

## AM I AN ADJECTIVE OR A NOUN?

I woke up this morning with my mind on adjectives. This is something I have been thinking about for a long time. I have never been good at grammar. I don't know a past participle from a gerund, but I do know that an adjective modifies a noun. And the question I have been pondering is: In my world, which really defines me--the adjective or the noun? And which is more important?

This goes back to a little couplet that my mother taught me when I was two or three years old: "I am an American Jew, and I'm proud of it, too." When I say, "I am an American Jew..." the word Jew is the noun, and American is the adjective, modifying the noun. Therefore, I am a Jew, first, and I just happen to be an American because my mother came here from Romania, and I happened to be born here. My mother, before coming to America, was a Romanian Jew. My cousins in France are French Jews. Jews in Israel are Israeli Jews. Hmm.

Here in America, most "ethnic Americans" are called "fill in the blank" Americans: Irish Americans, Italian Americans, Afro Americans, Mexican Americans. (Jewish Americans sounds awkward, and I don't remember hearing Puerto Rican Americans; perhaps because Puerto Ricans are American. I get a kick out of the term "New Yorican," a contraction of New York Puerto Rican, not unlike New York Jew.) American Anti-Semites may have good reason to worry about the first loyalty of American Jews—to their American identity or to their Jewish identity--to the noun or to the adjective? (Likewise, where is the American Anti-Semite's first loyalty?)

I have a similar problem with the concept of "worker-intellectual." The noun is what you are. The image of the worker-intellectual in the sweatshop: a thinker, a person of ideas, a writer, a poet, in a factory in order to survive. Worker is the adjective that modifies the noun that defines who they are--intellectuals. When not working, they may write books, essays, or poems, or may simply read or think. They are different from their fellow workers. They may either be admired or derided. "What the hell are you doing here?" They are workers because they can't make a living at an intellectual pursuit.

However, in today's world, the reality of the "intellectual-worker" is much more common: From Walter Reuther to Bruce Raynor, Andy Stern, John Wilhelm, and more than half my colleagues in the ILGWU Training Institute. Perhaps, the college-educated worker would be more accurate. Mostly middle class (their parents were the workers), they were born in the USA, received good educations, and would have entered academia, business or the professions, if their political philosophy hadn't driven them to define themselves as workers. They were wannabe workers much the same way that many of the worker-intellectuals (above) were wannabe intellectuals.

When I was organizing for the ILGWU, I wanted very much to be considered a worker, but I was really a college-educated intellectual. I was happy to settle for "intellectual-worker." Union organizers, the generation before me, were workers who left the shop or factory to organize other workers. They didn't come from an academic background,

motivated by the Marxist view of the working class as the vanguard to bring about a socialist society. They just wanted a union, a contract, and to get the foreman off their backs. Or the more ambitious wanted to be leaders in their union—business agents, officers. Whatever they wanted, they were worker-workers. After I graduated from CCNY in 1949, I applied to the UAW for a job. I was told to go to work in a UAW plant, get active in the union, and come back in a couple of years. I returned to CCNY for graduate school. (My friend Stan Aronowitz actually did go to work in a UAW plant. He, like Reuther, was the very model of the intellectual-worker, but where Reuther went on to be the President of UAW, Stan left the labor movement to teach and write about labor, and instead of being an intellectual-worker, became an intellectual-intellectual.) To make things more confusing, if having a union card makes you a worker, many of us in workers' education were members of Local 189 of the American Federation of Teachers. And of course, teachers, whether members of the AFT or the NEA are also workers. And the lawyers working for Greater Boston Legal Services are members of a UAW local.

For most of us, our occupation is the noun, and it is modified by our religion or nationality, or some other characteristic: Jewish doctor, Italian tenor, crooked lawyer, handsome actor, black baseball player etc. Sometimes our gender is the noun: short man, gay man, overworked woman, funny woman. But now I am rambling.

So which is more important, the noun or the adjective? I guess it depends on the circumstances.

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