

Prefatory note: This essay, which dates from 1996 or 1997 (and whose original title was "Marxism and psychoanalysis"), was written for an essentially pedagogical purpose. It was meant to introduce important concepts of Freudian psychoanalysis to a Marxist audience, specifically the membership of the ICFI, and it was also meant to demonstrate Marxism's need for those concepts. The uncertainty of the date arises from the fact that I only have an undated hard copy on file, but the reference in the opening paragraph to it being "just over a hundred years since the publication of Studies on Hysteria" narrows it down to 1996-97, since that book came out in 1895. Because the essay was written before the launching of the World Socialist Web Site (in 1998), it was not intended for publication since it was too long to be run in The International Workers Bulletin, the WSWS's printed predecessor (and, one might add, there wasn't at the time, nor is there still, a theoretical journal of the IC, which would have been an appropriate forum for such an essay). As is explained in Chapter 7 of Marxism Without its Head or its Heart, my hope was that this essay would open up a discussion on the significance of some of the insights of psychoanalysis for Marxist theory and practice, particularly with respect to the struggle for socialist consciousness in the working class. As it turned out, no one within the IC ever responded to it and it is probably a fair guess that few members ever saw it and that virtually no one bothered to read it. I am posting it now because it is still a worthwhile introduction to the subject matter. I have changed the title to more accurately reflect the essay's contents, and here it is worth highlighting the sections on Kautsky and Plekhanov, which shed light on important and on-going problems regarding Marxist conceptions of human nature and of art. The section on Trotsky's 1933-1935 notebooks also deserves mention because of its discussion of the philosophical contribution Trotsky made there to an understanding of what he termed "subjective dialectics". As we have noted in our polemics, the IC has completely ignored these notebooks of Trotsky's: there hasn't been a single article or lecture devoted to them even though they were published over two decades ago, which yet again underscores the IC's neglect of Marxist philosophy. (And neglect as well, it should be said, of Trotsky's legacy.) Finally, the posting of this essay helps to show how distorted a picture David North presents of my theoretical work in section 11 of his Marxism, History and Socialist Consciousness.

F.B.

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Psychoanalysis and the “empty place” of psychology within Marxism

By Frank Brenner

It is my aim in this paper to show that a familiarity with the basic concepts and major discoveries of Freud’s psychoanalysis can be of great value to Marxists. Before proceeding, however, a question almost seems to ask itself: why is such an undertaking still necessary at the end of the 20th century? Psychoanalysis has been around for a long time; indeed, it is now just over a hundred years since the publication of *Studies on Hysteria* in which Freud announced to the world his new technique for the treatment of psychic illness. Despite all the controversy that has attended it since its birth, no one can deny the enormous impact psychoanalysis has had on social and cultural life. When Freud died in 1939, the poet W. H. Auden wrote that, “To us he is no more a person/ Now but a whole climate of opinion.” Freud transformed the way we see ourselves with his discoveries of the unconscious mind, ‘Freudian slips’ and the Oedipus complex, but the fame (or, for some, notoriety) of these concepts does not sufficiently convey the extent of his influence on modern consciousness. “He is,” declares a recent writer, “the major source of our modern inclination to look for meanings beneath the surface of behavior – to be always on the alert for the ‘real’ (and presumably hidden) significance of our actions. He also inspires our belief that the mysteries of the present will become more transparent if we can trace them to their origins in the past, perhaps even in the very earliest past we can remember (or, more likely, *not* remember). And, finally, he has created our heightened sensitivity to the erotic, above all to its presence in arenas, notably the family where previous generations had neglected to look for it.”¹ In short, Freud effected a sea change in psychology; like Marx, Darwin and Einstein, his achievement forms one of the key intellectual landmarks of our time.

And yet there has been virtually no assimilation of that achievement by Marxists. It would be wrong to blame the Freudians for this, though their antipathy to Marxism is well known. After all, Darwin and his leading disciples like Thomas Huxley and Herbert Spencer were no more inclined towards Marxism than the adherents of psychoanalysis; for that matter, genetics was founded by a monk, the great chemist Mendeleev was a conscious opponent of dialectics, Mach and Einstein were both neo-Kantians. Obviously in all these cases (and dozens more like them), Marxists draw a distinction between the science, which is demonstrably dialectical and materialist in character, and the ideological ‘spin’ given to it by the scientist which expresses his/her social position in the professional middle class.

Why then hasn’t the same approach been taken to Freud? Clearly there is something different about psychoanalysis: at first glance, it looks more like speculation than science, and wildly idealist speculation at that. And what is the object that this science claims to study? By contrast with the palpable, objective kinds of reality studied in such ‘hard’ sciences as biology or physics,

¹ Paul Robinson *Freud and his critics*, p. 271.

the phenomena in psychoanalysis seem much less ‘real.’ As a psychology, it studies the mind, and so let us consider for a moment what that is. A Marxist would probably begin with some basic postulates of materialism: that thought is a reflection of reality and that the brain is the organ of thought. From this emerges, if only by implication, a conception of the mind which equates it with the process of thinking, i.e. with consciousness. But it isn’t hard to show that such a conception is fundamentally inadequate. We aren’t always conscious; on the contrary, there are huge gaps in the continuity of consciousness, most obviously during sleep but even when we are awake. If the mind equals consciousness, then we are forced to the conclusion that it ceases to exist in these gaps, but evidence that this isn’t the case is everywhere: in the fact that we all dream in our sleep, in the fact that we all say things we consciously don’t want to say or can’t recall things we consciously want to remember. The mind clearly does continue to exist in the gaps of consciousness, but this, in turn, can only mean that there are realms of the mind beyond (or, rather, beneath) consciousness.

Let us take a closer look at this evidence for unconscious mental life: dreams, slips of the tongue or of the pen, misreading a detail in a letter or an article, having a name ‘on the tip of your tongue,’ mislaying an object, bungling an action, forgetting an appointment or birthday or anniversary. These are all highly ephemeral phenomena and a seemingly dubious basis for a science of the mind. Couldn’t it be argued that these phenomena (perhaps with the exception of dreams) are so ephemeral as to be insignificant, that they are simply chance events and nothing more? But all too often chance is necessity inadequately understood. Ephemeral phenomena may have important underlying causes; the investigations of modern physics into subatomic particles certainly attest to that. If we tend to overlook these mental phenomena, if we tend not to give them a second thought, this has less to do with their being transitory than with their being subjective. In other words, we don’t think of them as ‘real’ because they are only something going on inside our heads. Of course this is true in the sense that the mental image of a thing isn’t the same as the thing itself. But why should this mean that the image - or indeed any other mental phenomenon - is ‘unreal’? To believe this is to fall victim to what Freud once called the “illusion of psychical freedom,” i.e. the illusion that our apparently random thoughts arise out of ‘free will,’² that they lack any objective determinacy, that they are, so to speak, fancy free. But it is not only psychoanalysts but also Marxists who must reject such a view because, according to Marxist philosophy, the subjective is also objective, which means that what goes on inside the mind is no less real - in the sense of being an objective material process - than what goes on outside it. (In passing it should be said that Freud’s insistence on the determinism of psychic phenomena no more excludes the possibility of freedom than does Marxist economic determinism: freedom remains the recognition of necessity which in the realm of mental life means making the unconscious conscious.)³

² S. Freud *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, p. 76, and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, p. 316.

³ Is every slip of the tongue, misreading, etc. determined by unconscious motives? Certainly some can be explained otherwise, by linguistic analysis for instance, i.e. two words are confused because they sound similar. The present-day campaign to discredit psychoanalysis has made much of this, but Freud never claimed to explain every slip, nor is such a claim necessary to the validity of his theory: all the latter requires is that a large number of such cases *can only be explained* by unconscious motivation. In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* Freud adduced a vast number and variety of cases including ones in which different kinds of slips (or, to use Freud's term, parapraxes) were combined: a man repeatedly forgets to go to a meeting he is supposed to attend on Fridays and finally, when he makes up his mind to go, shows up but on Saturday; a woman having stayed with relatives finds she has accidentally taken home an object she desired and then, having promised to return it, discovers that it has been mislaid and can't be found; a man posts a letter without an address and, when it is returned, posts it again but without a stamp (pp.

