

Intellectuals and Partisanship

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For Marxism and for Marxian theoreticians there is a tension between doing intellectual work and their moral-cum-political commitments. For other intellectuals there sometimes are rather similar tensions but characteristically such matters do not afflict them as deeply or so endemically as they do intellectuals in the Marxist traditions.

I shall try to get a purchase on this tension by taking off from a remark made by Erik Olin Wright. Wright (1979, p. 211) asks, "What is the role of intellectuals in the struggle for socialism? How can Marxist intellectuals serve the working class?"¹ He takes these, not uncharacteristically, to be "the really important political questions facing progressive intellectuals."

If we delete the "the," I agree. But then how can I, or can I, reasonably face down the scorn of some intellectuals who would dismissively respond by saying that it is the business of intellectuals to give the best approximation to the truth they can muster and that is all? That is, to elaborate a bit, they, depending on whether they are social scientists or philosophers, should seek to amass the best available evidence perspicuously displayed for their claims and then to design critical tests for these claims; with that perspicuously arranged social description and interpretation (assuming the subject is society) in hand they should seek to articulate important claims about society or about a particular historically determinate society and then produce sound or at least reliable arguments for these claims. (By reliable arguments I simply mean valid arguments whose premises are creditable.) Intellectuals, whether they are social scientists or philosophers, should — to continue the objection — do this and things of this sort and nothing more. To talk of serving the working class or the capitalist class or elites or anyone or anything else is utterly unworthy of an intellectual. Indeed it is morally retrograde. The task of the intellectual is to try to tell it like it is. Anything else is propaganda and is incompatible with the very vocation of the intellectual.

Is this too swift a way with Marxist intellectuals? Intellectuals have historically, and repeatedly, been concerned with human liberation and emancipation. They have, among other things, and very crucially, wanted to understand human nature and fundamental social structures, how these social structures can be expected to change, and the agencies and limits of that change. With this understanding, or with what we can plausibly get of it, they have tried reflectively and knowledgeably to consider what kinds of lives we *should* lead and, as well and relatedly, they have considered questions about what sorts of society in our epoch *should* be sustained or brought into being. These latter concerns are surely not concerns just to tell it like it is or perhaps even at all to tell it like it is, though being able to make normative claims reasonably and wisely requires as a necessary condition being able to make some reasonable approximation to telling it like it is. But that is not all there is to it. That does not mean the rest is propaganda, mere rhetoric, or just kibitzing. Not even the severest or most probing of the non-cognitivists or error theorists thought that, as the work of Bertrand Russell, Axel Hägerström, Ingemar Hedenius, Charles Stevenson, and J. L. Mackie attest.

It will in turn be responded, the scorn remaining, that what is offensive (as distinct from perhaps being just mistaken) is not the attempt to argue that a certain conception of the world is better than some other conception, but the serving of the interests of the working class or indeed any class. What is offensive, as an essential of that, is the *subordinating of the intellect to some cause*. Such a commitment turns the Marxist intellectual into a propagandist or a hired intellectual gun for the working class. It is this that is irreconcilable — or so the claim goes — with the search for truth. Moreover, even if “truth in politics” or “truth in ethics” is anomalous, there is something like justifiedness or a measure of reasonableness in going in one way rather than another. But to serve the interests of x (a person, a class, a race, a gender, a state, or whatnot) is what is morally and intellectually unacceptable. It implies, as I have remarked, or so it seems at least, the subordination of the intellect of the individual and it is this very thing that is incompatible with his or her very vocation as an intellectual. (I speak here of “vocation” in Max Weber’s sense.) But a Marxist intellectual will take up the standpoint of the working class; will seek to help the working class to gain a voice where before it was inarticulate. But it is just this that is being objected to as a subordination of one’s intellect to class interests: it is, as I have remarked, to become a hired intellectual gun and to abandon one’s vocation as an intellectual.

