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Politics and Literature

Revolution and the Intellectual

(AN INTERVIEW WITH JEAN-CLAUDE GAROT)

What does the position of “left-wing intellectual” mean today?

FIRST OF ALL, I don't think you can have an intellectual without his being “left wing”. There are of course people who write books and essays and so on and who belong to the Right. As far as I am concerned, though, simply using one's intellect is not enough to make one an intellectual. If it were so, there would be no difference between a manual worker and people who read and improve their minds. Where would you draw the distinction between the professional workers of the period of anarcho-syndicalism who sought to think out their situation and an intellectual who wrote essays? The worker works with his hands. But so does the intellectual write with his hands. In this sense there is no distinction. What you have to do in fact is define the intellectual on the basis of the function which society assigns to him. The man I call an “intellectual” is recruited from a socio-professional group made up of what one might call the “theoreticians of practical knowledge”.

This definition stems from the fact that we now know all knowledge to be practical. A hundred years ago it was possible to regard scientific research as being disinterested – that was the bourgeois concept. Today this is an outdated ideology. We know that science sooner or later implies practical application. Consequently, it is impossible to find any kind of knowledge which is, strictly speaking, impractical. The theoretician of practical knowledge can be an engineer, a doctor, a researcher, a sociologist, etc. The sociologist, for example, studies in the United States how to improve relations between bosses and workers in such a way as to cover up the class struggle. Atomic science, it goes without saying, has an immediate practical application. In other words, as soon as you have a practitioner of some kind who operates on the basis of knowledge (the operational laws of which define his field of activity) for the purpose of obtaining further knowledge – a purpose which is not immediately practical but may become so, or is so indirectly, as in the case of a doctor – then I would define that man as a theoretician of practical knowledge, but not as an intellectual. What on the other hand defines an intellectual in our society is the deep-seated contradiction between the universality which bourgeois society is obliged to grant his knowledge and the particular ideological and political framework within which he is forced to apply it. A doctor studies blood in so far as “blood” is a universal reality, i.e. in so far as blood groups exist everywhere in the same way; hence his theoretical practice constitutes a spontaneous denunciation of racialism. But he is made to study this biological universality in the service of bourgeois society.

In this capacity he represents a certain level of the middle-class bourgeoisie which, although not capital-producing, shares a portion of the increment value through helping bourgeois society to survive. The intellectual-to-be has thus received a universal education, but in the context of a particular society with particular interests and possessing a class ideology – an ideology which is itself particular, which is instilled in him from childhood onwards, and the particularity of which is in contradiction to the universalism of his social activity.

The intellectual, however, remains dependent upon his ideology, in so far as it is the ruling class itself which, controlling the purse strings, decides upon the distribution of jobs and appointments for intellectuals. In other words, the intellectual is a twofold product of bourgeois society: firstly, he is a product of the particular class in power and the particular ideology it holds, which forms him *qua* private individual, and secondly he is a product of the technical universality of a bourgeois society which assigns to the restricted domain of organized science the clear conscience of its *de jure* universalism and thus forms him *qua* universal technician.

You have this curious character, then, a true product of present-day society, who exists in a state of perpetual contradiction between, on the one hand, an ideology instilled in him since childhood and naturally comprising all the characteristic bourgeois concepts – racialism, a certain type of humanism which represents itself as universal but is in fact restrictive – and on the other hand the universality of his profession. If this man compromises, if he turns his

back on reality, if by the exercise of bad faith, by performing a kind of balancing act, he succeeds in keeping at bay the uncertainty arising out of this contradiction, then I do not regard him as an “intellectual”. I regard him simply as a functionary, a practical theoretician of the bourgeois class. Even if he is an author or essayist it makes no difference: he will defend the particular ideology he has been taught.

But as soon as he becomes aware of the contradiction, as soon as his job leads him to challenge, in the name of the universal, the particular within himself and hence everywhere, then he is an intellectual. In other words the intellectual is a man whose peculiar internal contradiction, if he makes that contradiction explicit, causes him to find himself occupying the least favoured positions – that being where universality is generally to be found.

By what theoretical criteria can this intellectual be defined?

The first theoretical criterion they possess comes from their job: it is rationality. For them there is a strict relationship between universality, which is the very product of practical reasoning and dialectics, and the classes which, in a negative sense, uphold the universal. The least privileged classes, as Marx pointed out, can only realize their aims by destroying the very notion of class and creating the social universal. This means that universality is no longer relegated to the apparently irresponsible domain of science, but becomes once more the social and historical universality of mankind. Because it is in fact this practical universality which has

made possible and inevitable scientific development and the technical accumulation of labour – as an affirmation, which the bourgeois class has appropriated to itself, of man’s power over the world.

