

Marxism and Modernity

MODERNITY HAS COME to mean as many things to as many different men as Marxism. Now that both have been consigned to the capacious dustbin of history it is worth considering the essential characteristics of these movements and the possible relationship which existed between them.

One is immediately puzzled by the fact that modernist literature, art, and political theory seem, at first inspection, to have little or nothing to do with Marxism; are, in fact, reactionary to Marxism. The anti-positivist revolt and the symbolist movement, the keys to understanding the rise of modernist aesthetics and politics, are clearly anti-Hegelian, anti-positivist, and anti-Marxist in inspiration. "Socialism" was, for Nietzsche, the very symbol of Western decadence.

Socialists and Marxists themselves were aware from the time of the appearance of the first symbolist poems and novels, neo-Kantianism in philosophy, Schopenhauer in aesthetics, and Neo-Machiavellianism in politics, that these distinctive manifestations of modernity were incompatible with Marxism. Lenin's attack on "empirico-criticism" is of a piece with Stalinism's invention and elaboration of Socialist realism as a substitute for modernity. The frantic efforts of the *Partisan Review* to be both Marxist and "modernist," and the tensions and debates which this effort engendered among American humanist intellectuals, is evidence enough of the deep and intractable problem which the relationship of Marxism to modernism presented.

Nor was it simply that men of the Left had moved Right or that men of the Right

had moved Left, the extremes embracing on the common ground of fanaticism. There were important and essential differences which held Right and Left in tension and these differences could not be bridged by the easy clichés of newspaper editorial rhetoric. There was after all some fundamental difference between the modernism of Ezra Pound and the cynical sentimentalism of Bertolt Brecht even though they both admired and embraced blood-stained tyrants. The fundamental question remains: Was Marxism a modernist movement? If modernist, was the association so deep and close that once philosophical and cultural modernism waned Marxism too was bound to depart the scene of history? After all, extinct political philosophies are nearly as numerous as species of trilobites in the limestones of the Pennsylvanian. Are Marxist intellectuals, recently so numerous that their intellectual flights darkened the skies, about to go the way of the Passenger Pigeon?

Marx and Engels felt themselves to be the heirs of the Enlightenment, and dialectical materialism to be the philosophical cutting edge of the progressive forward march of humanity. Mankind was on the point of departure out of the alienation and conflicts of the old society for a new and utopian society which lay, charted but undiscovered, in the future's expansive seas. Like the figures in Watteau's *A Pilgrimage to Cythera* (1717), the new man had embarked on a Voyage to Cythera, an eroticized secular paradise. The presiding deities were to be Venus and Mars, for even to Marx one could only make love by first making war.

There can be no doubt that the Socialists of the nineteenth century thought themselves to be the most modern of men, the vanguard of the future. Traditional society and conservative politics were, according to them, the preserve of the reactionary past. In the transformation of society both the intellectual and the artist were to play an indispensable role. One of the most interesting and important aspects of the development of the idea of progress from the eighteenth century to the present has been the relationship of morals and especially art to the idea of progressive development. As religion and the transcendent as a source of value and creative inspiration decayed, an invented morality and a culture rooted in the transforming desires of the new man became the source of artistic inspiration. The Enlightenment insisted that all of man's activities should be tested by the measure of utility. Art as conceived of in classical aesthetics together with contemplative knowledge or prayer can not meet this test of utility.

Moreover, if art is to be socially useful, if it is to be responsive to the perceived needs of mankind, it must be developmentally progressive. However, taught by the Romantics, we have come to regard a "masterpiece" as standing outside the temporal sequence and as endowed with an absolute validity. Nor, we may argue, is the quality of ethical action progressive. The moral imperatives and the supreme act of selflessness of laying down one's life for his fellowman possess an absolute character.

The Enlightenment and Socialism, the Enlightenment's successor, insisted that all human action is time-contingent and progressive in character.

Aesthetic idealism and moral absolutism must be abolished, Marx wrote in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, "All philosophies have sought to explain the world; the point, however, is to change it."

However, from the standpoint of so-

cial utility, it is entirely conceivable that a man ought not to lay down his life for his friend. Perhaps the man who performs the act is a Nobel laureate and his friend is an intellectual mediocrity only marginally useful to society. Perhaps it would be more useful to our society were the money spent on art museums spent on slum clearance or in counseling delinquent teenagers. The fact is that the ideas of progress, political transformation and social utility pose special problems for moral and aesthetic theoreticians.

The invention of the concept of the *avant garde* was the work of Saint-Simon, Pierre Joseph Proudhon and the French realist painter, Gustave Courbet. Though initially Socialist it was not specifically Marxist, though Marxism borrowed its theoretical framework. Like Marx, both Proudhon and Courbet were revolutionary activists. Never mind that Proudhon was the father of modern anarchism, and despite the bitter attacks Marx made on Proudhon, one of the most important influences on the thought of the mature Marx. Marx nearly always repaid influence with denunciation and vituperation.

