

From Anxious Intellectuals to Ardent Activists

**Anxious Intellects: Academic Professionals, Public Intellectuals,
and Enlightenment Values.**

By John Michael
Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2000.

Reviewed by Chad M. Hanson

There is irony in the opening sentence of John Michael's *Anxious Intellectuals*. He notes, "The most surprising thesis this book advances is the one fundamental to its project: the thesis that we need another book on intellectuals."

Perhaps it's not surprising that the author should be anxious about his own book. The question of whether or not the world needs another book about intellectuals is legitimate. But despite his anxiety, John Michael knows the answer is yes.

Anxiety looms whenever the subject is intellect. Who would dare claim the title of "intellectual"? After all, what does it mean to be an intellectual? The questions surface often in Michael's work. He explains, "Intellectuals generally—and left intellectuals particularly—seem confused and at odds about what they are supposed to profess, and why after all, anyone should want to listen."

Michael suggests that intellectuals have retreated, primarily to colleges and universities and the publish-or-perish world of speaking and writing in discipline-specific jargon. He paints a familiar picture

of the contemporary intellectual as a university-based technocrat operating in a moral vacuum, lost without a political compass or popular agenda.

Throughout the book, Michael implores academics to enter the arena of popular politics. But in light of the post-Reagan political climate, he also suggests leaving the cultural baggage of the left at home.

For more than two decades it has been difficult to stand on a left-wing platform without somehow being aligned with Karl Marx, Fidel Castro, or the entire host of villains that brought us the former Soviet Union.

Accordingly, while Michael stops short of specifying a course of action for the new class of intellectuals he envisions, he relies on a set of universal guiding principles, those of the Enlightenment.

Ostensibly transcending the politics of left and right, Michael suggests: "The fundamental grounding of any intellectual's politics ... must always and do come from certain strains within the varied and vexed traditions of the Enlightenment"

However, the Enlightenment

values he refers to are not politically neutral; they are the stock-in-trade of the left.

He is talking about “justice, equality, solidarity, compassion, rationality, and the rest.” His plea for a return to Enlightenment values is not opaque; his agenda is clearly progressive. He is asking authors and academics to step out into popular politics, with Enlightenment values under one arm and a commitment to social justice under the other.

Michael suggests there are groups in the academy who are moving toward the politics he describes. He notes: “It is the politics toward which many academic professionals in cultural studies specifically, and in the humanities and social sciences more generally, aspire.”

But while he consistently promotes the idea of an activist form of scholarship, in the end, Michael himself comes up short. On one hand, the goal of this book is to inspire scholars from across the disciplines, to prompt people to engage in relevant public service. On the other hand, the work is written from the increasingly unique perspective of cultural studies, and in the prose style of academic literary criticism. The subjects of Michael’s work, the lens through which he views them, and the hand he writes in all reveal his own position in the academy as an associate professor of English.

Despite the book’s title, I was surprised to find few references to the Enlightenment. In the body of the book Michael visits the work of a number of contemporary thinkers: Theodor Adorno, Cornel West, Paulo Freire, and Stephen Hawking, among others. All are

important scholars in their own right, and Michael handles them with skill, but these are hardly Enlightenment figures.

The remarkable history of the Enlightenment is that the movement shook the very foundations of science, culture, and economics. Enlightenment scholars changed the way men and women viewed nature, themselves, and the societies they lived in.

Folks like West, Freire, and Hawking may embody the spirit of the Enlightenment in that they have been more successful than most academics when it comes to capturing the minds and imagination of the American public. But Michael overestimates the role of academics in forging public perception. He portrays college and university faculty as the great hope of the American left; but the present truth is they’ve been decidedly bested by those who write and speak from a conservative base: Dinesh D’Sousa, William Bennett, and even Rush Limbaugh.

Conservatives have learned the value of engaging the public, and have developed a popular voice that resonates with Americans—even when the message does not match the interests of readers or listeners.

In order for the Enlightenment project to continue, the movement needs spokespeople that the public pays attention to.

Academics looking to *Anxious Intellectuals* for a manual on how to use the works of Locke or Voltaire to transform themselves into public philosophers will be left wanting. The book is, for the most part, an academic exercise itself.

Each of the subjects are seen through a theoretical framework drawn from the work of Michael

Berube, Stanley Fish, and others who work in the genre of literary criticism. The analysis is well executed, but it is presented in a fashion that is best appreciated by English department faculty.

Therefore, in response to Michael's original question, "Do we need another book about intellectuals?" the answer is yes. We need this book, but we also need another—one that follows the form that Michael only suggests.

We still need an unabated guide for knowledge workers, one that prescribes entry into the world of popular politics and public engagement, but one that draws on the strength and character of historic Enlightenment figures, and one that is written for a general

audience.

That's a tall order but these are tough times. Anti-intellectualism persists as a threat to any progressive agenda. In order to meet the challenge, faculty will have to put both academic pretense and academic prose aside. Only then will they be welcomed to take part in public discourse. ■

Chad M. Hanson teaches sociology at Northcentral Tech in Wausau, Wisconsin. His research interests include the study of two-year colleges as sites for social change, and the role of higher education in American culture, politics, and economics. He is also author of recent articles appearing in *The Teaching Professor* and *The National Teaching and Learning Forum*.

