Intellectuals, Sociology of

1. Origins

Intellectuals are people whose main activities involve producing, evaluating, and distributing culture. Their role often involves endorsing or criticizing the cultural objects of their attention. The intellectual role has been performed in all but the most primitive human societies. However, the Renaissance humanists (circa 1300–1600 CE) were the first influential group resembling today’s intellectuals. Renaissance scholars thought they lived in a golden age of virtue and learning. To emphasize the point, they invented the term ‘Middle Ages’ to refer to the dark gulf separating their era from the glories of the ancient world. Promoting the study of poetry, grammar, rhetoric, history, and moral philosophy, the humanists from Petrarch in the fourteenth century to More, Erasmus, and Rabelais in the sixteenth century influenced the Reformation, the scientific revolution, and the Age of Reason.

Only since about 1600, however, have intellectuals become a large, moderately well-defined, and occasionally self-conscious group. The chief factors that helped to distinguish them were the rise of commerce and industry since the late Middle Ages, the spread of literacy, the growth of markets, and the proliferation of social contexts for intellectual discussion and debate. Flourishing commerce and industry permitted the accumulation of economic surpluses. They were used to expand state and private institutions employing intellectuals. Public education and mass literacy increased demand for intellectual services. In turn, the evolution of markets for these services allowed intellectuals greater freedom to define their political allegiances. The interests of aristocratic and church patrons no longer constrained them.
Finally, a host of modern social settings—ranging from universities to political movements, professional societies to coffee houses, academic journals to mass-circulation newspapers—provided contexts within which intellectuals could formulate their social and political identities.

It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that ‘intellectual’ and the kindred ‘intelligentsia’ entered common parlance. The term ‘intellectual’ was first employed on a wide scale in France. In 1898, Georges Clemenceau referred to the leaders of the anticlerical and antimilitary camp that opposed the conduct of the Dreyfus trial as les intellectuels. Soon the political right was deriding the self-proclaimed conscience of the French nation. Because of the resulting public debate, the term intellectual stuck. The term intelligentsia was popularized in Central and Eastern Europe a few decades earlier. It, too, denoted liberals, socialists, and other critics of authority. Only gradually since the end of the nineteenth century has the term intellectual gained widespread acceptance and succeeded in unwrapping itself from quotation marks.

2. Theories

Many normative or moralistic treatments of the problem of intellectuals may be found in the literature. They make a case for what intellectuals should do. In contrast, this article focuses on the analytical literature, which seeks to explain why intellectuals do what they do. Three main analytical traditions inform the sociological study of intellectuals. Sociologists have regarded intellectuals as (a) members of a class or as a class in their own right; (b) relatively classless; and (c) embedded in a shifting network of class and other group affiliations.

Class theory. Early Marxists asserted that intellectuals are bound to become members of the proletariat under capitalism. Later Marxists, disappointed with the failure of many intellectuals to become radicalized, claimed they are part of the petite bourgeoisie. Both Marxists and non-Marxists updated these assertions in the 1970s. The middle of the class structure had expanded enormously over the preceding century. People with university degrees filled many of the middle ranks. Reflecting on this change, some social thinkers argued that the intellectuals form a class. Alvin Gouldner held that the intellectuals form a new ‘emancipatory class.’ Barbara and John Ehrenreich maintained that intellectuals form part of a new ‘professional-managerial class.’ Irving Kristol called intellectuals the ‘new class of knowledge workers.’ These and other scholars disagreed about the political interests of the intellectuals. However, they shared the view that intellectuals form a large, rising, and ideologically quite homogeneous class.

Theories of classlessness. In contrast, Karl Mannheim held that modern intellectuals form neither a class nor part of a class. Instead, they are ‘members of a relatively classless stratum which is not too firmly embedded in the social order.’ Intellectuals are typically recruited from various classes. However, because they participate in a common educational milieu, their class differences, and the variations in outlook normally associated with them, tend to be suppressed. Others echoed Mannheim’s conclusions. Talcott Parsons asserted that intellectuals put ‘cultural considerations before social ones.’ Everett C. Ladd and Seymour Martin Lipset wrote that the capacity of intellectuals for social criticism, creativity, innovation, and attention to facts enables them to overcome their class socialization—and, for that matter, the influence of many other groups and communities to which they belong.

