

# Lisa and American Anti-intellectualism

AEON J. SKOBLE

American society has generally had a love-hate relationship with the notion of the intellectual. On the one hand, there is a sense of respect for the professor or the scientist, but at the same time there is great resentment of the "ivory tower" or the "bookish"; a defensiveness about intelligent or learned people. The republican ideals of the Founders presuppose an enlightened citizenry, yet today, the introduction of even remotely sophisticated analysis of political topics is decried as "elitism." Everyone respects a historian, yet a historian's opinion may be disregarded on the grounds that it is "no more valid" than that of the "working man." Populist commentators and politicians frequently exploit this resentment of expertise while relying on it as it suits them, for example when a candidate attacks his opponent for being an "Ivy League elitist" while in fact being a product of (or relying on advisers from) a similar educational background.

Similarly, a hospital may consult a bioethicist, or it may reject the counsel of bioethicists, on the grounds that they are too abstract and unconnected to the realities of medicine. Indeed, it seems as though most people like being able to support their positions by citing experts, but then invoke populist sentiment when the experts don't support their view. For instance, I may lend support to my argument by citing an expert who agrees with me, but if an expert disagrees, I may respond "what does he know?" or "I'm entitled to my opinion too." Oddly, we see anti-intellectualism even among intellectuals. For example, at many universities today, both among the Student body and the faculty, the role of the classics, and humanities generally, has been greatly diminished. The trend has clearly been to develop pre-professional programs and emphasize "relevance"; whereas traditional humanities classes are regarded as a luxury or an enhancement, but not truly necessary features of a college education. At best they are seen as vehicles for developing "transferable skills" such as composition or critical thinking.

There seem to be periodic pendulum swings: in the 1950s and early 1960s, there was tremendous respect for scientists, as the nation found itself competing against the Soviets in such areas as space exploration. Today, it seems the pendulum has reversed swing, as the current Zeitgeist holds all opinions to be equally valid, but at the same time, people still seem interested in what alleged experts have to say. A cursory review of TV talk shows or newspaper letters-to-the-editor reveals this ambivalence. The talk show will book an expert because, presumably, people will be interested in that person's analysis or opinion. But the panelists or audience members who disagree with the expert will argue that their opinions, their perspectives, are just as worthwhile. A newspaper will run an opinion column by a specialist, whose analysis on a situation may be better informed than the average person's, but the letters from people who disagree will often be based on the underlying (if unstated) premise that "No one really knows anything" or "It's all a matter of opinion, and mine counts too." This last rationale is particularly insidious: in fact, if it

were true that everything were merely a matter of opinion, then it actually would follow that mine is as relevant as the expert's; indeed there would be no such thing as expertise.

So, it is fair to say that American society is conflicted about intellectuals. Respect for them seems virtually to go hand in hand with resentment. This is a puzzling social problem, and also one of great importance, for we seem to be on the verge of a new "dark ages," where not only the notion of expertise, but all standards of rationality are being challenged. This clearly has significant social consequences. As a vehicle for exploring this issue, it may be surprising to choose a TV show which, at first glance, seems devoted to the idea that dumber is better; but actually, of the many things that *The Simpsons* skillfully illustrates about society, the American ambivalence about expertise and rationality is clearly one of them.<sup>1</sup>

On *The Simpsons*, Homer is a classic example of an anti-intellectual dolt as are most of his acquaintances, and his son. But his daughter, Lisa, is not only pro-intellectual, she is smart beyond her years. She is extremely intelligent and sophisticated, and is often seen out-thinking those around her. Naturally, for this she is mocked by the other children at school and generally ignored by the adults. On the other hand, her favorite TV show is the same one as her brother's: a mindlessly violent cartoon. Her treatment on the show, I argue, captures the love-hate relationship American society has with intellectuals.<sup>2</sup> Before turning to the ways in which it does this, let's have a closer look at the problem,

