

A USER'S GUIDE  
TO CONSTRUCTIVE  
DIALOG

# ARGUING FOR OUR LIVES

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## CHAPTER 1 In Defense of Intellectual Life

There are two clichés about our intellectual lives that illustrate contemporary U.S. culture's confusion and cowardice. One is the response to one's attempt to analyze a difficult problem: "You think too much." The second is the common advice for getting along in groups: "Don't talk about religion or politics."

On the first cliché: Yes, it's possible to overthink, if we engage in endless analyzing as a way to avoid taking action we should take, or if we get stuck in our heads and cut ourselves off from our experience and emotions. We don't want to fall into passivity or disembodied abstraction. But too often in this culture, when we want to tackle a tough problem and think it through carefully, we will be accused of thinking too much, as if somehow the problems we face can, and should, be handled without using our intellect.

On the second cliché: If we don't talk about religion or politics, what else is there of interest to discuss? In this context, I'm defining "religion" broadly, as wrestling with ultimate questions of existence that are wrapped up in the query "What does it mean to be a human being?" I'm using "politics" broadly as well, to mean the quest to answer the

unavoidable question in any society, "How should power and resources be distributed?"

We all should think a lot, especially about religion and politics. We should all be striving to be the best critically thinking intellectuals we can be.

Both those terms—critical thinking and intellectual—come with some baggage. Some people fear that encouraging "critical thinking" is really a euphemism for an attack on traditional values, especially those rooted in religious faith. And many assume that "intellectuals" are elitist snobs who tout their academic credentials as proof of superiority. Both terms can be misused that way, of course, but that is not the only fate for critically thinking intellectuals.

Critical thinking should lead us to evaluate all claims, including "traditional values," and that means that individuals and societies will on occasion have to abandon some of those traditions. The world came to abandon the traditional values that justified slavery and defined women as the property of men, and most of us agree that was a good thing. But critical thinking can not only lead to challenges to tradition but can also help us understand the strength of some of those values. A critique of hierarchical male-dominated models of family, for example, can lead to greater appreciation for the way in which more egalitarian models of family can help connect people in healthy communities.

Critical thinking also should be applied to new ideas, to help us separate important insights from faddish claims. Such critical thinking applied, for example, to each new diet plan that promises to make losing unwanted weight easy would save people a lot of money and heartache. In the classroom, critical thinking applied to postmodern literary theory could

save countless students from sloggng through attempts to explain literature in arcane academic language and would likely increase their appreciation of literature.

Some kinds of intellectual work require specialized training, which means some people will play special roles in some endeavors. In a technologically advanced society, obviously no one person can acquire the knowledge of every technology; we will have to rely on specialists' expertise in some arenas. But especially on matters of social, political, and economic policy, everyone is capable of developing the intellectual abilities needed to contribute to the cultural conversation about our goals. We don't need to be specialists to develop viewpoints we can defend in dialog with others. In a healthy democratic system, experts serve the greater good rather than dictate it.

To create a culture in which people aspire to be critically thinking intellectuals, we must overcome the negative connotations of the terms. That effort would be aided immensely if those people who are paid to do intellectual work—professors, teachers, clergy, journalists, and writers—were to demystify their work. I have been a university professor for more than two decades, and the longer I teach, the more I talk with students about the process by which I come to understand a concept or answer a question. My goal is not to showcase my allegedly superior intellect but to demonstrate how we all can work our way through a problem. That's not false modesty; I believe I have something important to offer the students as a result of my intellectual work, but I don't believe that I have some special gift that gives me an advantage. Whatever I know is the result of effort and struggle, not genius. My job is to make that process attractive and attainable, not shroud my professional status in a mystical aura.

Even with these attempts at the demystification of intellectual life, in my experience many students are nervous about applying critical thinking and most are reluctant to identify as intellectuals. For some time, I've been tempted to ask my students, in jest, "Are you now, or have you ever been, an intellectual?" One semester, I finally did that.