Mechanical materialism and the mind

The crucial point is this: is it possible to understand subjectivity objectively? If we go back to the 1920s where psychology was the subject of considerable debate inside the Soviet Union, many Marxists would have looked not to Freud but to the famous reflexologist Pavlov for an answer to this question. Pavlov's work fit the image of a materialist psychology much more than did psychoanalysis: it utilized controlled, repeatable experiments and empirical data, i.e. all the trappings of 'hard' science, whereas Freud based his ideas on individual case studies (necessarily uncontrolled and unrepeatable) as well as folklore, mythology, art, anecdotes, jokes and other supposedly unscientific sources. Thus it became commonplace in the Soviet Union to hold up Pavlov as an exemplar of materialist science against Freud's supposed subjective idealism, with Trotsky as one of the few dissenting voices on this issue. Pavlov's work undoubtedly did have scientific merit, but it failed in one fundamental respect as a meaningful theory of the mind. Pavlov's premises were purely physiological: he based his psychology on the stimulus-response model of neurophysiology. Of course without physiology there can be no psychology, since the mind cannot exist apart from the body and in particular the brain. But this did not mean that psychology was *reducible* to physiology any more than, say, chemistry was to physics. In the essay "Dialectical Materialism and Science," Trotsky pointed out the necessary differences that exist between the sciences: "Each science rests on the laws of other sciences only in the so-called *final instance*. But at the same time, the separation of the sciences from one another is determined precisely by the fact that each science covers a particular field of phenomena, i.e. a field of complex combinations of elementary phenomena and laws that require a special approach, special research technique, special hypotheses and methods."⁴

Though psychology certainly was physiology in the "final instance," Pavlov's approach took no account of what *differentiated* the two. That differential element is society: though we are born with the potential for a mind, that potential is only realized in and through social life. (When members of our species grow up outside of society, such as the 'wild child' cases that occasionally crop up, their mental functioning, like their existence, reverts to an animal state.) Thus what pertains to psychology is the field marked out by the *interaction* of biology and society. It is the interaction that is crucial and that needs to be studied with its own "special approach"; to lose sight of this is to dissolve psychology into one or another of its constituent elements, an error we will encounter often when we come to consider the history of the disputes and splits within the psychoanalytic movement. Pavlov provides a clear example of physiological reductionism and it is ironic that such a doctrine, ignoring as it did the social component of psychology, should have been so warmly embraced by Marxists. The irony was compounded by the fact that when Pavlov did turn to social matters, he insisted that they could only be understood on the basis of his theory of reflexes. Because this amounted to an idealist attack on the validity of historical materialism, Trotsky was forced to publicly criticize Pavlov on this score.⁵ What was less apparent at the time – in large measure because of the iconization of Pavlov by the Stalinist bureaucracy – was that Pavlov's ideas on individual psychology were as

290-1). All of us can readily think of similar examples from our own experience. A single error or slip we might chalk up to 'coincidence' (as inadequate an explanation as that is) or try to account for it in some other way, but a *combination* of errors is clearly something more than coincidence and there is simply no other reasonable explanation in such cases except unconscious motivation.

⁴ L. Trotsky *Problems of Everyday Life*, p. 214.

⁵ See "Science in the Task of Socialist Construction" in *Problems of Everyday Life*, pp. 202-3.

problematic as his views on social psychology.

It was Wilhelm Reich, the leading figure among the Freudo-Marxists, who brought this out in the late 1920s when he took issue with the prevailing (pro-Pavlov) consensus within the Soviet Union, which he described as follows: “... psychological phenomena as such do not exist: the life of the soul is simply a physical process ... the very concept of the soul, or psyche, is an idealistic and dualistic error.” This wasn’t Marxism, Reich argued, but rather mechanical materialism, which “consists in the fact that measurable, ponderable and palpable matter is identified with matter as such.” Just because an emotion couldn’t be measured or reproduced experimentally in the same way as a reflex didn’t make it any less real. Indeed, if one accepted such a narrowly mechanical standard of reality, then much else besides emotions or the soul would have to be written off as idealist illusion: “... if one is logical, one should not speak of class consciousness, revolutionary will, religious ideology, etc. but should wait until chemistry has supplied the necessary formulae for the physical processes concerned, or until the science of reflexes has discovered the appropriate reflexes.” (And this was indeed what Pavlov was suggesting.) Moreover, even assuming that such “necessary formulae” were eventually found, “our understanding of what pleasure (or sorrow, or class consciousness) actually is will not have advanced a jot” because such formulae can tell us nothing about “the actual content of feelings and ideas.”⁶ Knowing everything there is to know about the neural circuitry and reflexes that go into producing a smile or shedding a tear gets us no closer to understanding happiness or sorrow: we would simply be mired in a mountain of physiological data without ever penetrating the life of the mind. Had he been aware of it, Reich could have found important support for his argument in Engels’s *Dialectics of Nature*. Reacting against a reductionist tendency in the natural sciences of his time, Engels wrote with great prescience: “One day we shall certainly ‘reduce’ thought experimentally to molecular and chemical motions in the brain; but does that exhaust the essence of thought?”⁷

The mind, then, is not the same as the brain nor is it a simple mirror of external reality. It needs its own “special approach” which is only another way of saying that it needs to be studied as an autonomous phenomenon. The historical evolution of psychology bears this out. It was among the last of the sciences to emerge because, as Otto Fenichel, another of the Freudo-Marxists, pointed out, the resistance of class society tended to increase “in proportion to the approach of the subject matter of the science to the personal concern of man.”⁸ For centuries psychology was treated as a branch of speculative philosophy, dealt with either in metaphysical terms (e.g. the theological conception of man as half-angel, half-devil) or else in terms of the various categories (or ‘faculties’) of reason such as those elaborated by Kant.

But there was one aspect that couldn’t be handled this way - mental illness. In the feudal era, this was treated as a religious matter (the mad were said to be possessed by the devil), but with the advent of bourgeois society, a more secular approach was borrowed from medicine: madness was ‘brain disease.’ Psychiatry was established as a medical specialty and it proceeded to categorize mental illnesses and detail their symptoms just as physicians did with physical ailments. But the problem was that aside from those cases which really were ‘brain disease’ (and

⁶ W. Reich, "Dialectical Materialism and Psychoanalysis" in *Sex-Pol*, pp. 11-13.

⁷ F. Engels *Dialectics of Nature*, p. 175.

⁸ Otto Fenichel *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*, pp.3-4.

which were more properly the province of neurology), there were a great many other cases that had no physical causes whatsoever. Obviously a medical approach would not work here: one had to understand mental illness (and therefore the mind) on its own terms. But that was a dangerous proposition: if madness wasn't a medical condition, that meant that nature wasn't the source of this 'illness'; what other source could there be, then, except society? This was not something mainstream bourgeois science could confront objectively: here we come across the same ideological 'blind spot' that can be found in other fields of vital concern to the ruling class such as economics and history. Unable to make any meaningful progress in understanding and therefore treating mental illness, psychiatry became in large measure a pseudo-science in which bourgeois social and moral norms were often passed off as objective criteria of sanity and insanity. (Malingering, homosexuality and juvenile delinquency are only a few of the more egregious examples of the kinds of behavior that have been classified as 'disease' at one time or another.) At the same time, the 'treatments' it did offer had far more to do with policing than with healing: lobotomy, electroshock or (in more recent times) powerful tranquilizers have served to render the insane and many not-so-insane 'harmless'. These barbaric methods are a measure of the antagonism of bourgeois society to opening up mental life to an objective examination.

