

Edward Said
Professionals and Amateurs
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[...] The particular threat to the intellectual today, whether in the West or the non-Western world, is not the academy, nor the suburbs, nor the appalling commercialism of journalism and publishing houses, but rather an attitude that I will call professionalism. By professionalism I mean thinking of your work as an intellectual as something you do for a living, between the hours of nine and five with one eye on the dock, and another cocked at what is considered to be proper, professional behavior—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."

Let us return to Sartre. At the very moment that he seems to be advocating the idea that man (no mention of woman) is free to choose his own destiny, he also says that the situation—one of Sartre's favorite words—may prevent the full exercise of such freedom. And yet, Sartre adds, it is wrong to say that milieu and situation unilaterally determine the writer or intellectual: rather there is a constant movement back and forth between them. In his credo as an intellectual published in 1947, *What Is Literature?*, Sartre uses the word *writer* rather than intellectual, but it is clear that he is speaking about the role of the intellectual in society, as in the following (all-male) passage:

I am an author, first of all, by my free intention to write. But at once it follows that I become a man whom men consider as a writer, that is, who has to respond to certain demand and who has been invested with a social function. Whatever game he may want to play, must play it on the basis of the representation which others have of him. He may want to modify the character one attributes to the man of letters [or intellectual] in a given society; but in order to change it, he must first slip into it. Hence, the public intervenes, with its customs, its vision of the world, and its conception of society and of literature within that society. It surrounds the writer, it hems him in, and its imperious or sly demands, its refusals and its flights, are the given facts on whose basis a work can be constructed.¹

Sartre is not saying that the intellectual is a kind of withdrawn philosopher-king whom one ought to idealize and venerate as such. On the contrary—and this is something that contemporary lamenters over the disappearance of intellectuals tend to miss—the intellectual is constantly subject not only to the demands of his or her society but also to quite substantial modifications in the status of intellectuals as members of a distinct group. In assuming that the intellectual ought to have sovereignty, or a kind of

unrestricted authority over moral and mental life in a society, critics of the contemporary scene simply refuse to see how much energy has been poured into resisting, even attacking, authority of late, with the radical changes in the intellectual's self-representation that has been produced.

Today's society still hems in and surrounds the writer, sometimes with prizes and rewards, often with denigration or ridiculing of intellectual work altogether, still more often with saying that the true intellectual ought to be only an expert professional in his or her field. I don't recall Sartre ever saying that the intellectual should remain outside the university necessarily: he *did* say that the intellectual is never more an intellectual than when surrounded, cajoled, hemmed in, hectored by society to be one thing or another, because only then and on that basis can intellectual work be constructed. When he refused the Nobel Prize in 1964 he was acting precisely according to his principles.

What are these pressures today? And how do they fit what I have been calling professionalism? What I want to discuss are four pressures which I believe challenge the intellectual's ingenuity and will. None of them is unique to only one society. Despite their pervasiveness, each of them can be countered by what I shall call amateurism, 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.

Specialization is the first of these pressures. The higher one goes in the education system today, the more one is limited to a relatively narrow area of knowledge. Now no one can have anything against competence as such, but when it involves losing sight of anything outside one's immediate field—say, early Victorian love poetry—and the sacrifice of one's general culture to a set of authorities and canonical ideas, then competence of that sort is not worth the price paid for it.

In the study of literature, for example, which is my particular interest, specialization has meant an increasing technical formalism, and less and less of a historical sense of what real experiences actually went into the making of a work of literature. Specialization means losing sight of the raw effort of constructing either art or knowledge; as a result you cannot view knowledge and art as choices and decisions, commitments and alignments, but only in terms of impersonal theories or methodologies. To be a specialist in literature too often means shutting out history or music, or politics. In the end as a fully specialized literary intellectual you become tame and accepting of whatever the so-called leaders in the field will allow. Specialization also kills your sense of excitement and discovery, both of which are irreducibly present in the intellectual's makeup. In the final analysis, giving up to specialization is, I have always felt, laziness, so you end up doing what others tell you, because that is your specialty after all.

If specialization is a kind of general instrumental pressure present in all systems of education everywhere, expertise and the cult of the certified expert are more particular pressures in the postwar world. To be an expert you have to be certified by the proper authorities; they instruct you in speaking the right language, citing the right authorities, holding down the right territory. This is especially true when sensitive and/or profitable areas of knowledge are at stake.

[...]