Is this so? Let us see a little more of what helping the working class to gain a voice could come to. It could, of course, have different readings and the choice of reading is important. There are choices here, and important choices, between more Leninist and more Gramscian readings.² But at a minimum, as a kind of crude common denominator, it would involve helping to articulate and to systematically display a sound (truthfully premised and validly argued) social theory and practice that would in some not insignificant way contribute to the unifying of the working class — its development as a class — and with this, of course, lead to a better understanding of its situation and potential. But this would involve coming to better understand what capitalism is and how it works and how it is likely to develop and what post-capitalist possibilities there are, including socialist possibilities, and what they are likely to be like, particularly if the advanced capitalist societies were to take such a turning. We also need, if we can, to get a good understanding of the likelihood of their so turning. Perhaps there are systematic reasons why any such knowledge is impossible but that itself would be something very much worth knowing (see Taylor, 1985). Such endeavours are an attempt to ascertain, with the best methods available, which means, of course, the most objective ways available, what is the case or might possibly become the case in such domains. There can be no subordination of one’s intellect there, no turning away from one’s vocation as an intellectual. Truth is plainly what matters. Sound theory in such domains requires a good understanding (or at least as good an understanding as the subject matter allows) of what is and can become the case, and sound practice would be rooted in such an understanding, though in being concerned with what is to be done it will, of course, be prescriptive as well. Whether or not such norms can be true or false, they can be justified or unjustified, more rather than less reasonable and more rather than less emancipatory. Concern with what is and can be the case, though conceptually distinct from what is emancipatory, remains part of a common praxis. Moreover, what is emancipatory and what is not can be reasonably argued and is not utterly subjective or perhaps even subjective at all. “Emancipatory” is surely not the clearest term in the world but it plainly is not just an emotive label without anything even approximating determinate criteria of application (see Nielsen, 1977a, 1977b). So the Marxist intellectual, in helping the working class to gain a voice, need not, and indeed must not, for among other reasons, the very internal viability of Marxist theory itself, substitute the shouting of slogans where

argument is appropriate, but instead should try to tell the truth as best he or she can. For the intellectual to serve the working class, he or she must do just that.

It might be thought that with that remark about not shouting slogans I make it too easy for myself. I simply steer clear of practical issues posed by actual movement activism. There are social scientists, both Marxian and non-Marxian, who have decided not to limit their activities to theorizing and research. They make or help prepare speeches for rallies or prepare position papers to be presented to parliamentary committees and the like. But they also join demonstrations and on those and similar occasions sometimes shout slogans.

I agree, and nothing I said above gainsays that, that there is a place for the shouting of slogans, for marching together, for fighting together and for singing together. A Marxist who would not willingly do this on appropriate occasions — and there surely are appropriate occasions — would not be much of a Marxist. But here it is nothing that a Marxist does *qua* Marxist *intellectual*. He or she on such occasions simply acts with his or her comrades as one defiant, struggling person among many fighting for working-class emancipation.

The values of solidarity, participation, and class cohesion are very deep indeed. There is no political life without them. Indeed I am inclined to think that a life without them would be an impoverished life or at least less than a fully human life. But whether or not that is so, at least it is plain that values such as solidarity are of a not inconsiderable weight in our lives. Moreover, for solidarity to obtain, particularly in a group struggling for its own emancipation, it requires acts of this sort, namely the singing of songs, demonstrations, shouting slogans, chanting, and where necessary fighting together against a common enemy. Sometimes an intellectual must simply throw in his or her lot with the insurgent movement. But here, at least in most circumstances, there is nothing distinctive for an intellectual to do *qua* intellectual. At most, where he or she is a figure of stature like Sartre or Deutscher or Mandel his presence, *as such a person*, would have added symbolic value.

Intellectuals, of course, typically have a rather important and distinctive role to play in planning strategy and tactics, in writing speeches and position papers, and the like. Here their expertise is clearly in place. But here, in the very interests of the movement, though not only in those interests, the intellectual must have a scrupulous concern for truth, for trying to read the situation and the possibilities accurately, and for attempting to be clear about what is to be done in such circumstances. Not infrequently in such contexts the intellectual will have to oversimplify (though I expect much less often than is usually thought) in the making of popular statements that are brief and readily accessible. We need, of course, to ask, when does popularization and simplification become unwarrantable oversimplification? There can, of course, be no justified playing fast and loose with truth or with what it is reasonable to believe. But how exact, how argumentative, how detailed and evidence specifying we should be, can, beyond giving a few platitudes, have no useful non-contextual specification.

