Deconstructing Anti-intellectualism

https://www.e-ir.info/2017/09/25/deconstructing-anti-intellectualism/

ALEX ETL, SEP 25 2017

The year 2016 offered a series of shocking political events, culminating in the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump. Observers from across the globe tried to interpret these developments from different angles. The outcome of their work has been a number of newly emerging concepts adapted in order to make meaning out of the current state of affairs. Terms like 'post-truth era,' 'filter bubble,' and 'anti-intellectualism' entered the explanatory jargon of experts, analysts, and journalists. This article takes up one of these linguistic constructs – 'anti-intellectualism' – and aims to point out that its usage invokes exclusionary and dangerous practices.

Inherent in the concept of 'intellectualism' is a privileged group – the intellectuals – who, in contrast to those deemed as thinking with emotion, are able to think rationally to address great problems. The Oxford Dictionary calls it 'the exercise of the intellect at the expense of the emotions.' Conversely, as Richard Hofstadter writes in 'Anti-intellectualism in American Life,' anti-intellectual ideas and attitudes share the 'suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life'. (Hofstadter, 1963) Many articles have published in recent months that the problem with contemporary political events is the rise of 'anti-intellectualism,' a phenomenon which is said to endanger the basis of society. For example, Matthew Motta and Jay A. DeSart both concluded that 'anti-intellectualism' can be used to craft support for different political movements and politicians, as it happened during the election of Donald Trump. (Motta, 2017; DeSart, 2017) Besides these examples, 'anti-intellectualism' became a popular term in 2017 among such newspapers as the Washington Post, the New York Times, the Guardian, and the Diplomat.

'Anti-intellectualism' as a concept is inherently problematic because 'intellect,' 'intellectual' and 'intellectualism' are nothing, but empty or illusionary categories. There is no objectively established group of 'intellectuals.' None can decide who obtain the capability to think 'intellectually,' that is, to exercise reasoning at the expense of emotions. Nevertheless, the constructed category of 'intellectuals' is depicted mostly by academics, experts, journalists, politicians, philosophers, writers, activists and scientists in our everyday discourse. This can be seen in a wide range of lists of top 'intellectuals', established by newspapers like the Observer, the New York Times, and the Foreign Policy. A similar example emerges from the above cited scholarly articles, since both Motta and DeSart use the term 'intellectuals' as constituted by scientists, academics and experts.

However, it is easy to see that one could exercise intellectualism without belonging to this group, just as the constructed group of intellectuals can also easily draw on their subjective emotions even without fully understanding the fact. This was also captured by Noam Chomsky, who argued that in many cases academics constitute a privileged class, while 'plenty of people in the crafts, auto mechanics and so on, probably do as much or more intellectual work as plenty of people in universities.' (Mitchell and Schoeffel, 2002: 96) Hence, 'intellectualism' and 'anti-intellectualism' emerge as illusionary, empty terms from the discursive field.

The biggest trouble with 'anti-intellectualism' is that the concept presupposes a clear distinction between 'intellectuals' and the 'masses'. As showed above, the former group is constituted mostly by scientists, academics, journalists and experts, the latter consists of ordinary people who do not have access to the truth and therefore require the intellectual services of the former. In this context, 'anti-intellectualism' refers to the rejection of the 'masses' to allow 'intellectuals' to tell them how to solve their own problems. Hence, the concept of 'anti-intellectualism' implies that persuading the 'masses' by logic is not possible anymore, while it portrays 'intellectuals'

Deconstructing Anti-intellectualism

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as the victims of this situation. This implicitly implies that scientific reasoning is an inherently pointless effort, since the 'anti-intellectuals' will not pay attention to it.

The more important problem is, however, that the two constructed groups – 'intellectuals' and 'anti-intellectuals' – are mutually exclusive, hence a binary opposition emerges in the discourse. This division is further strengthened by the fact that the constructed group of 'intellectuals' share certain common traits, such as the rejection of Brexit, Trump and similar anomalies. Thus, a Brexit or a Trump supporter is prone to being called an 'anti-intellectual', or 'anti-elite'. The predicament of 'intellectualism' or 'anti-intellectualism' is that it perpetuates these mutually-exclusive categories. In other words, the term 'intellectual' necessitates the existence of 'non-intellectuals' or the 'masses'. This is not only a binary opposition, but also a hierarchical relationship in which the 'intellectual' occupies the superior (savior), while the ordinary people the inferior (needs to be saved) position.

Because 'intellectualism' and 'anti-intellectualism' are not stable categories with fixed content, there is no rule to decipher who belongs to the 'intellectuals' or the 'masses' in reality. Nevertheless, the binary can establish a feeling of exclusion even though these are only imagined categories. Being in the inferior group leads to dissatisfaction. This power position plays well into the hands of populist strategies, which can now utilize this inferior sentiment against the constructed superior group and gain credit and support among the seemingly excluded members of the 'intellectual' society. From this perspective, it is only a matter of political maneuver to ignore scientific data, an 'anti-intellectual' move from the inferior side that can lead to increased popularity. As such, politicians can operationalize this notion and target the constructed group of 'intellectuals' and those people who are linked to this empty category based on their occupation within the knowledge economy. In this regard, the New York Times provided an important insight, how the Republican Party started to embrace the 'anti-intellectual' label from Eisenhower, through Nixon, to Reagan in order to gain votes. Similarly, Nigel Farage used this tool a few month ago, when he accused the Labour party that it was 'hijacked by Islington intellectuals'.

To be clear, I acknowledge a need for academic expertise to be deployed in systematically delegitimizing decisions that are harmful to society. However, 'anti-intellectualism' as an explanatory concept is definitely not a helpful tool for this, as it evokes elitist and exclusionary practices, which create even bigger social damage. Instead of this, one can talk about certain trends, for example how Republicans have grown negative about colleges and universities, or how we have to face certain limitations of reasoning due to the functioning of the human mind. Important insights, like these can provide useful entry points for further research to explain different phenomenon. Nevertheless, when analysts try to interpret ongoing international events, they must carefully evaluate the consequences of their words. Just as explanatory concepts such as 'anti-intellectualism' can be immediately useful, they can also pose a greater, hidden danger.

Note

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Deconstructing Anti-intellectualism
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