Theories of shifting social networks. Both class theories and theories of classlessness ignore some crucial issues. For example, intellectuals may be found at all points on the political spectrum. Yet class theories briefly note ideological heterogeneity, dismiss it as an uninteresting side issue, and leave it unexplained. Meanwhile, theories of classlessness minimize the significance of social influences on the shaping of ideas. Thus, they deflect attention from the very issue that the sociology of intellectuals is supposed to analyze.

A third approach seeks to overcome both these problems by focusing on the intellectual’s web of shifting group affiliations. According to Pierre Bourdieu, cultural fields tie individual and organizational actors together in various social institutions. These cultural fields are structured as social networks. Different positions in a social network are associated with different endowments of economic, social, and cultural capital. Network position is also associated with cognitive structure. Thus, intellectuals in similar network positions share tastes, ideas, and values. Randall Collins’ analysis of philosophical schools takes this argument a step further by showing how intellectuals gain reputations by successfully competing for attention, fame, and influence in intellectual networks.

Bourdieu’s and Collins’ mesolevel theories are compatible with Robert Brym’s macrolevel approach. Developing themes in Antonio Gramsci’s essay on intellectuals, Brym argues that the ideologies and political allegiances of intellectuals depend on their social origins and the structure of opportunities for education, employment, and political involvement they face during their careers. These opportunity structures are, in turn, shaped by the relative power of major classes and other groups. Accordingly, to explain intellectuals’ ideologies and political allegiances, one must trace their paths of social mobility as they are shaped by the capacity of classes and other groups to expand the institutional milieux through
which intellectuals pass. To the degree these milieux are imprinted with the interests of the classes and other groups that control them, they circumscribe the class and other group interests reflected in intellectuals’ ideological and political allegiances. From this point of view, it is an oversimplification to say that intellectuals form a class, are members of a class, or are classless. They are embedded in social networks whose ties to various classes and other groups shift over time and help account for their ideologies and political allegiances. This theme has also been taken up by Jerome Karabel. It is illustrated in the remainder of this article.

3. Social Origins and Institutional Opportunities

3.1 Social Origins

In Weimar Germany, professors were largely anti-republican and Right-wing. Mostly their fathers were military officers, state bureaucrats, and academics: members or handmaiden of the aristocracy. In contrast, nonacademic intellectuals were inclined to the left. They tended to be children of successful participants in the Industrial Revolution: members of the upstart German bourgeoisie. Similarly, in the middle of the nineteenth century, Russia’s conservative and politically moderate intellectuals were recruited overwhelmingly from the aristocracy. On the other hand, the first generation of truly radical Russian intellectuals dates from the 1860s, and it contained in its ranks a large mixture of commoners. Their fathers were merchants, peasants, and petty officials. These examples illustrate that support for the traditional social order is common among intellectuals who have been reared in upper-class families that are threatened by social change. Being born into a less advantaged class has usually been associated with greater potential for intellectual radicalism.

But not always. In North America, rates of upward social mobility are higher than in Europe, and historically class has been a less important social distinction. As a result, class origin has less bearing on the ideologies and political allegiances of North American than European intellectuals. Especially in the United States, ethnic and racial origin, educational background, field of expertise, professional and institutional status, and generational experience matter more. Accordingly, American surveys show that professors in small provincial universities are more likely to be politically conservative than professors in prestigious Ivy League universities. African-American and Jewish intellectuals are usually more liberal than non-Jewish white intellectuals. Young intellectuals who work in the social sciences and cultural fields are more likely to be Left-wing than older intellectuals in industry and business.

3.2 Economic Opportunities

As intellectuals reach adulthood, the structure of markets for intellectuals’ skills can modify their early political socialization. An abundance of secure jobs that allow free expression can dampen intellectuals’ early radical impulses. A lack of such jobs often exerts a radicalizing effect. Some intellectuals may continue to express radical political sentiments after they have taken jobs that suit them professionally. Still, the rate and intensity of radicalism are generally greater when the number of such jobs is fewer.

