

Review Essay:

Unredeemed Marxism: Political Commitment in Bourdieu and MacIntyre

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Pierre Bourdieu, *Political Interventions: Social Science and Political Action*, Verso, 2008.

Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson, *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism, Selected Writings, 1953-1974*, Brill, 2008.

Both Alasdair MacIntyre and Pierre Bourdieu had a fraught relationship to Marxism. Intellectually and politically each was differently indebted to Marxism. As is often the case when the explicit engagement of social thinkers with Marxism recedes, intellectual debts are forgotten or obscured, especially by academic camp followers seeking institutional respectability. Recurring bouts of amnesia and obfuscation invite later epigones to lash intellectually bland and politically insipid projects to the masts of their more radical masters. These two collections restore a focus on the political commitment of two major intellectuals and illuminate the darkened corners of their respective subjects' troubled and often neglected relationship to Marxism.

Bourdieu and MacIntyre became internationally renowned scholars in their own right, MacIntyre as a professional philosopher, Bourdieu as the contemporary synthesiser of classical social theory. MacIntyre is best known for his elaboration of Aristotilean themes in *After Virtue* (1988), a work that helped to propel him to the front rank of academic philosophy. Bourdieu acquired fame for his masterpiece, the sociological study of French ruling class culture *Distinction* (1984). *Distinction* is not only an incisive empirical study of the interrelations of economic and cultural capital but it also represents a stunning aesthetic achievement in its own right, as recognised by the leading Bourdieu scholar Bridget Fowler: 'The book cuts between a Proustian perspective on the parts of the aristocrats of culture and a Proudhonian aesthetic on the part of the skilled working class, in a dizzying exercise of perspectival thought that has the scope of a modernist novelist like Musil'.¹

Bourdieu and MacIntyre were born a year apart, the latter in 1929, the former in 1930. Both were therefore in their mid-twenties by 1956 when the workers' rebellion in Hungary threw the Communist Parties in both France and Britain into turmoil. Both cut their political and intellectual teeth in the context of the Cold War and national liberation struggles. Both saw Stalinism as the pathological ideological expression of the coming to power of technocratic rule. Both made political interventions in anti-colonial struggles; MacIntyre in the early 1970s as the conflict escalated in the north of Ireland, Bourdieu through a lifetime's reflection on France's colonial policy in Algeria.

¹ Bridget Fowler, *Pierre Bourdieu and Cultural Theory: Critical Investigations* (London: Sage, 1997), p. 50.

Propelled by contrasting points of social origin, MacIntyre and Bourdieu pursued divergent political trajectories. Bourdieu, the son of a postman in a mainly peasant rural community in the French Pyrenees, served time in the French Army. He experienced firsthand the embittering effects of French colonial policy in Algeria. Bourdieu's class background, what he called 'habitus', and the Algerian war of liberation deeply structured his political commitments even after he became an internationally famous scholar of note. In contrast, MacIntyre was born in the militant industrial city of Glasgow and was able to combine simultaneously a professional career as an academic philosopher and, remarkably, membership of both the Communist Party and the Church of England. Unlike MacIntyre, Bourdieu never felt the pull of the Communist Party (nor the established church!). While Bourdieu was carrying out fieldwork in the stormy violence of Algeria between 1955 and 1960, MacIntyre left the Communist Party to take up residence within the British New Left. By the end of the decade he had gravitated towards Trotskyism, which he saw as the reincarnation of genuine Bolshevism now usurped by Stalinism. MacIntyre's sojourn within British Trotskyism encompassed a year with the Socialist Labour League before leaving in frustration over the lack of internal democracy and crude anti-New Left sectarianism. In 1960 he joined the more congenial heterodox environment of the International Socialist group, before beginning a process of disengagement from organised Marxism in the mid-1960s.

In *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism*, the editors Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson attempt to salvage MacIntyre's most intensely active phase - between 1953 and 1974 - as a committed Marxist intellectual. The later date might suggest a mistaken sense of longevity since, as the editors show, MacIntyre had already rejected Marx's crisis theory by the mid-1960s. When he subsequently broke organisationally with Marxism a few years later, at the very moment when the most tumultuous wave of working class struggle began to open up internationally, he was merely acting on an already established conviction that the working class was a spent force. Of more lasting value is a number of articles reproduced here illustrating the ethical force of MacIntyre's earlier Marxism. This achievement is condensed by the editors as 'a historically mediated humanist interpretation of the concept of desire', which promises to connect the 'strategic lessons of classical Marxism to the real desires of ordinary people in their struggles both in and against capitalism'.² Lesser pieces cover book reviews and essays on the political and social issues of the day as they were dissected by one of British Marxism's most perspicacious thinkers.

