

Should Science be partisan?

Andy Blunden September 2020

With the growing interest in “formative interventions,” that is, conducting social science research through intervening into social problems and trying to solve them, there has arisen a tendency to demand that Science abandon the charade of neutrality and be “flagrantly partisan.” The context in which this question has arisen is not one in which the demand for Science to be “objective” and non-partisan is broadly respected, but on the contrary, at a moment when Science faces massive partisan interventions. In the United States in particular, questions like the efficacy of simple public health measures, the causes of wild fires and plain questions of fact are being decided by partisanship alone, and the very idea of “truth” dismissed. Under conditions of acute crisis resulting from the conjunction of the pandemic, dangerous climate change and political instability, this partisanship has been greatly to the detriment of the welfare of the great mass of the population, not only within the US, but internationally.

Given that everyone knows that at least one party engaged in this hyper-partisanship will not be persuaded to step back, what are other parties to do? Be partisan in equal and opposite measure, or pull back from the brink and concede as fact the bare-faced lies of one’s political opponents in Science? And is it just a question of one side not playing by the rules or is the issue deeper than this?

I think it is fair to say that Science has never before been so corrupted by politics than at the present moment, nor the need for Science in the application of public policy so urgent. But this is not the first time that ideology in Science has been an issue. Political economy, situated at the very root of class antagonism, has wrestled with partisanship for centuries. So what did Marx have to say about partisanship in Science?

Marx considered the development of political economy from two different standpoints: (1) that of the socialist advocates for the interests of the proletariat:

But in the measure that history moves forward, and with it the struggle of the proletariat assumes clearer outlines, they no longer need to seek science in their minds; they [the Socialists] have only to take note of what is happening before their eyes and to become its mouthpiece. ... From this moment, Science, which is a product of the historical movement, has associated itself consciously with it, has ceased to be doctrinaire and has become revolutionary. (*Poverty of Philosophy*, Ch. 2, 1847)

and (2) that of the bourgeois apologists for capitalist exploitation:

Political Economy can remain a science only so long as the class struggle is latent or manifests itself only in isolated and sporadic phenomena. Let us take England. Its Political Economy belongs to the period in which the class struggle was as yet undeveloped. [after which] the science of bourgeois economy had reached the limits beyond which it could not pass. (*Afterword to Capital*, 1873)

So long as the class struggle was still undeveloped, the bourgeoisie had a practical interest in furthering the science of political economy, in particular to be able to advise governments on policies which promote the expansion of the market economy and the accumulation of capital. At this time, the Socialists were able only to build utopian castles in the sky, lacking the opportunity to “catch a

glimpse of the material conditions necessary for the emancipation of the proletariat and for the formation of a new society” (*op. cit.*)

On the other hand, once conditions for the formation of a new society are extant and the proletariat has begun to struggle for that new society, a quasi-natural science of the value of human labour has become questionable. The bourgeois finds itself in the position that the development of political economy as a science undermines its class interests. It needs to combine the practical interest in maximising capital accumulation with an apology for exploitation. On the other hand, the Socialists can “appropriate the world in the only way they can, [because t]he real subject retains its autonomous existence outside the head just as before; namely as long as the head’s conduct is merely speculative, merely theoretical. Hence, in the theoretical method, too, the subject, society, must always be kept in mind as the presupposition.” (*Grundrisse*, 1857) Here Marx refers to the fact that Science develops, in the first place, by observing the social process, which brings the essence of relations to the surface, so to speak, and also, that science advances through intervention in the class struggle.

The situation (2) above is clearly that which is relevant to Cultural Psychology and Activity Theory today. What Marx tells us is not that we should be “partisan” but that the state of the social process is such that it is only necessary to “show the world what it is fighting for” (Marx 1844). As to intervention, intervention by definition always “takes a side.” But that has never been something which was at issue. Marx explicitly makes the distinction between intervention and Science which is “merely theoretical.” So what sense is there in claiming that our theoretical judgments should be “partisan”?

“Partisan” (OED) means “Of, relating to, or characteristic of a partisan; supporting a cause, party, or person, esp. zealously or blindly; one-sided, prejudiced.”

