

Intellectuals: Public, Private and Platonic

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Abstract: Intellectuals all over the world have been a breed of people different from the rest of the society. Different not simply because they follow a different form of occupation from the rest of the society but mostly because the life associated with that occupation translates into a role and functions which determine what a society thinks and how it acts. They have been the creator of the economic, political and cultural life of a society, so much so that the modern society may be seen as largely the result of their creation. Yet, and in spite of, the dominant role they play in society, they remain difficult to understand and to analyze or even to classify them into any coherent category. I have discussed many of these issues elsewhere. Here an attempt is made to locate this rather amorphous group of people into a typological construct. "Public Intellectuals, Private Intellectuals and Platonic Intellectuals" are the classifications proposed for such a typology, the rationale for which is offered therein.

Keywords: intellectuals, intelligentsia, public Intellectuals, private intellectuals, Platonic intellectuals, classification of intellectuals

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The day man found a way to dodge manual work and was yet able to convince the society of his importance, the intellectual was born. The excuses for not working were translated into all kinds of mumbo-jumbo, like witchcraft and magic. Gradually however, they had to prove their real worth as in terms of medicine-men and keepers and teachers of knowledge. But the basic distinction of the intellectuals as anti-manual workers remains till today and one way or the other they keep dodging manual work but they also continue to contribute to the society in ways that other strata of the population do not. They not only continue to affect the knowledge content of the society, they also influence the economy and politics and are the prime builders of civilization and culture. They are the creators of all that is beautiful in human society like art, literature, music and philosophy. They have been the most vicious opponents of dictators all over the world but they have themselves ruled societies with iron-clad authority.

It is this enigmatic group of people, who have been the locus of every society for millennia past, is the focus of this paper. Their role and position in society in the recent times have become even more unfathomable with the fall of the Soviet Russia and the rise of the global system. We shall, thus, in this paper try to understand these, rather, baffling group of people and their role in society today, a task made further difficult since I too consider myself as being one of them.

First, However, it must be noted that the term intellectual does not mean the same thing to all those who work with the intellectuals or even to the intellectuals themselves. Nor must we assume that the

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term intellectual of today was used to mean the same thing over the long period of history. Indeed, the term intellectual came to its modern usage only in the 19th century during the Dreyfus affairs in France, in 1898, when Georges Clemenceau referred to the leaders of the anticlerical and antimilitary camp that opposed the conduct of the Dreyfus trial as *les intellectuals* (Brym, 1980; 2001). The term made its mark and stuck on even after the end of the affair. A few decades before that another term, *intelligentsia*, was also being used in Central and Eastern Europe to identify the liberals, socialists and other critics of authority. Both these terms continue to be in use though sometimes denoting different groups as will be shown later.

By and large, these two terms refer to the group of people whose primary occupation is based on acquiring and disseminating knowledge. For the present purpose we shall use the term intellectual in a very broad and general sense so that we may accommodate the different meanings used by different authors over the years. We shall, of course, look at the deviations from the basic definitions as and when deemed necessary to fully appreciate the meaning of the concept as well as to examine the various roles the intellectuals play in the world, particularly in the global society today. Thus, for the present we shall refer to the intellectuals as the creators of ideas (Brym, 1980) and producers of culture (Brym, 2001). They are a small minority, a breed apart (Benda as quoted in Kimball, 1982), found in every society who provide an interpretation of the world for the society; they create the “world view” for the society (Mannheim, 1936; 1956).

This is the much-used view of the intellectuals, who are seen as emerging with the advent of Enlightenment and modernity. In most cases the term refers to the secular intellectuals, as opposed to the clergy based in the church, and attempts are often made to show the distinctness of the two. Thus, during the Middle Ages in Europe the term *laicus* or layman was used to indicate those without the knowledge of Latin. Until the later Middle Ages intellectuals not connected with the church were treated as *laicus*. A study of the Italian history shows that much of the intellectual work during the middle ages, including those at the court, were performed by the clergy. The secular intellectuals mainly worked as teachers. Writing of literature was not even considered as a profession. In countries like Italy writing in vernacular language soon gained recognition and the entire society became the audience for the intellectuals and they also began to play a role in the life of the court and politics in the towns.

