

What It Means To Be An Intellectual

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A friend sent me an email this morning and at the end of it, almost as an afterthought, he responded to a quote I'd sent him from an author praising books. "He would say that," my friend replied, "he's a writer."

I want to quibble with this statement — how is it that we can dismiss someone's argument simply because of their job? — but doing so would seem bizarre. There's a social norm that how much we discuss something should be roughly proportional to its importance. Mountains of print may be spilled on the issues of international relations but spending a couple emails [discussing punctuation](#) would seem dreadfully bizarre.

There's just one problem: I *enjoy* deep discussions of punctuation and other trivialities. I could try to justify this taste — some argument that we should think about everything we do so that we don't do everything we think about — but why bother? Do I have to justify enjoying certain television shows as well? At some point, isn't pure enjoyment just enough? After all, [time isn't fungible](#).

But of course, the same drive that leads me to question punctuation leads me to question the drive itself, and thus this essay.

What is "this drive"? It's the tendency to not simply accept things as they are but to want to think about them, to understand them. To not be content to simply feel sad but [to ask what sadness means](#). To not just get a bus pass but [to think about the economic reasons getting a bus pass makes sense](#). I call this tendency the intellectual.

The word "intellectual" has a bit of a bad rap. When I think of the word I hear a man with a southern accent sneering at it. But this stain seems appropriate — *the idea* has a bad rap.

And why is that? One reason is that many people simply don't like to think about things. Perhaps it reminds them of school, which they didn't enjoy, and they don't want to go back there. Another is that they're busy people — men of action — and they don't have time to sit and think about every little detail. But mostly it's just because they think it's a waste of time. What's the point? What difference does it make what you think about punctuation? It's not going to affect anything.

This is the argument that's often used when demonizing intellectuals. As Thomas Frank summarizes the argument:

The same bunch of sneaking intellectuals are responsible for the content of Hollywood movies and for the income tax, by which they steal from the rest of us. They do no useful work, producing nothing but movies and newspaper columns while they freeload on the labor of others. (116)

When I think of intellectuals, though, I don't really think of Hollywood producers or politicians or even newspaper columnists. But the people I do think of seem to have something else in common. They don't just love thinking, they love language. They love its tricks and intricacies, its games, the way it gets written down, the books it gets written into, the libraries those books are in, and the typography those books use.

Upon reflection this makes perfect sense. Language is the medium of thought and so it's no surprise that someone who spends a lot of time thinking spends a lot of time thinking about how to communicate their thoughts as well. And indeed, all the intellectuals that come to mind write, not because they have to or get paid to, but simply for its own sake. What good is thinking if you can't share?

This contrasts with how intellectuals are commonly thought of — namely as pretentious elitist snobs. But real intellectuals, at least in the sense I'm using the term, are anything but. They love nothing more than explaining their ideas so that anyone who's interested can understand them. They only seem pretentious because discussing such things is so bizarre.

This stereotype actually seems more like the caricature of the academic than the intellectual. (It's perhaps worth noting that most of the intellectuals I can think of *aren't* academics or at least have left the academy.) Far from being intellectuals, academics are encouraged to be almost the opposite. Instead of trying to explain things simply, they're rewarded for making them seem more complicated. Instead of trying to learn about everything, they're forced to focus in on their little subdiscipline. Instead of loving books, they have to love gabbing — up in front of class or at office hour with students or at professional conferences or faculty meetings.

Not that there's anything wrong with that. At the beginning I declined to justify my being an intellectual on any grounds other than pure personal enjoyment. And here, at the end, I can't think of any better justification. Certainly people should think deeply about their actions and the world's problems and other important topics. But the other ones? That's little more than personal preference.