

Intellectuals as both dangerous and endangered
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Recently I have had several opportunities to revisit my work on intellectuals, perhaps the social category that I hold in highest esteem. I have no doubt that intellectuals benefit society. The only question is the circumstances under which they can do the most good for society. I raise this concern against a long-standing self-representation of intellectuals as both dangerous and endangered. To be sure, many non-intellectuals — including academics who disparage intellectuals — regard the very claim to such high stakes as no more than self-serving hyperbole. Nevertheless, I believe that it contains a sufficiently large grain of truth to merit some unpacking.

Intellectuals are dangerous not because they ‘speak truth to power’ so effectively. Here the historical record is mostly one of noble failure. Rather, intellectuals are dangerous because they inject an unwanted measure of competition that de-stabilises the structure of epistemic authority in society. In particular, intellectuals reveal academics to be inveterate ‘rent-seekers’, as economists call those who turn a profit not by doing anything productive with their property — in this case, their knowledge — but by charging a lot to others who might wish to do something productive with it. (And here we should think about the charges in terms of time as well as money.) Though normally seen as ideological opponents, Ricardo and Marx were united in their contempt for those paradigmatic medieval rent-seekers, feudal lords and professional clerics. We can now include academic experts who all too readily condemn intellectuals simply because they manage to profit from expert knowledge either without having acquired the proper credentials themselves or — perhaps more damningly in expert eyes — without requiring others to do so.

By being routinely subject to the constraints imposed by the multiple media in which they operate, intellectuals develop keen powers of discrimination that enable them to spot what economists — with Gordon Tullock firmly in mind — would call ‘path dependencies’ in academic thought. Intellectuals realize that the specific means by which academics produce and validate knowledge speaks more to how they themselves came to know something than how others should appropriate that knowledge in the future. An intellectual pondering a sound bite or pitching a newspaper column is dealing with matters of appropriation. While there is little reason to think that intellectuals have deliberately tried to ‘demystify’ or ‘deskill’ academic knowledge, often that has been the unintended consequence. When they hit the mark, intellectuals demonstrate that it is possible to elude the rents that academics normally impose as ‘educational requirements’ in order to acquire an empowering form of knowledge.

In this respect, intellectuals are entrepreneurs of epistemic efficiency who see academic expertise as fencing and channelling the otherwise free-ranging human mind. This analogy suggests that academics are instinctively feudal and intellectuals instinctively capitalistic. And to a large extent, that is correct. However, there is a difference between breaking feudal land control simply in order to make the land more productive and to enable everyone to benefit the most from the land. Marxists, but not all self-avowed

communists, have believed that the latter is not achievable without the former. In any case, intellectuals who simply make knowledge more easily available without concern for who might benefit or be harmed by it are rightly seen as epistemic entrepreneurs in the capitalist mould.

At the same time, however, intellectuals are reasonably seen as an endangered socio-epistemic species. But the ultimate danger these days has rather little to do with issues such as censorship and other forms of political coercion, which of course continue to blight the lives of particular intellectuals. Much more serious is the second-order threat posed to the intellectual as a distinct socio-epistemic species. The recent overextension of the concept of 'whistleblower' is as an Orwellian bellwether. The term was coined by Ralph Nader who, in alluding to the action of a referee in a sports match, drove home the idea that employees should treat their organization as a participatory democracy and hence personally invested in upholding the organization's norms. In short, employees are not merely players but referees as well.

The first whistleblower to gain public notoriety had been the US Defence Department analyst Daniel Ellsberg who provided the *New York Times* with reams of confidential documents that revealed the often conflicted reasoning behind the prosecution of the Vietnam War. Its overall effect was to expedite America's departure from what had already become an unpopular military engagement. Whistleblowers in this sense — and Ellsberg in particular — are proper intellectuals. Ellsberg's skills in mathematical decision theory had helped to construct US Cold War strategy, but once he realized how his work was being used, he decided that it was time to act against his employer, the US government. (It is to America's great and lasting credit that Ellsberg was legally vindicated.) However, even though Ellsberg himself has anointed Julian Assange, Bradley (now Chelsea) Manning and Edward Snowden as successor 'whistleblowers', these people occupy a rather different place in the means of knowledge production, one that threatens the integrity of the intellectual.

Assange, Manning and Snowden never participated in the formation of any of the policies that were revealed by their 'whistleblowing', which nowadays simply means computer hacking. Moreover, they justified the massive release of confidential information in terms of vague libertarian statements and disgruntlement with US foreign policy. All of them were happy to let the recipients of this information make up their own minds about more specific responses. While superficially a liberal gesture, in practice it served to focus public concern on the sheer fact of secrecy rather than any major points of foreign policy. Not surprisingly, then, after a few months of diplomatic embarrassment, there is no evidence that this deluge of documents has resulted in an ideological re-alignment of interests across the globe. What may have changed, of course, are the channels of communication used, the modes of encryption, etc, used in diplomatic communications. While these latter-day whistleblowers are certainly inconveniences, they may also unwittingly serve as troubleshooters in the world of politically sensitive, computer-mediated communications. But by this point, we have moved far beyond the realm of intellectuals.

The current vogue for Wikileaks-style whistleblowers speaks volumes to the lack of understanding that contemporary society has for the politics of representative democracy in which intellectuals have historically flourished. The very idea of 'representation' in 'representative democracy' presumes that citizens will not be consulted in every decision, and that the decisions taken by their representatives may be other – but presumably better – than that of the citizens themselves, given a similar opportunity. (Of course, there is always the next election to boot the representatives out if they do not live up to this ideal.) Crucially, on this view, secrecy only becomes a problem when people are being systematically deceived. This means that politicians need to earn the people's trust – a task quite different from ensuring that everyone knows the content of all political deliberations. Moreover, the election system in representative democracies means that any misgivings can be voiced on a regular basis, regardless of how well the polity is doing. In this context, intellectuals often function very well in projecting alternative visions for the future that can propel a party into power.

Against this backdrop, today's computer-based whistleblowers should be seen as merely mimicking the intellectual delivery pattern of the computers they use. They are bionic search engines designed to disseminate indiscriminately. While this role may suit our postmodern condition, with its fetishisation of big data over grand theory and a celebration of ambivalence all round, those intellectuals who still hope for a different future need to become genuine masters of digital media because for now they are largely mastered by it.

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