

History, Culture and the Communist Manifesto—Part 2 - On emancipation

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“All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”

THE OPTIMISTIC UNDERTONES in which Marx alluded to the *disenchantment* (i.e. *de-mystification*) of the world were but a pale anticipation of the candid faith in the emancipating dynamics of modern secularized society, a faith which was to undermine the subversive potential and universalist promises of socialist and other radical traditions for more than a century after the *Communist Manifesto*.

The idea that once delivered from the divine spell, human beings would be “compelled to face with sober senses” their “real conditions of life,” no doubt expressed the unprecedented sense of liberty and hope enclosed in the liberating force of human action; but at the same time, it certainly underestimated the spell cast by the “newly-formed relations.”

Nowhere has this (new, secular) spell proven so strong as in its attribution of racism, anti-Semitism, sexism and xenophobia to residual, backward mentalities, obscurantist prejudice or uncompleted modernization—assuming that these mentalities are destined to be wiped away with the progress and consolidation of a new secular or rational order.

Indeed, though the development and constant reformulation of such forms of discrimination and oppression have constantly drawn upon and reactivated “traditional” earlier cultural patterns and mentalities, they are nevertheless inextricably connected to the new secular order of political legitimation, its antinomies, its double dynamics.

Stressing common humanity as a sufficient ground for equality, secularized universalism worked within the new political order as a powerful impulse of what Ernst Bloch called the “erect stride of humankind toward human dignity.”

Liberated from the theocratic hold of religion, natural right and common humanity provided, for the first time on such a large scale, legitimate ground for comparison of the social position of the oppressed to that of the dominant orders—thus permitting people to identify inequality with injustice.

Ironically, this novel fragility, which political universalism introduced into the heart of the legitimation of inequality and domination, created the need for the dominant classes to turn

difference into a source of anthropological inferiority.

The connection established between physical, “racial” characteristics and political rights and duties was a specifically modern political phenomenon. Its novelty resided first in that it resorted to Nature—which became the new indisputable ground for legitimating domination, replacing older metaphysical explanations for inequality.

Inspired by the mathematical logic “science is measurement,” the concept of nature, inherent in the ideology of natural right, was employed to neutralize the “socialist” element within comparison—reducing what is qualitatively different into a set of quantifiable determinations.

Nature, viewed in the real or imaginary “evidence” of color of skin, of facial lines, of breasts, muscles and genital organs could be thus used not just to contest human equality, but also—and this was a frightfully novel component in the history of domination—to break the unity of humankind.

Indeed, so long as faith in a divine order guaranteed social and political hierarchy, anthropological continuity between blacks and whites, Jews and Gentiles, had not challenged social inequality. Consequently the unity of humankind was not in danger.

But as this very unity became the fundamental source of human rights, inequality seemed arbitrary—unless it could be based on differences so radical that no common denominator was possible. “Naturalizing” social differences offered a privileged way out.

Pseudo-science and Domination

Inspired by the classifications of natural science, the idea of biological endowment re-elaborated the aristocratic notion of heritage in terms compatible with the new political system. It reconciled the fiction of free individuals with the fact of persisting social inequality, the abolition of birth privilege with the persistence of ascribed privileges.

But most of all, naturalization of domination and oppression contributed to establishing *a specifically modern connection* between power relations of diverse origins and character (racism, anti-Semitism, gender oppression, colonialism) by attaching their social acceptability to the same logic of legitimation. This logic transformed equality, from a bond between the constitutive differences of humankind into a principle incompatible with difference.

Modern constructions of otherness into a source of inferiority, political incapacity and domination were not the immediate result of scientific knowledge. They stemmed from the need to provide watertight arguments for ideas that were produced as political weapons.

Though produced in the realm of the new conflicting social relations whose legitimacy was unstable, these ideas drew their authoritative power from the new sacralization of science and instrumental reason. The latter’s immediate outcome—scientism—was to infect not only dominant bourgeois ideologies, but also the critical understanding of power relations and the struggles against domination and oppression.

The eurocentric “prejudices” that shaped the understanding of modern society and culture in Marxist and socialist traditions; the “opinions” that favored the positivist and determinist conceptions of history and class struggle or the social-Darwinist theories within the Second International; the “beliefs” that fostered systematic gender and race discriminations within the left; all these are not just residues of “fast-frozen relations.”

The Ambiguous Enlightenment

They are the expression of the social and political dynamics of the “newly-formed” relations and the lasting difficulty of resisting them. Their development corresponded to, and was fostered by, the founding axiom of the modern state—the principle of one and indivisible power—and the ensuing lasting suspicion this axiom cast upon human diversity and multiplicity.

The state practices—including the welfare state and “democratic” state (eugenics, immigration policies, racial segregation)—of the last two centuries should suffice to remind us how much coercion and suffering it took for “difference” to be constructed as the antipodes of equality. Our century has tragically exposed the illusion of progress by revealing mass murder, the unprecedented crime against human plurality, and recently the horror of ethnic purification, as possible though not inevitable outcomes of political modernity.

Failing to grasp the double dynamic of modernity—the *dialectic of Enlightenment*—the dominant traditions of the left have failed to “face soberly” existing reality and to resist it. Rather than bow to the crushing weight of this assessment, today more than ever, we must bear in mind that, as young Adorno wrote in the 1930s, the interpretation of given reality is tied to its abolition.

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P.S.

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