

Our present political distress: a conversation between R.G. Collingwood and A. MacIntyre

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An historical suggestion tends to describe A. MacIntyre as an heir of R.G. Collingwood, “a suggestion MacIntyre himself approves of” writes M.J. O’Neill.¹ However, an heir is not necessarily an immediate follower nor a copy of his inspirer. Each thinker is always a mix of several influences, and if we can clearly follow Collingwood’s intuitions in the historical approach of MacIntyre, or reveal, as an archeologist would do, evidence of a Collingwoodian methodology in, for example, *A Short History of Ethics*, even in *After Virtue*, it would be a bit bold to compare Collingwood and MacIntyre’s political standpoints. As a matter of fact, K. Knight recently warned us about two fundamental differences between Collingwood and MacIntyre, the first one regarding to the theoretical presupposition of what Knight called the “Kantian presuppositions of [Collingwood] enquiries”². The second one which interested me here being the political one, namely Collingwood’s relation to liberalism.

Yet, even if there is an apparent discrepancy about MacIntyre’s and Collingwood’s understanding of liberalism, I need to precise that I want to compare their political thought, and that I am by no means trying to identify them. Such an attempt would be futile, especially because as Knight pointed it out: “Much has changed since Collingwood”³. The century of totalitarianism is behind us, and with him concepts used by Collingwood which seem now outdated, like “civilization”. Despite those historical differences, my aim is to conduct a fruitful discussion between those two philosophers in order to define a common ground for political science. Their concern for the political distress of their respective time gives birth to three features which I want to stress on: first the acknowledgment of the failure of liberalism, second the redefinition of the role of philosophy in society, and finally the examination of their call to Utopia and political imagination through historical studies. Those three features being connected by one superior goal: the reunification of theory and practice in human life.

¹ Michael J. O’Neill, « ‘An Argumentative Ally’ Collingwood’s influence in MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* », *The Heythrop Journal*, 2019, p.10.

² Kelvin Knight, « History and Plurality », *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 2014, p.19. I am not sure of what Knight means here by ‘Kantian presuppositions’, maybe it could be enlightened by G. Vanheeswijck, “The Kantian heritage of R.G. Collingwood and P.F. Strawson : two varieties of descriptive metaphysics”, *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, vol.31, no.3 (July 2014), pp.271-292 and Giuseppina d’Oro, “The Myth of Collingwood’s historicism”, *Inquiry*, vol.53, no.6, pp.627-641, 2010.

³ Kelvin Knight, « History and Plurality », *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 2014, p.22: “Much had changed since Collingwood. Fascism had been defeated, Western Europe’s empires had been dismantled and so too had that of the USSR, shortly followed by the dismantling of the USSR itself.”

Acknowledgment of the failure of Liberalism

If MacIntyre's critics of liberalism are well-known, a quick review of Collingwood's sources would maybe convince the reader that the Waynflete Professor at Madgalen College perfectly exemplified the characteristics of British Idealism. In other words, Collingwood would embody all the features of this Victorian movement: a German inspiration (i.e. Kant and Hegel) and a strong political defense of imperialism and liberalism.

But historians might notice that the great enthusiasm for liberal ideals has been tackled several times within the British Idealism movement. A watchful eye could easily disclose a degradation of the blind faith towards liberalism from Utilitarianism to Idealism, from Mill to R.G. Collingwood. A noticeable alteration would be T.H. Green's advocacy for an interventionist state, emphasizing the role of a regulation by the State to avoid economical "laissez-faire". Collingwood follows Green and goes even further: "All over the world liberal or democratic principle, having lost their 'punch' and having become mere matters of habits, have lost their initiative and have been thrown on the defensive."⁴ Liberalism is an example of what in Collingwood's words is call "a survival"⁵: a concept which no longer belongs to the conceptual scheme which gave its meaning. Moreover, liberalism as stated by Collingwood never reached its own ideals.

