

The 'Intentional Fallacy' revisited

(Who cares about motives?)

Dr. T. P. Wilkinson

In the great scheme of things a minor confusion or disturbance in the routine of less mainstream journalism, whether called progressive, left or radical – terms which themselves confuse more than they clarify – has no great consequences. No revolts occur and none are quelled. But a recent controversy, in which certain essays were rejected by what might be called the less- or sub-mainstream establishment, should draw our attention to a constant and serious problem in our analysis of events: the problem of *intention*.

The controversy concerned comments by Bill Blum in three recent essays, of which only the first was published by the usual outlets. After the first – which, *en passant*, blamed Islam for the actions of ISIS¹ – was criticised by a well-known journalist and editor,² the second two articles appeared on Blum's website under 'essays and speeches', explicitly challenged that criticism, and applied the rubric 'political correctness'.³ The statements and arguments in the subsequent two articles were heavily criticised, while at the same time suggestions were made that the articles at issue could not have been written by Blum! The assertions that Blum could not have written the articles in dispute are symptomatic of the Enlightenment ideology which still governs what many people believe to be 'progressive' or 'left' thought.

1 The relevant paragraph was this:

'Obama's declaration that ISIS "has nothing to do with Islam". This is standard political correctness which ignores the indisputable role played by Islam in inspiring Orlando and Long Beach and Paris and Ankara and many other massacres; it is the religion that teaches the beauty and godliness of jihad and the heavenly rewards of suicide bombings.'

2 The criticism was by Kim Petersen at <<http://dissidentvoice.org/2016/07/stop-using-millenary-religions-as-a-scapegoat-for-the-crimes-of-modern-imperialism/>>. Blum replied at <<https://williamblum.org/essays/read/political-correctness-demands-diversity-in-everything-but-thought>>.

3 I have already dealt with the issue of 'political correctness'. See <<http://dissidentvoice.org/2016/08/doubts-about-something-to-be-or-not-to-be-correct/>>.

The Enlightenment character to which I refer is the secularised belief that there is coherence in the world and human action, conventionally described as, e.g., 'laws of nature'. According to this, the society in which we live – e.g. the Anglo-American Empire – is corrupt. Nonetheless there is some almost holy element in this society which, were its rulers finally to recognise and conform to it, would expose the redeeming virtue of the US, the supposed pinnacle of Western culture, which would then blossom for all to see and share. This is the Christo-centric 'West' that Mr Blum is not alone in defending against *faux*-Islam. It is also the Christo-centric 'West' that, prior to the invention of Islamisticism (as opposed to Islam/Islamism), Mr Blum and most US Americans defended against what they claimed to be the global threat of Communism, both Soviet and Maoist. Begrudgingly the outer party⁴ accepted that Russia or China might – at best – be permitted to address the deficits and misery inherited from their domestic despots. However but under no circumstances could the ideology attributed to them be applied to abolish Anglo-American despotism (which continues against its non-white population). A consistent exception to this rejection of any international ideology was the black communist in the US and to some extent the black nationalist (e.g. Marcus Garvey *et al.*) On the whole, however, the US regime holds ideological sway over at least the vast majority of whites on both sides of the Atlantic. This hegemony is not unlike that exercised for centuries by its progenitor and spiritual inspiration, the Roman Catholic Church.

The US regime became the model of the 'acceptable' revolution.⁵ The French Revolution only became legitimate after its first

⁴ A far more accurate term than middle class. George Orwell used the term 'outer party' in *1984* to refer to the broad mass of those who supported 'Big Brother' but had no share in actual power. Noam Chomsky has described the most propagandised people in the system as being the academics, middle management and members of the professional classes, to whom the Establishment addresses the bulk of educational and media resources and whose indoctrination is essential for system maintenance. In fact the counter-Establishment draws most of its support from that most heavily propagandised and indoctrinated class, consumers of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* as well as less conspicuous Establishment media. Other countries in Europe have their equivalents, many of which defer to the US media: e.g. in Germany, *Der Spiegel*, *Focus*, *Die Zeit*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Die TAZ*.

