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# THE HEARTLESS LOVERS OF HUMANKIND

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In the past 200 years the influence of intellectuals has grown steadily. It has always been there, of course, for in their earlier incarnations as priests, scribes and soothsayers, intellectuals have laid claim to guide society from the very beginning. From the time of Voltaire [1694-1778] and Rousseau [1712-78], the secular intellectual has filled the position left by the decline of the cleric, and is proving more arrogant, permanent and above all more dangerous than his clerical version.

It was Percy Bysshe Shelley who, in his 1821 tract "In Defense of Poetry," first articulated what I might term the Divine Right of Intellectuals. "Poets," he wrote, "are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." This claim is now taken for granted by the large if amorphous body that sees itself as "the intellectuals" or "the intelligentsia." The practical influence of intellectuals has expanded enormously since then. As Lionel Trilling [1905-75] put it, "Intellect has associated itself with power as perhaps never before in history, and is now conceded to be itself a kind of power."

I believe the reflective portion of mankind is divided into two groups: those who are interested in people and care about them; and those

who are interested in ideas. The first group forms the pragmatists and tends to make the best statesmen. The second is the intellectuals; and if their attachment to ideas is passionate, and not only passionate but programmatic, they are almost certain to abuse whatever power they acquire. For, instead of allowing their ideas of government to emerge from people, shaped by observation of how people actually behave and what they really desire, intellectuals reverse the process, deducing their ideas first from principle and then seeking to impose them on living men and women.

Almost all intellectuals profess to love humanity and to be working for its improvement and happiness. But it is the idea of humanity they love, rather than the actual individuals who compose it. They love humanity-in-general, rather than men-and-women-in-particular. Loving humanity as an idea, they can then produce solutions as ideas. Therein lies the danger, for when people conflict with the solution-as-idea, they are first ignored or dismissed as unrepresentative; and then, when they continue to obstruct the idea, they are treated with growing hostility and categorized as enemies of humanity-in-general. Thus the way is opened for what W.H. Auden [1907-1973], a typical hard-nosed intellectual of his day, approvingly called "the necessary murder." "The liquidation of class enemies," to use the Leninist expression, and "the Final Solution" as the Nazis put it, are both the terminal point of intellectual process.

Insensitivity to the needs and views of other people is, indeed, a characteristic of those passionately concerned with ideas. For their primary focus of attention is, naturally, with the evolution of those ideas in their own heads; they become, in the full sense, egocentric.

The intellectual's indifference or hostility is not directed merely towards those who do not fit into his schemes for humanity-in-general but also those in his own circle who, for one reason or another, refuse to play their allotted roles in his own life.

## THE SKILLFUL EXPLOITER

The more I study the lives of leading intellectuals, the more I perceive the ravages of a common, debilitating scourge, which I call the heartlessness of ideas. The rise of the new secular intellectual has produced some notable specimens.

Shelley [1792-1822] was the prototype, so far as Anglo-Saxon countries are concerned, of the modern, Western progressive intellectual. He coined the notion of the right of intellectuals to influence public events. The poet, and by extension the intellectual class as a whole, was the true legislator because he had a purity, in his devotion to ideas, not open to men of the world, the common clay: He was disinterested. But Shelley exhibited, in his own life, what can be seen as a characteristic failing of progressive intellectuals: the inability to match his general benevolence to his particular behavior. His treatment of virtually every human being over whom he was able to exercise some emotional or physical power was, by the standards of the common clay he despised, atrocious.

Any moth that came near his fierce flame was singed. His first wife, Harriet, and his mistress, Fay Godwin, both committed suicide when he deserted them. In his letters he denounced their actions

roundly for causing him distress and inconvenience. It looks as though he was about to desert his second wife, Mary (the author of "Frankenstein"), when his death by drowning ended his power to hurt. His children by Harriet were made wards of the court. He erased them completely from his mind, and they never received a single word from their father. Another child, a bastard, died in a Naples foundling hospital where he had abandoned her.

Shelley was particularly skillful at exploiting women and servants. He wrecked the life of a schoolmistress, Elizabeth Hitchener, by seducing her both to his bed and his political schemes, got her in trouble with the police, borrowed 100 pounds from her savings (which was never repaid) and then abandoned her, denouncing her narrow vision and selfishness. He left a trail of other victims, mostly humble landladies and tradesmen. He always had servants, but few were ever paid.

