



## MODERNITY, THE INDIVIDUAL AND RATIONALITY IN MARXISM (SURREALISM AND REVOLUTION)

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*Constellation*, 1935 by Valentine Hugo shows six Surrealist 'stars': Paul Eluard, André Breton, Tristan Tzara, Benjamin Péret, René Côtel, René Char.

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A significant amount of contemporary cultural criticism has come to be shaped around the so called 'problematic of modernity'. A dense complex of debates and controversies has criss-crossed, developed, or reacted against categories and orientations that were evolved by the Frankfurt School (especially Adorno) on the one hand, amidst the unrelenting bid of post-structuralist theory for hegemony in cultural 'discourse', on the other. This article will in no way attempt to summarise or systematise this complex. It will attempt to focus on a limited number of ideas that are crucial to it, in order to consider certain assumptions that need to be clearly either accepted or rejected.

Through the conception of modernity, theorists want to concentrate on certain forms of social relationship and experience that predominate not only in bourgeois society, but also in those non-capitalist societies that perpetuate analogous or basically similar forms of urbanism, industrialism, secularization and statification. Permeating the concept in its contemporary usages is a tragic mood, rooted in a perception that the Marxist project has failed—that history has not seen an 'aufhebung' of alienation, fragmentation and bourgeois reason, and that the Marxist mode of critique as part of praxis has exhausted its possibilities. The fundamental doubt, within so much Marxism as also outside it, is that perhaps no social and experiential transformation could ever create a rational society of free individuals.

Let us begin by considering the concept of the individual. Notwithstanding structuralism, it is clear that Marxism needs a theory of the individual. I will attempt a brief summary of some of the features of this. There are, in the various historically specific socio-economic formations, correspondingly various types of individual. On this perfectly concrete level, different forms of *individuality* are structured by different societies: characteristic psychic structures, patterns of behaviour, consciousness and experience, are determined by and simultaneously ensure the reproduction of specific forms of social organization. For example, we can talk of the general characteristics of the individual in simple or primitive communities. For Marx this individual maintained an integrated personality at the level primitive society made possible. Just as labour is not yet organised into an alienated division, so the experience and faculties of individuals are not yet fragmented. Apart from role distinctions based on sex, each member of society is capable of undertaking all the basic activities found in that society, just as he/she attains whatever knowledge is engendered in it. This individual is one in which the diverse psychic functions are not yet differentially repressed. If we work through the implications of this conception in terms of an historicised, dialectically reworked psychoanalysis, we might say that cognitive thought does not yet dominate a conscious ego, whilst emotion, intuition, and sexuality are not yet repressed into an unconscious. Yet primitive society, though unalienated within, is overwhelmingly alienated before nature which it can hardly at all control or comprehend; thus we might consider the primitive individual as repressed in his/her entire being-in-the-world. Though we may talk of conscious and unconscious, the psychic processes are not yet split and channelled into disparate domains.

In class societies an alienated division of labour is accompanied by fragmentations of consciousness and psyche. Particular forms of unintegrated individuality reflect and actively sustain historically specific social relations, institutions and structures of belief. In bourgeois society, in spite of differentiations between classes and the sexes, there are certain structural characteristics of the individual that are general: a conscious ego harbouring the mental processes of rationality and morality mediates between the outer world of society and nature and the repressed unconscious processes which include sensibility and sexuality. The reified processes of capitalist society - in production and all institutions - are mirrored in the instrumental rationality of this reified consciousness. The abstract, mechanistic materialism of western science is the counterpart to a social metabolism with nature that dominates, dissects, and uses it as mere thing to exploit. The project of Marxism is the self-transformation of society into a condition of classless, unalienated, self-regulation of existence in dynamic harmony with nature. Society's self-development as conscious 'freely associated producers' entails 'all-rounded social individuals'. It involves *individuation*: though not a term of Marx's this denotes a psychically integrated, balanced, unique, concrete individuality: a form of individual whose self-fulfilment is not in conflict with that of others, nor with society's transparent, emancipatory praxis.

Discussion of the individual frequently confuses these conceptions leading, I believe, to false theoretical dilemmas. Often, a critique of *bourgeois individualism* is seen to necessitate the theoretical rejection of individuality as a category: actually to imply that there are no active individuals in any society—past, present or future! Liberal ideology's mystified reflection of the market presents the fragmented, alienated individual of bourgeois society not as determined in activity by reified processes of capital accumulation and labour, but as conscious, free, and self-determined. The just desire to criticise this ideology in all its forms seems ultimately to underlie structuralism's and post-structuralism's rejection of all subjects of history, *per se*. That individuals are constituted by capitalist social processes to perform unreflexively in the roles assigned to them, is seen to entail that individuals never could be subjects of their activity and thought. Marx's historico-ethical concept of communist individuality is repulsed.

