

The Writer: commitment and alignment

Raymond Williams

Some people, when they see an idea, think the first thing to do is to argue about it. But while this passes the time and has the advantage of keeping them warm it has little else to recommend it. If there is one thing we should have learned from the Marxist tradition it is that ideas are always representations of things people are actually doing or feel themselves prevented from doing. So that the first way to look at the idea of commitment is not as at some general notion about which we can at once argue, citing this or that historical case, but rather to see why the notion of commitment was developed and against what alternative ideas it was directed.

In fact the matters at issue have been discussed in many terms. Commitment became the normal term, in our own time, because of the famous intervention by Jean-Paul Sartre at the end of the war when he wrote:

If literature is not everything it is worth nothing. This is what I mean by "commitment". It winks if it is reduced to innocence or to songs. If a written sentence does not reverberate at every level of man and society then it makes no sense. What is the literature of an epoch, but the epoch appropriated by its literature?¹

It was in this sense that a long standing argument was concentrated around the notion of commitment. But immediately with a certain difficulty. First that Sartre, quite wrongly in my view, said that this should only apply to prose, that poetry was something else. But it is very difficult to argue this case for one kind of writing in ways that make it clear why you should exclude the same demands on another kind of writing. The distinction between prose and poetry that Sartre tried to make confused the argument from the beginning. Second, and much more seriously, the unstated background of Sartre's intervention was a very specific historical and political context. It was within the climate of the Resistance. It was moreover at a time of real possibilities of significant movement, in France as in other parts of Western Europe, towards a new kind of democracy. The engagement of intellectuals of all kinds, and especially writers, in those great collective movements which had come from anti-fascist war and resistance, had an immediate, concentrated and urgent social resonance. On the other hand in England, by the time the idea had taken its usual inordinate time to cross the Channel (because that must be one of the longest cultural journeys in existence by comparison with the physical distance) it fell into the most difficult times.

The cold war

Then it sounded like, and of course correctly sounded like, a well-

known position in the 1930s. The positions of the British Left writers in the 30s, although they were not normally assembled around the term 'commitment', were directed towards the same essential idea. But in the late 40s and early 50s it was another time. It was the beginning of the cold war. There were then three kinds of backlash against the idea.

First, and we should not forget this, a backlash against the cause to which those writers had been committed. This was the time when we had to look at the other face of that generation of the 30s. It is true that many of the best had died in Spain or in the general European War. But we had also the beginning of that extraordinary and terrible period in which one writer after another from the 30s renounced what he had then believed in, and explained in what was meant to be a charming and pathetic — anyway an apologetic — manner how he had been taken in or fooled or something of that kind. There were some writers who didn't move in this way but their views tended to be less publicised. By the early 50s you could line up a whole series of writers who said 'Yes, of course, I was like that in my foolish youth, but now I know better.' And from that it was no distance at all to saying that writers should keep out of that kind of political and especially left-political thing. That was the first reason why the argument got off to a very bad start after the war.

Second, there was one very severe problem that ought to be intellectually distinguished from this but of course was not. For there were phrases, including the Stalin phrase, in the Soviet Union, when the notion of commitment could easily be related to the practice of an authority above the writer which was telling him what to write and how to write. 'We know what you mean by commitment. You don't want to be a real writer, you want yourself and others to be party hacks.' And the fact that some — too many — real historical instances could be quoted to support this made clarity very difficult to sustain.

Yet at its best this was always a dispute inside the socialist movement. There is still no better statement on this whole matter than that of Brecht, a communist writer, in the 1930s, replying to an article by the Hungarian Marxist then in Moscow, George Lukacs. Brecht said of that whole tendency:

They are, to put it bluntly, enemies of production. Production makes them uncomfortable. You never know where you are with production; production is unforeseeable. You never know what is going to come out. And they themselves don't want to produce. They want to play the apparatus and exercise control over other people. Every one of their criticisms contains a threat.²

So there was a principled position, inside the socialist movement, which could enable a totally committed writer like Brecht to make the necessary distinction between a commitment to production linked to a cause, and on the other hand subservience to some version of desirable production arbitrarily decided by a party and its ideologists. This remains a crucial distinction, but it was very difficult to sustain it in the period of cold war and that mood of confession of errors which was weakening the confidence of a whole generation of writers. In practice the two very different ideas — of commitment and of subservience — were pushed together and seemed to support each other.

Good writing

Third, there was a certain backlash among those few Left writers who kept their heads through this difficult period. And it was an intensely difficult period, because it was so complex. There was an understandable wariness of what can quite properly be called opportunism. This, then as now, was not the reality of commitment but a careerist version of it. Commitment still meant, at its best, taking social reality, historical reality, the development of social and historical reality, as the centres of attention, and then finding some of

The Writer And Commitment

Annelies Wilder-Smith



The Writer And Commitment:

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