

Why Do Intellectuals Oppose Capitalism?

by Robert Nozick

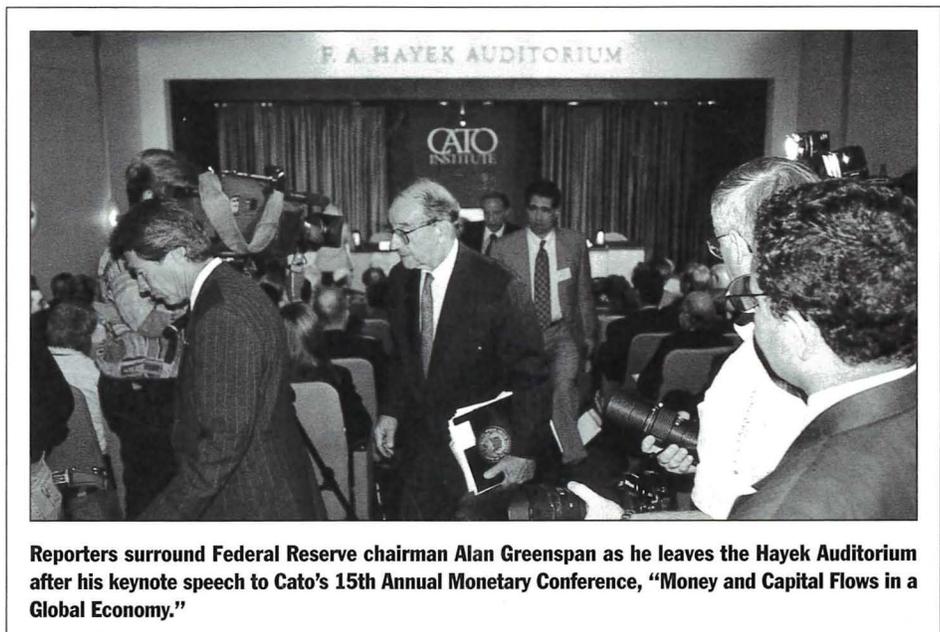
It is surprising that intellectuals oppose capitalism so. Other groups of comparable socio-economic status do not show the same degree of opposition in the same proportions. Statistically, then, intellectuals are an anomaly.

Not all intellectuals are on the "left." Like other groups, their opinions are spread along a curve. But in their case, the curve is shifted and skewed to the political left.

By intellectuals, I do not mean all people of intelligence or of a certain level of education, but those who, in their vocation, deal with ideas as expressed in words, shaping the word flow others receive. These wordsmiths include poets, novelists, literary critics, newspaper and magazine journalists, and many professors. It does not include those who primarily produce and transmit quantitatively or mathematically formulated information (the numbersmiths) or those working in visual media, painters, sculptors, cameramen. Unlike the wordsmiths, people in these occupations do not disproportionately oppose capitalism. The wordsmiths are concentrated in certain occupational sites: academia, the media, government bureaucracy.

Wordsmith intellectuals fare well in capitalist society; there they have great freedom to formulate, encounter, and propagate new ideas, to read and discuss them. Their occupational skills are in demand, their income

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Reporters surround Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan as he leaves the Hayek Auditorium after his keynote speech to Cato's 15th Annual Monetary Conference, "Money and Capital Flows in a Global Economy."

much above average. Why then do they disproportionately oppose capitalism? Indeed, some data suggest that the more prosperous and successful the intellectual, the more likely he is to oppose capitalism. This opposition to capitalism is mainly "from the left" but not solely so. Yeats, Eliot, and Pound opposed market society from the right.

The opposition of wordsmith intellectuals to capitalism is a fact of social significance. They shape our ideas and images of society; they state the policy alternatives bureaucracies consider. From treatises to slogans, they give us the sentences to express ourselves. Their opposition matters, especially in a society that depends increasingly upon the explicit formulation and dissemination of information.

We can distinguish two types of explanation for the relatively high proportion of intellectuals in opposition to capitalism. One type finds a factor unique to the anti-capitalist intellectuals. The second type of explanation identifies a factor applying to all intel-

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“Intellectuals feel they are the most valuable people, the ones with the highest merit, but a capitalist society does not satisfy the principle of distribution ‘to each according to his merit.’”

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lectuals, a force propelling them *toward* anti-capitalist views. Whether it pushes any particular intellectual over into anti-capitalism will depend upon the other forces acting upon him. In the aggregate, though, since it makes anti-capitalism more likely for each intellectual, such a factor will produce a larger proportion of anti-capitalist intellectuals. Our explanation will be of this second type. We will identify a factor which tilts intellectuals toward anti-capitalist attitudes but does not guarantee it in any particular case.

