

The Ignorantsia: A Definition

The term *ignorantsia* does not exist in the English language. So, what does the word mean? At first blush, the word is a rough proxy for the “masses” (or plebeians or more accurately the “unwashed masses”), and it is a play on the word *intelligentsia*. To start with, however, it is super-important to stress that it is used in a social structurally neutral sense. That is, members of the *ignorantsia* are not restricted to a specific group of people—be they categorized in terms of class, gender, nationality, ethnicity, race, religion, age, educational qualifications, etc. The term *ignorantsia* refers to those among the *masses* who lack *political consciousness* and hence are ignorant of their place within the matrix of hierarchic power relations that characterize all capitalist societies, as a consequence of which they engage in political behavior that fundamentally go against their *objective* interests and thereby help to strengthen the oppressive power of the ruling elites they should be opposed to. Note, however, that the term does not refer to members of the ruling elites. In the West especially, the *ignorantsia* are those among the masses who have surrendered wholesale their critical intellect to ‘Big Business’ in exchange for crumbs from its table. Mesmerized by the ideology of capitalist consumerism—undergirded by the ideology of *neoliberalism* (see Metcalf [2017])—the *ignorantsia* are unwilling to question the domination of their lives by the dictates and demands of big business. Historically, this problem of course is of long standing and has been the basis of the enduring hegemony of the ruling classes in the West (and today it has spread to the rest of the world). For example, this is how one very astute observer, W.E.B. DuBois, described this matter more than a hundred years ago, albeit in a slightly different political context (imperialism):

If we are coming to recognize that the great modern problem is to correct maladjustment in the distribution of wealth... [then] in this crime white labor is *particeps criminis* with white capital. Unconsciously and consciously, carelessly and deliberately, the vast power of the white labor vote in modern democracies has been cajoled and flattered into imperialistic schemes to enslave and debauch black, brown and yellow labor, until with fatal retribution they are themselves today bound and gagged and rendered impotent by the resulting monopoly of the world’s raw material in the hands of a dominant, cruel and irresponsible few. (1921, p. 7)

Needless to say, the term *ignorantsia* has a pejorative flavor surrounding it; this is not accidental: it is a response to the frustration and exasperation (but not hopelessness) with the illogical self-destructive behavior of the *ignorantsia*. Moreover, it comes from the belief that there is sufficient room in Western capitalist societies for the *ignorantsia* to develop alternative ways of thinking and behaving so as to break the mental chains that bind them to the capitalist

class. In other words: the ignorantsia are not entirely blameless for their ignorant condition. No capitalist class physically forces them to, for example, watch the crass money games on prime-time television rather than say a mind-opening program on PBS (Public Broadcasting Service—a free noncommercial television channel in the U.S. funded mainly by viewers and private organizations [including, interestingly, big business]). In societies where the forces of what may be called *coercive oppression* work more at the mental level (via the agencies of the corporate media, government, etc.) rather than at the physical level (imprisonment without trial, torture, political murders, etc. etc.) the oppressed must also bear responsibility for their oppression-- otherwise not only is everything hopeless, but those who are concerned with justice might as well close up shop and go home.

In light of the foregoing, the term ignorantsia, therefore, must be seen to incorporate two implicit messages: despair *and* hope. One legitimate question that arises from the foregoing is how does one define 'political consciousness' or who is a politically conscious person? At the immediate level it may be assumed that a person who lacks political consciousness is someone who lacks political knowledge about society. Yet there are many political science professors who would easily qualify for membership among the ignorantsia. Political consciousness goes beyond the matter of knowledge and information. Knowledge, of course, is especially important but it is not a sufficient factor. Political consciousness should be seen more as a state of mind where the unending desire to acquire knowledge and information about society takes place within the context of four attitudes of mind corresponding to four issues: (1) civilization; (2) objectivity; (3) truth; and (4) the status quo.

(1) *Civilization*. A politically conscious person recognizes that civilization has two dimensions to it: the moral and the material, and it is the former that is of paramount importance. By moral civilization is meant the attainment of civilized attitudes and behavior vis a vis other human beings and other forms of life on this planet. Central to moral civilization is the attitude and behavior that is motivated by concrete efforts to respond to the question: What can I do, in terms of my personal attitudes and behavior toward all life forms (beginning with my immediate family and then extending outward to my relatives, friends, community, other communities, society, other societies and other planetary life forms, etc.) to make this planet a better place for them to live in? Underlying this question would be such positive behavioral things as altruism, love, morality, humanity, magnanimity, forgiveness, charitability, amicability, open-mindedness, justiciability, and so on.

