

# Criticism and Politics: A Rejoinder

by Terry Eagleton

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I share Phil Beisly's uneasiness about aspects of my 'Faith and Revolution' article. In particular, he seems to me right to fasten on a serious obscurity of relationship between, on the one hand, the 'extreme' testing of Christian commitment I delineated, and, on the other hand, the 'normative' values, life-forms and practices of the Christian faith as we familiarly know it. He also raises an acute point about how the notion of the Church as *intensifying* ordinary revolutionary practice is to be squared with Christianity's permanently *critical* stance to the world. But if the image of the Church as super-revolutionary vanguard won't quite do, neither will the image of the Church as Cambridge literary critical seminar. Beisly and I share a belief in Christianity's 'critical, negative, transcending role': the problem on which my article focused was the *specificity* of that Christian critical transcendence, in an historical epoch where other creeds, and Marxism above all, advance similar and serious claims.

That still seems to me a reasonable question to raise: a *real* question, rather than one merely generated by a self-absorbed terminology. And the difficulty can't be evaded by a simple replacement of a Marxian conceptual framework by another, equally ideological set of formulae: the hypostasized absolutes, at once generously 'concrete' and emptily self-definitive, of a Leavisian concern with 'life'. That this self-enclosed Leavisian terminology is *ideological* seems to me self-evident. One doesn't need to plough back far into the last decades of the nineteenth century to uncover at least some of the roots of that curious coupling of ordinary English anti-intellectual empiricism with an assertive, often contentless transcendentalism which, in part at least, characterizes the Leavisian ideology. (I say this as someone with an admiration for Leavis's work which, in some aspects at least, is as intense as Beisly's.) Nor is it difficult to see how that ideological synthesis reflects a concrete social tradition of non-conformist liberalism—a tradition tied firmly by its pragmatism and empiricism to the established society, yet able at the same time, in a wholly idealist way, to transcend its less palatable priorities by an appeal to 'Life'. To question that appeal is, naturally, to stand convicted of the greyest allegiance to theory; for what, after all, could be more concrete than 'Life'? And yet, watching with some dismay the hair-raising ease with which these resounding 'Life' formulae are actually manipulated by those influenced by Leavis, one feels like putting the opposite question: what, after all, could be more abstract? 'The only valid commitment is a commitment to life': what does *that* mean? I can see, clearly

enough, some of the visible embodiments of Leavis's own 'life-commitment': they can be found, for example, in his resolute opposition to the extension of higher education in Britain, or in his finely patrician contempt for the men and women who, often at considerable cost and self-sacrifice, built and sustained such organizations as the Workers' Educational Association. Life to him, in those respects at least, is death to me, and to a few million others. And, of course, life to the IRA Provisionals is death to the UVF: does 'a commitment to life' have anything to say about that? Maybe: since our commitment, Beisly says, must be to 'specific realities'. But just to specific realities, or, as it were, to any particular specific realities? To this specific reality rather than that? Or to the whole, seamless, sensuous texture of specific reality itself, as a significant commitment in itself? As often in Leavisite argument, the wires between a kind of evaluative empirical statement—*this* reality—and a kind of metaphysical proposition—Specific Reality—become crossed.

If the commitment is to particular realities rather than to an abstraction called 'immediate experience', theory is of course integral: how else do we define and discriminate between competing concrete priorities? Theory, however, as Beisly rightly points out, isn't the whole of life by any means; I take it he's aware that one of the most succinct expressions of that truth occurs in a well-known epigram beloved of Lenin. (Not fortuitously, either: Lenin's shrewd and masterly regulation of the tension between theory and practice, his refusal to fetishise either, is an instructive case in point.) One had taken it, indeed, that Marxism stood arraigned at the bar of liberal opinion for (among other crimes) its imbalanced preoccupation with *practice*—for its destructive impatience with contemplative disinterestedness. Beisly, accordingly, in a pincers movement familiar enough in liberal responses to Marxism, criticizes me at once for jettisoning critical disinterestedness in the name of intensive practice, and remaining academically cocooned within theory. To question a concern with intensive practice he stresses the role of (contemplative) criticism; to oppose a concern with theory he stresses 'life'. 'Theory' is ossified and encapsulating, but 'criticism' isn't; 'practice' is narrowing, but 'life' isn't. Is anything gained by this transposition of terms? For 'criticism', surely, is tough, selective, rigorous, just as 'theory' is. Maybe the point at issue is that it's more *responsive* to its materials, but then I know of no historically successful Marxist theory which lacked that intimate responsiveness to the lived experience it explicated. And what is 'life' if not a practice?

That final point warrants a further comment. The revolutionary practice of Marxism is easy, in a liberal era, to counterpose to a sensitive contemplation of 'values' and 'qualities'; but no reading of working-class revolutionary history will allow that antithesis to stand. The moving history recorded in Edward Thompson's *The*

*Making of the English Working Class*, or the histories of twentieth-century Marxist movements in Europe, are evidence enough that 'felt life', 'specificity of individual experience' and so on are no monopoly of the middle-class literary liberals. Was there no felt life, no immediacy of lived experience, no sensitive discernment of 'life-enhancing' values, in the revolutionary struggles of German and Italian men and women in the early 1920s, or on Clydeside in the same period? Were practical 'obligations' (the term has a Victorian ring) actually experienced, then, as alternatives to 'critical considerations'? 'Theory', in those concrete situations, wasn't grasped in the classically pragmatist terms which Beisly offers—terms learnt by Henry James from his brother, and transmitted from there, unquestioningly, into twentieth-century literary critical orthodoxy. It wasn't a matter of that 'provisional allegiance' to concepts which, in the lectures of William James, has all the equivocating, over-genial, stylish obliquity of the secure middle-class liberal who can afford to sit comfortably loose to problems of objective truth. Theory, in those situations, had a rather more traditional and time-honoured reference—a reference to what was *true*. Of course Beisly is right that Marxism has too often made a blunt instrument of theory and used it to assault what is real and living. So has the ideology of liberalism, even on its nonconformist, Leavisian wing: has Leavis no responsibility for the arrested development of those whom 'Life-enhancement' would lead him to exclude from the Universities? Has the acerbity of his criticism not, in part, closed him to 'life'? There *are* alternatives to pragmatism and Stalinism, in the relation of thought to life—alternatives vividly illustrated, among other instances, in the biographies of Lenin, Connolly, and Rosa Luxemburg. All three of those thinkers saw theory as a guide to life, not a substitute for it; but neither did they see life as a hypostasized absolute which could take the place of theory. For the final implications of *that* position, we have to look to a quite opposite wing of the political history of modern Europe.

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