## **Fallacious Authority and Real Expertise**

It is a staple of introductory logic courses that it is a fallacy to appeal to authority," yet people typically make more out of this than is appropriate. Strictly in terms of logic, it's always a mistake to argue that a proposition is true because so-and-so says it is, but appeals to authority are more commonly used to show that we have good reason to believe the proposition, as opposed to being proof of its truth. Like all fallacies involving relevance, the problem with most appeals to authority is that they are invoking the authority in an irrelevant way. For example, in matters which really are subjective, such as which pizza or soft drink I should buy, invoking anyone else is irrelevant, since I may not have the same tastes.<sup>3</sup> In other cases, the error is in assuming that because a person is an authority about one thing, that person's expertise should carry the day in all areas. We see this in celebrity endorsements for products unrelated to that person's field. For example, Troy McClure endorsing Duff Beer would not constitute a valid appeal to authority, since being an actor doesn't make one an expert on beer. (And experience is not the same as expertise: Barney is not an expert on beer either.) In other cases, the appeal is fallacious on the grounds that some matters cannot be settled by appeal to experts, not because they are subjective, but because they are unknowable, for instance the future of scientific progress. The classic example here is Einstein's claim in 1932 that "there is not the slightest indication that [nuclear] energy will ever be obtainable."<sup>4</sup>

But after building up all this skepticism about appeals to authority, it's worth remembering that some people actually do know more about some things than other people, and in many cases, the fact that an authority on a subject tells us something really is a good reason to believe it. For example, since I have no first-hand knowledge of the Battle of Marathon, I am going to have to rely on what other people tell me, and a classical historian is precisely the sort of person I should go to, whereas a physician probably is not.<sup>5</sup>

Often what people resent is the application of wisdom, especially to moral or social ideals. People may argue that yes, there is such a thing as being an expert on the Greco-Persian Wars, but that doesn't mean that person can inform our discussion about world politics today.<sup>6</sup> You may be an expert on Aristotle's moral theory, but that doesn't mean you can tell me how I should live. This sort of resistance to expertise stems partly from the nature of a democratic regime, and the problem is not new, but was identified by philosophers as early as Plato. Since, in a democracy, all voices get heard, this can lead people to conclude that all voices have equal value. Democracies tend to justify themselves by contrast to the aristocracies or oligarchies they replace or resist. In those elitist societies, some presume to know more, or actually to be better people; whereas we democrats know better: all are equal. But of course, political equality doesn't imply that no one can possess knowledge that others lack, and indeed few people think this about most skills, for example plumbing or auto repair. No one, though (they say), can know more than anyone else about how to live, how to be just. Hence a kind of relativism develops: from the rejection of ruling elites, who in fact may not have had any better idea than anyone else about justice, to a rejection of the notion of objective standards of right and wrong entirely. What is right is what I feel is right, what is right-for-me. Today, there is a trend even in the academy to dispute notions of objectivity and expertise. There are said to be no true histories, only different interpretations of history.<sup>7</sup> There are no correct interpretations of literary works, only different interpretations.<sup>8</sup> Even physical science is said to be value-laden and non-objective.<sup>9</sup>

So we have all these factors contributing to a climate in which the notion of expertise is eroded, yet at the same time we see countervailing trends. If there's no such thing as expertise, and all opinions are equally valid, why are the talk shows and bestseller lists populated by experts on love and angels? Why watch those shows or read books in the first place? Why send the kids to school? Clearly, people do still put some stock in the notion of expertise, and in many cases, yearn for its guidance. People actually seem to have some tendencies towards wanting to be told what to do. Some critics of religion ascribe its influence to this psychological need, but we need look no further than the political realm to see evidence of it. People look to political figures for their "leadership": we're having a problem with unemployment--doesn't anyone know how to do something about that? This person would make a better president than that one because he knows how to reduce crime, end poverty, make our children better, and so on. But the ambivalence shows itself very clearly in these contexts. If candidate Smith bases his appeal on his expertise and ability to "get the job done," candidate Jones will likely charge Smith with being an elite, a "pointy-head." We also see the paradoxical situation wherein celebrities' pronouncements on political matters taken seriously, as if being a talented musician or actor gave greater weight to one's political views, while at the same time the notion of being an expert on government is derided. With whose views are most Americans more familiar, Alec Baldwin and Charlton Heston, or John Rawls and Robert Nozick?