Shelley's depredations never shook his superb confidence in what he called "my tried and unalterable integrity." Criticism, however well documented, left him cold: "I speedily regained the indifference," he wrote, "which the opinion of anything or anybody but our consciousness merits." Explaining to a friend why he was deserting his wife and running off with another woman, he wrote: "I am deeply persuaded that, thus enabled, [I shall] become a more constant friend, a more useful lover of mankind, a more ardent asserter of truth and virtue."

Karl Marx [1818-1883] was another example of a man who became convinced that it was his duty to put ideas before people. Hence his relentless and often unthinking cruelty to those around him became

a kind of distant adumbration of the mass cruelty his ideas would promote when they finally became the blueprint of Soviet state policy. His father, who was afraid of him, detected the fatal flaw: "In your heart," he wrote his son, "egoism is predominant." Marx was particularly odious to his mother, who rebuked him for his financial improvidence and ceaseless attempts to dun for cash. What a pity it was, she remarked, that he did not try to acquire capital instead of writing about it.

There was an enormous gap between Marx's egalitarian ideas and the way in which he actually behaved. In one way or another he inherited considerable sums of money. He never had less than two servants. He had a horror of what he called "a purely proletarian set-up." He made his wife send out visiting cards in which she was described as "nee Baronesse Westphalen." He would not let his three daughters train for any profession or learn anything except to play the piano. He kept up appearances by pawning the silver and even his wife's dresses. He seduced his wife's servant, begot a son by her, the forced Friedrich Engels to assume paternity. Marx's daughter Eleanor once let out a cri de coeur in a letter: "Is it not wonderful, when you come to look things squarely in the face, how rarely we seem to practice all the fine things we preach -- to others?" She later committed suicide.

Marx's whole life was an exercise in emotional or financial exploitation -- of his wife, of his daughters, of his friends. Studying Marx's life leads one to think that the roots of human unhappiness, and especially the misery caused by exploitation, do not lie in the exploitation by categories or classes -- but in one-to-one exploitation by selfish individuals.

Nor is this indifference to others a mere human failing in a great public man. It is central to Marx's work. He was not actually interested in real human beings, how they felt or what they wanted. He never met a member of the proletariat, except across the platform at a public meeting. He never made a visit to an actual factory, rejecting Engel's offers to arrange one. He never sought to meet or interrogate a capitalist, with the solitary exception of an uncle in Holland. From first to last, his source of information was books, especially government bluebooks.

## **A GOOD MAN, BUT...**

It is no accident, I think, that Lenin [1870-1924] never set foot in a factory until he became the Soviet dictator, and never, so far as we know, had any real contact with the workers whose lives he claimed the right to transform. He, too, was a library-socialist. Nor did Stalin ever seek out the working man or the peasant to discover what he actually wanted; he was also a great devourer of statistical columns. What masses of facts these monsters ingested before they went on to devour human flesh! One might say that the road to the gulag is paved with unwritten Ph.D. theses.

Many, of course, have lamented the way that Marxism reflects its founder's indifference to people as emotional, living human beings. If only, it is said, Marx had been able to read Sigmund Freud! But if we examine Freud's life, we find the same dichotomy: and unbridgeable gap between theory and practice, between ideas and people. Now Freud [1856-1939], unlike Shelley and Marx, was in many ways a good man -- even a heroic one.

But this, too, was another case of a man who never allowed his ideas to penetrate his private relationships or improve his dealings with people. Unlike Marx, he did not look into bluebooks; he looked into his own mind, and there found infinite reasons for righteousness. Freud was the dominant, patriarchal male all his life. His wife was little more than his servant, even spreading the toothpaste on his toothbrush, like an old-fashioned valet. He never discussed his work or theories with her, and never encouraged her to apply his work in raising their children. Nor did he himself. He sent his sons to the family doctor to learn the facts of life. His large household revolved entirely around his own needs and habits. When a visitor raised a Freudian issue, Freud's wife replied pointedly: "We don't discuss anything like that here."

There was a strain of exploitation, both in his family life and still more in his treatment of his followers. Men like Adler [1870-1937] and Jung [1875-1961] were accused of "treachery" and renounced as "heretics." Worse, he wrote of their "moral insanity." He could not believe that anyone who had once come under his influence and then had broken away could be wholly sane. He thought that heresiarchs like Jung were actually in need of psychiatric treatment.

