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Mario Vargas Llosa

The Nobel Committee gets it right for once.

Like the rest of the world, we were surprised, stunned almost, by last month's news that the great Peruvian novelist, journalist, and sometime politician Mario Vargas Llosa had won the Nobel Prize for literature. How could this be? The author of a long shelf of essays, stories, and novels, including (in their English titles) *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, *The Time of the Hero*, and *The Feast of the Goat*, Vargas Llosa is not a lightly concealed pornographer, like Elfriede Jelinek (our 2004 Nobel laureate), nor is he a Communist, Communist fellow-traveler, or flack for left-wing tyrants like, well, like so many recent recipients of that most conspicuous if tarnished honor. (Ponder, for starters, the names Günter Grass, Harold Pinter, and José Saramago, Nobel laureates all.)

Indeed, Vargas Llosa has not only been a popular writer but also an exemplary public figure. Among other things, he is a staunch defender of free markets and the democratic ideals of limited government and individual liberty. He is also a clear-eyed critic of utopian schemes. "The idea of a perfect society lies behind monsters like the Taliban," he observed in an interview. "When you want paradise you produce first extraordinary idealism. But at some time you produce hell." In 1990, Vargas Llosa ran for the presidency of Peru, and as a journalist he has done much to counter the sclerotic leftism that has blighted so much of Latin American cultural life. He frankly described his fellow Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez as a "Castro courtesan." In 1976, he indulged in a more pragmatic form of critical intervention, greeting García Márquez at a movie premiere in Mexico with a solid punch in the nose. It's not often that we wish we could have been at a movie premiere in Mexico; that was one we were sorry to miss.

We would have thought that Vargas Llosa's elevation would be grounds for near universal rejoicing. But no Nobel award is complete without a bit of macabre comedy. On reflection, we see that it was only to be expected that news of Vargas Llosa's award would be a bitter tonic to the left-wing redoubts that regard the Nobel Prize as a sort of birthright belonging to their ideological tribe. Writing for the refreshingly effervescent website *Spiked*, the Swedish journalist Johan Norberg provided an amusing smorgasbord of pink-hued outrage about Vargas Llosa's award. "In Sweden's biggest newspaper, *Aftonbladet*," Norberg writes,

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 Ezpeleta even claimed that the prize was a victory for racists, because Vargas Llosa once wrote an essay attacking the ideology of multiculturalism. So, it's OK to support champions of Lenin and Stalin, admirers of Castro, or partisans of Slobodan Milošević. But just let someone come to the table with a kind word for Adam Smith, *The Federalist Papers*, or American democracy: Horrors!*

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