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VIRTUE *and* POLITICS

ALASDAIR MACINTYRE'S  
REVOLUTIONARY ARISTOTELIANISM

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# Introduction

## *Towards a Virtuous Politics*

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Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* ended with a seemingly insoluble dilemma: although he believed that we must stand up against the new 'dark ages' that have engulfed us, his analysis of modernity pointed to the *near* impossibility of so doing (MacIntyre 1985a, 263). Such was the overwhelming pessimism of this argument, coupled with his powerful critique of liberalism, that the mature thought of this ex-revolutionary socialist has often been misconceived as a conservative or communitarian response to liberal modernity (e.g., Mulhall & Swift 1996, ch. 2; Kymlicka 2002, 209). Accusations of conservatism have typically been underpinned by clumsy inferences from his Thomism or by a superficial reading of his relationship to the hermeneutic tradition. Claims that because he borrowed aspects of his conception of tradition from Gadamer, MacIntyre embraced the cultural and political conservatism that followed from Gadamer's Heideggerian standpoint, are doubly wrong. Whereas Gadamer imagined the concept of tradition in the singular, MacIntyre conceives traditions as plural and conflicting. Moreover, MacIntyre insists not only that virtue is predicated upon the existence of social practices

through which people are able to make sense of their lives within particular traditions, but also that capitalist and state institutions undermine these practices, thus preventing us from actualising our potential as social and rational animals. His critique of capitalism is as strong today as it was in his Marxist youth, and it continues to be informed by Marx's insights into the conflict inherent within the capitalist mode of production. For this reason, MacIntyre's turn to Aristotle since his break with the Marxist left in the 1960s is best understood not as conservative rejection of modernity but as an attempt to deepen insights inherited from Marx's critique of capitalism. This reinterpretation of MacIntyre's thought, and the re-characterisation of his mature thought as a form of 'revolutionary Aristotelianism', focusing upon practices as 'the schools of virtues', is now over a decade old (Knight 1996; 2007; MacIntyre 1998g, 235), and this book is intended as a collective culmination of that corrective process.

Nevertheless, there is a problem associated with the use of the word 'revolutionary' to describe MacIntyre's mature thought. In a comment on MacIntyre's claim that the energy he once invested in overthrowing the capitalist system was 'misdirected and wrongheaded', and that 'what we have to do is withdraw from it and not get involved in its disasters' (MacIntyre 1994c, 42), Paul Blackledge suggests that 'it is idiosyncratic to say the least to label as a revolutionary someone who dismisses any attempt to overthrow the existing order' (Blackledge 2009, 869). Indeed, MacIntyre has written that 'not only have I never offered remedies for the condition of liberal modernity, it has been part of my case that there are no remedies. The problem is not to reform the dominant order, but to find ways for local communities to survive by sustaining a life of the common good against the disintegrating forces of the nation-state and the market' (MacIntyre 1998g, 235; 1995b, 35). Although claims such as this have led many on the left to dismiss MacIntyre as an extreme pessimist, it is also the case that they point towards a model of virtuous anti-capitalist and anti-statist politics that has something in common with the young Marx's comments on the virtues of working-class socialism (see Blackledge's essay in this volume, and Marx 1975a, 365).

Against the backdrop of the tension between MacIntyre's revolutionary opposition to capitalism and his political pessimism, this col-

lection of essays aims to open a dialogue about the possibility of developing a virtuous political practice in the modern world; that is, of exploring the possibilities of struggling for, to abuse a phrase of Adorno's, the possibilities of leading a good life in and against a bad world.

The obstacles confronting any project of developing a virtuous politics in the modern world are obvious enough. Writing in 1995, MacIntyre commented that whereas Aristotle had understood *pleonexia*, the drive to have more and more, as the vice that was the counterpart of the virtue of justice, in bourgeois society it is portrayed as a virtue. MacIntyre comments that it is this inversion of virtue and vice that 'provides systematic incentives to develop a type of character that has a propensity to injustice' (MacIntyre 1995d, ix–xiv; 1985a, 137; 2006i, 39). MacIntyre has extended this critique of capitalism in a number of other places. For instance, in 'Some Enlightenment Projects Reconsidered', he argues that the 'free market economy' should be numbered among those modern institutions that are corrosive of the virtues, and that, like modern states, free markets act to frustrate the formation of a community of autonomous individuals who might otherwise be able to deliberate collectively on the good life (MacIntyre 2006m, 173). Similarly, in 'Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good', he suggests that the phrase 'free market' is a misnomer because in the modern world markets tend to be 'ruthlessly impose[d]', and once imposed they 'forcibly deprive many workers of productive work', condemning them to 'irredeemable economic deprivation' (MacIntyre 1998g, 249). Again, in 'Toleration and the Goods of Conflict', he claims that 'the values of state and market are not only different from, but on many types of occasion incompatible with, the values of' those kinds of local communities within which virtues might flourish. In the former, 'decision-making is arrived at by a summing of preferences and by a series of trade-offs', which depend upon 'the political and economic bargaining power of the representatives of contending interests'. By contrast, it is a characteristic of those local communities to which he refers that within them a shared conception of the common good 'provides a standard independent of preferences' (MacIntyre 2006o, 213). Concretely, MacIntyre argues that 'for there to be an identifiable common good there must be identifiable structures of community, so that one can understand how the parts which different