Nevertheless, this failure of liberalism doesn't demand to get rid of it. First, because of an historical necessity: in 1942 when Collingwood writes its political essay *The New Leviathan*, liberalism appears to him as the last option left to those who desire to preserve freedom against Nazism, Communism and Fascism. But being a champion of liberalism against dictatorship doesn't mean being a defender of liberalism *per se*. It would be preferable to define here what Collingwood means by liberalism, as we find it in his article 'Modern Politics'⁶ : liberalism is "a dialectical solution of all political problems by free discussion, opposition, and second characteristic: free expression of opinion on all political questions." This definition is clearly stated in opposition to the dictatorship of his time: his liberalism is correlated to his opposition to totalitarianism. This is also the reason why in *The New Leviathan* civilization is understood as a process from a state of non-agreement to a state of political and institutional agreement.

⁴ R.G. Collingwood, "Fascism and Nazism" in *Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. David Boucher, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1984, p.194.

⁵ R.G. Collingwood, *The Philosophy of Enchantment, Studies in Folktale, Cultural Criticism and Anthropology*, ed. David Boucher, Wendy James, Philip Smallwood, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2005, see precisely "Part II. Tales of Enchantment" pp.113-288.

⁶ R.G. Collingwood, "Modern Politics in *Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. David Boucher, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1984, pp.177-186

Those are not ideals for Collingwood but actions that should be practiced. The failure of liberalism comes precisely from a lack of practice: a complete separation between theory and practice. I want to add here that, in a way, MacIntyre's critics of liberalism has been foreseen by Collingwood and could be identified to what he calls the critic "from the left": "The other attack on liberalism, from the left, complains in effect that liberalism, as it has actually existed, is not genuinely liberal at all, but hypocritically preaches what it does not practice. Behind a façade of liberal principles, the reality of political life has been a predatory system by which capitalists have plundered wage-earners."

So, does Collingwood's re-examination of Liberalism diverge enormously from what MacIntyre promotes? Or does MacIntyre's analysis of our present practice of liberalism fit with Collingwood's standpoint? Because what Collingwood asks of political life is not a new theory of governance or a new theory of the state, but precisely to go back to practice. As a regular reader of Aristotle, Collingwood knows that politics is, first of all, a matter of ethics, and that ethics and politics are intrinsically linked. That's why he attacks so strongly the birth of the "realist movement" in Oxford: "Another was political theory; this they destroyed by denying the conception of a 'common good', the fundamental idea of all social life, and insisting that all 'goods' were private."

The very idea of a unified life which is a major statement of MacIntyre's *After Virtue*⁷ is at the basis of Collingwood's critics of the political distress of his time: from his first book in 1921 (*Speculum Mentis*) to his last in 1943 (*The New Leviathan*).

The Failure of Practice

In his article "How Aristotelianism Can Become Revolutionary: Ethics, Resistance, and Utopia"⁸ MacIntyre argues that for us today "ethics is principally or only a matter of arguments." Such an issue has been a long-term concern for Collingwood and was the main subject of his "Lectures on Moral Philosophy" given from 1921 to 1940 at Oxford. The central concept of those lectures is action because action reconnects with what MacIntyre calls the two sources of political philosophy: theoretical philosophy and an empirical study of politics.⁹

⁷ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, University of Notre-Dame Press, United States, 1st ed. 1981, chap.15 "The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life and the Concept of a Tradition".

⁸ A. MacIntyre, "How Aristotelianism Can Become Revolutionary: Ethics, Resistance, and Utopia", *Philosophy of Management*, Volume 7 Number 1, 2008.

⁹ A. MacIntyre "A Perspective on Philosophy" *Social Research*, Vol.38, no.4, Critical Perspectives on the Social Sciences, Winter 1971, pp.655-668.

To better understand MacIntyre and Collingwood common statements about the failure of practice in political life, we can take the example of the role of philosophy and the role of university.

The separation of theory from practice, the “compartmentalisation”¹⁰ of life provokes at least two major issues: one regarding the philosopher, one for the students in universities. First, in his article “The Present Need of a philosophy”, Collingwood criticizes the understanding of the “supreme indifférence of the sage”¹¹ devoted only to his work and research. And he asks himself what the role of the philosopher in the political ship could be: he can’t be the pilot because he has no experience of sailing, nor a mere spectator, he hasn’t though the experience of the “coastwise fisherman”, but he could help clarifying the issues: he has to live on the ship. One of his actions on the political ship is to educate students and prepare them to act in and for the society. Yet, this role which belongs to universities has been jettisoned by Realist’s philosophy (e.g. Moore, Prichard, Ross etc.) We find here what MacIntyre described in “The Irrelevance of Ethics” as the non-ethical life of ethics teacher.

