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Criticizing the Others or Ourselves? The MacIntyre-Winch Debate and the Idea of Social Criticism

ABSTRACT: MacIntyre states in his criticism of Winch's *Idea of Social Science...* that it is impossible to criticize the practices of societies with different forms of rationality in terms of their own forms of rationality; these practices must be intelligible within *our own* rationality. In this way he assumes that the only possible way to criticize other cultures is a "view from outside." Responding MacIntyre, Winch states that every criticism of other cultures requires "extending of our own ability of understanding." This seems to suggest that the only possible criticism is the "critique of ourselves." This paper attempts to support Winch's position with political argumentation. It refers to the Walzer-Said debate to demonstrate that the logic of social criticism requires reference to the political dimension of domination and the associated concept of emancipation.

KEYWORDS: Peter Winch, Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Walzer, Edward Said, social criticism, emancipation, ideology.

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This paper aims to present what I could call the paradoxical nature of every social criticism. I use the Winch-MacIntyre debate and the Walzer-Said debate to describe two essentially contradictory elements of social criticism. First, every social criticism, to be effective, needs to get rid of metaphysical tendency to ground criticism in objective and universal criteria. Here I am referring to the current criticism of Habermas's concept of critical theory, which indicates its weak points, such as reduction of politics to rational argumentation; elitist view of democracy; exclusive and idealistic understanding of democratic participation; eliminating conflict and passions from the political, etc. (see e.g. Mouffe, 2000; Walzer, 1997, 2002, 2007; Tully, 2008). Second, however, every social criticism, to be effective, requires reference to the concept of emancipation, in which the play between the universal and the particular is a necessary condition (see e.g. Laclau, 2007). I am going to demonstrate how these two points are at the same time impossible and necessary for all social criticism, similar to the way, for MacIntyre, a common understanding of religious concepts by skeptics and by believers "is both necessary and impossible" (1977, p. 64).

In the seminal work *The Idea of Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (2014), Peter Winch explores the implications of Wittgenstein's reflections on language for social sciences by reviving the notion of *Verstehen* and the concept of "meaningful behavior," which were central to Weber's interpretative sociology. In it Winch contends that the idea of modeling the social sciences on the natural sciences was been a mistake, and that the "notion of human society involves a scheme of concepts which are *logically incompatible* with the kinds of explanation offered in the natural sciences" (2014, p. 72). Instead, he suggest applying to the social sciences the "a priori methods" characteristic of philosophy. He introduces to the language of social sciences concepts borrowed from Wittgenstein's philosophy, including the "forms of life" and "rule following" (Wittgenstein, 1988), enriching and reviving the interpretative tradition in the social sciences, which found themselves at a methodological impasse at the time of his writing.

According to Winch, the most important characteristic of the concept of following the rule for social science is the social context in which the rule is made. It is impossible, as Wittgenstein states, that somebody follows the rule only once, i.e., gives an order just once (Wittgenstein, 1988, §199). It is impossible to establish a rule in separation, just as "the private language" is impossible. For human behavior

to be recognized as following the rule, it necessarily requires social context. It means somebody must exist who will be able to assess if I am acting adequately to the rule or not – that is, if I am following the rule or making mistake. The concept of “following the rule” is in this way “logically inseparable” from the notion of “making a mistake” (Winch, 2014, p. 32). Otherwise, to speak about “following the rule” would make no sense, since everything that is being done is as good as anything else that might be done, whereas the point of the concept of a rule is that it should enable us to evaluate what is being done.

Of course, these Wittgensteinian reflections refer not only to the question of language or meaning, but also to all social life, since we give meaning to all our actions. It means that in a way the entire social world consists in following the rule. But if this is true, applying causal explanations in the social sciences is inadequate because there will never be certainty that everybody will always follow the rule in the same way. So it is more appropriate to speak of reasons or motives for human behavior rather than of causes.