(2) *Objectivity*. A politically conscious person recognizes that there is no such thing as an objective approach to knowledge-- especially in the area of human affairs-- if by objectivity one means lining up the pros and cons of every given issue. Under such objectivity there would be pros for torturing children to death, for starving people to death, for mutilating the dead, for dismembering pregnant women, for massacring thousands of innocent civilians, for rendering millions refugees, for imprisoning thousands without trial; that is there would

be pros for all this and more that has been undertaken in the defense of some mythical 'national interest' by nations and political movements throughout history up to the present. Similarly, there are no pros for racism; there cannot be equal time for racists (of whatever color they may be). However, even more basic than this; it is necessary to concede that regardless of how desirable it may be, objective social science is impossible and in fact does not exist. This problem was raised by, among others, Gunnar Myrdal (1969) two decades ago. He framed it thus:

The ethos of social science is the search for 'objective' truth. The most fundamental methodological problems facing the social scientist are therefore, what is objectivity, and how can the student attain objectivity in trying to find out the facts and the causal relationships between facts? How can a biased view be avoided? More specifically, how can the student of social problems liberate himself from [a] the powerful heritage of earlier writings in his field of inquiry, ordinarily containing normative and teleological notions inherited from past generations and founded upon the metaphysical moral philosophies of natural law and utilitarianism from which all our social and economic theories have branched off; [b] the influences of the entire cultural, social, economic, and political milieu of the society where he lives, works, and earns his living and his status; and [c] the influence stemming from his own personality, as molded not only by traditions and environment but also by his individual history, constitution and inclinations? (1969:3-4.)

Why is objectivity impossible in the social sciences? At the simplest because (as Myrdal alludes above) social scientists are human beings and human beings are not machines: they possess emotions, likes and dislikes, subconscious minds, values, and so on. Human beings possess culture, history and above all live in societies. All these factors will impinge on the outlook (ideology, world-view, etc.) of researchers which in turn will affect—whether they like it or not—their research. Consequently, any study of any phenomenon or 'object' in the social sciences will invariably be colored (not necessarily consciously) by the researcher's own subconscious proclivities, and manifest at the level of choice of questions asked, choice of data collected and examined, choice of methods used, and so on. There is, however, another problem too: all work in the social sciences, even that which purports to be for the sake of the advancement of basic knowledge alone, is ultimately (and if not directly at least indirectly) programmatic. That is, all studies in the social sciences contain within them a mission-- whether articulated or not-- relating to the ultimate value or purpose of the study: which is to either preserve or change the status quo; this also has a bearing on 'objectivity' in the social sciences. Clearly then, there is no such thing as objective social science; those who pretend otherwise, usually the so called 'academic experts' are merely foisting a big lie on the unwary. (Some, such as Kuhn [1970], have gone so far as to say that even in the natural sciences there is no such thing as 'objective' science.)

(3) *Truth*. A person who is politically conscious is a person who seeks the truth in relation to society as a whole with the objective of understanding how that society can become a better society for all its members in terms of social justice, economic progress, environmental safety, and so on. What kind of truth? It is truth relating to how the status quo has come about and how it is maintained--that is who benefits from it and who suffers from it. This task requires one to be fully conversant with all historical processes that explain the status quo, which in turn requires him or her to be multi-disciplinary in approach given the multidimensional nature of all human existence. For, in the words of that brilliant intellectual, Paul A. Baran, 'the seemingly autonomous, disparate, and disjointed morsels of social existence under capitalism-- literature, art, politics, the economic order, science, the cultural and psychic condition of people-- can all be understood (and influenced) only if they are clearly visualized as parts of the comprehensive totality of the historical process.' (1961:12-13) Since no society is perfect in terms of social justice, human advancement, and general human happiness, the politically conscious person is of necessity continuously questioning the status quo and striving for its perfection. Consequently he/she is by definition an insurrectionist, a revolutionary (but whose weapons are pens and whose ammunition are words) because he/she does not wish to permit the beneficiaries of the status quo (the rich and the powerful) from obfuscating the truth: that the status quo, especially in capitalist societies, benefits primarily the rich and the powerful and that it has evolved to this end through human agency and not some supernatural being or even just 'nature.'

