

# Modernism and Marxism.

## *The dilemma of modernism*

In this paper I want to ask whether Marxism is a part of the modernist project, and as such is to be swept away by the new wave of post-modernism. But to ask this question we have to ask what is meant by 'modernism', and in what respects the modernist project is at an end.

In the interests of international understanding I turn first to an authoritative source, the current edition of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, where I find 'modernism' defined as 'the principal trend in bourgeois art in the era of decadence'. Modernism is marked, in art, politics and philosophy, by 'the militant negation of tradition' as 'petit bourgeois morality yielded to decadent amorality'. 'The belief in the "eternal truths" of class civilisation was replaced by the antithetical illusion of ... relativism. ...All styles are considered intrinsically equal and of equal worth.' Despite its apparent radicalism, 'by the mid-twentieth century the huge system of speculation and advertising had subjugated the artistic life of the capitalist countries ... Barrages of advertising create false needs and artificial demands for social phantoms.' The modernist 'sees the chief meaning of artistic creation not in transforming the surrounding world in the name of a social ideal, but in changing the means of depicting or "seeing" the world, ... by negating all the attributes of real being, including the possibility of any kind of representation of reality ... and the very function of art as a mirror of the world.' Thus 'schools of modernism constantly vacillate between the extremes of ... abstract innovation and a return to archaic tradition'. It would seem that Mikhael Lifshits, the author of this entry, is not of the opinion that Marxism is a part of the modernist movement.

However we cannot let the matter rest with Professor Lifshits, for we must subject his argument to Sovietological analysis, which rests on the epistemological principal that everything is the opposite of what it seems. In many respects Professor Lifshits's characterisation of 'modernism' brings it very close to what has recently been hailed in the capitalist world as 'post-modernism', or at least to the radical wing of 'post-modernism'. However there is no simple inversion of meaning here, for Professor Lipshits does not offer a modernist critique of post-modernism. He locates himself firmly within the post-modernist movement, but on its conservative wing, in telling us that 'a genuine cultural revolution has nothing in common with a movement for the destruction of the old culture and the creation of a modernist "anticulture".'

We cannot simply dismiss these apparent contradictions as a manifestation of outdated and ideological modes of thought, for every ideology contains the germs of truth, in however distorted a form it might appear. The truth contained in the apparent contradictions of Professor Lipshits's analysis is that 'post-modernism' is profoundly modernist in its inspiration. If we take the defining feature of modernism to be its rejection of traditional values and constraints, of the determining character of the legacy of the past, to celebrate the self-determination of the actuality of the present, then the modernist impulse is always threatened by its own institutionalisation, as modernist forms become embedded in new traditions and new conventions. From this point of view contemporary post-modernism is merely a new phase of the dialectic of the modernist movement.

The fundamental dilemma which has always confronted modernism is that of discovering some alternative foundation for meaning and truth to that of the rejected authority of tradition. Post-modernists distinguish themselves from modernism in their rejection of the rationalism which they see as the modernist inheritance from the Enlightenment. Post-modernism rejects any attempt to discover any rational foundation or determinate meaning in cultural, social and even natural forms of life. But, as Professor Lifshits unwittingly makes clear in identifying Nietzsche as modernism's 'most influential thinker', this rejection has always been at one pole of the modernist dilemma, at the other pole of which stands Professor Lifshits's determined search for a solid reality. David

Harvey introduces his exploration of this dialectic in his book *The Condition of Post-Modernism* with a telling quote from Baudelaire, who defined modernity in 1863 as 'the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is the one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immutable'. Now that we are able to look at the development of Soviet art as a whole we can see that 'socialist realism' did not develop in opposition to modernism, but as a part of this creative dialectic which thrived in the 1920s and early 1930s, before Stalin cut off the source of this creativity by depriving the dialectic of one of its poles, in realising Lenin's ambition, in Professor Lifshits's approving words, 'to force this stratum out of the educational institutions of Soviet power, replacing it with a higher level of the intelligentsia'.

