

Elites and Social Change

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Abstract

This article aims to shed light on the role of the intellectual in Arab societies, positioned between the challenges of meeting daily material needs and the fulfillment of their ethical obligation to effect positive change within their community. Owing to the scientific status that grants them social responsibility, intellectuals—considered members of the elite—possess the capacity for critical thinking and scientific analysis of societal realities. These qualities enable them to participate in decision-making, disseminate awareness and knowledge, and contribute to development by critiquing the status quo and advocating for change through scientifically grounded solutions and alternatives.

Keywords: *Elite, Intellectual, Social Status.*

Received: 14-10-2024

Accepted: 12-04-2025

Introduction

The intellectual, as a holder of cultural capital, is regarded as a primary producer of ideas and behavioral models through their social and professional status (i.e., the position they occupy). By leveraging their intellectual and cultural capital, the intellectual plays a crucial role in raising awareness within their community and enlightening its members. They are viewed as a pioneer of the nation and a social actor whose influence stems from their affiliation with an elite capable of decision-making. This elite status allows them to develop significant ideas and concepts that shape societal identity and produce renewed knowledge linking academic theory to various societal institutions (i.e., the lived reality), which are in constant need of guidance, enlightenment, and leadership to move toward positive change.

In this study, we aimed to highlight several key axes relevant to the title of the research. We began with a preliminary section covering the central concepts, including definitions of the elite, the intellectual, and cultural facts related to the intellectual's level of awareness. This was followed by a section addressing the different types of elites (political, bureaucratic, military, economic, symbolic, feminist, religious, and media-related). We then examined the role of the elite in Algerian society, after presenting the various types of intellectuals—those defined by academic qualifications and those shaped by personal experience. Finally, we explored the intellectual's role in disseminating awareness within society, as well as their distinctive social and professional status, concluding with their contribution to change across all dimensions of society.

Conceptual Introduction to the Elite

The Concept of the Elite Group

Linguistically:

The Arabic term *ṣaḥḥa* (with the vowel "a" or "u") denotes the "elite" and refers to the purest and best of anything. It also connotes sincerity in affection, as in the word *muṣṭaḥḥa*, meaning "the chosen one." In social terms, *ṣaḥḥa* refers to the distinguished and noble members of society—those with influence, authority, and power, including elite artists, intellectuals, and scholars (Ibrahim Mustafa, 1989).

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Terminologically

According to the *Dictionary of Sociology*, the elite is defined as "a small group within a given society at a specific historical moment, referred to by this name due to the importance it either attributes to itself or is attributed to it by others" (SUMPF, 1973, pp. 100–101).

The elite constitutes a group of individuals who share distinct characteristics that set them apart from the rest of the population. They are entrusted with specific roles as a privilege earned through their social rank, which allows them to participate in decision-making processes within their societies. In the context of this study, particular attention is directed toward the university professor as a member of the societal elite.

Plato divided society into three classes based on biological and psychological foundations: desire (workers), courage (soldiers), and wisdom (rulers). The "rulers" likely represent individuals with exceptional intelligence, knowledge, and judgment—essentially, members of the elite or ruling class.

Thus, the elite is a socially, politically, or economically recognized group characterized by specific valuable traits—such as intellectual capability, prestigious administrative positions, or military influence—making them highly dominant, powerful, and influential.

The Elite (Al-Nukhbha)

The elite are defined as "the cultured elite close to centers of power, or the distinguished writers and individuals with cultural status."

The term *nukhbha* implies esteem, success, and value. It refers to a limited number of individuals whose capabilities and privileges are extensive, owing to their qualifications, which grant them a special status in social, political, cultural, or economic spheres.

These individuals possess high academic qualifications and the ability to think critically about societal issues, making decisions and offering informed recommendations to policymakers—such as university professors.

The elite occupy strategic positions that grant them the authority to drive change. Vilfredo Pareto was the first to introduce the term "elite" to describe a group distinguished by success and excellence in a specific domain, setting them apart from the rest of society.