The French essayist Julien Benda in his 1927 publication, *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, uses the medieval term “*cleric*” meaning “scribe” to identify the intellectuals. The term would today include “academics and journalists, pundits, moralists, and pontificators of all varieties”. Benda feels that from the pre-Socratic times the intellectuals have been a breed apart. They are “all those whose activity essentially is *not* the pursuit of practical aims, all those who seek their joy in the practice of an art or a

science or a metaphysical speculation, in short in the possession of non-material advantages." It is because of these men, Benda felt, that civilization came into being (Kimball, 1982).

Brym (2001), who sees the intellectuals as those "whose main activities involve producing, evaluating and distributing culture", shows that although there have always been intellectuals of some sort in every society in the past, the Renaissance humanists between circa 1300 and 1600 were the first who would fit the "current usage" of the term. They promoted the study of poetry, grammar, rhetoric, history, and moral philosophy and helped bring about the Reformation, the Age of Reason and the scientific revolutions of the later days. However, he is quick to point out that it was only after the 1600 that the intellectuals became a "large, moderately well-defined and occasionally self conscious group".

Dennis Smith (2001) similarly shows that the intellectuals in Europe and America belong to a tradition that goes back to the 17th century when the church began to lose its credibility in "defining who we are, how the world is constituted and what rules you should follow in life". He, thus, goes on to define the intellectuals as the "people who use their minds - their power of reason and their power of imagination - as a way of getting knowledge and insight into the ways things are: the way we are, the way the world is." He feels that the intellectuals are the people who ask, and sometimes answer, "awkward and fundamental questions in an interesting way". It involves "attacking or breaking down your own or other people's common-sense assumptions and looking for explanations of the world that are better or more reliable or more interesting or just different." Thus, intellectual activity is driven by curiosity and inspired by the search for "unexpected links, connections and possibilities that transform the way we see the world"

The intellectuals, according to Smith (2001), are not satisfied by conventional wisdom and may try to "reduce its influence or change its character". The intellectuals appealed to "reason rather than faith". They were "highly critical of what they saw as the ignorance and superstition perpetuated by religion". Smith argues that all through the Middle Ages the world was explained away by tradition and custom, ("they always happened that way") and by religion ("it is God's Will"). Thus religion and custom were the two ideas that dominated thinking and, indeed, were all that was necessary to explain the world of nature or of man. Smith then goes on to show that these two ideas were soon replaced by another set of two ideas, namely that of science and technology and that of the market.

As early as the first decades of the 20th century Julien Benda felt the need to differentiate the intellectuals who seek practical ends from those who build ideologies. He identified as intellectuals "all those whose activity essentially is *not* the pursuit of practical aims, all those who seek their joy in the practice of an art or a science or a metaphysical speculation, in short in the possession of non-material advantages." Some like Kimball (2001) uses the term *intelligentsia* to identify the same

group. Bookchin (1991) also uses the term intelligentsia, as opposed to intellectual, to identify this group of “true intellectuals” but excludes the academics from consideration. The intellectuals are the ones who are in the market as commodities and are absorbed by the academia as much as by the government and the corporations. “Their public arena is the classroom and they work according to a syllabus.” Because of this absorption into the universities and into corporations and the state machinery “they end up getting trapped in the institutions so that they can't get out of them anymore.” The intellectuals are, thus, the institutionalized thinkers and institutionalized people who train others, rather than impart wisdom. Thus, the intelligentsia, for him, are the “true intellectuals”

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However, defining the intellectuals thus is not enough to understand the role they play in any society. Many have argued in favour of looking at the political ideology the intellectuals adhere to, to fully understand the role they may play in society. The intellectuals have been seen as the organic, traditional, modern, conservative, progressive, revolutionaries, the left and the right etc. and a role befitting each ideological stand has been attributed to them or to a group of them. I have discussed these issues elsewhere (Islam, 2005) and shall not go into any details here. Suffice it to note that in ideological terms, the left, who played a crucial role in the world polity, had a major setback after the fall of the Soviet System and that the number and the influence of the right are on the rise all over the world. This has been particularly heralded by the unfettered growth of the market economy and globalization.

