

# The Commitment of the Intellectual :: Monthly Review

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## The Commitment of the Intellectual

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What is an intellectual? The most obvious answer would seem to be: a person working with his intellect, relying for his livelihood (or if he need not worry about such things, for the gratification of his interests) on his brain rather than on his brawn. Yet simple and straightforward as it is, this definition would be generally considered to be quite inadequate. Fitting everyone who is not engaged in physical labor, it clearly does not jibe with the common understanding of the term “intellectual.” Indeed, the emergence of expressions such as “long-haired professor” and “egghead” suggests that somewhere in the public consciousness there exists a different notion encompassing a certain category of people who constitute a narrower stratum than those “working with their brains.”

This is not merely a terminological quibble. The existence of these two different concepts rather reflects an actual social condition, the understanding of which can take us a long way towards a better appreciation of the place and the function of the intellectual in society. For the first definition, broad as it is, applies accurately to a large group of people forming an important part of society: individuals working with their minds rather than with their muscles, living off their wits rather than off their hands. Let us call these people *intellect workers*. They are businessmen and physicians, corporate executives and purveyors of “culture,” stockbrokers and university professors. There is nothing invidious in this aggregation, no more than there is in the notion “all Americans,” or “all people who smoke a pipe.” The steady proliferation of that group of intellect workers represents one of the most spectacular results of historical development thus far. It reflects a crucially important aspect of the social division of labor, beginning with the early crystallization of a professional clergy and reaching its acme under advanced capitalism—the separation of mental from manual activity, of white collar from blue collar.

Both the causes and the consequences of this separation are complex and all-pervasive. Rendered possible by, and contributing mightily to, the continual expansion of productivity, this separation has become at the same time one of the principal facets of the progressive disintegration of the individual, of what Marx referred to as the “alienation of man from himself.”

This alienation expresses itself not only in the crippling and distorting effect of this separation on the harmonious development and growth of the individual—an effect which is not mitigated but underscored by the intellect workers' getting some “exercise” and by the manual workers occasional partaking of “culture”—but also in the radical polarization of society into two exclusive and all but unrelating camps. This polarization, cutting across the antagonism between social *classes*, generates a thick ideological fog obscuring the genuine challenges confronting society, and creates issues as false and schisms as destructive as those resulting from racial prejudice or religious superstition. For all intellect workers have one obvious interest in common: not to be reduced to the more onerous, less remunerative, and—since they are the ones who set the norms of respectability—less respected manual labor. Driven by this interest, they tend to hypostatize their own position, to exaggerate the difficulty of their work and the complexity of the skills required for it, to inflate the importance of formal education, of academic degrees, etc. And in seeking to protect their position, they pitch themselves against manual labor, identify themselves with the intellect workers who comprise the ruling class, and side with the social order which has given rise to their status and which has created and protected their privileges.

Thus under capitalism the intellect worker is typically the faithful servant, the agent, the functionary, and the spokesman of the capitalist system. Typically, he takes the existing order of things for granted and questions the prevailing state of affairs solely within the limited area of his immediate preoccupation. This preoccupation is with the job in hand. He may not be satisfied with the level of costs in the factory which he owns, manages, or in which he is employed, and may seek to lower them. He may be given the task of “selling” public opinion on a new soap or a new political candidate, and he will carefully, scientifically attend to his assignment. He may not be content with the current knowledge of the structure of the atom, and hence will devote prodigious energies and talent to finding ways and means of expanding it. One might be tempted to call him a *technician*, but this could easily be misunderstood. As a president of a corporation, he may make weighty decisions affecting the national economy as well as the jobs and lives of thousands of people. As an important government official, he may greatly influence the course of world affairs. And as a head of a large foundation or scientific organization, he may determine the direction and the methods of research of a large number of scientists over a long period of time. All this is clearly not what is meant by the term “technician,” which usually denotes individuals whose task it is not to formulate policies but to carry them out, not to set goals but to work out the means of their realization, not to provide the great designs but to look after the small details. And yet the designation “technician” comes closer to encompassing the nature of what I mean by “intellect worker” than the customary use of the word would suggest.

For, to repeat, the purpose of the intellect workers work and thought is the particular job in hand. It is the rationalization, mastery, and manipulation of whatever branch of reality he is immediately concerned with. In this regard he differs little, if at all, from the manual worker who molds metal sheets, assembles parts of an engine, or lays bricks in constructing a wall. Putting it in negative

terms, the intellect worker *as such* is not addressing himself to the meaning of his work, its significance, its place within the entire framework of social activity. In still other words, he is not concerned with the relation of the segment of human endeavor within which he happens to operate to other segments and to the totality of the historical process. His “natural” motto is to mind his own business, and, if he is conscientious and ambitious, to be as efficient and as successful at it as possible. For the rest, let others, too, attend to their business, whatever it may be. Accustomed to think in terms of training, experience, and competence, the intellect worker regards dealing with problems of that totality as one specialty among many. This is to him the “field” of philosophers, religious functionaries, or politicians, even as “culture” or “values” are the business of poets, artists, and sages.

