

The Two Masks of Materialism*

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1.

Everyone can forsake the inquiry into the relationship between philosophy and life, but the materialist, for whom it is a point of honour to demonstrate the *non*-theoretical genesis of theory. All in all, materialism is nothing if not the unity of philosophy and life. Save that, as if cursed, it always remains inferior to its task. The materialist seems fated to oscillate between two equally marginal roles: the *enfant terrible* who mocks his elders and the village idiot who from time to time is allowed to speak uncomfortable truths. Rebellious or naive, either way his status is that of a minority. The more he is in the right, the less convincing he is. Why this enduring impasse?

There are two main "character masks" which the materialists dons when appearing upon the philosophical stage: the first, a parodic echo of marxism, makes him into a *sociologist of knowledge*; the second, more archaic, assigns him the part of the sensationist. Both masks betray a certain slenderness in the character.

In the case in which the sociology of knowledge prevails, there is a maximal effort to shed light upon the socio-historical conditionings of abstract thought and thereby to deny its supposed purity. This is an irreproachable intention, but it becomes contradictory when it is precisely socio-historical conditions which induce the drastic split between knowledge and empirical experience. Within capitalist modernity, the separation between "theory" and "life" ceases to be the theorist's vain illusion, constituting instead the *material* result of *material* conditions. So

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that the denial of the effective "autonomy" of thought turns out to be nothing but a sign of thoroughgoing *idealism*. There is nothing less historical and more hyperborean than looking for the dirty laundry that lies behind the categories of theory. In so doing, we take their formidable *practical* power lying down; the more helpless we are, the more we think we have it all figured out.

The sociologist of knowledge chases his own tail, trapped by an ironic paradox; he is wrong precisely because he is right: in theory there are no traces of immediate vital praxis precisely because this praxis, organised within the capitalist mode of production, has made theory into an "independent" force. Instead of pausing to reflect on the rather earthy causes of this independence, the materialist-sociologist exorcises them with a mocking laugh. But there's worse: not only does this figure fail to grasp the status of knowledge, he also loses hold of the very "society" in whose name he claims to speak: he fails to notice the abstract connections ("real abstractions", as Marx called them) that pervade society and make it cohere. These are accounted for with greater realism, albeit indirectly, precisely by that "pure" thought which the sociologist sought to unmask. Kant's transcendental Subject, never reducible to single empirical subjects, captures the impersonal truth of exchange relations better than any on-site inquiry. There is more history and "life" in the *a priori* categories of the *Critique of Pure Reason* than in Voltaire and La Mettrie put together. The greatest of separations is also the most concrete. In the figure of an imperturbable and autonomous intellect, the era of the commodity and its "theological niceties" resonates with a clarity unknown to those who think they can catch it with a fast hand.

2.

Though outdated, today the *sensationist* tendency in materialism still appears more radical and promising. Its dominant theme is the shadow thrown by the body unto thought, the role played by the sensible in the abstraction that would like to efface it.

According to Adorno, the profound aim of materialists is to make manifest to knowledge, in the rudest possible way, what it is forced to forget, that is, the impressions of *pleasure* and *pain* that never fail to mark out sensory perception. This curt reminder has a polemical function: against all the primal scenes of metaphysics, the materialist falls back on a rather trivial *coup de scène*, all of a sudden re-introducing the image of a body in pleasure and pain into the orderly corridors of logic. He takes

advantage of the embarrassment he has thus caused to signal the irrepressible point: no relationship is conceivable between *logos* and *ethos* (that is, between philosophy and politics) unless one goes to the root of the relationship between *logos* and *aisthesis* (between theory and sensation). Only in the connection of thought with pleasure (or with pain) do ethics and politics find a non-negligible foundation.

Materialism attains its particular dignity when it takes the form of a radically critical procedure, an intermittent *settling of accounts*, a provocative questioning about happiness. Instead, as soon as it pretends to erect itself as a positive system it seems doomed to the most discouraging theoretical indigence. Its *leitmotivs* are well known: the praise of immediate experience, the assent given to inductive procedures, a crass theory of "reflection", a conformist adequation to common sense. This conceptual arsenal remains at the margins of the paths effectively staked out by modern science, whose hypothetico-deductive style contradicts or devalues direct perception. But what lies behind the naïveté of materialism in the epistemological field? Behind so much haplessness, should we not perhaps discern the oblique defence of a radical claim?

