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Don't give him the Nobel - he's right-wing!

Swedish leftists are outraged that Mario Vargas Llosa won the Nobel Prize for literature, because he isn't 'one of us'.

Johan Norberg

'I am a bit angry', said the Swedish literary critic Ulrika Milles during Swedish television's broadcast of the announcement of the Nobel Prize in literature for 2010. It took the country's cultural elite just seconds to realise that a mistake had been made in the Swedish Academy's voting process: you see, Mario Vargas Llosa, the winner, is no longer a socialist. 'I lost him when he became a neo-liberal', complained Milles. Many others echoed her.

People who never voiced any concerns about the politics of other Nobel Prize winners – like Wisława Szymborska, who wrote poetic celebrations of Lenin and Stalin; Günter Grass, who praised Cuba's dictatorship; Harold Pinter, who supported Slobodan Milošević; José Saramago, who purged anti-Stalinists from the revolutionary newspaper he edited – thought that the Swedish Academy had finally crossed a line. Mario Vargas Llosa's politics apparently should have disqualified him from any prize considerations. He is after all a classical liberal in the tradition of John Locke and Adam Smith.

Journalists and writers on Sweden's statist left explained that Vargas Llosa became a 'traitor' during the 1980s, when he came out against socialism and even ran for the Peruvian presidency on a liberal platform. They suggested that it was probably his privileged lifestyle as a successful writer that undermined his sympathy and solidarity with the poor and oppressed.

In Sweden's biggest newspaper, *Aftonbladet*, three writers ripped him to pieces on the first day after the announcement of the Nobel Prize. One wrote that the prize was a victory for the Swedish right; one said it was a victory for the Latin American authoritarian right; one accused him of being not just 'neo-liberal' but also 'macho' (what Vargas Llosa did not know is that it is only acceptable for female authors to write about sex nowadays; when men do it, apparently, it is chauvinist and distasteful).

Aftonbladet's Martin Ezepeleta even claimed that the prize was a victory for racists, because Vargas Llosa once wrote an essay attacking the ideology of multiculturalism. That the same essay also called for a more open immigration policy meant nothing to Ezepeleta – until others called his bluff and he quietly omitted the charge of 'racism' from his article and pretended that it had never been there.

It was left to the far-left newspaper *Flamman* to tell its fellow travellers to back off. Sure, Vargas Llosa is a libertarian, but he is also a fantastic writer and an 'excellent choice' for the Nobel Prize. Well, he is. Even if you hate free markets, free trade and other things that Vargas Llosa supports, it is difficult to deny that he is one of the greatest storytellers of our times.

Vargas Llosa has written some simple stories, even silly ones, but novels like *The Feast of the Goat* and *The War of the End of the World* are the kind of ambitious stories that are not told any

more, in a time when most writers don't have the patience to share anything other than their favourite bars and their tragic love lives. At his best, Vargas Llosa is the literary world's answer to string theory scientists: he deals with more dimensions than the rest of us can experience with our senses. Like Victor Hugo, he captures a whole era or a country's tragedy in a few chapters, but like the best thriller writers he also keeps us in suspense with dramatic plots. And he also manages a huge number of characters, like the great Russian writers – characters whose relations, conversations and inner developments make up the real stage for the story.

Vargas Llosa jumps back and forth between these dimensions, changes narration and time, to tell the same story from different angles, to make it more whole but also more complex. It's technically complex, but easily accessible and readable, even unputdownable. He can make lightweight subjects seem serious and important, and he can write about misery and tragedy in a humorous, ironic way.

But before you get carried away and conclude that Vargas Llosa deserves the prize: did I forget to tell you that he is not a socialist? Well, he *was*. He was a convinced Communist who supported the Cuban revolution. He moved on not because he was no longer able to sympathise with the poor and oppressed, but because he still did when others began to identify more with the revolutionaries than with the people in whose name they made the revolution. He saw that Castro persecuted homosexuals and imprisoned dissenters. While other socialists kept quiet and thought that the dream justified the means, Vargas Llosa began to ask himself the difficult questions about why his ideals looked more like prison camps than socialist utopias when realised.

That is when the author began to think that the centralisation of power and wealth to the government led to authoritarianism, and that trade barriers, regulations and the absence of property rights protected the powerful and made it impossible for the poor to start businesses and build a life of their own. He became a classical liberal, forever fighting against the corrupt and the authoritarian, no matter how they disguised themselves – whether as military juntas, mercantilist right-wingers or socialist dictators – and he took up the fight for the rule of law and property rights for the poor and oppressed.

The attempts to portray Vargas Llosa as a supporter of the authoritarian, conservative right in Latin America are just embarrassing. The only piece of evidence in the *Aftonbladet* article was that he supported Sebastián Piñera in Chile's last presidential election – which doesn't make sense in any way since Piñera is a moderate, democratic politician who has attacked the authoritarian tradition of Chile's right and voted against Pinochet in the referendum on his rule in 1988.

Vargas Llosa's attempt to hold all rulers to the same standards is what makes the claim that he betrayed the left so revealing. A lot of intellectuals have condemned rightist dictatorships in Peru and Chile, and a lot of intellectuals have condemned leftist dictatorships in Cuba and Nicaragua, but few have, like Vargas Llosa, condemned them both.

If that is an attack on the left, it is only because that left has put its hope in successive generations of caudillos like Castro and Chávez. Anyone who insists that the same democratic rules should apply to their heroes becomes a traitor, a quitter, a rightist. He is the slave on their chariots, whispering that all glory is fleeting and that thou are mortal. And that's not a popular role to play. As Vargas Llosa once wrote: 'For reasons that elude me, anyone defending freedom of expression, free elections and political pluralism in Latin America is known as a right-winger among the area's intellectuals.'

The attempts to politicise a prize in literature, and the demands that authors should be card-carrying leftists, are not very attractive. But perhaps the critics have a point after all. Perhaps we can't separate Vargas Llosa's novels from his politics, his literature from his belief in liberty. In an essay on writing he explained that 'all good literature is radical, and poses radical questions about the world in which we live', and that literature is 'the food of the rebellious spirit, the promulgator

of non-conformities'.

It can even be said that the Swedish Academy agrees, because it gave Vargas Llosa the prize 'for his cartography of structures of power and his trenchant images of the individual's resistance, revolt and defeat'. The difference between him and his old friends-turned-opponents is that he takes that power and that resistance seriously. They are not just fiction.

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