Of greater importance today is the fact that the gradual involvement of the intellectuals in various occupations in the global system as well as the opportunity to work outside the native land, have had a tremendous impact on the ideological position of the intellectuals. The need to cling to any political ideology or even having an opinion that may affect his or her society and polity in any manner has lost its significance almost completely. Thus, although there has been a phenomenal rise in the number of intellectuals, or at least those who would be treated as intellectuals because of their involvement in what are considered as intellectual professions, the number of intellectuals following any particular political ideology, as is shown below, has become an insignificant minority among the vast multitude of such professionals. And in the work place holding of any ideology may actually be counterproductive for most, as a result, a vast majority have actually become *apolitical*.

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Yet, for me, the real test of being an intellectual is to stand up for the greater needs of the society. Whether as a writer, a professor or a media personality, they participate in the major debates of the society, speak up for justice, freedom and equality, fight against oppression, prejudice and

intolerance, and stand up for humanity. They are the kind of persons Benda or Bookchin calls the "true intellectuals". It is in search of such intellectuals that I have come up with a threefold classification of the intellectuals of today. To illustrate this classification, I propose to go back to history and use the example of three of the greatest intellectuals of all times for heuristic purpose only. These three, belonging to the ancient Greek society, namely Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, do represent three distinct types of intellectual careers and would be very relevant for our purpose here.

Socrates, if we recall, was the typical opposition demagogue, protesting the ills of the society and inevitably incurring the wrath of the establishment, jailed and eventually was forced to take his own life. He represents what is essentially the public role of an intellectual, what is actually "expected" of an intellectual. And following him, through the centuries, there have been so many such public intellectuals, who have risked their lives challenging the establishment in spite of the tragic eventualities, always expected and often perpetrated on them.

Historically, thus, the intellectuals have played an oppositional role and are, hence, expected to continue to play a similar political role. They were the critics in the Dreyfus affair; they were the critics that Benda laments about. They were the radicals and later the left in most societies. According to Sartre "the duty of the intellectual is to denounce injustice wherever it occurs" (quoted by Kellner 1998). The domain of the intellectual is "to write and speak within the public sphere, denouncing oppression and fighting for human freedom and emancipation." (Kellner, 1998). Edward Said (2012) also found the primary role of the intellectuals as oppositional.

Indeed, for many, the real intellectual is the one who plays a political role. Bookchin (1991), though he used the word *intelligentsia*, to identify the "true intellectuals", argues that *intelligentsia* is a concept of Russian origin where it referred to the "people who thought and still lived in a public arena, and who tried to create a public sphere." For him Denis Diderot is an example of the *intelligentsia* "who wrote - virtually in poverty for much of his life - who read and was creative, who walked the streets of Paris intoxicated by the life of the people, who played chess and was involved in the discussions in the cafes, acting as a ferment, challenging authority everywhere along his way and going to prison for a period of time." Thus for Bookchin (1991) the *intelligentsia* are the people who not only engaged in thinking and writing but also "engaged in confrontations with the system instead of shying away from them." The *intelligentsia* (in Russia) went with others to Siberia (on exile) and created enormous social ferment, they worked outside the institutions and would rather create institutions for the masses who needed to understand the real issues of the time (Bookchin, 1991).

This role of the public intellectual was at the root of the emergence of most third world countries, in much of their leadership against colonial oppression and is at the core of all radical politics. The left everywhere, at least before the fall of the Soviet System, fulfilled this role of the public intellectual.