However, fundamental to Winch’s position – and also to understanding the disagreement between Winch and MacIntyre – is his understanding of Wittgenstein’s concept of “form of life.” As Wittgenstein states: “What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – forms of life” (Wittgenstein, 1988, p. 226). To clarify the notion of a form of life, according to Winch, is to understand the nature of social phenomena. Forms of life involve rule-following and rule-governed behavior, and therefore they must be based on conventions and agreements. One can say, then, that to study society is “to elucidate the variety of forms of life which characterize our own and other societies” (Bernstein, 1978, p. 67). When we elucidate these varied forms of life, however, it would be a mistake to assume that our own forms of life are the standard for assessing others’ forms of life, and we must be prepared to grasp forms of rationality that are different from ours.

In “Understanding a Primitive Society” (Winch, 1977), a continuation and elaboration of *The Idea of Social Science...* (2014), Winch deepens these arguments and refers to the Evans-Pritchard notion of “correspondence with reality,” contending that the concepts of rationality and truth are radically relative to particular cultures and contexts. Therefore, we cannot state that modern scientific knowledge is more rational or true than the witchcraft of peoples like Azande. It means there are no universal epistemological foundations that could be used as a neutral standard to evaluate radically incommensurable cultures. Hence, Winch argues, it is “illegitimate” to say that “our concept of reality is the correct one” (1964, p. 324). Modern scientific knowledge cannot be recognized as more rational than the primitive Azande witchcraft culture, which means Western social scientists should not criticize the Azande for their witchcraft; they can only describe their rationality and way of life. MacIntyre restates Winch’s view: “we cannot ask which system of beliefs is the superior in respect of rationality and truth; for this would be to invoke a criteria which can be understood independently of any particular way of life, and on Winch’s view there are no such criteria” (MacIntyre, 1977b, p. 228).

Criticizing Hume's concept of causality, MacIntyre states in "A Mistake About Causality in Social Sciences" (1962) that this relativist view of social science essentially excludes the possibility of any reasonable criticism. Analyzing the relation between beliefs and action, he criticizes Winch for excluding any causal explanation from the range of social-scientific methods, and he introduces his distinction between rational and irrational beliefs and actions. He explains it by emphasizing the concept of "description" or "stock of descriptions" for the understanding of human action. An agent's action "is identified fundamentally as what it is by the description under which he deems it to fall" (MacIntyre, 1962, p. 58), but since these descriptions must be also intelligible to other people, the description must be socially recognizable as a description of human action. "To identify the limits of social action in a given period is to identify the stock of descriptions current in that age," MacIntyre contends (1962, p. 60). The descriptions are contextual and occur within "beliefs, speculations, and projects," which are continually criticized, modified, rejected or improved. It means the stock of descriptions changes over time as an effect of rational criticism in human history. According to MacIntyre, the notion of rational critique requires the possibility of choice between alternatives, and to explain this choice is to make clear what the agent's criterion was, and why this criterion appears rational to those who invoke it. Hence "in explaining the rules and conventions to which action in a given social order conform, we cannot omit reference to the rationality or otherwise of those rules and conventions" (MacIntyre, 1962, p. 61). To put it simply, according to MacIntyre, when studying societies with norms or criteria of rationality different than ours, we cannot interpret their practices in terms of their own rationality; those practices must be intelligible within our own rationality, and intelligibility requires evaluation in terms of truth or falsity. Therefore, the "external perspective" rejected by Winch is in fact the only perspective available to us when describing the practices of culturally different societies.

Responding to MacIntyre, Winch states that the intelligibility of a "new description" of practices alien to our culture depends on "further development of rules and principles already implicit in the previous ways of acting and talking. To be emphasized are not actual members of any 'stock' of descriptions; but the *grammar* which they express" (Winch, 1977, p. 96). Winch also explains his view of criticism and the study of alien ways of life by referring to the idea of "extending our understanding" (1977, p. 102), "learning different possibilities of making sense of human life" through analogies to another culture, or "seeking a way of looking at things which goes beyond our previous way" (1977, p. 99). However, to explain this possibility of extension of our own understanding, Winch refers to something he calls "fundamental notions" or "limiting notions," constituting an "ethical space" (1977, p. 107) inescapably involved in the life of all known human societies. According to Winch, these concepts are birth, death and sexual relations. In this sense, describing Azande practices would not consist of criticizing their nonsensical practices in terms of their correspondence to reality and confirming our belief in our technical-scientific worldview's superiority over their belief in magical practices and rituals. It is also

