


# The End of Ideas in American Politics?

Americans have long mistrusted intellectuals, nowhere more so than when intellectuals have had access to power. There is considerable irony in this apprehension, for the Founding Fathers were themselves men of intellect and learning. Refined and erudite, many were well and widely read in history, politics, law, and science, and applied their knowledge to solving the problems of the day. It is reasonable to expect that the careers and accomplishments of such men as John Adams, John Dickinson, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and a host of others would offer unassailable evidence that intellectuals can also be effective statesmen.

The rise of democracy in the early nineteenth century contributed to the eclipse of the patrician intellectual in American political life. Yet, members of the founding generation effected their own demise. By the 1790s, they were hopelessly at odds with one another. Mired in a series of controversies, many of them arising from disagreements about the French Revolution, they succumbed to the passions of the moment, vilifying former comrades as if they were lifelong adversaries. All that they had in common—their origins, their education, their ideas, their experiences—was not enough to prevent them from turning on each other. They issued vicious and exaggerated charges of conspiring with agents of revolutionary France, of plotting to subvert Christianity, or of scheming to reinstate monarchy. They renounced prudence, moderation, virtue, and honor. They lost their standards of probity and judgment. They lapsed into demagoguery. It is a wonder that more of them did not get shot.<sup>[1]</sup>

Writing in 1953, the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. lamented

that the American intellectual finds himself “in a situation he has not known for a generation.” After initiating the New Deal and managing the war effort, the intellectual had fallen into disrepute by the 1950s, while the businessman had regained his former prestige and returned to power, giving rise to “the vulgarization which has been the almost invariable consequence of business supremacy.” From formulating public policy and guiding public opinion, the intellectual had become little more than a curiosity whom the American people could dismiss as irrelevant, or worse, whom they could blame for every failure and injustice or could implicate in every design against freedom. “Anti-intellectualism,” Schlesinger concluded, “has long been the anti-Semitism of the businessman.”<sup>[2]</sup> It requires little effort to imagine what Schlesinger would think of Donald Trump. 

Whatever Schlesinger’s critique might have been, it is evident that Mr. Trump has understood, or has at least intuited, that most Americans are not only suspicious of intellectuals but that they are also unmoved by ideas. They are, instead, animated by their emotions, their fears, and their hatreds. No one excels Mr. Trump at manipulating the passions of his audiences. But Mr. Trump is also more a creation of the Republican party than either he, or many Republicans, would probably care to admit. He has profited immensely from the longstanding Republican denunciations of government, even to the extent of now threatening the stability and cohesion of the party itself. Perhaps more important, Mr. Trump is the heir to conservative attacks on the intellectual elite. According to this argument, intellectuals are impractical and irresponsible. Adversarial, bent on revolution, accountable to no one, often consumed by envy and resentment, intellectuals, in control of both the media and education, assert virtually unlimited influence over the lives of ordinary persons. Most troubling of all, their ambition knows no bounds. The more power they achieve, the more they want.

The conservative rebuke of the intellectual as a social type likely originated with Edmund Burke's criticism of the French revolutionaries. Burke declared:

*Your literary men, and your politicians, and so do the whole clan of the enlightened among us. . . . have no respect for the wisdom of others; but they pay it off by a very full measure of confidence in their own. With them it is a sufficient motive to destroy an old scheme of things, because it is an old one. As to the new, they are in no sort of fear with regard to the duration of a building run up in haste; because duration is no object to those who think little or nothing had been done before their time, and who place all their hopes in discovery. They conceive, very systematically, that all things which give perpetuity are mischievous, and therefore they are at inexplicable war with all establishments. They think that government may vary like modes of dress, and with as little ill effect; that there need be no principle of attachment, except a sense of present conveniency, to any constitution of the state. . . . Their attachment to their country itself is only so far as it agrees with some of their fleeting projects; it begins and ends with that scheme of polity which falls in with their momentary opinion.*<sup>[3]</sup>

In [\*The Old Regime and the French Revolution\*](#), Alexis de Tocqueville echoed and amplified Burke's indictment of a revolutionary intelligentsia. However varied their approach to the problems of government, all radical intellectuals sought "to replace the complex of traditional customs governing the social order of the day by simple, elementary rules deriving from the exercise of the human reason and natural law."<sup>[4]</sup> Tocqueville expressed more sympathy for their plight, and the actions they took to rectify it, than Burke had. He acknowledged the injustices against which they protested, the absurd privileges and the failed institutions, "whose evil

effects were increasingly felt on every hand though their true causes were less and less understood.”<sup>[5]</sup> At the same time, Tocqueville leveled a criticism at intellectuals that has continued to vex them. He accused them of being out of touch and of trafficking in fantasy.