Trotsky on the autonomy of the psyche

To approach the mind as an autonomous phenomenon is the necessary starting point of a materialist psychology. The best proof of that, in fact, comes not from Freud but from Trotsky. His remarks on this subject are contained in some notebooks from the mid-1930s which were discovered only relatively recently in the Trotsky archives at Harvard University and published in 1986.⁹ The relevant passages are from a discussion about the interrelationship of consciousness and nature and it will be useful here to present Trotsky's train of thought in some detail. Trotsky is arguing that this interrelationship needs to be understood "as an independent realm with its own regularities." This is because: "The dialectic of consciousness is not ... a *reflection* of the dialectic of nature, but is a *result* of the lively interaction between consciousness and nature and - in addition - a method of cognition, issuing from this interaction."¹⁰ Before this statement is misread as a lapse into idealism, it is necessary to emphasize that Trotsky's point is about the *dialectic* of consciousness, i.e. about the process rather than the content of thought. Indeed, a few paragraphs later when he invokes one of his favorite analogies – "Consciousness acts like a camera" – it is perfectly obvious that he holds to the materialist viewpoint that thought reflects reality. But *how* does that reflection take place? – that is the issue Trotsky was trying to get at. The process at work in the mind (like the process at work in the camera) isn't identical to the process of the reality it is reflecting. To argue otherwise isn't materialism but rather Hegelian

⁹ The volume is entitled *Trotsky's Notebooks, 1933-1935: Writings on Lenin, Dialectics, and Evolutionism* and it was brought out by an American academic, Philip Pomper. Trotsky had made mention of the material contained in these notebooks in his *Diary in Exile*, 1935 when he wrote in the entry dated May 16: "Today I wrote a little about the interrelationship between the physiological determinism of brain processes and the 'autonomy' of thought, which is subject to the laws of logic" (p. 119). Trotsky went on to complain about not having sufficient knowledge or time to devote to "a big and serious work" on the subject and it is clear that he abandoned the project. However, neither in his own published writings nor in research about him was there any further indication of what had become of the notes he had already written, and the common assumption prior to the opening of the archives was that they had been lost. Pomper came across them while looking through some notebooks that previously had been believed to contain only material for a biography of Lenin that Trotsky had once planned to write.

¹⁰ *Trotsky's Notebooks, 1933-1935*. This quote and all further ones from the *Notebooks* are from pp. 101-107.

idealism: “Since cognition is not *identical* with the world (in spite of Hegel’s idealistic postulation), dialectical cognition is not *identical* with the dialectic of nature.”

The camera analogy demonstrates this point: still photography “tears from nature ‘moments’ [while] the ties and transitions among them are lost”; motion pictures are more like nature in their “uninterruptedness,” but the latter is an illusion created by “exploit[ing] the eye’s imperfection,” i.e. by stringing together separate moments (or shots) with breaks between them too short for the retina to register. In other words, by a process of illusion, the camera produces a (more or less accurate) reflection of reality. Needless to say, the process (or dialectic) of consciousness must be a good deal more complicated. This brings Trotsky to the following conclusion: “Consciousness is a quite original *part* of nature, possessing peculiarities and regularities that are completely absent in the remaining part of nature. Subjective dialectics must by virtue of this be a distinctive part of objective dialectics - with its own special forms and regularities.” There is, to put this another way, an important degree of autonomy to the processes of the mind.¹¹

Having established this point, Trotsky considers a familiar objection to it: “The brain is the material substrate of consciousness. Does this mean that consciousness is simply a form of ‘manifestation’ of the physiological processes in the brain? If this were the state of affairs, then one would have to ask: What is the need for consciousness? If consciousness has no *independent* function, which rises *above* physiological processes in the brain and nerves, then it is unnecessary, useless; it is harmful because it is a superfluous complication - and what a complication!” Thus, the essential problem with physiological approaches to psychology was that the latter only began where physiology left off. Consciousness “can be biologically and socially ‘justified’ only in the event that it yields vital results beyond those which are achieved by the system of unconscious reflexes. This presupposes not only the autonomy of consciousness (within certain limits) from automatic processes in the brain and nerves, but the ability of consciousness to influence the actions and functions of the body as well.” Or, as Trotsky adds a little further on, in going from physiology to psychology, “we approach ... some sort of critical point, a break in the gradualness, a transition from quantity into quality: the psyche, arising from matter, is ‘freed’ from the determinism of matter, so that it can independently - by its own laws - influence matter.” It is just because there is this qualitative “break” between psychology and physiology that all the physiological data in the world cannot tell us a ‘jot’ about feelings or thoughts.¹²

¹¹ Since the concept of ‘autonomy’ has been used to disavow materialism (commonly by treating a given aspect of the cultural superstructure as being so ‘mediated’ from its material base that the latter ceases to have any significance whatsoever), it should be said that in these notes Trotsky always treats autonomy as a relative term, which he indicates by either qualifying it in some way or putting it in quotation marks. Materialists never lose sight of the relative nature of autonomy whereas idealists turn it into an absolute. But while steering clear of idealism, it is just as important for *dialectical* materialists to avoid the mistake of ignoring autonomy entirely, which is what mechanical materialists do with regard to the mind. Freud, it should be added, also insisted on the relative nature of the psyche’s autonomy, parting company with idealist opponents like Adler and Jung precisely over their attempts to divorce psyche from instinct, i.e. spirit from matter.

¹² It seems to me that the remarks cited in this paragraph are really directed at Pavlov, though Trotsky doesn’t mention him by name. In the 1920s, Trotsky held the view, expressed in *Culture and Socialism*, that Pavlov and Freud complemented each other. In essence, that view amounted to a hope that at some point in the future the theories of psychoanalysis could be confirmed experimentally by neurophysiology (a hope, one might add, that Freud also shared). Apart from the criticisms of Pavlov’s social views mentioned earlier, Trotsky had little to say

Trotsky now turns to psychoanalysis, which, he notes, “in practice completely removes itself from physiology, basing itself upon the inner determinism of psychic phenomena.” Because of this, Freud has often been accused of idealism, and it is true that psychoanalysts are frequently inclined to mystification. “But by itself the method of psychoanalysis, taking as its point of departure the ‘autonomy’ of psychological phenomena, in no way contradicts materialism. Quite the contrary, it is precisely dialectical materialism that prompts us to the idea that the psyche could not even be formed unless it played an autonomous, that is, within certain limits, an independent role in the life of the individual and the species.” This remarkable statement caps Trotsky’s argument: in effect what it says is that if psychoanalysis didn’t exist, Marxists would have had to come up with something very much like it. And while many Freudians would have vehemently denied any connection of their doctrine with the world outlook of Marxism, there was an important group of analysts, i.e. the Freudo-Marxists, who would have readily concurred with Trotsky’s analysis: the materialist and dialectical character of psychoanalysis was a major theme of their writing and Fenichel summed up their common position in the title of one of his essays: “Psychoanalysis as the Nucleus of a Future Dialectical-Materialistic Psychology.” Indeed, confirmation of this view of psychoanalysis can be found in as unlikely a source as Norman O. Brown, author of a well-known work which tried to meld psychoanalysis with mysticism, who noted how surprised he was to discover “Freud’s methodological affinity with the heretical tradition in logic that can be labeled dialectical.”¹³

Everything I have said so far is preliminary to a discussion of the actual content of psychoanalysis. My objective has been to establish that dialectical materialism “prompts us,” as Trotsky says, to an essentially psychoanalytic view of the mind. In the past, a lack of this kind of philosophical groundwork has led to great confusion: a Marxist might read a bit of Freud, encounter many strange and seemingly outrageous things - e.g. (‘pleasure principle,’ ‘reality principle,’ infantile sexuality, desires to sleep with one’s mother and murder one’s father, a phantasmagoria of perversions and fantasies - and, not surprisingly, dismiss the whole thing out of hand as sheer subjective idealism. But it wouldn’t be the first time in the history of science that something was dismissed as absurd *only because it was unfamiliar*. And, after all, what would we expect to find in a scientific psychology? If the truths it disclosed weren’t ‘strange,’ if it only confirmed what we already knew, i.e. the ‘common sense’ view we have of ourselves, then why have a science at all? But surely the need for such a science cannot be disputed: it is called for not only by the pervasive tragedy of mental illness (afflicting by some estimates as many as one in five people) but also by the darkness and confusion that shrouds so much of the

about the specifics of Pavlov’s psychology. Though he compared Pavlov to a diver working his way painstakingly up the “psychic well”, he also noted with a measure of irony that there was a long way to go before one could get “from the saliva of dogs to Poetry” (*Problems of Everyday Life*, p. 233). It is interesting to note that the “psychic well” metaphor recurs in Trotsky’s 1932 Copenhagen speech, but there is no mention of Pavlov this time, only of Freud who is praised for the “inspired” way in which his theories have “lifted the cover of the well which is poetically called the ‘soul’” (*Leon Trotsky Speaks*, p. 269). The remarks in the notebooks are explicitly aimed at the kind of physiological approach taken by Pavlov to psychology and Trotsky’s mentioning of reflexes seems an obvious enough reference to the Russian scientist. If this is the case, then it would mark something of a change from Trotsky’s earlier view: the essential problem was no longer the reactionary muddle of Pavlov’s politics but rather the mechanical materialism of his psychology. And, we can add today, if we turn to the theoretical descendants of Pavlov, i.e. the various schools of behaviorism, we find yet again mechanical approaches to the mind coupled with dubious and often overtly reactionary conclusions about social life.