not true that we are unable to say anything reasonable about their practices. Winch seems to say that the only reasonable criticism is not to criticize their practices, but to criticize ourselves – that is, to look at our rationality from the perspective of our relationship to these fundamental notions which in fact determine our actions and who we are as human beings. Therefore, he accuses MacIntyre of being able to see in Azande practices only a “technique of producing consumer goods” (Winch, 1977, p. 106). According to Winch, our rationality is so pervaded by this “instrumental-technical” virus that we have forgotten about fundamental dimension of our life – that is, about *humanity*. He says: “Our blindness to the point of primitive modes of life is a corollary of the pointlessness of much of our own life” (Winch, 1977, p. 106). The critique of ourselves in this case would consist of seeing in Azande culture something our culture lost long ago. Through the analogy with magical rituals, we can look in a different way at our own culture and practices of making the world intelligible, and see how they are pervaded by the cult of reason and technology inherited from Enlightenment.

Many criticisms of Winch’s approach followed MacIntyre’s charges against its descriptivism and relativism. In light of the above, however, it is hard to accuse Winch of excluding criticism. Rather, he reformulates traditional understanding of social criticism based on Marx’s critique of ideology in terms of Kantian searching for the limits of reason and the conditions of our self-understanding. But the deficit of this project identified by MacIntyre is obvious and hard to dispute: Winch’s idea of criticism is deprived of the possibility of assessing different kinds of rationality, so it is unable to identify the falsity of ideology and the cases of domination and oppression in society, making it, to a degree, worthless. (We could call this deficit an emancipatory deficit.) However, while I agree with MacIntyre’s argument concerning the significance of ideology criticism within social science, I am wary of the metaphysical tendency present in Marx’s original concept of ideology, and which MacIntyre repeats, to a degree. As he states in “A Mistake About Causality in Social Science”: „To explain actions within it [the social system – L.R.] we have to identify the rules and their connection with reasonable or unreasonable, true or false beliefs.” Simply speaking, according to him, the possibility of criticism depends on the existence of common ground, the objective point of reference, which will be a basis for assessing different cultures. Thus MacIntyre’s understanding of criticism repeats to some degree Marx’s dilemma of ideology, consisting of the contradiction between the reference to objective truth and situatedness of subject, which is avoided (with the mentioned deficit, of course) by Winch.

To conclude this part: paradoxically, Winch and MacIntyre are close to each other in their view of social criticism. Both criticize the universalist tendency of positivist social science, but at the same time both express a certain “craving for generality,” as Wittgenstein (1969, p. 17) put it, which seems a necessary moment of every criticism. MacIntyre refers to the idea of true or false beliefs that must be identified in the social system, suggesting that even though a given truth and rationality will always be *our* truth and rationality, it is still objective truth and rationality. This also means

we are in a way closed within our own rationality; assessing another cultures, we will always refer to our own standards and criteria. Winch, who openly admits that we are able to assess only our own standards, also expresses under MacIntyre's criticism a need for universality as a basis for criticizing other cultures when he speaks about "fundamental" or "limiting" notions situated somewhere between ethical space and biology. Both approaches, then, reveal this inevitable tension between universality and particularity, which, in my opinion, is at the very core of every critical reflection (Laclau, 2007).

I would like to explain it by referring to another famous and also more recent debate between Michael Walzer and Edward Said in the journal *Grand Street* in 1986'. This example concerns political rather than cultural dimension of social life, and it presents more directly how the play between universality and particularity is inevitable in every concept of social criticism. The main object of the controversy was Walzer's statement in "Nationalism, Internationalism and the Jews," published in *Dissent* (1972), about ways of dealing with national minority groups in a state, referring, of course, to the conflict between Israel and Palestine:

For them, very often, the roughness can only be smoothed a little; it cannot be avoided. And sometimes it can only be smoothed by helping people to leave, who have to leave, like the Indians of Kenya and Tanzania, the colons of North Africa, the Jews of the Arab world (Walzer, 1972, p. 195).