In Adorno, on the other hand, emerges the unargued view that there is no individuation without repression; that the development of rationality not only has been, but *must inevitably* be associated with domination over other human urges—as for Nietzsche and Freud. This view also assumes that instrumental rationality is the only form that reason can take: that the critique of technocratic capitalist science and the domination of inner and outer nature, must culminate in the rejection of any reason. Such thinking loses sight of a concrete individuation, a free self engaged in balanced thought, activity, sensibility and sexuality—in forms quite different from those characteristic of capitalist society.

This arises partly from the Frankfurt School's tendency to believe there was an autonomous, whole individual in the early phases of bourgeois society: as for Goldmann's 'problematic of the individual' there is too great a readiness to accept bourgeois liberalism's view of the individual in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, whilst the new kinds of fragmentation of individuals and their 'integration' into reified 'organized capitalism' are confused with an obscure

notion of the 'disappearance of the individual'. This contradictory and pessimistic conclusion seems to concur with current bourgeois ideologies: that the future can allow one of only two kinds of relation between individual and society: either the abstract freedom and individuality of 'liberal' bourgeois society or totalitarian collectivism with its implosion of 'private life'.

Structuralism's 'problematic of the subject' begins with a misidentification of Marxism's claim to achieve a transcendent synthesis and realisation from mechanical materialism and idealism, into a new social ontology of active agency and determined structure, with a non-Marxist 'humanism'. Althusser's initial misidentification of economic 'reductionism', with an alleged residue of Hegelian 'essence' and 'appearance' in Marx led to the rejection of all 'Hegelian' categories in Marxism: in particular totality, dialectical developmental process and activity. Instead of rescuing Marxism from mechanistic determinism and idealism, structuralism recreated them in more sophisticated form, through its conception of society as a set of externally related 'relatively autonomous' practices. According to its theory of ideology, subjects are 'interpolated' into Durkheimian types of structure, in a process which must always be unconscious.

Subsequently, post-structuralists have 'decentred' all processes in such a way that the idea of individuals existing in capitalist society at all is precluded, whilst no contrast can be made between the alienated individuals of that society and the active subjects of a possible future one. Instead of capitalist society being made up of people whose experience and psychic structure are fragmented and reified, who think in ideological forms that are compatible with the reproduction of capitalism, we are presented with a reified 'ideological level' which is untranscendable. Revolutionary praxis can no longer be understood as the appropriation of knowledge by society as a whole, to make thought penetrate reality, make social reality transparent and collectively willed, thus constituting individuals as authentic subjects. Post-structuralism takes reification, fragmentation and fetishised human relations as inherent in any social existence. The process of production of a 'dispersed' subject is not read as the dominant form of experience in capitalist society, but as an eternal ontological condition.

Adorno's negative dialectic and post-structuralist deconstruction react against the 'optimism' of 'traditional Marxism', with its categories of progress, historical potential and praxis. Capitalism has not fulfilled Marxism's 'promise', but has instead developed reification to a degree beyond that imagined by Marx or even Lukács. To this, the simple point must be made, that because reality and experience in capitalist society are reified, because commodified time is installed as a sequence of repeated instants, ever-changing forms for an inert content, this does not mean that in reality there is not also an underlying developmental process. Categories must be developed to understand new levels of reification and to grasp how and why no fundamental radical transformation has occurred, but this is quite distinct from an assimilation of reification into our ontology and epistemology. Thus we speak of the definition of a task, not an appeal to 'classical Marxism'. In contrast to irrationalism, reversion to critique as the continuous obsolescence of styles, the adoption of a jaded consciousness into endless 'deconstruction', we should be embracing the task of overcoming dehistoricisation.

At this point we might consider 'Modernism'. Within that plethora of cultural movements there was a complex of tendencies including the disintegration of the representational image and rational narrative, and a concern to explore what was now understood as the unconscious. The visual arts shattered Galilean-Newtonian space and time, and recreated them in myriad forms; atonal music broke down the formal hierarchies of western classical tonality and created from its elements a free, ungrounded dream-logic; poetry constructed new, condensed image-mosaics from language. Modernism or the avant-garde was the integrally entwined cultural concomitant to the transition from liberal to monopoly capitalism, in which post-Renaissance science and culture underwent a transformation even more radical perhaps than that connected with the Industrial Revolution. In its reaction to, furtherance of, and exploration of fragmentation and reification, Modernism bore complex and contradictory relations to social and political practice. There was the elitist-fascist strand, angry at advanced capitalism precluding the possibility of a high art firmly embedded in an organic, hierarchical society; Yeats or T. S. Eliot for example, who wanted to create a new aesthetic of association, from a dialectic between all cultures of the past and new myths imagined into the fragmentation of the present. There was the tendency which in retrospect might be seen as an accommodation to the new megalopolis: the technicism of Constructivism and Meyerhold's theatre, the Bauhaus, and associated planning Utopias which are close to Social Democracy's project of humanising life within capitalism.

