

EXPERTISE AND INCOMPETENCE

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1. *Expertise and Incompetence*

A friend sent me a Telegram post, based on remarkable quotes from the famous book *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963) by American historian and politolog Richard Hofstadter (1916–1970) [1]. I give these quotes in full:

“But in our time, of course, American society has grown greatly in complexity and in involvement with the rest of the world. In most areas of life a formal training has become a prerequisite to success. At the same time, the complexity of modern life has steadily whittled away the functions the ordinary citizen can intelligently and comprehendingly perform for himself.

“In the original American populist dream, the omnicompetence of the common man was fundamental and indispensable. It was believed that he could, without much special preparation, pursue the professions and run the government. Today he knows that he cannot even make his breakfast without using devices, more or less mysterious to him, which expertise has put at his disposal; and when he sits down to breakfast and looks at his morning newspaper, he reads about a whole range of vital and intricate issues and acknowledges, if he is candid with himself, that he has not acquired competence to judge most of them.

“In the practical world of affairs, then, trained intelligence has come to be recognized as a force of overwhelming importance. What used to be a jocular and usually benign ridicule of intellect and formal training has turned into a malign resentment of the intellectual in his capacity as expert. The old idea of the woolly-minded intellectual, so aptly caught in the stereotype of the absent-minded professor, still survives, of course; but today it is increasingly a wishful and rather wistful defense against a deep and important fear. Once the intellectual was gently ridiculed because he was not needed; now he is fiercely resented because he is needed too much. He has become all too practical, all too effective. He is the object of resentment because of an improvement, not a decline, in his fortunes. It is not his abstractness, futility, or helplessness that makes him prominent enough to inspire virulent attacks, but his achievements, his influence, his real comfort and imagined luxury, as well as the dependence of the community upon his skills. Intellect is resented as a form of power or privilege.” [Emphasis is mine.]

One more statement in that Telegram post is also attributed to Richard Hofstadter; *‘The complexity of modern life makes it difficult for ordinary citizens to par-*

participate independently and meaningfully in the governance of society, which undermines trust in democratic institutions.'

I was unable to locate it in Hofstadter's book, where previous quotes could be found on page 34. It seems that this formulation comes from another source mentioned in the Telegram post, the paper [3] where similar sentiments are attributed to a paper of 2015 (much closer to our times) by Ilya Somin – unfortunately, I was unable to trace it.

But I highlighted the words “the complexity of modern life makes it difficult for ordinary citizens to participate independently and meaningfully in the governance of society” for a good reason: I am convinced that they are already outdated.

Times have changed; the damning formulation now applies equally to politicians—as well as to all kinds of administrators, managers in softer lines of business (where rigorous criteria, based on principles of physics and exact sciences are absent), and the like—amidst what amounts to a pandemic of incompetence.

One reason for that is the ever growing chasm between people and the technology they depend on in their everyday life; it is much deeper than in 2025 and even more so—than it was in 1963. Another is the explosion in the complexity of economic, financial systems, politics of the world. And the utter inadequacy of education: it abandoned any attempts to teach anything complex.

Perhaps the worst consequence of this transformation—and it triggers a positive feedback loop—is that criteria for hiring or promoting subordinates based on competence have vanished, simply because the very understanding of what competence entails has been lost.

What remains, however, is a universal and timeless selection criterion: personal loyalty. I can see that in every country experienced by me at an above-tourism level.

Next, the loss of criteria of competence breeds various fads like wokerism, DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion), Net Zero policy, etc.—they increasingly look like quasi-religious cults where understanding is replaced by blind beliefs.

A colorful example: as it was reported around 30 June 2026 in every leading British newspaper,

The Treasury [the key department of the UK Government] removed numerical reasoning tests from its graduate recruitment scheme after finding they had an “adverse impact” on candidate diversity.

Indeed, intellect is incompatible with DEI: “it is resented as a form of power or privilege.”

Finally, a pandemic of incompetence suppresses a natural, as one would expect, immune response to uncontrollable spread of AI. This happens in the society as a whole—but, it seems, even more so in the ruling classes which have lost the understanding of what does it mean to lead, to rule.

