In other words, intellectuals believe that their special ability to imagine a better society is an indication of their intellectual and moral superiority.

Fawning media coverage only serves to confirm the high regard intellectuals have for themselves. However, there is something pernicious about academics using the media to pontificate about social matters that are usually well beyond the bounds of their expertise. For example, Noam Chomsky is undoubtedly an authority on linguistics, but he is an amateur as a political and social philosopher.

The track record of intellectuals is pretty dismal. Intellectuals have been proven wrong time and time again when it comes to war and peace, crime and punishment, and most of the social issues of our time.

Intellectuals did play a constructive role in the Civil Rights movement. However, intellectuals have erred by:

- Blaming capitalism for poverty.
- Blaming society for crime.
- Treating reality as illusory or subjective.
- Advocating unilateral disarmament.
- Romanticizing primitive cultures.
- Shifting power to government bureaucrats who pay no price for being wrong.

Worst of all, intellectuals exalt themselves by denigrating society. As a result, they undermine social cohesion.

Today, intellectuals produce few social benefits, but they extract great costs. Society can only tolerate so much of this.

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