In a political trajectory that contrasts with MacIntyre's, *Political Interventions* amply illustrates the course of Bourdieu's activism, which became even more acute after his academic reputation was firmly secured. In a reverse of the typical biography of the radical intellectual who later becomes disengaged and sceptical, the older Bourdieu got the more radical he appeared. Bourdieu responded vigorously to the social movement that opened up following the

² Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson, editors, *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism, Selected Writings, 1953-1974*, (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008), p. xix.

wave of public sector strikes that engulfed France in December 1995. On the other hand, he seems to have had far less direct engagement in the tumultuous events of May 1968. *Political Interventions*, however, tracks a much lengthier thread of political intervention on the part of Bourdieu from 1961 until his untimely death in 2002. In so doing, Bourdieu demonstrates a greater continuity and consistency of political engagement over the decades than is generally acknowledged. His public intervention ranges across intellectual autonomy, educational reform, colonial society, neoliberalism, sexuality, racism, media, opinion polls, social movements, immigration, terror, unemployment, and the state.

Political Apprenticeships

Algeria shaped profoundly Bourdieu's perspective on the relationship between commitment and scholarship. He was not content to passively document the empirical shifts in Algerian society or confined to 'reading the left-wing press and signing petitions'. Bourdieu felt obliged to take up a definite position at the heart of events – 'whatever the danger that this might involve' - as a witness, a participant, and a photographer.³ Such close physical proximity to 'the revolution within the revolution' provided Bourdieu with a molecular analysis of the social forces transforming Algerian society. In a 1961 article for *Esprit*, he described how these new realities revolutionised Islam as a traditional source of authority and stability:

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Political Interventions: Social Science and Political Action*, (London, New York: Verso, 2008), p. 4.

The revolutionary situation also shatters the old hierarchies associated with the outdated system of values, substituting for these new men whose authority rests more often on quite different foundations than those of birth, wealth, or moral or religious superiority. The old values of honour crumble before the cruelties of war. The ideal self-image and the values associated with it have been put to the most radical test. Like an infernal machine, the war has flattened social realities to the ground; it is pulverizing and scattering traditional communities – village, clan or family.⁴

While it possessed plenty of explosive material, Bourdieu doubted that Algerian society possessed any social group capable of making a thoroughgoing social and political revolution. None of the available social groups - the peasantry, the sub-proletariat, the unemployed, the dispossessed, the petit bourgeoisie, or the relatively privileged urban working class - occupied a strategic position that would allow them to exercise hegemonic leadership over the rest of society. Instead Bourdieu appealed rather vaguely to intermediary groups to act as a bridge to the 'revolutionary rationalization' of the masses.

In this Bourdieu criticised the complicity with the future Algerian ruling class by French intellectuals like Sartre and Fanon. Their romantic activist gestures exposed just how out of touch they were with the objective class dynamics shaping the struggle. As Bourdieu noted forty years later:

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Revolution in the revolution' (1961), *Political Interventions*, p. 11.

Algeria as I saw it – and this was far from the ‘revolutionary’ image given by the activist literature and writings of struggle – was made up of a vast sub-proletarianized peasantry, an immense and ambivalent sub-proletariat, a proletariat that was basically established in France, a petty bourgeoisie that was quite out of touch with the realities of Algerian society, and an intelligentsia whose particular characteristic was a poor knowledge of its own society and a failure to understand anything of its ambiguities and complexities.⁵

Bourdieu objected to the fashion among French Marxists coming under the gravitational pull of Stalinism to transform ‘the Proletariat’ and ‘the Party’ into the metaphysical instruments of ‘History’ and ‘Progress’. Both Sartre and Althusser in their different ways represented for Bourdieu the worst aspects of the ‘universal intellectual’, standing imperiously above society to summarily hand down absolutist verdicts about the human condition or scientific procedures. Such a self-willed divorce from concrete reality made the Sartrean myth of the universal intellectual the antithesis of Bourdieu’s conception of the engaged intellectual.⁶

MacIntyre took a more generous approach to Sartre, but only as a matter of degree. As a social theorist, MacIntyre found Sartre ‘at once brilliant and

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘A retrospective on the Algerian experience’ (1997), *Political Interventions*, p. 23.

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘My feelings about Sartre’ (1993), *Political Interventions*, pp. 25-28.

disastrous'.⁷ Compared to the dreary (British) empiricism of mainstream sociological statistical inferences and limited generalisations, Sartre might appear as exciting and daring, denouncing all and sundry, but especially the bourgeoisie, for their rank 'bad faith'. But for all his existential waffle about history as an active process of concrete transformation, MacIntyre, like Bourdieu, found Sartre wholly ignorant about the elementary facts of social life, preferring instead to romanticise the working class and Stalinism. Such formalism led Sartre to a terroristic conception of revolutionary groups, closer to nineteenth century nihilism and anarchism than to twentieth century Bolshevism. As antidote to Sartre's congenital sociological illiteracy MacIntyre sarcastically advised him to stick to writing plays where fewer prohibitions would be imposed on a fevered imagination.

Like Sartre, MacIntyre is a professional intellectual by training. But his Marxism was more intimately oriented to the organisational demands of praxis at a particular historical conjuncture in British society. In *MacIntyre's Engagement* we find him wading into the philosophical and sociological currents and controversies of the 1950s and 1960s. On one side stands Stalinism, dogmatic, dismissive and mechanical. On the other, the Marxist New Left and its humanistic idealisation of self-sufficient working class culture. In both cases, the empirical working class proves to be a great let down. Eventually, MacIntyre himself succumbs to a loss of faith, first in religion, later in the self-actualising capacity of the modern working class.

⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Sartre as a social critic' (1962), *MacIntyre's Engagement*, p. 201.

In his essay 'Notes from the moral wilderness' (1958-9) MacIntyre quarries the pathos of renegecy in the figure of the ex-Communist turned moral critic of Stalinism. In their time as Stalinists the disillusioned moralist had once identified themselves completely with the objective unfolding of the historical process. No gap was left between the 'ought' of moral principle and the 'is' of history. As they ascend to the vaulted position of the moral critic, on the other hand, there is only the absolute 'ought' of moral principle as a personal imperative with a purely accidental relationship to great historical forces. Arbitrary and subjective, moral criticism eschews any foundation in a general theory of historical dynamics. Purely moral criticism meant merely swimming with the high tide of liberal apologetics so prevalent in Cold War Britain.

Marxism: Christian and Scientific

Although he views Stalinism and moral criticism as opposite sides of a bad coin, MacIntyre reserves his most trenchant critique here, as in other places, for Stalinism. In order to salvage Marxist theory as a self-contained metaphysical system Stalinism was forced to endlessly reschedule the iron laws of history by ad hoc rationalisations and apologia. That socialism could not be introduced by the Red Army imposing itself on a subjugated population was not entirely understood by former Communists and social democrats in the New Left who thought that the British welfare state would bring a measure of socialism from above to a largely indifferent but grateful working class. Instead, MacIntyre argued for an active class morality that both orders our desires and at the same time expresses them. Desire is not understood here

as individualised caprice and impulse but those good ends to which historically societies have collectively aspired. For MacIntyre the promise of the abolition of class society releases human wants and desires, repressed since the Protestant Reformation, back into social life to provide substantive content to moral rules that have become abstract, coercive and socially meaningless. Such a prospect for a common humanity is paradoxically brought on to the horizon by a capitalist society that refuses to realise it. MacIntyre presents a gregarious form of Marxism in a morality that is something to be discovered by collective endeavour and social solidarity rather than something chosen haphazardly by individuals or delivered by the machine-like progress of History.

In his first published account of Marxism, *Marxism: An Interpretation* (1953) MacIntyre emphasised the fallibility of Marxist theory and the temptations of corruption in an organisational piety that ran along similar lines to the trials and tribulations of early Christianity. MacIntyre's is not the standard ideological attack on Marxism as a quasi-religious dogma, accepted only by true believers. Rather the Christian inheritance of Marxism resides in its practical moral commandments and insistence on redemption. Actions are justified in both traditions according to the ends they serve. Both also aspire to make truth claims, leaving them vulnerable to empirical falsification. To simply level the charge of 'metaphysics' at Marxism is therefore wholly inadequate. MacIntyre's Marxism turns on the actuality (or not) of proletarian revolution. Marxist theory can only ever be verified in practice by changing life.

MacIntyre began by trying to be both a Christian and a Marxist but by 1968 had ceased to be either. Instead he advocated an Aristotelian model of the good life composed of small-scale, local communities exercising collective rationality as a mode of self-actualisation. In part this is rooted in his acceptance of the conventional wisdom on the New Left about a morally good 'young Marx' and a morally dubious 'late Marx'. MacIntyre adopted the young Marx as the moral compass for a Christianity in Cold War crisis:

Religious content must be realised in political terms. But this is exactly what the young Marx did in his criticism of religion. Marxism is in essence a complete realisation of Christian eschatology.⁸

While MacIntyre came to embrace Marxism more fully, Christianity continued to frame his understanding of the young Marx as the inversion of Hegel's secularisation of Christian theology. Alienation thus becomes a category that allowed the young Marx to pass over from 'quasi-theological to quasi-sociological explanations'.⁹ It is to the young Marx that even the elderly MacIntyre in the mid-1990s continues to return to inform his conception of the good life:

If we are now to learn how to criticise Marxism, not in order to separate ourselves from its errors and distortions – that phase should be long over – but in order once again to be able to learn from it, then we shall need

⁸ MacIntyre, 'Extracts from *Marxism: An Interpretation*' (1953), *MacIntyre's Engagement*, p. 21.

⁹ MacIntyre, 'Marxists and Christians' (1961), *MacIntyre's Engagement*, p. 185.

once more to re-examine Marx's thought in the 1840s and above all the changes in his conception of the relationship of theory to practice.¹⁰

MacIntyre identifies an unlikely affinity between the 'young Doctor Marx' and *Doctor Zhivago*, the Christian humanist figure in Pasternak's tragic novel about 'the human substance of the Revolution'.¹¹ On the other hand, MacIntyre's humanism leads him to denounce any pessimistic lingering on the negative side of the dialectic.¹² This is understandable in his critique of Marcuse (although he does tend to overstate the case for the prosecution in his little study of Marcuse to such an extent that not much that passes for social theory would survive his stringent test of intellectual rigour - no bad thing perhaps).¹³ MacIntyre is on occasion far too sanguine about affirmative tendencies within the ethical critique of capitalism. His Marxism is future-oriented, pointing to the positive possibilities already inherent to contemporary reality. But, in the end, when these potentialities did not become operative in the ways predicted MacIntyre walked away from Marxism to embrace a radical communitarian vision.