⁵ Although it certainly was not a revolution, as has been argued elsewhere, *inter alia* by Gerald Horne, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776*, reviewed by this author in *Lobster* 68.

revolutionary acts had been repealed: e.g. the restoration of slavery. With the ultimate defeat of the French Revolution in 1848, the 1789 Revolution was reinterpreted to conform more to the Anglo-American vision.⁶ The decapitation of Louis XVI and his spouse was nothing more than the end of European dynastic succession and its replacement with national corporate governance. Monarchs from 1848 on enjoyed their thrones by consent of the 'board of directors' of the country's major economic powers.⁷

A redemptive ideology

The Enlightenment ideology to which the outer party is committed is above all a redemptive ideology. By asserting that the corrupt can be finally healed by the incorporation of the USA; and, furthermore, that the purpose of all sincere political and social action is to purge the corruption in the regime and return it to its primitive innocence (albeit with Coca-Cola, Big Macs, Starbucks, Levis and iPhones), an implicit dogmatism emerges and a complementary need to police those who deviate from the current version of the dogma.

This demand for ideological purity, for coherence, or compliance with the 'laws of nature' or the 'original intent of the Founding Fathers' is by no means a monopoly of the Establishment.⁸ It is also rife among the 'counter-Establishment', those who constitute the majority of the 'progressive' and 'left' in the outer party. Progressives and what I have also called the '*faux gauche*' – analogous to the '*faux filet*' served in middle-range French restaurants, usually with chips – are not anti-establishment but 'loyal opposition'. They await the moment when they may redeem the State by becoming the Establishment. (That is the root of Bernie Sanders' absurdity: he is already Establishment and yet campaigned to be taken for counter-Establishment, so that he could then be ennobled in the Establishment in which he was a mere local notable.)

It is also for this reason that the annoying term 'political

6 In 1789 France was, to quote de Gaulle, 'made with the sword'. A plaque in the entrance to the French military museum, Les Invalides, in Paris, bears this quotation by Charles de Gaulle: '*La France fut faite à coups d'épée.*'

7 This is the significance – and about the only one – of the provision in the US Constitution that the President must be a native-born citizen.

8 The most useful definition of the term 'Establishment' is probably found in C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956).

correctness' can so easily be appropriated throughout the outer party – that is in both the Establishment and the counter-Establishment. The term meant nothing in the black nationalist movement, as can be seen in the clear rejection of measures like 'affirmative action' from their very inception. For decades both wings of the Establishment, that in power and that aspiring to power (here I do not mean the Establishment duopoly of Democratic and Republican parties) have fought over how to pacify non-whites that the regime cannot exploit and integrate simultaneously. The counter-Establishment defended 'affirmative action' like confession was defended in the Reformation. Of course, the entire Establishment, including the counter-Establishment, in the US remains convinced that non-whites are doomed; Calvinistically (and for Catholics, according to Augustine) predestined to their lot under the regime. The nature of the political dispute among whites is how whites ought to behave toward the damned, not whether they are damned or not. Affirmative action and community policing were reforms designed to protect those non-whites who just might, in the eyes of an omniscient god, really be part of the Elect. (Just as social security is really an insurance policy taken out by the Establishment to cover the risk that it might, accidentally, exploit the Elect among the poor, e.g. deserving whites.)

Within this barely secularised version of Christian dogma, adorned in Enlightenment vestments and insignia, the imperative to impose ideological control in word and deed becomes obvious. The counter-Establishment risks losing its distinguishing characteristics if it cannot enforce the language adopted to express its alternative ambitions. It loses its only defining quality as 'opposition' or 'counter-Establishment': the language with which it manipulates its followers and the political environment in which it exercises limited, but hopefully expanding, power.

The Establishment enjoys the luxury of the ultimate sanctions: the ability to impose its will through brute force. Whereas the Establishment can just kill its opponents or deprive them of the means to work and earn a living, the counter-Establishment can only deprive dissidents of attention, of access to the channels of philosophy, of the rewards of enticement and seduction. This is the principle cause for the rabid sectarianism that prevails in the counter-Establishment. Unless those who dominate the counter-Establishment are close enough to

Establishment immunity, they can only deprive their opponents of rewards and not have them killed. (Although sometimes they are killed, too. *Inter alia* the deaths of Trotsky,⁹ Petra Kelly and Gerd Bastian¹⁰ come to mind.)

