

On Intellectuals and Their Duties in the 21st Century

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Theme: [History](#)

"It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies." ~Noam Chomsky [1]

Intellectuals have always played a major role in society, from the philosophers of old such as Plato and Aristotle who articulated thoughts about government, science, and biology to modern intellectuals such as Noam Chomsky and Cornel West who go about speaking truth to power and working toward informing and empowering average people. Yet, the role of the intellectual has changed over time and thus the time has arisen to reexamine and redefine the duties and responsibilities of the intellectual for this new century.

Before going into what the duties of intellectuals are, one must first define what an intellectual is. The term intellectual can be defined as "a person who primarily uses intelligence in either a professional or an individual capacity." [2] This application of intelligence can be for almost anything, but it is more popularly viewed as applying intelligence to social, economic, and political issues. Furthermore, the intellectual goes beyond focusing on newsworthy items and goes into the realm of theory, from thinking and formulating theory to articulating as to how that theory would potentially work in reality.

Currently, it seems that intellectuals are split into three camps: public, private, and dual intellectuals.

The public intellectual is usually a university professor who goes about researching, writing, and sharing their ideas in the public sphere via books, conferences, and being guests on radio and television shows. While this may seem to be a positive occurrence, much of this information remains in the realm of academia or academia-related areas with little of it becoming truly disseminated to the mainstream public. The books may be published and the conferences occur, but the only people who know about them are mainly people who are either in that field professionally or already have an interest in that area of study. Of the little information that does get disseminated on a mass scale, it is mainly done by well-known intellectuals such as Chris Hedges. Thus, there is currently a problem concerning public intellectuals where the information isn't truly getting out to the people at large and because of this the majority of people are unaware of what new theories or discoveries are occurring and thus more vulnerable to misinformation and less likely to become active and involved in the current economic, social, or political situation.

The private intellectual is one who uses their intellect for the benefit of private groups, foundations, or individuals. One such example is Martin L. Leibowitz, the managing director of the Rockefeller Foundation. Leibowitz uses his intellect for the betterment of the

Foundation by managing its assets and investments in order to make the most profit, thus allowing the Foundation to continue its work.

Dual intellectuals are members of the intelligentsia that have one foot in both worlds, occupying the space of a public intellectual and also being or having been a private intellectual. Arguably the most prominent dual intellectual in American politics today is Zbigniew Brzezinski. While he has been a professor at Harvard and Columbia and is currently employed by John H. Hopkins University, Brzezinski was also the co-founder of the Trilateral Commission, which concerns itself with increased cooperation among the United States, Europe, and Japan. Intellectuals such as these are arguably the most powerful as not only do they have the connections and power that comes from being in the private sector, but they also have major sway over the collective consciousness of a society. Dual intellectuals can make their ideas public, put them out into the mainstream society, and because they also have a background as a public intellectual, the public is much more willing to trust them as they see such people as experts.

There are further differences between intellectuals when one breaks them down into their relationship with the current political, economic, and social system. There are three types: loyalist, reformist, and radical.

Loyalist intellectuals are those who uphold and are in favor of perpetuating the current structures. Intellectuals such as these are often deeply embedded within the system and hold government posts or are in think tanks that are quite instrumental in forming policies, such as the Council on Foreign Relations and its relation with the US State Department. Once again, an example of a mainstream loyalist intellectual would be Zbigniew Brzezinski. He has a history of favoring the current global political and economic system, atop which the United States is perched, and wanting to preserve that system for as long as possible. Intellectuals such as these are highly touted in their societies and may command great influence and respect among the society at large and are used by elites to formulate policies that continue the present state of affairs.

Reformist intellectuals support the overall system but would prefer to see certain reforms to the current system as to promote certain values of equality, justice, and human rights. University professors appear to make up a large percentage of reformist intellectuals. Reformist intellectuals are used by the elites to produce new generations of intellectuals that support the status quo and can be co-opted by elites to promote policies that are favorable to them.

Radical intellectuals find fault with the system and criticize it, often offering alternatives that would break down the current structure. Intellectuals of this type tend to be the most useful in terms of going beyond what is spoon-fed to the public by elite-owned media that ignore, distort, and in many cases outright lie about ongoing situations, both domestic and international, and getting to the heart of the matter by telling what the true reasons policies are chosen and exactly whose interests are served. Radical intellectuals are often among those few intellectuals that have a moral conscience and believe in wholly changing the system if not uprooting and replacing it entirely. While most radical intellectuals are in the fringes, some have gained mainstream attention such as Cornel West and Chris Hedges.

While there are three main sets of ideological stances in relation to the current societal structure, there is a subset of intellectuals in the radical circle: underground radicals. These are intellectuals that are radicals (sometimes even more so than the mainstream radicals),

but have had little mainstream notoriety. There are many current-day examples of these intellectuals such as Andrew Gavin Marshall and Allison Kilkenny. Underground radicals often harbor views that are outside the mainstream political system and have no trust whatsoever within the political elite to change society for the better. Such intellectuals are greatly needed as they are often independent voices, not tied to any organization or entity that would censor them and thus they are more likely to be committed to the truth.

While there are different types of intellectuals, they all have the same types of duties.

The intellectual first and foremost has a duty to themselves to be honest in their research and work, honesty being objectivity and avoiding distortion of facts. Objectivity plays a major role as if one is going to espouse policy ideas that are contrary to the actual reality of the situation, no one is helped as the policy will be incorrect and potentially make a situation even worse. This is not to say that intellectuals cannot have any political or ideological leanings, but rather when conducting research or proposing policy, one should keep such things separate.

