

In Defence of Intellectuals

It should be noted that this piece uses quotations relying on gendered terminology. The author does not endorse this, and would like to assert that when using such terminology, it is merely to present the quotations as they were written. If it were possible to make the tigers leap into the past and create a culture of non-gendered writing and/or language translation, I would do so

The assorted sundry of the revolutionary Left are probably more than familiar with Karl Marx famous 11th theses on Feuerbach, so there should not be any need to repeat it here. I will do so anyway, for the sake of loosening the memory of tired minds;

"The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it." (Marx, 1845)

His line here is such a powerfully simple and clear way to articulate a politics that moves beyond critique and towards practice. But, there is a contradiction with a very important and also often quoted set of sentences that appear in the later work of Capital Volume 1, chapter 7;

"A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality." (Marx, 1867)

So, the philosophers indulge in their past time of interpretation neglecting the necessity of action, whilst what makes humankind distinct from even the most practically skilful animal is our ability to think. The contradiction between the inadequacy of interpretation alone and the solely human ability to imagine presents, I believe, the risks at play in any discussion of the role of intellectuals in the revolutionary movement.

Amongst the Left involved in organising workers there can be a risk of falling into an understanding of the role of intellectuals in the revolutionary movement that at times verges on

hostility. This particular position originates in an understandable attempt to prevent intellectuals from having an undue influence over the strategic and tactical decisions of a revolutionary movement that has the goal of liberating the creative faculties of all humankind. Sometimes our movement must make seemingly irrational, or spontaneous, changes in direction that rely on intuition as much as analysis. But, for the revolutionary Party, the intellectual is not simply a 'theoretician', it is a social category. In this sense, what is defined by a political Party as an intellectual is an important indication of what role the organisation expects them to play. This then has potential implications for how the theoretical work of a Party is produced. Karl Marx himself outlined the risks of subordinating the strategy and tactics of the revolutionary organisation to the whims of a certain kind of intellectual,

"We cannot, therefore, go along with people who openly claim that the workers are too ignorant to emancipate themselves but must first be emancipated from the top down... Should the new party organ take a position that corresponds with the ideas of those gentlemen... then there is nothing left for us, sorry as we should be to do so, than to speak out against it publicly and dissolve the solidarity within which we have hitherto represented the German party abroad." (Marx, 1879)

Marx's warning here is related to the role that traitors to the ruling class have within a revolutionary socialist movement when they break with their class origins and become active in the workers movement. For Marx, when ruling class intellectuals are won over to socialism, they do so on the basis of the *idea* of socialism, not as a consequence of the experience of oppression and exploitation. They therefore have, in Marx's view, a tendency towards practicing socialist politics as if it were an educational project in which they pass on the ideas to the masses. The material isolation of middle-class thinkers from the dirt and squalor of working class life feeds a politics of abstraction, in which a false division is posed between ideas and the practice of political activity. The worry for Marx is not just that middle class intellectuals would have ideas that would be damaging to the work of organising class struggle, but that such intellectuals do not grasp the intuitive ebb and flow of working class life, and so can only encounter socialism as an abstract idea. They can be more or less formally 'scientifically' correct, but this does not guarantee a flexibility of action rooted in the art of practice. Such figures would be gifted by social status that would allow this unconscious weakness to distort the development of the most effective set of strategies and tactics.

In capitalist society we are subject to forces that would see us atomized and alienated. The effects of this alienation is to create a sense that collective, conscious decision-making activity is a practical impossibility. One attempt to overcome this force is to pose the *idea* as a solution. Utopian attempts to form collective voluntary communities around a plan to directly create a

new society with its own laws and structures in the here-and-now, or at least local attempts towards this. Another reaction to this alienation is to reject the idea that there is any hope for any attempt at conscious collective activity to succeed, and that there is therefore only a minority capable of understanding the requirements and risks of making decisions in the name of the majority. These two ideas whilst seemingly opposed are actually two sides of the same coin. They both support the notion that the masses are not capable of discovering their collective capacity to change the world through practice, and either must be educated to know better or are simple barbarians destined to live nasty, brutish and short lives without protection from above. Both perspectives rely on the notion that the only place that the *hope* of a new world exists is in our minds, not in our bellies. So, we see a continuing reinforcement of the false division between enlightenment and action in which the intellectual becomes the elevated standard bearer for the moral order.

