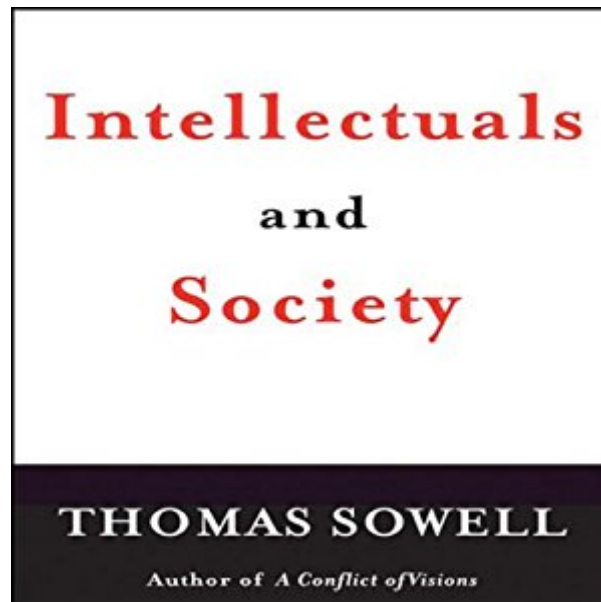




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Intellectuals And Society



Synopsis

The influence of intellectuals is not only greater than in previous eras but also takes a very different form from that envisioned by those like Machiavelli and others who have wanted to directly influence rulers. It has not been by shaping the opinions or directing the actions of the holders of power that modern intellectuals have most influenced the course of events, but by shaping public opinion in ways that affect the actions of power holders in democratic societies, whether or not those power holders accept the general vision or the particular policies favored by intellectuals. Even government leaders with disdain or contempt for intellectuals have had to bend to the climate of opinion shaped by those intellectuals. *Intellectuals and Society* not only examines the track record of intellectuals in the things they have advocated but also analyzes the incentives and constraints under which their views and visions have emerged. One of the most surprising aspects of this study is how often intellectuals have been proved not only wrong, but grossly and disastrously wrong in their prescriptions for the ills of society - and how little their views have changed in response to empirical evidence of the disasters entailed by those views. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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Customer Reviews

Thomas Sowell is, hands down, one of the most thoughtful, intelligent, and talented writers of the last century when it comes to analyzing ideas and trends around the world. I myself was introduced to Dr. Sowell a few years ago. His common-sense insight, interesting writing style, and occasional

humor have done a lot to help me inform my own world-view. Sowell's book, *Intellectuals in Society*, is a crowning achievement that everyone should read, regardless of creed, or ideology. In such a tumultuous time politically, it feels easy to let our own emotions, or the words of those we see as on a higher intellectual plane, dictate how we see the world. Dr. Sowell does an exceptional job of looking at and dissecting the Intellectuals words throughout the history of America and the western world in general. When Sowell says "Intellectual," he specifically means those whose final products are ideas. The most damning point that Dr. Sowell makes is that unlike other careers who work or think on a high intellectual plane, such as doctors, engineers, or architects, the "Intellectuals" who's end products are ideas rarely, if ever, end up being held accountable for when said ideas don't work in practice. In fact, these ideas have in fact had devastating effects around the world, and caused millions upon millions of lives to be wrecked or downright destroyed. It is worth noting that Sowell himself may be considered an "Intellectual," but I believe that he is able to practice far more restraint and acknowledge the intellectual limitation far more than many, if not most, of his peers are won't to do. Sowell spends a good chunk of the book looking at empirical, historical data which shows the folly and utter fallacies of intellectuals throughout history. Many totalitarian regimes, specifically in the early to mid twentieth century, have been found to have been supported quite fervently among many intellectuals of the time, specifically many on the left such as H.G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, among others. Other examples of the folly among intellectuals include many of the prevalent views they had surrounding making piece treaties with totalitarian leaders, such as Adolf Hitler, as a means to avoid war. This was particularly evident among Neville Chamberlain. When future prime minister Winston Churchill expressed (in hindsight) very reasonable criticism of this piece treaty, he was scorned, and mocked, rather than actually challenged or debated. Ultimately, the refusal to hear out those like Churchill led not to piece, but to the most bloody war in human history in the form of World War II. The most interesting and worthwhile fallacy that Sowell points out is how real, flesh and blood individuals have been described by Intellectuals. The most notable hear is none other than chief justice Clarence Thomas. Sowell points out that while Thomas is accused of being a recluse, due to the fact that he doesn't like to attend political gatherings (and isn't too keen on self-promotion.) In actuality, Clarence Thomas enjoys speaking with regular people, and loves going on road trips around the country. he often likes to strike up a chat with regular people without so much as mentioning his role on the Supreme Court. This is yet another example of how the ideas of Intellectuals matter more to them and their ilk than actual, flesh and blood people. Dr. Sowell's book is dense, and is written in a way that may come off as somewhat inaccessible to some, though that isn't really a fault of the books, or of Dr. Sowell's writing style. As a matter of fact, it is a testimony to

the craft with which Dr. Sowell wields his pen that the book remains as intriguing and informative as it does from start to finish. Thomas Sowell is a man who has done extensive and thorough research in every topic in which he covers, whether it be the economic fallacies of many Intellectuals, to law and order, to geopolitical issues, to more besides. Regardless of where one stands on any of these issues, I would highly recommend that you rent, or even purchase a copy of Thomas Sowell's brilliant, insightful, and meticulously well-written book. While Sowell himself thinks on a high intellectual level, he never condescends to the reader or his audience. This book will surely be of use if you're someone with a desire to think for yourself and have a desire to filter out the "spin" that it seems like we see all too often from those in politics, academia, the media, entertainment industry, and so forth. With that said, I highly encourage you to give this book a read.