As we can notice it, for Collingwood political life, as a life of action, must begin at the smallest step of the scale: the family, the university, sport’s practice, games. The student, the one who is educated must be immersed in a make-believe situation. Those training implies co-operation which Collingwood finds in Aristotle: “Aristotle is quite clear that to do the right thing (τα δέοντα πράττειν) is not enough to make a man good (ἀγαθος or σπουδαίος, i.e. possessing ἀρετή); in addition he must act in a certain condition (πως εχων). But the condition, which is not [110 or 105] a merely temporary state but a permanent determination of his character (εξήγς), is brought about by a training (εθισμος) which he cannot give to himself; he must co-operate in it, and learn to value its results, and in that sense is responsible for his condition (κυρίως της ἐξέως), but he is not the author of that condition. **Consequently, if his early training had been defective in certain directions, no blame can attach to him for a defective possession of the corresponding virtues; we blame not him but his teachers or the educational system in which he grew up.**”¹²

In MacIntyre’s vocabulary we could translate as follow: the University as an institution has corrupted the practice of teaching/learning by trying to achieve goods which are not internal goods but fictitious one. This corruption is directly related in Collingwood’s philosophy to a wider defect of civilization: “That is, no doubt, a good reason for smashing a world of office-drudges and factory-drudges. Not simply that it is a world unfit for men to live in; but it is a world consuming its own capital

¹⁰ See for example A. MacIntyre, “How Aristotelianism Can Become Revolutionary: Ethics, Resistance, and Utopia”, *Philosophy of Management*, Volume 7 Number 1, 2008 p.3.

¹¹ Lord Listowel, “The Present Need of a Philosophy”, *Philosophy*, Vol. 9 no 35, 1934, p.269

¹² R.G. Collingwood, “Lectures on Moral Philosophy”, 1933, Dep.Collingwood 5, Bodleian Library.

of civilization through having wantonly thrown away the power of educating its young, and is heading straight for bankruptcy.”¹³

To sum up, remediating to this political distress implies first to redefine the role of the philosopher in the *polis* because he is the one who could clarify the issue especially the corruption of practice. So, we need a “gloves-off philosophy”¹⁴ says Collingwood agreeing here with Marx and the idea of a philosophy used as a weapon, he also gives the example of the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno whose book *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* (1913) he proposed for translation. Then, philosophy needs to explain the problem of the divided life and lead us to the unity of existence. Because one problem underlined by Collingwood and MacIntyre is the extreme specialization of practices.

But to renew political life both philosophers claim that we shouldn’t wait for help from above. Bureaucracy in MacIntyre’s words is more poetically called by Collingwood “the Old Man of the Sea”. It is a reference to this Old Man that tricks the traveler and especially Sindbad the Sailor into letting him ride on his shoulders while the traveler transport him across a stream. The Old Man wouldn’t then release his grip, forcing his victim to carry him until death eventually comes. As Collingwood warned us: “There must be no waiting for legislative help, and no attempt to do what we want by legislative action. Legislation is controlled by the Old Man of the Sea in his own interest. The sort of professionalized, bureaucratized education [...] is the only kind politicians can produce.”¹⁵

Get rid of the Old Man of the Sea and call for Utopia

This is the last shared statement that I want to comment here. When the failure of liberalism and the lack of practices are accepted, what can we do then? In “The Present Need of a Philosophy”, Collingwood introduces a very common position about institutions, speaking of those “in favor of allowing established institution to stand firm for fear of worse to follow” and he adds “there is always a dead weight of inclination, however bad things may be, to enjoy what good we can snatch for the short time allowed us.”¹⁶

¹³ R.G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1942, p.313.

¹⁴ R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, Oxford University Press, 1939, p.153.