But there was also the humanist—socialist self-emancipatory moment. For all its ambiguities I think this was the crux of Surrealism. Surrealism wanted a revolutionary integration of the human being, liberating her/his creative 'species being'. In the movement of dream into reality and vice versa, it urged a praxis to overcome the split between conscious and unconscious, instating all individuals as free and world-transforming. As indissoluble from the revolutionary transformation of capitalist forms of production and bureaucratic domination into a classless community in conscious, collective control over social life, Surrealism conceived a new psychic organisation, in which unsuppressed and undistorted sensibilities blend in a dynamic harmony with an unreified cognitive rationality. In a sense it continued the project of early nineteenth century Romanticism—associated with Schiller or Shelley for example: that of integrating science with the ethic of emancipation, seeing imagination as the function that synthesises knowledge and experience. A liberating development of the senses and experience in all activity and relations, is inseparable from a consciousness that transforms science from reification, inhuman abstraction and domination, into knowledge as part of organic praxis in dynamic harmony with nature.

In his article *Modernity versus Postmodernity* (New German Critique, No. 22, Winter 1981), Habermas sympathises with Surrealism's challenge to the sealed and separated domains of culture in bourgeois society. But he judges its revolt as fundamentally misdirected, because he considers it sought to transform the whole of life through an explosion outward of 'art'. He says:

*A rationalized everyday life, therefore, could hardly be saved from cultural impoverishment through breaking open a single cultural sphere—art—and so providing access to just one of the specialised knowledge complexes. The surrealist revolt would have replaced only one abstraction...*

*A reified everyday praxis can be cured only by creating unconstrained interaction of the cognitive with the moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive elements.*

*Reification cannot be overcome by forcing just one of those highly stylized cultural spheres to open up and become more accessible (p.11).*

I disagree with Habermas on this. The thrust of Surrealism was not merely to aestheticise the cognitive and moral-practical but, hearing an echo from Rimbaud, to 'change life'. This meant a praxis of liberation in all political, economic, and cultural-psychic spheres, not a swamping of them by one single sphere, the aesthetic. As when Shelley said: 'We want the poetry of life', the call was for the creative transformation of every dimension of life, bringing into being a new morality, a new science, a new individual person, a free society. My concern is not to rescue the Surrealist movement from all criticism, but to claim that its central intention was and is valid. As with any movement, the reasons for its historical 'failure' do not necessarily lie in its being essentially misguided. I would assert that the hope for transformation of both capitalist and state-bureaucratic societies entails more and more a mass, decentred disalienation, a multi-subject Gramscian process of society's self-emancipation, a cultural—aesthetic praxis in all spheres, of the kind elaborated by Rudolph Bahro. This is not a return to bourgeois rationalism's mythical self, and nor can it accept the dualism of Habermas whereby a revolution can only occur in communicative social practices separated from a technical sphere of production which is regarded as already rational, and incapable of fundamental change.

We return to the questions of rationality and cultural critique. Instead of the 'historically progressive potential' of capitalism leading through revolution to human emancipation, the epoch of Modernism saw war, crisis, and fascism. Apart from the fact that the avant-garde was exploring possibilities of consciousness and reality quite other than those that Lukács's realist aesthetic demanded or could encompass, it is understandable that artists might respond to this experience not through a working beyond the Marx-Lukács rationalist tradition, but with an immediate expressive, fantastic irrationality. *Theory* however, should not jettison rational development in favour of irrationality and purely stylistic rebellion. The reaction to the 'repressed critique' of Stalinist Diamat (theory of liberation turned into dogma and dehumanization), or to economistic western Marxism, should be through criticism restoring the progressive dialectic: re-examining its origins and recreating its relation to new reality. Instead there is the tendency in Adorno to see any aspiration to systematic theory as a positivist capitulation to reality-as-given. The rejection of capitalist and Soviet—technocratic reality, and pseudo-Marxisms, slips into an irrational suspicion of the genuine Marxist project. There is a sense that it has 'let us down'; it cannot be seen that however much the twentieth century has backlashed on the promise of Socialism, if the goal is not still to unite theory and collective practice then there is no purpose in talking about liberation, nor ultimately in engaging in criticism at all. As also against post-structuralism, it must be asserted that because fragmentation advances ever further in reality, this is not a reason to reject totality either as a category of thought or as a real attribute of society—no matter how fragmented its elements and the consciousness it immediately produces. And by rejecting post-structuralism's 'texts' that