The term public intellectual was first used by C. Wright Mills and has since been made universal by Richard Posner in his celebrated work "Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline" (Harvard University Press, 2001). Posner is looking for this kind of intellectuals in the present day scenario as well. But unfortunately, as in Russell Jacoby's *The Last Intellectual (1989)*, Posner only finds that this type of public intellectual is fast vanishing from the scene.

Instead in its place, a wholly new breed of public intellectuals has emerged. They are also often called the "media intellectuals". Due to the unimaginable explosion of the media all over the world, this new breed of "public" intellectuals has also proliferated. To be in a position to influence public opinion, the intellectuals always needed a platform. In the earlier times word of mouth and face to face dialogue, as with Socrates, were the only means of such communication. Later, the books and finally the news papers offered this stage to the intellectuals. Yet, their power to reach the masses was limited, at the best, to the reading public. The radio and subsequently the television and finally the electronic "social media" have ended all those limitations and today the whole world is open for the intellectuals to influence, if not to manipulate.

But, unfortunately, the role of the intellectual in shaping public knowledge and influencing governmental decisions has only dwindled in real worth. The public intellectuals, or better still, the intellectuals in public forums are a pathetic lot for the simple reason that *those who are intellectuals, worthy of their salt, are not in the public forum, while the ones in the public are not intellectual enough*. When in public, of necessity, the intellectual discussion has to be a much diluted version of what the intellectual may actually know, so that either the intellectual has to stoop down to lower levels to reach the audience or a low level intellectual is more likely to be successful in reaching the public. Unfortunately the latter option seems to have caught on and in reality most of those who face the public today belong to this category. Of course, there are major and celebrated exceptions but, by and large, this seems to be the actual run of the public intellectuals today.

Of equal importance is the fact that the intellectual who once makes a name in the public domain from any one discipline is more likely than not is asked to deliver on subject matters that are best covered by other disciplines. So that, and this I have observed on Bangladesh TV channels, a professor of Bengali language commenting on Indian foreign policy in Central Asia, a poet, who may not have kicked a ball in his life, commenting on World Cup soccer matches and experts of international affairs commenting on everything under the sun. I have heard trash beyond comparison, for instance, a senior professor of English explaining the reason for low enrolment in English medium schools as being high tuition fees, what an intellectual discovery! The same professor (of English) is found almost every day, even live at 1 am in the morning, analyzing everything from "fatwa" to local government

elections. And the number of such public intellectuals is increasing almost exponentially along with the rise in TV channels and the unfettered access to the internet.

These public intellectuals are nowhere close to delivering what the public actually need from them and even though they may simplify a few difficult concepts for the public, unfortunately or, perhaps, fortunately, they are far from influencing the government policies and have very little impact in molding actual public opinion in any significant way. Their total failure to influence the feuding political parties, including the ruling party, an iota in the current bloody run up to the elections in Bangladesh, though dozens of them have been occupying thousands of hours over the many months in front of scores of cameras, speak volumes about their downright impotency.

Yet, there is a pressing need for the public intellectuals, particularly in the face of the global forces that are destroying the very fabric of culture and human decency. In the current absence or impotency of the left, even a few such individuals, as public intellectuals, may help raise awareness of the public against injustices all over the world that go unchallenged and bring relief from the oppression of the rulers and the market forces and, thereby, restore human dignity. The future of the world and mankind depends on them. For they are the true intellectuals!

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Unfortunately, few intellectuals today can be counted as such “true intellectuals”. Not all intellectuals today are engaged in building ideas and ideologies for the public nor are they participating in politics in equal measures. *There are many among the intellectuals today who do not so much as concern themselves with politics or even with the public realm.*

Since the advent of universal education and the growth of universities, the number of people who would be considered as intellectuals or those who work in the intellectual professions, have increased phenomenally, definitely over the past century. As a result, there are literally hundreds of thousands, even millions, within any country, or society, who could be identified as intellectuals. Of course, it would be futile to expect that all of those hundreds of thousands of intellectuals will be involved in public life or even to have strong political opinions. But some must, for the polity and the social beliefs to endure with any dignity.