¹³ Norman O. Brown *Life Against Death*, p. xii.

mental life of ‘normal’ people. If we abandon the illusion of ‘psychical freedom’ and try to consider objectively what is going on inside our minds, we soon find that beneath the surface unity of consciousness there lies a sea of contradictions. “No one who has ever looked deeply into his or her self,” writes one analyst, “can fail to be impressed with the anarchy that reigns there.”¹⁴ Psychoanalysis tries to understand the order underlying that anarchy or, to put this another way, it is the application of reason to unreason. “The subject matter, not the method of psychoanalysis, is irrational,” states Fenichel.¹⁵ But the findings of such a science are bound to seem strange to rational consciousness, especially since, as we will eventually see, the irrational isn’t just an absence of reason but arises out of an active repression by reason. In short, it would be hard to imagine anything less suited to being judged on the basis of first impressions than psychoanalytic theory.

Marxism’s need of a ‘genetics’

There remains a further preliminary point that needs to be raised, one that relates to Marxism rather than to psychoanalysis. Psychology, as the Freudo-Marxists contended, is an “empty place” within the world outlook of Marxism. To say this is neither to detract from the many psychological insights to be found in the works of Marx and Engels nor to deny the immense significance of historical materialism for an understanding of both social and individual psychology. But there is no worked-out theory of the mind within historical materialism nor does the latter do away with the need for such a theory. Since the first and second generation of Marxists had no access to a materialist psychology, it was inevitable that this would be an “empty place” in their writings. Furthermore, the working class is the first property-less and therefore in large measure culture-less class to come to power, which imparts, as Trotsky noted in *Literature and Revolution*,¹⁶ a certain one-sidedness to the proletarian revolution: its creative energies are almost entirely concentrated on politics while other cultural realms such as art (or psychology) are necessarily left in a relatively “empty” state. The danger in such a situation is to start making a virtue out of necessity by pretending that there is no gap where one exists. This is just what happened in art: the cultural backwardness of the masses was turned into a virtue by the advocates of ‘proletarian culture.’ A similar tendency emerged with regard to psychology: because of the absence of a materialist understanding of subjectivity it was assumed that subjectivity itself did not exist, i.e. that the psyche (mind, soul, etc.) was an idealist illusion, that it was all just a matter of neurons and reflexes (which helps explain the appeal of Pavlov’s approach despite his evident idealism on social issues).

What exactly is this “empty place” in Marxism? Erich Fromm, a Freudo-Marxist in his early days, explained the matter as follows: “Marx and Engels postulated the dependence of all ideological processes on the economic substructure. They saw intellectual and psychic creations as ‘the material basis reflected in man’s head.’ In many instances, to be sure, historical materialism could provide the right answers without any psychological presuppositions. But only where ideology was the *immediate* expression of economic interests; or where one was trying to establish the correlation between economic substructure and ideological superstructure. Lacking a satisfactory psychology, Marx and Engels could not explain how the material basis was

¹⁴ Joel Kovel, “The Marxist View of Man and Psychoanalysis” in *The Radical Spirit*, p. 183.

¹⁵ Fenichel, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹⁶ L. Trotsky *Literature and Revolution*, pp. 203, 206.

reflected in man’s head and heart.”¹⁷ This issue is of cardinal importance to the Freudo-Marxists and crops up repeatedly in their writings: Marxism explains that social being determines social consciousness, i.e. that economics determines ideology, but what it cannot explain is the *process* by which this ideology is embedded in the mind of the individual. There is surely nothing automatic or natural about this process, i.e. we aren’t born with bourgeois character traits such as possessiveness or competitiveness, though of course this is just what the intellectual apologists for capitalism would like us to believe. But we abandon the field to them unless we have an alternative explanation.

Fromm acknowledged that where an individual’s motivation is directly determined by economic interest, Marxism has no need of a psychology to account for what is going on. Actually, this gives too narrow a picture of what Marxism can explain; as I will argue when I come to Reich, the Freudo-Marxists tended to ignore important aspects of Marxist theory (e.g. the fetishism of commodities) which are invaluable in understanding the psychology of everyday life in capitalist society. But even if we give Marxism the full measure of its due in this realm, a great deal still remains in the dark. For one thing, we know that in capitalist society the great mass of the population do not act in accordance with their objective economic interests but very much against them. This is explained by the fact that the dominant ideology of any class society is the ideology of the ruling class and that therefore the oppressed share (to one degree or another) the same outlook as their oppressors. But this is a remarkable fact which calls for further explanation. Historical materialism assumes - since it has no other way of understanding psychological motivation - that people behave rationally, i.e. according to their economic self-interest (though it is often far from self-evident what that self-interest is). But clearly the behavior of the oppressed is in some significant degree *irrational* or else they would not continue to put up with their oppression. Here a materialist psychology is indispensable because *emotion* is the crucial factor at work in this aspect of social life - as it is in many others - and only a psychology can disclose to us how class ideology shapes the feelings of the masses.

It is useful here to draw an analogy with Darwinism: when Darwin first put forward his theory, he “proposed and demonstrated an evolutionary process which proceeded by means of a hypothetical transmutation of the species ... and yet remained wholly in the dark as to the actual genetic means of this transmission and transmutation”; it was only when genetics, having rescued Mendel’s work from obscurity, emerged as a science in the early part of this century that the means by which species evolved became evident. Marxism finds itself in a similar position: it has demonstrated the material forces at work in social evolution but it too is in need of a ‘genetics’, i.e. a theory which can show *how* these forces are realized “in man’s head and heart.” With the emergence of psychoanalysis, there finally existed a psychology which could meet this need within Marxist theory.¹⁸

¹⁷ E. Fromm, “The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology” in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, p. 155.

¹⁸ The quote and the point about Marxism lacking a ‘genetics’ is from E. P. Thompson’s polemic against the French Stalinist philosopher Louis Althusser, *The Poverty of Theory*, p. 164. Thompson, a British radical historian, was not specifically concerned with Freud in these remarks; indeed, his critique of what he disparagingly called ‘Marxisms’ (Althusser being treated as a case in point) was much more wide-ranging. That Thompson was right against Althusser but wrong against genuine Marxism need not deter us from making use of his analogy since it can support a conclusion quite different than the one he came to: after all, genetics did not lead to the repudiation of Darwinism but to its strengthening; and so why shouldn’t the same be true for Marxism?

Kautsky’s ‘social instinct’

Marxists are forced to live in enemy territory; a gap in theory can therefore constitute a breach in their ideological defenses. The Freudo-Marxists claimed that this was the case with psychology: for lack of an adequate theory, Marxists were often led “to inject a private, purely idealistic psychology in this empty place,”¹⁹ Indeed, this is just what Marxists would expect to happen once we accept the basic premise. Examples of this are most often to be found in those writings where Marxists have, as it were, left the beaten track by trying to tackle matters such as ethics, art, sexuality, family relationships, etc.: sooner or later one reaches the limits of historical materialism as a theoretical guide in these matters and then the only available recourse is to start improvising a psychology, which almost always means smuggling in an idealist one.