So the first criterion is that all irrationality be abolished, not from any sentimental point of view, because in fact the only way to abolish the contradiction is to use reason to combat ideology, but from a theoretical point of view which contains within itself the passage to the practical level. In so far as his reason is inherently opposed to racialism, the intellectual is among those who suffer from racialism, and the only way in which he can help them initially is by formulating in and beyond himself a rational critique of racialism.

The second criterion of the intellectual must be radicalism. In the struggle between the particular and irrational and the universal, no compromise is possible – nothing is possible except the *radical* elimination of the particular. The intellectual suggests above all the idea of radical action. And his practical knowledge, because it is practical, can only find its support in social groups which themselves demand radical action.

This means that every time there is a choice to be made in the matter of parties or political groupings, the intellectual is impelled to choose whichever is most radical in order to regain universality.

In actual fact we are all, as intellectuals, what one might call “universal individuals”. That is to say our decisions are still, in spite of everything, tied to a certain number of irrational elements – quite rational, of course, from the point of

view of an analysis of our situation in society, but irrational in so far as they are felt and experienced. Consequently there is an element of irrationality that causes options to be arrived at by the mode of the universal individual. But what is certain is that the task of the intellectual lies in freeing himself from his contradiction (which is ultimately the contradiction of society itself) and for that purpose occupying the most radical position. But radicalism can lead us into certain dangers. One of those dangers is "leftism", i.e. demanding the universal immediately and instantaneously with all the practical, theoretical and, in fact, very often symbolic and imaginary consequences which this kind of "voluntarism" implies. Fortunately in the intellectual's case there are two elements acting as a brake on leftism.

First of all, there is the fact that the intellectual must arrive, and wishes to arrive, at "practice" by way of truth. Truth is what action discovers to be the scope of real possibility. The intellectual's action, in so far as he was originally a theoretician of practical knowledge, can only be defined as the synthetic utilization and determination of possibilities. In the case of an experiment there are certain possibilities. These are not limited to the ways in which the equipment can be arranged in the laboratory; they depend also on the financial resources which the experimenter has at his disposal. A doctor has certain possibilities. These are not only the possibilities of contemporary medical science; there is also for example the fact that a particular operation which would best fit the case cannot be performed because the patient is not in the right place, i.e. he is way out in the country, or lying beside a railway line after a train smash, etc.

In this sense, constant evaluation of the scope of possibility has the effect of restraining the intellectual and preventing his radicalism from turning into leftism. Thus an intellectual will never – unless he has in fact fallen a prey to leftism – say that the revolution in Belgium or France is coming tomorrow and that preparations must be made for an immediate assumption of power.

The politician may say so. A banned French Communist Party member did in fact say a few years ago: “The revolution is at hand; we shall see socialism in our lifetime.” He was not speaking as an intellectual; he was speaking as a “leftist”, for propaganda purposes. The intellectual’s radicalism will be held in check by his having continually to take stock of the scope of possibility.

The second check on radicalism, the radical choice once made, results from a further difference. The first difference lay between the irrational and ideological particular on the one hand and the practical and scientific universal on the other. The second lies in the contrast between discipline and criticism. An intellectual, as soon as he joins a political party, is obliged like anyone else, or to an even greater extent than anyone else, to submit to its discipline. At the same time, however, his peculiar nature, in so far as he judges the particular in terms of the universal, compels him to be critical. Intellectuals in socialist societies face exactly the same problem.

There are thus two checks on the tendency to leftism: concern for truth and respect for discipline. These two checks stem from a double contradiction which must be resolved dialectically; on the one hand, the

contradiction which causes the theoretician of practical knowledge to become an intellectual (that between particular and universal), and, on the other hand, the contradiction between the practical aims of the party and the universal vocation which is what attracted the intellectual to the party (the antithesis of discipline and criticism).

It is as if the same particularity as motivated the intellectual's rational radicalism were reborn within the party – despite the fact that the latter represents itself as the instrument most apt to *realize* that radicalism. But since in this case the particularity of the party is put forward purely *with a view to* the universal and not in contrast to it, as in bourgeois society, the intellectual will agree to place himself under its discipline – while remaining alert to the risks of rightist deviation and the danger of losing sight of long-term objectives.

Now then, intellectuals who have gone over to leftism through universality are still intellectuals – but mistaken intellectuals. They elected to go the whole hog. They opted from the start for a group which appeared to them to represent the universal. They examined neither the real possibilities of that group's situation *nor the implications of loyalty*.

But it may be that now a different group represents the universal. This gives rise to very serious problems, because before switching parties one must first of all find out, in the context of discipline, whether in fact the first party is wrong and whether it would be appropriate to change over to another group.

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