The Value of Intellectuals

Intellectuals now expect to be the most highly valued people in a society, those with the most prestige and power, those with the greatest rewards. Intellectuals feel *entitled* to this. But, by and large, a capitalist society does not honor its intellectuals. Ludwig von Mises explains the special resentment of intellectuals, in contrast to workers, by saying they mix socially with successful capitalists and so have them as a salient comparison group and are humiliated by their lesser status. However, even those intellectuals who do not mix socially are similarly resentful, while merely mixing is not enough—the sports and dancing instructors who cater to the rich and have affairs with them are not noticeably anti-capitalist.

Why then do contemporary intellectuals feel *entitled* to the highest rewards their society has to offer and *resentful* when they do not receive this? Intellectuals feel they are the most valuable people, the ones with the highest merit, and that society should reward people in accordance with their value and merit. But a capitalist society does not satisfy the principle of distribution “to each according to his merit or value.” Apart from the gifts, inheritances, and gambling winnings that occur in a free society, the market distributes to those who satisfy the perceived market-expressed demands of others, and how much it so distributes depends on how much is demanded and how great the alternative supply is. Unsuccessful businessmen and workers do not have the same animus against the capitalist system as do the wordsmith intellectuals. Only the sense of

unrecognized superiority, of entitlement betrayed, produces that animus.

Why do wordsmith intellectuals think they are most valuable, and why do they think distribution should be in accordance with value? Note that this latter principle is not a necessary one. Other distributional patterns have been proposed, including equal distribution, distribution according to moral merit, distribution according to need. Indeed, there need not be any pattern of distribution a society is aiming to achieve, even a society concerned with justice. The justice of a distribution may reside in its arising from a just process of voluntary exchange of justly acquired property and services. Whatever outcome is produced by that process will be just, but there is no particular pattern the outcome must fit. Why, then, do wordsmiths view themselves as most valuable and accept the principle of distribution in accordance with value?

From the beginnings of recorded thought, intellectuals have told us their activity is most valuable. Plato valued the rational faculty above courage and the appetites and deemed that philosophers should rule; Aristotle held that intellectual contemplation was the highest activity. It is not surprising that surviving texts record this high evaluation of intellectual activity. The people who formulated evaluations, who wrote them down with reasons to back them up, were intellectuals, after all. They were praising themselves. Those who valued other things more than thinking things through with words, whether hunting or power or uninterrupted sensual pleasure, did not bother to leave enduring written records. Only the intellectual worked out a *theory* of who was best.

The Schooling of Intellectuals

What factor produced feelings of superior value on the part of intellectuals? I want to focus on one institution in particular: schools. As book knowledge became increasingly important, schooling—the education together in classes of young people in reading and book knowledge—spread. Schools became the major institution outside of the family to shape the attitudes of young people, and almost all those who later became intellectuals went through schools. There they were successful. They were judged against oth-

ers and deemed superior. They were praised and rewarded, the teacher’s favorites. How could they fail to see themselves as superior? Daily, they experienced differences in facility with ideas, in quick-wittedness. The schools told them, and showed them, they were better.

The schools, too, exhibited and thereby taught the principle of reward in accordance with (intellectual) merit. To the intellectually meritorious went the praise, the teacher’s smiles, and the highest grades. In the currency the schools had to offer, the smartest constituted the upper class. Though not part of the official curricula, in the schools the intellectuals learned the lessons of their own greater value in comparison with the others, and of how this greater value entitled them to greater rewards.

The wider market society, however, taught a different lesson. There the greatest rewards did not go to the verbally brightest. There the intellectual skills were not *most* highly valued. Schooled in the lesson that they were most valuable, the most deserving of reward, the most entitled to reward, how could the intellectuals, by and large, fail to resent the capitalist society which deprived them of the just deserts to which their superiority “entitled” them? Is it surprising that what the schooled intellectuals felt for capitalist society was a deep and sullen animus that, although clothed with various publicly appropriate reasons, continued even when those particular reasons were shown to be inadequate?

In saying that intellectuals feel entitled to the highest rewards the general society can offer (wealth, status, etc.), I do not mean that intellectuals hold these rewards to be the highest goods. Perhaps they value more the intrinsic rewards of intellectual activity or the esteem of the ages. Nevertheless, they also feel entitled to the highest appreciation from the general society, to the most and best it has to offer, paltry though that may be. I don’t mean to emphasize especially the rewards that find their way into the intellectuals’ pockets or even reach them personally. Identifying themselves as intellectuals, they can resent the fact that intellectual activity is not most highly valued and rewarded.