Fromm mentioned one of Kautsky’s works as an example of this tendency and it is well worth considering here. The book is called *Ethics and the Materialist Conception of History* and it was published in 1906, which is to say, long before Kautsky’s apostasy from Marxism. Indeed, Kautsky’s strengths are evident in the book’s early chapters as he provides a broad historical overview of the development of ethical conceptions that takes in the ancient world, the Christian church, the Enlightenment and Kant. The latter was of particular importance to Kautsky since his purpose in writing the book was to counter the growing influence of neo-Kantianism inside the socialist movement. The Kantian conception of ethics was an ahistorical one based on the famous “categorical imperative,” a philosophical restatement of the old Christian precept – do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Kautsky was easily able to demolish Kant’s claim that this imperative was derived from pure reason and that it had nothing to do with historical reality; in fact, it represented a protest against feudal society, the ethical counterpart of the political ideals of ‘Liberty, Equality and Fraternity’ of the revolutionary bourgeoisie.²⁰

But when Kautsky tried to put forward a materialist alternative to Kant, he quickly got into trouble. He postulated the existence of a “social instinct” with some rather extraordinary properties: “In the first place naturally comes altruism, self sacrifice for the whole. Then bravery in the defence of common interests; fidelity to the community; submission to the will of society; then obedience and discipline; truthfulness to society whose security is endangered or whose energies are wasted when they are misled in any way by false signals. Finally ambition, the sensibility to the praise and blame of society. These all are social impulses which we find expressed already among animal societies, many of them in a high degree.”²¹ These impulses, as he went on to say, are “nothing but the highest virtues, they sum up the entire moral code.” Moreover, even conscience was rooted in instinct: “We have no reason to assume that conscience is confined to man.”²² The “social instinct” provided Kautsky with his ultimate refutation of Kant: “What appeared to Kant as the creation of a higher world of spirits, is a product of the animal world ... An animal impulse and nothing else is the moral law.”²³

To someone reading this at the end of the 20th century, Kautsky’s “social instinct” seems a

¹⁹ Fromm, op. cit., p. 157, n. 27.

²⁰ K. Kautsky, *Ethics and the Materialist Conception of History*, p. 58. The book is available on line: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1906/ethics/index.htm>

²¹ Ibid, p. 99.

²² Ibid, p. 99.

²³ Ibid, pp. 96-7.

classic case of anthropomorphism. In fairness to Kautsky, it should be said that he derived his ideas from Darwin's *The Descent of Man*. In that book Darwin's purpose had been to argue against the view that man was an exception to evolutionary theory and, as part of that argument, he had tried to show that characteristics that seemed uniquely human such as emotions or morality could be traced back to animal behavior. On the whole and in many of its individual insights, Darwin's work was an invaluable contribution to materialism; what it wasn't - but what Kautsky unfortunately tried to make it out to be - was an adequate basis for a materialist theory of human nature. Though we are animals who have evolved from other species, we are also animals who have made ourselves human, which means that we have fundamentally altered our own 'nature' through the process of changing the world around us. There is, in other words, a leap in development that distinguishes our species from all others and that makes any simple extrapolation from animal to human behavior or vice versa highly problematic: psychological traits such as 'bravery' or 'altruism' may mean something completely different for animals than for humans and all too often the ascribing of such characteristics to other species is nothing more than anthropomorphism.

But Darwin's theory was understandably concerned with establishing the underlying unity of all species; it had virtually nothing to say about what made humans different than other animals. In this void, it was possible to infuse all kinds of idealist and reactionary content. The most notorious example of this was 'social Darwinism': though presumably a theory of human society based on Darwinian principles, its promulgators actually filled the human 'void' in that theory with their own social assumptions, i.e. the prejudices of the British upper middle classes. That should have alerted a leading Marxist such as Kautsky to the danger of uncritically applying Darwinian theory to the human realm; instead, he made a similar misuse of that theory, filling the notion of a 'social instinct' with his own assumptions about the inherent virtues of human nature.

The problem was that Kautsky's assumptions shared many of the features of the ethical conception he was attacking, i.e. Kant's. Kant had taken the Christian 'golden rule' and turned it into an ahistorical "imperative"; Kautsky took his 'virtues' – essentially a belief that man is naturally good – and similarly turned them into an ahistorical "social instinct." Thus, the latter was little more than a categorical imperative by another name. It also had similar historical roots, i.e. Rousseau and the bourgeois democratic revolution. And it also had the fatal flaw of all ahistorical conceptions of morality: it was incapable of explaining how people born with virtuous instincts end up in a vice-ridden world. Kautsky knew he had a problem here and tried to extricate himself from it later in the book by drawing a distinction between the social instinct and "moral codes," i.e. the particular forms of morality, which were entirely subject to historical change. But this historical factor had no discernible bearing on the ahistorical 'core' of morality, i.e. the social instinct, which remained "that element of human morality which, if not independent of time and space is yet older than the changing social relations ... [it] is just that which human morality has in common with the animal."²⁴

One might wonder why Kautsky was so insistent on this point; after all, he could have stayed on the solid ground of historical materialism by holding to the view that all morality was historically relative. That view was sufficient as long as it was a matter of criticizing the position of his ideological opponents, but his real difficulty was that the struggle for socialism itself raised

²⁴ *ibid*, p. 192.

important moral issues. The virtues that Kautsky located in his social instinct – altruism, self-sacrifice, bravery, fidelity to the community, submission to the will of society, obedience, discipline, truthfulness, ambition, conscience – what were these but a catalogue of the qualities the Marxist movement sought to cultivate within its ranks and within the working class as a whole? Were these virtues really nothing more than “simple conventional fashions” like the passing moral codes of class society? To have said so would have meant abandoning the morality of socialism to the neo-Kantians, and indeed this was just the argument they had been making, i.e. that they rather than the Marxists could provide an ethical basis for socialism. Kautsky needed a materialist way of explaining the kind of moral behavior that the struggle for socialism required. But historical materialism alone couldn’t provide him with that and neither, as we have seen, could Darwinism. What he needed was a materialist theory that could account for human (as distinct from animal) instinct and how it was shaped by social life – in other words, a materialist psychology. In its absence, Kautsky was forced back to the idealist ethics he had been trying to break free from.²⁵

This example from Kautsky is fairly representative of the overall problem of the empty place of psychology in Marxist theory. It would be wrong to exaggerate its importance: in the context of the history of the Marxist movement, it is simply one further indication of the extent to which the theoretical life of the Second International was infected by neo-Kantianism. But though Marxists have long since overcome the consequences of that ‘infection’ in politics and philosophy, on a matter such as ethics it was possible largely to ignore the problem because of its relative lack of urgency, and so little progress has been made beyond Kautsky’s position. (By this I do *not* mean that there is anything idealist about the Marxist view that morality is socially and historically conditioned. Indeed, Kautsky’s book, as I noted, defended that view very ably. My point is that in the absence of a materialist psychology, idealist notions of a ‘social instinct’ or of the inherent goodness of man will tend to fill the gap whenever the need for a *positive* conception of morality crops up.)

Plekhanov’s art of ‘lofty sentiments’

Let me bring in another example, this time from Plekhanov’s writings on art. As part of his argument against the theory of art for art’s sake, Plekhanov asserted that “the merit of an artistic work is determined in the final analysis by the weightiness of its content.”²⁶ This assertion is open to objection on artistic grounds alone: though Plekhanov’s desire to emphasize the importance of content was understandable, making it into the sole basis for determining artistic

²⁵ A materialist psychology, it should be added here, would not have proved the inherent nature of Kautsky’s ‘virtues’ any more that it would have proved the existence of original sin. When such a psychology finally did emerge with Freud, it provided a basis for the moral ideals of socialism in a completely different sense - by demonstrating that there was an unprecedented and increasingly unbearable level of antagonism between human nature and the requirements of class society. The world stood condemned not for being ‘evil’ in an abstract moral sense but for being *inhuman* in the precise sense that it was all but impossible for people to live according to their human ‘nature’. One further point: there is something essentially problematic about the very notion of a ‘social instinct’ – Kautsky’s or anyone else’s - because it is tantamount to saying that society is the product not of history but of nature, a position whose reactionary implications are self-evident. The fact that humans are unquestionably social animals calls for a very different kind of explanation, one which can show how we become *socialized*.