### ***Marx, modernism and 'humanistic rationalism'***

If we turn from art to social theory we have to ask where Marx stood in relation to the modernist project. I think that the first thing that we can say unequivocally is that Marx saw his work in profoundly modernist terms. Many have noted that *The Communist Manifesto* is an archetypally modernist manifesto. Marx and Engels borrowed the rhetoric of the romantic critique of capitalism to describe the inexorable process by which capitalism destroys all traditions and all inherited values, breaking up communities, destroying personal ties, sweeping away all established beliefs and superstitions. But Marx and Engels turned the romantic critique on its head, proclaiming the cosmopolitanism and the universalism of capital as the means by which all forms of particularism are destroyed, so opening the possibility of a universal human community founded not on superstition but on reason. However, capitalism is not this new human community, because it is not the power of reason, but the rule of money which destroys traditional social and moral forms, and money is not the expression of human reason depicted by classical political economy, but is an autonomous social power, divorced from the human will by its roots in the alienated form of social labour. Capitalism is accordingly marked by a growing polarisation between human need and the means to the realisation of human need, as the social character of the individual is developed not in the form of the 'rational community', but is imposed on the individual as an external constraint in the form of money. This is the source of the fundamental irrationality of capitalism. Capitalism does not submit society to the rule of human reason, but to the anarchy of capitalist production and the universality of class conflict.

Marx and Engels offered a profoundly modernistic critique of capitalism, which located itself firmly on the rationalist wing of modernism, with its emphasis on the intellectual and technological power of modern science. But what is this reason, in the name of which Marx and Engels criticised capitalism, and which they saw as providing socialism with its scientific foundations?

Marx and Engels unequivocally assimilated Marxism to the 'movement of modern science', and stressed from their youth to their dying day that the foundation of their socialism lay in a scientific understanding of the 'natural laws' of capitalist society. However, this did not mean that they took positions which would later come to be called 'positivistic', 'scientistic' or 'technologicistic'. Their commitment to science was a methodological commitment to the power of reason and evidence, not a commitment to any kind of metaphysics of the object, nor to any belief in technological determinism. This cannot be too strongly stressed, given the subsequent fate of Marxism. Despite Plekhanov and Lenin, Marx was very definitely not a philosophical materialist, dialectical or otherwise. Marx condemned philosophical materialism in the same breath as he criticised idealism, and for the same reasons. I have argued this case at length elsewhere, so I will just state it now. Simon Clarke, *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology*, Macmillan, London and Humanities, New York, 1987/1991. Simon Clarke: 'Was Lenin a Marxist?' *Rubezh*, Syktyvkar, 1991.

In the *German Ideology* (GI), and elsewhere, Marx characterised his starting point as 'materialist', but the term referred not to a philosophical materialism, but to the premise of 'real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live' which can 'be verified in a purely

empirical way' (GI, p.31), a perspective which Marx identified as that of the '*practical* materialist, i.e., the *communist*' (GI, p.56). Engels typically characterised Marx's work as 'materialist', but in the sense of assimilating it to the movement of modern science, which 'no longer needs any philosophy standing above the other sciences' (Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (AD), pp.39–40), the task of philosophy being only to formalise the 'materialist dialectic', which Engels saw as the characteristic method of modern science. Marx believed that the opposition between materialism and idealism was a false one, since 'matter' is no less idealist a concept than is the 'idea', so that '*abstract materialism* is the *abstract spiritualism* of matter'.

Marx sought to overcome this false opposition by focussing on *society* as the mediating term between the 'material' and the 'ideal', but society understood not as yet another abstraction, but as the everyday practical activity of real human beings. It is the divorce of individual from society which underlies the false antitheses of the Enlightenment, in eliminating the mediating term between humanity and nature, between the ideal and the material, between subject and object. Thus in his early works Marx criticised materialism and idealism alike from the standpoint of '*human sensuous activity, practice ... practical-critical activity ... human society or socialised humanity*' (First Thesis on Feuerbach), characterising his own position not as a materialism but variously as a humanistic naturalism, or a naturalistic or real humanism: 'Consistent naturalism or humanism is distinct from both idealism and materialism, and constitutes at the same time the unifying truth of both' (*Collected Works* (CW), 3, p.336).

Although Marx and Engels compared the laws of capitalist development to natural laws, the quasi-natural character of these laws derives not from any philosophical materialism or technological determinism, but from the alienated character of social labour under capitalism, which means that the products of social labour, created by the human will, are transformed into objective social powers which constrain the individual with the force of a natural law. The 'laws of motion' of the capitalist mode of production are not technological laws, but the laws of development of alienated social relations of production. It is not modern technology, but the social power of capital, that sweeps away all tradition and creates the global community, in the alienated form of the rule of money. It is not the needs of technological development which capitalism cannot meet, but the needs of the proletariat. The socialist project is not to set free the forces of production, but to overcome the alienated form of social labour, to subordinate the forces of social production to human need by bringing them under conscious human control.