In addition to political expertise, people also yearn for, and seem least ambivalent about, technological expertise. Most people are quick to acknowledge their own incompetence at plumbing, auto repair, and surgery, and happily turn those tasks over to the experts. In the case of the surgeon, we do see another manifestation of the ambivalence I have in mind, namely when people defend alternative medicine or spiritual healing- what do doctors know? This is a trickle-down from the currently-fashionable trend in academia which maintains that all science is value-laden and non-objective. But we don't have any advocates of "alternative plumbing" or "spiritual auto repair," so these people's expertise is more generally accepted; and do-it-yourselfers are not a counter-example, since that's more a matter of regarding oneself as that sort of craftsman, rather than denying that anyone else is. Also, since plumbers and mechanics less frequently position themselves as experts in fields beyond their own, as surgeons might position themselves as ethicists, they are less susceptible to being regarded skeptically.<sup>10</sup>

## Do We Admire or Laugh at Lisa?

American anti-intellectualism, then, is pervasive but not all encompassing. As it does with many other aspects of modern society, *The Simpsons* often uses this theme as fodder for its satire. In the Simpson family, only Lisa could really be described as an intellectual. But her portrayal as such is not unequivocally flattering. In contrast to her relentlessly ignorant father, she is often shown having the right answer to a problem or a more perceptive analysis of a situation, for example when she exposes political corruption<sup>11</sup> or when she gives up her dream of owning a pony so that Homer won't have to work three jobs.<sup>12</sup> When Lisa discovers the truth behind the myth of Jebediah Springfield, many people are unconvinced, but Homer says, "you're always right about this sort of thing."<sup>13</sup> In "Homer's Triple Bypass," Lisa actually talks Dr. Nick through a heart operation and saves her father's life. But other times, her intellectualism is itself used as the butt of the joke, as if she were "too" smart, or merely preachy. For instance, her principled vegetarianism is revealed as dogmatic and inconsistent,<sup>14</sup> and she uses Bart in a science experiment without his knowledge,<sup>15</sup> evoking examples of the worst sort of arrogance, such as the infamous Tuskegee study.<sup>16</sup> She agitates to join the football team, but it turns out she is, more interested in making a point than in playing.<sup>17</sup> So although her wisdom is sometimes presented as valuable, other times it is presented as a case of being sanctimonious or condescending.

One common populist criticism of the intellectual is that you're no better than the rest of us." The point of this attack seems to be that if I can show that the alleged sage is "really" a regular person, then maybe I don't have to be as impressed with his opinion. Thus the expression "Hey, he puts his pants on one leg at a time just like the rest of us." The implication of this nonsequitur is clearly "he is just a regular person like you and me, so why should we be awed by his alleged expertise?" In Lisa's case, we are shown that she has many of the same foibles as many kids: she joins her non-intellectual brother in revelry as they watch the mindlessly violent *Itchy and Scratchy* cartoon, she worships the teen idol Corey, she plays with Springfield's analogue to the Barbie Doll, Malibu Stacy. So we are given ample opportunity to see Lisa as "no better" in many respects, thus giving us another window for not taking her smarts seriously. Of course, it is true that she is a young girl, and one might argue that this is merely typical Young girl behavior, but since in so many other cases she is presented not simply as a prodigy but as preternaturally wise, the fondness for *Itchy and Scratchy* and Corey seem to be highlighted, taking on greater significance. Lisa is portrayed as the avatar of logic and wisdom, but then she also worships Corey, so she's "no better." In "Lisa the Skeptic," Lisa is the sole voice of reason when the town becomes convinced that "the skeleton of an angel" has been found (it's a hoax), but when it seems to speak, Lisa is as afraid as everyone else.

Lisa's relationship with the Malibu Stacy doll actually takes center stage in one episode,<sup>18</sup> and even this highlights an ambivalence in society about rationalism. It gradually occurs to Lisa that the Malibu Stacy doll does not offer a positive role model for young girls, and she presses for (and actually contributes to) the development of a different doll which encourages girls to achieve and learn. But the makers of Malibu Stacy counter with a new version of their doll, which triumphs on the toy market. The fact that the "less intellectual" doll is vastly preferred over Lisa's doll, even though all of Lisa's objections are reasonable, demonstrates the ways in which reasonable ideas can be made to take a back seat to "having fun" and "going with the flow." This debate is often played out in the real world, of course: Barbie is the subject of perennial criticism along the lines of Lisa's critique of Malibu Stacy, yet remains immensely popular, and in general, we often see intellectual critiques of toys dismissed as "out of touch" or elitist.<sup>19</sup>

