

# From Legislator to Experts: The Decline of Intellectuals in *Ravelstein*

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**Abstract:** Anti-intellectualism is rooted in American historical tradition and has gradually become the most prominent social trend in American society. The rise of anti-intellectualism is also the process of changing the role of intellectuals. With the popularity of anti-intellectualism, authority possessed by intellectuals gradually weakened, not only authority over knowledge but also authority in power mechanism, which ultimately led to intellectuals constantly seeking role transformation. From the aspect of anti-intellectualism and role transformation of intellectuals, extreme egalitarianism inherent in anti-intellectualism and populist politics has expelled intellectuals from being legislators. After being legislators, intellectuals transformed into interpreters, but the interpreter was impacted by division among intellectuals and conflict between intellectuals and the public caused by anti-intellectualism. As anti-intellectualism intensified, intellectuals' chosen role as experts was unable to cope with the overall anti-intellectual atmosphere of society. Based on Saul Bellow's *Ravelstein* as a model, this paper will discuss how anti-intellectualism has affected the transformation of the role of intellectuals regarding social phenomena as well as the characters depicted in the novel.

**Keywords:** Anti-intellectuals; Intellectuals; Ravelstein

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## 1. Decline of the legislator: Disappearance of intellectuals' authority

Legislator "consists of making authoritative statements which arbitrate in controversies of opinions and which select those opinions which, having been selected, become correct and binding"<sup>[1]</sup>. Legislator designs social rules, order and cultivate the public. Ravelstein tried to act as a legislator, but he failed because the tasks of intellectuals had changed. Anti-intellectualism led to the decline of intellectuals' authority, not only authority over knowledge but authority in power mechanisms.

Firstly, anti-intellectualism led to irrational relativism and skepticism the authority of intellectuals over knowledge has diminished., the public pursued extreme equal status for personal knowledge. In addition, after the coming of postmodern society, the cooperation of knowledge and power collapsed, and an anti-intellectual

stance appeared not only among the public but in government. Populist politics rose under the influence of anti-intellectualism. Legislator's authority in power mechanism has diminished.

### **1.1. Diminished authority over knowledge**

Anti-intellectualism sets off extreme egalitarianism among the public and promotes equality of personal knowledge. The public seeks equal efficacy for their knowledge and appeals to radical liberty by the influence of anti-intellectualism. In this process, relativism and skepticism became tools to attacks on the authority of intellectuals. Intellectuals' authority over knowledge is related to the universal rules of the world, the knowledge "often produced through detaching people from their immediate experience, so that they can transcend their specific circumstances and through their position of detachment learn to appropriate the insights generated by society as a whole" [2]. Which is different from personal knowledge. In postmodernist society, the emergence of uncertainty, ambiguity, and pluralistic thinking, contributed to the rise of relativism and skepticism and provided a way for the public to justify personal knowledge and to question the universal knowledge of intellectuals. The public equates special personal knowledge with universal knowledge that intellectuals possess through relativism and questions the certainty of intellectuals' knowledge.

In American society, "relativism holds that what is right in Santo Domingo and what is wrong in Pago, and therefore moral standards are not absolute" [3]. It shows how popular relativism is in America. For the public, "the relativity of truth is not a theoretical opinion but a moral assumption, a condition of a free society" [4]. It is related to the freedom to pursue equality. Individually held knowledge, standards, and moral norms are inherently as valid as those prevailing in society. Skepticism came along with relativism. The public is free to question the rationality and truthfulness of knowledge, intellectuals, government officials, and social statutes. American public "seeks equality of substance, equality of viewpoints and the discursive equality of efficacy equivalence derived from them" [5]. Such a radical pursuit of equality and freedom is brought by anti-intellectualism. It combined with relativism and skepticism has resulted in the quest for equality in the efficacy of the public's knowledge. It guarantees everyone has the right to express themselves and their questions. In this case, Ravelstein could only rely on his expertise, to avoid being questioned by the public.

