

The Folly of the Intellectuals

Daniel Pipes

A [16th-century English expression](#) holds that “there’s no fool like an old fool.” But the emergence of totalitarian ideologies like fascism, communism, and Islamism around World War I means this saying needs be amended to “there’s no fool like an intellectual fool.”

An intellectual is someone engaged in the world of ideas; who reads and writes for a living; who turns facts into theories. [Jean-Paul Sartre](#) defined him as “someone who interferes in what does not concern him.” Cute that, but intellectuals overwhelmingly criticize their own societies, something that provides a useful function in autocracies but has an insidious impact in democracies; just note the current educational system.

The late Professor Paul Hollander (1932-2019) studied in depth the exuberant praise of totalitarian leaders by well-fed, free, and celebrated Western thinkers. His [final work](#), *From Benito Mussolini to Hugo Chavez: Intellectuals and a Century of Political Hero Worship* (Cambridge University Press, 2017) surveyed this phenomenon since its origins in World War I. [John Earl Haynes](#) has helpfully collected some of the more outrageous quotes emanating from those celebrated minds, with one added by me:

Mussolini: Herbert Croly, founding editor of the American magazine, *The New Republic*, gushed over the “élan of Italian nationalism which ... would enable Italians to master themselves through a renewal of moral vision.” He called fascism “a political experiment which aroused in a whole nation an increased

moral energy and dignified its activities by subordinating them to a deeply felt common purpose.”

Hitler: Arnold Toynbee, the influential English world historian, interviewed the German *Führer* in 1936 and reported being “convinced of his sincerity in desiring peace in Europe.”

Stalin: Jerome Davis, a famed Yale Divinity School theologian, thought “it would be an error to consider the Soviet leader a willful man who believes in forcing his ideas upon others.”

Mao: John K. Fairbank, Harvard’s dean of American China scholars, asserted, “The Maoist revolution is on the whole the best thing that happened to the Chinese people in centuries” and concluded that Mao’s China “is much more our friend than our enemy. It is peculiarly self-absorbed and nonaggressive abroad.”

Arafat: [Edward Said](#), a university professor at Columbia, said the Palestinian leader “made the P.L.O. a genuinely representative body.”

Khomeini: Richard Falk, a Princeton political scientist, judged that the Iranian ayatollah had created “a new model of popular revolution, based for the most part on non-violent tactics.” He went on to conclude that “Iran may yet provide us with a desperately needed model of human governance for a third-world country.”

Castro: Acclaimed American novelist Norman Mailer flattered his Cuban host with “You were the first and greatest hero to appear in the world since the Second War ... you are the answer to the argument ... that revolutions cannot last, that they turn corrupt or total or they eat their own.”

Kim Jong II: University of Chicago historian Bruce Cumings depicts the North Korean dictator as “a homebody who doesn’t socialize much, doesn’t drink

much and works at home in his pajamas. ... He most enjoys tinkering with his many music boxes, sitting on the floor. ... He is prudish and shy, and like most Korean fathers, hopelessly devoted to his son.”

These fawning testimonies inspire several conclusions:

* I also read, think, and write for a living, so I distance myself from these intellectual dolts by [explaining](#) that I have “the simple politics of a truck driver, not the complex ones of an academic.”

* Universities host far too many humanities and social science programs (a [Chair in Transgender Studies?](#)) while [poseurs and provocateurs](#) dominate the art world (a [\\$120,000 banana?](#) a \$69.3 million [digital artwork?](#)) Conversely, more vocational and technical schools are needed, along with genuine artists.

* [Paul Johnson's](#) 1988 book, *Intellectuals: From Marx and Tolstoy to Sartre and Chomsky* exposed unpleasant and amusing personal foibles. But that's a sideshow. The real problem is that, in the aggregate, the editors, professors, and writers who concern themselves with politics and the arts get it more wrong than right and so have a more harmful effect than a constructive one.

Where will it end? Not well. Intellectuals proliferate as robots and artificial intelligence increasingly take over practical work, so leisure time expands, inviting greater convolutedness and egoism. Common sense becomes ever more difficult as governments provide guaranteed incomes and food apparently grows in supermarkets. By not appreciating the fundamentals but relentlessly finding fault, intellectuals are taking us down a dark path.

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