

***The Best and the Brightest:  
Changing Roles of American Policy Intellectuals***

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During my time at the Asian Forum Japan (AFJ), I have come to realize the unappreciated importance of policy intellectuals within the Japanese political sphere. I have been privileged enough to be able to meet with Diet members and their staff, economists, political commentators, and others who are intimately involved in the policy crafting process. These individuals undoubtedly play an indispensable role in the Japanese political world, yet there seems to be a gap between their function within the political sphere and their potential role as facilitators of public discussion and understanding of political issues. This has not always been the case, as public intellectuals played an important role in the debate over such early postwar issues as the 1960 Japan-US security treaty. However, whether due to a relatively politically disinterested Japanese public, a lack of ideology-based politics in the diet, or the seemingly inscrutable political deal-making process, public understanding of the importance of policy intellectuals and their role as public intellectuals seems to be decreasing. I will try in this paper to understand the reasons behind this problem by analyzing the similar problems arising in the United States, my home country.

The first issue in analyzing the effect of policy intellectuals on American society is definitional. Although the term “policy intellectuals” is not frequently used in American writing, the term “public intellectual” is. As American public intellectuals are most commonly concerned with political issues and current events, and often work in government for at least some of their career they can be considered similar with the term “policy intellectuals” for our purposes. Richard Posner, himself a prominent American public intellectual, defines the term in his book *Public Intellectuals: a Study of Decline* as an intellectual who “applies general ideas to matter of public concern, working from the top down, theorizing about the abuses, corruptions, or injustices which he has discovered.” The term can be applied to any active scholar or other intellectual, such as policy theorists, “policy wonks,” journalists, political operatives, etc. However, in order to be considered a truly “public” intellectual, a writer must target his work to the general educated public, rather than exclusively towards members of

academia or other specialists. Another possible stipulation for the definition of “policy intellectual” would be previous or current experience in government or government-affiliated organizations.

In *Public Intellectuals: a Study of Decline*, Posner argues that the influence of the American public intellectual decreased dramatically over the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Posner attributes this decline largely to the increased specialization of academics. As universities became more prominent and academic careers became more attractive during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they absorbed more intellectuals who would otherwise have gone on to become independent writers and commentators (in the vein of John Maynard Keynes or Bertrand Russell). This caused university-affiliated academics to become by far the dominant form of intellectual in modern America. However, as academia became increasingly specialized, tenured academics lost their motivation or ability to write outside of their field to a broad audience, or to fulfill the roles of social and political critics that they had before. Moreover, as academics continued to increase in number, it became harder to be noticed in the media or by the public.

America now lacks the type of widely recognizable political intellectual that had been so prevalent in the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. Henry Kissinger). This lack applies especially to intellectuals affiliated with or working for the government. Instead, most policy intellectuals that would be recognizable to an audience outside of actual policy-makers and government insiders are academics (e.g. Paul Krugman) and/or journalists (Thomas Friedman and again Krugman). The prominence of television media and newspapers’ op-ed pages for disseminating the views of many policy intellectuals means that those views are often polarized and easily associated with one party or political position. Furthermore, many prominent government policy intellectuals come from an academic background (Jeffrey Sachs, Lawrence Summers), reflecting the increasing influence of academics in modern intellectualism and policy making. Government policy-makers who have made their career inside the government rarely have a body of widely disseminated writing to associate with, and therefore cannot be considered truly public intellectuals.

Think tanks can be similar in function to academic institutions. Although they of course are not affiliated with students, think tank members generally have advanced academic degrees, just as university professors. However, think tanks are generally

more conservative than universities, due to both a reaction against the liberal dominance of academia, and their corporate funding. Moreover, think tank members, while often prominent and well known to the public, target their research more specifically to policy-makers and government insiders. Richard Posner also claims that, because of their political affiliations, think tanks tend to compromise independent intellectualism.

The internet also serves as a potential corrective for the dominance of academic intellectualism in America. Through blogs, online magazines, and other sources, writers can distribute their work to large audience. Also, the participatory nature of many websites encourages debate, thereby raising the general level of intellectualism. Although internet commentators do not yet have the name recognition of traditional intellectuals, and have not yet entered government, they are a probable next step of American policy intellectuals. Economics has proven a particularly receptive intellectual field for internet participation.

While some of these phenomena may be specific to the United States, Japan would do well to learn from the struggles and changes in the American intellectual sphere over the past century. As the print intellectuals of Japan's immediate postwar era are replaced by talk-show commentators and internet commenters, the general tone and societal role of intellectualism will change too. A more vibrant and well known community of policy intellectuals in would raise the level of national political discourse, and potentially give Japanese politics the energy and popularity that it needs so much. Although a robust community of policy intellectuals already exists in Japan, only by spreading their debate to the public sphere will they influence the broader trends of Japanese politics.