Art was to become a weapon in the class struggle, but more importantly the artist, the intellectual, and the moralist were to occupy a central position in society, for it is they who formulate the social vision now that the old priesthood and the old religion have been banished. They invent the vocabulary of dream and aspiration; they create the rhetoric of social and political life. They have, in short power over the forms of the secular myth. The myth of a secular paradise restored strikes one, now that we are at the end of the twentieth century, as romantic and sentimental balderdash whether the object of the new myth is the classless society or the creation of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*. The Marxist myth of alienation overcome, sentiments of universal harmony and humanitarianism, aggres-

sion dissolved by sympathy and love, is indeed a kind of Rousseauistic religion intended to restore man to his lost paradise. It is difficult to believe that intellectuals and artists who supposedly give their energies to close observation and analysis could espouse a doctrine so contrary to the empirical evidence. Such a conception, of course, places the artist and the intellectual in a very powerful but also in a very perilous position. We can understand why artists get into trouble in totalitarian societies.

Much has been written in the past decade and many brains have been spilled over whether or not the atheism of Marx was intrinsic to his system or simply a cultural and temporal accident. The notion that but for a cultural derailment Marx might have been a cantor in a London synagogue is too absurd to be humorous; too farfetched to be taken as an historical possibility. Any Socialism which is more systematic than the compulsory distribution of alms presupposes a world in which the Gods have been deposed and man, "come of age," is the master of his fate, a demiurge whose creative activity has displaced the flawed and imperfect creativity of God.

The essential character of modernity, whether it is the modernism of the Left or of the Right, is the displacement of God and the fashioning of a human order which transcends a providentially ordered history. "Atheist humanism" about which Pierre de Lubac has written so illuminatingly is the essential ingredient in modernism whether Left or Right.

Insofar as the Enlightenment served as the seedbed out of which modernism grew, atheism was modernity's heritage from the Enlightenment. Paul Hazard in *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century From Montesquie to Lessing*, observed nearly two generations ago:

- . . . First there were the critics in full cry. .
- . . . It was the chorus of the new generation

upbraiding their predecessors for saddling them with so ill-conceived a social order, an order which was the child of illusion and the parent of ill. . . .

Why, they asked, was this? Thereupon they preferred a change the like of which for sheer audacity had never before been heard of. Now, the culprit was dragged into open court, and behold, the culprit was Christ! . . . What the critics were determined to destroy, was the religious interpretation of life. . . .

The Promethean vision of a new age and a new society is predicated on the death of God. As Dostoyevsky clearly discerned, it is only after the death of God that everything will be permitted. The socialist vision of a heaven on earth and the aspiration of the nihilistic Right to create an heroic mankind unfettered by traditional moral concerns, untrammelled by conventional aesthetic norms and free through violence and art, remold the givenness of life; both assume the necessity of deicide.

Modernism has little or nothing to do with the control of the environment and the amelioration of the human condition through the application of science and technology. Men have been doing that since the first man used a tool, and perhaps the greatest changes in the way men live were made at the time of the neolithic revolution from 9,000 to 6,000 B.C. Modernism is rather the belief that all creatureliness, all limitations, all conventional values and beliefs have been abrogated, and sovereign man now disposes of his destiny with Godlike power. Artistic creativity is no longer mimetic, no longer a reenactment of the divine creative gesture, but the arbitrary and self-sufficient enactment of the artist's personality, wholly new and completely individualistic. This arbitrary creativity could be either social drama, an expression of class, or it could be the powerful gesture of the *Übermensch*.

By 1870 it was clear that the socialist vision of a political *avant garde* served by an artistic *avant garde* acting as a kind of propaganda arm, what was later called by the Bolsheviks, "Agitprop," was unacceptable either as convincing politics or as persuasive art.

This shift had really taken place just after 1848 but became very noticeable in 1870. The composer Wagner was, for example, an enthusiastic revolutionary in 1848. After 1848 his aesthetics led him to reaction and a rather typical blend of racist-nationalism and neo-romantic authoritarianism.

Symbolist art that dominated the period after 1870 was an elite art, an art which sought its audience among initiates and the cognoscenti, rather than among the politically awakened masses. It was an art of metaphysical anxiety and social alienation rather than an art of revolutionary affirmation. To be sure, many of the writers of the symbolist school and painters of the impressionist and post-impressionist schools espoused the *avant garde* social and political ideas of various revolutionary "Lefts," but their art was elitist and very nearly in contradiction to their social and political theory.

How did this happen, and what were the consequences? The problem arose because both bourgeois society and the movements of the Left, bourgeois liberalism and democracy on the one hand and Socialism and anarchism on the other, were creatures of mass society and mass man. Nietzsche saw this clearly enough and said it over and over again. Indeed, most socialists were more bourgeois in a cultural sense than the bourgeoisie itself. What the elite artists and writers of the late nineteenth and the twentieth century were protesting were the values, tastes, standards, and enjoyments of mass society with its materialism and its anxious pursuit of comfort. Both the middle classes and the proletarian revolutionaries wished to create a

society which was "snug" and *gemütlich*. Ideally such a society would be neat, orderly, provide plenty of creature comforts and not make many spiritual or intellectual demands.

