

# SUFFER THE INTELLECTUALS

**Owen Harries** explains why predictions by intellectuals so often turn out to be wrong

**O**n political matters particularly, intellectuals tend to share these two characteristics: they are slaves of fashion, and, on the big questions, they tend to get things hopelessly wrong. Contemplating his fellow big thinkers in New York, the art critic Harold Rosenberg once famously described them as ‘a herd of independent minds.’ The description applied, and applies, beyond New York. Intellectuals generally are prone to run together. Beneath their often savage surface differences and scorn for orthodoxy, there is usually a surprising degree of uncritical acceptance of erroneous views concerning the way things are and, in particular, the way things are going.

Thus, if you had been an intellectual living in 1910 or thereabouts, it is more than likely that you would have subscribed to the view propagated by Norman Angell in *The Great Illusion* that war was a dying institution (because it did not pay), and that the forces of capitalism—of technology, free trade and liberal rationality—were rapidly creating a peaceful and borderless world. You would have been wrong, of course. But the fact that an unprecedentedly bloody war followed shortly afterwards did not prevent Angell from being awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in due course.

Had you been a typical intellectual twenty-five years later, on the other hand, you would have believed the exact opposite: that, with the Great Depression, the world was witnessing the death throes of capitalism and liberalism, that the failed system was destroying itself due to its ‘internal contradictions.’ To replace it, there was

a ‘Coming Struggle for Power,’ to quote the title of another enormously influential book, by John Strachey—a fight to the death between fascism and communism.

Indeed, the belief that capitalism was finished remained intellectual orthodoxy in Europe well into the next decade. In 1945, for example, one of Britain’s leading historians, A. J. P. Taylor, was assuring his BBC audience, ‘Nobody in Europe believes in the American way of life, that is, in private enterprise. Or rather, those who believe in it are a defeated party, and a party which seems to have no more future than the Jacobites in England after 1688.’

Even later, at the end of the 1940s, the influential editor and man of letters Cyril Connolly was saying the same sort of thing more poetically: ‘It is closing time in the gardens of the West and from now on an artist will be judged only by the resonance of his solitude or the quality of his despair.’

All this as the West was on the eve of the biggest surge of economic prosperity ever witnessed in human history, brought about by the supposedly terminally ill capitalist system.

Go on another couple of decades and the prevailing intellectual view was that the totalitarian

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communist system was indestructible, the Soviet Union was winning the Cold War, and the United States—defeated by a peasant army in Vietnam, torn by internal dissent, disgraced by Watergate—was losing it.

As late as 1984, the intellectuals' favorite economist, John Kenneth Galbraith, was insisting that 'the Soviet system has made great material progress in recent years,' and that 'the Russian system succeeds because, in contrast with the Western industrial economies, it makes full use of its manpower.' Even later, in 1987, a history book—Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*—made an enormous impact in intellectual circles when it depicted the United States as suffering badly from 'imperial overstretch' and facing decline. And later still, into the 1990s, it was widely predicted that Japan—and perhaps Germany!—would soon overtake America economically.

Nor should one forget the apocalyptic conclusion of the Club of Rome in the 1970s—that, unless prompt and drastic action was taken to limit population and industrial growth, the world would self-destruct by the end of the century—which was enthusiastically seized on by most intellectuals. Before the end of the decade, the Club's book, *The Limits of Growth* (1972), had sold four million copies and become the bible of the enlightened.

And so it goes. Why do intellectuals get things so wrong, so often? The question is worth asking because they are still with us, still vocal, still taken seriously by many as interpreters of the course of human history. A large part of the answer, surely, lies in the intellectuals' search for—demand for—coherence in human affairs, for pattern, meaning, and consistency. This was once found in the form of religion; for the last hundred years or more, most intellectuals have found it in the form of ideology.

