

THE BURDEN OF THE INTELLECTUAL (1956)¹

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He's either a professor in a department, a rich businessman, or a high-ranking bureaucrat. With his clothes, the way he walks and talks, he's a complete "Westerner." He is one of this country's "luminaries," one of our "select few." On the bus, after surveying from head to toe a poorly dressed man with a patched shirt who sits across from him, he will turn to the man next to him.

"There you have it," he'll say, "that man sitting across from us is our destiny. If democracy is brought to a country where eighty percent of the population are illiterate, that's exactly what our country will look like!"

We have heard such words at least once a day for years. During our blackest days, our hearts feel themselves darken a bit more with such words; on days when we lack conviction it is as if we even discover wisdom in them.

Most often, we do not even consider that intellectuals are an insignificant minority in every country across the world, including democratic countries. Even in countries where ninety-nine percent of the population are literate, perhaps eighty percent of them are, if not completely illiterate (*kara cahil*), then uneducated (*cahil*); but to this

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day democracy has not led to the sovereign reign of ignorance (*cehaletin hükümranlığına*) in a single one of those countries!

When thinking of successful democracies, England and the United States are the first examples that come to mind. If you compare our poorly dressed, illiterate man (*kara cahili*) in a patched shirt to someone from one of these countries who pursues the same vocation (for example, a shepherd or a construction worker) but who is a *literate* know-nothing (*okur-yazar cahili*), who is well-groomed, who chills his water in the refrigerator, and who watches television at home in the evening, you will either find no difference in their mentality at all or you will find in favor of our poorly dressed, illiterate man with his keen intelligence gained through a more difficult life struggle. What is more, know-nothings from those countries also lack the faith and respect for education possessed by our completely illiterate man. But in not a single one of those countries has the ignorance of the majority prevailed over the future of the nation. While there may have been small trade-offs, ultimately the most progressive ideas and the most inclusive perspectives won out.

In fact democracy is not, as we assume, a system of government that discounts the voice of the intellectual minority, or neglects to count their vote. Democracy is a system of government that teaches humility to the intellectuals, and, through this humility, teaches them to heed the concerns of the majority, and to interest themselves in their concerns. These principles can only be realized through democracy, so that, even within the poorest neighborhoods that lie along his path, the intellectual will grow accustomed to going door to door and preaching the benefits of progressive thought and open-mindedness.

Our intellectuals have still not managed to save themselves from the pridefulness and feelings of superiority of autocracy and the single-party regime, from the indolence that comes from occupying the head of the table. They have not yet managed to take sufficient ownership of the “progressive” ideas that they have overheard or snatched from books, so as to be able to convince the majority to believe in them as well; they have not been able to summon enough faith to face self-sacrifice or danger for the sake of disseminating those ideas. Without themselves believing in the “progressive” ideas that they have acquired, they aim to force-feed them to the majority while avoiding the burdensome effort of convincing others.

That is why it is wrong for an “intellectual,” one of our “select few,” to survey the poorly dressed, illiterate man sitting across from him from top to bottom and say, “If democracy is brought to a country where eighty percent of the population are illiterate, that’s exactly what our country will look like!”

In fact, the proper response to this intellectual, who is “Western” in his dress and manners alone, should be: “If democracy is brought to a country where eighty percent of the intelligentsia are either haughty and spineless, lazy and dyspeptic, or fearful and lacking in belief, *this* is what our country will become!”

TRANSLATED BY SARAH-NEEL SMITH