Seen from the viewpoint of the elite artist or writer the taste of commissars is not very different from that of capitalists. They are both, in fact, philistines who wish to employ art as a decoration for a mediocre life or as a slogan to manipulate the masses. The elite artist, however, had something quite different in mind, and so while he might entertain revolutionary social and political enthusiasms because he felt keenly the injustice of the world, he no longer conceived of art as a weapon in the class struggle, as a Stalin or a Hitler was later to think of it. There was no patience among them for what H. G. Wells was to describe as a utopia of little fat men.

Symbolist and decadent alike rejected the passé materialism, the naive belief that all reality might be explained by recourse to reductionist natural scientific ideas. Positivism and determinism left no scope for creativity, and even for those who rejected any transcendence the drive to free creativity ruled out the philistine platitudes of Marxism. We must realize that what the symbolists and decadents in the seventies of the last century were creating was a counter culture. The source of this effort to create a counter culture was that all-purpose invention of the Romantics, alienation. Here Marx, himself profoundly influenced by Romanticism, found himself psychologically if not aesthetically in harmony with the Romantics and neo-Romantics. He too saw *Entfremdung* as the root of the revolutionary dynamic. It was, however, a psychological perception which might in part be explained by dialectical materialism but could not be reconciled to it.

The evidences of alienation were numerous; the loss of community, boredom, satiety, powerlessness, and futility,

the suction of the absurd together with the awareness of a terrible freedom. All these are constantly reiterated feelings on the part of the neo-Romantics and symbolist writers and artists. They are, moreover, perceived by these writers and artists both as man's essential condition and as a fate forced on them by society. Mass man, his pleasures, his comforts, his dreams and hopes, these are the sources of alienation and enervation, the impotence, despondence, and pessimism which the elite artist and poet feel. It is a revolution against the petty goals, the mindless pleasures, the dulled sensibilities induced by materialism. The poet and the writer become revolutionaries though not revolutionary in the ordinary political sense. Their revolution is individual, personal and cultural rather than universal and political. It is the revolution of Sinclair Lewis fed up with the pettiness and provinciality, the mediocrities and stupidities of Sauk Center.

Of course this sense of alienation and rebellion can itself be turned into art; transmuted into high poetry. There must be chaos, Nietzsche observed, in order that a dancing star be born. There is no better description of the source, the engendering experience, out of which the early poems of T. S. Eliot developed than the above.

The alienation of the *avant garde* artist is, however, not a mysterious consequence of the materialist society in which he lives. It is the direct result of the elite and esoteric nature of his art and his conception of the creative act as a displacement of the divine creative gesture. Not only is the *avant garde* artist a revolutionary in his rebellion against his society, but also he is an even greater rebel in his rejection of the artistic expectations of his society. He refuses to create for a wide general audience. He deliberately chooses forms which will make his work inaccessible to ordinary men and women.

And so at one and the same time he denounces a philistine society that rejects him, and deliberately separates himself from his society by an art which is inaccessible to all but a narrow public or an art that rejects the values and violates the sensibilities of the larger public.

Marxism was thus an early and incomplete form of modernism. Like the great bulk of the modernists, Marx assumed a world without God, a world marked by alienation, a world to be transformed by human action into a utopia. Man is man only insofar as he is self-sufficiently creative.

To be sure, a considerable number of modernists were either pantheistic mystics or turned from atheist humanism to religious orthodoxy. Religious modernists are modernists after the fact of modernism. Atheist humanism is the distinctive mark of modernism.

Thus while twentieth century modernists have for the most part rejected the naive "science" of dialectical determinism and Marxism's preposterous aesthetic and political theories, modernism, like Marxism, is a system of ideas fashioned to deal with a world from which the transcendent is absent.

This accounts for the centrality of Friedrich Nietzsche for both contemporary modernists and Marxist survivors. It is no accident that the definitive scholarly edition of Nietzsche, only recently published, is the work of two Italian Marxists, Giorgio Colli and Massimo Montinari.

Marxism as a system is not viable. It is quite possible that it will survive in a reborn Nietzschean form, godless, alienated and promising social and political transformation. In the Soviet form from Lenin through Stalin it had already abandoned political Marxism and adopted the political mode of the modernist Right. The congruence of Stalinist and Hitlerite political forms has been no accident as Karl Dietrich Bracher has brilliantly demonstrated. Aesthetic and political mod-

ernism is totalitarian in its affinities.

It is possible that modernism will choke and suffocate on its own anxiety, despair, and hopelessness. If it survives it will survive as a Nietzschean philosophy that seeks to transform the world through art and violence. The art and violence will not be justified and contained within the framework of dialectical materialism, but rather a fascism whose goals are set by a nihilist elite. The transformational myth will be preserved at the ex-

pense of dialectical materialism.

Of course, socialism will survive not as Marxism but rather as welfare statism. The belief that there is a remedy, technical or human-manipulative, for every evil will not die easily. Statism is older than Marxism and will survive its demise. There are always many who will put their faith and hope in the "Utopia of little fat men."

— *Stephen J. Tonsor*