



Who Invented the Intelligentsia?

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Letter to Adam Podgórecki in appendix to Adam Podgórecki, 'Procreation of Social Values: "Intelligentsia of All Countries, Unite"', in Adam Podgórecki and Maria Łoś, (London, Boston and Henley, 1979: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 315–18 at 315–16



Adam Podgórecki (1925–98)

TO ADAM PODGÓRECKI

28 March 1978

Dear Professor Podgórecki,

Thank you for sending me a copy of *Oficyna Poetów* with your article on the intelligentsia, which I read with great interest and attention, and in particular, of course, the note in which you refer to my attribution of the intelligentsia – both the word and the reality which it denotes – to nineteenth century Russia.

You may well be right, and, in consequence, I may be mistaken; but I am not clear about why you think this. I think that my concept

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of the intelligentsia is perhaps somewhat different to that which you indicate in your article. The sense in which it refers to writers, artists, thinkers, academics, intellectuals of various kinds, critics of society, etc. is far wider than the group to which I wish to refer. In your sense of the word, it goes back to the French *philosophes* in the eighteenth century, to the German *Aufklärer*, perhaps to the *libertins* sceptics in France in the seventeenth century, perhaps even to the humanists of the Renaissance. I wish to speak of something much more specific and narrow: a self-conscious group of thinkers who see themselves as directly opposed to an oppressive and irrational regime, united not only by opposition to it, but by a commitment to rational thought, social and intellectual progress, a belief in, and a deep respect for, the methods of the natural sciences, dedicated to such values as civil and personal freedom, personal integrity and the pursuit of truth, no matter what the consequences – and therefore opposition to the established government, established Churches, to tradition, prescription, reliance upon uncriticised intuitions, and irrationality of every kind.

In this sense, to take the English alone, neither Dickens nor Carlyle nor Ruskin can be regarded as members of an intelligentsia; besides which, in England the very notion of the intelligentsia is thin and unconvincing, inasmuch as there has not been a modern powerful clerical establishment to be attacked, nor an arbitrary government, at any rate in the nineteenth century. In Russia, neither Gogol nor Dostoevsky nor Tolstoy nor even Chekhov would have thought themselves as members of the intelligentsia. Tolstoy is very hostile to it. The same applies to the nationalist school of Russian composers and painters. But the term, in my sense, does apply to countless doctors, schoolmasters, agricultural experts, economists etc., who regarded themselves as disciples of this central oppositional Fronde, on which they looked as leading in the war against obscurantism, bureaucratic rule, philistinism etc.

I do not know if the Poles used this word before the Russians – I should be much interested to know whether they did.¹ I had always assumed that [316] it was first used by someone in Russia in the 1860s, whether by Boborykin (to whom it is usually attributed) or

¹ [It seems they did, as AP observes in his reply (316–18 at 316). The term was first used by the Polish philosopher Karol Libelt in 1844. See also Andrzej Walicki, OM 48–9.]

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someone before him. I do not believe, for example that a Polish poet like Mickiewicz would have identified himself with a group of this type, any more than would his contemporaries Silvio Pellico, Pushkin or the Decembrist poets. They may have fought against despotism, but they were not committed to idealisation of the natural sciences and scientists, nor to a faith in material progress. The major values of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment certainly formed a *sine qua non* of the Russian intelligentsia in the sense in which I wish to speak of them. My 'intelligentsia' had a powerful sense of internal loyalties, in terms of which they could regard men like Katkov, at times even Turgenev, as traitors or backsliders; and Slavophiles, however intelligent, intellectual, pure-hearted, brilliant, influential, would not be regarded as members of this movement.

If it is not a Russian phenomenon or a Russian word, I should like to be corrected.

Yours sincerely,
Isaiah Berlin

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