

**The Intellectual According to Said,
with support from DuBois**

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In the introduction to Edward W. Said's compiled lectures, he defines intellectuals as those "whose main role is to provide authority with their labor while gaining great profit" (xv). This seems like a clear cut definition of what we seek to define as an intellectual. However, if you take a more critical look at the statement, it falls apart at once. Questions arise around what is meant by a role? Or, further, what kinds of roles are intellectual? What specifically is meant by authority? Is labor simply work or simply effort? Finally, we may ask, what is a great profit and is it necessary? For the sake of this essay, I will try to approach these questions each in turn, though I have little doubt other thoughts will arise to lead us astray.

What did Dr. Said mean by *role*? Is a role simply a job or vocation? If we agree, then what about those who say: motherhood is a role, which is not a mere vocation, though at times it may feel like it. This points us to features contained in a role, reminding us people do not exist in a vacuum of singular labels. Role may then be viewed as purpose. Yet, purpose asks what distinctions create a purpose. Is purpose something as simple as a calling? If we add philosophical theory to the idea of role, I may never come to any conclusive answer as such. The eddies to meaning of purpose run on forever.

To save us from the endless discussion that may ensue, let us look to W.E.B. Du Bois's work: *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois's much celebrated work is a series of essays originally published in 1903 (xxi) and presents a context to gather a better definition of the intellectual by. Du Bois is today considered a foremost intellectual of his time. Through him, let us return to the question of what is meant by *role*?

Said's statement is preceded by a list of traditional job roles: "professionals, experts, consultants" (xv). Taking this list, we compare to Du Bois. Du Bois's role throughout much of the work is as a scholar and teacher, father and husband, male and African American (ix, 41-42,

96, 226-227). It is a sizable list, but truncated compared to all else Du Bois was in his time (such as all his familial, interpersonal and professional roles). How do these lists compare?

Plucking out the short list of roles beside Du Bois and comparing it to the list Said made, we easily determine Said meant vocational roles. The supposition is an intellectual is a teacher or scholar; an expert of his or her field and/or a consultant of that field. Yet, problematically, Said also refers to intellectual as a vocation in itself (xv). This insinuates a double role for the intellectual. More clearly, the intellectual holds a professional job, as well as the position of intellectual. It also provides the point at which the purpose (or calling) connects into this idea of role, because not all professionals are intellectuals. They choose to be through a sense of purpose. So, that is simple enough to piece back together. Let us move on to another more troubling piece.

What specifically is meant by *authority*? Authority is traditionally understood as an element of power. Said states in his lectures that an intellectual is a person a group looks to as a uniting figurehead; one who goes forth as an embodiment of their sentiments to communicate those sentiments to others (43). This example, attempts to define the intellectual by what he or she does, and produces images of authority figures such as elected officials and even political pundits (especially in the modern sense of celebrity pundit). Is this to say a police officer is an intellectual? This idea of authority can often fold back in on itself (I will explain this idea in a moment). A police officer by role is an authority figure, but his or her position does not denote an extraneous role of intellectualism via this job role. This becomes complicated when you point to instances of the officer being consulted in the media. To clarify the difference we need to return to the idea of role.

First, let us explore authority further through a brief essay by Mary Louise Pratt, entitled *Arts of the Contact Zone*. Pratt presents the ancient work of an Andean man named Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, titled *The First New Chronicle and Good Government*. Pratt also provides a brief history of this man Poma. He created the equivalent of a European illuminated manuscript to better communicate with the leaders of his oppressors (the Spanish). Poma adapted his oppressor's means of communication, still greatly foreign to his people, and applied it to his understanding of what happened around him. Yet, despite his efforts, his work went unread for centuries. It is dated 1613 and was not examined with any seriousness until the 1970s (33-40).

You may ask, what does all this have to do with authority? Let me explain. Poma was mindful enough to obtain the ability to communicate with those deemed superior to him by European conquerors and European tradition. In other words, Poma took on a role, equipping himself through education and acquisition of knowledge (34). This is what gave him authority, but not the same authority as our police officer. Poma was enabled to speak, authorized by his knowledge. His authority, though, is proven not to have the same context of authority he needed to have his manuscript well received. When Poma sent forth his manuscript, was he aware of the status roles hold, or even the status within the roles themselves? I would assume not, or he little cared, carrying through with his attempt, as we have his manuscript now.

I return to context, to better explain. Poma sent his work to the King of Spain (33). We view kings as definitive seats of authority, as many countries use them to govern the mass of people within their borders. This level (or status) of authority is viewed quite differently from that of the scribe, akin to law enforcement, or the supreme keeper of the law. It is power authority, often seen absolute through prestige of a particular role. Poma's role as scribe (for that is what he was in creating this manuscript) was relegated to levels (or status) far below the

Spanish King he addressed. Poma had informational authority, or knowledge, but not ample power or prestige. Upon receipt of the manuscript, it is quite likely the king dismissed it as no more than another of many texts or an amusing piece of folk art. Further proof of this is Pratt's example of a similar work which Spain actually utilized; ironically created by another man who originated from Poma's shores. This other man was "the son of an Incan Princess and a Spanish official, and had lived in Spain since he was seventeen" (36). The difference between these individuals is their role and the subsequent perceived authority of that role, which along with prestige raises or lowers it to a certain level of power.

