Referring to at least three examples, assess the validity of the idea of the left...

Politics, Communism

Famously, in the last of his Theses on Feuerbach (1845), Marx declared that ‘ The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it’ (1974, p. 123). This was intended as part of a contribution to a contemporary debate within German philosophy — in this case, over the exact character of existing materialism. However, Marx’s challenge could be said to encapsulate the key question at the heart of the discussion about the role of the ‘ philosopher’, or intellectual — what impact do his or her ideas have in the wider world? More plainly, what is the relationship between thought and action? In terms of the communist or socialist left, with which, of course, Marx was most concerned, this question has worked itself out in a number of ways, but perhaps the main focus has been on the issue of the political or social commitment of the intellectual — especially, his or her commitment to a specific ideology and political formation such as the Party.

At times in the history of the Leftist intellectual since the 19th century, this has led to a high degree of tension between those who see a specific ideological commitment as the sine qua non of an intellectual position, and those who argue for a more creative, if not more complex conception of the relationship between intellectuals and the practical political sphere. Thus, for the Left the idea of the intellectual as a figure who stands in some way apart from and above the political fray and offers universally applicable insights into the state of things as they are is problematic. In his book on the intellectual, Legislators and Interpreters (1987), the social theorist Zygmunt Bauman identifies two general conceptions of the intellectual and of intellectual work – modern and postmodern. For the first of these, he writes, the ‘ typically modern strategy of intellectual work is one best characterised

by the metaphor of the “ legislator” role’. This role ‘ consists of making authoritative statements which arbitrate in controversies of opinions and which select those opinions which, having been selected, become correct and binding’ (1987, p. 4). In this conception, the intellectual has, through his or her ‘ superior, objective knowledge’ (1987, p. 5), access to an impartial, universal ‘ Truth’ which enables him or her to make the right decisions on the part of society or humanity as a whole. The modern intellectual of whom Bauman is writing has its origins largely in the rationalist philosophes of 18th century France, who sought to establish modern society on the basis of Reason and rationalist principles. Such a ‘ legislative’ intellectual would seem to be anathema to those on the Left, especially the revolutionary Left, who required the intellectual to be aligned with and committed to their particular cause. However, for Bauman, and for other theorists such as Michel Foucault, whose conception of the ‘ universal’ intellectual as ‘ the master of truth and justice’ (1980, p. 126) shares much in common with Bauman’s, the Leftist intellectual in fact operates in much the same way as the figure he describes. Thus, Lenin in What is to be Done? (1902) wrote of the revolutionary intellectual as one who brings theoretical-consciousness to the masses, or proletariat, from ‘ outside’ (1988, pp. 143-4). Lenin argued that the proletariat was incapable of developing such a consciousness spontaneously, on its own, and needed the vanguard intellectual, standing at the head of the class and organised within the tightly disciplined revolutionary party, to supply its shortfall. Although eventually he became persona non grata, as far as the Soviet state was concerned, and was assassinated by agents of that state, Trotsky also argued with Lenin for the

supremacy of the party. In his speech given to mark the founding of the Fourth International in1938, he signalled the need for complete commitment on the part of revolutionary intellectuals to the party: ‘ Our party demands each of us, totally and completely…For a revolutionary to give himself entirely to the party signifies finding himself’ (1974, p. 86). For Trotsky, the experience of persecution at the hands of Stalin did not lead to his disillusionment with the idea of the revolutionary party as the ‘ lever of history’ (1974, p. 86), the means by which intellectuals such as himself would raise the ‘ revolutionary level’ of the masses (1974, p. 86). It was in this context, and only in this context, that the intellectual of the Left (specifically, the revolutionary left) had validity, because he or she had political agency. However, for many on the Left the victory of Stalin and totalitarianism in the Soviet Union led them to re-think the relationship between the intellectual and the working class, seeking to address the problem of how to produce intellectuals from and develop revolutionary consciousness more widely and authentically in the working class itself. Perhaps the most convincingly elaborated effort to do so was that of Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci is best known for his development of the concept of the ‘ organic intellectual’. Such an intellectual is distinct from the ‘ traditional’ type by dint of the fact that it arises out of the ranks of the working class itself, instead of being of the bourgeoisie, or ruling class. The ‘ traditional intellectuals’, although they thought of themselves as autonomous and ‘ endowed with a character of their own’ (Gramsci, 1971, p. 8), were rather a stratum which legitimised the rule of the bourgeoisie, which had arisen with that class and functioned to serve its ends in the spheres of culture and