Said, in his response, wonders how Walzer can call his own stance "progressive and even radical" and states that in all probability Walzer is

unconscious of the degree to which Israel's military victories have affected his work by imparting an unattractive moral triumphalism ... to nearly everything he writes (Said, 1986a, p. 100).

Responding subsequently to Walzer's polemic, Said articulates his own position all the more emphatically:

No one would deny that critics belong to a community... What Walzer cannot see is that there is a considerable moral difference between the connectedness of a critic with an oppressing society, and a critic whose connection is to an oppressed one (Said, 1986b, p. 253).

The Said-Walzer controversy basically speaks the controversy over the viability of genuine and effective social criticism as such, and concerns first and foremost the problem of *the critic's rootedness* in his own culture and community. The controversy becomes really palpable if viewed from the respective vantage points the two thinkers occupy: it is a debate between an American Palestinian fervently advocating the equitable treatment of Palestine and the Orient by the Western world and an Amer-

ican Jew ardently involved in building the Israeli state after World War II. The query Said poses fundamentally refines Walzer's reflection, since it takes into account not only the critic's attitude to his own community but also the community's positioning in relation to its environment. Said thus expresses doubts concerning the very core of Walzer's project: is it really and necessarily so that the idea of critical detachment (as in MacIntyre), which Walzer rejects as if *a priori*, cannot somehow assume the critic's connectedness with and engagement in his own community (as in Winch)? Are the two ideas in fact inevitably mutually exclusive? Indeed, the solution Walzer proposes not only leads to unequal treatment of subjects in a community but also entails a kind of "double standard." Who is a *real* member of a community, and who is an *alien*? When is criticism internal, and when is it external? And who can legitimately decide such matters?

Albert Camus, whom Walzer defended in *The Company of Critics* (2002), is an emblematic embodiment of such dilemmas. After the Algerian war broke out in 1954, Camus faced the necessity of choice similar to that of the mythic Odysseus: should he opt for his own country (colonial French Algeria) or "the eternal justice" (Walzer, 2002, p. 132)? According to most critics, Camus renounced the eternal justice for the sake of his country, just as Odysseus renounced immortality. Consequently, he was doomed to perplexity, split between two radical solutions to the Algerian question. On the one hand, Camus could not identify with the radical factions of *pieds-noirs*, whose brutal policies he had opposed throughout his lifetime, but on the other hand, he could not join Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, the supporters of the FLN, because he longed for his homeland and for the maintenance of the *status quo*. According to Walzer, this dilemma made Camus give up critical detachment, which requires "taking side with the oppressed," because their protests "embody universal principles" (Walzer, 2002, pp. 149–150). If one views a picture from a distance, one can hardly spot the figures of particular people in it. Discarding the detachment, Camus resolved "never to sit on a judge's bench ... like so many of our philosophers" (Camus, 1991, p. 207). For him the primary commandment became adhering to his own community, being "intimate" with it and understanding it from within, instead of turning it into an alien force to be criticized from universal perspectives and stances.

Such reasoning generates an obvious paradox: Walzer favors Camus' attachment to the community of settlers/colonizers over the Algerian nation's 131-year-old struggles of enslavement and freedom. If we bear this in mind, which party to this conflict is in the right hardly begs a question. This, however, entails assuming that certain minimal (universal) principles do exist to which the international community appeals in denouncing the colonialist engagement of the French government. Criticism would thus be intrinsically *external*. Thus Walzer adopts here the stance of the *oppressors*, a result – as Said observed – of his identification with the Israeli nation and its hegemonic position *vis-a-vis* Palestine (1986a, p. 103). Is the critical voice of Palestinians – 20 percent of Israel's population – citizens *external* to the community? If so, should Palestinians be denied the right to express criticism and "be helped to leave"?

