Book Reviews

Paul Blackledge and Kelvin Knight (eds)


What is the best way to interpret Alasdair MacIntyre’s political philosophy? Since the publication of After Virtue, MacIntyre has often been read as a nostalgic communitarian who has moved on from the Marxist politics of his youth. Recently, however, this interpretation has been questioned by a group of scholars who see an enduring radicalism in MacIntyre’s mature thought. This new book is billed as a culmination of their project. It brings together a mix of philosophers, political theorists, sociologists, and historians – as well as MacIntyre himself, who contributes an introduction and reply to his critics – to reassess MacIntyre’s complex political philosophy, and consider whether ‘revolutionary Aristotelianism’ is a more fitting interpretation of it.

The idea of ‘revolutionary Aristotelianism’ leads many of the contributors to consider the continuity between MacIntyre’s youthful Marxism and mature Aristotelianism. According to the editors, ‘MacIntyre’s turn to Aristotle...is best understood not as a conservative rejection of modernity but as an attempt to deepen insights inherited from Marx’s critique of capitalism’ (p. 2). On this matter there is little consensus. For whilst many of the commentators agree with the editors that MacIntyre’s mature thought can be usefully described in this way, others suggest that whilst MacIntyre cannot not be read as a nostalgic communitarian, he cannot be read as a revolutionary either; revolutionary Aristotelianism, as one commentator puts it, is an ‘unhappy mix’ (p. 79).

Appropriately the volume starts by reprinting Kelvin Knight’s ‘Revolutionary Aristotelianism,’ the essay that first challenged accusations of conservatism back in 1996. What is revolutionary about MacIntyre’s Aristotelianism? According to Knight, the answer has to do with MacIntyre’s concept of a ‘practice.’ A practice is a cooperative human activity, engagement in which enables the discovery of goods that are ‘internal’ to that practice, as well as the development of practical skills and moral qualities or ‘virtues.’ The critical thrust of this position comes from MacIntyre’s belief that practices are at odds with the central features of modern society, especially the capitalist economy.
To borrow MacIntyre's favourite example, the practice of fishing is one where fisherman can develop skills and virtues that enable them to achieve the goods that are particular to fishing. But the practice of fishing is difficult in modern times. For capitalism prioritises a large catch over the achievement of the internal goods of fishing; it increases and intensifies competition between crews; and it introduces large-scale factory fishing that makes it difficult to sustain traditional fishing fleets. According to Knight, MacIntyre's thought is revolutionary as it articulates a 'politics of self-defence' (p. 31) for local communities that aspire to protect their practices and sustain their way of life from the corrosive effects of the capitalist economy. Exactly how, and in what way, small-scale communities are meant to resist the advances of the global market economy remains unclear, however.

The next three essays all question the cogency of Knight's thesis. Tony Burns traces the intellectual development of MacIntyre's thought from his youthful enthusiasm for Marxism in the 1950s to the present day. Burns agrees with Knight that MacIntyre's mature thought can be described as revolutionary, but disagrees about the proximity of this position to Marxism, noting that MacIntyre's discussion of social practices contains no mention of Marx.

Both Alex Callinicos and Sean Sayers go further in their contributions, pointing out significant differences between MacIntyre and Marx, and using the views of the latter to criticise the former. Callinicos is uneasy about 'revolutionary Aristotelianism': he questions whether it is possible to obviate the inegalitarian elements of Aristotle's thought, such as his exclusion of women and slaves from the *polis*; he is alarmed by MacIntyre's commitment to desert as a principle of distributive justice; and he points out that a 'politics of local community' is an unsatisfactory framework for understanding modern forms of resistance, since many anti-capitalist movements take transnational forms. But the crux of the matter for him, as for Sayers in his essay, is MacIntyre's one-sided critique of modernity. MacIntyre laments the breakdown of stable forms of community and portrays the modern world in a wholly negative light. But Callinicos's and Sayers's convincing response is that the effect of modernity is in fact far more complex than Macintyre acknowledges. The emergence of modernity has liberated people from the fetters of engulfing communities, drawn people out of their local standpoints and given rise to universal interchange of ideas and products. It has created a world of greater diversity; and it has given rise to liberal values of liberty, toleration, equality, and respect. In short, modernity is not a wholly negative phenomenon; there are goods that are to be sustained and built on in the future.

The next two essays both assess Macintyre's critique of Marxism. MacIntyre has criticised Marxist revolutionaries for the way that they try to