While he also shared MacIntyre's affinity for the early Marx, especially the Feurbach theses, Bourdieu's engagement with Marx also appealed to the so-called 'scientific' late Marx. Individuals are important in Bourdieu's corpus in so far as they are 'personifications' of generic positions or dispositions. In the

¹⁰ MacIntyre, '1953, 1968, 1995: Three perspectives' (1995), *MacIntyre's Engagement*, p. 425.

¹¹ MacIntyre, 'Doctor Marx and Doctor Zhivago' (1959), *MacIntyre's Engagement*, p. 71.

¹² MacIntyre, 'Herbert Marcuse: From Marxism to pessimism' (1967), *MacIntyre's Engagement*.

¹³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marcuse* (Glasgow: Fontana 1970).

case of the cultural underpinnings of class society it is not for the social scientist to engage in ‘the ritual conflict’ of ascribing value judgements to cultural objects, say by voicing a preference for dubstep music rather than opera, but to analyse the objective social structure that awards merit to one thing rather than another. By stressing empirically verifiable social regularities and probabilities, Bourdieu lacked MacIntyre’s optimism of the intellect and has been frequently accused of pessimistic resignation. But while MacIntyre’s ethical optimism led to political pessimism, Bourdieu’s intellectual pessimism supported an active political optimism. As Bourdieu put it: ‘Giving power to imagination can also mean painting the dictionary red’.¹⁴ Many of the articles and interviews collected here function as effective rejoinders to reproaches about Bourdieu’s supposedly excessive analytical pessimism and his wildly positive, voluntaristic support for all forms of movements resisting worldly domination. Sober knowledge of the social world – not an optimistic theory of human nature - is viewed by Bourdieu as the indispensable foundation for critical thought and action.¹⁵

Although Bourdieu relied heavily on Marxist categories of class, ideology, and capital he evinced no programmatic commitment to Marxism. If Bourdieu refused to identify himself as a Marxist this was in a context where Marxism meant whatever the French Communist Party and its fellow travellers said it was. If that was Marxism, then Bourdieu was no Marxist. Stalinist pronouncements on class typically lacked precision, hence the ‘big cannon

¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Giving voice to the voiceless’ (1977), *Political Interventions*, p. 74.

¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Basing criticism on a knowledge of the social world’ (1992) *Political Interventions*.

balls' of class interests were 'always aimed too high' by 'the Marxist heavy artillery'.¹⁶ Bourdieu saw truth as antagonistic rather than monistic, a perpetual struggle between knowledge as objective structure and subjective construction. Bridget Fowler has done more than most to locate Bourdieu within the non-dogmatic tradition of classical Marxism.¹⁷ Rather than lapsing into theoretical eclecticism, Fowler argues that Bourdieu creatively deploys Pascal, Weber, Durkheim, Wittgenstein and Nietzsche in productive encounters with classical Marxist theory. Other critics are much less convinced by Bourdieu's Marxism. Some see him as lacking any systematic sense of capitalism as a social whole. Bourdieu is also found guilty by critics of a highly deterministic view of working class life, as class completely lacking subjective agency in its objective domination by cultural and ideological structures. More routinely, he is coveted as a radical ornamentation for purely scholastic projects.

Political Interventions is a corrective, if it were needed, to any lingering sense that Bourdieu's constructivist *oeuvre* lacked any conception of subjective action leading to social and political change. Unlike MacIntyre's Marxism, Bourdieu's approach to class relations was indebted neo-Kantian sociology as much as Marx. 'Basically, all I have done is to take seriously Durkheim's idea, in a Marxian transposition, that logical classes are social classes'.¹⁸ A logic of theoretical representations organises the world into classes at least as much

¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, 'The naked Emperors of the University' (1984), *Political Interventions*, p. 149.

¹⁷ Fowler, *Pierre Bourdieu and Cultural Theory*.

¹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Intellectuals and social struggle' (1975), *Political Interventions*, p. 67

as structured relations to the means of production. To view class as a thing-like substance, as certain Marxists are prone, is to court reifying in theory what are actively structured social relations. As Bourdieu often paraphrased Marx, this merely confuses 'things of logic' for the 'logic of things'. Theory is mistakenly transformed into a metaphysics of practice.

Classification is therefore a key stake in the struggle between classes. Class is both precondition and consequence of classification, both material condition and subjective consciousness. Consciousness becomes part of the objective conditions of class, which in turn gives rise to antagonistic representations. This much was recognised by Marx's *Theses on Feurbach* but later Marxism, for Bourdieu, failed to sufficiently recognise that its own theory of classes itself made possible a conception of society as class divided. 'The paradox of Marxism is that it has not included in its theory of classes the theoretical effect that the Marxist theory of classes has produced and that has contributed to making it possible for something such as classes to exist today'.¹⁹ Bourdieu did not seek to resolve the tension involved in marrying a Durkheimian notion of representation with a Marxist notion of class relations. He sought to raise it to the level of a creative contradiction.

