

Whither the public intellectual? | The Express Tribune

Abbas Moosvi December 11, 2022

Original, nuanced, philosophically oriented thinkers are few and far between in academia today

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Mainstream economists have been selling the same ‘privatise-liberalise-deregulate’ snake oil for almost 50 years — to no avail. Seeing policy as a purely technical/apolitical endeavour, these charlatans have ravaged vulnerable communities the globe over. There is no critique or dynamic analyses; no structural, long-term perspectives; no overarching animus or even call to action. In fact, at no point in this process does the question of democracy even arise: ordinary people are talked down to, merely informed once decisions have already been taken. These prescriptions are for their own good, after all, and they best believe it! Where are the public intellectuals?!

The prevalent ‘intellectual deficit’ isn’t a personal/cultural failure, academia has deliberately been shaped — via directed funding — to restrict the expanse of scholarly inquiry. In the Global South, multilateral donor agencies and international financial institutions have achieved this by strategically crowding out the knowledge production arena via the swift capture of all budding academics — subverting their activities to certain geopolitical agendas in exchange for perks, fame and money. As universities increasingly move towards adjunct faculty (short-term, part-time contractual employees) experiencing declining real wages, scholars are compelled to look elsewhere to supplement their incomes — in this case, big foreign donors.

It is thus no wonder that original, nuanced, philosophically oriented thinkers are few and far between in academia today. In their stead have emerged missionaries looking for a quick buck, regardless of how frequently they must bend the knee for the White man. Those that wish to avoid this and stick to ‘traditional’ approaches to research are also bound by the suffocating peer review system, in which even slight deviations from established schools of thought are seen with suspicion and hostility. Within this modality, a kind of ‘you-scratch-my-back-I-scratch-yours’ pathology tends to prevail whereby academics support the work of their friends, regardless of quality, substance, or real-world relevance, helping one another advance in their respective careers.

Scholars in contemporary times are involved in a process of tinkering at the margins i.e. proposing rudimentary interventions in a manner that ensures the

status quo remains largely intact. Considerations of power differentials between various competing groups never figure into the equation. “Eliminate sludge.” “Pursue ‘public-private partnerships.’” “Encourage sustainable lifestyles.” These empty prescriptions are not necessarily wrong but they miss the forest for the trees. For this to change, the prioritising of quantitative ‘indicators’ over qualitative, structural considerations must end: and questions about institutions, political parties, land relations, real estate thuggery, rent seeking industrial big wigs, and more, come to the fore.

Intellectuals would do well to approach society not as a blank slate to impose theories upon but rather with the starting point of acknowledging contextual, historical details that have shaped the larger political economy. It would help if academia and international ‘development’ organisations adopted a more interdisciplinary approach to their activities as opposed to what they currently do, which place certain disciplines (like economics and finance) above others (such as sociology and anthropology) while making hiring and firing decisions, thus naturally operating with countless blind spots that render their credibility void at the outset.

On the other hand, even ‘progressive’ academics and scholars seem to have lost the plot — abandoning material analyses for more abstract, theoretical approaches inspired by the schools of anarchism and postmodernism. This is not to say that there is no value to be attained from these perspectives, which have made significant contributions to the pool of knowledge available to anyone interested in justice and human dignity, but that they are fundamentally idealistic in their nature — disconnected from the messiness of the real world and hyper-focused on an approach that tends to pit identities against one another rather than acting as a unifying force against oppressive structural forces.

Politics in contemporary times has been transformed from referring to competition for power in society, a bottom-up process led by the working masses and their genuine representatives from the intelligentsia, to signifying palace intrigues: vacuous entertainment for the deliberately undereducated. If critical thinking and the ability/willingness to rebel, question and challenge are not granted a central place in education curricula and policymaking is reduced to an elitist activity taking place behind closed doors then the inevitable consequence will be a citizenry that mindlessly accepts what it is told about how society functions, assuming it is the ‘natural’, ‘default’, and ‘routine’ state of affairs.

The role of intellectuals is not to sit in offices of university departments churning out dense, theory-laden papers that hardly anyone other than their peers can comprehend. It is rather to understand the concerns, grievances and misfortunes of the most marginalised, along with communicating not only the political causes of these but also a simplified, consolidated and forthright agenda as an exit strategy. This necessarily requires adopting clear stances, causing controversy and putting oneself in the firing line — all of which academics today are reluctant to do under the garb of ‘impartiality’ and ‘objective’ analysis, as if there could ever be such a thing.

Francis Fukuyama’s claim of the ‘end of history’ — by which he meant ideology — only normalises one particular ideology i.e. ‘liberal’ democracy, to such an extent that even the discussion of possible alternatives is seen as blasphemy. Who dare challenge this? After all, isn’t this system essentially founded upon fundamental

liberties? Liberties for whom, though? If the vast majority of people are stuck in dead-end jobs they not only hate but also secretly believe are pointless — jobs they must continue doing in order to simply survive — is that freedom? Or is freedom the ability to ‘quit’ said job and risk collapsing into poverty within days? Perhaps freedom refers to the ability to choose from 15 different flavours of doughnut at the local café? The ‘end of history’ certainly enabled a much higher degree of ‘freedom’ in terms of the mobility of capital for big businesses, but little changed for the mobility of labour. Who is benefitting from this post-Cold War ‘freedom’, precisely?

Human societies are not a problem to be solved via the clever engineering of men in high offices. Progress is achieved via continued negotiation among stakeholders with skin in the game — particularly on questions of power.

Policy, and in turn sovereignty, cannot be forfeited to opportunistic imperial institutions. Intellectuals must unapologetically embrace politics.

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