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THE ROLE OF THE INTELLECTUAL IN THE MODERN WORLD¹

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ABSTRACT

Intellectuals appear to have had more influence in former periods than in our own. This influence today has been exaggerated. Intellectuals may influence people's talk more than their actions. They are thought to have caused changes when they merely have been foreseeing them a little sooner than the rest. Intellectuals who form their opinions upon evidence have little influence today. Since the war, people of intelligence have had little or no influence on the course of events. This cannot be attributed to democracy because in the totalitarian states their influence is no greater. The large social forces are in essence irrational, prompting men to act against the interest of mankind and against their own private interests. The man who really acts in accordance with his own interest is he who believes he is sacrificing himself to a public end. Anti-intellectualism arises in situations where strong passions that cannot be gratified exist. The intellectual still has influence where passionate issues are not involved, as in the field of technology technicians do more to change the face of the world than social scientists. But technical change is blind and directionless, without a conception of the ends for which men should live. Respect for the intellectual and the sage is in inverse proportion to the intelligence of the community; respect for the intellectuals decreases with the increase in their numbers. A little education is unsatisfactory because it is just enough to subject people to propaganda. Short of complete ignorance for everyone, the best thing is a good education for all. This is a pre-condition for the influence of intelligence and rationality in the world. Modern means of communication enlarge the range of collective hysteria—the great enemy of democracy. A wholesome, happy childhood and a critical and skeptical attitude to be developed by education are the primary sources of sanity.

I have been speaking a fair amount and I have become quite adept at talking on subjects of which I am completely ignorant, and I gather that is what is expected of me tonight. I want, first of all, before I embark upon my remarks, to make it perfectly clear to you that I am not a social scientist, and I am speaking as an ignoramus.

¹ An address to the Sociology Club of the University of Chicago.

But, now, having made this statement, I will assume the prophetic mantle.

The way in which the subject, "The Role of the Intellectual in the Modern World," appears in my mind is: Has the influence of the intellectual waned?—and more especially of the intellectual who devotes himself to the social sciences, especially in the modern world as it is now. And of course I think one naturally looks back to the "good old days" when the intellectual really had some influence.

You all remember the story of Carlyle, when a dinner companion said that books never had any influence on the course of events. Carlyle replied, "There was a fellow called Rousseau, and they said that about his book, and their skins went to bind the second edition." I am afraid few of us can hope for such a success as that. Even if we should have the luck to run to second editions, I'm afraid the binding would be of less distinguished stuff, though I must say I have often wondered whether Rousseau had any influence whatever upon the course of events.

After all, the course of events was determined by the fact that the French were hungry, and they would have been just as hungry if Rousseau hadn't existed. Much the same men would have emerged at the end, and I am not at all sure that the course of events in France would have been different at all if Rousseau hadn't lived. But perhaps that is a paradox.

Of course, it does look as if in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century intellectuals had much more influence on the course of events than they can hope to have now. The influence of the Benthamites in England at that time was very real. They altered jurisprudence generally. They got an immense amount of change in the constitution, and in all sorts of ways they affected the course of events. Apart from those from Greece and Palestine, you will find them the most influential group of intellectuals that existed.

German intellectuals had a great deal of influence. The whole of the present situation in Germany would have been impossible except for the pioneering work of men of learning. You have men like Treitschke and the rest of them, and the economists who invented or revived the nationalistic kind of economics. You have altogether in Germany a whole crowd of professors who gave respectability to

the particular brand of nonsense which is now in vogue, and I think perhaps they did have some influence on the course of events, but I doubt if they had very much. I think all that happened was that they were quicker than the others in seeing the kind of nonsense that was going to go down, and talked it a little sooner.

I know there are some people who maintain that the writings of Karl Marx have had some influence on the course of events in Russia. I think that is also very questionable, just as it is questionable whether Rousseau influenced the course of events in France. In the main Russia has been engaged in a controversy, such as you find in the ancient world, between town and country. The problem for the town people was to induce the country people to feed them, because the country people didn't see any use in the people in the town. So that, I think perhaps the influence of the intellectuals in the "golden days" is not so great as it seems, looking back. They influenced people's talk, the phrases they used, but I don't think they influenced their actions anything like as much as is supposed. The man who appears influential is merely the one who sees the change coming a little sooner and so he is thought to have caused it.