We are not dealing with Hegel's butler, lazy and incredulous, who turns up his nose when his master demolishes "sense certainty", denying the status of real knowledge to the assertion "here and now I see a tree". The materialist, who is no butler, puts his objection forward, not by discussing from first principles whether the here-and-now constitutes effective knowledge, but by giving expression to the intolerable objection gnawing away at him: to truly speak of sensation, one must say "here and now I see a tree with *pleasure* or *displeasure*". But this claim to the integral and non-decomposable character of perception has little success, for a predictable reason: it is devoid of any development whatever. In fact, to go beyond sensation and guarantee the possession of a universal knowledge, it is necessary to put pleasure and pain aside, or, more strongly, to put them aside, with retroactive effect, already within sensation itself. And it is then, but only because forced to do so by the failure of his own genuine demand, that the materialist subscribes to those theories of knowledge which, more than others, seem to leave open some possibility of restating this demand in the future. Induction, "reflection", or common sense, are not inevitable options, but opportune supports in order to take up again — if needed in an indirect or masked fashion — a non-mutilated discourse on bodily sensation. The acceptance of "sense certainty" as the solid foundation of knowledge is only a provisional position of retreat, cunningly adopted in order to safeguard a claim regarding the completeness of sensation. In brief: the lesser evil, the least

grievous of errors. At the root of the epistemological "naïveté" of materialism lies the hope, which is *anything but naïve*, of making the pleasure/pain dyad count even within the most rarefied of theories. Even sensationist-materialism, with its *coups de scène* and its embarrassing truths, remains a marginal figure.

3.

In order to take stock of all the difficulties incurred by the philosophical defence of the life of the senses, it is a good idea to unearth Feuerbach, the reviled protagonist of modern materialism. He writes: "Philosophy therefore must not begin with itself, but with its antithesis, with non-philosophy. This principle, present within us and different from thought, is the principle of sensualism". Life is the grammatical subject, thought its predicate, and not vice versa. Senses surpass concepts: the experiences of the former never fully pass into the latter. What is perceived in the silence of touch remains independent from the speculative power of language.

But can "sensualism" really be taken as an indubitable starting point? Reading Feuerbach, one has the strange impression that he is, at the same time, right and wrong. Right, to insist, without posturing, on the autonomy of the sensible. Wrong, because this autonomy is truly such only if it is introduced and, as it were, legitimised by thought. That the body, or "life", can achieve its proper place and emphasis only on the basis of abstractions, or rather, as a result of their work, this is the aspect that we must thank the adversaries of materialism for putting into focus.

Hegel, in the first and utterly crucial pages of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, had in fact elucidated that the sensible is not an absolute datum, but just another thought: the thought of what is not a thought, precisely. Only that in Hegel, as in the entirety of metaphysics, from the fact that the sensible presents itself as *thought* it follows that thought, when applied to corporeal life, only ever encounters itself. It is here that we witness the emergence, precisely thanks to the resistance of matter, of the experience of a *thought that thinks itself*. The sensible is here nothing more than a propellant, or a *sacrificial* ingredient, playing its part in the renewal of the magic circle of self-reference. The impression is the same: right and wrong at the same time.

There is nonetheless another angle from which, at least by way of hypothesis, the entire question can be considered anew. "Sensualism", if taken seriously, is anything but an immediate *incipit*, a presupposition, or

a tranquil foundation. Nor should it be taken instead as a precarious and biased stage within the self-referential life of the spirit. Rather, it should be conceived as happy *point of arrival* for the "labour of concepts"; as the *result* or the apex of theory; as a complex *goal*, toward which converge quite sophisticated intellectual performances. To paraphrase Feuerbach: philosophy must *end* not with itself, but with its antithesis, the life of the senses; and, ending thus, it must depose it, return it to itself, *absolve it*.