The unity of theory and practice is not just the parallel development of theory of one hand, and practical activity on the other. Rather, there is a continual dynamic between ongoing revolutionary activity, and robust self-criticism. The task involves grasping that a theory of the world is necessary to understand how best to intervene in it, but also that practical activity itself produces knowledge that we must learn to interpret and decode. A revolutionary would be ineffective if they left their critical thinking elsewhere whilst handing out leaflets, intervening in meetings, organising strikes and marching on demonstrations. So, having a cadre of individuals in a revolutionary organisation that are primarily charged with being the 'strategists', 'thinkers' or 'theorists' runs counter to the necessity of revolutionary practice and replicates the status of the 'intellectual' in wider capitalist society.

For Antonio Gramsci, "all men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals" (Gramsci, pg. 9). For Gramsci, the intellectual performed a particular *function* in wider society, and was not just the chosen profession or disposition of an individual. He argues that the intellectual was a particular social category, taking the form of state administrators and religious leaders for example, not just the stereotypical middle class academic. Our society elevates certain versions of this kind of intellectual through the institutions of the ideological superstructures that rest upon the economic base of society. These kinds of intellectuals are called 'traditional' in that they take on leadership roles in the production of *common sense* ideology and ideas. Intellectuals therefore function as an expression of the world view of a given class as it enters onto the stage of history and assumes a role as leading on the decisions that effect society in general.

The workers movement was also responsible for creating its own intellectuals. This is not to mean that individuals who are part of the academic life of a nation or state simply *become* advocates

of working class struggle. Rather, this means that the institutions of the working class (trade unions, parties, tenants associations, liberation campaigns, and mass movements) produce within their structures people that gain the function of intellectuals in these respective bodies. They do not simply *replicate* the way that 'traditional' intellectuals work, but express the general understanding of the world which the working class develops through approximating in practice. They therefore emerge in an 'organic' way from out of the surging tumult and ceaseless conflict of working class politics.

Whilst this is true we still run the risk here that we can alienate the task of 'understanding' the world to a self-selecting clique of 'those in the know'. This would effectively reinforce the same kind of division of labour that dominates capitalist society - the division between a small number of 'managers' who make decisions informed by, or actually are, the intellectuals of their side, versus a vast number of workers who are there only to take instruction and are denied any space for independence of thought or dissenting opinion.

This may seem like something that could not happen in a revolutionary Party, but this division of intellectual work gained a significant influence over the activity of Louis Althusser, a French Marxist philosopher who was active in the French Communist party (PCF) during the middle parts of the 20th century. Chris Harman highlights an aspect of Althusser's politics, in his review of Gregory Elliott's *Althusser: The Detour of Theory*,

"[For Althusser] Marxism is not a theory developed by the workers' movement as it became conscious of the society in which it struggled, but a "science" evolving in the same way as Althusser saw the physical sciences emerging—as the work of a specialist group of scientists guided only by a concern for knowledge. The mass of people could never escape from the grip of ideology—pre-scientific notions and beliefs—even when they are engaged in struggles that shake society to its foundations. The scientific elite can recognise that "ideologies" are necessary to the masses, but will themselves see through such primitive notions." (Harman, 2009).

The implication of this underlying hostility towards the organic intellectuals of the workers movement was to detach theory from the democracy of the membership of the Party, and therefore the class. This leaves it deposited in the hands of a diminishing group of 'thinkers'. This group would be engaged in *theoretical practice*, essentially an attempt to define in abstract terms what the true balance of class forces was within society. The logic of this argument was taken so

far as to suggest that the Party intelligentsia was the only group of people capable of knowing the true nature of reality!