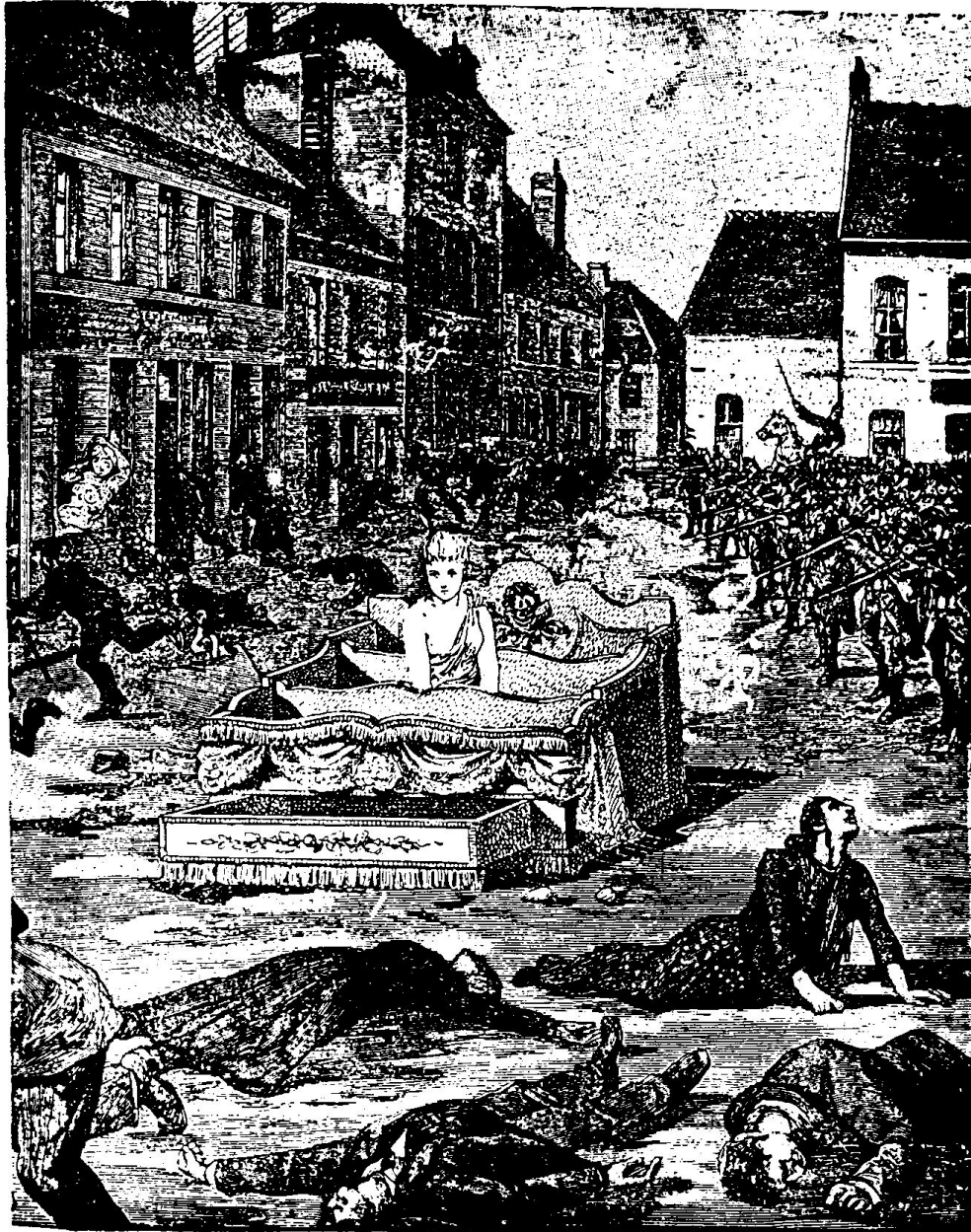
write themselves, we do not have to embrace a dogmatic, undialectical, naturalistic theory of reflection.

Marx sought to overcome the dichotomies of fact and value, of knowledge and experience, in critical thought and in concrete practice. We surely do not want to reject that project in favour of either scientism or a Nietzschean (or any other) enthronement of taste over reason and ethics. And neither a permanent avant—gardism nor a pure Lukácsian art of critical reflection answers the need for a societal aesthetic of mass praxis. A society of rational individuals is one in which all are engaged in imaginative critique and recreation.

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At every bloody uprising she flower into grace and truth: From la Femme 100 Têtes by Max Ernst, 1929.

