

JUDGE THEM BY THEIR ACTIONS

Intellectuals aren't as smart as they think they are, writes **Michael Duffy**

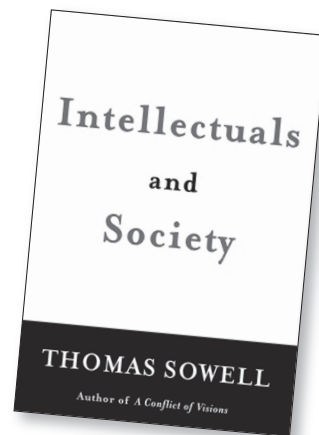
Intellectuals and Society

By Thomas Sowell

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Thomas Sowell doesn't like his fellow intellectuals very much. Where Paul Johnson, in his 1988 book *Intellectuals*, was prepared to eviscerate a relatively small number of deep thinkers, Sowell takes on the entire class. He concludes they are responsible for a great deal of the misery of recent centuries. There's not much doubt about communism being an intellectuals' project, but Sowell believes intellectuals are still ruining the lives of ordinary folk around the world because of their pernicious influence over governments.

He defines intellectuals as those who deal with ideas but not their application: 'Adam Smith never ran a business,' he notes, 'and Karl Marx never administered a Gulag.' Most contemporary intellectuals are academics in the humanities, largely of the left or its successor ideologies. They believe themselves capable of providing society with an analysis of its problems and solutions. This is a little broad-brush, but we know who he's talking about.

Sowell described the intellectuals' confidence in their ability to understand and change the

world in his 1995 book *The Vision of the Anointed*. *Intellectuals and Society* is in large part a repetition of the arguments found there and in other books, of which 79-year-old Sowell, a scholar at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, has written many. In particular, he has been an impressively lucid populariser of liberal economics (e.g. *Basic Economics*) and an original thinker on race relations (e.g. *Black Rednecks and White Liberals*).

Sowell has been something of a pioneer in the now popular field where economists apply some tools of their trade, such as the knowledge of incentives and statistics, to areas rarely investigated in this manner before. 'To understand the role of intellectuals in society,' he writes, 'we must understand what they do—not what they say

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they do, or even what they may think they are doing, but what in fact are their actions and the social consequences of those actions.' Given that intellectuals are usually considered from the point of view of culture, in other words pretty much on their own terms, this is a useful approach.

The book begins with an interesting proposal, that intellectuals suffer from their own version of the knowledge problem. Friedrich Hayek identified the knowledge problem as it applied to central planning, where no one person or group of people can ever know enough to plan for others at any level of detail. The necessary knowledge is too extensive and too dispersed. It exists, both consciously and unconsciously, in huge numbers of other people, and is also embodied in customs and institutions. The only way to convey this knowledge is through floating prices, which require free markets.

Sowell says intellectuals have much in common with the central planners who used to set more than 24 million prices in the old Soviet Union. They believe they know enough to do the job, which in their case is to understand society's problems and devise effective solutions. They believe this because they know far more about their area of expertise than most people do, something Sowell has no quibble with. But even though they might know more than you or me, do they know enough? He says no. He argues that intellectuals cannot understand complex problems sufficiently to devise sweeping solutions, because the necessary knowledge, as in the case of prices and markets, is too enormous and dispersed to be adequately grasped by any individual or group.

Sowell is not arguing against expertise, just that experts are not nearly as smart as they—and we—think they are. Therefore, we ought to have much less confidence in the pronouncements of intellectuals and much more scepticism about accepting their constant proposals for major change. 'If no one has even one per cent of the knowledge currently available,' he notes, '... the imposition from the top down of the notions in favour among elites, convinced of their own superior knowledge and virtue, is a formula for disaster.'

The belief to the contrary is based on what Sowell calls 'the vision of the anointed,' basically a continuation of the Whig view of history, which

sees human existence as continually improvable through government action. This encourages a model of society as a set of problems requiring solutions crafted by intellectuals and applied by politicians. It is left-wing in part because it requires bigger government to satisfy the continual need for change. This explains why most intellectuals are of the left: the vision of the anointed, as well as providing self-esteem, is a vast job-creation scheme.

In contrast to this upbeat worldview is a darker and older one that sees civilisation as constantly at risk of slipping back into chaos, its institutions hard-won and not fully understood by anyone, with attempts to change the existing order fraught with unknown risks. In this view, intellectuals are as likely to be wreckers as saviours. It's a view that can be traced back at least to the ancient Greeks and to the idea of original sin, and is routinely dismissed by some on the left as unnecessarily timid and fearful. It has had few modern proponents among intellectuals, although one was Kingsley Amis, who noted of some proposed 'reform' of the time, 'More will mean worse.'

