

CONVERSATION ■ In a new and controversial book, British writer Paul Johnson criticizes the moral and judgmental foibles of the intellectual elite that came to prominence in the 18th century and remains a potent force today

The high priests of knowledge

Intellectuals have the arrogance to believe that they can use their brains to tell humanity how to conduct its affairs. In so doing, they turn their backs on natural law, inherited wisdom and the religious background that have traditionally defined the aims of society. Their approach, beginning with Jean Jacques Rousseau and on through Jean-Paul Sartre, Ernest Hemingway and James Baldwin, is moralistic but not in a religious sense. In fact, those who have been most influential have often challenged religion. They find it hard to admit that there is a higher authority than their own judgment; they have a deep-rooted and tremendously powerful arrogance.

This separates them from other men of letters throughout the last 200 years, men such as Evelyn Waugh, a great writer with a most powerful intellect who could humble himself in the presence of the Deity. I regard Waugh, Edmund Burke, Samuel Johnson, Rudyard Kipling and others like them almost as anti-intellectuals. They view the established churches and the practices and customs of society as an important part of human wisdom. If I were writing my book over again, I would write it as a dialogue between these thinkers and those I call intellectuals, rather than focusing on intellectuals alone.

But doesn't the rise of intellectuals simply reflect the rise of modern science and scholarship?

Secular intellectuals really emerged in the 18th century, particularly in France, where Rousseau, although a bohemian figure, received enormous hospitality from the ruling class. The aristocracy felt guilty about their privileges and thought that having him in their châteaux was a talisman against disaster. The 1930s was another period when intellectuals were important, and, more recently, there were the '60s, which coincided with a huge expansion of higher education, so there were jobs galore at the universities. It was a period when intellectual gurus such as Sartre and Bertrand Russell appeared to have a worldwide audience.

Old-style intellectuals tended to be politically oriented, while in more-recent decades, intellectuals have tended toward hedonism, which can rapidly get out of control and develop characteristics that are terrifying, including violence. James Baldwin and Norman Mailer, to name two, attempted to legitimize violence in certain forms. It is a curious fact that intellectuals, though generally nonviolent, nevertheless have a certain attraction to violence. They will defend the most violent courses of action taken by foreign governments of which they approve. In Cambodia, in fact, there was a purge carried out by a group of intellectuals whom I call Sartre's children because they had all been educated in Paris in the 1950s and influenced by Sartre's

ideas as well as by Marxism. Sartre was one of the first philosophical figures to produce arguments in favor of terrorism and is very much to blame for what has become the ambivalence of some intellectuals toward terrorists.

You're saying, then, that intellectuals are out of touch with the real world of actions and consequences?

Intellectuals are always talking about the workers, the masses or humanity—they love the word *humanity*—but they don't come into contact with ordinary people very much. Most come from pretty secure middle or upper-middle-class backgrounds and see ordinary people more as individuals who do things for them rather than as acquaintances, let alone intimates. They dismiss the middle class as bourgeois, mercenary and materialistic, while seeing themselves as rebels against society. But once they're with one another, they are very conformist. Someone has referred to intellectuals as a "herd of independent minds"; they are easily stampeded. At the same time, individual beasts sometimes do get ejected from the herd, and then they gore one another. For the most part, however, they move together and plug each other's books. As a result, they are liable to create an

intellectual consensus that can easily become a general consensus because they are very influential, powerful people who have a gift for words and access to the media. That's why I think they are so dangerous.

What exactly do they threaten?

In the rise of intellectuals, truth has become a prime casualty. They think that there is only *Truth* with a capital T, which they feel that they have found and must deliver to others. In that respect, Karl Marx, who thought that he had a direct line to metaphysical truth, is the archetypical intellectual. Intellectuals are simply not inclined to take the scientific approach, to look for evidence that conflicts with their hypothesis just as carefully as they look for evidence that confirms it.

But perhaps that matters less than it used to because the literate public is increasingly unlikely to listen to these gurus, in part because there is a pervasive feeling throughout the Western World that utopia is not attainable. One should listen to and read intellectuals but not necessarily take great notice of what they say, particularly when they gang up and produce manifestoes. Winston Churchill used to say, "Experts should be on tap but never on top." That's very good advice. ■

Conversation with Robin Knight in London

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