Unfortunately, and as Brian Martin (1998) feels, most intellectuals just maintain conventional views and lives. There is little inherent radicalism in being an intellectual. Therefore, only a handful of the intellectuals may be involved in shaping the public sphere and the others are simply as passive as the rest of the public, while some may even be apathetic to the public need or be truly *apolitical*. This explains why one may find the intellectuals of today as not meeting the ideal typical expectations. The

number of such uninvolved ones may actually be overwhelmingly large and frustrate any attempt to discover the “true intellectual” among them.

Some see this apathy as the result of two major factors, one is the rise of the academia and the research institutions and absorption into the government bureaucracies and the second is the rise of the market; the culture of the academy and the culture of commerce (Starr, 1995). The culture of commerce turns the intellectual into a commodity while the academia kills the intellectuals. Russell Jacoby (1989) lamented the fact that *most intellectuals have become professors!* Pierre Bourdieu (1985) characterizes intellectuals as “a dominated fraction of the dominant class. They are dominant in so far as they hold the power and privileges conferred by the possession of cultural capital . . . but . . . dominated in their relations with those who hold political and economic power.” What this means in practice is that institutional intellectuals may profess any number of “radical” ideas but are curiously passive vis-à-vis the system itself (Marjorie Perloff, n.d.). Marjorie Perloff finds the intellectuals as a vanishing species so far as “public voice” is concerned.

These intellectuals, in the academia or in government jobs and in corporations, are just living an ordinary life like rest of the society. They live a private life away from the public spotlight. They merely eat, live and procreate like much of the rest of the society and their importance or the role in society is, perhaps, as little exiting as that of any other profession or work force. I see them as representing the life and work of Aristotle as teacher to Alexander the Great, a researcher and a philosopher, being a part of the establishment, indeed, upholding the establishment itself. Supplying its needs and being a part of it.

The role played by these intellectuals in society today is to recreate and perpetuate the society, to maintain the status quo, not to “rock the boat” or to fight against the injustices that may be happening there, to turn a blind eye to oppression and injustices and, as in the case of Aristotle, to even uphold slavery, to enjoy and protect the middle class dream and retire to a blissful life of the suburbia. With little or no ambition beyond building a career in the profession they are involved in, whatever radicalism may be there is spent on campus infighting. *The most challenging thing they will ever do in their lives is to become professors and tutor a new breed of professors.* This is the true life of almost all the intellectuals today.

Regrettably, these private intellectuals are by far the largest group of such professionals. They, in their hundreds of thousand, if not millions, just vegetate, rarely if ever, rising to the needs of the public. They do serve the society and its economy as in the government bureaucracies and corporations or research institutes and are definitely necessary for the survival of that society as they perform the basic needs of imparting knowledge and skills but they do not meet the criteria of being

“true intellectuals” and remain as intellectuals in their private spheres only, not bold enough to risk their middle class life style.

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Between these two above categories of intellectuals, the public and the private, they nearly cover the whole profession. Yet, I find that there are a few amongst us who may be as passive as the private intellectuals but may at the same time seek to be as active as the public intellectuals and want to change the world around them and set up a just society, whatever that may mean to them, even if in their utopian dreams. This is the category I wish to identify as the Platonic Intellectuals, following the historical personality by the name of Plato. Plato, if you remember, wanted to establish a just society, though his sense of justice may not have been much appreciated then or down the historical times. He not only dreamt of establishing a utopian society for which he set up a workable blueprint and wanted to try it out on an experimental basis in Syracuse (Sicily). Only that the king of Syracuse did not empathize with Plato’s dream nor appreciated the role of the “philosopher king” much. Plato’s friends had to rescue him from the prison two years later.