Not that every intellect worker explicitly formulates and consciously holds this view. Yet he has, one might almost say, an instinctive affinity to theories incorporating and rationalizing it. One of them is Adam Smiths time-honored and well known concept of the world in which everyone by cultivating his own garden contributes most to the flourishing of the gardens of all. In the light of this philosophy, the concern with the whole moves out of the center of the individuals preoccupation, and affects him, if at all, merely marginally, that is to say in his capacity as a citizen. And the strength and influence of this philosophy derive from the very important truth that it conveys: that under capitalism the whole confronts the individual as an overpowering objectified process irrationally propelled by obscure forces which he is incapable of comprehending, let alone of influencing.

The other theory which reflects the condition and satisfies the requirements of the intellect worker is the notion of the separation of means from ends, of the divorce between science and technology on the one side and the formulation of goals and values on the other. This position, the ancestry of which is at least as distinguished as that of Adam Smith, has been aptly referred to by C.P. Snow as a “way to contract out.” In Snows words, those “who want to contract out say we produce the tools. we stop there. It is for you, the rest of the world, the politicians, to say how the tools are used. The tools may be used for purposes which most of us would regard as bad. If so, we are sorry. But as scientists, this is no concern of ours.”<sup>1</sup> And what applies to scientists applies with equal force to all other intellect workers.

Needless to say, “contracting out” leads in practice to the same attitude as the Smithian “minding ones own business” it is indeed nothing but another name for it. And this attitude remains essentially unaffected by the now generally felt disposition to put ones faith in the government rather than in the principles of *laissez faire*, to substitute for Gods invisible hand the more obvious if by no means necessarily more beneficent hand of the capitalist state. The result is the same: the concern with the whole becomes irrelevant to the individual, and by leaving this concern to others he *eo ipso* accepts the existing structure of the whole as a datum and subscribes to the prevailing criteria of rationality, to the dominant values, and to the socially enforced yardsticks of efficiency, achievement, and success.

Now I submit that it is in the relation to the issues presented by the *entire* historical process that we must seek the decisive watershed separating intellect workers from intellectuals.<sup>2</sup> For what marks the intellectual and distinguishes him from the intellect workers and indeed from all others is that his concern with the entire historical process is not a tangential interest but permeates his thought and significantly affects his work. To be sure, this does not imply that the intellectual in his daily activity is engaged in the study of all of historical development. This would be a manifest impossibility. But what it does mean is that the intellectual is systematically seeking to relate whatever specific area he may be working in to other aspects of human existence. Indeed, it is precisely this effort to *interconnect* things which, to intellect workers operating within the framework of capitalist institutions and steeped in bourgeois ideology and culture, necessarily appear to lie in strictly separate compartments of society's knowledge and society's labor—it is this effort to interconnect which constitutes one of the intellectuals outstanding characteristics. And it is likewise this effort which identifies one of the intellectuals principal functions in society: to serve as a symbol and as a reminder of the fundamental fact that the seemingly autonomous, disparate, and disjointed morsels of social existence under capitalism—literature, art, politics, the economic order, science, the cultural and psychic condition of people—can all be understood (and influenced) only if they are clearly visualized as parts of the comprehensive totality of the historical process.

This principle “the truth is the whole”—to use an expression of Hegel—carries with it, in turn, the inescapable necessity of refusing to accept as a datum or to treat as immune from analysis, any single part of the whole. Whether the investigation relates to unemployment in one country, to backwardness and squalor in another, to the state of education now, or to the development of science at some other time, no set of conditions prevailing in society can be taken for granted, none can be considered to be “extraterritorial.” And it is wholly inadmissible to refrain from laying bare the complex relations between whatever phenomenon happens to be at issue and what is unquestionably the central core of the historical process: the dynamics and evolution of the social order itself.

Even more important is to realize the implications of the practice, studiously cultivated by bourgeois ideologists, of regarding the so-called “values” held by people as lying outside the purview of scientific scrutiny. For these “values” and “ethical judgments” which to the intellect workers are untouchable data, do not drop from heaven. They themselves constitute important aspects and results of the historical process and need not merely be taken cognizance of but must be examined with regard to their origin and to the part which they play in historical development. In fact, the defetishization of “values,” “ethical judgments,” and the like, the identification of the social, economic, psychic causes of their emergence, change, and disappearance, as well as the uncovering of the specific interests which they serve at any particular time, represent the greatest single contribution that an intellectual can make to the cause of human advancement.