There are at least two other things here that should be noted. First, the Marxist intellectual's commitment to struggle for socialism, to taking the side of the working class, to serving its interests, as he sees those interests, is indeed self-consciously *parti-pris*. But, partisan or not, it need not for all of that be something which is morally or intellectually unjustified. When Marxian theoreticians make the sort of claims we noted Wright making, they have, prior to that, come to the conclusion that in our epoch it would be a good thing — a morally and humanly desirable thing — if capitalism could be replaced by a genuinely democratic and socialist world order. The triumph of the working class, they believe, would

not only be a good thing for the working class it would be a good thing for humankind generally. Socialism, and eventually communism, with the victory of the working class, would, they think, bring about greater well-being, greater equality (both substantive and procedural), and a more extensive and fuller mutually assured autonomy. All of this, of course, may be mistaken. It may indeed be Marxist wish fulfillment, pie in the sky by and by, or more of the false consciousness of Marxist intellectuals. However, if it is not more of what Raymond Aaron took to be their opium, but instead, if the Marxist cluster of considered judgments are justified, if their moral assessment of the desirability of socialism over capitalism is near to the mark, then, such intellectuals, in taking the side of labour, are not doing something which could be dismissed as being simply partisan or arbitrary. They are rather doing something which has the objectivity of a cluster of justified moral claims. (The objectivity might very well be the intersubjective warrant of a cluster of claims shown to be considered judgments which are in a coherent pattern squaring with our best knowledge of the social world and of human nature. We must beware, if we ask for more reified conceptions of objectivity, particularly in the domains of politics and ethics.)

Second, we should not link objectivity with neutrality.³ What is important is commitment to the truth and an ability to stick with that commitment and some reasonable success rate here. Or, since there is no such thing as *the* truth, though there can be and indeed are clusters of systematically and consistently related true propositions or approximately true propositions, there should be a commitment (again with a reasonable success rate) to making sound or at least reliable arguments, to an impartial attention to evidential claims, interpretations, the giving of reasons, and an impartial examination of rival attempts to articulate a clear and plausibly connected cluster of relevant propositions in the relevant domains. It is things of this sort that we need for objectivity. If these things are obtained we have objectivity whether or not we are neutral. One needs a certain impartiality here but that is not the same thing as neutrality.

The impartiality that is to be adopted by a partisan is the same that anyone adopts if they are impartial. It is to be committed to considering (where such considering is in order) in an even-handed way all the relevant interests, to not independently of the rights or wrongs of the matter favour a particular cause or person, to be prepared, where something is at stake and where it is feasible, to look at all the relevant evidence for or against what is being considered, and the like. What this being impartial comes to is the same for the partisan as the non-partisan. What is different is that partisans, perhaps more than others, frequently fail to be impartial. (There is the phenomena of "The True Believer.") What I am saying is that for the partisan who has integrity and who cares about his or her cause, its being right or being justified and not just being her cause is what he or she will insist on. Such partisans will insist that their commitments will be ones that can be sustained impartially. To claim that such people are not *really* partisan is, in effect, to stipulate a *persuasive* definition of "partisan" where an "unbiased partisan" becomes a contradiction in terms.

We are, the above to the contrary notwithstanding, as Charles Taylor has pointed out, fatally prone to cook the books over matters of politics and issues of morality. This is characteristically not a matter of conscious intent but something we do unwittingly. It is very difficult indeed in such domains to escape ideological posturing and mystification. (This, of course, is not only a problem for the Marxist but for everyone. The person who views himself to be the most self-consciously apolitical is very likely to be the most hostage to that.) But that it is difficult does not make it impossible. We can, perfectly consistently, be passionately committed to socialism and *for that very reason* insist on scrupulously and impartially weighing the competing claims of socialism and capitalism. So much is at stake

— or at least so we believe — that we very much want, if we can, to be right over such matters. But this entails being able to ascertain what should be thought and done here or at least some reasonable approximation to that. For very understandable reasons we very much want it to be the case that there be a good case for socialism. Behind this is the belief that with the achievement of socialism we can see hope in the world — a hope that is a hope for humankind — but without socialism we can see none. This being so, if indeed it is so, we will try very hard indeed, if we are reasonable, to ascertain how things actually stand here. After all, we want to know whether there is any hope. Of course, we speak here, *perhaps* like some wild person committed to some grandiose “meta-narrative,” of hope on a very grand scale. It is hope for a truly human society and that, of course, is decidedly on the grand scale. It is understandable that there should be post-modern scepticism, irony, and even derision of this.