For "expertise" in the end has rather little, strictly speaking, to do with knowledge. Some of the material brought to bear on the Vietnamese war by Noam

Chomsky is far greater in scope and accuracy than similar writing by certified experts. But whereas Chomsky moved beyond the ritually patriotic notions—that included the idea that "we" were coming to the aid of our allies, or that "we" were defending freedom against a Moscow or Peking inspired takeover—and took on the real motives that governed U.S. behavior, the certified experts, who wanted to be asked back to consult or speak at the State Department or work for the Rand Corporation, never strayed into that territory at all. Chomsky has told the story of how as a linguist he has been invited by mathematicians to speak about his theories, and is usually met with respectful interest, despite his relative ignorance of mathematical lingo. Yet when he tries to represent U.S. foreign policy from an adversarial standpoint, the recognized experts on foreign policy try to prevent his speaking on the basis of his lack of certification as a foreign policy expert. There is little refutation offered his arguments; just the statement that he stands outside acceptable debate or consensus.

The third pressure of professionalism is the inevitable drift towards power and authority in its adherents, towards the requirements and prerogatives of power, and towards being directly employed by it. In the United States the extent to which the agenda of the national security determined priorities and the mentality of academic research during the period when the U.S. was competing with the Soviet Union for world hegemony is quite staggering. A similar situation obtained in the Soviet Union, but in the West no one had any illusions about free inquiry *there*. We are only just beginning to wake up to what it meant—that the American Departments of State and Defense provided more money than any other single donor for university research in science and technology: this was preeminently true of MIT and Stanford, who between them received the biggest amounts for decades.

But it was also the case that during the same period university social science and even humanities departments were funded by the government for the same general agenda. Something like this occurs in all societies of course, but it was noteworthy in the U.S. because in the case of some of the anti-guerrilla research carried out in support of policy in the Third World—in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East principally—the research was applied directly in covert activities, sabotage, and even outright war. Questions of morality and justice were deferred so that contracts—such as the notorious Project Camelot undertaken by social scientists for the Army beginning in 1964, in order to study not only the breakdown of various societies all over the world, but also how to prevent the breakdown from occurring—could be fulfilled.

Nor has this been all. Centralizing powers in American civil society such as the Republican or Democratic parties; industry or special interest lobbies like those created or maintained by the gun-manufacturing, oil, and tobacco corporations; large foundations like those established by the Rockefellers, the Fords, or the Mellons—all employ academic experts to carry out research and study programs that further commercial as well as political agendas. This of course is part of what is considered normal behavior in a free market system, and occurs throughout Europe and the Far East as well. There are grants and fellowships to be had from think tanks, plus sabbatical leaves and publishing subventions, as well as professional advancement and recognition.

Everything about the system is aboveboard and, as I have said, is acceptable according to the standards of competition and market response that govern behavior under advanced capitalism in a liberal and democratic society. But in spending a lot of

time worrying about the restrictions on thought and intellectual freedom under totalitarian systems of government we have not been as fastidious in considering the threats to the individual intellectual of a system that rewards intellectual conformity, as well as willing participation in goals that have been set not by science but by the government; accordingly, research and accreditation are controlled in order to get and keep a larger share of the market.

In other words, the space for individual and subjective intellectual representation, for asking questions and challenging the wisdom of a war or an immense social program that awards contracts and endows prizes, has shrunk dramatically from what it was a hundred years ago when Stephen Dedalus could say that as an intellectual his duty was not to serve any power or authority at all. Now I do not want to suggest as some have—rather sentimentally I think—that we should recover a time when universities weren't so big, and the opportunities they now offer were not so lavish. To my mind the Western university, certainly in America, still can offer the intellectual a quasi-utopian space in which reflection and research can go on, albeit under new constraints and pressures.

Therefore, the problem for the intellectual is to try to deal with the impingements of modern professionalization as I have been discussing them, not by pretending that they are not there, or denying their influence, but by representing a different set of values and prerogatives. These I shall collect under the name of *amateurism*, literally, an activity that is fueled by care and affection rather than by profit and selfish, narrow specialization.

The 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 heart of even the most technical and professionalized activity as it involves one's country, its power, its mode of interacting with its citizens as well as with other societies. In addition, the intellectual's spirit as an amateur can enter and transform the merely professional routine most of us go through into something much more lively and radical; instead of doing what one is supposed to do one can ask why one does it, who benefits from it, how can it reconnect with a personal project and original thoughts.

Every intellectual has an audience and a constituency. The issue is whether that audience is there to be satisfied, and hence a client to be kept happy, or whether it is there to be challenged, and hence stirred into outright opposition or mobilized into greater democratic participation in the society. But in either case, there is no getting around authority and power, and no getting around the intellectual's relationship to them. How does the intellectual address authority: as a professional supplicant or as its unrewarded, amateurish conscience?

ⁱ Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature? And Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 77-78. 74