individuals contribute are contributing to a common goal' (MacIntyre 1994c, 35). He concludes that only in small-scale communities is politics able to escape from the compartmentalisation that is endemic in the modern world and 'inimical to the flourishing of local communities' (MacIntyre 1998g, 248).

If this orientation towards local communities informs the widespread belief that MacIntyre is a communitarian thinker, the flaws in this interpretation of his ideas are apparent once we recognise that he is just as critical of state power as he is of modern 'free' markets. He points out that those who aim at conquering state power are themselves conquered by it, and through it 'become in time the instruments of one of the several versions of modern capitalism' (MacIntyre 1995d, xv). And in a more specific comment on communitarianism, he argues that, far from being an alternative to liberalism, this ideology has become part of the 'ragbag of assorted values' through which modern liberal states attempt to justify themselves (MacIntyre 1998g, 245).

So, against conservatives and liberals alike, MacIntyre argues that 'what is most urgently needed is a politics of self-defence for all those local societies that aspire to achieve some relatively self-sufficient and independent form of participatory practice-based community and that therefore need to protect themselves from the corrosive effects of capitalism and the depredations of the state' (MacIntyre 1995d, xxvi). This is not to suggest that he is unaware of the faults of local participatory communities. Rather, against liberalism's elitism and communitarianism's confusion of the politics of the state with politics practiced in such communities, he espouses a politics which recognises that while life within such communities is 'imperfect', such communities can at their best engender forms of life which might act as the utopian standards by which one ought to live one's life (MacIntyre 1995d, xxi). Moreover, he argues that the charge typically made by so-called pragmatic politicians against their radical opponents, to the effect that the political perspectives of the latter are utopian, is best understood as a damning critique not of radicalism but of the standpoint from which that charge is made (MacIntyre 1990a, 234–35). Specifically, he believes that it is only in some local communities that 'cooperation as a common good' can emerge spontaneously as an alternative to the individualism that is both generated by

capitalism and taken to be axiomatic by liberals (MacIntyre 1999a, 114, 130). In his mature work, therefore, MacIntyre proselytises an anti-statist and anti-capitalist politics that is best understood as a development of the ideas of Marx, as well as those of Aristotle and Aquinas, and which MacIntyre understands to be rooted in the forms of practice that are found in some local communities (MacIntyre 2006n, 193).

The overlap between MacIntyre's mature thought and Marxism has a practical as well as a theoretical aspect. For instance, in 1994, long before the recent financial crash, he suggested that Michael Milken (the corrupt Wall Street banker who inspired the character played by Michael Douglas in Oliver Stone's 1987 *Wall Street*) was in the right against his 'moralist' critics when he claimed to have only been 'doing his job', but that he was wrong to believe that this should have kept him out of jail; on the contrary, 'it probably means that many other financial managers should be [in prison] too'. Commenting on politics at the other side of the barricades, in 2006 MacIntyre signaled his support for those struggles

engaged in by members of some rank and file trade union movements, of some tenants' associations, of the disability movement, of a variety of farming, fishing, and trading cooperatives, and by some feminist groups, and on the other by those who work within schools, hospitals, a variety of industrial and financial workplaces, laboratories, theatres, and universities in order to make of these, so far as possible, scenes of resistance to the dominant ideology and the dominant social order. (MacIntyre 2006o)

Whereas MacIntyre's mature disdain for Wall Street and his support for some rank-and-file trade unionists—including the resistance they 'offer to attacks on their members' wages and working conditions' (MacIntyre 2007b)—displays an obvious affinity with his youthful Marxism, his contemporary distance from Marxism is best exemplified, as we noted above, by his argument that the energy he once invested in overthrowing the capitalist system was 'misdirected and wrongheaded'.