### **1.2. Marginalization of intellectuals in power mechanism**

In the late 20th century, anti-intellectualism set off populist politics, and the contradiction between the public and the intellectual elite was highlighted. Finally, the public will expel intellectuals from the center of power, their anti-intellectual attitude will further hinder intellectuals from re-entering the center of power mechanism. Thus, intellectuals could not act as legislators. Maintaining the role of a legislator is a difficult task for intellectuals, and Ravelstein's attempt proves it.

Ravelstein attempts to get close to the center of the power mechanism, not realizing that it may be related to the transformation of the power mechanism. Anti-intellectualism pushed the public to appeal to political demands, mass democracy was intensified into populist politics, and elite politics began to decline. Ravelstein tries to continue to maintain his role as a legislator, which gives his series of actions a certain elite class undertone. His students have entered important national departments, and keeping in touch with them was an important way for him to be associated with power: "Quite a number served in the State Department. Some lectured in the War College or worked on the staff of the National Security Adviser" [3]. Ravelstein attempted to talk about "policy questions they deal with in day-to-day Washington are aligned with the Plato they studied two or three decades ago, or Locke, or Rousseau, or

even Nietzsche”<sup>[3]</sup>. He tried to combine his knowledge of political philosophy with the nation’s policies, and in the discussions with his students, attempted to get into the center of power mechanism again.

This attempt of Ravelstein to act as a legislator is doomed to fail because it has an unavoidable elitist undertone, which is opposed to populist politics. The prevalence of anti-intellectualism led to the failure of Ravelstein’s attempt, as the elite class nature of legislators clashed with populist politics. The cooperation of knowledge and power established by legislators gave the intellectuals an elitist nature that differed from the public. The elitist nature of legislators is what caused the deep anti-intellectual attitude of the public. Although the American political mechanism is still full of elites, it shows a kind of populist politics in the eyes of the public, elites need to claim that they represent the public, and need to make anti-intellectual, anti-elite speeches to gain popular support, it reflects the trend of populist politics as follows.

“Egalitarian politics propose to dispense with trained leadership in favor of the native practical sense of the ordinary man with its direct access to truth. This preference for the wisdom of the common man flowered, in the most extreme statements of the democratic creed, into a kind of militant popular anti-intellectualism”<sup>[6]</sup>.

The failure of Ravelstein is the conflict between elites and the populist politics brought by anti-intellectualism. His students joined national departments as consultants or gave up their intellectual status to become politicians. They are in the elitist circle, but such elitism is hated and despised by the public. Populist politics does not show elitist arrogance openly, it keeps the public politically engaged.

## **2. Hindered interpreters: Repression of anti-intellectualism**

The legislator had declined, and interpreter became an ideal role, which “consists of translating statements, made within one communally based tradition, they can be understood within the system of knowledge based on another tradition”<sup>[1]</sup>. As interpreters, intellectuals communicate between different cultures or knowledge communities to achieve the ideal circulation, and mutual understanding of knowledge and culture.

For Ravelstein, although his practice as a legislator has failed, he still acted as an interpreter. His interaction with students in his field and the interdisciplinary academic exchanges he has attended have demonstrated his stance. In a multicultural context, Ravelstein actively built bridges of communication: “to several hundred people here and in England, France, and Italy. He interpreted Rousseau to the French, and Machiavelli to the Italians”<sup>[3]</sup>. Ravelstein was also a participant in academic polemics between different fields, such as “His disputes with Oxford don classicists and historians”, which allowed him to explain his knowledge of political philosophy to other fields”<sup>[3]</sup>.

The rise of anti-intellectualism had impacts on interpreters. The effectiveness of an interpreter is based on the harmonious communication of different communities in an open communication space. For example, the communication space of intellectuals in different professional fields, and that between two cultural communities of intellectuals and the public. Anti-intellectualism narrowed the open communication space and harmonious communication became impossible. By deepening the division among the intellectuals and the estrangement between the public and intellectuals, anti-intellectualism has gradually deprived communication space for interpreters. Eventually, the role of interpreters will fail.