²⁶ G. Plekhanov *Art and Social Life*, p. 171.

merit was no better than the view Plekhanov was opposing, which held that form was the only thing that mattered in art. But let us grant the point for now: the problem then becomes how to determine the “weightiness” of artistic content. Here, Plekhanov borrowed an idea from John Ruskin, the Victorian critic and social reformer, that “a maiden may sing of her lost love, but a miser cannot sing of his lost money” which goes to show that “the merit of an artistic work is determined by the loftiness of the sentiments it expresses.”

So, it is “loftiness” that is key, but then how does one determine “loftiness”? Is there anything objective which makes some emotions loftier than others? Ruskin and Plekhanov didn’t so much address this problem as finesse around it by offering a kind of litmus test for loftiness. Ruskin: “Question with yourselves respecting any feeling that has taken strong possession of your mind. ‘Could this be sung by a master, and sung nobly, with a true melody and art?’ Then it is a right feeling. Could it not be sung at all, or sung ludicrously? It is a base one.” To which Plekhanov added: “This is true, and it cannot be otherwise. Art is a means of intellectual communication. And the loftier the sentiment expressed in an artistic work, the more effectively, other conditions being equal, can the work serve as such a means. Why cannot a miser sing of his lost money? Simply because, if he did sing of his loss, his song would not move anybody, that is, could not serve as a means of communication between himself and other people.”²⁷

If the emotion moves you, it is lofty; if it doesn’t, it is base. The assumption underlying such a claim is that we all know, ‘instinctively’ as it were, the difference between what is lofty and what is base. It isn’t hard to see that by making this assumption Plekhanov was doing what Kautsky had done – injecting “a private, purely idealistic psychology” when he encountered a problem that could only be solved in psychological terms. The substance of that idealism was a moral judgment: greed was base, love was lofty. But a moral precept – justified as it might be as an expression of indignation at the brutality of bourgeois society – isn’t the same as an objective insight into the nature of emotions, let alone a credible basis on which to measure artistic merit. To use it in that way amounts to substituting what *should* be true for what actually is. And a glance at the artistic canon is enough to show how seriously mistaken a conception can be when arrived at in this way. To begin with, it wasn’t even true that a miser could not sing of his lost money: misers abound in the works of Shakespeare, Molière, Balzac and many other artists; indeed, greed is one of the great recurring themes of Western art. Nor was it true that a miser’s plight would not move anybody; on the contrary, a character like Shylock or Timon was quite capable of arousing an audience’s compassion. Of course it isn’t the money as such but the psychological obsession with it that an audience finds moving in such a character, but as soon as we allow for such a distinction, there is little left of ‘loftiness’ as a criterion for artistic merit.²⁸ Indeed, we could easily take this further: there are any number of works (*Paradise Lost* and *Carmen* readily come to mind) in which ‘good’ characters embodying lofty ideals leave the audience completely cold whereas ‘bad’ characters who are embodiments of baseness engage its interest and sympathy. Indeed, this was such a common occurrence in Hollywood movies in the

²⁷ Ibid, p. 172. The Ruskin quotes are from his 1870 Oxford lectures on art.

²⁸ This is so because the notion of obsession immediately introduces an objectively psychological, rather than a subjectively moral, criterion, and once we shift the viewpoint in that way, we can come to see that, though love and greed are certainly very different, they may have similar psychological roots in the life of an individual and therefore the emotional content of each may not be as far removed from the other as Plekhanov assumed: love can be greedy, i.e. ‘possessive,’ just as greed can be the outcome of frustrated love. Artists like Shakespeare had intuitively grasped this long before Freud spelled it out in scientific terms.

Thirties and Forties that some actors preferred playing ‘bad guy’ roles.

At any rate, the most serious objection to Plekhanov’s conception is quite simply that much of the greatest artistic work, certainly in the last two centuries, has been primarily concerned with those sentiments which clearly aren’t lofty - hate, despair, revenge, obsession, shame, i.e. all that goes into the ‘dark’ side of the human personality. Plekhanov’s well-known aversion to modern art – among other things he discounted the significance of impressionism and dismissed cubism as “nonsense cubed” – is hardly surprising in this context. Indeed, Plekhanov, again following Ruskin, turned this aversion into a general principle. Ruskin believed that great art was only possible in a morally healthy society and since capitalism was patently immoral, its art must necessarily be inferior. Plekhanov concurred, declaring: “In decadent times art must be decadent.”²⁹ Again, a moral judgment – a “desire for injustice and oppression to be punished with intellectual barrenness,” as the Marxist art historian Arnold Hauser said of Ruskin³⁰ – was being substituted for objective analysis. Of course art was not immune from the social crisis of capitalist society, but this hardly justified a blanket condemnation of all modern art as decadent. Art, like psychology, had its own degree of autonomy, its own rhythms of development, so that in decadent times it was also possible for some art to *resist* decadence.³¹

As with Kautsky, it is necessary to keep these criticisms in perspective: a balanced appraisal of Plekhanov’s artistic writings would take in those aspects such as his analysis of the social roots of art for art’s sake which endure as positive contributions to a Marxist artistic perspective. Moreover, it is to Plekhanov’s great credit that among the classical Marxists he did more than anyone to establish the basic principle that art needed to be evaluated by an aesthetic as well as a sociological analysis. Art, Plekhanov insisted, wasn’t the same as politics or journalism (a mistake made by ‘tendentious’ art) because it used images rather than logic to convey its ideas. But in making this point, Plekhanov came up against the very shortcoming we have been discussing here – the lack of a materialist psychology. If art wasn’t logical, its appeal could not be to reason, but then there had to be something else in the mind which it did appeal to. Here Plekhanov was forced to resort to the categories of Kantian philosophy: art acted on the “contemplative faculty.”³² But he had little to say about what that was, though on one occasion he claimed that it was identical to instinct.³³ This was less an explanation than an indication of

²⁹ Plekhanov, op. cit., p. 223.

³⁰ Arnold Hauser *The Sociology of Art*.

³¹ Or, to put this another way, it is one thing to say that this is a bad time for art (which it is) and quite another to say that all modern art is bad. There are two related reasons why the latter isn’t true: First, as Marx once pointed out, “the decline of earlier classes, such as the medieval knights, provided the raw material for magnificent and tragic works of art” (cited in Maynard Solomon, ed., *Marxism and Art*, p. 64), which shows that (in some cases at least) the decadence of a society can be conducive to great art. Second, the modern period has been marked not just by the decline of the ruling class but also by the revolutionary resistance of the oppressed and the emergence of an international socialist movement, which has also had its impact on art. This last point, however, has to be qualified: for the most part, the impact of Marxism and the labor movement on cultural life has not been a direct one and there is little correlation that can be shown to exist between the politics of most modern artists and the merit of their art. The most important impact of the socialist movement was in changing the cultural atmosphere by creating a sensibility that the world could be (and ought to be) very different than it was; thus, even artists politically indifferent or hostile to Marxism were still deeply affected by it, if only in the form of what seemed a purely personal impulse to swim against the stream of bourgeois social life.

³² G. Plekhanov *Unaddressed Letters*, p. 111.