Sowell says:

The two visions differ fundamentally not only in how they see the world but also in how those who believe in these visions see themselves. If you happen to believe in free markets, judicial restraint, traditional values and other features of the tragic vision, then you are just someone who believes in free markets, judicial restraint and traditional values. There is no personal exaltation resulting from those beliefs. But to be for 'social justice' and 'saving the environment,' or to be 'anti-war' is more than just a set of beliefs about empirical facts. This vision puts you on a higher moral plane as someone concerned and compassionate, someone who is for peace in the world, a defender of the downtrodden, and someone who wants to preserve the beauty of nature and save the planet from being polluted by others less caring. In short, one vision makes you someone special and the other vision does not.

Sowell spends much of his bitter book describing disasters that occurred after politicians took the advice of intellectuals. Examples include economic blunders, educational reform, and opposing the Vietnam War. He notes that few intellectuals have ever had to account to society for such failures. Most people work in jobs where their output is tested by some sort of objective factor. Sales people, for instance, have to sell things; doctors are expected to make most patients better; engineers lose their jobs if their edifices fall down. But intellectuals have traditionally been resistant to any external testing of the truth of the ideas they deal with. The only test that most acknowledge is the acceptance of their peers.

As the great post-war French writer Jean-Francois Revel noted, ‘Those who hold the monopoly of error reserve to themselves the monopoly of rectification.’

Non-intellectuals might well find this strange: they wonder about an occupation where ridiculous or disastrous ideas, such as communism, can be accepted and respected, sometimes for decades. They may find the price intellectuals charge for their virtue a little high.

Sowell notes the tremendous importance played by the up-market media in supporting the vision of the anointed. This is done not by lying—or not often, anyway—but by simply not reporting most facts inconsistent with the required view. The vision of the anointed can only exist inside a knowledge bubble.

Apart from the problems that intellectuals have created in particular areas of policy, Sowell sees them as loosening the bonds that hold society together. They have done this by attacking the old bonds, such as family, religion and patriotism, and replacing them with awkward categories such as class and gender. He ends the book by raising the possibility that this could lead to the disintegration of American society.

As that last point suggests, there are some sweeping judgments here, and where examples are provided there is sometimes the feeling that cherries are being picked. Most of the examples are restricted to America and are decades old, and will be familiar to readers of previous books by the author.

Another problem is the failure to consider some important questions raised. If intellectuals are as malevolent as Sowell says, why is this so? Why don't politicians, and the rest of us, just ignore them? It seems to me the core problem could be that too many of us, not just in the intelligentsia but in society more broadly, have been prepared to give too much respect to ideas and their petrified form, ideology, when it comes to thinking about what government should do. (Revel again: ‘Ideology functions as a machine to destroy information, even at the price of making assertions in clear contradiction of the evidence.’) One reason for this state of affairs could be the way universities function and are regarded by society. Sowell's initial thoughts on the intellectuals' knowledge problem are promising but they are not developed.

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Another question, given Sowell's sweeping denunciations, is whether intellectuals should have any influence on politicians, and if so, how much. He seems to approve of intellectuals such as Milton Friedman and William F. Buckley. What role, if any, should they play? What influence did they have on Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan? Was it a good one?

I get the impression that Sowell is often more interested in damning intellectuals of the left than understanding them. I felt something similar with Richard Posner's 2003 *Public Intellectuals* (where the species has been ruined by university employment and the resulting specialisation) and Frank Furedi's *Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone?* (where the problem is a dumbing down).

A more perceptive writer on the subject has been Clive James, whose 2007 *Cultural Amnesia* is in part a conservative history of Western political intellectuals. (The above gags from Amis and Revel are pinched from it.) On Thatcher and the free market ideologists, James wrote, I suspect wisely,

‘the only political theories worthy of the name are descriptive, not prescriptive. If prescriptive theories have plausible hopes of filling a gap left by a decayed or undeveloped institution, the game is already lost. [Thatcher] should have trusted her instincts and shut out the smart voices, which—as often happens when they at last get a hearing—turned out to be not smart enough.’

Despite the problems with Sowell’s book, if you’re interested in the subject and unfamiliar with his previous work, you’ll find much that is good here. And the guy can sure turn a phrase: let me end with two examples.

Despite the often expressed dichotomy between chaos and planning, what is called ‘planning’ is the forcible *suppression* of millions’ of peoples’ plans by a government-imposed plan.

And

Many of what are called social problems are differences between the theories of intellectuals and the realities of the world—differences which many intellectuals interpret to mean that it is the real world that is wrong and needs changing.

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