Moreover, “the complexity of modern life makes it difficult for ordinary citizens” even to ask questions about policies, about the economy, and, more generally – about the state of the nation and its strategic standing. And here we encounter another dangerous trend: erosion of the right to ask questions and creeping totalitarianism.

2. *The right to ask questions*

One of the characteristic features of totalitarian regimes is that loyal followers are not supposed to ask questions but have to wait for answers and directives from Big Brother,

Fuehrer, Leader, President etc. Moreover, asking questions openly and in public could be seen as disloyalty and a thought crime.

The right to ask questions is a fundamental right of people in a democratic nation, so obvious that it is never mentioned and becomes visible only in comparison with non-democracies.

I grew up and lived under a classical totalitarian regime and instantly see the difference. When I naturalised as a British citizen three decades ago, I was confident that I was joining a true democracy.

Unfortunately I am witnessing an increasing suppression of the right to ask questions. Here are two examples of them which are apparently seen as inappropriate, divisive — in short, undesirable:

- In the case of Henry Nowak, did the alleged ideological indoctrination of police affect the tragic outcome of the knife attack on him?
- Is the pursuit of Net Zero a contributing factor to the miserable state of the British economy and the loss of the energy independence of the country?

Please notice: these are just questions, they do not pre-empt answers.

They are passed to me by friends who have personal reasons to ask, but are afraid to raise the issues in public. One works in a university and has been subjected to what he describes as “ideological brainwashing.” The other works in the energy sector.

But one’s reasons for asking should not really matter. In principle, the right to ask questions should not depend on the strength of their justification.

Of course, there are natural common sense limitations for freedom of speech, including the proverbial shouting of “Fire!” in a crowded theatre when there is no fire. And I hasten to add that I am talking only about the socio-political sphere, not about inter-person communication on private matters.

But suppression of questions goes beyond common sense, it is the most widespread form of silent suffocation of the freedom of speech. At the level of individuals, suppression of questions is easily internalised and becomes a subconscious level inhibition not even recognised by them—especially if their skill to pin-point a problem and formulate a question is not properly developed. This is what is happening with hundreds of millions or even billions of people living under totalitarian regimes. I lived there, I had seen that.

Yesterday I heard on the TV: “It is time to ask some awkward questions.” But questions should not be pre-judged as awkward. It is answers that could be awkward indeed.

Politicians who never ask questions and instead wait for ready answers from quangos, unelected and unaccountable to the electorate — they are not fit for the role of leaders of a democratic nation.

3. *Epilogue*

I would prefer not to go in details of a current sordid scandal in British universities which succinctly summarised in the title of one of many articles on that subject in *The Telegraph* (the leading right-wing British broadsheet newspaper):

The Arday scandal exposes the creeping decay of Britain’s great universities

[2]

The interested readers may wish to browse through the tidal wave of publications and see for themselves that the roots of ‘the creeping decay of Britain’s great universities’ go deeper than issues of race and privilege. They are in

The loss of criteria of competence and suppression of the right to ask questions.

References

1. Richard Hofstadter, **Anti-Intellectualism in American Life**. Knopf (1963).
2. Charles Moore, *The Arday scandal exposes the creeping decay of Britain's great universities*. The Telegraph 08 August 2026.
3. Tom Nichols, *How America Lost Faith in Expertise And Why That's a Giant Problem*. Foreign Affaires, February 13, 2017.

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About me

I am a research mathematician but I have 40+ years of teaching experience at secondary school and university level in four different countries with four different education systems. Since 1998 I was a Professor of Pure Mathematics at the University of Manchester, currently I am a retired Professor Emeritus. I published 90+ research papers and co-authored three monographs in hardcore mathematics.

I also have an interest in cognitive aspects of mathematical practice; see my book *Mathematics under the Microscope* ((16) in the list below), which explains a mathematician's outlook at psycho-physiological and cognitive issues in mathematics and mathematics education, and touches on some issues raised in this paper.

Some of my papers on mathematics education, etc. can be found in my personal online journal/blog *Selected Passages From Correspondence With Friends*.