I nominate Thomas Sowell for the Eric Hoffer award for his penetrating analysis in *Intellectuals and Society*. He defines his subject matter as those persons who have ideas as the end product of their work. It seems fair to say that he is focused on those whose ideas are about social issues as opposed to, say, mathematics - issues such as economics, law, and war. In addition he deals with the intelligentsia, which along with the intellectuals "... would include those teachers, journalists, social activists, political aides, judges' clerks, and others who base their beliefs or actions on the ideas of intellectuals." Among the observations Sewell makes about the subject of his investigations the following seven stand out.

1. The end product of intellectuals is not amenable to immediate testing in the physical world. Engineers, doctors, and football coaches are subjected to such tests but not intellectuals. That raises the question: how are the end products of intellectuals - their ideas - judged?
2. They are judged by their peers, that is, by other intellectuals. Consequently, a kind of prevailing consensus arises which with the help of the intelligentsia permeates the culture.
3. They have a compulsion to put their ideas into action. It isn't enough to just sit on their hands and bask in the glow of intelligentsia approval.
4. They are inextricably connected to their ideas. It's as though to challenge their ideas is to challenge their life.
5. They view themselves as the anointed whose task is to enlighten the populace. One thinks of Obama resonating with San Francisco intelligentsia when he referred to his opposition as Bible thumping, gun toting rednecks.
6. They are never held accountable for failure. As time passes and history demonstrates the error of their ideas they do not fall into disgrace as would, for example, a doctor who killed his patients.
7. They are never right. Well, hardly ever. He does document one case where they were on the right side. As the saying goes even a stopped watch is right twice a day.

The foregoing does not do justice to the rich narrative, the logic, and the numerous examples from history which make *Intellectuals and Society*

so enjoyable to read. What I found particularly valuable was that certain insights fell into place for me. The testing of the end product by peer review rather than by physical reality is a case in point. The upshot of peer review as the standard of truth is that intellectuals as well as the entire amen chorus of intelligentsia are drawn into the world of social metaphysics. Nathaniel Branden, who coined the term social metaphysics, defined it as "... the psychological syndrome that characterizes a person who holds the minds of other men, not objective reality, as his ultimate psycho-epistemological frame of reference." To illustrate with a caricature, a social metaphysician sitting in a room feels water dripping from above. He doesn't look up to see if there is a leak in the ceiling; instead, he asks the person next to him if the ceiling is leaking. An affirmative answer gives him a feeling of certainty in his "knowledge" that seeing it with his own eyes would never do. If reality is the contents of other persons minds and if the contents of those minds are the intellectual's ideas that have passed peer review, it simply will not do to have those ideas challenged. To challenge those ideas is to destroy reality and you along with it. That explains why members of the intelligentsia get in such a tiff when they meet opposition. Von Mises must have had the intelligentsia in mind when he wrote "Most men endure the sacrifice of their intellect more easily than the sacrifice of their daydreams." Mayor Bloomberg would deny gravity before he would give up denying soft drinks to New Yorkers. Why is it that intellectuals have such an uncanny talent for being wrong? One would think they would be right maybe half the time. It can't be because there is only one right answer and many wrong ones; some issues such as going to war have only two alternatives - either you go or you don't go. It seems that part of the explanation is the premium put on novelty. Who among the intelligentsia would applaud an intellectual who simply stated the common sense obvious? Why not get attention with novelty when there is no penalty for failure? Perhaps some future investigator will provide a better answer to the question. In any event their penchant for leading society in the wrong direction is a very serious problem. As currently constituted the intelligentsia is a cancer on society. Many thanks to Thomas Sowell for enlightening us about the nature of this malady.

This book explains how intellectuals take untested ideas that may sound good, gain consensus within their intellectual community, and then spread these ideas primarily through the college ranks and the media. He demonstrates how it is not necessary for them to demonstrate results, and, even if the idea proves later to not work, the originator's intellectual star-power does not diminish. This is in contrast to the non-intellectual world, where failed ideas do not lead to rewards and peer recognition. Sowell is an original thinker, meaning he does not merely pass on things you have

already read elsewhere. He offers insights into how decades of social engineering experiments have produced generations of Americans who don't feel particularly obligated to have to contribute much to our society but are well versed on what they think society owes them. If you believe that everyone should at least try to pull their own weight, you will find a kindred spirit in Thomas Sowell. If you focus more on what society should be sure everyone is given, this book is a good way to see the other side of some of the arguments put forth by the intellectual community. It is important to see the other side if agreement can ever be reached between the sides.

Amazing book. Deeply researched with excellent index and documentation references. If you want to understand what the "progressive" intelligentsia have done to America and how they do it, this is a primary source for the facts and dispassionate analysis.

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