In my introductory journalism class at the University of Texas at Austin, I told students at I was going to take a risk and ask some of them to come out in front of their classmates. I feigned nervousness and warned them that I wasn't sure if this was a wise thing to do, but that I needed to know more about them for the next section of the course. Instead of asking if any of the students were gay or lesbian—the identities typically associated with coming out—I posed a different question: How many of you, I asked, are intellectuals? How many, I asked, are willing to stand up in front of others and publicly declare, "I am an intellectual!"

The students chuckled, then looked nervously at each other when they realized I was serious. No one stood at first. I repeated the question: "There are two hundred of you in this room, all college students attending a prestigious institution of higher learning, and not one of you is an intellectual?" Finally one student stood and then a few others, but no more than a dozen were willing to claim the label.

After the exercise, we talked about why university students, no matter what their academic major or particular interests, might reject the label "intellectual." As I expected, some associated the term with elitism, a claim that one is smarter than everyone else. Others assumed it is a term that describes certain professional positions, such as university professors, and it would be dishonest to embrace the identity

themselves. Some likely refused because by that point, late in the semester, they were skeptical of identifying with anything I suggested.

I told them that as journalists, or prospective journalists, their hesitation wasn't surprising to me. Most working journalists would reject the term, mostly to avoid being seen as snobby. But I pressed them to consider how we could use the term in a positive fashion, not just as a label for certain professions and not as an assertion of arrogance.

What would it mean to be serious about being a critically thinking intellectual? First, the term "intellectual work" is not just a synonym for "thinking." Every day, everyone thinks about things. Intellectual work suggests a systematic effort to (1) collect relevant information, (2) analyze that information to discern patterns that help deepen our understanding of how the world works, and (3) use that understanding to make judgments about how to try to shape our world. The key is "systematic effort," which requires intention and discipline. We all think, but intellectual work means organized thinking to reach conclusions for a purpose. When it's defined that way, it becomes clear that lots of different kinds of people do intellectual work—not just writers and professors, but students, organizers, political activists, researchers of various kinds. They engage in that systematic effort in search of the answers to questions about the natural world, technology, human behavior, societies. Some focus on fairly small questions while others look more broadly.

We should add three important qualifications to this defense of intellectual work.

First, this definition of intellectual work doesn't assume

a simplistic dichotomy between work done with our minds and work done with our bodies. All the work we do in the world involves some combination of our minds and bodies. Anyone with experience in the skilled trades, such as plumbing or carpentry, knows that work requires not just physical exertion but a sharp mind that can assess a problem and plan the appropriate steps to complete a task. Successful gardening requires a lot of digging, weeding, and hauling, but also involves an extraordinary amount of knowledge about the way that air, water, soil, plants, and animals interact. Even basic manual labor requires thought about how to perform a task efficiently. I once had a warehouse job that involved unloading trucks and stacking boxes of building supplies, and what I remember about it is not just the physical labor but the craft of coordinating the unloading with other workers and constructing the stacks of boxes in a stable fashion—the more careful the construction of the stack, the higher we could stack the boxes without them falling. In that case, the intellectual work was relatively simple and solved a problem of limited interest to others, but it demonstrates the capacity we all have to be systematic in our thinking.

Second, not all intellectual work involves critical thinking. Many jobs in the so-called “information economy” involve exercising the intellect but require no critical thinking in the way I am using the term. Some of that work is clerical in nature, shifting data from one place to another or one form to another, with little serious reflection needed by a worker. One can open an academic journal and read articles in which the author demonstrates an understanding of various theories and methods, presenting information but employing little rigorous self-reflection and limited critical thinking.

Third, what the culture labels intellectual work is not more important than, or superior to, other categories of work. It's obvious that those people who are paid to do work that is primarily intellectual wouldn't last long if others weren't engaged in work that creates food, shelter, clothing, and other necessities. When a society is affluent enough to subsidize intellectuals, often those given the privilege of doing intellectual work create the illusion of their greater value, which we should reject.

We shouldn't assume that only those being employed in primarily intellectual vocations have the capacity or the duty to be thinking critically. In a healthy society, everyone would understand themselves as intellectuals. In a healthy democracy, all citizens would see intellectual work as part of their political obligation.