For example, the Quebec educational system began to produce substantial numbers of highly educated French-speaking graduates in the 1960s. The new graduates found that an English-speaking minority controlled the larger and more efficient businesses in the private sector of the economy. Many highly educated Québécois were shut out of good jobs. This, among other factors, encouraged some of them to develop the idea that to become ‘masters in their own house’ Quebec must become a sovereign state. Surveys show that intellectuals became separatists in disproportionately large numbers and were a driving force leading to the election of separatist governments in 1976 and 1994.

3.3 Political Opportunities

The patterns of political opportunities intellectuals face also profoundly affect their ideas and loyalties. At the level of social organization, political opportunities are structured by the availability of historical agents: workers, peasants, ethnic collectivities, and other groups that intellectuals may demarcate as the chief instruments of social change. Whether intellectuals become, say, socialists, populists, or nationalists is determined partly by which historical agents are mobilized for political action and which are relatively politically dormant at a given time.

At the level of the political system, the capacity of party organizations to absorb new talent is also important in shaping intellectuals’ allegiances. For example, before the 1920s, the German Social Democratic Party had attracted most of the country’s radical intellectuals. In the 1920s, however, it became (to use the then-current catchwords) ‘bossified, ossified, and bourgeoisified.’ Old men remained incumbents in the German Social Democratic Party for many years, and young men and women had little hope of rising in its ranks. Lack of opportunity was one reason the young generation of radicals turned in large numbers to the Communist Party of Germany.

If historical agents are largely unmobilized and no party organization is available to sustain the intellectual’s beliefs, a process of political disillusionment is likely to set in. The lack of a historical agent combined with the presence of a party organization, however, is likely to lead to intellectual elitism.
4. Intellectual Elitism

Ever since Plato envisaged an ideal society ruled by ‘philosopher-kings,’ some intellectuals have been politically motivated or subconsciously driven by the conviction that they are better suited than non-intellectuals to create and maintain a just society. For example, in 1816 Hegel referred to Prussia as ‘the state of the intelligentsia.’ Both he and Comte characterized historical epochs in terms of the accomplishments of the human mind. Moreover, they saw the human mind as the driving force of history and its personification as the intellectual.

Other intellectuals have spurned such elitist views. The degree of elitism expressed by intellectuals varies independently of their position on the left–right dimension of politics. One finds democrats and elitists on both the left and the right. Two sets of circumstances promote intellectual elitism: weak participatory democracy by the masses and lack of competition from other elites.

The history of Latin America illustrates how weak mass demand for political participation encourages intellectual elitism. For example, in the 1950s, Cuban revolutionary intellectuals were faced with a small and reformist working class and a politically inert peasantry. Consequently, they took matters into their own hands, forming guerilla bands in the countryside to seize state power. The low level of popular political participation in, and mass control over, the Cuban revolutionary party diminished the likelihood of subsequent democratic development.

The history of socialism and communism in Russia reveals a similar pattern. However, the Russian case is also instructive because it illustrates the opposite tendency. Even apparently unyielding elitists can democratize if they are pressured from below. Thus, when ties between workers and Russian Marxist intellectuals were dense—during the strike wave of the 1890s, the 1905 revolution, and the period of labor militance in 1912–14—most intellectuals wanted their parties to operate according to democratic principles. In contrast, when working class political participation fell—due to labor quiescence caused by troughs in the business cycle, strong government and police reaction to radical activities, and enormous losses in World War I—intellectuals returned to elitist principles of party organization.

A second precondition of democratic practice among intellectuals is vigorous elite competition. Aristotle argued that justice can be maximized not if philosopher-kings rule, but if constitutions are divided against themselves—if, in other words, there exists what is now called a separation of powers between the various branches of government. Following Aristotle, scholars now commonly believe that tyranny and arbitrary rule by an elite can be prevented if the branches of government hold each other in check. One may invoke a broadly similar principle in analyzing intellectual elitism. Nonintellectual elites need to keep intellectuals in check if they are to prevent the political and social dangers that can result from intellectuals taking Plato to heart.

