

Who is an Intellectual?

Edward Said on the Moral Vocation of an Intellectual

By
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“The role of the intellectual is not to consolidate authority, but to understand, interpret, and question it...Indeed, the intellectual vocation essentially is somehow to alleviate human suffering and not to celebrate what in effect does not need celebrating, whether that’s the state or the patria or any of these basically triumphalist agents in our society.”

–Edward Said, “On Defiance and Taking Positions” in Reflections on Exile and Other Essays, 2000. pp. 502-3

The Need for Intellectuals

If there is one lesson that we can learn from the late scholar and Palestinian-rights activist, Edward Said, it is this – *the intellectual vocation is a moral one*. If this is so, society itself must be discerning in her choice of intellectuals. We are presupposing that society acknowledges the importance of having intellectuals in her midst. Only when there is a general awareness on the need and importance of having intellectuals can society then chooses the types of intellectuals she wants. The failure to distinguish the types of intellectuals will eventually lead to an immoral ordering of society.¹

The Types of Intellectuals

In a classic work written by the prominent Malay sociologist, Dr. Syed Hussein Alatas, he mentioned the distinction between two types of intellectuals – the *non-functioning* and the *functioning* intellectuals. The emergence of *functioning* intellectuals in society is vital for development and social change. By *functioning* intellectuals, he meant as those who are able to: (1) pose problems, (2) define the problems, (3) analyze the problems, and (4) suggest solutions for the problems.² In addition, the concept of ‘*functioning*’ intellectuals can be further described by contrasting them with the *non-intellectual intelligentsias*³:

“A non-intellectual, though educated, is passive mentally. He accepts what is taught to him uncritically. He does not exert himself thinking about different problems over a span of years. He is not emotionally committed to the intellectual pursuit. He does not miss an intellectual discussion because he feels no need for it. He does not spend time reading on serious subjects. He is not capable of forming an opinion beyond what is obvious to most people. If he is a specialist, his knowledge of subjects outside his field is comparable to that of the layman.”⁴

In our structure of society, it is mostly the intelligentsias who choose the type of intellectuals for the public. The intelligentsias, who occupied important and influential positions in social institutions, corporations and government bodies, tend to promote intellectuals that are in line with ideological interests and group orientations. It is because of this that the acute problem of the relationship between institutions and the intellectuals, emerge. This is the problem that Edward Said addressed in his Reith lecture series, *Representations of the Intellectual*. It is in these lectures that Said explored on what it means to be a *true* intellectual and what should an intellectual do to maintain a moral edge in their approaches to social problems and issues.

The Role of the Intellectuals

What does it mean to be an intellectual? In a series of lectures delivered in 1993, Edward Said addressed one of the most thorny issue that had pit him against many other scholars and academics in the establishment and various public institutions – what is the role of an intellectual? And what should be his/her relationship to power?

A Sense of Exile

First and foremost, Said had always maintained that it is important for an intellectual to be detached from power, or to be in a constant state of ‘exile’. *Exile* for the intellectual, which Said identifies in its metaphysical sense, is “restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others”.⁵ It is necessarily a condition of someone who “stands as a marginal figure outside the comforts of privilege, power, being-at-homeness”, yet deriving pleasure of “being surprised, of never taking anything for granted, of learning to make do in circumstances of shaky instability that would confound or terrify most people”⁶ Since an intellectual never follows a prescribed path, being exilic is synonymous to being marginal. One need only look at history to recognize that almost all intellectuals were at one time or another, suffered in exile or marginalized in their lifetime.⁷

Speaking Truth to Power

It is this sense of exile that allows an intellectual to speak truth to power. For Said, intellectuals “are not professionals denatured by their fawning service to an extremely flawed power” but rather, they are those who provide “an alternative and more principled stand”⁸. Said himself had observed throughout his academic and activist life that many intellectuals within institutionalized groups speak *for* power. Being patrons of these institutionalized groups, they cannot think as an independent intellectual, but “only as a disciple or acolyte”. For “in the back of [their] mind there is the thought that you must please, and not displease”.⁹ An intellectual must always choose between actively representing the truth to the best of his ability and passively allowing a patron or an authority to direct him/her.¹⁰ Thus, it is important for an intellectual to maintain a sense of detachment (‘exilic’) in order to speak truth to power, since

“...the intellectual properly speaking is not a functionary nor an employee completely given up to the policy goals of a government or a large corporation, or even a guild of like-minded professionals. In such situations the temptations to turn off one’s moral sense, or to think entirely from within the specialty, or to curtail skepticism in favor of conformity, are far too great to be trusted.”¹¹