The Intellectual

An intellectual is characterized by insight, quick wit, intelligence, and a capacity for learning. When these qualities are present, an individual may be regarded as an intellectual.

An intellectual may be defined as "members of the educated class in society who often work in professional or administrative roles and maintain a certain level of awareness of themselves as a social class" (Atif Ghaith, 1979, p. 252).

The term can also refer to someone who belongs to a group known as the elite, sharing in its characteristics and enjoying a privileged status.

Edward Said argued that "the term intellectual traditionally refers to what concerns the mind, reason, or logical thought, and has come to denote the individual who embodies such intellectual capacities" (Edward Said, 2002, p. 9).

Zaki Badawi described intellectuals as "individuals who distinguish themselves from other members of society through their expertise and knowledge, which may arise from their professional obligations that require such expertise or knowledge" (Badawi, 1982, p. 222).

Cultural Realities

These refer to "the earnest effort to transform a set of cultural ideas and convictions into institutions and social forces that function as social units concerned with cultural matters and strive for its development and deepening."

They are reflected in the level of awareness and recognition of the intellectual's social and professional status and their potential to positively transform society.

Types of Elites

The Intellectual Elite (Intelligentsia)

This term originated in 19th-century Russia and includes all individuals with university-level education or those who contribute to innovation, critique, and the transmission of ideas—such as authors, writers, scientists, philosophers, doctors, and university professors.

This category may also include "self-made intellectuals"—individuals who, despite not having formal academic training, achieve high levels of cultural and intellectual awareness through self-study, extensive reading, and personal effort, without the aid of formal educators or classrooms.

The Political Elite

This is a minority that holds the reins of power and controls political decision-making and legislative processes, including members of parliament, political party leaders, ministers, and members of the national council.

This elite group is considered one of the most influential in society, as it occupies the top of the social hierarchy and exerts control over its base by making decisions that affect all sectors.

The Bureaucratic Elite: Bureaucracy refers to an administrative system in which laws and regulations are implemented by civil servants. The bureaucratic elite—or technocracy—comprises a group of administrators who are graduates of prestigious institutes, universities, and higher education institutions. They have risen to the ranks of the administrative elite and participate in decision-making processes.

However, the term "bureaucracy" often carries negative connotations among the general public due to the rigid and sometimes authoritarian practices of certain administrators, which have become an obstacle to serving both individual needs and the public interest.

The Military Elite: This elite is associated with the armed forces and may play a significant role in decision-making processes in some countries due to the power and control they exert over national security. Represented by high-ranking officers, snipers, and special forces, the military elite holds one of the most influential positions in society. They are primarily responsible for internal and external security, especially in times of crisis or emergency. Their influence is marked by strict discipline, authority, and power.

The Economic Elite: This group consists of businesspeople and capitalists who own companies, financial assets, and real estate, which grant them significant influence over national economic activities, investments, and production. Consequently, they can impact decision-making processes in society and, in some cases, may even influence changes to legislative frameworks.

The Symbolic Elite: Symbolic elites are represented by prominent societal figures such as poets, artists, and athletes who shape cultural values. With the advancement of media and communication technologies, especially social media, a new category of influential figures has emerged: content creators. Distinguished by various traits across diverse fields, they have amassed significant followings, sometimes surpassing those of traditional celebrities.

The Feminist Elite: This group is composed of women's associations concerned with women's issues and rights. It advocates for gender equality and seeks to preserve and enhance women's social status. Represented by successful and distinguished women in various fields, this elite serves as a role model and garners significant attention and support, especially among women. The influence of the feminist elite varies across societies depending on political systems and the presence of civil institutions that promote women's leadership. It is particularly prominent in developed societies as a sign of modernization and liberation.

The Religious Elite: This group includes religious scholars, imams, and clergy who have a direct influence on religious and moral orientations within society. In Muslim societies, religious figures often enjoy prestigious social status, granting them the authority to make decisions and resolve societal issues without the need for formal governmental institutions.