This irony is that the isolation of theoretical practice amongst a select group of intellectuals advocated by Althusser occurred in part as a knee-jerk response to the movement of the 'New Left' away from the Stalinist orthodoxies after the Hungarian uprising of 1956. The 'New Left', whilst a temporary holding space for a heterodox Left renewal, presented the Stalinists with the threat of a re-emergence of a genuine tradition of socialism-from-below capable of winning the class away from their bureaucratic distortions. In this case, the function of the PCF intellectual was to isolate the art of revolutionary theory away from the creativity of the masses, whose tentative and emerging distrust of Stalinism became viewed as an effect of the distortions of bourgeois ideology and individualism.

In his defence of the role of intellectuals in the revolutionary Party, Tony Cliff argues that there is no room in a revolutionary party for a minority of theorists, all members must be intellectuals;

"The worst damage that can be done inside a revolutionary party is if there is an attack on the intellectuals inside the party, in the name of a proletarian attitude. As a matter of fact such an attack is not so much on the intellectuals but on the workers in the party. It is an insult to the workers as it assumes the workers are unable to grasp theory." (Cliff, 1999)

Tony Cliff also outlines the distorting effects on the division of labour under capitalism upon the intellectual opportunities for workers, and how the Party as a structure is meant to differ from this,

"It is not good enough for a minority of party members to know the theory. Everybody should know it. Lenin wrote that in a revolutionary party there is no rank and file, therefore everybody must have a knowledge of Marxism. The revolutionary party is not a copy of a capitalist factory or the capitalist army. In the factory the managers decide and the workers have to obey. In the capitalist army the officers command and the soldiers stand to attention. In a revolutionary party every member has the power of thinking, deciding and acting" (Cliff, 1999)

This echoes how Gramsci understood that the intellectual is a *function*, not just a type of person. Intellectuals in the revolutionary Party are those that take on the role of developing the overall theoretical and strategic direction of the Party's forces. When this role becomes isolated in a small number of hands, it replicates the role of the intellectual in wider bourgeois society - as consultants for managers, or managers themselves. The Party has to bring together the voices of the working class into a cauldron of debate and contestation over the necessary political direction of the organisation and its relationship to the class itself. The moment when theoretical *leadership* becomes isolated in a small number of hands, the Party begins to be unable to develop a continually renewing revolutionary cadre.

This is the meaning behind the title of this piece. It is not seeking to defend those who occupy the role of intellectuals within wider capitalist society, but is meant as a defence of the principle that all Party members must be given the standing of intellectuals within our own organisation. No member can be said to possess full ownership over the *correct* interpretation of the politics of socialism-from-below. Once a decision, conscious or not, is taken that some members are more *intellectual* than others it hammers a nail into the coffin of the Party as a self-renewing and dynamic political force. We begin to replicate the failures of Althusser.

The only remedy to saving the revolutionary tradition is to *open it up*. Subjecting the strategies of any Party to wide ranging and robust criticism is the only means by which we can create a political culture in which no decision made by any member is unaccountable. Be they a passionate but ill-disciplined student, a lacklustre but dedicated trade union national executive member, or a full-time member of our central committee.

What distinguishes humans from animals is our imagination, and what distinguishes the revolutionary is their ability to inspire the imagination of our class. To inspire is a collective project, and it is the success of our comrades and allies that lifts our hearts and steels our vision. The only way we can learn from these successes, and feed our hungry minds, is to be open to their insights. If the challenge of intellectual work becomes a minority pursuit within a Party then it will behave in the wider movement as if only it, and not the class itself, has the answers. This will distort its potential, and shackle its limbs to the concrete blocks of sectarianism.

In the end, it is not what distinguishes the intellectual from the worker, or the Party member from the movement, that makes the difference. Rather, what matters is the bonds of solidarity forged in the struggle for liberation from the disfiguring and alienating effects of capitalism. The revolutionary Party collects the best elements found in all struggles and generalises their insights, provocations and experiences in order to ensure not only that our class *learns quickly*, but is also

enabled to develop robustly democratic and accountable cultures in the political bodies it creates. By sharing these aspects and products of intellectual work we undermine the idea of the intellectual as *a type of person* and turn theoretical work into *a function of all members of the Party*.

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