Intent

To return to the issue of intent: whether one examines the historical debates in the International Workingmen's Association or even those

9 The exact reasons and actors behind the assassination of Leon Trotsky remain disputed to this day. Strangely enough many prominent neo-conservatives (reactionaries) claim to have been Trotskyists in their youth. This lends even more ambiguity to the circumstances in which Trotsky and (alleged) Trotskyists were persecuted. An interesting but by no means conclusive insight into the Stalin-Trotsky conflict can be found in *Mission to Moscow* (1941), by the one-time US ambassador to the Soviet Union (1936-38), Joseph E. Davies. This memoir suggests that the anti-Soviet interests exploited real conflicts within the Communist Party and, by linking real pro-Western conspirators with dissidents loyal to an exiled Trotsky, created the impression that Trotsky was the focus of all opposition to Stalin. The sympathy shown for the infamous 'show trials' coincides with the author's view that their propaganda target was not domestic but foreign: namely that Stalin would not tolerate Western subversion, even if it meant sacrificing loyal communist dissidents to make the point. On the other hand *Mission to Moscow* – which was filmed by Hollywood and released in 1943 – shows how even the US propaganda machine was able to produce pro-Soviet films. By 1945 such films would become impossible in the US. What is nonetheless clear is that tolerance for a counter-Establishment depends on what might be called 'historical conditions' and not on systemic purity. If there was no apparent counter-Establishment in the Soviet Union during World War II, one can certainly say that there was (and apparently still is) no alternative to white supremacy in the West.

10 Petra Kelly and Gerd Bastian were leaders of the German Green Party found dead in their bed on 19 October 1992. The official story – sanctified by the counter-Establishment in Germany – is that Bastian was depressed, shot Kelly and then shot himself. The fact that the bodies were considerably decomposed by the time of discovery made a precise time of death impossible to determine. The fact that two of the most prominent opposition politicians in Germany at that time were 'missing' for nearly five days before being 'discovered' in their own home defies the imagination. In fact, between 1989 and 1992 there were numerous assassinations in Germany and elsewhere in the course of consolidation that followed the collapse of the GDR. Shortly after Kelly and Bastian were killed, the Green Party split between so-called 'fundis' and 'realos' was decided in favour of the 'realos' who, under later foreign minister Joschka Fischer, would lead the Greens in their support of Yugoslavia's destruction and the German humanitarian imperialism (also called 'humanitarian interventionism' or R2P, responsibility to protect, in US/UN slang).

within the Jacobin Society,¹¹ the attempts to establish convention and coherence in revolutionary organisations (perhaps itself an oxymoron) have generated enormous levels of violence. It is a central argument of the Enlightenment counter-Establishment that this sectarian violence is proof that European revolutions – as opposed to the unilateral declaration of independence of 4 July 1776 – were not democratic or really governed by the *intent* to create a 'free society'. If, it is argued, the Jacobins were genuinely democratic in their intent, they would not have executed so many of their opponents, real or imagined. If what became the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had really been driven by democratic intent, it could not have become the party of Stalin.¹² It is the same argument – albeit on a trivial scale – which leads people to claim that Bill Blum could not have written the critical essays because these essays are somehow incoherent with the intent imputed to him based on a reading of his previous work.

What is meant by the statement that 'Bill Blum could not have intended the arguments in his last two essays'? The problem is similar to those who say 'Marx could not have intended the policies or practices of Stalin as a consequence of his writing'. What is that problem though? A useful essay – among many he wrote – was published by Professor Morse Peckham.¹³ In 'The Intentional? Fallacy?' Peckham argues that statements about the 'intent' of an author – his point of departure was literary text – are not information about any real or imagined thought or psychic state of the author – this being inaccessible – granting that such were to exist. Rather these are utterances about how the reader should respond to the text in question. The statement that Blum or Marx could, or could not, have intended something is another way of saying that the statement in question should be treated as coherent or incoherent with the view of this person prevailing. Of course this leads to the question as to what those views or presuppositions of the reader are and how they may otherwise control his/her behaviour. Peckham's argument is worth examining at length but to retain my focus I refer the reader to the work itself.

11 See Jules Michelet, *History of the French Revolution* (1847)

12 I withhold here any judgement as to whether Stalin is to be viewed as a universal manifestation of evil.

13 Morse Peckham, 'The Intentional? Fallacy?' (1968), in *The Triumph of Romanticism* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1970), particularly pp. 430, 431 and 436.

