

Intellectuals versus society: ignorance and wisdom

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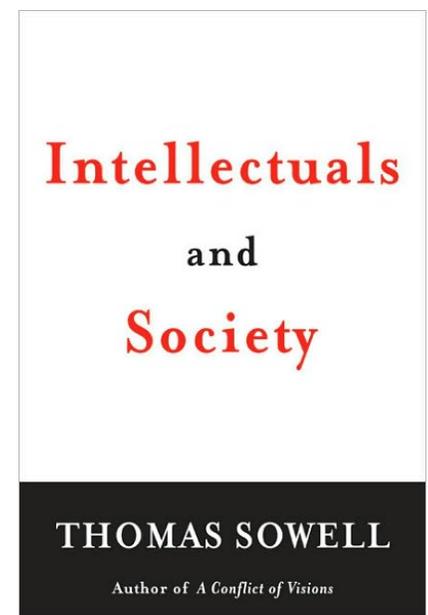
In *Intellectuals and Society*, Thomas Sowell's key charges are that intellectuals are selective with facts, dismissive and arrogant towards opposition, unaccountable and bigoted. **Aidan Byrne** is unimpressed and finds the book to be neither philosophy, nor politics, instead we have an instructive tour d'horizon of Tea Party concerns in this highly partisan book.



Intellectuals and Society. Thomas Sowell. Basic Books. March 2010. 416 pages.

Find this book:

Thomas Sowell's *Intellectuals and Society* consists of a series of outdated and sometimes dishonest shots at Sowell's political enemies, collectively designated 'intellectuals'. The book's title could well have been *Intellectuals versus Society*, for the author's purpose is to enunciate intellectuals' 'credentialed ignorance' juxtaposed with the 'mundane wisdom' of real Americans who exercise mundane wisdom transactionally and unconsciously rather than imposing ideological frameworks. Intellectuals disguise elitism, prejudice and arrogance through 'verbal virtuosity', a recurrent phrase. His definition of an intellectual is deceptively simple: a 'dealer in ideas' who profitably peddles ideas in the marketplace with neither accountability nor consequences. The term designates enemies of the free market: Marx, Sartre, Lenin, Hitler, Mao, Dewey, Steinbeck and a supporting cast of marginal targets. On the right, Hayek and Friedman are the most-cited thinkers. The reader could while away several hours listing those absent from the index: women in particular are conspicuously ignored. The most surprising absentee is [Ayn Rand](#), for – despite not appearing once – her ideas form the core of Sowell's argument.





Sowell's definition of society is limited to individual consumption. Electoral accountability is ignored, while democratic government is a junket for élites with 'no... feedback to force them to adjust to the reality of other people's desires and preferences'. All legislation and judicial decision-making is tyrannical – he never acknowledges the possibility that elected governments theoretically enact the will of the people. 'Collective decision-making, whether through democratic processes or through top-down commands, involves people making decisions for other people rather than for themselves... essentially allowing ignorance to overrule knowledge'. Despite American political sclerosis, the notion of government by, of and for the people has surely not been *completely* forgotten?



This reductive view of human relations leads to a tour of Tea Party attitudes, rather than any serious discussion of the successes – and manifest failures – of intellectual leadership. Where we might have expected an examination of MacNamara or Kissinger, Greenspan's economics, Jameson's concept of the public sphere, Arendt's moral philosophy, Baudrillard's exchange or Judt's critique of twentieth-century intellectuals, Sowell takes a different tack. *Intellectuals and Society* is a diatribe against sophistication, deliberation and complexity. Intellectuals are rhetoricians freed from consequences and

accountability, peddling leftwing dogma in opposition to the collective wisdom of real-world consumers (citizens are never mentioned). Safety, employment or salary regulation is élitist meddling by ignorant external parties. The corporation knows best and the battle between it and the employee is fair and equal.

Externality is Sowell's weakest ground. We are not 'external' to corporate pay (one of his examples): because he disregards non-transactional human relations, he cannot understand their complexity. Apparently rational individual investment decisions at Goldman Sachs might seem like *private* transactions, but the result was *collective* bankruptcy: we 'external parties' paid a heavy price. Sowell's mythical American is a rational consumer in full possession of the facts, whereas regulation empowers 'third parties who pay no price for being wrong'. In a world in which Goldman Sachs employees their own products 'junk', and in which the financial system relied on rating foolish financial instruments AAA for as long as it took to pass the parcel, Sowell's arguments fail at the level of the Masters of the Universe whose unsupervised computers were *actually* taking the decisions, let alone for the honest schmucks the author invokes.

Ignoring the widespread intellectual and academic backing for deregulation, Sowell insists that regulation is an 'elite' imposition, 'a formula for disaster'. Intellectuals are hostile to market forces, introducing irrelevancies such as morality and 'social responsibility' rather than understanding that the system is self-correcting. The market is a state of nature tending to freedom and prosperity, not an ideological, mythical structure. Although Sowell's definitions are slippery we can reconstruct his thinking. There has never been a monopoly, for instance because consumers control '100 percent of the market'. Freedom is not the exercise of (imaginary) 'rights', but consumption and production without state intervention: 'the free market... is a huge exemption from government power', a system which rejects 'commonality of purpose' and 'collective decision-making' as naturally oppressive.

