

What role do intellectuals have in new South Africa?

INTELLECTUAL is a buzzword in South Africa's body politic.

This signifies its importance in relation to the battle of ideas, development and democratic consolidation in post-apartheid South Africa.

However, not much work has been done by scholars, political activists/politicians and journalists with regard to its precise meaning.

This also shows a "knowledge gap" in public discourse in South Africa.

A theoretical foundation needs to be laid for all and sundry if ideas of intellectuals are to be taken seriously.

So, the key questions are: what is an intellectual?

What is the social function of intellectuals in the so-called new South Africa?

First, I drew my definition from the Gramscian model (the ideas of Italian Marxist theorist and politician Antonio Gramsci) when trying to tease out the notion of intellectual(s).

Gramsci, in his seminal work titled *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, argued that there were two categories of intellectuals in society, namely the traditional professional or academic intellectuals and organic intellectuals.

The traditional professional refers to academics or scientists who are on a mission to manufacture new knowledge via peer review journals, scholarly books and so on.

Again, traditional professional intellectuals are normally found in universities and think tank organisations for scientific research.

The academic intellectuals are also responsible for the training of future professionals or other aspiring members of the intelligentsia.

This kind of an intellectual life is more of a calling.

Taking your craft seriously as a traditional professional intellectual is about responding to the call of duty as it were.

Among other things, the academic intellectual is a "lover of knowledge".

This implies that the traditional professional intellectual falls in love with the creation of knowledge.

The intellectual in question is always interested in using scientific evidence to solve social problems.

When internalised, this kind of habit on

In my View



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knowledge production becomes a lifestyle.

It becomes something that is enjoyable, not for monetary gain.

This does not mean that academic intellectuals do not need to make ends meet.

The point is that the traditional professional intellectuals should not be driven by the desire to accumulate more money, over and over again.

The academic intellectual should be propelled by passion to bring about social change to bear through critical analytical tools.

Conversely, organic intellectuals are not academically grounded per se, but yet play an important role in society.

For instance, the organic intellectuals are located within the context of grassroots social movements and trade unions, political parties, and are inclined towards the poorest of the poor.

Vladimir Lenin, in his classic work titled *What is to be Done*, uses the phrase "revolutionary intellectuals" or intellectuals of

the working class when talking about organic intellectuals.

The organic intellectuals are always questioning social relations between the haves and the have nots.

The revolutionary intellectuals tend to express social discontentment through service delivery protests, civil disobedience and strikes, etc.

In other words, the organic intellectuals are concerned about class contradictions.

There is a common denominator between the traditional professional intellectuals and organic intellectuals, namely critical thinking.

Critical thinking is a closer examination of social, political, economic and cultural issues through a continuous habit of asking questions by looking at arguments from different perspectives.

Moreover, critical thinking is about identifying a problem systematically and carefully, and providing a solution to effect change for the better.

Criticality is not necessarily a synonym of criticism in society.

It is about an independent evaluation of the state of affairs on public policy or implementation in a sceptical way.

All in all, both types of intellectuals have

to grapple with important questions pertaining to national interests.

For both the traditional professional intellectuals and organic intellectuals to co-exist, respect is of paramount importance.

Respect is one of the unwritten rules of the intellectual life.

It is practically impossible for intellectuals to engage in a debate without the rule of engagements, such as respect.

Furthermore, both social groupings of intellectuals should not look down on each other or compete on who knows better.

Needless to say, these different types of intellectuals should complement one another with an aim of deepening South Africa's democracy.

Intellectuals from all walks of life in South Africa need to provide an oversight

role to the powers-that-be.

A critical mass that engages in public affairs by writing letters to newspapers, participating in debates on radio and attending community meetings enhances the notion of citizenship.

The intellectual tradition in South Africa could also contribute to good governance and transparency of state institutions.

This is precisely because institutional factors which are hindering economic development, such as corruption, maladministration and incompetence (to mention a few), can be laid bare in public.

By so doing, men and women (from different racial backgrounds) will have a say in the direction the country is taking.

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