Blum or the true 'Blum'?

The discussion around Bill Blum's articles (and I believe the same should occur regarding the work of Noam Chomsky) illustrates the partial range of responses already elicited. Some have asked whether he was ill when he wrote them. Some have claimed he could not have written the articles. At least one explanation is that Blum's text shows that he is capable of being fooled into thinking and saying ridiculous things. Another is that Blum has always said some such things that are considered 'non-Blumian' by others. The next level of discussion includes: if it is real Blum, what are to we think of Blum now? If Blum has always been this way but only writes this way now, is this the 'true' Blum or the 'old age Blum' or some other kind of Blum than the one whose work was previously read and welcomed?

In fact there are Establishment members who appear to have joined the counter-Establishment or even abandoned the Establishment as a whole (although these do not appear to publish in sufficient quantities to make even a provisional judgement possible). Paul Craig Roberts is one example. If one reads his work over the entire time span from his days in the Reagan administration until today, he appears to have become about as vehement an anti-capitalist as one can imagine. At the same time, at least in correspondence I had with him, he sees no contradiction between his present writing and his support for Ronald Reagan. Does that mean that we should read Mr Roberts' texts as an advanced discourse in Reaganomics? (He was once Reagan's Assistant Secretary of the Treasury for Economic Policy.)¹⁴ It could mean nothing other than that, when Mr Roberts reads or writes, he 'feels' (or judges) his writing to be coherent with his own understanding of his personal biography and beliefs including some loyalty to Ronald Reagan. In other words there is no *immanent* reason why Mr Roberts' perceived coherence should govern another reader's interpretation: e.g. that Mr Roberts has gone mad, or that it is possible for a Reagan capitalist to convert to an anti-capitalist, or that Mr Roberts is simply insincere. It is entirely possible to respond to Mr Roberts' text without considering Mr Roberts' previous

¹⁴ But then we should not forget the praise Barack Obama heaped upon Ronald Reagan, and arguably with a more fanatical following. See, for example, <<http://www.nytimes.com/ref/us/politics/21seelye-text.html>>.

positions or history at all. One can simply respond by agreeing or disagreeing with his writing.

However, the virtue of considering Mr Roberts arguments as 'epiphanous' (to borrow another religious metaphor) is again the affirmation that the texts produced by Paul Craig Roberts today exemplify the redemptive rhetoric of the counter-Establishment by showing that even members of the Establishment can be converted. In other words the counter-Establishment also seeks (in fact needs) the Establishment to enhance its legitimacy. Under other historical conditions one could imagine Mr Roberts being burned at the stake and his ashes spilled into the Potomac.

One of the principal arguments by the counter-Establishment against the legitimacy of the Soviet Union was that it produced Stalin and Stalin was a brutal dictator. Leaving aside the appropriateness of the term 'dictator' in the Soviet context, certain facts cannot be denied. Stalin led two consecutive massive industrialisation processes in a country which, prior to 1917, had no meaningful industrial infrastructure whatsoever. It is a widely held principle in the West that chief executives of major economic enterprises may exercise powers over their enterprise, which by any measure could be called dictatorial or absolutist. If Stalin were viewed as the CEO of Soviet Union Inc., then the exercise of dictatorial power would be comparable to that of people like Henry Ford or the Du Pont and Rockefeller families. So clearly the term 'dictator' is not a reference to the exercise of absolute authority over political, social and economic resources, since this is a common form of business organisation in the West.

It is also argued that Stalin was excessively brutal in the forced industrialisation of Russia and its agriculture. That means that the process by which between 1500 and 1918 untold millions of people were deliberately enslaved and slaughtered, and three continents were subjected to the imperial control of a half-dozen European states plus the USA, has no 'intentional' value for appraising the system that predominated in 1918 and finally triumphed over most of the planet in 1945. Alone, the forced industrialisation of manufacturing and agriculture in the US required the enslavement of millions and the annihilation and continued subjugation of the continent's indigenous inhabitants. Whereas the same process in the largest country on earth within thirty years is judged solely by the 'intent' of Stalin, despite the

fact that the *second* industrialisation was forced by the intentional (planned and executed) destruction of the first industrialisation by the Western financed and supported NAZI invasion and occupation that ended in 1945.¹⁵