It follows from this that even in those instances where an unjust order has been overthrown and a new just order is being constructed, the task of those who are politically conscious is not over. The new order will still have imperfections. Hence as long as human societies remain imperfect the job of the politically conscious is a permanent one. To put it differently: a politically conscious person is someone who is essentially, to use Baran's words:

a social critic, a person whose concern is to identify, to analyze, and in this way to help overcome the obstacles barring the way to the attainment of a better, more humane, and more rational social order. As such he[/she] becomes the conscience of society and the spokes[person] of such progressive forces as it contains in any given period of history. And as such he[/she] is inevitably considered a 'troublemaker' and a 'nuisance' by the ruling class seeking to preserve the status quo. (1961:17)

(4) *Status quo*. A politically conscious person is never satisfied with the status quo. Or to put the matter differently: a politically conscious person is not a *political conservative*; that is he/she shuns the ideology of *political conservatism*. So, what then is political conservatism? Very briefly it is an ideology that advocates the preservation of the existing or a bygone political, social and economic order. In other words it is an ideology that justifies maintenance of the status quo or its overthrow in favor of a past order status quo ante. Historically, conservatism in the Western world arose in opposition to the revolutionary political, economic and social changes wrought first by the French Revolution and later by

the Industrial Revolution. For example, Edmund Burke, one of the prominent conservatives of the 18th century England, and whose thoughts would influence conservative political theory in the 19th century, believed in the preservation of the power of the monarchy and the landed gentry (the upper class); retention of a close relationship between the State and the Church; and the limitation of voting rights to a select few in society.

Conservatism in the twentieth century has tended to emphasize *laissez faire* (meaning to 'leave alone' in French) economics, where there is no State intervention in the economy (except in circumstances explicitly requiring the protection of the interests of capitalists), and virulent opposition to the development of a welfare State. Conservatives, therefore, believe in absolute minimal government-- except where capitalist interests are threatened (for example, conservatives do not object to the use of State power to smash trade unions-- especially in situations of conflict between capitalists and workers). Since conservatism harks back to a past social order it follows that present day conservatives, such as those in the U.S., are opposed to many of the advances that have been made in the area of human and civil rights since the end of the second World War, including rights for blacks, women and even children. They are also opposed to efforts by the federal government to regulate industries in order to protect consumers directly (e.g., from fraud, unsafe products, false advertising, etc.) and indirectly (e.g., from environmental pollution), and of course are vehemently opposed to any programs designed to help the poor.

On the basis of their pronouncements and on the basis of the foregoing it can be safely asserted that in general (there will always be exceptions of course) conservatives—depending upon the degree of intensity of adherence to their ideology—tend to display the following attributes: racism; sexism; favoritism toward the wealthy; intolerance toward alternative viewpoints, ideologies and lifestyle; patriarchal tendencies; unquestioning obedience to law-- even if unjust; disdain for programs, projects and ideas aimed at protecting the environment because they believe environmental protection costs capitalists money (and since they have money they do not have to worry about their own health: e.g., if you can drink imported mineral water why worry about water pollution); disdain for the poor and the handicapped (the former because they are considered lazy and the latter because they are considered a burden on society); and jingoism accompanied by much belligerency (since the wealthy tend to profit from war and usually their children are able to avoid military service).

It is necessary to stress that not all conservatives will share all of these attributes, though all will share most of them. In a nutshell then conservatives are people who believe in a political and social order that would protect to the maximum possible privileges that they have garnered over the long course of human history at the expense of other human beings. (For an excellent account of the genesis of the conservative ideology see Moore [1966]). In the U.S. in general, but not always, conservatives tend to be Republican party members and/or usually vote for Republican candidates, and in general they are wealthy or come from wealthy backgrounds. In other words, they are usually members of the ruling elite, and as such they cannot be classified as members of the ignorantsia. However, to gain political power they need the support of electorally