Marx and Engels proclaimed the 'scientific' foundations of their socialism, but the scientific character of their socialism was opposed not to 'humanism', which saw the basis of socialism in concrete human aspirations, and to which they were deeply committed, but to 'utopianism', which saw socialism as a vision to be imposed on society by the legislator. They saw the objective necessity for revolution in the objective contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, which expressed themselves in recurring crises, and in the relative pauperisation and insecurity of the mass of the population. But they were perfectly clear that the agent of the revolution was the proletariat, and the significance of the objective contradictions of the capitalist mode of production was the contribution they made to the development of the proletariat as a self-conscious organised force. Social production would be brought under social control not by the power of science, but by the democratic self-organisation of the producers.

Marx was as scathing in his attacks on the Enlightenment vision of the wise legislator, as he would have been on the same vision in Bolshevik hands. For Marx, and for the Marxists of the First and Second Internationals, socialism was inseparable from the fullest development of democracy, in theory if not always in practice. Nevertheless, laudible as the project was, neither Marx nor his democratic socialist successors were ever clear *how* this would be achieved. Marx was certainly naive in his belief that the appropriate forms of democratic organisation would develop spontaneously with the growth of the workers' movement, and even more naive if he believed that they could spring fully formed from the ferment of revolution. Nevertheless his inspiration was clearly that of a 'humanistic rationalism', not that of a 'naturalistic', 'technological' or 'scientific' rationalism.

## ***Modernism and the Communist Project***

I think that it is very important to understand how the profoundly humanistic inspiration of Marx's critique of capitalism was lost in the development of both the social democratic and the communist wings of the socialist movement. It is vital to understand to what extent this development was inherent in the utopian elements which undoubtedly marked Marx's own vision of the future, to what extent it derived from a deformation of Marx's thought through its subordination to other intellectual influences, and to what extent it was determined by the historical development of the workers' movement. However here I would like to undertake a more modest task, and look at the links between the development of the 'scientistic' and 'technologicistic' doctrines of the orthodox Marxism of the twentieth century and a particular phase in the development of the modernist movement.

We know that in the hands of Plekhanov, Lenin and Stalin Marxism was turned into the philosophical doctrines of 'dialectical and historical materialism'. In these doctrines, which rest primarily on a few phrases in Marx's 1859 Preface to *The Critique of Political Economy*, Marxism is reduced to a mechanical materialism, in which the historical process is reduced to the discontinuous development of the social relations of production under the impact of the inexorable development of the forces of production. According to this theory the social relations of production are functionally adapted to the forces of production, but this adaptation takes place not smoothly, but through the discontinuous process of stagnation and revolutionary transformation. The development of the forces of production is not matched by a parallel development of the social relations of production since the class which holds power resists the necessary adaptation of the social relations of production. The unchanging social relations of production eventually become a fetter on the development of the forces of production, the development of the contradiction culminating in the revolutionary transformation of the social relations of production to bring them into line with the functional needs of the forces of production. This leads to the rather bizarre Stalinist notion that capitalism is characterised by the stagnation of the forces of production, while the achievement of socialism is to set free their unlimited development. This is quite the opposite of Marx's characterisation of capitalism and of socialism, according to which capitalism is characterised by the unlimited development of the forces of production, regardless of human need, while socialism is marked by the subordination of production to human aspirations.

The fetishisation of the forces of production was not a purely Stalinist phenomenon, but was a dominant feature of the 'rationalist' wing of the modernist movement in the 1920s. The destruction of the old order in the First World War was followed by a period of acute economic, social and political crisis in Europe in the post-war decade. The old order had been destroyed, but in the turmoil which resulted it was not clear what would take its place. In this context many Europeans looked not to the turmoil of their own society but to the relative social peace and growing prosperity of the United States for their vision of the future world. The most striking feature of America, from the European point of view, was its historically unparalleled development of machinery and modern industry. Whole branches of production, which in Europe were still dominated by artisanal production methods, had in America been industrialised. New branches of production, producing not the traditional means of subsistence, but commodities which had never been conceived before, had sprung up. Americanism was identified in Europe not simply with industrialism and the development of machine technology, which was already familiar, but with the systematic application of scientific methods to the social organisation of the production process, embodied in the principles of 'Taylorism' and 'Fordism'. The scientific rationalisation of production concerned not only the labour process, but had a much wider significance, as mechanisation and scientific rationality increasingly spread to the sphere of consumption, with the development of the domestic appliance, through the automobile, to the new mechanical forms of entertainment and communication, the cinema, the radio, the phonograph and the telephone.