Well represented in this collection is Bourdieu's abiding concern with the contradictions of educational reform. Educational institutions in France depended on a 'Jacobin ideology' that allowed certain criticisms to be made of the education system so long as its socially conservative function was left

¹⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Revealing the wellsprings of power' (1982), *Political Interventions*, p. 135.

unscathed.²⁰ Social conservatism functions through education to reproduce the existing distribution of class entitlements and rewards. For Bourdieu, education can only become a universal good if the economic and social conditions on which it is premised are themselves universalised. In the fight to actualise universalism against both 'rational absolutism' and 'antiscientific nihilism' political struggle is necessary in what Bourdieu terms the 'realpolitik of reason'.²¹ MacIntyre made a parallel diagnosis of the class function of British education, where formal equality in education functions as a mechanism for perpetuating class inequalities, something perhaps even more true forty years on: 'working class people will gradually learn that they are still to be excluded, and that in streamed comprehensive schools and expanded universities, it will still be the case that all the advantages lie with children of middle class parents'.²² For Bourdieu, the student revolt of 1968 misfired to the extent that the main victims of education's role in the reproduction of class society were more or less systematically excluded from higher educational institutions.

As any genuinely shared vision for education gets lost all that is left is the unbridled competition in the individual scramble for market position. More recent student revolts protest against neoliberal education as a surrogate for cut-throat market competition for high grades, studying the right subject at the

²⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Jacobin ideology' (1966) *Political Interventions*.

²¹ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Mental walls' (1992), *Political Interventions*, p. 222

²² 'The strange death of social democratic England' (1968), pp. 366-7. MacIntyre ended his talk to the BBC audience with this still pertinent reminder: 'if it is said that I have been presenting something akin not so much to a personal view as to a partisan political broadcast, let me point out that I am talking for and of a group that has no party, the British working class'.

right school, and exam mania.²³ At the behest of the Mitterand government in 1984, Bourdieu drew up 'Proposals for the Future of Education' in support of a range of practical measures to advance a genuinely democratic intellect through a much needed reform of the technocratic educational system. Instead, technocracy entrenched itself more deeply, applying ideological fixes such as economism and technological fetishes like computing to remedy economic and social problems. Economism as the ideology of technocracy fails to account in its cost-benefit balance sheet for the magnitude of unredeemed social suffering. Bourdieu expected this situation to break down under the weight of its own contradictions: 'when rats are subjected to a treatment like that inflicted today on teachers and researchers, distributing electric shocks and grains of wheat haphazardly, they go mad'.²⁴ As managerialism and technocracy run rampant in Britain's 'business-facing universities' Bourdieu's analysis remains apposite. Business is more exalted than science, while the bullying boss is presented as a human ideal. Academics are maddened by arbitrary legitimations and the spectacular salaries of those that occupy the top rung of the academic cage. Seemingly 'technical choices' (like 'quality assurance') about institutional practices (or 'governance') or criteria for reputational eminence – 'the interest of disinterest' - are never socially neutral: they repeatedly favour the already well favoured.²⁵

²³ Pierre Bourdieu, 'A refusal to be cannon fodder for the bosses' (1986). *Political Interventions*.

²⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Revealing the wellsprings of power' (1982), *Political Interventions*, p.135.

²⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Some indicators for a policy of democratization' (nd, 1968?) *Political Interventions*.

The Philosopher's Gamble

As MacIntyre began to take his leave from Marxism he claimed that Marx's individual theses had been refuted by empirical changes in the nature of capitalism. These shifts had deepened the internal stratification of the working class into sectional competitors rather than potentially revolutionary collaborators. Echoing Bourdieu's sentiments, MacIntyre would later claim that Marxism was doomed in any case by internal theoretical inconsistencies and errors as result of the lessons of the *Theses on Feurbach* falling into neglect. But if he considered the renewal of Marx's Feurbach Theses so critical this, surely, was as much the responsibility of MacIntyre as anybody else. After all, who educates the educators?

In a review of Lucien Goldman's *The Hidden God*, MacIntyre drew close to accepting some form of decisionism as an inevitable part of the human tragedy.²⁶ In his Romantic anti-capitalist phase, the young Georg Lukacs, coming under the influence of Simmel's attempt to build psychological foundations for historical materialism, advanced a tragic view of cultural decay. Under the commodity system humanity suffers a grievous loss of meaning. Lukacs, argues Goldman, is faced with a prospect analogous to that which confronted Pascal during the crisis of faith in mid-seventeenth century Christian theology: how to resolve a crisis of belief in a world without meaning. For Christians God's other-worldly power is hidden by the phenomenal world. Pascal refused to restore meaning to this world through a rational verification of the existence of God, a mistake made by Descartes' Christian apologetics.

²⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Pascal and Marx: On Lucien Goldman's Hidden God' (1964), *MacIntyre's Engagement*.

Instead, only by gambling that God exists in an eternity without guarantees - the famous Pascalian wager - can meaning be restored to the disenchantment of being forced to live in this world without spirit.

By extension, for Hegel, Marx and Lukacs (and MacIntyre) being in the world already imposes decisions on us, in this case the wager of making history rather than believing in God. For the Lukacs of *History and Class Consciousness*, the Marxist wager on the proletariat would still hold true even if it was empirically disproved in an unshakeable belief or 'scientific conviction' in the dialectical method. MacIntyre diagnosed with rare panache in his essay 'Breaking the chains of reason' (1960) the moral and rational force of the wager against the intellectual's suspicion of commitment. Here the wager is represented on one side by Keynes, 'the intellectual guardian of the established order', and, on the other side, Trotsky, the hunted defender of rational, proletarian self-activity. Trotsky embodies the full implications of the tragic majesty in the Pascalian wager.