Given such an attitude toward hope, the truth of the matter, if there is any, is very important to ascertain. It is very important, that is, that we ascertain, if we can, what is objectively the case here. And if, after all, there is no genuine objectivity here we will, if we see this, be very disheartened indeed. Indeed, if that is the case (something I do not consider here), it is anything but clear whether we could succeed in being either partisans or non-partisans. Those concepts would probably become Holmesless Watsons. But a commitment to objectivity, to impartiality, to bowing before the facts of the matter (where there are such facts) is not the same as having an attitude of neutrality.⁴ In fact at times such an attitude of neutrality may stand in the way of attaining truth. A scientist may have the courage or at least the tenacity to press on because of a deep commitment and end up making an important discovery.

So I started with Wright’s observation that Marxist intellectuals should seek ways of serving the working class. Aware that some intellectuals would see this as a perversion of the commitment and vocation of the intellectual, a turning of him or her not into a responsible social scientist or philosopher, but into a kind of propagandist, where, if the propaganda is artfully deployed, the intellectual will be someone having the aura of being a very considerable social scientist or philosopher indeed while in reality cheapening the coin. There are, of course, on the Right and on the Left and in the centrist position of liberalism such Felix Kruhls. Indeed they sometimes get a considerable following. Moreover, one might unwittingly be entrapped here oneself. There are here slippery slopes a plenty that are hard to see, and we may be slipping away royally before we are aware of it. One, that is, may unwittingly fall into such posturing, unconsciously captivated by its beguilements. Our capacity to trick ourselves and our capacity for wish fulfilment here is very extensive and insidiously entrapping.

Still there is nothing inevitable about this. One can take the standpoint of labour and remain a partisan of truth, though in doing so one must also be prepared to bow before the facts however unwelcome. To be prepared to do so is just part of what it is to be an intellectual and it is also, and more importantly, part of what it is to be a reasonable human being. Someone who will not so bow is not reasonable.

Let me, as a kind of coda, consider the person who would respond as follows: Why get so worked up over taking the side of labour or indeed any side? Isn’t it enough to be curious about some intellectually intriguing and demanding matters, including those political or moral matters or meta-political or meta-moral matters, if such there be, which are so de-

manding? I like solving intellectual puzzles, this person could continue, in a neat and economical way. I like to display the powers of human reason as perspicuously and comprehensively as possible. Isn't this enough for a self-respecting intellectual to care about? Why get mixed up, particularly in some obsessive way, in all this moral and political stuff? It is very messy and nobody will ever get to the bottom of it. Isn't such an interest more religiose than rational?