### **2.1. The internal division of intellectuals**

The combination of anti-intellectualism and the tradition of pragmatism in American society has contributed to

the division in knowledge and changed into a division among intellectuals. In American society, the recognition of the importance of knowledge goes along with the questioning of intellectuals and knowledge: “Precisely at a time when the intellectual authority of knowledge is widely questioned, education and learning have assumed an unprecedented significance.”<sup>[2]</sup> However, the pursuit of knowledge has tended to be banal and instrumental, seeking practical benefits. The public’s pursuit of knowledge is not motivated by the lofty goal of truth but has given way to a more pragmatic, benefit-oriented goal.

On the contrary, if the benefits of knowledge are not clearly manifested, the public will ignore them. Such prejudice also exists in the educational system: “While you could get excellent technical training in the U.S., liberal education had shrunk to the vanishing point”<sup>[3]</sup>. “If students followed Ravelstein, they would find jobs hard to get”<sup>[3]</sup>. The public has shown their pragmatic pursuit of knowledge and their devaluation of humanistic knowledge: “The philosopher’s interests are not shared by most people, Hostility to philosophy is the natural condition of man”<sup>[7]</sup>. For the public, scientific and technical knowledge is valuable, while humanistic knowledge is despised. Such division in knowledge will be transformed into division within intellectuals. The public shows a negative attitude towards humanities intellectuals: “Individual scholars pursuing their passionate interests increasingly risk labels such as ‘irrelevant’, ‘elitist’, ‘out-of-touch’ and ‘marginal’. Scholars, the pursuit of excellence and truth, is frequently represented as a bizarre, self-indulgent and irrelevant pursuit”<sup>[2]</sup>.

This tendency contributed to the division of intellectuals, that is, humanities intellectuals versus technical intellectuals. Snow suggested that intellectuals in Western societies were increasingly divided into two groups, a cultural division between scientists and humanities intellectuals<sup>[8]</sup>. There exists complementarity between the two groups. In American society, because of anti-intellectualism and pragmatism, the division has intensified. Interpretation of knowledge and complementarity between them was reduced. It is difficult to have normal communication and interaction between the two groups.

Ravelstein, as a representative of humanities intellectuals, expresses his prejudice against technical intellectuals numerous times. He satirizes Vela, a physicist, as politically ignorant, and mocks Vela’s belief that scientists should be above politics. His assessment of Vela shows his bias against scientific intellectuals: “Great personalities among scientists were scarce. Great philosophers, painters, statesmen, lawyers, but great-souled men or women in scientists are extremely rare”<sup>[3]</sup>. This assessment elevates humanistic intellectuals and devalues technical intellectuals. On the contrary, technical intellectuals do not have positive opinions of humanistic intellectuals either. Chick is a typical humanities intellectual, “(He was) accustomed to being downgraded by engineers, Washington hotshots, various scientists”<sup>[3]</sup>. Prejudice exists between two groups. Technical intellectuals believe that humanities intellectuals’ knowledge is not beneficial and cannot lead to progress and change in society. Similarly, humanities intellectuals think the progress and greatness of scientific and technological knowledge comes from the knowledge itself, not from intellectuals who master it.

Rational communication between different communities of knowledge has become difficult. Their complementarity was also cut off, and mutual incomprehension between the two groups has become worse. Therefore, the interpretation of knowledge between these two groups becomes difficult, interpreter is doomed to fail.

## **2.2. Banalization and ignorance of the public: Compressed public space**

Secondly, anti-intellectualism led to the banalization and ignorance of the public, which is exacerbated by the policy of inclusion measured by the government in fields of culture, education, and politics, which compresses

the space between the public and intellectuals. The banalization is largely due to the instrumental pursuit of knowledge caused by anti-intellectualism and pragmatist traditions. The ignorance of society devalues truth and knowledge and elevates the status of personal knowledge originating from personal experience brought by anti-intellectualism. As a result, personal knowledge without any educational training is equal to the professional knowledge of intellectuals. Some of the public hold that “my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge”<sup>[9]</sup>. With these tendencies, effective space between intellectuals and the public has been reduced.

