

# Writing About Indifference Is Not Enough

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The fundamental question is this: Is writing about indifference itself not tantamount to indifference? If the world is the grip of a crisis, if we are threatened by a climate catastrophe, a demographic collapse, political conflicts, war, and persistent energy shortages, and all this is happening amid a raging coronavirus pandemic, would it not be better to throw oneself into practical activism than to waste one's time on subtle, yet most likely useless deliberations? Who needs contemplations about the notion of indifference, which do nothing to replace real care?

If this is indeed the case, then the problem is more serious, as it might even prompt us to ponder the usefulness of the whole of philosophical thought. Likewise, the sense that meta-reflection is completely superfluous could plunge us into discouragement. This was noted by Democritus, who observed that “speech is the shadow of action.” He said those words back in the fifth century BC. This was the golden age of philosophy, but it had developed long before him and continues to develop – despite the fact that it sometimes meanders into the dangerous alleys of self-reference while dreaming about locking itself up in an ivory tower, isolated from the here and now, from what pains us so much.

We should ask ourselves whether we have any grounds to believe in the allegations of indifference leveled against philosophy, or whether they merely reflect the voices of those who do not see its gigantic, even titanic engagement in life. In 1845 Karl Marx wrote in the “Theses on Feuerbach” that “[t]he philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”<sup>1</sup> However, we must not forget about such meticulous interpretation, because it often provided an impetus for actual political and social change. Even if philosophy has realized its own limitations and attempted to save itself by putting *vis contemplativa* (the power to contemplate) above *vis activa* (the power to act), we could nonetheless observe that it does affect the latter. History is filled with philosopher politicians who were not always political philosophers. From the engaged statist Socrates, through Plato, Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, Machiavelli, John Locke, representatives of the Frankfurt School, Henri Bergson, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Marx himself – the list of theorists who translated contemplative reflections into specific actions is long. If we think about how their fate often became tragically intertwined with the broader context of world history, we may notice that the most important goal that they set for themselves was “to change the world.” However, the fact remains that the price that they paid for this was sometimes a lot higher than being excluded from the group of theorists or knocked off their philosophical pedestal.

On 11 February 1917, Antonio Gramsci published his manifesto in *La città futura*. It started with the following sentences: “I hate the indifferent. I believe that life means taking sides. One who is really alive, can be nothing if not citizen and partisan. Indifference is lethargy; it is parasitism; it is cowardice; it is not life. Therefore, I hate the indifferent. Indifference is the dead weight of history. Indifference plays an important role in history. It plays a passive role, but it does play a role.

<sup>1</sup> Trans. W. Lough, <https://marxists.org>.



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It is fatality; it is something that cannot be counted on; it is something that disrupts programmes, overturns the best made plans; it is that awful something that chokes intelligence.”<sup>2</sup> The author of those words was undoubtedly a philosopher, but also a man of action involved in the formation of the Communist Party of Italy and a radical anti-fascist.

Gramsci spent the last 11 years of his life in prison, during which most of the thousands of pages of text he authored were written. He saw indifference as the worst of all human sins – by becoming indifferent, humans allowed injustice to happen around them. The task of theory is to engage in the practice of life, in the creation of political reality. Assuming the safe position of an observer is unacceptable, because what this means in reality is consent to the evil that manifests itself in injustice, exclusion, and wars. Only those who make up a particular society wield real influence over its development. In this context, philosophy and philosophers are faced with the most serious task of setting the direction of historical development, which requires them to constantly critique the state in which we are. Only by overcoming individual and collective limitations can we build something qualitatively new, something that allows the ideal of an equal and free community to come to fruition.

However, not being indifferent and showing commitment and care for social issues means great responsibility. Only those who do nothing bear no responsibility. Gramsci again: “This is why I hate the indifferent: their whimpering, innocents always, bothers me. I hold each and every one of them accountable for how they carried out the task that life put before them and puts before them every day, for what they did and, especially, for what they did not do. And I believe I can afford to be unrelenting, unwilling to show pity and to share my tears with them.”

Writing about indifference is surely not enough. That said, it may be the first important step towards liberation from indifference and towards action. After all, writing as such is an action, tout court, one needed for example to wake others up. Indifference is negated by care and engagement, which may not be important in a crystal palace, but life is impossible without them. ■

Sándor Györfly,  
untitled mural, photo  
22 May 2010, East Side  
Gallery – a gallery and  
a monument to freedom  
created by artists from  
all over the world on  
the Berlin Wall

<sup>2</sup>Trans. Matilda Colarossi, <https://paralleltxts.blog/2015/11/01/indifferentithe-indifferent-by-antonio-gramsci/>