Although speaking with the voice of authority, intellectuals embraced “abstract theories and generalization regarding the nature of government” in which they placed “a blind confidence.” They lacked the experience to “temper their enthusiasms” and they “completely failed to perceive the very real obstacles in the way of even the most praiseworthy reforms, and to gauge the perils involved in even the most salutary revolutions.” Mere theoreticians, they offered “bold speculations” and “became more addicted to general ideas and systems, more contemptuous of the wisdom of the ages, and even more inclined to trust their individual reason than most of those who have written books on politics from a philosophic angle.”<sup>[6]</sup> In their opposition to the old regime, in their clamor for a new order, much of it in Tocqueville’s opinion justified or at least understandable, revolutionary intellectuals had come to assume that the only alternatives were a meek submission to tyranny or a complete destruction of the political system. It was a false and regrettable choice.

Despite their criticism of intellectual hubris, neither Burke nor Tocqueville ever denigrated ideas themselves or misjudged their power. They knew, as Richard Weaver later made clear, that ideas have consequences and cannot so easily be dismissed. It was, in fact, ignorance, Tocqueville asserted, that propelled the revolution. Had the French people been more conversant with, and more involved in, the workings of government, they would likely have known better than to be swayed by flamboyant but specious pronouncements. In the absence of such restraints, philosophy gave credence to, and eventually unleashed, passions as fanatic and irrepressible as

they were murderous.

Enlightened virtues, it seems, are inseparable from enlightened vices. Those who advocate the critical habit of mind, admirable in their quest for truth, refuse to accept any idea on faith and submit all ideas to relentless scrutiny, yielding always and only to conclusions grounded in the clearest evidence. Heirs to the critical traditions of the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, they celebrate the triumph of intelligence over superstition. However beneficial, such a critical outlook often degenerates not into skepticism but into cynicism. It can display contempt for those who lack the requisite formal education and the proper academic credentials. It can place unwarranted confidence in the opinions of pundits and experts while demeaning common sense. Uninhibited by the recognition of its own defects and liabilities, extravagant, immoderate, and promiscuous, the critical mind, as Burke and Tocqueville observed, can reduce the world to rubble and ashes.

Since the eighteenth century, critics have surely been right to point out the deficiencies of any tradition that impedes human potential, that restricts human expression, and that binds men and women to unjust relations of power, authority, and subordination. Conservatives, by contrast, have shown that the burdens of freedom are often too heavy for the individual to bear alone. It may well be the most valuable insight of conservative political thought that human beings are by nature social and gregarious. They can realize their humanity, to the extent that it is possible to do so, only through interaction with other human beings, which requires at a minimum forbearance and compromise. Society envelops the individual in an affectionate web of communal associations that extend backward and forward in time to join the living to the dead and unborn. Within this community resides the accumulated wisdom of human experience.

Evidence of that wisdom, ironically, shows itself in the

resolve to accept the loss of innocence that has attended the Modern Age. Continuing to adhere to traditions after events have discredited them is to retreat into a utopian sanctuary as illusory as the revolutionary vision of an ideal future. "When ancient opinions and rules of life are taken away," Burke conceded, "the loss cannot possibly be estimated. From that moment we have no compass to govern us; nor can we know distinctly to what port we steer."<sup>[7]</sup> Like Burke, Emile Durkheim spurned withdrawal into the artificial enchantment of an inviolate past and the unwillingness to engage reality, which was often both the motive for, and the consequence of, such an escape.

Durkheim believed in reason and science, not because he thought reason and science innately superior to other sources of knowledge and order but because he thought they were all that remained once religion and tradition had been abandoned. "Once established beliefs have been carried away by the current affairs," he declared, "they cannot be artificially reestablished; only reflection can guide us in life, after this. Once the social instinct is blunted, intelligence is the only guide left us and we have to reconstruct a conscience by its means. . . . [Science] is the only weapon for our battle against the dissolution which gives birth to science itself. "

<sup>[8]</sup> The decline of religion and tradition was a catastrophe. Enthralled by the prospect of freedom, men and women in the modern world became less inclined to accept restraints of any sort. They instead demanded opportunities, progress, and rights, transforming themselves into a dissociated, incoherent mass of selfish, antagonistic individuals. Rationalism, secularism, and individualism, the essential components of modern life, all but assured social disintegration.

In [\*On Suicide\*](#), published in 1897, Durkheim exposed the circumstances under which the connections between the individual and society had dissolved. The loss of religion and

tradition gave rise in some persons to what Durkheim called *anomie*, not merely the breakdown of values, beliefs, and ideas but also the condition of lawlessness. Unbounded desire and ambition drew the self into a ceaseless but disappointing quest for pleasure and satisfaction. Bored, anxious, and disheartened, modern men and women dissipated themselves in the void that they struggled to fill. Suicide was often the only release from their inability to govern desire and passion and to counter the emptiness of disappointed expectations.