Thus Taylorism and Fordism were seen in the 1920s as the central component of a new way of life, 'Americanism', which was hailed as the herald of Modernism. Moreover, for the Europeans 'Americanism' involved not simply the transformation of production and consumption, according to strict criteria of technical rationality, but also the development of new forms of social stratification, in which social position was determined in strict accordance with technical function, and corresponding new forms of morality and of personality, of socialisation and education, to 'elaborate a new type of man suited to the new type of work and productive process' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 286).

The precise relationship between Americanism, Modernism and Fordism was a matter of fundamental debate. While some acclaimed all things American, others sought to draw on the American model more selectively, or even to reject it altogether. Some wanted Hollywood, Jazz and the Speakeasy, without the grime of industry, the vulgarity of a meritocracy and the greyness of a homogeneous working class. Others wanted the cleanliness and precision of the industrial and social machine, without industrial conflict or the immorality and degradation of gangsterism and ghettos. While the old ruling class was at best lukewarm about Americanism, both Communist Left and Fascist Right saw Taylorism and Fordism as the basis of their image of the future. The central issue was the social conditions under which Europe could follow the American example, and revolutionise its archaic methods of production. Left and Right agreed that some kind of political revolution was necessary, to sweep away the barrier to modernisation presented by the decadent ruling class which still clung to the levers of power. Both Left and Right agreed that this Utopian vision could only be introduced under the direction of a new ruling class, using all the power at its disposal to transform society in the image of modernity. Where they disagreed was essentially in the social base of this revolution. For the fascists the social base of the revolution lay in the 'productive classes', a corporatist fusion of capitalists and workers who would sweep away the decadent rentiers who dominated the old order. For the communists, on the other hand, this Utopia could only be realised under the leadership of the Party of the working class. The decadence of the rentiers was not simply the degeneration of a parasitic stratum, but was a manifestation of the parasitism of capital itself.

In the Soviet Union the issue had already been partly determined by the Bolshevik revolution, although the struggles continued through the 1920s, and were only finally resolved with Stalin's 'left turn' which ended the experiment of the NEP at the end of the decade. Taylorism and Fordism were seen by the Bolsheviks in technologicistic terms, as the means of bringing the process of production as a whole under rational scientific control. Although they had been developed under the rule of capital, their full potential could not be realised in capitalist conditions. On the one hand, their scientific inspiration was subordinated to, and distorted by, the attempt by the capitalist to use them not as the means of transforming production, but as the means of intensifying labour. On the other hand, the private ownership of the means of production meant that the application of scientific methods within the enterprise contrasted ever more starkly with the failure to apply such methods to the relations between enterprises. Only under socialism could the potential of these scientific methods be fully realised. Only under socialism could the 'new type of man suited to the new type of work and productive process' be fully developed.

In Western Europe the issue was not the building of socialism, but the struggle against fascism. This issue was taken up by the leader of the Italian Communist Party, Antonio Gramsci, who is widely seen in the West (at least outside Italy) as one of the founders of 'Western Marxism', and even a precursor of post-Modernism, but who in fact aligned himself unequivocally with the Modernist project. In his essay 'Americanism and Fordism', written while in prison, Gramsci asked the fundamental question of whether the Fordist project could be realised in a class society, and more specifically whether fascism could deliver its promise to modernise Italy by introducing Fordist production methods.

Gramsci saw Fordism as deriving 'from an inherent necessity to achieve the organisation of a planned economy', the problems to which it gives rise 'marking the passage from the old

economic individualism to the planned economy' (p. 279). Thus Fordism represents the 'ultimate stage' (p. 280) of the socialisation of the forces of production, based on the subordination of financial to industrial capital and the creation of a new form of morality. The issue is thus that of the adaptation of the social relations of production to this ultimate stage in the development of the forces of production.

Fordism could arise in the United States because in the US industrial capital had already swept aside the parasitic strata, and the petit bourgeoisie had been drawn into capitalist production. According to Gramsci, however, fascism could not introduce Fordism to Europe, not because the fascists were aligned with the capitalist class, for it was capitalists who had introduced Fordism in the United States, but because the resistance to Fordism in Europe had come from the marginal, backward and plutocratic forces, which were precisely the popular base of fascism. For this reason fascism could not introduce Fordism, because the social implications of Fordism are such that fascism could only introduce it by dissolving its own class base. Moreover, the fascist state suppresses the competition required for the Fordist revolution, and only increases the extent of parasitism as its means of holding power.

