



Intellectuals and Society

Thomas Sowell

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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.

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