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The intellectual wants the whole society to be a school writ large, to be like the environment where he did so well and was so well appreciated. By incorporating standards of reward that are different from the wider society, the schools guarantee that some will experience downward mobility later. Those at the top of the school's hierarchy will feel entitled to a top position, not only in that micro-society but in the wider one, a society whose system they will resent when it fails to treat them according to their self-prescribed wants and entitlements. The school system thereby produces anti-capitalist feeling among intellectuals. Rather, it produces anti-capitalist feeling among verbal intellectuals. Why do the numbersmiths not develop the same attitudes as these wordsmiths? I conjecture that these quantitatively bright children, although they get good grades on the relevant examinations, do not receive the same face-to-face attention and approval from the teachers as do the verbally bright children. It is the verbal skills that bring these personal rewards from the teacher, and apparently it is these rewards that especially shape the sense of entitlement.

Central Planning in the Classroom

There is a further point to be added. The (future) wordsmith intellectuals are successful within the formal, official social system of the schools, wherein the relevant rewards are distributed by the central authority of the teacher. The schools contain another informal social system within classrooms, hallways, and schoolyards, wherein rewards are distributed not by central direction but spontaneously at the pleasure and whim of schoolmates. Here the intellectuals do less well.

It is not surprising, therefore, that distribution of goods and rewards via a centrally organized distributional mechanism later strikes intellectuals as more appropriate than the “anarchy and chaos” of the marketplace. For distribution in a centrally planned socialist society stands to distribution in a capitalist society as distribution by the teacher stands to distribution by the schoolyard and hallway.

Our explanation does not postulate that (future) intellectuals constitute a majority

even of the academic upper class of the school. This group may consist mostly of those with substantial (but not overwhelming) bookish skills along with social grace, strong motivation to please, friendliness, winning ways, and an ability to play by (and to seem to be following) the rules. Such pupils, too, will be highly regarded and rewarded by the teacher, and they will do extremely well in the wider society, as well. (And do well within the informal social system of the school. So they will not especially accept the norms of the school's formal system.) Our explanation hypothesizes that (future) intellectuals are disproportionately represented in that portion of the schools' (official) upper class that will experience relative downward mobility. Or, rather, in the group that predicts for itself a declining future. The animus will arise *before* the move into the wider world and the experience of an actual decline in status, at the point when the clever pupil realizes he (probably) will fare less well in the wider society than in his current school situation. This unintended consequence of the school system, the anti-capitalist animus of intellectuals, is, of course, reinforced when pupils read or are taught by intellectuals who present those very anti-capitalist attitudes.

No doubt, some wordsmith intellectuals were cantankerous and questioning pupils and so were disapproved of by their teachers. Did they too learn the lesson that the best should get the highest rewards and think, despite their teachers, that they themselves were best and so start with an early resentment against the school system's distribution? Clearly, on this and the other issues discussed here, we need data on the school experiences of future wordsmith intellectuals to refine and test our hypotheses.

Stated as a general point, it is hardly contestable that the norms within schools will affect the normative beliefs of people after they leave the schools. The schools, after all, are the major non-familial society that children learn to operate in, and hence schooling constitutes their preparation for the larger non-familial society. It is not surprising that those successful by the norms of a school system should resent a society, adhering to different norms, which does not grant them the same success. Nor, when those are the very ones who go on to shape a society's self-

image, its evaluation of itself, is it surprising when the society's verbally responsive portion turns against it. If you were designing a society, you would not seek to design it so that the wordsmiths, with all their influence, were schooled into animus against the norms of the society.

Our explanation of the disproportionate anti-capitalism of intellectuals is based upon a very plausible sociological generalization.

In a society where one extra-familial system or institution, the first young people enter, distributes rewards, those who do the very best therein will tend to internalize the norms of this institution and expect the wider society to operate in accordance with these norms; they will feel entitled to distributive shares in accordance with these norms or (at least) to a relative position equal to the one these norms would yield. Moreover, those constituting the upper class within the hierarchy of this first extra-familial institution who then experience (or foresee experiencing) movement to a lower relative position in the wider society will, because of their feeling of frustrated entitlement, tend to oppose the wider social system and feel animus toward its norms.

Notice that this is not a deterministic law. Not all those who experience downward social mobility will turn against the system. Such downward mobility, though, is a factor which tends to produce effects in that direction, and so will show itself in differing proportions at the aggregate level. We might distinguish ways an upper class can move down: it can get less than another group or (while no group moves above it) it can tie, failing to get more than those previously deemed lower. It is the first type of downward mobility which especially rankles and outrages; the second type is far more tolerable. Many intellectuals (say they) favor equality while only a small number call for an aristocracy of intellectuals. Our hypothesis speaks of the first type of downward mobility as especially productive of resentment and animus.