## Philosopher Kings? D'Oh!

A more specific instance of the way *The Simpsons* reflects American ambivalence towards the intellectual is found in the episode "They Saved Lisa's Brain."<sup>20</sup> In this episode, Lisa joins the local chapter of Mensa, which already includes Professor Frink, Dr. Hibbert, and the Comic Book Guy. Together they end up in charge of Springfield. Lisa rhapsodizes about the rule of the intellectuals, a true rationalist utopia, but too many of their programs alienate the regular citizens of the town (including, of course, Homer, who leads the charge of the idiot brigade). It would be easy enough to see this sequence of events as a satire on the way the average person is too stupid to recognize the rule of the wise, but more than that is being satirized here. Also under attack is the very notion of rule of the wise—the Mensans have some legitimately good ideas (more rational traffic patterns), but also some ridiculous ones (censorship, mating rituals inspired by *Star Trek*), and they squabble amongst themselves. The Mensans offer something of value, especially in contrast to the corrupt regime of Mayor Quimby or the reign of idiocy that Homer represents, and Lisa's intentions are good, but it is impossible to see this episode as unequivocally pro-intellectual, since one theme is clearly that utopian schemes by elites are unstable, inevitably unpopular, and sometimes foolish. As Paul Cantor argues, "the utopia episode embodies the strange mixture of intellectualism and anti-intellectualism characteristic of *The Simpsons*. In Lisa's challenge to Springfield, the show calls attention to the Cultural limitations of small-town America, but it also reminds us that intellectual disdain for the common man can be carried too far and that theory can all too easily lose touch with common sense."<sup>21</sup>

It is actually true, however, that utopian schemes by elites tend to be ill-conceived, or are power-grabbing schemes masquerading as the common good. But is the only alternative Homer's mob or Quimby's oligarchy? The framers of the United States Constitution hoped to combine democratic principles (a Congress) with some of the benefits of an undemocratic elite rule (a Senate, a Supreme Court, a Bill of Rights). This has had mixed results, but in contrast to other alternatives seems to have fared well. Is all of our society's ambivalence about intellectuals due to this constitutional tension? Surely not. That is part of it, but, more likely than not, this ambivalence is a manifestation of deeper psychological conflicts. We want to have authoritative guidance, but we also want autonomy. We don't like feeling stupid, yet when we are honest we realize we need to learn some things. We respect the accomplishments of others, but sometimes feel threatened and resentful. We have a respect for authorities when it suits us, and embrace relativism in other cases. The "we" here is, of course, a generalization: some people manifest this conflict less than others (or in a few cases not at all), but it seems an apt description of a general social outlook. Unsurprisingly, *The Simpsons*, our most profoundly satirical TV show, both illustrates and instantiates it.

The ambivalence in American society towards the intellectual, if it is indeed a deep-rooted psychological phenomenon, is not likely to go away any time soon. But no one is better off for encouraging or promoting anti-intellectualism. Those who wish to save the republic from the tyranny of Professor Frink and The Comic Book Guy need to find ways to argue against it that do not entail a wholesale attack on the ideal of intellectual development. Those who champion the common man ought not do so in ways that belittle the achievements of the learned. That approach is tantamount to defending Homer's right to live as stupid person by criticizing Lisa for being smart.<sup>22</sup> That's not a sound idea for the development of the nation or of any individual<sup>23</sup>

