



Are Americans Really Anti-Intellectual?

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Media coverage often implies that Americans are ill-informed or hate intellectuals. Politicians are known to make fun of the highly educated – as Massachusetts Senator Scott Brown did when he sneeringly tried to slight his 2012 election opponent, Elizabeth Warren, as “the professor.” Or media features may play up the supposed popularity of ignorance, as in the spoofs of Sarah Palin’s 2008 vice-presidential campaign and television coverage of grammatical errors in signs at Tea Party rallies. In such instances current news events are sometimes said to reflect a long history of American “anti-intellectualism.” So frequently does that term get bandied about in the mainstream media that it almost seems obvious that Americans really do revel in ignorance and mockery of the best-educated.

But in fact, positing anti-intellectualism as typical for America is a relatively recent phenomenon. The term “anti-intellectual” has appeared in the *New York Times* over 650 times since 1870, and more than three-quarters of the times happened after historian Richard Hofstadter published his 1964 book *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. For nearly 100 years, in short, Americans were rarely described as anti-intellectual. Only over the most recent half century, has “anti-intellectualism” become a recurrent interpretive lens to make sense of society and politics. It is worth looking more closely, as I have done in my work, to better understand the concept and the realities.

The Recently Fashionable Notion of Anti-Intellectualism

Richard Hofstadter’s *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, a Pulitzer-winning work that exposed the roots and social consequences of American anti-intellectualism, was published in 1964 and covered ground similar to that discussed by sociologist Lewis Coser, who published *Men of Ideas* that same year as an attempt to define and historicize the intellectual as social type. Another influential sociologist, Christopher Lasch, published a similar analysis in his 1965 book *The New Radicalism in America*, which discussed “the life of reason in a world in which the irrational has come to appear not the exception but the rule.” Together Lasch, Coser, and Hofstadter popularized what soon became a consensus view that ordinary Americans disdained intellectuals. “The intellectual’s relation to the rest of society is never entirely comfortable,” Lasch wrote, “but it has not always been as uncomfortable as it is today in the United States.”

For these 1960s scholars, the aim was to defend intellectuals as a valuable class that Americans had unfortunately pushed outside the mainstream of political and cultural life. But in a way this effort backfired, because it opened intellectuals to attacks by those who perceived their efforts as separate and elitist, or by those who could gain political advantage from making such claims.

An Alternative View of American Traditions

The fullness of U.S. history does not really line up with the images pushed to the fore in the mid-1960s. Although there have unquestionably been episodes of anti-intellectualism, Americans have been more inclined to celebrate the nation’s democratic culture as a hotbed incubating genius and intellectual accomplishment, including by people from ordinary backgrounds.

Americans around 1900 loved popular songs about “college boys” and the new “co-ed.” They attended popular summer schools called Chautauquas, redefined housework as “domestic engineering,” and demanded access to higher education. In the 1910s and 1920s, Albert Einstein became a household name because, as one journalist boasted in *Popular Science Monthly*, “we have over a million and a half readers of the popular scientific magazines – over three and a half million if engineering and technical magazines are included.” During that same time, workers’ educational programs – of which there were more than 400 by 1926 – opened new learning opportunities to women and men. Higher education became more accessible, as male enrollments in U.S. colleges increased by 55% between 1907 and 1915, and college attendance by women jumped by a remarkable 156%.

Fascination with educated Americans reached from black periodicals such as *The Crisis* celebrating African Americans who earned doctorates to the national excitement about the “brain trust” advising President Franklin Delano Roosevelt during the Great Depression. At the time, the *Chicago Tribune* announced that “debutantes hang on their exposition of the quantitative theory of money, the law of diminishing returns, and the intricacies of foreign exchange.”

Even during the putatively anti-intellectual 1950s, *Newsweek* reported that “drugstore book racks, once the undisputed home of Mickey Spillane, now also shelter the paperbound works of Plato, Shakespeare, Freud, and St. Augustine.” Inasmuch as America’s supposed anti-intellectualism makes good headlines today, it can hardly be taken as a true portrait of American history. Far from celebrating the ignorant, Americans have often been drawn to brainpower, genius, and have demonstrated fascination with the curious habits of ivy-educated elites.

Arguments about Anti-Intellectualism May Reflect Growing Social Inequalities

Today, working-class frustrations over income inequality can, at times, be articulated as distaste for the use of scholarly language to diagnose everyday problems. And when ordinary women and men describe working-class perspectives as “common sense,” they can be met with contempt from those who think this is a mask for various prejudices. Rather than acknowledging the alienating effects of speaking in insider expert language to general audiences in a nation where only about 65.9% of the population goes to college, it can be easier for commentators to simply dismiss popular concerns as crudely “anti-intellectual.” But it seems quite unlikely that Americans have really become more anti-intellectual over the past half century – and more likely that we are seeing splits due to sharply rising inequalities of wealth, income, and access to affordable college opportunities. Attacks on intellectuals – and mockery of popular anti-intellectualism – may be on the rise in the United States today, but if so they are more symptoms than traditions or causes. We should keep in mind that the use of “anti-intellectual” has only flourished in recent times – and the notion tells us little that is useful or true about either Americans and U.S. history or about the changing social realities of our time.

Read more in Aaron S. Lecklider, *Inventing the Egghead: The Battle over Brainpower in American Culture* (University of Philadelphia Press, 2013).

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