I think of them at the end, Keynes with his peerage, Trotsky with an icepick in his skull. These are the twin lives between which intellectual choice in our society lies.²⁷

For MacIntyre the exiled Trotsky was no futile patron saint, still less Isaac Deutscher's 'prophet outcast', but the kindred spirit of Marx, the activist-intellectual holed up in the British Museum.²⁸

²⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Breaking the chains of reason' (1960), *MacIntyre's Engagement*, p. 166.

Negative examples of the wager for MacIntyre are the cases of the radical sociologist C. Wright Mills and anti-imperialist fighter Che Guevara. Mills was an inveterate critic of the 'men of power' in the US ruling elite (note, not the ruling class). As such, he wagered on the need for a new, more enlightened elite, but an elite nonetheless. Mills wanted to replace the dominant legitimations of the old elite with the legitimate domination by a new elite, a top-down managerialism by 'the right people' carrying through the right decisions.²⁹ For MacIntyre Mills failed to take seriously enough working class self-activity as constitutive of social reality. In its place Mills was seduced by the idealised self-image of the US as a virile democracy composed of small scale, face-to-face publics, a model that bears striking similarities to the radical communitarianism adopted by the later MacIntyre. In yet another negative example of the wager Che Guevara continually appealed to heroic but abstract moralism in the spirit of sacrifice necessary for the struggle against imperialism.³⁰ MacIntyre mobilises Marx's famous judgement on the pathos of politically backing entirely the wrong horse based on a redundant form book: 'Don Quixote long ago paid the penalty for wrongly imagining that knight errantry was compatible with all economic forms of society'. Both Mills and Guevara, heroes of the New Left, made their wager with outmoded forms of moral conduct and failed social analyses. These were no Pascalian wagers but Quixotic refusals to confront the hidden potential of the reality concealed by modern capitalism: working class self-activity.

²⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Trotsky in exile' (1963), *MacIntyre's Engagement*.

²⁹ MacIntyre, 'C. Wright Mills' (1962), *MacIntyre's Engagement*.

³⁰ MacIntyre, 'Marxism of the will' (1969), *MacIntyre's Engagement*.

What sort of wager does MacIntyre derive from Pascal, Hegel, Marx and Lukacs? For the editors, the tragic human condition imposes some form of decisionism as inevitable:

One way or another we all make the wager, and those who do not bet on the proletariat are compelled to retreat back to the tragic vision: if we reject Marx, then we are doomed, therefore, to fall back into one form or another of the incommensurable ethical perspectives dominant within bourgeois society.³¹

MacIntyre, they continue, simply changed his bet. With no foundational theory of human nature to ground his wager on Marxism, the editors argue, revolutionary commitment became for MacIntyre yet another more or less arbitrary decision to be taken. Conversely, rather than the notion of the wager providing an alternative to the tragic vision the exact reverse is the case: in the gamble of the Pascalian wager tragedy finds its re-enchanted expression. Modern fideism however operates in severely exposed shallows. Compared to seventeenth century Christians who gambled everything on the existence of God, MacIntyre seems to have made a thoroughly modern wager, one that does not demand so much of a commitment that it could not be changed in short order if conditions subsequently take an unfavourable turn (and in the 1960s 'conditions' appeared far from unfavourable!). MacIntyre's decisionism seems in retrospect to be more a matter of the pragmatism that he lambasts

³¹ Blackledge and Davidson, 'Introduction', *MacIntyre's Engagement*, p. xxxvii.

in others than the unyielding burden that characterises the Pascalian wager of Marx or Trotsky.

Across the writings collected here MacIntyre oscillates between a wager on the proletariat and a wager on the dialectical method. MacIntyre changed his bet not out of a personal temperament that favoured caprice but one committed to a faith in reason confined by definite historical conditions. Far from lacking a theory of human nature, MacIntyre in fact subscribed to one all along, young Marx's notion of praxis as sensuous-practical consciousness. His version of historical materialism avoided contact with foundational humanism, really naturalism, which for MacIntyre must fall back into an infinite regress. Naturalism can never therefore perform its allotted function as the juridical court of final appeal. Throughout many of the pieces collected here MacIntyre attempts to hold these wagers on class and method together in the revolutionary praxis of open-ended forms of action - now precondition, now consequence – that Marx outlined in the Theses on Feurbach.³² It may be that the gap between the ethical appeal of the early Marx and the empirical reality of a politically stunted working class proved too great for MacIntyre: he preferred to twist rather than stick with the hand that history dealt.