³³ G. Plekhanov, “French Drama and French Painting of the Eighteenth Century from the Sociological Viewpoint” in *Selected Philosophical Works*, v. 5, p. 397.

his theoretical dilemma, since to regard instinct as ‘contemplation’ was to twist the Kantian category out of all recognition; what Plekhanov really needed was a theory of instinct.³⁴

That he did not have such a theory was obviously not his fault and, had history turned out differently, the resulting problems and misconceptions this gave rise to in his work would have long since been corrected by later Marxists. But instead, under the Stalinist regime, his artistic theories became party dogma and their idealist lapses were carried to grotesque extremes: Soviet artists were compelled to produce art with “lofty” themes and any art that didn’t conform was branded as decadent. The priority for the Trotskyist movement was to denounce this Stalinist policy for the perversion of Marxism that it was, but beyond that it was not possible for a long time to devote much attention to matters of artistic perspective, let alone reevaluate Plekhanov’s ideas on the subject. (The one call for such a reevaluation came from the Surrealist poet Andre Breton, which is fitting since as a leading modernist deeply influenced by psychoanalysis, he would have been acutely aware of the problems in Plekhanov’s work.³⁵) In recent years the situation in the Marxist movement has changed and the development of an artistic perspective is once more on the agenda; one of the things we are finally in a position to do is to carry out the long overdue task of learning from and overcoming Plekhanov’s mistakes.

Novack’s one-sided conception of human nature

I want to cite one further example both because it comes from a much later period than the work of Kautsky and Plekhanov and because it touches directly on the topic of human nature. It comes from a 1973 book by George Novack titled *Humanism and Socialism*. Some explanation is in order here because Novack was a leading figure in the US Socialist Workers Party which had broken its ties with the Trotskyist movement a decade before the publication of this book; as such, his views could hardly be said to represent the standpoint of Marxism. But while Novack’s revisionism on political and philosophical issues was readily apparent, on other matters he was sometimes capable of espousing an orthodox line. The book I am concerned with, and certainly the particular remarks I am about to cite, fall into this category: it is to the extent that they express an orthodox rather than a revisionist viewpoint that they are of interest in this discussion. (Let me note here in passing that the same was true in Plekhanov’s case: his major book on art, *Art and Social Life*, was written in 1912, long after his break with Lenin, but no one ever questioned its legitimacy as a Marxist text on this ground.)

Novack’s book was intended as an exposition of the Marxist viewpoint on a number of related issues including human nature, social progress and freedom. Rebutting the liberal view that society is the product of human nature, Novack wrote: “Human nature – good, bad, or indifferent – is the product of society. The qualities of human beings are endlessly changeable, just as their potential capacities are boundless. Human nature is far more changeable than glass, which can flow like a stream, be drawn into threads, or become rigidly frozen. Human nature, hardened into one mold, can be shattered, remelted, and recast into very different, almost unrecognizable,

³⁴ The American philosopher John Dewey pointed out that contemplation is “about as inept a term as could be selected to denote the excited and passionate absorption that often accompanies experience of a drama, a poem, or a painting.” Kant’s assigning of aesthetic experience to the contemplative faculty had the effect of encouraging the attitude that art was an “ivory tower of ‘Beauty’ remote from all desire, action and stir of emotion” (*Art as Experience*, pp. 252-3) – in other words, the very attitude that Plekhanov was fighting against.

³⁵ A. Breton, “On ‘Proletarian Literature’” in *What is Surrealism?*, p. 95.

forms. The whole panorama of social evolution testifies to this plasticity of humankind.”³⁶

The first thing to be said is that insofar as this is an argument against liberalism, Novack is right. As he says, for liberals “history has been the result of a continuous tug of war between the good and bad, the rational and irrational components of human nature. This is a secular version of the Christian interpretation of humanity and its history as a contest between divine and devilish forces.”³⁷ That conception of human nature is patently false and Novack responds to it in much the way that Marxists have always done, by insisting that it is society that determines human nature and that the causes of historical change lie in the material relations at the base of social life rather than in some eternal ‘human essence.’

But let us consider Novack’s remarks from another angle – not just as a refutation of liberalism but as an alternative conception of human nature. To pose the matter in this way will probably strike many Marxists as odd. Why should there be any need for a specifically Marxist conception of human nature? Surely the issue was settled long ago when Marx defined the human essence as “the ensemble of the social relations,” which is basically all that Novack is saying here. But as important as Marx’s thesis is, it isn’t – and was never meant to be – the final word on an issue as complex as human nature; indeed, the great interest Marx and Engels took in Bachofen and Morgan’s work in anthropology and Engels’s essay on the labor theory of human origins attest to their own efforts to deepen their understanding of human nature.³⁸ For someone like Novack, however, Marx’s thesis is the final word, and therefore since human nature is quite simply “the product of society,” it is therefore subject to the same incredible diversity and change that has marked society historically. It is just this extreme changeability – this protean quality of human nature – that Novack conveys with his analogy to glass. (He also conveys something else, though perhaps unintentionally: glass, after all, is not only malleable, as he emphasizes, but also transparent, which would suggest that human nature is rather easy to see through, a relatively uncomplicated phenomenon, indeed – to pursue the analogy further – a kind of empty vessel capable of being filled by any manner of social content.) In any case, a problem with this conception becomes evident: while it deals solely with the changes in human nature, it has nothing to say about its *continuity*.

Why should this matter? Because if we focus entirely on the “plasticity” of humankind to the complete exclusion of its continuity, then we are replacing one idealist error by another. Let us put the problem in perspective: if human nature really has changed as utterly and completely as Novack suggests, then it would seem that history is less a matter of the social evolution of the same species than of its virtual transformation into a species of a different kind. But this is as patently false as the liberal view: for one thing, there is not a single tribe on this planet, no matter

³⁶ George Novack *Humanism and Socialism*, p. 127.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Stanley Diamond, a radical American anthropologist, once proposed amending Marx’s formulation to read “the ensemble of social relations *and possibilities*” (*In Search of the Primitive*, p. 345). Diamond’s point was that on its own Marx’s thesis could be misread in an anti-Marxist way, i.e. as a statement that capitalist social relations, like any others, are expressions of the “human essence” (or human nature). But Marxism isn’t neutral on this issue: it believes passionately that a classless system of social relations is *better* than the prevailing system of class domination. This can only mean that some social systems are better expressions of the “human essence” than others, and that the current system is as much (or, indeed, far more) a repression of the possibilities within human nature as an expression of the latter.

how primitive it may be, that is not as much a part of the human race as the denizens of the most advanced industrial society; for another thing, our ancestors going far back into prehistoric times have left incontrovertible and eloquent proof of their fundamental kinship with us in such remarkable cultural artifacts as the great cave paintings.

And Novack’s relativist conception is open to a further objection: if human nature is, as it were, mere putty in the hands of society, what would there be to prevent a reactionary government from ‘molding’ its population in such a way as to maintain them in eternal subservience? No doubt every ruling class in history has felt the desire to do just that, but even the most repressive and totalitarian regimes have been unable to secure that kind of omnipotence. This raises an interesting point because it shows that a one-sided conception of human nature such as Novack’s can easily be given a conservative slant, i.e. it can be used to demonstrate why revolution *isn’t* possible. And indeed this is commonly how it is used in academic Marxist circles, notably in the theories of ‘mass culture’ which ascribe to bourgeois ideology virtually unlimited powers to manipulate the masses.

Inside the SWP, however, this slant took a somewhat different direction. A year after Novack’s book came out, his wife and fellow SWP member Evelyn Reed published a 500-page tome called *Woman’s Evolution*. In this book, there is no concern about keeping up orthodox Marxist appearances: it was written entirely for the middle class feminist movement and made no pretense about having anything to do with the struggle for socialism. Presenting itself as a scholarly work of anthropology, it set out not merely to counter misogynist prejudices about the inferiority of women, but to prove that ‘woman’s nature’ was inherently superior to man’s. To that end, Reed engaged in some ‘creative’ revision of Engels; according to her, it was not so much labor as mothering that was responsible for the transition from ape to human: “Although both sexes were equally endowed with the hand, brain, and other anatomical preconditions required for human activity, it was the female that led the way over the bridge from animality to humanity. The mothers alone were equipped with the maternal and affective responses that were extended into the human world in the form of social collaboration.”³⁹ As for males, they were “hobbled by individualism, competition, and striving for dominance over other males [and so] they could not respond to the need for group preservation. But the females, already equipped by nature with their highly developed maternal functions and, moreover, capable of cooperating with other females, could achieve the self-restraint and foresight required to take the measures necessary for group survival.”⁴⁰

It is interesting to note the similarities between this conception and Kautsky’s: we are back once again to a social instinct, but this time only for females. Without getting sidetracked into all the issues raised by Reed’s remarks, it is enough to say that her interpretation of the anthropological record is dubious and her conclusion has a rather glaring weakness: there are lots of species whose females engage in mothering behavior but only one species which has ever made the transition to humanity, so it is clear that mothering by itself cannot be the sufficient cause of that transition. What I want to take note of here, however, is the underlying connection between Novack’s conception of human nature and Reed’s conception of ‘woman’s nature’: Reed stood as much as Novack for the view that human nature is “the product of society,” but to that she simply added that society itself is the product of ‘womankind’. Because the continuity of human

³⁹ Evelyn Reed *Woman’s Evolution*, p. 48.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 69.

nature was an ‘empty place’ in Novack’s conception, Reed was free to fill it with her feminist prejudices. And of course so could others; indeed, one of the main features of the ideology of post-modernism, which emerged out of the middle-class radical milieu that the SWP was a part of, is its claim for the unique ‘nature’ of all kinds of sexual, racial and ethnic groups. The road to this political morass was paved, at least in some small part, with one-sided conceptions of human nature.