Gramsci argued that the Fordist revolution was still in its early stages, so that its class character had yet to be determined. In America working class resistance to Fordism was based on the sectional defence of craft rights, so it was the capitalists who played the progressive role. In Italy, on the other hand, it was the workers who had most forcefully pressed for industrial modernisation and the Fordist revolution on their own terms, although their demands had been co-opted and their movement defeated. In this argument Gramsci's modernism clearly has priority over his Marxism, for it is Fordism that is progressive, and defines the progressive or reactionary character of particular class forces.

Nevertheless Gramsci argued that the Fordist project cannot be fully realised in a class society, not because of the economic limitations of capitalism, but because of its moral limitations. The Fordist revolution demands the emergence of the 'new man', whose very being is subordinated to his productive role (Gramsci said nothing about his wife). However, while the capitalists preach the virtues of the new morality to the workers, they do so only in order to subordinate the workers to their own will. Meanwhile the capitalists themselves undermine their own preaching by adopting the licentious and degenerate way of life of a parasitic ruling class. The result is that Fordism in a capitalist society can only be introduced by means of external coercion, and so cannot develop to its fullest potential. For Gramsci only communism could realise the Modernist utopia of a new society and a new man.

Gramsci was by no means complacent about the ability of a communist society to realise the Fordist dream. The influence of 'the petit bourgeois and Bohemian layabout' is a particular problem under socialism, 'where the working masses are no longer subject to coercive pressure from a superior class' (p. 300), but have not yet 'assimilated "virtue" in the form of more or less permanent habits', and so are very vulnerable to moral corruption, precipitating a serious crisis. Gramsci agrees with Trotsky that the crisis can only be resolved by the exercise of coercion by an elite of the class which can struggle against the libertarian conception, but Gramsci argues that Trotsky erred in proposing a purely repressive solution, through the militarisation of labour, rather than recognising the need for the development of self-discipline.

In the event Gramsci's anxiety about the future of Communism proved right. Neither Communism nor capitalism could evoke the workers' enthusiasm for the Modernist utopia, so that both had to resort to coercion to impose an appropriate morality on the labourer. The Soviet system was more successful than the capitalist only in that it developed much the more systematic and rigorous system of coercion. But even after 70 years the 'New Soviet Man' had still failed to develop the appropriate self-discipline, and was not persuaded of the joys of labouring as a cog in a mighty industrial machine. Despite its best efforts to provide hard work and a frugal life, supported by edifying art, music and literature, with extensive facilities for healthy Fordist sports, the Soviet state was unable to protect the working class from blue jeans, rock music, Pepsi Cola,

alcohol, modern art, fornication, homosexuality ..... The collapse of the Soviet block leaves only the Great Leader, Comrade Kim Il Sung, pursuing the Modernist dream!

The fate of the Stalinist system raises many questions, about both modernism and Marxism. In conclusion I would like just to point to two of them. First, it is important to stress that the modernist vision which the Soviet system sought to realise was only one variation on an infinitely diverse theme, a variation which had specific historical roots in the world crisis of the 1920s. The model of the 'New Man' offered a deeply pessimistic vision which saw the only solution to social conflict and the diversity of human aspirations in the uniform and universal human subordination to the machine. But this not a vision that was inherent in the rationalistic project of modernism, but one which was subordinated to an overwhelming concern with social order, and a corresponding concern to develop new, and increasingly 'totalitarian' forms of social and political domination.

Second, if we return to the vision of the Communist manifesto we find a profound irony. In the Manifesto Marx and Engels saw the foundations on which the revolutionary proletariat as lying in the homogenisation of the proletariat, as all divisions of skill were dissolved in the subordination of labour to the machine, and its massification, as production was conducted on an ever-increasing scale. This same process lay at the heart of the Taylorist and Fordist vision of the 1920s. But it was a vision which was realised not in the capitalist world, but in the Soviet Union. The fate of Marx's prediction in both capitalist and communist worlds makes it clear that Marx's modernist model was much too simplistic. But the problems that Marx addresses still remain. Capitalism has developed the forces of production to an unprecedented degree, and has brought prosperity to a minority, and yet capitalism is no more able to meet the needs of humanity today than it was one hundred and more years ago. Inequality increases even more rapidly than prosperity, while the increased pace of change simply leaves more victims trailing in its wake. Marx's rational humanist critique of capitalism has never been more relevant, but the prospects for the future have perhaps never been as bleak. In such a situation it seems to me that intellectuals have a special responsibility to defend the values of rationality and truth which lay at the heart of the Enlightenment project, and not to be drawn into a discourse of 'postmodernism' which rejects the very possibility of reason.