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Torn between objectivity and utopia

Notes on the critical class

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The uncompromising criticism against intellectuals (against their groundlessness, class egoism, idealism, passivity) is the favorite sport of intellectuals themselves, since they emerged as a stratum of society. There is something in the intellectual's position, that makes him/her dissatisfied with his/her role, which pushes him to go "into the masses", into public activism (first version), or into the practicism and simplicity of "real life" (second version). Moreover, one may say that intellectuals, as such, are a contradictory class. The internal tension of their position consists in the fact that, having the best access to the total grasp of society (science) and the leisure to imagine and think through the future possibilities (art), for the "experiments in being" (Nietzsche) they do not have political or economic power, neither as a whole (qua a solidary group), nor individually – examples of intellectuals coming to power are rare and are characteristic for critical, destructive, or revolutionary moments. Moreover, while the intellectuals are close to the dominant class of society (bourgeoisie, in the Modern case), in their function and in their way of life, they do not coincide with it, but, on the contrary, often act as a "fifth column" of other classes (aristocracy or proletariat), in its midst. All Modern

revolutions were led by intellectuals, and intellectuals took part in them, en masse, both physically and ideologically. However, they usually lost their positions after the revolution's victory because it turned out that, in their way of life they had been closer to the former than to the new dominant class, while the universal utopia of the destruction of classes and the universalization of the way of life of intellectuals could not be realized.

On a general level, one may reduce the deep contradiction of the intellectual stratum to the contradiction between theory and practice. The knowledge of reality requires a certain distancing from it, and this distancing is achieved through stoppage and an imposed passivity. Adorno and Horkheimer wrote, in a similar context (in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*), of Ulysses who asked to tie him to a mast, so as to be able to listen to the music of Sirens, to the voice of the world. Therefore, when a typical intellectual is not ready to radically undermine the system s/he criticizes, s/he does not just protect his/her class interest (in this case, it would be unclear why s/he takes the voice of the weak and humiliated as such), but expresses the essential boundedness, the fascination by his/her object of study. The intellectual who accumulates expert knowledge and sees him/herself as an advisor of the rulers, is bound and enslaved by the very terms of his/her knowledge, even as s/he perceives him/herself as a "freely floating" cynical observer. When, on the contrary, an intellectual tries to escape into abstract thought, s/he is caught again, because his/her mastery of thought becomes an exile from the world, depends on a "reservation" created for intellectuals by the material forces that they do not control or even understand.Hence the very notion of critique, as it was developed by Kant, and as it later passed to Hegel (under the name of *Aufhebung*, sublation) and Marx. This notion expresses the internal contradiction mentioned above. The critique, in the

philosophical sense of the word, is an attempt to negate its object and to emphasize its indestructibility. For Kant, as he criticized the scientific reason and the Enlightenment rationalism, the critique signified a compromise: science has a right to exist so far as it does not infringe on the rights of the ethics (ethics of activity); a monarch has a right to command as long as he does not infringe on the right of public dissent, etc. For Hegel, who criticized both the Enlightenment type of reason and the individualist moralism of Kant, critique meant simply hegemony, in Gramsci's sense (Gramsci's notion is profoundly Hegelian). The past stages of human spirit (property, contract, slavery, family), according to Hegel, have a right of existence, but in the framework of the dominant form of constitutional state. Indeed, Hegel's notion of *Aufhebung* (preservation through annulment, annulment through preservation) is nothing but the historicization of Kant's notion of critique.

But Marx, who constantly appeals to the category of critique and puts this term as a subtitle of his most important texts, puts Hegel's notion upside down: yes, history cannot destroy its past forms, and as a result theybear on the present, like vampires and monsters, with their dead weight. In all these authors, critique is both the negation of the indestructible and the indestructibility of the negated. Though Marx, unlike a typical intellectual, reveals this tension and calls to the revolutionary and destructive "critique of the Earth", we cannot say that he resolved the problem of critique's ambiguity once and for all. In Marx's own works, and even more in "Marxism", there is a tension between the properly critical analysis of political economy, which involved the description of its irreducible antinomies and utopian imagination, and the systematic generalization of political economy in a "historical materialism", which, qua positive and "empirical" doctrine, suffers from

objectivism and from the slavish dependence on the status quo (hence the conformism of the Second International and the technocratism of Stalinism). When Marx and Engels, in *The German Ideology,* criticize "ideologists" (i.e. intellectuals) for being, in truth, true conservatives, we have to read it as a self-criticism. The very operation of knowledge, and even more so the social function of knowledge requires a moment of retardation, or temporary conservation (thus, Engels, for instance, was a factory owner and helped Marx with money during his work on the "Capital": the critique of capitalism directly dependent on its preservation).

How to express this contradiction? Can the intellectuals fully overcome their false universalism and conformism and join, for instance, a revolutionary party? But in this case, they would lose the financial support from state or business, and hence the leisure needed for systematic thought... They would get the only chance for theoretical generalization in prison (if it's a Western prison). It is not by chance that, for Gramsci, in his Prison writings, the function of intellectuals became one of the central themes.

It appears that the intellectuals, like the proletariat, constitute a zone of rupture of social reality. They embody present society's contradictions between solidarity and division of labor, between integration and exploitation, between democracy and governance. Intellectuals are the most free-thinking and even probably the most democratic (in their values) strata of the society, but, at the same time, they hold the leading (although not the commanding) positions in the most authoritarian sectors of today's society: education, medicine, expert governance. Intellectuals elaborate a total vision of society, imagine its perspective, but at the same time, their own being qua a self-reproducing stratum *embodies* the division between the intellectual and the material labor, where

most of the society is deprived of leisure or of the balancing liberal education which is necessary for a personality in order to bear intellectual contradictions.

In this sense, we need to criticize intellectuals for their liberal narcissism, for the perception of the whole society in their own image. But no less necessary is the critique of the non-intellectual world of "need and understanding" (Hegel's formula of the capitalist civil society), in which the narrowly egotistic aims of activity foreclose one from the whole, and one becomes subject to the enslaving bubble-gum of the cultural industry or to fascist myths. *The critique of domination should, therefore, be accompanied by the critique of slavery!* Marxism, as a school of higher criticism, shows that a critique cannot be fixed into a doctrine, a method, or a system. A true critic constantly criticizes him/herself and falls, at times, into the position of a vulgar materialist (*plumpes Denken,* to use Brecht's famous concept), or into the position of an idealist optimist, or in the position of an idealist maître standing above the scene. Critique is not a fixed position, but an uneven rhythm of oscillation between preservation and conservation, a zone of permanent crisis. One needs to learn how to balance in this crisis, so as not to go mad, but one also needs to use the crisis in order to push the whole society to revolutionary self-transformation.

In today's society, there are almost all material conditions ready for everyone to become intellectuals, to make the very division of intellectual and non-intellectual labor disappear. But meanwhile, the utopia is realized in the opposite sense, "history advances with its bad side" (Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy*) and the intellectuals turn into "immaterial workers" who are even more vulnerable to mythology and political technology than the average uneducated workers: they have enough leisure and detachment, to learn, but not enough, to think - that is, to reflect on the world as a whole,

from a distance. Today an intellectual should throw away the posture of an unrecognized elite and realize – after the pertaining hesitations – his/her place in the camp of the oppressed.