Nevertheless, as he argues in the essay which opens this collection, while the compartmentalisation characteristic of life in the modern

world mediates against us asking such Aristotelian questions as ‘What would it be for my life *as a whole* to be a flourishing life?’ and ‘What is my good *qua* human being and not just *qua* role-player in this or that type of situation?’, by which we might begin to move from general ethical concerns about human flourishing to more specific political means which could foster such human flourishing, modern social relations do not completely foreclose discussion of such issues. Concretely, he suggests that when communities come together to build schools, for instance, general questions such as these can and do emerge spontaneously. Moreover, by answering such questions in an Aristotelian manner, many members of such communities will tend to challenge existing utilitarian modes of education, and in so doing will be met by representatives of the state and of capitalism who will inform them that their alternative proposals are ‘unrealistic’. In such situations, MacIntyre argues, it is important for those communities to stand their ground and to insist on the possibility of the impossible. While this position appears to be ‘utopian’ from the standpoint of civil society, because it is a practical response to practical problems, MacIntyre labels it ‘a Utopianism of the present, not a Utopianism of the future’.

This stress on the practical virtues associated with those community-based forms of opposition to capitalism and the state is a useful rider to what otherwise might easily appear as the one-sided political conclusion of *After Virtue*; for while MacIntyre’s politics of resistance is apparent in this text, it is almost completely lost against the background of the book’s dominant pessimism. This theme of the politics of virtuous resistance, when read in the context of the reinterpretation of MacIntyre’s mature thought as a form of revolutionary Aristotelianism, is the departure point for the other essays in this volume. To varying degrees, the editors and contributors to this volume believe that MacIntyre’s focus on ethical forms of resistance to capitalism and the state has created a space for a dialogue about the relevance of his thought to contemporary progressive politics. To this end, this book brings together a series of explorations of the strengths and tensions of MacIntyre’s mature thought, with a view to developing their potential to inform virtuous political practice in the modern world.

After MacIntyre’s opening essay, we republish Knight’s virtually unobtainable 1996 essay ‘Revolutionary Aristotelianism’. This essay first

challenged earlier conservative appropriations of MacIntyre's critique of liberalism by reinterpreting his Aristotelianism through the lens of his earlier engagement with Marx. If this reading of MacIntyre's thought sets the scene for the arguments of the rest of the essays in this collection, it is nonetheless subjected to an important critique by Tony Burns in his contribution. He challenges not only the claim that MacIntyre's thought can be understood as a form of revolutionary Aristotelianism but also the argument that there is a strong affinity between MacIntyre's thought and Marxism. Nevertheless, he concludes that MacIntyre's thought might profitably be used to supplement gaps within classical Marxism. For Alex Callinicos, the divergence between MacIntyre and Marx is greater than this, and much to Marx's benefit. Callinicos defends Marx as the most important successor of the Enlightenment tradition, from which he inherited and radicalised the concept of equality as a basis for a thoroughgoing immanent critique of capitalism. In particular, Callinicos defends not only a dialectical analysis of both the oppressive and the liberating aspects of capitalism against what he considers to be MacIntyre's one-sided criticisms of modernity, but also the transhistorical normative needs principle, which he claims is implicit to Marx's critique of capitalism. While Sean Sayers would reject the idea that Marx embraced any transhistorical norms, like Callinicos, he criticises what he conceives as MacIntyre's 'one-sidedly' negative critique of modernity. Through a critical engagement with bureaucratic idiocies of Britain's pseudo-market in academic ranking, Sayers deploys Marx's dialectical critique of capitalism to argue that alongside the negative consequences of compartmentalisation and fragmentation, modern capitalism has underpinned the emergence of important values such as liberty, equality, individuality, and tolerance. Sayers points out that although MacIntyre's relentlessly pessimistic account of modern social relations can explain the negative side of the modern academic experience, for example, it is less able to recognise the positive side of liberalism's 'agreement to disagree' in a tacit critique of any attempt to impose a stultifying orthodoxy on thought. This vision of tolerance is an important inheritance from the Enlightenment, which reflects the contribution of liberalism to modern progressive politics. Sayers points to the continuities between liberalism and Marxism. Niko Nojonen, in contrast, explores the commonalities between MacIntyre's critique of the consequences of liberal modernity and