Autonomous Sociology

Bourdieu roundly rejected fideism as way to ground political commitment. His residual republicanism would have sociology trump once and for all Christian

³² MacIntyre, 'Marx' (1964), *MacIntyre's Engagement*.

humanism and, by extension, MacIntyre's Christo-Marxism: 'Social science is happy to destroy the pretences and prevarications forged by a religious vision of humanity, of which the revealed religions have no monopoly'.³³ This depends not so much on being forced to take a gamble by the void of meaning in a disenchanted world than on the rational casuistic of general theory attentive to specific cases. It is therefore necessary, Bourdieu argues, to make 'a strong distinction between a critique that is 'decisionist', arbitrary, and the kind of critique implicit in the very logic of research because it is the condition for the construction of its object, because research forces the accepted self-evidence to be turned upside down'.³⁴ This is Pascalian in a sense different from MacIntyre's wager in that Bourdieu takes up a concrete standpoint in defence of the autonomous intellectual field as an absolute precondition for public intervention.³⁵

It is less a matter of self-conscious, rational deliberation than it is of being thrown into the game of chance as the hidden effect of the concrete positioning in social life. For Pascal, it is absurd to see the wager as a heroic self-conscious decision to act. Pascalian intellectuals are likened to the 'thinking reed', physically wretched and puny but also capable of greatness through reason and consciousness. Commitment does not follow logically in a straight line from scholarly analysis, as many intellectuals like to flatter themselves; indeed the reverse may be just as true. Meaning cannot be

³³ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Declaration of Intent, *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 1 January 1975', *Political Interventions*, p. 91.

³⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Intellectuals and social struggle' (1975), *Political Interventions*, p. 69.

³⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, Cambridge : Polity Press, 2000.

created out of nothing but moral fortitude, as scholastic dogma contends. It depends on sensuous practice in a world which has already ensnared us in the game of chance. From the deed the belief follows. In the fight for the 'realpolitik of reason', committed intellectuals are both inside and outside, neither retreating to the scholastic solitude of the ivory tower nor collapsing themselves into worldly instrumentalism.

Public commitment premised on the autonomy of an intellectual field protects against withdrawal into scholastic obscurantism. Bourdieu's model of intellectual transcendence is Zola's 'J'accuse' intervention in the Dreyfus affair, part of an image of the public intellectual in opposition to scholastic obscurantism in France going back to Voltaire's 'man of letters'. Intellectual autonomy must be defended from the conformist encroachments of technocratic expertise bought by the patronage of the neoliberal state. Intellectual autonomy makes possible irreverence towards all forms of power, embodied for Bourdieu in Michel Foucault's rejection of 'the division between intellectual investment and political commitment'. Foucault became a self-styled 'specific intellectual' against the Sartrean myth of the 'universal intellectual' who had already rigged the odds of the bet in their favour, a mystification all too familiar on the left.³⁶ Against this false polarity, Bourdieu came to advocate an internationalist collective intellectual released from the reactionary limits of national one-sidedness that became so threatening to critical thought following the collapse of the Stalinist regimes. Autonomous intellectuals who intervene publicly rest their authority to speak from their

³⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, 'On Michel Foucault' (1984), *Political Interventions*, p. 138.

specific expertise. This, Bourdieu believed, allows the maximum scope for critical independence and freedom from powerful interests: 'the only possible basis for a power that is specifically intellectual and intellectually legitimate, lies in the most complete autonomy in relation to all existing powers'.³⁷

Autonomy and objectivity are of the first order for legitimising Bourdieu's political interventions, which some British social scientists view with embarrassment as the typical gesture of the French intellectual. Closer to Gramsci's conception of the traditional intellectual (in the process dispensing with the 'myth' of the organic intellectual) such autonomy allowed Bourdieu (and Foucault) to marshal the support of French trade unionists for Solidarnosc in Poland in 1981 against the complicity of the French CP. In this context international solidarity was deemed essential to break with the national tailism of the hack Party intellectual who attempted to dignify every disgrace perpetrated by Stalinism.³⁸

As Bourdieu reminds us in the articles, interview and speeches collected here, this has to be constantly fought for against the anti-intellectualism of external institutions like the church, state, corporations or mass media.³⁹ He was fond of quoting Spinoza to the effect that 'there is no intrinsic force in the truth'. Intellectuals have to compete in a game 'dominated by the media-political

³⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Intellectuals and established powers' (1985), *Political Interventions*, p. 132.

³⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Rediscovering the left's libertarian tradition' (1981), *Political Interventions*.

³⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, 'For an international of intellectuals' (1992), *Political Interventions*.

logic of cultural fast food and the bestseller'.⁴⁰ Such is the domination of the public sphere by hack, glib and cliché-ridden journalism that Bourdieu despaired of the lack of status for a 'competent discourse on social affairs'.⁴¹

[The media-intellectual] complex is a real Trojan horse, seeking to introduce into intellectual life and public space the logic of show business, a cynical quest for visibility at any price and a traffic in symbolic capital.⁴²

Too often the powerful who are short on thoughts call on thinkers who are short of power. Intellectual autonomy is further frustrated by an institutional consecration of arbitrary and facile criteria of academic achievement that too often distracts scholars from the necessary 'patient work and long obscurity that major work presupposes'.⁴³ Because there can be 'no compromise in matters of truth', Bourdieu's is the self-interested defence without illusions of the autonomy of a privileged social world of intellectual production.⁴⁴

For exposing the Jacobin ideology in education Bourdieu was viciously attacked by the French Community Party. Their denunciation of Bourdieu was a reaction to the trauma felt by many Stalinist intellectuals who believed deeply in the 'merit' conferred by their own personal educational success

⁴⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Basing criticism on a knowledge of the social world' (1992), *Political Interventions*, p. 191.