The effect of patronizing power is great indeed. It produces habits of mind, which Said severely criticized as “corrupting *par excellence*”:

“Nothing in my view is more reprehensible than those habits of mind in the intellectual that induce avoidance, that characteristic turning away from a difficult and principled position which you know to be the right one, but which you decide not to take. You do not want to appear too political; you are afraid of seeming controversial; you need the approval of a boss or an authority figure; you want to keep a reputation for being balanced, objective, moderate; your hope is to be asked back, to consult, to be on a board or prestigious committee, and so to remain within

the responsible mainstream; someday you hope to get an honorary degree, a big prize, perhaps even an ambassadorship.”¹²

To internalize such habits is to denature, neutralize and finally kill the passionate intellectual life.

Amateurship

Last but not least, Said pointed out that the greatest danger today facing the intellectual and the intellectual life, is the attitude he called ‘professionalism’:

“By professionalism I mean thinking of your work as an intellectual as something you do for a living, between hours of nine to five with one eye on the clock, and another cocked at what is considered to be proper, professional behaviour – not rocking the boat, not straying outside the accepted paradigms or limits, making yourself marketable and above all presentable, hence uncontroversial and unpolitical and ‘objective’.”¹³

Since an intellectual should be governed by values like truth and justice, it is never justifiable for an intellectual to speak or write under the dictation of his profession and with the sole aim of promoting ‘official’ views.

In contradistinction, Said suggested an attitude to be adopted, which he called ‘amateurism’.

Amateurism is

”the desire to be moved not by profit or reward but by love for and unquenchable interest in the larger picture, in making connections across lines and barriers, in refusing to be tied down to a specialty, in caring for ideas and values despite the restrictions of a profession.”¹⁴

In short, amateurism is an activity that is “fuelled by care and affection rather than by profit, and selfish, narrow specialization”. It is not an activity where the “audience is there to be satisfied, and hence a client to be kept happy”. Therefore, there is no such thing as having the necessary professional position and academic credentials to claim oneself as an intellectual, or to raise problems as one deem necessary. Said reminded us that

“An intellectual today ought to be an amateur, someone who considers that to be a thinking and concerned member of a society one is entitled to raise moral issues at the very heart of even the most technical and professionalized activity...”¹⁵

Such is the role of an intellectual - it is as much a responsibility as well as a moral vocation. This is perhaps the best way to describe the life and career of Edward Said himself in his struggle to challenge the misrepresentations of Islam and the Muslims in the West.

[This article was first published in *The Muslim Reader* magazine, Sep-Dec 2003 issue.]

ENDNOTES

¹ Many works had been written on the importance, function and nature of intellectuals/elites and their relation to social growth and progress. Some of these works are Antonio Gramsci (*Selections from the Prison Notebooks*), Edward Shils (*The Intellectuals and the Powers*), Syed Hussein Alatas, (*Intellectuals in Developing Societies*), Karl Mannheim (*Ideology and Utopia*), and C. Wright Mills (*The Power Elites*).

² Syed Hussein Alatas, *Intellectuals in Developing Societies*. London: Frank Cass, 1977. p. 15. Alatas did acknowledge that there are intellectuals who gave bad diagnoses of a perceived problem. Such intellectuals are to be considered as *non-functioning*, or at the very least, *badly-functioning* intellectuals.

³ *Intelligentsias* are those who have undergone higher-level education. In modern societies, this group consists of the specialists and professionals who occupy various governmental positions, institutions and corporations.

⁴ Alatas, *Intellectuals in Developing Societies*, op. cit. pp. 15-6.

⁵ Edward Said, *Representations of the intellectuals*. London: Vintage, 1994. p. 39

⁶ *ibid.* pp. 43-4

⁷ This is also true in Muslim history where the likes of Ibn Rushd (d. 1198), Ibn Khaldun (d. 1395), Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 341) and many other early Muslim scholars, thinkers and intellectuals who were at one point or another suffered persecution and were marginalized from mainstream Islam until many years later.

⁸ Said, *Representations*, op. cit. p. 71

⁹*ibid.* p. 89

¹⁰ *ibid.* p. 90

¹¹ *ibid.* p. 64

¹² *ibid.* p. 74

¹³ *ibid.* p. 55

¹⁴ *ibid.* p. 57

¹⁵ *ibid.* p. 61