“The exceptionally high number of voluntary deaths,” Durkheim argued, “manifests the state of deep disturbance from which civilized societies are suffering, and bears witness to its gravity.”<sup>[9]</sup> The remedy to “this current of collective sadness” lay in the past, not in the artificial restoration of worn out customs, practices, and traditions that “could be endowed only with an appearance of life.” Rather, Durkheim proposed to seek “in the past the germs of a new life which it contained, and hasten their development.”<sup>[10]</sup> Modernity may have furnished individuals with unprecedented opportunities for independence and progress. The erosion of community it had brought about generated feelings of loneliness, isolation, and despair. Unchecked freedom and excessive individualism were, it turned out, a deadly menace to the human personality. “If minds cannot be made to lose the desire for freedom by artificially enslaving them,” Durkheim affirmed, “neither can they recover their equilibrium by mere freedom. They must use this freedom fittingly.”<sup>[11]</sup> Suicide was a warning that human beings do not and cannot stand alone. They must come together to create stability, coherence, and meaning, or else they will condemn themselves to wander a barren and solitary wasteland until desolation overwhelms them.

With the advent of modernity, men could no longer pretend that order and morality came from God as they had once taken for granted. More than at any time in the past, human beings, if

they were to survive, had to think for themselves without established authority, whether secular or ecclesiastical, operating as a sure guide. Under such circumstances, it is all the more calamitous that many Americans today have relinquished even the pretense of thought and have come, not for the first time in their history, to resent the life of the mind and those who represent it.<sup>[12]</sup> They are content to accept slogans and cant that parody and ridicule ideas; they extol intellectual vulgarity because they confuse it with exuberance and strength. Those who arouse and inspire them often belittle reasoned dialogue, logical argument, and objective standards of judgment. They lie. They encourage hatred and xenophobia. They speak of pursuing self-interest at the expense of community, and target convenient scapegoats as the cause of all misery and affliction. As have others in the past, they do not hesitate to glorify violence, which has always been the first expression of barbarism.

Tormented by doubts about all that once seemed invulnerable, assailed by economic crisis, fearful of a life that seems to be without purpose and a world that seems to be out of control, and bewildered by a growing sense of their own insignificance, many Americans have fashioned in their minds the image of an ideal society in which life is simple, uniform, and intelligible. Gradually, that vision has not only disenchanted but has also estranged them from the here-and-now, from reality itself. They indulge in a fantasy that appears far more attractive than the world in which they have been condemned to live, and many are willing, even eager, to follow anyone who promises to bring their dream to fruition. On that account, Ralph Waldo Emerson may provide a salutary corrective. "Great men, great nations," Emerson proclaimed, "have not been boasters and buffoons, but perceivers of the terror of life, and have manned themselves to face it."<sup>[13]</sup> Will Americans ponder Emerson's words? Will they face reality? Will they brave the challenges they must confront without



sacrificing their finest principles and becoming worse than the enemies whom they seek to defeat? Will they have compassion rather than contempt for the downtrodden and the unfortunate, remembering perhaps a time when they or their ancestors were themselves among the downtrodden and the unfortunate? Will they, finally, come together as a people to bind up the nation's wounds, or will the United States continue its descent into the maelstrom? I wish I knew.

Notes:

<sup>[1]</sup> Although many historians have written about the political turmoil of the 1790s, an early, but concise and insightful, analysis may be found in Marshall Smelser, "The Federalist Period as an Age of Passion," *American Quarterly* X (Winter, 1958), 391-419.

<sup>[2]</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., "The Highbrow in Politics," *Partisan Review*, Vol. XX (March-April 1953), 162-65.

<sup>[3]</sup> Edmund Burke, [\*Reflections on the Revolution in France\*](#) (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1910), 84-85.

<sup>[4]</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, [\*The Old Regime and the French Revolution\*](#) Translated by Stuart Gilbert (New York: Anchor Books, 1983), 139.

<sup>[5]</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>[6]</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-41.

<sup>[7]</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 75.

<sup>[8]</sup> Emile Durkheim, [\*Suicide: A Study in Sociology\*](#) Translated by John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: The Free

Press, 1951), 169.

<sup>[9]</sup> Ibid, 391.

<sup>[10]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[11]</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>[12]</sup> See, for example, Richard Hofstadter's classic study [Anti-Intellectualism in American Life](#) (New York: Vintage Books, 1962).

<sup>[13]</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Fate," in [The Conduct of Life, The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson](#), Vol. 6, Fireside Edition (Boston and New York, 1909), 11.

*This blog post has been reproduced with the permission of [The Imaginative Conservative](#). The original blog post can be found [here](#). The views expressed by the author and The Imaginative Conservative are not necessarily endorsed by this organization and are simply provided as food for thought from Intellectual Takeout.????????????*

Image Credit: Library of Congress; Inset: Michael Vadon <http://bit.ly/1brPrry>