The policy of social inclusion adopted by the U.S. further compressed communication space, it has embraced banalization and ignorance of the public. It “does not attempt to cultivate and elevate the public taste, it regards the taste of the public as something to flatter and interactive entertainment for an otherwise disengaged public”<sup>[2]</sup>. In America, this policy is integrated into the management system, and the public regard it as a right for themselves. They have the right to demand that governmental and other service-oriented institutions recognize and affirm their banalization and ignorance. Ravelstein said: “The public saw a higher education as a right. The White House affirmed it. Students were like “the mackerel-crowded seas”<sup>[3]</sup>. The banalization and ignorance of the public are encouraged by institutions in cultural and educational fields that cater to a minimum standard of public thinking ability. Ravelstein argues that the most obvious problem with American education is that it no longer focuses on the cultivation of human thinking and ideas, but rather seeks to satisfy the banalized needs of the public: “No real education was possible except for engineers, computerists”<sup>[3]</sup>. Because students’ tendency toward banalization leads them to focus only on the practical utility of knowledge.

In short, anti-intellectualism has devalued the status of intellectuals and led to division within intellectuals. The division has further limited the interpretation of knowledge within intellectual communities. For the public, anti-intellectualism has lowered the reflective and critical thinking of the public. This has brought about a general tendency toward banalization and even ignorance in American society. The U.S. state mechanism has accepted and affirmed these tendencies through the policy of inclusion, which has compressed possibilities for intellectuals, especially humanities intellectuals, to communicate with the public as interpreters.

### **3. The retreating experts: Limits of the new role of intellectual**

After the fall of interpreters, intellectuals became experts. They were confined to professionalism, withdrew from the public sphere, and gave up open communication. However, anti-intellectualism still prompted the public to despise intellectuals. Because conflict has been shifted to experts by the manipulation of power. In the time in which Ravelstein lived, this tendency was not apparent. But now anti-intellectualism exploited by power is more obvious.

#### **3.1. Professionalism and amateurism of intellectuals**

Anti-intellectualism first compressed the space between the public and intellectuals, the intellectuals were disillusioned with the public. With the division among intellectuals, the path of exchanges and communication among intellectuals was also restricted. Thus, the exclusivity of intellectuals was strengthened. Professionalism limited intellectuals’ interpretation of faculty and students within the disciplines. Hence, intellectuals transformed from interpreters to experts. The emergence of experts meant that the amateurish enthusiasm of intellectuals for public affairs and society began to diminish.

Professionalism has brought a series of pressures on intellectuals. It designated that people who work as

intellectuals as something do for a living, stick to proper, professional behavior, making themselves marketable, presentable, uncontroversial, unpolitical, and “objective.” Firstly, professionalism emphasizes the cult of expertise, which undermines the legitimacy and authority of intellectuals when they express their opinions in other fields. It causes intellectuals to be completely caught up in professional knowledge and to view knowledge through a theoretical or methodological perspective. Secondly, professionalism allows intellectuals to establish an identity of authority within their profession, and when that identity of authority is associated with power, intellectuals are not legislators but experts employed by the government, who are financed by the government, and whose priority is to satisfy the demands of the government rather than to care for the society and question authority<sup>[10]</sup>.

The intellectuals who appear in *Ravelstein* are all limited to professionalism. Ravelstein has extensive training in history, especially the history of moral and political theory<sup>[3]</sup>. However, Ravelstein would make Greek errors in his book because he was not an expert in Greek. Such a mistake was criticized by other intellectuals, and they did not want to admit the authority of Ravelstein. Other intellectuals, the professors in the university, all of them tend to focus on their professional field. The division among intellectuals hence intensified. The restricted field of intellectuals could not be avoided in the United States, where the university system emphasized a fine-grained division of knowledge and professional, academic training. The academic training and writing do not treat the public as an audience, “Specialization makes it difficult for an intellectual to write for a general audience”<sup>[11]</sup>.

In addition, professionalism suppresses the amateurism of intellectuals. Intellectuals who are experts are less concerned with public affairs. The amateurish enthusiasm that intellectuals are supposed to have gradually disappears, whether they are humanities or technical intellectuals. Intellectuals should “rise above the partial preoccupation of one’s own profession or artistic genre and engage with the global issue of truth, judgment, and taste of the time”<sup>[1]</sup>. They need to have “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 caring for ideas and values”<sup>[10]</sup>. Intellectuals are concerned with public affairs and the actual state of human existence, which requires intellectuals to go beyond the limitations of professionalism. However, most experts did not care for the intellect of the public, thus anti-intellectualism among the public will become serious.