Government is anathema because it interferes with transactions which should be left to 'those with personal experience and a stake', while 'the market is smarter than the smartest of its individual participants'. Sowell's reliance on this mystical market-maker leads him from the financial sphere into the social: we learn that 'judicial activism' prevents police officers from shooting suspects as much as they'd like (Sowell explains that he was a Marine shooting tutor and therefore *is* qualified to assess officers' claims). We learn that Theodore Roosevelt's conviction that Native Americans were racially inferior cannot be challenged by armchair intellectuals. Sowell's racial references are disordered and disturbing 'dog-whistles'. 'Cultural differences are a legacy of the past, limitations on what can be done in the present are limitations on what can be regarded as moral failings by society'. Sowell's argument is a coded intervention into the more pressing issue of slavery's consequences. To him, slavery's cultural legacy means that it *shouldn't* be considered a moral problem, nor should amelioration be attempted: easy for a rich white man to say. Despite crime statistics being fairly uniform between black-majority American cities and white-majority ones, black men form 40% of the prison population: one imagines that a prisoner's view of slavery's legacy might differ from Sowell's.

The author views *any* assertion of morality as confusion between causality and symptom: "greed" and "racism" are fenced off by quotation marks as 'indignant indictments and condemnations' by confused intellectuals. Loan-sharks' charges are rational and reasonable rather than extortionate: the applicant is 'the person most knowledgeable... as well as most affected by it', and so regulation is unacceptable. The loan shark doesn't prey upon the poor: he's an efficient actor in a rational market that efficiently prices scarce resources.

Intellectual contributions to any debate – examples include minimum wage advocates, urban planners ('the forcible **suppression** of millions of people's plans by a government-imposed plan'), 'teachers who are classroom indoctrinators or... liberation theology' and the judiciary- are 'vested interests' who by intervening in 'mutually acceptable transactions' ensure that fewer transactions follow, depressing the economy. Sowell ignores our current situation, praising the post-Reaganite 'growth, low

unemployment and low inflation', drawing a veil over subsequent developments. Nowhere does Sowell acknowledge corporate lobbying, for instance: in his world, only small-minded, self-regarding 'intellectuals' are guilty of bad faith. Conservatives are nicer and more respectful of opposition than leftwingers: evidently he hasn't experienced talk radio or Fox News. Market efficiency has been misunderstood as monopoly, while high corporate pay is awarded for the provision of goods and services to customers incentivised to seek alternative, cheaper sources. Sowell's analysis throughout lacks recognition that humans are more than *homo economicus*: there is no culture, only transactional systems. To him, Fred Goodwin and Bob Diamond are symptoms of a perfected system rather than evidence of cultural, political and – though unmentioned – economic failure.

Sowell's key charges are that intellectuals are selective with facts, dismissive and arrogant towards opposition, unaccountable and bigoted. Yet his sources are usually newspaper articles, the opinions of ideological allies, or even uncited 'many statements'. He devotes a chapter to debunking claims of an American 'wealth gap' – yet never mentions the Treasury data showing that real wages have declined since the 1970s: once 'food stamps' are taken into account, the poor have never had it so good! "Rights" and the 'social contract' are 'fictitious' 'assertions of arbitrary authority' while 'tradition' is the repository of collective wisdom. Curiously, while bewailing 'judicial activism', he avoids discussing whether state intervention in women's reproductive matters – a central issue in his circle – isn't equally oppressive.

The ideological underpinning of *Intellectuals and Society* is Sowell's division of humanity between intellectuals ('an anointed élite... with a mission to lead others in one way or another to better lives', and those who take the 'tragic view' that 'the inherent flaws of human beings are the fundamental problem and social contrivances are simply imperfect means of trying to cope with... the tragedy of the human condition'. Our current state is the best possible, civilisation is fragile and attempts at improvement are inevitably oppressive. From this flows the most depressingly partisan aspect of Sowell's argument. Pausing to ascribe liberalism to 'ego', he asserts that 'there is far more in common between Fascists and even the moderate left than between either of them and traditional... very similar goals have been proclaimed by people whom the left repudiates... such as Fascism in general and Nazis in particular': even democracies get a taste for intervention and so become tyrannies. Intellectually-informed societies develop oppressive structures common to 'radical or moderate leftists, elite professions' and 'totalitarians, whether Communist or Fascist' Sowell argues that the shared flaw in Nazism and Communism was their socialist element: both believed in state wage controls, 'higher taxes on the wealthy' (like Thatcher's 1979-1988 60% band?), 'government care for the elderly', 'a decreased emphasis on the role of religion and the family' and 'government taking on the role of changing the nature of people, usually beginning in early childhood', this last echoing Tea Party plans to abolish the Department of Education, a thinly-disguised attack on racial integration.

Sowell's book attacks liberal, experts and intellectuals for their interventions into the media sphere (the wealth of homosexual journalists explains the absence of 'factual information' that could reflect negatively on homosexuals), the law, war (pacifism fails to understand the 'tragic vision' that human aggression must be controlled by force) and finally for seeking to replace 'family, religion and patriotism' with 'class' and "gender".

Ultimately, this partisan book reproduces the Hobbesian vision of humanity as savage and selfish and lacking higher instincts. There is no society: we are all rational consumers whose only influence should be through our myriad daily economic transactions. Intellectual utopianism is tyrannical arrogance. Democracy leads to fascism, and intellectuals are already there. *Intellectuals and Society* is neither philosophy, nor politics. It is, however, an instructive *tour d'horizon* of Tea Party concerns.

He specialises in masculinity in interwar Welsh and political fiction, and teaches on a wide range of modules. He blogs as Plashingvole.blogspot.com and tweets as [@plashingvole](https://twitter.com/plashingvole). [Read more reviews by Aidan.](#)

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