Surely such puzzle solving or, more generally, *purely* intellectual pursuits, systematic or piecemeal, are perfectly legitimate. That is hardly something that could be in contention. There is nothing wrong, to take one obvious part of it, with proving theorems. Perhaps only Euclid has seen beauty bare. But if intellectuals so limited themselves — I speak here of intellectuals as a group not about what every individual intellectual must do — that would hardly be something that would fulfil the vocation of intellectuals. (I continue to speak of vocation in the way Max Weber does.) Intellectuals have not only wanted to solve puzzles but they have also wanted to be able to say something about what a just and humane social order would look like, and what a good life would be, and how these things might be attained or appropriated. And sometimes, the attaining of this, if indeed it can be attained, involves taking sides and part of that taking of sides — for an intellectual a very important part of taking sides — is the producing of arguments for (a) taking sides and (b) for taking a particular side. Only if a kind of positivism or scientism were justified which would show us that we cannot argue about, or reasonably deliberate about, or decide about the ends of life, would we be justified in turning aside such considerations as being something intellectuals, with their commitments to clarity, should eschew. But this has not been established or even made plausible and indeed Jürgen Habermas (1970) may be right in thinking that such scientism is not what reason commits us to but is instead a pervasive ideology of our time (see Nielsen, 1978). Such scientific restriction on the role of intellectuals is itself irrational. Moreover, we wish to go beyond such pure intellectuality because we human beings *care* about the quality of our lives and of the lives of those who are close to us and some of us, though typically less intensely, also care about the quality of life of humankind more generally and, to do so, we need neither be suckers nor any the less rational for all of that. (This is different from saying that rationality so commits us. There are many things reason *permits* which it does not *require*.) Given this caring we wish to use our big brains, our sensibilities, and our historical understanding to give a reasonable articulation, if such could be had, of what such a life would look like and to figure out how it could be attained or at least approximated. If Marxists are right that carries with it a commitment to class struggle. They may be wrong, even deeply confused about this, but that itself is an intellectual and moral issue that cannot rightly be set aside as being beyond the domain of intellectuals as something not in their province. And if Marxists are right, or even nearly so, then being *parti pris* is what it is and rationally justified for all of that for a person who *cares* about the world. Of course, if people did not care, then nothing like that would be on the agenda but then we would not be talking about people: beings who are recognizably human.

I remarked earlier that with the achievement of socialism I could see a hope for humankind, without it I could not. It, I am confident, will strike many that it is utterly naive, socialism or no socialism, to speak of a "hope for humankind." Perhaps so? But that is not a critique of cynical reason but an acquiescence in it. Perhaps that is all a tough-minded person can do. But then, again, perhaps not. There is, of course, the old story of the pessimism of the intellect and the optimism of the will.⁵

Notes

1. I would like to thank Danny Goldstick for some helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.
2. See Richard Schmitt (1987, pp. 146–150). See also the exchange between Herbert Gintis and Paula Rothenberg (Shalon, 1983, pp. 11–24, 45–50, 51–58). Note in this connection the remark by Marx and Engels in the *Manifesto* that just as “at an earlier period, a section of the nobility went over to the bourgeoisie, so now a portion of the bourgeoisie goes over to the proletariat, and in particular, a portion of the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movements as a whole” (Tucker, 1972, p. 481). But on the Gramscian side, note also Tucker (pp. 483–484).
3. That objectivity and neutrality should not be so linked has been powerfully argued by both Robert Paul Wolff (1969, pp. 69–76) and Charles Taylor (1975, pp. 128–148). See, as well, the essays by Stuart Hampshire and Conor Cruise O’Brien in *The Morality of Scholarship* (Black, 1967).
4. One reader has commented that “the facts however unwelcome that one should bow to are never explained.” This reader wants me, it seems, to consider facts about working-class oppression and the like. I am completely baffled by this. My topic is intellectuals and partisanship and, particularly, around this, the predicament of a Marxian intellectual. I was not trying here, though I have elsewhere, to argue substantively about socialism. But here in this, if you will, methodological essay the important thing to bring out is the necessity to accept the facts as facts when they indeed are facts and to develop one’s policy or practice in the light of a non-evasive examination. The scope of this covers any facts that at least are putatively relevant. There is no point *here* in specifying particular facts.
5. One reader has, pedantically and pointlessly, I believe, objected to my use of “sound argument,” “sound practice” and “sound theory.” A sound argument in logic is a valid argument with true premises. I use sound argument in a slightly more liberal way by speaking of sound arguments where we have something truthfully premised and validly argued. (Something, remember, may be truthfully claimed and turn out to be false.) The reader also wants to reserve “valid” for “deductively valid” setting aside the possibility of there being inductively valid or in terms of canons of legal reasoning legally valid arguments and the like. I see no sufficient reason for such restrictions, but, if you do find this matter troublesome, you can simply speak of “cogent arguments” or “good arguments” or of something being “cogently argued” where I use “sound” or “soundly.” Speak that way, if you will, but nothing turns on it. “Sound” has a reasonable and straightforward application in the context in which I use it.

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