A few published papers and a book on issues around mathematics:

This does not include my hardcore mathematics papers and books.

- (1) *The tool/weapon duality of mathematics*. J. Humanistic Mathematics 16 no. 1 (2026), 365–392. DOI: 10.5642/jhummath.UZBE3851. Pre-publication: *This Journal*, 13 no. 1.
- (2) *Response to “Decolonization of the Curricula: Beyond Historical Enrichment”*. *The Mathematical Intelligencer* (2023).
- (3) *‘Decolonisation’ of the curricula*. *The Mathematical Intelligencer* 45 no. 2 (2023), 144–149. Earlier version: [arXiv:2212.13167v3 \[math.HO\]](#).
- (4) A new course ‘Algebra + Computer Science’: What should be its outcomes and where it should start. *Doklady Mathematics* 107 Suppl. 1 (2023), S117–S131. (With V. Kondratiev.) [arXiv:2212.12257v1 \[math.HO\]](#).
- (5) *Is pluralism in the history of mathematics possible?* *The Mathematical Intelligencer* 45 no. 1 (2023), 8. (With J. Bair, V. Kanovei, M. G. Katz, S. Sanders, D. Sherry, M. Ugaglia, and M. Van Atten.)

- (6) **The Kolmogorov reform of mathematics education in the USSR.** In D. De Bock (Ed.), *Modern Mathematics—An International Movement?*, Springer International Publishing, pp. 319–336, 2023. [arXiv:2210.03574 \[math.HO\]](#).
- (7) **Historical infinitesimalists and modern historiography of infinitesimals.** *Antiquitates Mathematicae* 16 , 189–257 (2022). [arXiv:2210.14504v1 \[math.HO\]](#). (With J. Bair, V. Kanovei, M. G. Katz, S. Kutateladze, S. Sanders, D. Sherry, M. Ugaglia.)
- (8) **Mathematics and mathematics education in the 21st century** (2022). (With Z. Kocsis and V. Kondratiev.)
- (9) **Mathematics education policy as a high stakes political struggle: The case of Soviet Russia of the 1930s.** (With S.D. Karakozov and S.A. Polikarpov.)
- (10) **A mathematician’s view of the unreasonable ineffectiveness of mathematics in biology,** *Biosystems*, 205, 104410 (2021). [arXiv:2103.04190 \[math.HO\]](#).
- (11) **A view from lockdown: mathematics discovered, invented, and inherited.** In: *Mathematics Online First Collections*. Springer (2020). [arXiv:2103.04101 \[math.HO\]](#).
- (12) **Mathematics for makers and mathematics for users,** in *Humanizing Mathematics and its Philosophy: Essays Celebrating the 90th Birthday of Reuben Hersh* (B. Sriraman ed.), Birkhauser, pp. 309–327 (2017).
- (13) **Cauchy’s infinitesimals, his sum theorem, and foundational paradigms.** *Found Sci*, 1–30 (2017). (With T. Bascelli, P. B. Laszcyk, V. Kanovei, K. U. Katz, M. G. Katz, S. S. Kutateladze, T. McGaffey, D. M. Schaps, and D. Sherry.)
- (14) **Being in control.** In *Understanding Emotions in Mathematical Thinking and Learning* (U. Xolocotzin (ed.). Academic Press, San Diego, 2017, pp. 77–96. The final pre-publication version: [bit.ly/2d6Encg](#).
- (15) **Economy of thought: a neglected principle of mathematics education,** in *Simplicity: Ideals of Practice in Mathematics and the Arts* (R. Kossak and Ph. Ording, eds.). Springer (2017), pp. 241–265. [http://bit.ly/293orpK](#).
- (16) **Calling a spade a spade: Mathematics in the new pattern of division of labour,** *Mathematical Cultures: The London Meetings 2012–14* (B. Larvor, ed.). Trends in the History of Science. Springer, 2016, pp. 347–374. [goo.gl/TT6ncO](#).
- (17) **Mathematics under the Microscope: Notes on Cognitive Aspects of Mathematical Practice.** Amer. Math. Soc., Providence, RI. (2010). Available from the [AMS](#).

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