And this raises a further issue. Interpreting their function as the application of the most efficient means to the attainment of some stipulated ends, the intellect workers take an agnostic view of the ends themselves. In their capacities as specialists, managers, and technicians, they believe they have nothing to do with the formulation of goals; nor do they feel qualified to express a preference for one goal over another. As mentioned above, they admit that they may have some predilections as citizens with their predilections counting for no more and no less than those of other citizens. But as scientists, experts, scholars, they wish to refrain from endorsing one or another of these “value judgments.” It should be perfectly clear that such abdication amounts in practice to the endorsement of the *status quo*, to lending a helping hand to those who are seeking to obstruct any change of the existing order of things in favor of a better one. It is this “ethical neutrality” which has led many an economist, sociologist, and anthropologist to declare that *qua* Scientist he cannot express any opinion on whether it would be better or worse for the people of underdeveloped countries to enter the road to economic growth; and it is in the name of the same “ethical neutrality” that eminent scientists have been devoting their energies and talents to the invention and perfection of means of bacteriological warfare.

But it could be objected at this point that I am begging the question, that the issue arises precisely because of the impossibility of deducing by means of evidence and logic alone any statements concerning what is good or what is bad or what contributes to, rather than militates against, human welfare. Whatever force there may be in this argument, it is actually beside the point. It can be readily granted that there is no possibility of arriving at a judgment on what is good or bad for human advancement which would be *absolutely* valid regardless of time and space. But such an *absolute*, universally applicable judgment is what might be called a false target, and the insistence on its indispensability is an aspect of a reactionary ideology. The truth is that what constitutes an opportunity for human progress, for improvement in the lot of men and also what is conducive of inimical to its realization, differs in the course of history from one period to the next, and from one part of the world to another. The questions with regard to which judgments are required have never been *abstract*, speculative questions concerning “good” or “bad” in general; they have always been *concrete* problems placed on the agenda of society by the tensions, contradictions, and changing constellations of the historical process. And at no time has there been a possibility or, for that matter, a necessity to arrive at *absolutely* valid solutions; at all times there is a challenge to use mankind's accumulated wisdom, knowledge and experience to attain as close as possible an *approximation* to what constitutes the best solution under the prevailing conditions.

But if we are to follow the “contractors out,” the “ethically neutral” minders of their own business, then we would bar precisely that stratum in society which has (or ought to have) the largest knowledge, the most comprehensive education, and the greatest possibility for exploring and assimilating historical experience, from providing society with such humane orientation and such intelligent guidance as may be obtainable at every concrete junction on its historical journey. If, as an eminent economist recently remarked, “all possible opinions count, no more and no less than

my own,” then what is, indeed, the contribution which scientists and intellect workers of all kinds are willing and able to make to society’s welfare? The answer, that it is the “know-how” for the realization of whatever objectives society may elect, is completely unsatisfactory. For it should be obvious that society’s “elections” do not come about by miracles, that society is guided into some “elections” by the ideology generated by the social order existing at any given time, and is cajoled, frightened, and forced into other “elections” by the interests which are in a position to do the cajoling, the frightening, and the forcing. The intellect workers withdrawal from seeking to influence the outcome of those “elections” is far from leaving a vacuum in the area of “value” formation. It merely abandons this vital field to charlatans, crooks, and others whose intentions and designs are everything but humanitarian.

It may be well to mention one further argument which is advanced by some of the most consistent “ethical neutralists.” They observe, sometimes haltingly and blushing, that after all it is by no means establishable on grounds of evidence and logic that there is any virtue in being humanitarian. Why shouldn’t some people starve if their suffering enables others to enjoy affluence, freedom, and happiness? Why should one seek a better life for the masses instead of taking good care of ones own interests? Why should one worry about the proverbial “milk for the Hottentots,” if such worry causes discomfort or inconvenience to oneself? Isn’t the humanitarian position in itself a “value judgment” for which there is no logical base? Some thirty years ago I was asked these questions in a public meeting by a Nazi student leader (who eventually became a prominent SS man and functionary of the Gestapo), and the best answer that I could think of then is still the best answer I can think of now: a meaningful discussion of human affairs can only be conducted with humans; one wastes ones time talking to beasts about matters related to people.

This is the issue on which the intellectual cannot compromise. Disagreements, arguments, and bitter struggles are unavoidable and, indeed, indispensable to ascertain the nature, and the means to the realization, of conditions necessary for the health, development, and happiness of men. But the adherence to humanism, the insistence on the principle that the quest for human advancement requires no scientific or logical justification, constitutes what might be called the axiomatic foundation of all meaningful intellectual effort, an axiomatic foundation without the acceptance of which an individual can neither consider himself nor be thought of as an intellectual.

