

Philosophy and Revolution

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October 24, 2009

If there is one dominant philosophy in the modern world that embraces both left and right (not to mention post-modernism) that philosophy is pragmatism. As a philosophy pragmatism is really quite simple. If you want to eat a bowl of soup, and the choice is between using a fork or a spoon, you will choose the spoon because it will do the job best. If you want a society where the maximum number of commodities is available to the maximum number of consumers, you might try and create a free market; or, if that doesn't work, you might try state-control and nationalisation; and, if neither does the job, there is always a mixture of the two, such as market-socialism (or something a lot nastier). The question for pragmatism is always and only, 'what works best'. If on the other hand you advocate a society in which there is no commodification of production and no reification or alienation of human labour, the pragmatist will say you are not living in the real world. You are talking abstractions. As for alienation, well what does a non-alienated state of being look like? And the pragmatist might accuse you of looking for a concealed reality behind appearances, the consciousness of which – and this isn't allowed either – might lead to consciousness of a possible alternative.

Go back two and a half thousand years and we find Plato arguing that there is indeed a reality beyond the false appearance of the phenomenal world. Plato, who doesn't give a damn about public opinion, argues that the truth in its totality, like the soul, is universal, beyond time and beyond space.

In Plato's imaginary Republic he divides society into three parts, which correspond to what he sees as the three human characteristics. At the base is the multitude. The soul of the multitude expresses itself in the love of food, comfort and sex. Above the multitude are the Guardians – the functionaries, military leaders and educators – who love power and honour. Above the guardians are the Philosophers, who love wisdom. And because the philosophers are the most perfect they live communistically, with equality between the sexes, and no private property. As regards government and the decision-making process,

Plato excludes, as well as the multitude, anyone who selfishly engages in the pursuit of wealth for its own sake. No capitalist would want to live in Plato's Republic.

Rosa Luxemburg says that at the moment the Greeks enter history their situation is that of a disintegrated primitive communism. The ancient society, in which all members of the tribe are entitled to an equal share of their collective produce and collective plunder, is undermined by the rise of aristocracy and the spread of monetisation. So, at the very time in Greek history when primitive communism is extinguished in reality, it is reinvented as an elitist ideal by Plato.

Aristotle, who comes after Plato, develops the concept of the 'good life'. The good life spans through one's lifetime; it is not a project in which the end takes primacy over the means; one's life is not a means to something else; its activity is an end in itself. Aristotle, like Plato, divides the human community into three parts: at the top is the realm of theory and philosophy, secondly there is the realm of *praxis* (which means action in the sense of free activity) and thirdly at the bottom of society is production. Whilst philosophy and praxis are activities with no other ends than themselves, production – as performed by slaves, women, artisans and others who Aristotle excludes from citizenship – has its end outside of itself.

Like Plato, Aristotle believes that ideal forms and universals are real in the logical-metaphysical sense. But unlike Plato, Aristotle argues that ideal forms and universals cannot exist separately from the material reality. In Aristotle's Republic – or rather the polis, or city state – what he calls the *material* cause is the quality and quantity of the citizens rather than the physical territory, which he assumes to be under private ownership. What he calls the *efficient* cause of the polis is the legislator – the revolutionary leader who founds the constitution. And what he calls the *final* cause (the *telos* or purpose) of the polis is the self-sufficient community and the good life.

According to Aristotle's concept of totality in the polis, the whole is more than the sum of its parts. By contrast, if we accept our fate under capitalism, we are just a collection of atomised individuals subject to a treadmill of unlimited value-production which is ultimately beyond our control, rather than members of a self-sufficient, rational community. In *Capital* Marx describes the *polis* of Greek Antiquity as well as primitive communism as societies in which it is the actual community that presents itself as the basis of production; and in which the final purpose of production is the reproduction of the community. Marx says that in mediaeval feudalism the forms of domination appear quite openly as the motive power of production; whilst in capitalism the domination is characterised by economic mystification. When Marx talks about the communist 'realm of

freedom' in relation to community and final purpose he is using Aristotle's terminology. But Marx is also suggesting that society can consist of the Good Life **without** the class system that Plato and Aristotle could see no alternative to.

Marx comes out of German Idealism. Immanuel Kant, the founder of German Idealism argues, in some ways like Plato, that there is a concealed reality beyond phenomenal appearances. But Kant says that we can never know the thing-in-itself; we can never know the ultimate reality of things in their historical totality. But that's OK he says, because science depends on that division of reality into two parts. For Kant time and space are a priori 'forms of sensibility' which condition all of the knowledge we get through sense perception and understanding. Because of the a priori forms of time and space, and because of judgements based on categories such as cause and effect, universal and particular etc, we can make sense of the manifold events we perceive in the phenomenal world; we can measure data, we can calculate numbers for practical purposes. The dualism in the philosophy of Kant is a reflex or projection of the dualism in bourgeois society between labour and capital.

Kant does however introduce the **possibility** of totality. In 1784 Kant publishes an essay on Universal History in which he considers the idea that human freedom and self-determination, beyond the mechanical ordering of animal existence, is present in nature as a tendency **in** nature itself. In that sense Kant's argument resembles Aristotle's. And Kant, at one point, seems to prefigure the Communist Manifesto when he says:

'The means employed by nature to bring about the development of all the capacities of men is their antagonism in society... the unsocial sociability... which constantly threatens to break up society.'