In the world as it is now, the intellectual, the man, I may say, who forms his opinions upon evidence, has painfully little influence. Perhaps that always was so. I don't know that any of these men I have talked about ever formed their opinions on evidence. At the time of the Treaty of Versailles there were men who formed a rational opinion of the situation but nobody listened to them. The economic consequences of "The Economic Consequences of the Peace" were, from the private point of view, very pleasing for the author, but otherwise I don't know that the book had any influence upon events at all. From that time onward, at any rate, people who had any intelligence had no influence on the course of events. Sometimes people attribute this to democracy, but I think that is absolutely wrong, because in the "good old days"—I mean days as much as six years ago—we took the democratic world for granted, and when the world was nasty we said it was because of democracy. But we haven't found that the influence of the intellectuals has increased in totalitarian states, so I don't think democracy has anything to do with the matter at all.

There are certain large forces in the world, economic forces, and nationalistic forces especially, which, so to speak, are in their essence irrational. I mean by "irrational" that they prompt men to act in ways which are not only against the interest of mankind but against their own private interest. I believe that almost every man's view as to what is to his interest is unduly cynical and that the only man who really acts in accordance with his own interest is the man who believes he is completely sacrificing himself to some public end. The great example of that is how the Quakers got rich. The Quakers invented the practice of fixed prices in shops by asking what they wanted and no more. This was so convenient to purchasers that the Quaker shopkeepers made fortunes. If we could all induce ourselves to give up the factor of self-interest, we should no doubt all get very much richer and very much happier. The things people do are irrational from their own point of view.

Every nation would be richer if every nation abandoned nationalism. People who perceive some truth of this kind, that goes against popular passions, must either lose all influence or else tell lies. Some people choose the one and some the other. If you tell lies you don't do so well as the man who believes them. That is one of the difficulties of the intellectual in the modern world where great anti-intellectual passions are involved. Anti-intellectualism is produced by the existence of some very strong passion which is, in the nature of things, incapable of being gratified, and therefore people take an irrational point of view in order not to see that it can't be gratified. I think that is the usual cause of it.

I remember at the end of the war, when some people tried to explain to old ladies that the Germans couldn't pay more than a certain amount, and the amount they could pay was not the total damage due to the war, the old ladies couldn't understand that because, they said, God is good and therefore He must have created a world in which the Germans could be suitably punished. People want something inherently impossible and so they become anti-intellectual.

The intellectual still has great influence where passionate issues are not involved, though more the technician than the social scientist. The technicians are really the people who count in the world.

It is a painful thought, because I know no technique at all. But I think we have to face it. Suppose some individual were to invent an adequate defense against airplanes! He would do more to transform the world than all the preachers that ever existed could do.

Take again such a question as irrigation. Irrigation in large parts of the world—in Egypt, in California, probably even in the Sahara and in the center of Australia—is capable of the most enormous effects. They are, again, purely technical, and the fact that the technician can produce those effects has, in its turn, an immense influence on government because great irrigation works have to be governmental. In fact, all the increase of government activity in the world is traceable to technicians.

Take again such a matter as public health. It is one of the few really gratifying features of the modern world that public health has quite steadily improved. That is no doubt due to government measures, but those government measures in turn are due to purely technical things. The people who discovered how to deal with malaria and yellow fever, for instance, have been of more social importance, I fear, than the people who invented social theories. The technician, all around, is the really big man in the modern world.

Well now, I don't want to stop at that, because I don't think that is the end of wisdom in the world. In fact, I think it is the beginning of folly. If you allow the world to be run away with by technicians, God knows to what they will apply their techniques. In fact, they apply their techniques mostly to war. I would rather die of yellow fever than of bombs, if the choice were given me. So the technician, when he is left alone, hasn't any guidance in him; he hasn't any direction. What he does is blind, and the whole force of modern scientific industry, scientific technique, in every direction has been quite incredibly blind—just going ahead little bit by little bit, here a bit, there a bit, without any great outcome at all, for if the technician has done good in this direction and harm in another, the result is zero. That isn't altogether satisfactory.