Marx's theory of alienation, a concept which he claims underpins not only Marx's but also MacIntyre's critique of liberalism and capitalism. For his part, Paul Blackledge explores MacIntyre's concrete criticisms of the practice of Marxist revolutionaries through the lens of his deployment of Marx's third thesis on Feuerbach. He argues that although MacIntyre has made use of this argument to develop a powerful critique of managerialism and Stalinism, it is far from an immanent critique of all forms of socialist leadership, as the mature MacIntyre suggests. Blackledge follows the younger MacIntyre to argue that Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* actually point towards something like Lenin's politics (but most certainly not to the mythical 'Leninism' that was invented by Stalin and embraced as an authentic representation of Lenin's politics by Stalin's liberal critics). By contrast with Blackledge's defence of the contemporary relevance of anti-Stalinist Marxism, Émile Perreau-Saussine argues that MacIntyre points towards an ethical alternative not only to liberalism but also to Marxism, and that far from there being an important slippage between MacIntyre's early Marxist criticisms of Stalinism and his later rejection of Marxist politics *tout court*, the latter position was the logical conclusion of the former. Marxism, he claims, has been found wanting by the tribunal of history, and MacIntyre's work points to Marx's failure to escape the limits of bourgeois ethical theory.

Neil Davidson addresses the question of MacIntyre's Marxism by exploring his relationship to the thought of Stalin's greatest critic, Leon Trotsky. To those readers of *After Virtue* who are unaware of MacIntyre's past, the concluding portrayal of Trotsky alongside St. Benedict tends to come as something of a surprise. Davidson contextualises these comments with reference to debates within postwar Trotskyism, and in so doing, highlights not only the way that MacIntyre's critique of Marxism in *After Virtue* involved an over-hasty deployment of some comments by Trotsky, but also the fact that in the 1960s MacIntyre embraced an importantly different interpretation of Trotsky and Trotskyism, which can act as a Marxist point of departure for a critique of the pessimistic conclusions of *After Virtue*. In his contribution to the collection, Sante Malotta explores a different but related aspect of MacIntyre's critique of liberalism. He explicates and defends MacIntyre's deployment of the concept of natural law as a powerful and subversive critique of liberalism, and,

in an argument that complements Noponen's thesis, he points to the complementarities between MacIntyre's deployment of the natural law tradition and his reference to themes taken from Marx's theory of alienation. From a very different perspective, Anton Leist challenges what he conceives as MacIntyre's absolutist criticisms of liberalism, and defends from these criticisms those elements of liberalism that he considers to be a lasting contribution to progressive politics. Peter McMylor explores the sociological underpinnings of MacIntyre's critique of modern ethical theory as a consequence of the debilitating effects of the compartmentalisation of modern life through an analysis of his comments on the work of Erving Goffman. He considers the importance both of MacIntyre's contribution to an adequate sociology of modernity, and of the possibilities inherent within his model of modernity for an ethical alternative to that compartmentalised world. The second of Kelvin Knight's essays in this volume is an exercise in the history of ideas. The identification of communitarianism in the 1980s and '90s coincided with a revival of classical republicanism. MacIntyre's work was widely identified with both. In this essay, Knight opposes MacIntyre's work to that of J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner. Despite the sympathy MacIntyre once expressed for republicanism, Knight argues that its compartmentalisation of society into public and private spheres laid conceptual and practical bases for liberal modernity. Knight also opposes MacIntyre to the classical liberalism of F. A. Hayek and to Hayek's politically influential account of capitalism as a free and spontaneous order. In the wake of the state-led bailout of the recent financial crisis, the superiority of MacIntyre's account of modern political and economic order to that of Hayek should be clear. In the penultimate essay, Andrius Bielskis attempts to move the debate towards a more concrete register through an analysis of MacIntyre's influence on Lithuania's new left. He suggests that MacIntyre's conception of ethical anti-capitalism has informed the creation of a left that has attempted to move beyond the limits of earlier debates between reform and revolution. Finally, MacIntyre replies to his critics in a survey that adds to our understanding of the relationship between his Aristotelianism and Marxism, while simultaneously suggesting some concrete aspects of Aristotelian political practice. As he concludes, there is far more to be said. We hope that this book will contribute to opening that debate.

Two powerful contributors to the conferences at which this book was conceived suffered untimely deaths before its publication. Chris Harman, whose thought was influenced by MacIntyre's early Marxist writings, was one of the most important Marxists of his generation. Émile Perreau-Saussine was a gifted young academic and author of an important study of MacIntyre's oeuvre, *Alasdair MacIntyre, une biographie intellectuelle*. Their deaths came as shocks to all who knew them, and this collection is dedicated to their memories.