Plato’s conception of the “ideal state” has since been treated as a utopian notion but just try to ponder on the numerous attempts at building such utopias in the nearly two and half thousand years of human history since then. I am more or less certain that many, if not most, I have identified as the private intellectuals have also had the same dream at one time or the other, a dream of setting up a utopian society, becoming the “superman”. Just look at the main characters of the TV serial “Big Bang Theory”, all successful physicists engrossed in the real world of research and top notch technology, yet they each idolize a “super hero” and act out such fantasies, not only in their dreams but also whenever the opportunity permits, in the “real life” situations of the drama too. That is how intellectuals survive!

But as with Plato’s dream of establishing the “ideal state”, such dreams remain only dreams for these intellectuals for the simple reason that neither the king could become a philosopher nor would the king allow a philosopher to replace him as the king. In other words, unless the whole social structure is changed, piecemeal solutions here and there may give one some satisfaction of one’s worth in society but it will not satisfy the real needs of the society. The intellectuals with such utopian dreams and not having the capacity to realize them in the existing society are here identified as the Platonic Intellectuals. They either in an attempt to prove their own worth and the effectiveness of their dreams cook up unattainable objectives and impractical projects or get totally alienated from the society and lock themselves away from of the society, lead a humdrum existence.

One group of such intellectuals is the expatriates. They live in other societies, working in universities and research or multinational corporations with high salaries and an enviable life style, yet often dream of genuinely changing their own society back home. They cook up such projects that are not only unattainable but often totally devoid of reality. Let me cite an example. Very recently a well known Bangladeshi professor, who has lived all his life since graduate school in the USA, suddenly realized that there are too many dirt roads in Bangladesh connecting some 85,000 plus villages and they take up a sizable portion of the arable land. To end this wastage of land he chalked up an elaborate plan to build one super highway covering the whole country in place of all those dirt roads. And this super highway will connect small cities of 20,000 people each to be built and placed strategically along this superhighway to replace all those villages now connected by the dirt roads. He even submitted the plan to the government. But what he failed to realize, even in his acquired Western rationality, was the simple fact that to house the total population of 150 million of the country in townships of 20,000 residents each, will require 7,500 townships. Even if one such town can be contained with an area of 4 square miles, the total area needed for all the townships will cover more than 50% of the existing total land area the country, far more than the dirt roads he is trying to save the country from. We are not even calculating the financial and other costs involved in constructing those towns and the super highway. Such is the nature of utopian “dreams” nurtured by these expatriates, undoubtedly with all their sincerity. The plan was ceremoniously presented at a seminar attended by similar intellectuals who applauded the scheme, commenting on the bright future for the country.

Bizarre as it might seem, the reasons for such foolhardiness from a very well read scholar is obvious. Living away for so long and working for another society in conditions far superior, if not richer, than what he would have had in his own country, does give rise to a feeling of guilt and the need to compensate and hence, the necessity to do something for one’s own society. As noted above, the number of such expatriate intellectuals is multiplying by the day.

Just add to these the numerous intellectuals connected with thousands of NGOs and social welfare organizations all over the world. They are all dreaming in earnest about changing the lot of the fellow citizens, to bring about justice in the world, unfortunately, without ever disturbing the status quo or changing the system of rules that has created the unjust society in the first place. They pride themselves for attempting to transform the lives of the needy but all they succeed in achieving is meeting a few needs of own their personal lives. The dream of changing the world remains a dream, often, a questionable dream, like that of Plato.

Thus, public, private and Platonic intellectuals offer a better categorization than other classifications to understand the intellectuals of today. The few remaining **public intellectuals**, the true intellectuals, need to be more involved and more committed to their role in society. The dwindling number of such intellectuals is alarming for any society. Unfortunately, *the true intellectuals are only born during the times of social crisis and dictatorial regimes, while a prosperous society kills the true spirit of the intellectuals; they vegetate during the times of peace and prosperity.* That's when they turn into **private intellectuals**, more committed to their own progress and preserving their privileges and comforts of life rather than fighting for the needs of the unfortunate others. Enjoying these privileges in a protected or prosperous environment, as in a foreign country or a multinational corporation, give rise to feelings of guilt and the necessity to compensate. This leads to alienation and to the dream projects of the **Platonic intellectuals**.

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