Therefore, one would like, if it were possible, to see some greater influence in the world of those who think about human life as a whole and have some consideration of the ends of life, some thought as to what people should live for. Unfortunately, the more civilized the

world becomes the less it wants to listen to the sages. In former days they were listened to: it was so in England; it was so in Germany; it was so in China down to the revolution in 1911. It is still so in Tibet. In Tibet you can't get into any of the higher positions except that of Dalai Lama without a Doctor's degree, and a Doctor's degree is much harder to get there than in any white man's country. It takes twenty years. Tibet has a real regard for the intellectual! The respect for the intellectual is in inverse proportion to the intelligence of the community. I know it is very sad. I see you all being reduced to tears by this statement. It is all very sad because the intellectual, like the beasts in the zoo, is respected for his rarity. Where he gets very common he commands very little respect.

Then, of course, there is the spread of education, or what is called education. I don't know whether you know what I mean. It is something that we teach in the schools and it doesn't seem to me to be altogether satisfactory. In the world as it used to be before we had compulsory education, there were two rather sharply distinguished classes in every community—one of people who had a great deal of education and one of people who had absolutely none. Now, on the other hand, there are still people who have a great deal of education—many of them I see before me—and the other people have some. And that is where the trouble comes in. They have just enough to have acquired susceptibility to propaganda. The only solution to this problem is to have a very great deal of education all around. You can't go back to keeping the bulk of the population completely ignorant. Possibly they will be able to in Central Europe, but there it would be not only the bulk but the whole population. Short of complete ignorance, the best thing is a good education.

There is no reason under the sun why everybody shouldn't remain in school up to the age of eighteen. We can amply afford it. It wouldn't really cause any serious drain on the resources of any country. The drain could be easily made good by cutting down armaments. A fair percentage, after that, might have a certain modicum of intelligence. You might then get a new opportunity for intelligence and rationality to influence the world. That is, of course, a long story, but I don't think you can have any hope for it while you have the present vast mass of people who are able to read and noth-

ing further; who are just, therefore, material for any kind of hysterical propaganda.

Hysteria, collective hysteria, is the great danger of the modern world. It is a danger generally connected with density of population. Density of population does not make people more hysterical, but it makes the hysteria more collective. If you read about revivalists' methods in rural America one hundred years ago, or in rural England in the seventeenth century, or in Germany in the sixteenth century, or in Russia until the revolution, you will realize that collective hysteria is a common phenomenon in village communities. The modern methods of communication have diminished that form of hysteria but they have substituted a larger collective hysteria. I think that is the chief and gravest danger of the modern world, and I think it is the thing that people who care for democracy have got most to study—how to manage to make populations immune to collective hysteria. It is a disease. They found out how to deal with yellow fever but the mosquito of yellow fever didn't have political power. If it had had, it would have been harder to deal with. As a technical problem, ours is just as soluble.

I should certainly like to see the attention of students of social science focused on this. Every government has a horror of skepticism because it wants its subjects to think well of it, and only a very credulous population could do that. Therefore, every government tries to produce credulity. You have got to find some government capable of being admired in spite of people's skepticism, and if you don't, I think the large masses that you have nowadays will just destroy each other. I don't believe in the rationalizing arguments about war. People will tell you that war is due to overpopulation, that it is due to all sorts of practical things. Every man, with very, very few exceptions, will be a richer man if there is peace than if there is war. Therefore, I think the arguments people use to the effect that there is profit in going to war are rationalizations, and that insanity is at the bottom of their thinking. We have got to try to find out how to produce sanity.

You will produce sanity by making childhood happy, in the first place, and second, by a more or less critical and skeptical attitude. Those seem to me the two primary sources of sanity. They are ig-

nored throughout the world. In dictatorships pains are taken in seeing that children are unhappy, and I think dictators are wise in doing that. We have got to do the opposite. I think if you could do that the intellectuals might collectively have some influence again.

I said earlier that the technicians are really the important people nowadays, but the psychologists, if they can be really scientific, become technicians in a certain sphere and acquire the influence that technicians have.

Now, I've done my best to speak as if I knew what I was talking about, and I must apologize for the element of pretentiousness in my remarks. With that, I will sit down.

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