As an expert, Ravelstein still maintains his concern for society and public issues. While apart from Ravelstein, other intellectuals lack concern for public and political life. The experts were upset that Ravelstein had crossed over professors and academics to address the public directly. “If they (professors) had had the powers of the FBI, the professors would have put Ravelstein on the ‘most wanted posters’”<sup>[3]</sup>. The experts are authorities of their profession, but their accusations and opposition to Ravelstein reflect a loss of amateurish enthusiasm. They lost their concern for society and the public; lost confidence in communicating with the public and were inclined to avoid the public with highly professional writing and discussions. Most intellectuals abandoned the role of the interpreter under the pressure of professionalism and the impacts of anti-intellectualism. They encounter a problem: “Many of those engaged in academic and policy work have lost a sense of obligation to connect with what they do to the daily struggles of ordinary people”<sup>[12]</sup>. Intellectuals can be of extraordinary political significance and can be valuable political practitioners<sup>[13]</sup>. But they give up their amateurism. They chose to be experts, but being experts would not be useful for intellectuals, because anti-intellectualism gets much worse, and experts confined to professional fields are also affected by it.

### 3.2. Unwelcome experts under anti-intellectualism

Anti-intellectualism is still unfriendly to experts who have retreated into the realm of specialization. Because of professionalism, intellectuals have lost their amateurish enthusiasm, withdrawn from the public sphere, and cut off their communication with the public. Anti-intellectualism suppressed the public space for intellectuals and the public. The state power controlled the public sphere, exploited the anti-intellectual stance of the public, and radicalized the conflict between experts and the public to win the support of the public. It has made the public begin to oppose experts.

Intellectuals became experts and withdrew from the public sphere. Hence, the public sphere is controlled by state power. Experts have become victims of political power and were forced to accept the anti-expert tendency of the public. Thus anti-intellectualism was aggravated. However, this trend did not reflect an extreme side for Ravelstein, he does not act as a consultant like his students. Hence, he did not feel the awkward position of intellectuals in the power mechanism. For his students, especially for those who have served as government consultants. They tended to become victims. Anti-intellectualism was exploited by power, resulting in intellectuals being increasingly distrusted and loathed by the public. Many of Ravelstein's students, under their professional knowledge, have become consultants, and members of the National Brain Trust. But these intellectuals, who work directly with power, run the risk that their influence on decision-making will be amplified and that opponents will point the finger at intellectuals when times get tough: "The brain trust became useful to the President as a kind of lightning rod"<sup>[6]</sup>. The role of experts in the eyes of the public is exaggerated, so when the policy fails and the situation is difficult, the public's opposition to intellectuals strengthens, anti-intellectual sentiment rises, and experts are questioned and rejected. Ravelstein was able to avoid this outcome by not becoming a brain trust like his students. For his students, things got worse.

## 4. Conclusion

The role of intellectuals has undergone different changes in different periods, from legislators to interpreters to experts, intellectuals are gradually excluded from the center of power, and their position begins to be marginalized. The rise of anti-intellectualism has undoubtedly accelerated this process. Based on intellectuals in *Ravelstein*, the process of changing legislator to the interpreter, the extreme pursuit of equality of anti-intellectualism combined with relativism and skepticism disintegrated the authority of intellectuals over knowledge. The dominant position of knowledge in power has weakened, and at the same time, anti-intellectualism has promoted the rise of populist politics, and the importance of knowledge has weakened. Intellectuals were transformed into interpreters to adapt to this transformation. However, by deepening the internal division of intellectuals, anti-intellectualism makes it difficult to interpret and communicate with intellectuals. Between the public and the intellectuals, anti-intellectualism leads to banalization and ignorance of the public, while the policy of inclusion aggravates this tendency. The space for open and peaceful communication is compressed. Intellectuals were gradually confined to professional knowledge, and their amateurish enthusiasm for public affairs faded. But anti-intellectualism exploited by power, has further reduced the space for intellectuals to act as experts. Experts who provide advice for policy-making based on their expertise risk being criticized by the public.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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