If Camus criticized *pieds-noirs* from the position of the FLN independence struggles, would he have automatically denounced his own community and assumed a stance *external* to it? We can hardly resist the impression that at such points Walzer's argument on connected criticism begins to crumble. The situations Said cites are only a sample from a whole range of similar ones around the world. National, ethnic and cultural problems all over the globe are as many as there are nations, and they crop up wherever the state borders have been redrawn in the course of history. We deal with specific, particular situations everywhere, none of which can be measured with one universal yardstick. Therein, Walzer is certainly right. And yet, if we presume that the only real criticism capable of actually making a difference is the "internal" criticism that results from the critic's *connectedness* with his community, don't we disempower all those who are by definition alien to their own communities because they feel distinct and separate from the majority? Would Walzer resolve to "help the Jews to leave" if they did not have their own state and had not become fully independent of the Arab world?

To conclude, Walzer shares with MacIntyre (against Winch) a conviction that all criticism must built on our standards of truth and rationality. On the other hand, and contrary to MacIntyre, he does not agree with applying these standards to other cultures or communities, since the only possible criticism is "connected criticism." (This argument could be compatible with Winch's.) What is important, however, is that Walzer – unlike MacIntyre and Winch – is very careful about introducing metaphysical or universalist moment into his project. But as we could see, political practice demonstrates that the language of universalism or moral minimalism, to use Walzer's terminology, is sometimes the only chance for groups that, being absolute minorities in their own societies, have no opportunity whatsoever to implement changes within it. Evidently Walzer himself cannot evade the problem of universalism when he tackles the issue of moral minimalism in *Thick and Thin* (1994), in which he allows certain forms of minimalist or universalist criticism, recognizing them, however, as a form of maximalism. One might say that universalism, which Walzer methodologically excludes, sneaks into his reflection through the back door of the "substance of his thought," as Galston puts it (1989, p. 126).

I think that all doubts concerning Walzer's project of connected criticism may be reduced to a single, crucial objection. Although he is to a degree inspired by Marx's critical project, he clearly rejects its central rationale and objective: the concept of *emancipation*. For Walzer, rejection of criticism's universalism is tantamount to abandoning the liberatory rhetoric. This, however, produces a certain "moral vacillation" that Said stresses, while Walzer fails to differentiate between the oppressed and the oppressors. I believe this is the moment Walzer's internal criticism project actually deprives itself of radicalism and, to a certain extent, also undermines its own validity. At this point, the deficit resulting from the too-radical rejection of Marxism becomes manifest. Once again, the idea of social criticism requires reference to the notion of emancipation, which, in my opinion, is essential to all criticism.

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**KRYTYKUJĄC INNYCH CZY NAS SAMYCH? SPÓR MACINTYRE’A Z WINCHEM
I IDEA KRYTYKI SPOŁECZNEJ**

ABSTRAKT: Krytykując *Idei nauk społecznych...* Wincha MacIntyre stwierdza, że niemożliwa jest krytyka praktyk społeczeństw, w których obowiązują inne formy racjonalności w kategoriach ich własnych form racjonalności, ponieważ praktyki te muszą być zrozumiałe w obrębie *naszej własnej* racjonalności. W ten sposób zakłada, że jedynym możliwym sposobem krytykowania innych kultur jest „spojrzenie z zewnątrz”. W odpowiedzi Winch zauważa, że każda krytyka innych kultur wymaga „poszerzenia naszej własnej zdolności rozumienia”. To wydaje się sugerować, że jedyną możliwą formą krytyki jest „krytyka nas samych”. Celem tego artykułu jest próba wsparcia tego stanowiska poprzez odwołanie się do argumentów politycznych. Poprzez nawiązanie do debaty między Walzerem a Saidem, staram się ukazać, że logika krytyki społecznej wymaga odniesienia do politycznego wymiaru dominacji oraz połączonego z nim pojęcia emancypacji.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Peter Winch, Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Walzer, Edward Said, krytyka społeczna, emancypacja, ideologia.



1. I used this example in “Social Criticism Without Emancipation: Reflections on Michael Walzer’s Critical Project,” *Teraźniejszość-Człowiek-Edukacja*, no 65(1), 2014 and in my book *Śladami Marksa i Wittgensteina. Krytyka społeczna bez teorii krytycznej*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2012.