The Media Elite: Represented by journalists and media professionals, this elite plays a crucial role in shaping and influencing public opinion. The media is often considered the “fourth estate” after the three traditional branches of power: the legislative (parliament), the executive (government), and the judiciary (courts). Due to their direct connection with the public, media figures can significantly affect public perception, often without scrutiny regarding the credibility of the information presented.

The Elite in Algerian Society: The emergence of elites is a “necessity imposed by the nature of social differentiation, as well as by certain psychological factors—mainly the capabilities possessed by individuals who hold elite status” (Bayoumi, 2004, p. 12). In this regard, Pareto distinguishes between two types of elites: the ruling elite, composed of those who govern the state, and the non-ruling elite, which generally includes intellectuals.

According to Mosca, five factors contribute to the continuity of elites (Bottomore, 1988, p.14):

- A unified identity among elite members,
- Ideal application of the political formula,
- Adherence to tradition,
- Elite circulation,
- Support from the military.

Mosca also argued that elite dominance is not only necessary but inevitable in any society. He believed that elites should ideally come from the middle class, whose talents and qualities would ensure their continued dominance. Thus, Mosca sought to highlight the mechanisms by which elites maintain their status.

In Algeria, the emergence of elites has undergone several phases shaped by political transformations and social conditions before and after independence in 1962. Generally, the Algerian elite emerged in the late 19th century and consisted of a minority of young Algerians who adopted Western ideas, lifestyles, work ethics, and educational systems. These individuals aspired to transform Algerian society into a European-like society while retaining Islamic values and Algerian traditions. They demanded that France not require them to renounce their personal status as Muslims and sought the repeal of the *Sénatus-consulte* (1865)—a demand seen by some as symbolic, yet significant in expressing their nationalism (Abu al-Qasim Saadallah, pp. 161–162).

This educated group is often referred to as the “Francophone elite,” primarily based abroad. Domestically, the elite was represented by the “Association of Muslim Scholars,” which focused on Islamic education, revitalizing the Arabic language, raising awareness, and promoting nationalist thought. During the independence struggle, a distinctive elite emerged composed of “revolutionaries, activists, and freedom fighters” who exhibited traits such as courage and political awareness, leading them to resist colonialism and pursue national liberation through armed struggle.

Following independence, the elite shifted to include political leaders and statesmen. As education became more widespread, a new generation of elites emerged—intellectuals, writers, doctors, judges, and university professors—marked by their high educational achievements and professional influence.

Types of Intellectuals : Mohamed Riyad Watir classifies intellectuals based on academic qualifications and personal experience.

According to Academic Qualifications : Intellectuals are divided into three categories:
The Intellectual Elite: This group includes intellectuals, writers, scientists, and artists whose role is to produce culture.

Semi-Intellectuals: This group comprises junior employees, administrators, and nurses whose function is to disseminate culture.

Middle Intellectuals: This category consists of engineers, technicians, physicians, full-time political workers, and university and institute instructors, characterized by tendencies toward justice and equality.

According to Personal Experience : Some researchers argue that the concept of the intellectual is not limited to those specializing in cultural affairs or holding academic degrees from schools or academies. There exists another category shaped by life experience, referred to as the "experiential intellectual." (Hejazi, 1988, p. 23)

The Role of the Intellectual in Raising Social Awareness : A sound intellectual is one who successfully applies their knowledge in real-world contexts. New ideas and accumulated information lose their relevance if they are not shared with society and translated into solutions for its problems. The genuine work of the intellectual is evident in their efforts to establish cultural truths that act as social forces of guidance, orientation, and enlightenment. In this regard, Naji Bin Nasr asserts that "one of the strategic tasks the intellectual must prioritize is the establishment of cultural facts within the social environment" (Bin Nasr, 1986, p. 103).