Labriola and Trotsky against vulgarizers of Marxism

Before leaving this subject, it is important to draw attention to the fact that there exists within the Marxist tradition another point of view (or at least the rudiments of one) on the issue of human nature. In his influential *Essays on the Materialistic Conception of History* (1896), the Italian Marxist Antonio Labriola wanted to draw a clear distinction between Marxism and vulgar economic determinism: cultural fields such as art, science and religion were not mere “effluvia” of material (i.e. economic) interests; rather, they were determined “in great part and indirectly” by those interests. Labriola explained that what he meant by this qualification was “that in artistic or religious production the mediation from the conditions to the products is very complicated, and ... that men, while living in society, do not thereby cease to live alone by themselves in nature, and to receive from it occasion and material for curiosity and for imagination.”⁴¹ A few pages later, he returned to this idea. (Since the only English translation we have is from 1908 and sometimes uses outdated language, I will occasionally interpolate modern terms in square brackets.):

“... as I have said, men living socially, do not cease to live also in nature. They are not, of course, bound to nature as animals are, because they live on an artificial groundwork ... But nature is always the immediate subsoil of the artificial groundwork, and it is the environment which contains us. The industrial arts [i.e. technology] have put between us social animals and nature certain intermediaries which modify, set aside or remove the natural influences; but it has not for all that destroyed the efficacy of these, and we continually feel their effects. And even as we are born men or women, as we die almost always in spite of ourselves, and as we are dominated by the instinct of generation [i.e. sexuality], so we also bear in our temperament certain special conditions which education in the broad sense of the word, or social compact [i.e. accommodation to society], can modify, it is true, within certain limits, but which they can never suppress. These conditions of temperament, repeated in infinite cases throughout the centuries, constitute what is called the race [or ethnic character, according to another translation]. For all these reasons, our dependence upon nature, although it has diminished since prehistoric times, continues in our social life, just as the food [i.e. for thought] which the sight of nature affords to the curiosity and the imagination continues also in our social life. Now these effects of nature, and the sentiments immediate or mediate which result from [them], although they have been perceived, since history began, only [through] the visual angle [provided] by the conditions of society, never fail to reflect themselves in the products of art and of religion, and that adds to the difficulties of a realistic and complete interpretation of both.”⁴²

Labriola was grappling with an extremely important idea here, which he saw as the key to

⁴¹ A. Labriola *Essays on the Materialistic Conception of History*, pp. 216-7:
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/labriola/works/al02.htm>

⁴² *Ibid*, pp. 220-1.

overcoming the errors of the vulgarizers of Marxism (as well as answering those opponents who wanted to use the latter to discredit Marxism). That Labriola wasn't entirely successful is evident from his remark about race (or ethnic character) and Plekhanov, in a mostly favorable review of the book, correctly criticized Labriola on this score.⁴³ But it seems to me that Plekhanov missed the much larger issue that Labriola was raising: we need only change race to human race and everything Labriola said still stands. Our experience of life as men or women, our experience of sexuality, our experience of growing old, of dying, of grieving for the dead, our experience of a mother's love, of our physical frailty, of the wonder of nature, of the delight of a good meal, etc. etc. – all of these have certainly been modified by society but only “within certain limits.” To say this is in no way to suggest that there is some kind of abstract or eternal ‘human essence’; of course our internal ‘nature’ has been transformed by society, but this does not change the fact that humans all start as the same biological ‘raw material’ and that we all live within the confines of the same natural world. And that point, which Labriola was insisting on, had some important consequences in understanding a field such as art.⁴⁴

It was Trotsky, in fact, who made clear what those consequences were in the course of his struggle against the proponents of ‘proletarian culture’. Again, the issue hinged on a vulgarization of Marxism: the proletcultists treated artistic works as if they were political documents, judging them purely on the basis of their class content. Basing himself on Labriola, Trotsky argued: “How is it thinkable that there should be not a historical but a directly aesthetic relationship between us and a medieval Italian book [i.e. *The Divine Comedy*]? This is explained by the fact that in class society, in spite of all its changeability, there are certain common features” and he went on to cite love and the fear of death as typical examples.⁴⁵ If these “common features” were the key to our ability to enjoy the art of the past, it followed from this that they were also the key to developing a viable Marxist perspective on art, as indeed Labriola had suggested. But the whole point about these features was that they were *continuous*, that they persisted “in spite of” the changeability of class society, in other words, that they were not at all like Novack's molten glass.

Let us consider them more closely: obviously these features have to do with our being biological creatures who, though living in society, “do not cease to live also in nature”. Does this mean, then, that there is some ‘natural man’ lurking underneath the veneer of our social being? If that is the case, then we are back to Kautsky's position: human behavior is a matter of some social instinct, i.e. it is all biological. But these features clearly aren't encoded in our genes, though obviously the fact of our biological existence is an essential precondition for them. The difficulty is that we are used to thinking of biology and society as mutually exclusive opposites: biology is universal, society is specific; biology makes us human beings, society makes us slaves or serfs or workers. But the features we are talking about here don't fit neatly into either category: *they are social but they are also universal*.

⁴³ G. Plekhanov, “On the Materialist Understanding of History” in *Selected Philosophical Works*, v. 2, pp. 233-6.

⁴⁴ In a 1970 book *On Materialism*, Sebastiano Timpanaro, an Italian radical, drew attention to the significance of Labriola's remarks and made many of the points I have discussed in this paragraph (see pp. 45-51). Timpanaro's book called for a revival of materialism and correctly attacked the idealism of the so-called ‘Hegelian-Marxist’ and structuralist tendencies within the radical circles of the time, but he discounted the importance of the dialectic and (interestingly in the context of the present discussion) was an opponent of psychoanalysis, devoting a book to discrediting the theory of the Freudian slip.

⁴⁵ L. Trotsky, “Class and Art” in *Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art*, pp. 67-8.

Take the fear of death as an example: though our experience of it has certainly changed greatly in the course of history, it has not changed to such an extent that it has become unrecognizable, which is why an ancient poem on the subject, despite being very different than a modern one, is not so different that we cannot understand what the classical poet was writing about or be moved by the feeling he was conveying. In that sense, we can speak of the fear of death as being universal. But is it biological, i.e. is it somehow a natural characteristic that we are born with? The answer to that is quite simple: animals do not know they are going to die, only humans do. The fear of death, therefore, is not a given of our biology but an acquirement of our culture: it was only in the course of our development as humans that we became aware of it. But once we did acquire that awareness, it became a universal feature of our species. Thus, it is both social (or cultural, in the anthropological sense) and universal, and the same can be said for all of these common features. They comprise a common heritage of the human race which derives from our transition from the animal to the human state. What we tend to overlook, however, is that this transition is not just ancient history but that it plays an ever-present role in our lives: just as we were forced to make this transition as a species, so each of us is forced to make a similar transition individually in the course of growing up and becoming a part of human society. Herein lies the key to a materialist conception of human nature, and that brings us to Freud.

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