This is not the same as “emancipatory,” which is the word I would use for the type of Science I do. Etymologically, the “party” in “partisan” *could* be a cause or an interest, but this is not what the word means in contemporary discourse. It means being for or against Trump or the Tories, or whoever, of taking a position for or against one side in an actual dispute.

Now all of us would willingly use our status as scientists in the political fray in a partisan way against such reactionary figures when they intervene in matters in which we have an interest. But that is not what is at issue. What is at issue is our theoretical work, as researchers, including the theoretical work we do in the course of interventions. Nor would any of us have any doubt about our obligation to refute a partisan intervention in Science by any of these reactionaries. But what meaning would it have if we were to openly declare ourselves as “flagrantly partisan”? I believe it would support the conviction almost universal on the right wing of the political spectrum that *there is no such thing as objective truth* in Science, that there *is only* partisan opinion, and that *consequently* the opinion of the dominant party, however ill-founded, has an equal, and therefore in effect, a more-than-equal place, because it is the opinion of the dominant party or government.

But there is more to this than the connotations of the word “partisan.” The meaning of “emancipatory science” is like the word “socialist” when we say “socialist politics.” “Emancipation” indicates an ideal which orients our scientific practice, but *how* does it orient our practice? “Socialist society” is not the *object* of any actual project in which socialists participate. The object of a project is something real – the introduction of a new law, the creation of a social centre, the strengthening of a given trade union, the formation of some alliance, or whatever. “Socialism” or “emancipation” is the outcome of processes in which the activity of other parties as well as our own interact on continuously shifting ground over lifetimes. Our interest in Science no doubt begins with partisanship, which is its initial stimulus, but it does not end there. The struggle for freedom and self-determination develops and

becomes universal. Ideals like “socialism” or “emancipation,” or “science” for that matter, orient us by determining our ethics, in particular *how* we collaborate with others and *what* should be the objects of our collaboration. Our emancipatory or socialist ideals are embodied in our interactions or collaborations with others, both friends and enemies, so to speak.

If we were to “take sides” in every theoretical dispute rather than putting *our own* distinct position on a question of science, then we would inevitably fall into *eclecticism*. Which side should Science have supported in the dispute between the Free Traders and the Protectionists (the factions in 19th century bourgeois politics)? We might intervene on the side of the Protectionists to defend labour conditions or on the side of the Free Traders to reduce living costs, but we would not *take the side of* one or other party in that dispute because we did not support their program. Sure, we stick up for the denigrated minority against an oppressive majority, the deprived youth against a heartless bureaucrat, but we wouldn't necessarily associate ourselves with their argument or policy at that moment. To be worthy of support is not necessarily to be right in a matter of science. Giving critical support is not the same as being partisan. Sticking up for the underdog in every battle is not a program for science. Regrettably, many underdogs also hold reactionary opinions. When a casual abattoir worker insists on his right to go to work in defiance of quarantine orders, we would defend her in the courts but would not take her side in declaring the virus to be a hoax, for example. If she had had paid sick leave, she would have happily complied with a quarantine order.

Everyone, in fact, thinks they are for freedom. And constantly clarifying what freedom means, and patiently clearing the way, doesn't prevent you from always standing by the oppressed, exploited and denigrated. I think "partisan" strikes the wrong note.

As it happens we have an exemplary case study. Law is not the same as Science, but from the emancipatory standpoint the differences are not great. Ruth Bader Ginsberg has given us a striking model of how to take the side of the oppressed and denigrated everywhere while always remaining non-partisan. If RGB had stood up at some point and declared herself for “partisan law” I think that it is self-evident that she would never have achieved a fraction of what she did achieve. Because to be for freedom, equality, justice, truth, etc., means to be absolutely non-partisan with respect to the two parties before you. You respect them both. But you are not “neutral” with regard to freedom and justice. And neither party would ask you to be. Actually, both think that freedom and justice are on their side. Our ethic of collaboration always and everywhere requires that *we* decide what *we* do. Even when out of solidarity we offer our support to an embattled party, that remains on condition that we are not required to abandon our beliefs, only that what we *do* together is subject to mutual consent.

By interrogating all concepts, both those of our friends and those of our foes, emancipatory science can determine a practice which furthers freedom and justice.