

When the Ivory Tower Whitewashes Injustice

“One has to belong to the intelligentsia to believe things like that: no ordinary man could be such a fool.”

George Orwell, the British writer and essayist who sharply examined the link between language, power, and the loss of political reality, wrote this sentence in his 1945 essay, “Notes on Nationalism.” Europe had just emerged from a war in which ideologies, states, and intellectuals repeatedly demanded that facts conform to their loyalties. Orwell was not attacking education itself, but the point at which it ceases to be a tool for examining reality and becomes an instrument for defending prior commitments. The educated man is not immune to folly. At times he is more dangerous, because he can give it structure, style, professional language, citations, and a sense of moral superiority (Orwell, 1945).

The very place that promised to elevate humanity above ignorance, superstition, myth, and crude interests has more than once managed to bring those very forces back into the world, now clothed in the language of philosophy, theology, science, law, progress, security, liberation, or justice. Popular prejudice looks like prejudice. Institutional prejudice sometimes looks like a conclusion.

When a private individual holds a prejudice, it may remain confined to their own world. But when a prestigious institution adopts it, teaches it, publishes it, uses it to train professionals, incorporates it into textbooks, or translates it into policy, it assumes a different status. It ceases to be merely an opinion. It becomes authorized knowledge.

A knowledge institution is not merely a university. It may be an academy, a church, a court, a research institute, a professional association, a museum, an education system, a journal, an expert panel, a news organization, or a state apparatus that determines which data will be collected, how it will be classified, who is authorized to interpret it, and what conclusions will be deemed serious. Such institutions do not merely examine claims about reality. They determine who is permitted to speak, who will be recognized as an expert, and who will be heard as a credible witness; they also determine what counts as evidence, which language is deemed professional, which questions will be considered legitimate, and which will be marked in advance as unscientific, unenlightened, immoral, or irrelevant to the discourse.

The danger does not begin only when an institution knowingly lies. That is one possibility, and sometimes not even the most interesting one. The deeper danger emerges when power assumes the form of truth: when hierarchy is presented as nature, interest as science, control as order, prejudice as diagnosis, propaganda as context, policy as necessity, and a political stance as an objective conclusion.

The institution need not invent hatred; sometimes it suffices to cleanse it of its stench by giving it a Latin name, inserting it into a statistical table, or attaching a meticulous footnote that frames it as a legal clause, a conference topic, or a matter declared complex by an expert committee. Thus prejudice becomes more respectable precisely when it grows more dangerous.

Institutions are not in themselves the problem. A society without institutions is not free; it is one in which raw power is freed from the obligation to explain itself. Science, law, academia, religion, and expertise are among the most vital tools humanity has developed to combat ignorance, arbitrariness, and unchecked force. Precisely for this reason, we must ask what happens when they themselves lose their capacity to be tested.

Knowledge as method—a mode of inquiry open to scrutiny and correction—demands doubt, evidence, transparency, and the capacity to admit error. Knowledge as status rests on prestige, hierarchy, command of professional language, and social immunity. When an institution operates as method, it can expose injustice. When it operates as status, it can whitewash it.