⁴¹ Pierre Bourdieu, 'The naked emperors of the university' (1984), *Political Interventions*, p. 152.

⁴² Pierre Bourdieu, 'The object of a writer's parliament' (1994), *Political Interventions*, p. 240.

⁴³ Pierre Bourdieu, 'The naked emperors of the university' (1984), *Political Interventions*, p. 148.

⁴⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, 'History rises in the east' (1989), *Political Interventions* p. 219.

stories.⁴⁵ Dubbed by Bourdieu 'the miraculously saved', Stalinist educationalists were overtaken by a rebellion of students that they had already diagnosed as failures of bourgeois origin. Neither did they take well to Bourdieu's books *The Inheritors* (1964) and *Reproduction in Education* (1970). These studies exposed the underlying social, that is to say class determinants of educational 'merit', a critique that was supposed to be the exclusive property of Communist intellectuals. Hence Bourdieu's analysis had to be neutralised by Christians and Communists alike to conceal their undeclared stake in the game to keep the Jacobin ideology going.⁴⁶ Stalinist intellectuals and politicians, Bourdieu contended, depend for their existence on the political resignation of the working class all the while falsely imputing to them a class majesty and moral nobility. Behind all the comical pomposity of the General Secretary, Bourdieu detected the dominant legitimations being played out in the most absurdly grandiose ways as a technique to reinforce working class passivity and subordination.

But it was no joke when, in the mid-1990s, alongside Jacques Derrida and others, Bourdieu protested against vindictive state restrictions on the entry to France of Algerians escaping violence and repression.⁴⁷ In these final six years of his life Bourdieu was more active than ever in supporting the social struggles that exploded in 1995. With the Communist Party sidelined, centre stage was taken by striking transport workers against pension reform and the

⁴⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, 'A look back at the reception of *The Inheritors* and *Reproduction in Education*' (1989), *Political Interventions*.

⁴⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' (1980), *Political Interventions*.

⁴⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Failing to assist an endangered person' (1994); 'M. Pasqua, his advisor and foreigners' (1995); 'No ghettoizing of Algeria' (1995), *Political Interventions*.

mass movement against social security reform in ‘the Juppe plan’. Now neoliberalism entered the frame as the greatest danger to public services, intellectual autonomy and a modicum of non-commodified existence. Bourdieu saw the situation as particularly urgent, a desperate holding operation against market domination.⁴⁸ A full quarter of the book is devoted to these few years as one movement - students, the unemployed, homosexuals, anti-racism - gave rise to another. Bourdieu hoped that a European social movement would emerge to defend and extend the idea of Social Europe.

Snapshots of commitment

Apart from a generational coincidence, a number of parallels between Bourdieu and MacIntyre suggest themselves. Unexpected correspondences occur whenever MacIntyre analyses the molecular structure of British society, often to striking effect, or where Bourdieu undertakes philosophical investigations to enliven and ground empirical studies. However, MacIntyre’s political journalism relies on optimistic sketches of class society that naturally compares unfavourably to Bourdieu’s more rigorous sociological studies, such as his profoundly negative sociological testimony to neoliberal inhumanity, *The Weight of the World* (1993). This professional grounding deeply informs Bourdieu’s more political writings, just as MacIntyre’s is informed by a more general philosophical conception. Bourdieu’s philosophical ruminations prove more substantial and lasting than MacIntyre’s sociology.

⁴⁸ See also Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance: Against the New Myths of Our Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998); *Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market 2* (London, New York: Verso, 2003).

The New Left figure appeared to MacIntyre as a kind of ‘photographic negative of Stalinism’. But just as talk about photographic negatives is redundant in the age of digital technology, many of the personalities and events discussed by MacIntyre in the 1950s and 1960s have an antique feel about them, magnified since the Stalinist universe is no longer ours and being placed alongside his more lasting contributions to Marxist ethics. In the case of Bourdieu, *Political Interventions* is constructed like a photomontage composed of snapshots of resistance. A shifting sense is given of forty years of intellectual and political commitment on many fronts. Its overall effect is that under actually-existing crisis of neoliberal society the history of ‘the realpolitik of reason’ has yet to be written. As Stalinism entered decline Bourdieu’s agnostic Marxism became bolder. He took aim at neoliberal capitalism rather than the rather amorphous notion of technocracy that so concerned many French social theorists. If *MacIntyre’s Engagement* is a solemn, chronological tribute to the former Marxist, *Political Interventions* represents a modernist construction of finite fragments of Bourdieu, the non-Marxist Marxist.

Both of these collections are important contributions to reflexive praxis today. They demand political engagement from the intellectual as a ‘thinking reed’ confronted by a vast accumulation and destruction of social potentiality. Between them an effort is made to round out and deepen the classical Marxist inheritance. In neither case is success seen as a purely a theoretical matter. MacIntyre’s Marxist ethics and Bourdieu’s realpolitik of reason are unredeemed deposits left lying on the counter for historical materialism to

assimilate as part of the renewal of effective social and political transformation.