## Notes

1. Is it anti-intellectual for a Ph.D. in philosophy to write an essay about a TV show? As we argued in the introduction, not necessarily: it depends on whether or not the show can illuminate some philosophical problem, or serve as an accessible example when explaining a point. If we wanted to adopt an anti-intellectual approach, we could argue that all one needs to know about life can be learned from watching TV, but that's clearly not what we are saying; indeed, we're trying to use people's interest in the show as a way to get them to read more philosophy.
2. Intellectuals and experts are not the same thing, of course: many intellectuals are not experts in anything. But I suspect that the antipathy towards both is similarly rooted, and that the distinction is lost on those who would be inclined to reject or scorn both.
3. This is not to address the arguments concerning whether or not there can be objective criteria for judging food, not simply to distinguish between the way in which Smith's preference for chocolate over vanilla is really different from Jones's preference for murder over counseling.
4. Quoted in Christopher Cerf and Victor Navasky, *The Experts Speak* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 215.
5. Of course, there are the odd cases where the physician in question is, say, as a hobby, also an expert on the Battle of Marathon, but I am speaking here of the physician qua physician.
6. In case you're wondering, see Peter Green's *The Greco-Persian War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
7. See for example, Mary Lefkowitz's book *Not Out of Africa* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), in which she recounts her experiences as a classicist trying to maintain standards of rational inquiry in the heated area of race-based archeology.
8. For a rare objective account of artistic interpretation, see William Irwin's *Intentionalist Interpretation: A Philosophical Explanation and Defense* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999). Ironically, at the same time the notion of truth and expertise is being challenged within the academy--there are no such things as experts on morality--the talk shows and bestseller lists are populated with experts on such things as relationships, horoscopes, and angels. But these experts are heeded, I think, only to the extent that they confirm a person's predispositions, and rejected on grounds I have outlined when they do not. To be sure, the rejection of knowledge claims in the realm of values is different from the rejection of knowledge claims in physical matters. But what is interesting is that we do see both, and at the same time we also see bogus claims of expertise on a host of inappropriate matters.
9. See, for example, Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense. Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (New York: Picador, 1998). The springboard for this hook was Sokal's now-famous hoax, in which he submitted a bogus essay based on this theme, which was readily accepted by scientifically challenged journal editors as a fine work. That essay was "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," Originally published in *Social Text* 46-47, (1996), pp. 217-252.
10. This also highlights ways in which popular attitudes towards authorities and "intellectuals" are not exactly the same. People are less resistant to an authority or expert when the area seems not to be an intellectual one, for example we all recognize the plumber's expertise; but of course being an expert in anything requires a degree of intellectualism, so the distinction is a fallacious one, and is more a reflection of people's attitudes than a statement about the intellectual level of expert craftsmen. Expert craftsmen obviously do possess wisdom, but are often seen as less threatening to those who don't possess the wisdom. This might be due to the fact that when we speak of

- "intellectuals" or "smart people," we are describing a general characteristic which sets the person apart, whereas when we speak of an "expert," we are only describing an attribute which we may regard as isolated, and thus feel less threatened. Lisa is an intellectual (valuing the pursuit of wisdom) and very smart. while not specifically an "expert" on anything.
11. "Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington."
  12. "Lisa's Pony."
  13. "Lisa the iconoclast."
  14. "Lisa the vegetarian."
  15. "Duffless."
  16. This was a case in which the doctors experimented without consent, and with little regard for the well-being of the "participants," who were infected with syphilis.
  17. "Bart Star."
  18. "Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy."
  19. GI Joe, for example, is criticized for promoting militarism and violence, as do all "gun" toys, yet parents overwhelmingly reject the calls of some intellectuals that kids should be guided towards different play.
  20. For further discussion of this episode, see Chapter 11 of this volume.
  21. *Ibid.*, p. 178
  22. Some argue that, indeed, Homer does not have the right to live as a stupid person. There may be something to this, but it's neither here nor there with respect to the narrower argument I am making here.
  23. I am grateful to Mark Conrad and William Irwin for helping me clarify several of my points and reminding me of several useful examples.

## Source

Skoble, Aeon J. "Lisa and American Anti-intellectualism." *The Simpsons and philosophy: the d'oh! of Homer*. Ed. William Irwin, Mark T. Conrad, and Aeon J. Skoble. Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2001. 24-34.

Anti-Intellectualism in American Life and millions of other books are available for instant access. [view Kindle eBook](#) | [view Audible audiobook](#). Enter your mobile number or email address below and we'll send you a link to download the free Kindle App. Then you can start reading Kindle books on your smartphone, tablet, or computer - no Kindle device required.Â Despite these notable periods of favor for the intellectual, it is equally true that something about American civilization has often worked against intellectualism. Part of it was that America, which began as pioneer settlements, always had to be very practical. American anti-intellectualism, then, is pervasive but not all encompassing. As it does with many other aspects of modern society, The Simpsons often uses this theme as fodder for its satire. In the Simpson family, only Lisa could really be described as an intellectual. But her portrayal as such is not unequivocally flattering. In contrast to her relentlessly ignorant father, she is often shown having the right answer to a problem or a more perceptive analysis of a situation, for example when she exposes political corruption<sup>11</sup> or when she gives up her dream of owning a pony so that Homer won&ap