significant sections of the masses, the ignorantsia, who are “conservatives,” generally, by virtue of lack of political consciousness and hence are mired in ignorance of their place in society vis-à-vis the ruling elites—one consequence of which is that they lack the ability to determine the difference between their “objective” interests and their subjective interests. Today, in their most extreme form, such ignorantsia are the *far right* ignorantsia who support extremist right-wing and authoritarian *populist* politicians (e.g., Donald Trump, a self-styled billionaire, a self-confessed sexual predator who has been verified as such by the courts, a congenital liar, and a convicted felon). These people, who are a special breed of the ignorantsia, albeit with a long pedigree in U.S. history going all the way back to pre-Civil War era, are also sometimes referred to as the “MAGA crowd,” a play on their *ahistorical* ignorant slogan “Make American Great Again.” The demagogic instruments of ideological *and* cognitive manipulation wielded by Trump and his allies in the cultish enslavement of the minds of the far right ignorantsia are summarized in figures 1 and 2 below. (There are many books and articles on Trump, and the MAGA crowd; however, these three should suffice as an introduction to MAGA politics: Mounk [2019], Risen [2024], and the authoritative book authored by his niece, Mary L. Trump [2020].)

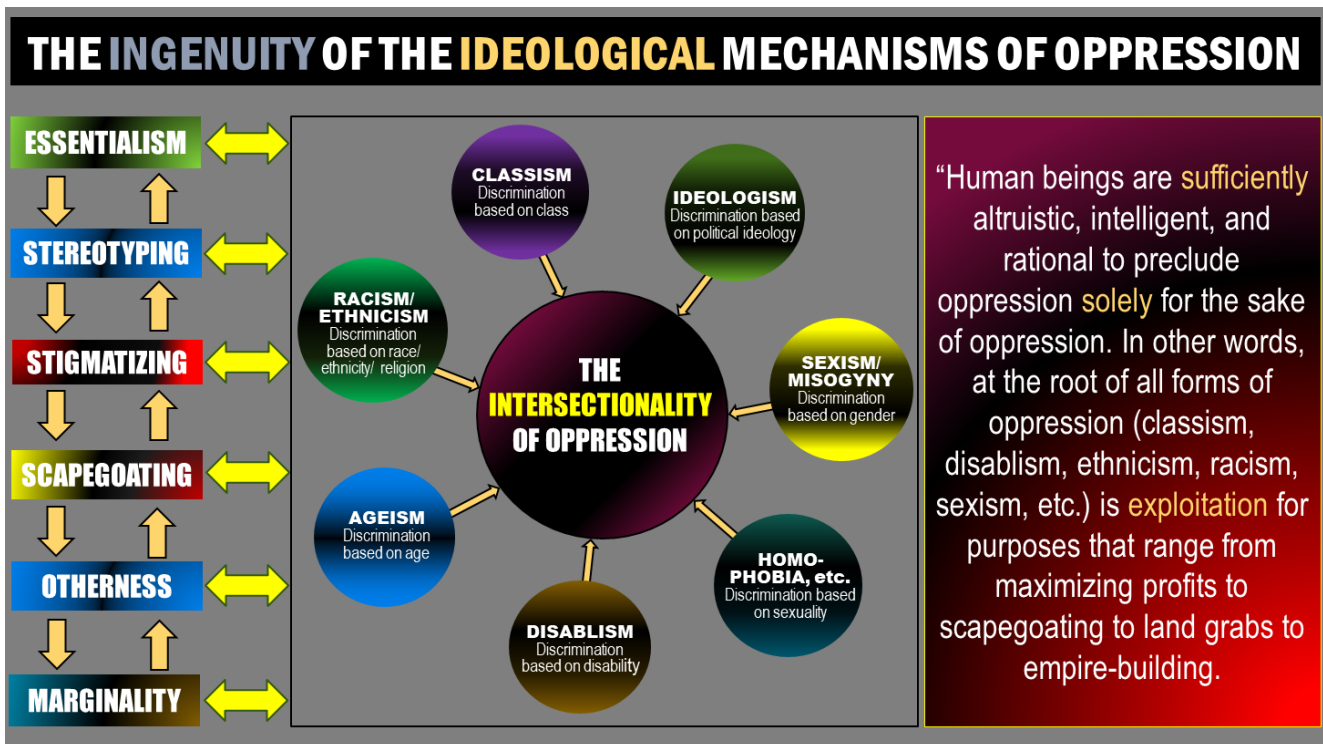


Figure 1: The Ignorantsia and the Ideological Mechanisms of Oppression

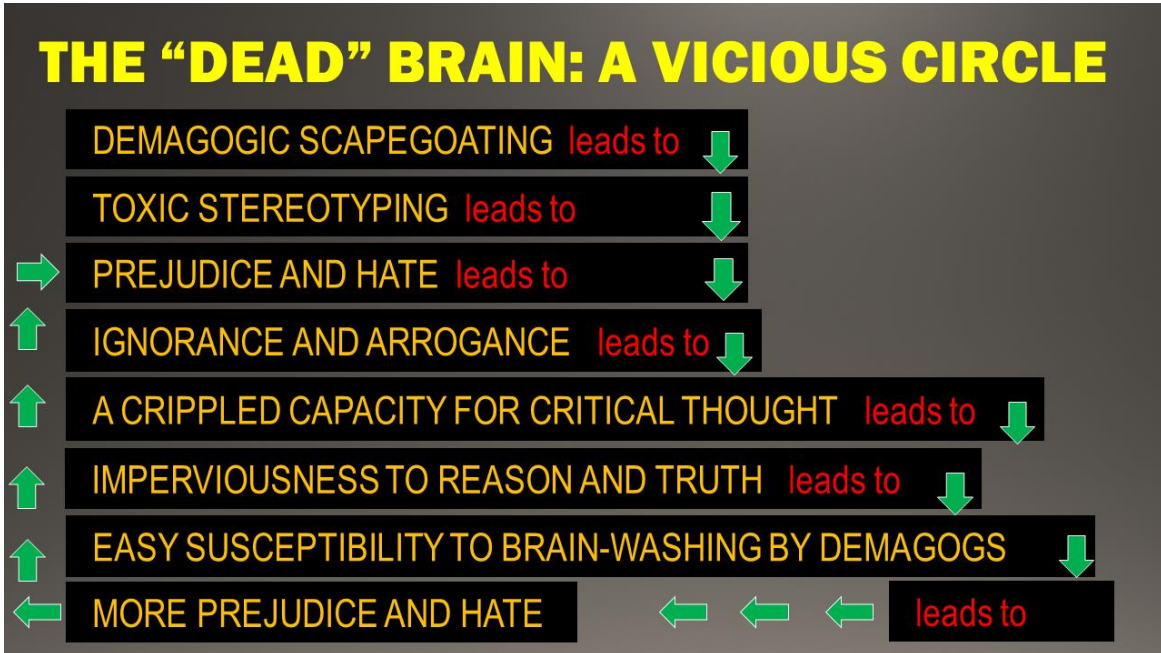


