

Anti-intellectualism & Public Intellectuals

**Excerpt from Column by Isaac Asimov
Newsweek, January 21, 1980**

“There is a cult of ignorance in the United States, and there always has been. The strain of anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that ‘my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge.’”

Excerpt from John Searle, The Campus Wars (1971)

“The two most salient traits of the radical movement are its anti-intellectualism and its hostility to the university as an institution. [...] Intellectuals by definition are people who take ideas seriously for their own sake. Whether or not a theory is true or false is important to them independently of any practical applications it may have. [Intellectuals] have, as Richard Hofstadter has pointed out, an attitude to ideas that is at once playful and pious. But in the radical movement, the intellectual ideal of knowledge for its own sake is rejected. Knowledge is seen as valuable only as a basis for action, and it is not even very valuable there. Far more important than what one knows is how one feels.”

Excerpt from Gene Wolf, “From a house on the Borderland” (1987)

“This, then, is the new illiteracy, the illiteracy of those who can read but don’t. [...] This new illiteracy is more pernicious than the old, because unlike the old illiteracy it does not debar its victims from power and influence, although like the old illiteracy it disqualifies them for it. Those long-dead men and women who learned to read so that they might read the Bible and John Bunyan would tell us that pride is the greatest of all sins, the father of sin. And the victims of the new illiteracy are proud of it. If you don’t believe me, talk to them and see with what pride they trumpet their utter ignorance of any book you care to name.”

Excerpt from Steven Poole, “Pretentiousness by Dan Fox review – why anti-intellectualism is the real snobbery,” The Guardian, February 11, 2016

“Writing and other arts are criticised as pretentious when they seem to aim at the highfalutin aesthetic or intellectual stratosphere while lacking the chops to see it through. But that, of course, is an inevitable risk of any ambitious creative work. To employ the word ‘pretentious’ against it is empty as criticism, because all it means is ‘not good’; but it is disgustingly full as moral injunction: it means that it is better not to try at all than to try and fail.... Some writers complain about the pretentious use of words, as though the very act of writing down words and hoping that others will read them and approve of one’s ideas is not itself fantastically pretentious in the first place.”

**Excerpt from Christopher Hitchens, “How to be a Public Intellectual,”
Prospect Magazine, May 24, 2008**

“One might do worse than to say that an intellectual is someone who does not attempt to soar on the thermals of public opinion. There ought to be a word for those men and women who do their own thinking; who are willing to stand the accusation of ‘elitism’ (or at least to prefer it to the idea of populism); who care for language above all and guess its subtle relationship to truth; and who are willing and able to nail a lie. If such a person should also have a sense of irony and a feeling for history, then, as the French say, *tant mieux*. An intellectual need not be one who, in a well-known but essentially meaningless phrase, ‘speaks truth to power.’ (Chomsky has dryly reminded us that power often knows the truth well enough.) However, the attitude towards authority should probably be sceptical, as should the attitude towards utopia, let alone to heaven or hell. Other aims should include the ability to survey the present through the optic of a historian, the past with the perspective of the living, and the culture and language of others with the equipment of an internationalist. In other words, the higher one comes in any ‘approval’ rating of this calling, the more uneasily one must doubt one’s claim to the title in the first place.”

Excerpt from Benjamin Aldes Wurgraft, “Thinking, Public and Private: Intellectuals in the Time of the Public,” Los Angeles Review of Books, July 15, 2016

“Greif and Robin’s briefs on behalf of a modified version of the public intellectual are stirring. However, they do leave us with substantial questions about the fate of the life of the mind in the age of the public. After all, they still insist on the consequences of ideas. In our focus on the immediate interventions that public intellectuals can make in the public sphere, is there room for private contemplation, and the glacial tempo at which ideas must sometimes develop? For ‘useless’ knowledge? For ideas that don’t spread, or whose spread may not take place until decades, or centuries, after our deaths? What may be missing in this age of public intellectualism is respect for the unpredictable half-lives of ideas themselves, and for the fact that public life could be enriched by an appreciation of ideas on their own terms.”

Excerpt from Russell Jacoby, “Christopher Hitchens: The Last Public Intellectual?” The Chronicle of Higher Education, December 18, 2011

“In the age of insufferable pundits and bland English professors, Hitchens summoned up a different possibility – the public intellectual as literate, lucid, and committed. Was he the last of the nonacademic intellectuals? Or was he something else, a very talented journalist? He resented the put-down that someone’s writing was “journalistic” and saw himself as working the vein that ran from Thomas Paine to George Orwell. At least some of his work ranks with that company’s. But he may have been *sui generis*, neither scribbler nor pedant. To whom can he be compared? Hitchens contained multitudes. Perhaps the absence of a cohort of public intellectuals meant that he carried that much more weight. Perhaps he was a public intellectual after its decline.”

Excerpt from John Issitt and Duncan Jackson, “What does it mean to be a public intellectual?” University of York, March 2013

“We live in a different world now (or at least those of us in the ‘West’ do); a world of social media, where anyone can have a view and disseminate it for anyone else to see relatively cheaply and with relatively little technical proficiency. Potentially everyone could be an expert on anything, or at least have a view on everything for anybody else to see. There is no longer a strict division between the controllers of communication and the consumers of communication, nor necessarily such a formalised relationship between the producers of knowledge and disseminators of knowledge. Does this have the potential to mean that everyone in the West can be a public intellectual? And further could one’s success on Facebook and Twitter indicate your status as a public intellectual?”

Excerpt from Barry Gewen, “Who Is a Public Intellectual?” New York Times, June 11, 2008

“[Daniel W.] Drezner’s impulse is to be inclusive: if you’ve written a serious book that has attracted a modicum of general attention, you seem to qualify as a public intellectual. I would be more restrictive, and I’d go back to the original New York Intellectuals for guidance. Broadly, they viewed the public intellectual as someone deeply committed to the life of the mind and to its impact on the society at large. Irving Howe refers to the pursuit of ‘the idea of centrality’ among the writers he knew, and the yearning ‘to embrace . . . the spirit of the age.’ That is, public intellectuals were free-floating and unattached generalists speaking out on every topic that came their way (though most important for the New York Intellectuals was the intersection of literature and politics). They might be journalists or academics, but only because they had to eat. At the most fundamental level, ideas for them were not building blocks to a career. Rather, careers were the material foundation that allowed them to define and express their ideas. It hardly needs to be said that this stance produced an inevitable tension between academic life, with its occupational demands for specialization, and opinionated public intellectuals refusing to be pigeon-holed. What do you specialize in?, Daniel Bell was once asked. Generalizations, he replied.”¹

¹ Commentary: Not to flatter myself, but based on the present evidence (i.e. GGDM), I might be considered a retro-New York Intellectual: I work as a paralegal because I have to eat (and so my cats don’t eat me), but I comment on generally everything, live a different life in my mind, embrace ideas for their own sake, and am assuredly a creature of my age.