¹⁵ R.G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1942, p.315

¹⁶ R.G. Collingwood “The Present Need of a philosophy”, *Philosophy*, Vol. 9 no 35, 1934, p.264

This “defeatist spirit” could be compared to MacIntyre’s vision of the endless debate and confusion of modern world: we think that things could not be other than they are. Collingwood adds to that also Marx’s critics of the State, because if all States have always been organs for the oppression of one class by another, no hope is possible, this is what he calls “Marx’s monstrous lie”.¹⁷

Therefore, in “The Present need of a philosophy”, Collingwood’s conclusion is that “there can be no evils in any human institution which human will cannot cure”¹⁸. This virtue of hope which is at the core of Collingwood’s work at the dawn of the Second World War, and which is the necessary virtue of the dialectic between Civilization and Barbarism in *The New Leviathan* for, without hope, our efforts to reach civility would be pointless. This very central virtue can be found in MacIntyre’s call for an “Utopianism of the present”¹⁹, emphasizing the “indispensability of the virtue of hope” a virtue, he says “that directs us beyond the facts of our present situation, whatever it is.”²⁰

The truth is that institutions are man’s product and governments are established to fulfill the human need for civilization which is, as Collingwood pointed out, a synonym for “good life”: “For the *raison d’être* not only of bodies politic but of every community is that men should live, as Aristotle says, a good life ; and in our terminology Aristotle’s ‘good life’ is called civilization.”²¹ And this good life doesn’t mean the accumulation of wealth, nor a contrast between rich and poor, but an understanding of what we really need. And this can only be possible if we understand what our own desires are. This is precisely the purpose of ethics. MacIntyre and Collingwood highlight the fact that, as Arthur Rimbaud would say: “on me pense”²², someone, the society thinks inside us and generates our feelings: “what the economy needs is that people should become responsive to its needs rather than to their own.”²³

Hence, we need to enlarge our political imagination thanks to history, “we need good empirical studies, histories of past success and failure in the life of the virtues, histories of those experiences from which, as we engage in our present projects, we need to learn.”²⁴ MacIntyre takes the example of people of vision: Marx, Lenin, Benedict, and we could add a good contemporary example: Dorothy

¹⁷ R.G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1942, p.89.

¹⁸ R.G. Collingwood “The Present Need of a philosophy”, *Philosophy*, Vol. 9 no 35, 1934, p.265

¹⁹ A. MacIntyre, “How Aristotelianism Can Become Revolutionary: Ethics, Resistance, and Utopia”, *Philosophy of Management*, Volume 7 Number 1, 2008, p.5: “This Utopianism of those who force Aristotelian questions upon the social order is a Utopianism of the present, not a Utopianism of the future. Utopianisms of the future have been and are misleading and corrupting, because they are always apt to and almost invariably do result in a sacrifice of the present to some imaginary glorious future, one to be brought about by the sacrifice of the present.”

²⁰ *Ibid.* p.6

²¹ R.G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1942, p.325.

²² A. Rimbaud, *Lettre à George Izambard*, 13 mai 1871.

²³ A. MacIntyre, “How Aristotelianism Can Become Revolutionary: Ethics, Resistance, and Utopia”, *Philosophy of Management*, Volume 7 Number 1, 2008, p.4.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p.6

Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement in the USA who tried to establish community of virtues inspired by an Thomistic Aristotelian philosophy. She was, in fact, extremely influenced by the French philosopher Jacques Maritain who might be a great bridge, historically and philosophically, between MacIntyre and Collingwood.

To conclude, what I have intended to do here is neither to oppose two philosophers who belong to different eras nor to identify their thought, but to allow them to discuss. I can't claim that they belong to one and the same tradition, partly because Collingwood rejected Neo-Thomism. However, both draw a political examination which is not State centered, they are not trying to give a typology of the régime like Aristotle did, nor defining some ideals of governance. They both are calling our attention on experience, small communities and the pursuit of a "good life". The underlying idea is to find a third way, an open way and a way for hope between individualistic liberalism and totalitarianism. Again, Jacques Maritain and his *Humanisme intégral* could be a great help to understand more deeply this statement, especially in his book *The Right of Man and Natural Law* written in 1942, the same year as *The New Leviathan*. Finally, the answer to our present political distress would neither lie in an electorate debate nor in a political agenda but could be found through a fruitful conversation between MacIntyre and Collingwood. "We are wrecks and fragments of men, and we do not know where to take hold of life and how to begin looking for the happiness which we know we do not possess"²⁵ once said Collingwood, and now we know that the important thing is to find where to begin.

²⁵ R.G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis or The Map of Knowledge*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1924, p.35.