My argument here is that the condemnation of Stalin, or for that matter Marx(ists), or the Jacobins, is based upon the judgement that the violence and suffering assigned to them was intended – if not explicitly by the orders given and acts committed – then implicitly because those orders and acts could have no other source than the atrocious intentions of the authors. Yet the counter-Establishment, especially in the US, is convinced that the persistence of slavery, genocide, and all the other elements of colonialism/imperialism in the US Empire were ‘unintentional’. The regular murder of Blacks by police in the US is not intentional. Lynching was never intentional. In a country whose official explanation for all economic injustice is the ‘intentional’ failure of its citizens to work productively, there is no theory of intention to cover the regular, institutional violence perpetrated by the military, police, bureaucracy, the clergy, and of course those who control them – business corporations and the families that own them.

‘Intention’ is a fiction

There is no ‘intention’ because ‘intention’ itself is a fiction. It is a term, an element of language, used to control the behaviour of the person(s) using it. In the secularised Enlightenment ideology that controls the behaviour of both the counter-Establishment and the Establishment, ‘intention’ is a word used in place of ‘guilt’ or ‘sin’. It is not a causal term at all – leaving aside whether ‘cause’ is at all useful here. But in the counter-Establishment, rife as it is with scientism,¹⁶ ‘intention’ tells the person making the judgement to see that which is being judged as the product caused by one actor, one sinner, rebelling against the ‘laws of nature’ (or the will of God). Intention turns an accident into a

¹⁵ I choose the term ‘NAZI’ as opposed to German since the organisation of the National Socialist regime included major components of armed and civilian fascists throughout Europe, managed and deployed by the regime in Berlin.

¹⁶ The Merriam-Wester dictionary: ‘A dictionary definition of scientism is: an exaggerated trust in the efficacy of the methods of natural science applied to all areas of investigation (as in philosophy, the social sciences, and the humanities).’

crime. Even when the counter-Establishment proposes policies to alleviate admitted injustice, these are always limited because they are in potential conflict with the intentions of those undeserving among the victims of injustice. Hence the language of intention also serves to rationalise the cynicism of policies like affirmative action or community policing which are then condemned by the Establishment for their 'unintended consequences'.

Peckham's final and most challenging theoretical work is called *Explanation and Power*.¹⁷ Peckham shows in lucid and comprehensive argument that the problem of controlling human behaviour is an on-going one and god, nature or society or any other Establishment cannot solve it. It certainly cannot be solved by a 'counter-Establishment'. Peckham maintained that the challenge, discovered by those Romantics who abandoned the Enlightenment with its secularised Christian world view, is for human beings to learn to sustain a condition of indeterminacy. This is what Sartre tried to say in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, a book generally rejected even on the Left.¹⁸ In fact we find in Sartre a particularly good example of a writer and activist who did not constantly comply with either the counter-Establishment or the Establishment. He and de Beauvoir both taught in schools during the German occupation. He became anti-American yet also antagonised the French Communists (PCF). His amorous relationships appear to defy any consistent explanation.

However Sartre made an attempt to show the implications of this indeterminacy. He did so not by resolving it in a redemptive ideology but by showing that redemption is impossible. Like Peckham, Sartre showed that only death is redemptive. Of course this redemption is the medieval position which, in its secularised version, constitutes the deep ideology of the Western empire. That is also why both the counter-Establishment and Establishment are capable of such extreme violence, whether in the exercise of power or the denigration of others. In this regime, the ascription of intention is the act preceding the ultimate sanctions. If someone like Blum intended to violate the counter-Establishment conventions (which I believe he neither did, nor

17 Morse Peckham, *Explanation and Power: The Control of Human*

Behavior (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), p. 65.

'Inexplicability is satisfied by an explanation, and everybody is satisfied by any explanation some of the time.'

18 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1960).

intended to do) then silence and exile are his just punishment. On the other hand the Establishment does not bother itself with the literary device of 'intention'. If someone like Blum sufficiently threatened the exercise of Establishment power, then the wages of his sin would be death. Or to quote Peckham: 'Again, the only way to dispose of an interpretation you object to is to kill everybody who utters it; and again, throughout history, this has been a popular mode of interpretational argument.' ¹⁹

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¹⁹ Morse Peckham, *Art and Pornography: An Experiment in Explanation* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), p. 145