Ideologies vary a good deal, but among the things they have in common is that they all require great selectivity with respect to empirical evidence. That which supports the ideological creed is readily assimilated and emphasised; that which conflicts with it is either noisily rejected or quietly filtered out and ignored. This process can be sustained for a very long time, and even in the face of mountains of contrary evidence. The ideological cast of mind is necessarily hostile

to genuine inquiry and critical thinking—to the testing of hypotheses, the search for and serious evaluation of counter-evidence, the revision or abandonment of key assumptions. For it is in the nature of ideology that the truth is considered to be already known.

As an enterprise that proceeds in a priori terms, it is also in the nature of ideological thinking that it scorns practical experience as a source of understanding and wisdom. Thus, individuals who have never organised anything more demanding than a round-robin letter to the editor or a university tutorial will without hesitation dismiss as simpletons and ignoramuses individuals who have been responsible for organising and implementing vast practical projects. To take a typical example, Dwight Eisenhower, the man responsible for planning and putting into effect the D-Day landing in World War II, was treated as a bit of an idiot by most intellectuals (at least until he warned against the emergence of a 'military industrial complex' in his farewell address as president).

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The literary critic and historian of ideas Edmund Wilson once identified another feature of intellectuals that helps explain why they get things wrong so often. Men of his generation and background, he observed, found it extraordinarily difficult to divest themselves of the assumption of inevitable progress. Brought up on it, their whole picture of the universe was constructed around it, and they were still likely to cling to it even in the face of compelling evidence to the contrary.

Wilson was writing in the middle of the last century, but the cast of mind that he identified has continued to exist to the present. The ideologies that most intellectuals have adhered to—liberalism, Marxism, democratic socialism—all assume inevitable progress. Insofar as it subscribes to the 'end of history' thesis, so does neoconservatism. And so does the current ideology of salvation by 'globalisation,' which is really an updated version

of the free-trade liberalism that Cobden and Bright preached in Manchester a century and a half ago.

The trouble with ideologies that preach inevitable progress—or one of the troubles, for there are many—is that they encourage linear thinking and discourage the factoring in of surprises, discontinuities, and disasters. (In the case of liberalism, the path is supposed to be pretty straightforward, with the future being essentially the present writ large; in the case of Marxism, the path is meant to zigzag a bit on the way. But utopia is the inevitable destination in both cases.)

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In his 1946 essay on James Burnham, George Orwell identifies another characteristic that in his opinion causes intellectuals to get things wrong: power worship. During the course of his career, Burnham, author of *The Managerial Revolution* (1941) and very influential in his day, was to move through the whole political spectrum from the far left to the far right. He made predictions with all the confidence of his intellectual status. But Orwell noted two things about these predictions: first, they varied greatly and tended to contradict one another; second, and even more serious, they were all quickly proved wrong by events. During World War II, for instance, Burnham in rapid succession predicted that Germany was bound to win the war, that Germany would not attack the Soviet Union until after the defeat of Britain, and that the Soviet Union would gang up with Japan in order to prevent the total defeat of the latter.

Orwell treats Burnham as a serious figure. Of his theory of a managerial takeover of modern societies, Orwell concedes that 'as an interpretation of what is happening, Burnham's theory is extremely plausible, to put it at its lowest.' So why were his predictions so poor? Orwell's answer is that 'at each point Burnham is predicting a continuation of the thing that is happening' at the time of writing.

Orwell goes on to offer his explanation for why he did this, and it is a very severe one:

Now the tendency to do this is not simply a bad habit, like inaccuracy or exaggeration, which one can correct by taking thought. It is a major mental disease, and its roots lie partly in cowardice and partly in the worship of power, which is not fully separable from cowardice. ... Power-worship blurs political judgment because it leads, almost unavoidably, to the belief that present events will continue. Whoever is winning at the moment will always seem to be invincible.

Orwell goes on to mention that in these respects Burnham is not peculiar but highly typical—typical of 'the power-worship now so prevalent among many intellectuals.' As evidence of this, he points to the fact that 'it was only after the Soviet regime became unmistakably totalitarian that English intellectuals, in large numbers, began to show an interest in it.' He also claims that in the desperate days of 1940 English intellectuals were much more resigned to the inevitability of a German victory than were ordinary people.