Returning to our police officer, we can now navigate the tricky notion of authority folding back in on itself. Du Bois and Poma's authority differs from that of the police officer or figure of leadership embodied by king or prince. More specifically, Du Bois and Poma used knowledge as authority to question the establishment. Said mentions this as the *Speaking Truth to Power*¹ aspect of intellectualism (85). Though it is not contained in the original statement, it is implied through careful navigation in defining what is meant by authority. Speaking truth to power is what Du Bois did in exposing the history of Africans in America. It is what Poma did in producing his book to force the Spanish to acknowledge his people as autonomous. In other words, the police officer is power and prestige, but the intellectual is authority.

In the exploration of these examples, *authority* came to have several meanings: knowledge, experience, evidence, permission and confidence but also sometimes prestige and power. In the case of the intellectual, authority means great knowledge (experiential or learned) of a specific subject on which he or she speaks, denoting both confidence and permission.

However, it also makes sense to consider an intellectual would claim both authority of

¹ The idea I present is best stated on the first page of the chapter, but Said goes more in depth throughout the chapter.

knowledge and authority of power. This is what I meant by it folding back in up on itself. It is still possible that the ruler or law enforcement figure be an intellectual, even if one feels that unlikely.

In the next piece of his statement, Said states intellectuals should *labor*. Labor holds some connotations that easily come to mind. For example, the Labor Class is so labeled because its members labor with their hands for compensation. The term also refers to the exhausting effort of using one's mind and describes a machine or vehicle's hampered motion. Later in his lectures, Said says "being an intellectual is not at all inconsistent with being an academic or pianist" (72-73). Said's analogy tells us he believes an intellectual is one who works with his or her hands but also one who works with his or her mind. Labor is the clearest of the distinctions. It is the act of labor and what that effort produces (perhaps a body of work in the form of volumes of written materials). So the answer is: labor is both work and effort in this instance.

Lastly, I discuss the meaning of *great profit*. Profit, much like compensation, exists in many forms, such as: monetary remuneration or valued objects; material tangible profit. It also arises in intangible gains, such as knowledge. Profit is gained by both individuals and groups. This idea becomes further problematic when it also implies the intellectual can be bought. If the intellectual is to make a profit by their labor, then accepting money and gifts is not out of their purview. However, such a notion may undermine the associated purpose of the intellectual role, changing purpose to the gain of wealth instead of speaking truth to power.

In the work *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, Julien Benda describes just such a situation: "the *clerks* began to play the game of political passions. The men who had acted as a check on the realism of the people began to act as its stimulators" (45). In this example presented by Benda, whether or not these *clerks* received monetary remuneration, the assertion is that the

clerks gained some form of profit by the change in how the *clerks* performed their roles. It further insinuates that by such, these men could be purchased, redirecting their efforts solely for the sake of profit (57).

When intellectuals have their authority and labor purchased, is what they share with the people they serve of any value? Therefore, is the idea that an intellectual make great profit by authority of his or her labor valid, as Said proposes? Through Benda's example we see how profit can corrupt an intellectual, going so far as to renege their purpose. Thusly, making a great profit becomes a dispensable element of what makes an intellectual.

In conclusion, through the works cited and my own assertions from those materials against Said's statement, I can formulate the elusive intellectual. To make it clearer, I will offer one last example, keeping in mind Said's words: that an intellectual is a person a group looks to as a uniting figurehead; one who goes forth as an embodiment of their sentiments to communicate those sentiments to others (43). Take two famous historical figures: Jesus and Mohammed. Both men were revered by their followers as great intellectuals of their times. Each was educated and used their education to claim authority in their role. They utilized their role to labor for their people and affect change. However, Jesus was a man of little means, meaning he had little to no wealth to speak of, and he did not gain any by his role. Jesus often survived on the charity of others, keeping no gains for himself. In fact, such a thing was antithesis to his ideology. Mohammed was a man of means, but this did not contradict his beliefs. The prophet may have had similar challenging beginnings to those of Jesus, but he amassed wealth in his lifetime. He had several wives, a respectable home and a measure of monetary prosperity. He gained status where Jesus was cast off and ridiculed. He also lived a very long life compared to Jesus, something many consider an immeasurable wealth. This comparison shows that profit is

not necessary for the intellectual. It can either be removed as an element or dismissed to no more than a possible upshot.²

Through all these indirect travels, a clearer picture of the intellectual comes into focus: the intellectual is one who is educated in a particular field (or many), giving him or her authority to produce a body of work through labor that may or may not create a profit as it is presented to his or her intended audience as a means of affecting change (speaking truth to power). I believe this is what an intellectual is and what Said had tried to define in his statement.

Works Cited

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² I wish to be clear, however, that profit does not always corrupt the messenger (as in the case of the Prophet Mohammed). Sometimes it does corrupt and mangles the message into something more representative of the status quo (as in the case of the *clerks*). However, (as in the case of Jesus) an intellectual does not require profit to claim the role of intellectual.