ethics. In fact, according to Gramsci, the ‘ traditional intellectual’ had been itself the ‘ organic intellectual’ of the now ruling class when it was expanding and elaborating its hegemony over all other classes. The elaboration of its own ‘ organic intellectuals’, therefore, becomes a key task for the working class in its struggle for hegemony, or cultural and political domination, over all other classes. The process whereby such intellectuals are created was not marginal to the achievement of that domination but constituted the very movement of that process. As the working class ‘ distinguishes’ (1971, p. 334) itself through the production of such intellectuals, it raises its general level of consciousness and culture and is able to produce more, and more accomplished, intellectuals, which will enable it to challenge its competitors across the whole field of culture and society. With the widening and deepening of this process, the working class is able to generate and develop a culture of its own sufficient to the tasks of the revolutionary transformation of society, rather than having to rely upon intellectuals from ‘ outside’ to perform those tasks for it. Such a conception as Gramsci’s would seem to place the intellectual at the very heart of the political and cultural practice of the Left, opening up the possibilities of participation in intellectual action to many members of the working class itself. However, the party was still a centralised and hierarchical structure. Gramsci still had to try and balance the often conflicting demands of party organisation and discipline with the centrifugal forces of popular participation and autonomy. Gramsci borrowed the idea of the Centaur from Machiavelli, which brought together the two sides of ‘ force and consent…the individual moment and the universal moment’ (1971, p. 170), party and mass. It was his conception that the ‘

organic intellectual’ would articulate these two sides, as an intermediate stratum which would ensure the unification of the spontaneous consciousness of the working class, rooted in its experience of oppression and exploitation, and the revolutionary-theoretical consciousness of its ‘ leaders’ in the party. However, Gramsci was to die after his long imprisonment and in the end his project to re-energise the revolutionary party from below was defeated by the bureaucratism of Stalinism, which became more entrenched with the movement towards World War in the 1930s. For Gramsci, the intellectual was not only a valid category but a crucial agent in the victory of socialism over capitalism, although one which still was to be seen within the context of the party. The last of the incarnations of the intellectual of the Left I am going to discuss is one which arose within the context of the post-war period and the rise of what came to be known as the ‘ New Left’. With the coming of the Cold War and the increasing disillusionment with the Soviet Union of many of those on the Left in the West, many of the latter began to look around for alternatives to the ‘ statist’ politics of the Communist Party. This process was hastened by events in Hungary in 1956, where the Soviet Union crushed a rebellion against its client regime, which saw a mass-scale withdrawal by intellectuals and others from the Communist Parties of the West. During this period, immediately after the Second World War, many intellectuals — or those in what might be called the ‘ intellectual professions’ — became deeply suspicious of state-level political organisations and sought to found a New Left which connected with the everyday lives and experiences and struggles of ordinary people on the ground. One may say that this effort had much in common with what

Gramsci hoped to do, as discussed above. However, the intellectual of the New Left was concerned with re-founding politics on the basis of ethical commitment rather than with achieving state power through the elaboration and strengthening of the party as an organisation. One figure who was influential both as a model and as an advocate of this altered conception of the Left intellectual was the British historian E. P. Thompson. Thompson argued for an emphasis upon moral responsibility and ethical commitment in the practice of politics. He was less concerned with seizing state power than enabling ordinary people to resist its worst effects. It is possible here only to touch upon the ideas Thompson developed with regard to the intellectual and his or her commitment to a more ethical politics in the post-war world. Thompson had been a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain as well as being a tutor in workers' and adult education, and each of these experiences could be said to have shaped his particular thinking about the necessary responsibilities of the intellectual. As a former Communist Party member, he believed that such events as those in Hungary demonstrated the bankruptcy of its politics and the failure of the party to connect itself to the wider working class. However, as a tutor Thompson saw education (especially that extramural education that took place outside of the formal context of schools and academies) as a key alternative context to that of the party in which the intellectual could play a vital role in politicising and connecting with ordinary members of the working class. Indeed, when Thompson joined Leeds University as an adult education tutor in 1948, he declared his aim to be ' to create revolutionaries' (Searsby et al, 1993, p. 3). At the same time, Thompson saw his involvement in adult and workers'

education as a two-way process, insofar as it enabled him to tap into a longstanding tradition within that sphere of independent thought and participation from below. At this time, then, Thompson was committed both to the party and to workers' education. However, this dual commitment eventually became impossible. In the wake of the 1956 events a journal he had co-founded, The Reasoner, was suppressed by the Communist Party which Thompson then left. From then on he was fully committed to ' socialist humanism' (see 1957), and with the struggle ' between competing moralities within the working class' (Thompson, 1959, p. 52). A key site for that struggle was education, where the intellectual of the Left could foster the humanist values necessary to enable his or her students to defend themselves against the corruption of state ideologies and politics, and the intellectual him- or herself could learn from the lived experience of the working class. Thompson became one of the most influential figures of the British New Left, and wrote one of the most influential texts of social history ' from below' in 1963, The Making of the English Working Class, as well as becoming a key figure in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. For Thompson, as for other New Left figures such as C. Wright Mills, the radical American sociologist, the Leftist intellectual had the most validity and social significance outside of the party and when relating to the struggles of people at the level of their everyday lives. What mattered for them was not ideology and dogma but moral values and experience. 2078 words

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