Modern, progressive intellectuals are similarly frustrated by those who do not share their ideas. I have been reading a book by Robert L. Heilbroner called "The Nature and Logic of Capitalism." There is no evidence that the author, any more than Marx, really knows anything about capitalists or what motivates them. Mr. Heilbroner simply assumes that capitalism is primarily about the exercise of power over people. This seems to me complete nonsense. I incline to the contrary belief of Dr. Samuel Johnson [1709-84] when he

observed, "Sir, a man is seldom so innocently employed as when he is getting money." Johnson's opinion was shared by John Maynard Keynes [1883-1946]. "It is better," he wrote, "that a man should tyrannize over his bank account than over other human beings."

Both Johnson and Keynes were among the many intellectuals who did not succumb to the desire to push others around, a desire that can also affect intellectuals on what most would call the right. For example, Ayn Rand [1905-82], the novelist-philosopher who championed the dignity of man and the individual's right to be free of control by others, humiliated and dominated many who came to know her privately.

But there are good reasons why most intellectuals share common ground with socialists. Keynes gets to the heart of the matter, for avarice is far less dangerous than the will to power, especially power over people. It is not the formulation of ideas, however misguided, but the desire to impose them on others that is the deadly sin of the intellectual. That is why they so incline by temperament to the left. For capitalism merely occurs, if no one does anything to stop it. It is socialism that has to be constructed, and as a rule, forcibly imposed, thus providing a far bigger role for intellectuals in its genesis.

The progressive intellectual habitually entertains Walter Mitty visions of exercising power. Freud, for instance, often described himself as a would-be conquistador (it was the word he used), wielding the pen rather than the sword and changing history through armies of followers rather than soldiers. Precisely, perhaps,

because they lead sedentary lives, intellectuals have a curious passion for violence, at any rate in the abstract. A few, of course, actually embrace it in practice. More characteristically, though, intellectuals, with much uneasy diffidence and many weasel words, support and justify violence in order that ideas with which they agree be imposed on unconforming humanity.

## **APPLAUSE FROM THE ARMCHAIRS**

In the 20th century, building upon 19th century foundations, the appetite for violence in the pursuit and realization of ideas has become the original sin of the intellectual. Consider, for instance, the repeated expression of admiration by intellectuals for ruthless men of action, and their long succession of violent heroes: Stalin, Mao Tse-tung, Castro, Ho Chi Minh.

Intellectuals occasionally demur at the quantity of the slaughter, the sheer number of the "necessary murders"; they nearly always have accepted the principle that socialist utopias must, if necessary, be erected on violent foundations. I well remember my old editor, Kingsley Martin, writing in the *New Statesman*, by way of a gentle rebuke to Mao Tse-tung, who had just massacred three million people, "Was it really necessary for the Chairman to kill so many?" This provoked a letter from his old liberal friend Leonard Woolf. Would Mr. Martin kindly inform the readers, he asked, "the maximum number of deaths he would have deemed appropriate?"

While the armchair men of violence in the West applauded and condoned, intellectuals elsewhere participated and often directed

the great slaughters of modern times. Many helped create the Cheka, the progenitor of the present KGB. Intellectuals were prominent at all stages in the events leading up to the Nazi holocaust. The events in Cambodia in the 1970s, in which between one-fifth and one-third of the nation was starved to death or murdered, were entirely the work of a group of intellectuals, who were for the most part pupils and admirers of Jean-Paul Sartre [1905-80] -- "Sartre's Children," as I call them.

Wherever men and regimes seek to impose ideas on people, wherever the inhuman process of social engineering is set in motion -- shoveling flesh and blood around as though it were soil or concrete -- there you will find intellectuals in plenty. Pushing people around is the characteristic activity of all forms of socialism, whether Soviet socialism, or German National Socialism, or, for instance, the peculiar form of ethnic socialism, known as apartheid, we find in South Africa; that sinister set of ideas, it is worth noting, was wholly the invention of intellectuals cobbled together in the social-psychology department of Stellenbosch University. Other African totalitarian ideologies are likewise the work of local intellectuals, usually sociologists.

So one of the lessons of our century is: Beware the intellectuals. Not merely should they be kept well away from the levers of power, they also should be objects of peculiar suspicion when they seek to offer collective advice. Beware committees, conferences, leagues of intellectuals! For intellectuals, far from being highly individualistic and nonconformist people, are in fact ultra-conformist within the circles formed by those whose approval they seek and value. This is what makes them, en masse, so dangerous, because it enables

them to create cultural climates, which themselves often generate irrational, violent and tragic courses of action. Remember at all times, that people must always come before ideas and not the other way around.