Empowering ordinary people should be the overall goal of the intellectual. On the local level, intellectuals should work with community organizations with the goal of addressing the problems of the community in a constructive manner. If it requires working with the state, so be it, but one must be aware that the problems that are in a town are best known and felt by those who reside within it, thus working with the local populace and local organizations should be at the center of any plan to quell problems within a community.

On the national level, the intellectual class should work much more to put its research and findings out to the general public, as this increase in information access may allow the general public to become aware of political theory and policy and will allow them to make more informed political decisions. The empowerment of people has a different role in the economic and sociological spheres. The economist should aid in the creation of policies that create economic wealth for the nation, but not at the expense of the many to the benefit of the few. Depending on the situation as well, the economist should also push for policies that would free the nation from dependence on external sources of income such as the IMF or the World Bank and rather support policies of internal economic development which will enrich the nation in the long-term. The sociologist should work to dispel myths and stereotypes of minority races/ethnicities and work to understand different cultures.

The intelligentsia must also combat old and outdated ideologies that hold people back. The current societal structure of the United States is such where it favors heterosexual gender-conforming upper-class white men. This system ostracizes and ignores those who do not fit into that narrow framework. Intellectually, the conversation is twisted and distorted with outright fabrications and myths continuing about Native Americans, blacks, and other minorities while white men are upheld as essentially the creators of modern society and other thinkers, activists, and the like that rebelled against the system are either ignored entirely or viciously distorted. Thus, it is up for the intellectuals to work with other organized groups to combat not only the historical distortions and omissions in the general historical narrative, but also the very system itself that favors one group of people over another.

The intellectual has a duty to the youth, specifically to the students in the classroom. Professors must go beyond the dull repetitiveness of the classroom, from having students memorize facts and figures, to doing serious critical analysis and having them apply the skills they are learning to current, real-world problems. Intellectuals should be willing and

ready to go off the set curriculum and tell students about the true history of their area of study; they should willingly reveal such important and relevant information such as that the educational system itself comes from a drive by the elites for social control [3] that is still being used today. [4] Revealing the true nature of the study will allow students to be even more critical in their thinking of current problems in the field and will be more inclined to speak truth to power as they know the underpinnings of the current social structure and how it has and continues to effect the lives of ordinary people.

The intellectual need to allow themselves to be challenged by students and ordinary people. Currently, there is so much trust in the intellectual elite that any ordinary person who challenges them is dismissed as a fool and uninformed. Such thinking leads to the public trusting rather unscrupulous people such as dual loyalist intellectual Henry Kissinger, a wanted war criminal. [5] Allowing intellectuals to be challenged will create an opportunity that will allow people to be exposed to those who have differing opinions and alternative viewpoints. It can foster discussion among individuals and allow people to learn from one another and in this vain of expanding knowledge and being open-minded, intellectuals should welcome challenges and critiques of their work from alternative viewpoints.

Intellectuals should be willing to aid in peaceful revolutionary political activity that advocates the transformation of the current social, economic, and political structures as to break down oppression and work towards true freedom and equality for all peoples, no matter race, sex, gender identity, socio-economic background, sexual orientation or any other form of oppression that holds people back. Yet, they must be careful in involving themselves in revolutions as they must be conscious of what they are doing as to ensure that they do not lead the revolution. The revolution cannot be led by the intellectual class, they can only guide it. Only the people can lead the revolution. However, this is not simply on the national level. We are living in a globalized society where revolutions against established elites have occurred all over the world [6] and grass-roots organizations have sprung up all over the world and are working together. A global revolution is occurring and, just like the protest groups are organizing and working together (to differing extents and success to be sure), intellectuals from all over the world should organize and work to think, research, and articulate a new system in which the current institutions of power and control are abolished and new systems that do not seek to dominate and oppress come into being.

The intellectual class has the responsibility to stand up for the people and against the systems of oppression for in doing this not only do they free others, but they also free themselves and allow the creation of a new world in which all peoples can be truly free. It is either that or aiding in the continuation of a system that oppresses, exploits, and controls the very many for the benefit of the very few. *That* is the choice intellectuals face in today's world. Let us hope they make the right decision.

Endnotes

Notes

1: Noam Chomsky, "The Responsibility of Intellectuals," *Noam Chomsky*, February 23, 1967 (<http://www.chomsky.info/articles/19670223.htm>)

2: Wikipedia, *Intellectual*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intellectual>

3: Andrew Gavin Marshall, "The Purpose of Education: Social Uplift or Social Control?" *Andrew Gavin Marshall*, April 8, 2012 (<http://andrewgavinmarshall.com/2012/04/08/the-purpose-of-education-social-uplift-or-social-control/>)

4: James F. Tracy, "The Technocratization of Public Education," *Global Research*, June 14, 2012 (<http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=31422>)

5: Christopher Reilly, "Henry Kissinger, Wanted Man," *Counterpunch*, April 28, 2002 (<http://www.counterpunch.org/2002/04/28/henry-kissinger-wanted-man/>)

6: Andrew Gavin Marshall, "Welcome to the World Revolution in the Global Age of Rage," *Andrew Gavin Marshall*, July 30, 2012 (<http://andrewgavinmarshall.com/2012/07/30/welcome-to-the-world-revolution-in-the-global-age-of-rage/>)

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