Kant says that in historical 'progress' individuals get bound up together in exploitative relationships. But exploitation contradicts Kant's categorical imperative that no individual should treat other individuals as a means to his or her own ends, but should instead treat them as ends in themselves. Kant says that moral wisdom must remain 'an unceasing reproach' to 'the realm of brute nature.' As regards world history, Kant speculates that as traffic, trade and industry spread throughout the world, the leading nations would need to collectively manage the available natural and human resources. To achieve this, nation states would have to recognise that their selfish and increasingly destructive behaviour would become self-defeating. And so the 'crooked wood' of humanity might be straightened by its own competitive crookedness. Kant, in 1784, foresees the type of international bodies we have over 200 years later, such as the UN, WTO and G20. Therefore, he is today the moral philosopher par excellence for the 'progressive' New Age

‘ethical consumer,’ who believes ‘change comes from within.’ In the ‘anti-globalisation’ movement Kantianism re-emerges in the idea of gradual ‘infinite progress’ towards a ‘fairer’ and ‘safer’ world, in which the self-edifying consumer becomes the agency for the ideals (‘oughts’) of ‘Stop Global Warming’ and ‘Make Poverty History.’

In the world of bourgeois science – Newtonian physics and Cartesian rationalism – the objective world exists independently of, and separate from, the thinking subject. Subjectivity becomes instrumental reason; that is, the method of reducing nature to nonbeing – the consequences of which are now obvious. In the philosophy of Kant, the concept of the thing is firmly separated from thing in itself, which he says is unknowable. In Hegel’s concept of totality this duality in the process of knowledge is resolved by eliminating the autonomy of both the objects and their concepts. In the Hegelian dialectic there is no objective reality that is independent of consciousness, and there are no mental concepts without a relation to the content of objective reality.

The Hegelian-Marxist concept of totality re-emerges in George Lukacs’ *History and Class Consciousness*, published in 1922. Lukacs argues that commodity production has the effect of rationalizing and mechanizing the work process in such a way that the working class becomes passive and fragmented. Through the sale of labour-power the labouring activity of the individual, whether mental or manual, is thingified, reified – alienated.

Against the fragmenting power of the commodity on the whole of society Lukacs dialectically juxtaposes the particular commodity that production is based on: labour-power. Since labour-power cannot be separated from the labourer, then any real self-consciousness on the labourer’s part can be ascribed, or imputed, as revolutionary. Lukacs thus postulates a working class that wakes up to mass revolutionary consciousness. Lukacs however, is well aware of the gap between the potential revolutionary consciousness and the actually existing reformist/false consciousness. So he formulates this ‘imputed’ revolutionary consciousness, which he claims can be determined by relating existing consciousness to the totality of social relationships, so that it becomes possible to infer the thoughts and feelings people **would** have in a particular situation, **if** they were able to assess how that situation, and the interests arising from it, ‘impact on immediate action and on the whole structure of society.’ For Lukacs, this power to ‘infer’ is embodied in the Communist Party.

45 years after Lukacs, the Situationist International takes up his analysis. In 1966 Omar Khayati says:

‘Since the struggle between the system and the new proletariat can only be in terms of the totality, the future revolutionary movement must abolish anything within itself that tends to reproduce the alienation produced by the commodity system... It must be the living critique of that system, the negation embodying all the elements necessary to supercede it. As Lukacs correctly showed, revolutionary organization is this necessary mediation between theory and practice, between man and history, between the mass of workers and the proletariat constituted as a class.’

However, as Guy Debord argues in *The Society of the Spectacle*, when Lukacs claimed that the Bolshevik form of organization was the long sought mediation between theory and practice, in which proletarians are no longer spectators of the events organised by the politicians, but consciously choose and live these events, the trouble was, ‘Lukacs was actually describing as merits of the Bolshevik party everything that the Bolshevik party was not’. Guy Debord differentiates the Situationist International from both vanguardism and anarcho-spontaneism when he says: ‘Proletarian revolution depends entirely on the condition that, for the first time, theory as intelligence of human practice be recognized and lived by the masses. It requires workers to become dialecticians and to inscribe their thought into practice’.

It seems to me that this statement bears more than a passing resemblance to (if not a *detournement* of) Raya Dunayevskaya’s argument in ‘Marxism and Freedom’ published ten years earlier in 1958 in the US. She argues that the Black civil rights activists, women, rank-and-file workers and youth represented a movement from practice which was itself a form of theory. But whereas Dunayevskaya’s anti-capitalism became increasingly grounded in philosophy during the 1960s, ‘70s and ‘80, Debord’s did not. In 1964 Dunayevskaya interestingly contrasted what she called ‘two kinds of subjectivity’. One kind is the elitist voluntarism of Mao Zedong: with no regard for objective conditions. Mao plunges China into the Great Leap Forward then the Cultural Revolution with disastrous human consequences. The other kind of subjectivity, as postulated by Dunayevskaya, is one resting on nothing less than the Hegelian transcendence of the opposition between Notion and Reality. That is to say, the revolutionary subject, through its struggle for freedom, gets to know and cope with the objective reality.

This second subjectivity has two sides: firstly, the fact that the workers were going to rebel spontaneously whether the theoreticians were interested or not; and secondly, the necessity for theoreticians to stop acting like bystanders and engage with workers thoughts and activities. For the theoretic power of philosophy in class struggles to be exercised, it must be projected organizationally as the power that is both the form for eliciting from the

U.S. Marxist-Humanists

masses their thoughts and for projecting a humanist and marxist perspective for a new society in which the capitalist value form is overcome.

A LONGER VERSION OF THIS TALK APPEARS IN THE JOURNAL *NEW INTERVENTIONS* 2010