The school system imparts and rewards only *some* skills relevant to later success (it is, after all, a specialized institution) so its

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reward system will differ from that of the wider society. This guarantees that some, in moving to the wider society, will experience downward social mobility and its attendant consequences. Earlier I said that intellectuals want the society to be the schools writ large. Now we see that the resentment due to a frustrated sense of entitlement stems from the fact that the schools (as a specialized first extra-familial social system) are not the society writ small.

Our explanation now seems to predict the (*disproportionate*) resentment of schooled intellectuals against their society whatever its nature, whether capitalist or communist. (Intellectuals are disproportionately opposed to capitalism as compared with other groups of similar socio-economic status within capitalist society. It is another question whether they are disproportionately opposed as compared with the degree of opposition of intellectuals in other societies to those societies.) Clearly, then, data about the attitudes of intellectuals within communist countries toward apparatchiks would be relevant; will those intellectuals feel animus toward *that* system?

Our hypothesis needs to be refined so that it does not apply (or apply as strongly) to every society. Must the school systems in every society inevitably produce anti-social animus in the intellectuals who do not receive that society's highest rewards? Probably not. A capitalist society is peculiar in that it seems to announce that it is open and responsive only to talent, individual initiative, personal merit. Growing up in an inherited caste or feudal society creates no expectation that reward will or should be in accordance with personal value. Despite the created expectation, a capitalist society rewards people only insofar as they serve the market-expressed desires of others; it rewards in accordance with economic contribution, not in accordance with personal value. However, it comes close enough to rewarding in accordance with value—value and contribution will very often be intermingled—so as to nurture the expectation produced by the schools. The ethos of the wider society is close enough to that of the schools so that the nearness creates resentment. Capitalist societies reward individual accomplishment or announce they do, and so they leave the intellectual, who considers himself most

accomplished, particularly bitter.

Another factor, I think, plays a role. Schools will tend to produce such anti-capitalist attitudes the more they are attended together by a diversity of people. When almost all of those who will be economically successful are attending separate schools, the intellectuals will not have acquired that attitude of being superior *to them*. But even if many children of the upper class attend separate schools, an open society will have other schools that also include many who will become economically successful as entrepreneurs, and the intellectuals later will resentfully remember how superior they were academically to their peers who advanced more richly and powerfully. The openness of the society has another consequence, as well. The pupils, future wordsmiths and others, will not know how they will fare in the future. They can hope for anything. A society closed to advancement destroys those hopes early. In an open capitalist society, the pupils are not resigned early to limits on their advancement and social mobility, the society seems to announce that the most capable and valuable will rise to the very top, their schools have already given the academically most gifted the message that they are most valuable and deserving of the greatest rewards, and later these very pupils with the highest encouragement and hopes see others of their peers, whom they know and saw to be less meritorious, rising higher than they themselves, taking the foremost rewards to which they themselves felt themselves entitled. Is it any wonder they bear that society an animus?

Some Further Hypotheses

We have refined the hypothesis somewhat. It is not simply formal schools but formal schooling in a specified social context that produces anti-capitalist animus in (wordsmith) intellectuals. No doubt, the hypothesis requires further refining. But enough. It is time to turn the hypothesis over to the social scientists, to take it from armchair speculations in the study and give it to those who will immerse themselves in more particular facts and data. We can point, however, to some areas where our hypothesis might yield testable consequences and predictions. First, one might predict that the more meritocratic a country's school system,

the more likely its intellectuals are to be on the left. (Consider France.) Second, those intellectuals who were “late bloomers” in school would not have developed the same sense of entitlement to the very highest rewards; therefore, a lower percentage of the late-bloomer intellectuals will be anti-capitalist than of the early bloomers. Third, we limited our hypothesis to those societies (unlike Indian caste society) where the successful student plausibly could expect further comparable success in the wider society. In Western society, women have not heretofore plausibly held such expectations, so we would not expect the female students who constituted part of the academic upper class yet later underwent downward mobility to show the same anti-capitalist animus as male intellectuals. We might predict, then, that the more a society is known to move toward equality in occupational opportunity between women and men, the more its female intellectuals will exhibit the same disproportionate anti-capitalism its male intellectuals show.

Some readers may doubt this explanation of the anti-capitalism of intellectuals. Be this as it may, I think that an important phenomenon has been identified. The sociological generalization we have stated is intuitively compelling; something like it must be true. Some important effect therefore must be produced in that portion of the school's upper class that experiences downward social mobility, some antagonism to the wider society must get generated. If that effect is not the disproportionate opposition of the intellectuals, then what is it? We started with a puzzling phenomenon in need of an explanation. We have found, I think, an explanatory factor that (once stated) is so obvious that we must believe it explains some real phenomenon. ■

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