The most compelling case for the benefits of elite competition derives from the history of communism, the epitome of intellectual tyranny in the twentieth century. Yet the dangers of intellectual elitism have hardly subsided now that the communist era has virtually ended. In much of the world, intellectuals are making bolder claims than ever about their ability to forecast and plan social and scientific change. Governments are respecting those claims by seeking the advice of intellectuals, awarding them research contracts, and employing them by the legion. Emboldened by their growing numbers and prestige, some intellectuals, particularly in the United States and Eastern Europe, have proclaimed themselves the ruling class of the future, the real holders of power in an era when knowledge allegedly means more than capital in determining status.

One should not take intellectuals’ claims about their accomplishments too seriously. Economists, the ‘hardest’ of the social scientists, have failed to forecast and regulate economic trends. Natural scientists have arguably helped to create nearly as many social problems as they have solved.

On the other hand, the dangers of too much intellectual influence on political life should be carefully heeded. Individual intellectuals have proved to be exemplary political leaders, but when intellectuals are in a position to impose their blueprints on society the result is often more harm than good. The ‘shock therapy’ advocated by the academics who formed the core of the Russian government late in 1991 caused tremendous social dislocation and political reaction that undermined reform in that country. This is only the latest example of what can happen when intellectuals rule. It seems reasonable to conclude that the practice of politics is much too serious a matter to be left only to the intellectuals.

Bibliography


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Intelligence: Central Conceptions and Psychometric Models

1. Lasting Debates in Intelligence Research: The Elusive Concept of Intelligence

Given its practical importance in individual lives and societies, the topic of ‘intelligence’ attracts much attention and debates both among the researchers and the general public. The research of intelligence has been pursued by psychometricians, cognitive psychologists, and developmentalists (see Sternberg et al. 1994 for comprehensive reviews; see also Intelligence: Historical and Conceptual Perspectives and Intelligence: History of the Concept). However, not many other terms in psychology are so elusive as ‘intelli-

gence’ escaping consensual definitions over more than 100 years of research. Tracking chronologically the reports of three representative forums, each participated by experts in the field, sheds some light on the changing terrain of intelligence research during the twentieth century.

In 1921, a classical symposium convened by the editors of the Journal of Educational Psychology was held to discuss three questions: (a) What is intelligence?; (b) How can it be best measured?; (c) What are the most crucial next steps in research? (Thurstone et al. 1921). Among the 17 leading researchers who participated, 14 different answers were given! About one fourth of the participants suggested elementary processes (i.e., perception, sensation, and attention) as primary attributes of intelligence. Another fourth of the experts thought that physiological mechanisms of the brain should be the determining factors, and there were still others who contented that overt adaptive behavioral responses are the key features of intelligence. Sixty-five years later, a succeeding effort with 27 experts was arranged to address the exact same questions (Stenberg and Detterman 1986); however, the degree of lack of consensus remains similar to that was in 1921. Experts of the 1986 forum offered two dozen definitions.

Aside from the diverse conceptions among researchers, two popular books also sparked heated debates in the general public. The views range from renouncing the idea of ‘measuring’ individuals along the dimension of psychometrically-defined intelligence (S. J. Gould, The Mismeasure of Man, 1981) to the belief in a general intelligence factor (R. J. Herrnstein and C. Murray, The Bell Curve, 1994). Reacting to these controversial debates, in 1995 the Board of Scientific Affairs of the American Psychological Association called for an another authoritative report from a dozen experts in the field to discuss the ‘knowns and unknowns’ of intelligence (Neisser et al. 1996). The diversities and controversies surrounding conceptions of intelligence led some researchers to contend that the multiple determinants (and their relations) contributing to individual differences in intelligence could only be understood within integrative frameworks.

2. Some Lasting Trends and an Attempt of Integration

In order to highlight a few continuing trends hidden behind the overwhelming diversities, organizers of the 1986 forum compared the main issues raised in their discussions with those that were discussed in 1921 and showed that there were some general agreements across the two efforts (Stenberg and Detterman 1986).

Specifically, conceptions including attributes such as adaptation to the environment, basic cognitive processes, and higher-order thinking (i.e., reasoning, problem