

Russia's war on Ukraine and the treason of intellectuals

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In the third decade of the millennium, there is an increasing and solid presence of institutions and organisations, ideas and bodies of knowledge that push and pull the country back towards the alignment with the West that so guided Cold War foreign policy and orthodoxy.

Watching, listening and reading South African reportage, opinions, descriptions and what passes for analyses of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has, so far, been a deeply insightful experience. It has been a proper lesson in the way intellectuals, those organically tied to a particular (transnational) social class, and whose power, influence and overall standing have been inherited from the preceding political order, have retained and reproduced "common sense" from the earlier order.

They have done so largely unchallenged, and have been benefitting from propaganda windfalls provided by Russia's violence against the Ukrainian people.

The Russian president, Vladimir Putin, is a necessary target for criticism, but his war on the Ukrainian people has been a gift for the intellectuals tied to dominant beliefs produced and spread along the Wall Street-Washington Axis. These beliefs were carried over, almost seamlessly, from the Cold War era in which the apartheid state was situated, to the democratic era.

It is part of that belief that a particular set of ideas, beliefs and values, as they constitute an ideology, with an attendant programme of action, is correct and eternally valid. Intellectuals, in general, are used, they make themselves available, or simply slip into place to "sustain, modify and alter modes of thinking and behaviour of the masses [and] are purveyors of consciousness".

Once established, these intellectuals peddle "common sense" established as it usually is under conditions of authority, dominance and control (I'm trying to avoid using the word 'hegemony' because anti-intellectualism is so pervasive and concealed within serious ideological concrete). Once the ideas and opinions have slipped into common sense, they effectively determine what may or may not be thought, known or said.

This common sense presents itself as neutral, which makes for frustrating reading. And so, we wake up, every day, to read how South Africa has "lost the West" (without answering

questions *ex-ante*) and that this is fatal. Is it? Have we forgotten, so soon, Kipling's "savage wars of peace" fought by the European world against those who failed to succumb to civilising missions?

Through reading the texts on the war, we get to the way that something is *presented* as true, while the truth is much more complex, nuanced, sophisticated and less imagined or socially constructed.

Theories rise and fall

What is *presented as true*, is made up by intellectuals with vested interests who rely on a set of empirical observations and theories presented as *the* way to see the world. This is singular "a" and "the". This ignores the understanding enjoyed by a relatively small group of us who were trained in a particular tradition of global political economy, that theory is always for someone and for a purpose, and that theories rise and fall with the rise and fall of powers.

Identifying these intellectuals would be career-ending. As a former colleague wrote, a few years after the end of the Cold War, "Those who swim outside these safe waters risk more than simply the judgement that their theories are wrong; their entire ethical or moral stance may be ridiculed or seen as dangerous [and] unrealistic."

It could result in marginalisation and possibly be career-ending. In acts of self-censorship, and because I have to put food on the table, I shall refrain from referring to them by name or institution. (Let that sink in, dear reader.) Anyway, since this is an opinion piece, I can get away with speculation, rumination — and allusion.

Since their specific positions, roles and views are sacred and sealed off from criticism and direct engagement, we can look at some historical parallels. A general appreciation of the way that dominant ideas are forced through, from one era to another, without intellectual challenges, may be found in the way that elites made the transition from the *ancien régime* past the French Revolution and into the new order. The same can be said about interwar Italian fascists who, after World War 2, simply adopted the Christian Democrat identity.

Considering South Africa in the third decade of the millennium, there is an increasing and solid presence of institutions and organisations, ideas and bodies of knowledge that push and pull the country back towards the alignment with the West that so guided Cold War foreign policy and orthodoxy.

We should not ignore the role that intellectuals play in presenting the ideas of, say, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) or the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (often promoted by the Centre for Development and Enterprise), with attendant conservative political economy, in South Africa.

Straight out of the copybook of US power and influence, these institutions and intellectuals within their "bloc" play a considerable part in "educating" South Africans.

This is almost perfectly an adaptation of the way organisations like the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP) and the CFR "shaped" Americans after World War 2.

Carnegie and the CFR would become important components of the US foreign policy establishment, even though they played no significant role in the actual making of policy itself. Intellectuals in the US, including journalists and opinion writers (it's difficult to think of Thomas Friedman as a journalist), played important roles as part of "the political and cultural establishment" that dominated the US and whose influence radiated abroad.

Influencing hearts and minds

With respect to the "peace" in its name, the Carnegie Endowment was directed, almost exclusively, at influencing the hearts and minds of Americans, and would establish offices in several countries abroad to carry out this type of civilising mission. This "mission" goes back to the objectives expressed by the former US secretary of war between 1899 and 1904, Elihu Root, who said, in 1915, that it was necessary for "peace advocates" to "inform the minds and educate the attitude of this great new sovereign that is taking charge of foreign affairs".

Inderjeet Parmar, scholar and columnist, reminded us, "Root's attitude to public opinion was not at all dissimilar to that of Walter Lippmann's as expressed in his 1922 essay *Public Opinion*, in which he defended the need for a specialised democratic elite to 'manufacture the consent of the governed'."

Back home, in South Africa, there is a democratic elite, or a cadre of elite intellectuals, who specialise in manufacturing consent. Russia's war in Ukraine, horrendous as it is, has inspired these intellectuals to drive for Ukrainian victory, and not a peaceful settlement.

South Africa is held as a hostage of the intellectuals, with "the West" as the benevolent and necessarily peaceful arbiter in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This is neither to say that South African politics is not lost in a hurricane, nor is this an even vague suggestion that Putin is not responsible for a horrendous war (when is war not horrendous?). No. It is simply to say that consent is manufactured by intellectuals (part of a transnational block anchored in the CFR, CEIP, CDE, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, and any number of entities on the right) that whatever South Africa does has to be consistent with what Washington expects, and any deviation makes the deviant complicit in all Putin's war crimes.

Sure, this is a leftist critique (inspired by Gramscian thought), but when you have (even) the right-wing Cato Institute agreeing that "Yes, the Press Helps Start Wars" and that US journalists "sold America the story of heroic Britain in 1940", and you look at the blinkered reportage (intellectual single-sourcing) about South Africa having "lost the West", it is cause for concern about intellectuals who have influential platforms.

War is never black and white. Particular wars may present clear dichotomies, but a sophisticated understanding, not shrouded in fake conceptions about "neutrality" reproducing "common sense" without understanding how it comes about, may be a bit too much to ask of intellectuals beholden to the consent manufactured in Washington or Whitehall.

The only consistency is that the same intellectuals peddling this commonsensical view of "the West" held the same views three decades ago. I could show you examples, dear reader, but I may get into trouble.

It may have been Susan Sontag who wrote that notwithstanding the great achievements of the West, its wars have placed notably the US in the ruins of thought. It's saddening that there are important and influential intellectuals who represent a "definitive image of a traumatised age in despair of itself".

On the positive side, it is a wonderful teaching moment for scholars and professors, researchers and columnists who, as Steve Smith, former vice-chancellor of the University of Exeter, wrote all those years ago, dared to swim outside safe waters and risk more than simply the judgement that their theories are wrong, but also that their entire ethical or moral stance is ridiculed, dangerous and unrealistic.

In a more irascible moment, I would say that they live, without fail or self-doubt, in the imagination of the European world where the rest of the world is intellectually meaningless and without a history.