Although the writings of C. P. Snow leave no doubt that he would unreservedly accept this point of departure, it would seem that he believes the commitment of the intellectual to be essentially reducible to the obligation to speak the truth. (It is worth noting here that there is also no basis in evidence or logic for the proposition that truth should be preferred to lies!) In fact, the principal reason for his admiration for scientists is their devotion to truth. Scientists—he says in the previously referred to address—“want to find what is *there*. Without that desire, there is no science. It is the driving force of the whole activity. It compels the scientist to have an overriding respect for truth, every stretch of the way. That is, if you’re going to find what *is there*, you

mustn't deceive yourself or anyone else. You mustn't lie to yourself. At the crudest level, you mustn't fake your experiments." (Italics in the original.) And yet, while this injunction goes a long way towards formulating the basic commitment of the intellectual, it falls short of taking care of the entire problem. For the problem is not merely whether truth is being told but also what *constitutes* truth in any given case as well as *about what* it is being told and *about what* it is being withheld. Even in the area of the natural sciences these are important issues, and there are powerful forces at work shunting the energies and abilities of scientists in certain directions and impeding or sterilizing the results of their work in others. When it comes to matters related to the structure and dynamics of society, the problem assumes central significance. For a true statement about a social fact can (and most likely will) turn into a lie if the fact referred to is torn out of the social whole of which it forms an integral part, if the fact is isolated from the historical process in which it is imbedded. Thus in this domain what constitutes truth is frequently (and can be safely) sought and said about things that do not matter, with the insistence on the pursuit and pronouncement of that kind of truth becoming a powerful ideological weapon of the defenders of the *status quo*. On the other hand, telling the truth about what *does* matter, seeking the truth about the whole, and uncovering the social and historical causes and interconnections of the different parts of the whole is decried as unscientific and speculative and is punished by professional discrimination, social ostracism, and outright intimidation.

The desire to tell the truth is therefore only *one* condition for being an intellectual. The other is courage, readiness to carry on rational inquiry to wherever it may lead, to undertake "ruthless criticism of everything that exists, ruthless in the sense that the criticism will not shrink either from its own conclusions or from conflict with the powers that be." (Marx) An intellectual is thus in essence a *social critic*, a person whose concern is to identify, to analyze, and in this way to help overcome the obstacles barring the way to the attainment of a better, more humane, and more rational social order. As such he becomes the conscience of society and the spokesman of such progressive forces as it contains in any given period of history. And as such he is inevitably considered a "troublemaker" and a "nuisance" by the ruling class seeking to preserve the *status quo*, as well as by the intellect workers in its service who accuse the intellectual of being utopian or metaphysical at best, subversive or seditious at worst.

The more reactionary a ruling class, the more obvious it becomes that the social order over which it presides has turned into an impediment to human liberation, the more is its ideology taken over by anti-intellectualism, irrationalism, and superstition. And by the same token, the more difficult it becomes for the intellectual to withstand the social pressures brought upon him, to avoid surrendering to the ruling ideology and succumbing to the intellect workers' comfortable and lucrative conformity. Under such conditions it becomes a matter of supreme importance and urgency to insist on the function and to stress the commitment of the intellectual. For it is under such conditions that it falls to his lot, both as a responsibility and as a privilege, to save from extinction the tradition of humanism, reason, and progress that constitutes our most valuable

inheritance from the entire history of mankind.

It may be said that I am identifying being an intellectual with being a hero, that it is unreasonable to demand from people that they should withstand all the pressures of vested interests and brave all the dangers to their individual well-being for the sake of human advancement. I agree that it would be unreasonable to *demand* it. Nor do I. From history we know of many individuals who have been able even in its darkest ages and under the most trying conditions to transcend their private, selfish interests and to subordinate them to the interests of society as a whole. It always took much courage, much integrity, and much ability. All that can be hoped for now is that our country too will produce its "quota" of men and women who will defend the honor of the *intellectual* against all the fury of dominant interests and against all the assaults of agnosticism, obscurantism, and inhumanity.

## Notes

1. ↩ Address delivered to the American Association for the Advancement of Science in New York on December 27, 1960, as published in [Monthly Review, February, 1961](#), p. 507. Italics in the original.
2. ↩ To avoid a possible misunderstanding: intellect workers can be (and sometimes are) intellectuals, and intellectuals are frequently intellect workers. I say frequently, because many an industrial worker, artisan, or farmer can be (and in some historical situations often has been) an intellectual without being an intellect worker.