Gaston Bachelard once wrote: "Sensual learning is no longer a point of departure, it is not even a mere guide: it is an *end*". The French epistemologist, perhaps the sharpest of them all, was referring to scientific practice in laboratories. Nevertheless, it can be argued that his observation now fits common experience, the various forms that this experience takes in late modernity. In short, it can become a sort of heraldic motto, or epigraph, for an instance of materialism that desires to escape its minority status. It can do so under two different but complementary aspects. First of all as the registering of a historical condition, our own, in which the relationship between knowledge and life has undergone radical mutations. Then, as a methodological principle on the basis of which one could once again introduce a reflection on sensualism, i.e. on pleasure and pain.

4.

Primum philosophare, deinde vivere: the reversal of this traditional adage has been factually realised by mature capitalism, which has in culture and abstract knowledge its principal resources. Not that philosophising is rife: on the contrary. The point instead is that every living experience presupposes a lot of materialised theory. Innumerable conceptual constructions, embodied in as many techniques, procedures, and regulations, orient the gaze and serve as the premises of any operation whatsoever. Direct perception and the most spontaneous action come *last*. This is the historical situation that comes about once the split between hand and mind manifests its *irreversibility*; when the *autonomy* of abstract intellect conditions and regulates the social productive process, on the whole and in every one of its singular aspects.

If he wants to remain faithful to his own critical motivation, the materialist-sociologist cannot go looking for "vital" residues in one theory or another, but must instead *identify and describe a specific form of life on the basis of the type of knowledge which permeates it*. Only in this way, besides, will he be able to lay his hands on the more obviously

“sociological”, or *tout court* material, aspects of contemporary experience (beginning with the experience of work). And it is precisely in this way, moreover, that he will find confirmation of the unity of “life” and “philosophy” which, as we’ve seen, is a point of honour for the materialist.

Do not forget though that this confirmation can be obtained only once pure theory is considered as a *material fact*. Tell me what you think, what cultural constellation you rely on, and I will tell you how you work, what relationship you entertain with social hierarchies, what are your earthly interests as well as your least reflective feelings and impulses. A *boutade* of course ... but an incredibly serious one.

Naturally, it is here no longer a question of the “great thinker” and of his possible compromise with the horrors of the age. We are not speaking about Heidegger, but about modern mass intellectual work. Nevertheless, precisely when concrete modes of existence appear as results of theoretical paradigms, the judgement passed on the “great thinker” allows for no shortcuts or plea-bargains. It becomes at once more stringent and more severe.

5.

Finally, it is worth one’s while to ask what opportunities are offered by the reversal of positions between knowledge and “life” to that other typical attitude of materialism, sensationism.

Perhaps it is precisely the *terminal* placement of sensible experience (i.e., the fact that it is preceded and prepared by “theory”) which offers a glimmer of hope for the resolution of the *impasse* that blocked the materialist demand to always include pleasure and pain within perception. As long as the “sense datum” is assumed as the *first* step in the representation of the world, that demand, however impassioned, cannot but sound quarrelsome and impotent. In this instance it is indeed necessary to purge sensation in order to extract from it an *information* capable of founding further universal assertions. Vice versa, when direct perception is understood as the furthest edge, or the last link, in an entirely deployed knowledge process, it can at last aspire to unconditioned integrity. The *historical* reality of an “autonomous intellect” warrants this assertion: there is nothing after sensation, everything else came before.

More than two centuries ago, in his *Treatise of Sensations*, Condillac imagined a statue “deprived of every species of idea”, which begins to

know, first with one sense alone, smell, then with hearing as well, and then, gradually, with all the others. By means of this example Condillac attempted to show what is proper to each sensory organ, as well as the genesis of intellectual representations. It is a thought experiment that merits repeating in the society of the spectacle (also called the “society of generalised communication”). Albeit with some decisive amendments. On the one hand, it is necessary to postulate that the statue, prior to whatever sensation, is *full* “of every species of idea”, that is, replete with socially effective conceptual schemata. On the other, one must hold that its perceptions, loaded with pleasure or pain, are not a prelude but an acme and an *accomplishment*.

Or rather, they are also a prelude, not to a further and disinterested knowledge, but to a *politics*.

Translated by Alberto Toscano