The intellectual functions as a societal sensor—responsible for uncovering the hidden or minute, diagnosing issues no matter how painful or frightening, and prescribing remedies regardless of their difficulty or bitterness. Jean-Paul Sartre notes, "The intellectual today is required to bridge the gap that separates them from their community and environment in order to fulfill their role. It is essential for the intellectual to carry a social message, advocate for it, and work toward its dissemination in society" (Sartre, 1973, p. 13).

Two key points highlight the role of the intellectual:

Cultivating Awareness: Awareness builds resilient societies capable of facing global transformations and challenges. “The elite is the social group that shapes the nation’s awareness and leads it. It receives the nation’s emotions and aspirations, informed by its historical and cultural legacy, and transforms them into conscious will and achievements.” (Shaq, 1989, p. 43)

Achieving Impact: The intellectual elite (especially academics) play a critical role in shaping society by converting academic findings into actionable decisions and applying them in real-life contexts to propel progress and modernization.

E. The Social and Professional Status of the Intellectual in Algeria
 Undoubtedly, the intellectual influences and is influenced by society as a member of it. He is affected by

the complexities—positive or negative—within his environment, which in turn impacts his effectiveness and performance. Among the many factors influencing the intellectual's position, material conditions have significantly contributed to their marginalization and disconnection from society.

The future demands serious investigation into societal issues, approached in the field and through objective engagement by intellectuals. They must fully commit to their cognitive and awareness-raising roles without disregarding or detaching from society's problems. The intellectual is not merely a transmitter of ideologies or common knowledge, but an active participant who communicates his informed and critical understanding to others. He is involved in social developments and must objectively express and raise awareness about them rather than remain silent or indifferent.

Intellectual activity and knowledge production are at the core of the intellectual's identity. Their ability to employ this knowledge in service of their society is essential. However, the current reality reflects otherwise. "What exists now are conflicting elites with no unified stance on major societal issues." (Mansour, 2006, p. 15) As Antonio Gramsci stated, "All men are intellectuals, but not all men have the function of intellectuals in society" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 131).

The Arab intellectual has, in many cases, become a spectator rather than an actor in events—restrained by institutional fragility and personal livelihood concerns. (Saad Eddin Ibrahim, p. 203)

This leads us to ask:

- What are the primary reasons that have led the Arab intellectual to settle for observation rather than action?
- Has the intellectual's goal shifted toward personal and material gain (e.g., promotions) instead of assuming social and intellectual responsibility in advancing society?

An intellectual is not merely someone who keeps pace with cultural developments but one who possesses the ability to think critically, generate ideas, and produce visions. This capacity only develops through strengthening mental abilities and intellectual structure, enabling knowledge creation and innovation. (Ghalyoun, 1986, p. 88)

An intellectual cannot remain unaffected by social, economic, or political conditions. These realities shape his position and influence his stance. Despite the intellectual's elevated social standing, it often remains confined to academic recognition, while material rewards remain modest compared to developed nations. Although some Arab countries have made efforts to highlight the role of intellectuals and research, the intellectual still struggles to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes. He remains confined to functional roles alone.

The lack of belief in a pioneering role within society is often rooted in material concerns. The ongoing brain drain from the Arab world reflects this—driven by insufficient material and intellectual support. Intellectuals, instead of serving their societies, find themselves alienated and unable to fulfill their potential.

The intellectual who does not believe in their transformative role often becomes consumed by the daily struggle to provide a decent life for their family, preoccupied with securing basic needs—housing, transportation, and daily expenses. This inevitably affects their academic performance, both in quality and quantity, as they become bound to academic-material outcomes alone. Even if they produce scientific work, it often ends up shelved in libraries or limited to classrooms, rather than being disseminated to society.

Amid these circumstances, the intellectual becomes a passive observer, relinquishing his social and intellectual responsibility. This absence has created a crisis of effectiveness among the intellectual elite, particularly in underdeveloped societies. Although the role of the intellectual in promoting awareness may not require extensive theorization, the reality speaks for itself. Economic and political pressures prevent intellectuals from fulfilling their enlightening and guiding duties.