Figure 2: The Ignorantsia and the "Dead Brain"

References

Baran, P. (1961). "The commitment of the intellectual." *Monthly Review* (May). <https://monthlyreview.org/1961/05/01/the-commitment-of-the-intellectual/>

Du Bois, W.E. B. (1921). To the World: Manifesto of the second Pan-African Congress. *The Crisis*. 23, No. 1, 5-10.

Kuhn, T. (2012). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (50th Anniversary Edition). University of Chicago Press.

Metcalf, S. (2017). "Neoliberalism: the idea that swallowed the world." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/aug/18/neoliberalism-the-idea-that-changed-the-world>

Moore, B. (1966). *Social origins of dictatorship and democracy: Lord and peasant in the making of the modern world*. Beacon Press.

Mounk, Y. (2019). *The People vs. democracy: Why our freedom is in danger and how to save it*. Harvard University Press.

Myrdal, G. (1969). *Objectivity in social research*. New York: Pantheon.

Risen, C. (2024). What's so new about the 'new right'? *New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/10/magazine/jd-vance-new-right-republicans.html>

Trump, M. (2020). *Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World's Most Dangerous Man*. Simon & Schuster.

Copyright © by y. g-m. lulat. *All rights reserved*. This document, either in whole or in part, may NOT be copied, reproduced, republished, uploaded, posted, transmitted, or distributed in any way, except that you may download one copy of it on any single computer for your personal, non-commercial home use only, provided you keep intact this copyright notice.