What is there to be said about Orwell's charges against Burnham? He is surely right in identifying, and condemning, the tendency to assume that whoever, or whatever, is winning at the moment is going to prevail in the long term. Intellectuals do this regularly, if not compulsively. Their record with respect to the prospects of democracy over the last thirty years provides a striking case in point.

By the mid-1970s, Western liberal democracy had experienced a decade's worth of battering from a variety of sources: antiwar protesters, members of the 'counterculture,' student protest movements, civil disobedience, domestic terrorists and assassins, corruption in high places and, in the case of the United States, defeat in war. The immediate reaction to all this on the part of many intellectuals, including some very eminent ones, was that it signalled the end of democracy. Thus, the intellectually formidable and usually sensible Daniel Patrick Moynihan proclaimed—in the tenth-anniversary issue of the *Public Interest*, of all

places—that ‘liberal democracy on the American model increasingly tends to the condition of monarchy in the 19th century: a holdover form of government ... which has simply no relevance to the future. It is where the world was, not where it is going.’ These views were echoed by a leading French commentator, Jean-François Revel, who considered that ‘democracy may, after all, turn out to have been a historical accident, a brief parenthesis that is closing before our eyes.’

The predictions of Moynihan and Revel turned out to be unfortunately timed. For, even as they wrote, democracy’s bad decade was ending and a spectacular reversal soon ensued. Beginning in the mid-1970s, a democratic wave surged through southern Europe (Portugal, Spain, and Greece), followed by waves across Latin America and in the Asia-Pacific region (South Korea, Taiwan, Papua New Guinea, and several of the smaller island states of the southwest Pacific). The collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of its bloc produced another substantial crop of new democracies.

Indeed, by the end of the 1980s, Francis Fukuyama was making precisely the opposite claim to that made only a short time before by Moynihan and Revel: that liberal democracy, the only ideology left standing at the end of a violent and turbulent century, had triumphed, and that its triumph was final. History, in the sense of a struggle between competing visions of the world, was over. A cruder and more activist version of Fukuyama’s thesis, one that maintained that the final triumph of democracy could not simply be left to ‘history’ but must be helped along by the vigorous application of American military power, was to animate the presidency of George W. Bush.

All these examples, together with the earlier ones given, support Orwell’s contention that intellectuals are inclined to believe that ‘whoever is winning at the moment will always seem to be invincible.’ But do they also support his explanation—that this is all due to power worship?

Certainly there is plenty of evidence of such worship in the history of the last century. How else can one explain the widespread adoration among intellectuals of such vile and murderous figures as Stalin and Mao Zedong, which persisted long after evidence of their true nature was abundantly available? Less obviously (and much less obnoxiously), a kind of power worship may

be evident in the way in which some intellectuals of the Left—notably those who had spent most of their lives being highly critical of, if not hostile toward, the United States as long as it was in a prolonged struggle with the Soviet Union—suddenly became enamoured of America once it became the ‘sole remaining superpower’ and the ‘indispensable nation.’

But that, and more, being conceded to the power-worship thesis, it seems to me that it is worth considering another explanation for the intellectuals’ error of assuming that the trends of the moment must inevitably prevail. In many instances it may be due less to power worship than to a form of egocentricity, a narcissistic belief that what is happening now, in their lifetime, is uniquely important and valid. This has been aptly called ‘the parochialism of the present,’ and it represents an utter failure of historical perspective on the part of those who are supposed to possess it. As an explanation of error, it is persuasive because vanity is such a striking feature of intellectuals. (There are, of course, equally striking exceptions to this tendency, including the present writer and surely you, dear reader.)

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Is all this worth bothering about? Probably, yes. We are living at the beginning of an epoch whose essential character still awaits definition. At present, several competing herds of independent minds are careering around, noisily insisting that their preferred label—‘American Hegemony,’ ‘Borderless World,’ ‘Rise of the Asian Giants,’ ‘Postmodern World,’ ‘Ecological Catastrophe,’ ‘War on Terror,’ etc., etc.—does the trick. As we listen to them, it will do no harm, and it might do some good, to bear in mind what an appalling record of prediction intellectuals have had over the last century.

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