Material struggles drive intellectuals away from social engagement out of frustration with their marginalized status. Among the many causes of the ineffective role of the elite in Algerian society, material conditions play a fundamental role. The intellectual, burdened by basic life challenges (housing, transport, scientific resources), finds their performance and social contribution hindered. They pursue promotions and credentials to improve their income and quality of life, hoping that financial stability will eventually provide space for creativity and service to society.

In conclusion, the intellectual in many parts of the Arab world has retreated from active engagement and decision-making roles. The lack of belief in their potential to effect change has led to a focus on personal advancement, further weakening the influence of the intellectual elite in social development and hindering progress toward a more enlightened and participatory society.

The Role of the Intellectual in Social Change

Social change refers to a deliberate and pre-planned transformation, implemented intentionally through programs and policies aimed at developing society. The intellectual plays a crucial role in facilitating social change across various domains:

Political Role : Sound political decision-making by the elite prevents harm to the principles and identity of society. A recent study on industrialization identified five ideal types of elites that generally lead the process of change and development in developing countries:

- Elites linked to the ruling group
- The middle class
- Revolutionary intellectuals
- Administrators
- National leaders (Mohamed Al-Suwaidi, p. 81)

The intellectual possesses the awareness and knowledge necessary to participate in social change by raising political consciousness among members of society and explaining the broader context without provoking chaos or conflict. This is achieved through constructive criticism and calls for reform, accompanied by well-thought-out alternatives. In doing so, the intellectual actively contributes to decision-making in society. Their societal status enables them to act as a bridge between the authorities and the general public.

Economic Role : The intellectual's role in economic change includes several key actions:

- Guiding public awareness toward purposeful economic behavior
- Promoting rational and productive consumer culture, such as supporting local production
- Contributing to planning and decision-making by utilizing field experience and expertise
- Encouraging investment, innovation, and startup initiatives that support the economy
- Critiquing failed economic policies by evaluating their outcomes and suggesting revisions or cancellations
- Supporting skilled, low-cost labor such as artisans and craftsmen

Cultural Role : The intellectual also plays a vital role in cultural transformation, demonstrated through:

- Spreading societal awareness of critical issues, emphasizing the importance or dangers of various matters through scientific studies and research that benefit the broader public, offering recommendations to decision-makers for reform
- Critiquing the present reality by identifying and analyzing negative social phenomena, their causes, consequences, and proposing behavioral modifications to mitigate them
- Reviving authentic cultural values and defending cultural heritage to preserve social identity and strengthen the individual's connection to their history. This task requires a culturally aware group with profound and comprehensive knowledge of societal cultural foundations
- Defending humanitarian and social values. The inherited moral code derived from religion serves as a set of social controls and norms that preserve social cohesion and prevent individuals from disconnecting from their culture and identity

Social Role : The intellectual undertakes several social responsibilities aimed at positive social change, including:

- Promoting positive values such as volunteerism and social solidarity
- Raising awareness about social responsibility at all levels—toward the homeland, fellow citizens, and oneself—as a reflection of a refined level of societal development
- Exercising personal moral accountability to serve as a role model and exemplary member of society
- Strengthening individuals' ethical orientation by supporting humanitarian causes and assisting vulnerable groups such as people with special needs

Conclusion

In conclusion, the intellectual serves as a safeguard for society due to the unique responsibility entrusted to them by virtue of their distinguished status as a member of the elite. Their belief in their role within society, and in the possibility of reform, change, and participation in decision-making, is not governed by material conditions or bureaucratic pressures. Rather, such challenges may serve as a driving force that motivates them to be an active and influential contributor—both intellectually and practically. The intellectual plays a key role in shaping decisions that lead society toward openness, development, and progress, thereby enabling liberation from traditional dependency.

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