

THE OLD CULTURE

AND THE NEW CULTURE

by
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1.

The development of society is a unified process. This means that a certain phase of development cannot take place in any area of social life without exerting an impact on all other areas. Through this unity and coherence of social development it is possible to grasp and achieve an understanding of the same process from the standpoint of one social phenomenon or another. Thus, one can speak of culture in its apparent isolation from other social phenomena, for when we correctly grasp the culture of any period, we grasp with it the root of the whole development of the period, just as when we begin with an analysis of the economic relations.

In bemoaning the collapse of the capitalist order the bourgeoisie most often claims that its real concern is with the perishing of culture; it formulates its defense of its class interests as if the basis of these interests were the eternal values of culture. In contrast, the starting point of the following set of ideas is the view that *the culture of the capitalist epoch had collapsed in itself and prior to the occurrence of economic and political breakdown*. Therefore, in opposition to the anxieties [of the bourgeoisie], it is a pressing necessity, precisely in the interests of culture, in the interest of opening the way to the new culture, to bring the long death process of capitalist society to its completion.

If one views the culture of two epochs scientifically the key question is: what are the sociological and economic conditions for the existence of culture? The answers to the question with which one would then ultimately have to begin arise out of these relationships between culture and its social pre-conditions: what actually is culture? Briefly condensed: the concept of culture (in opposition to civilization) comprises the ensemble of valuable products and abilities which are dispensable in relation to the immediate maintenance of life. For example, the internal and external beauty of a house belongs to the concept of culture in contrast to its durability and protectiveness. So when we ask: what is the social possibility of culture? we have to answer: it is available to those societies in which the primary necessities of life can be met in such a way that in meeting them one does not have to engage in the strenuous labor that consumes all his energy; where, in other words, free energies are at the disposal of culture.

Every old culture was thus the culture of the ruling classes; only they were in a position to place all their valuable abilities in the service of culture, independently of concern for subsistence. Here, as everywhere, capitalism has revolutionized the whole social order. In surpassing the privileges of feudal estates, it also surpassed the cultural privileges of estate society. Specifically, *capitalism drove the ruling class itself, the bourgeoisie, into the service of production*.¹ The

1. Engels, *Zur Wohnungsfrage*, p. 17.

essential differentiating feature of capitalism, in contrast to earlier social orders, is that in it the exploiting class itself is subjugated to the process of production; the ruling class is forced to devote its energies to the struggle for profit just as the proletariat is forced to devote itself to subsistence. (For example: compare the factory director in capitalism to the lord in the period of serfdom.) This claim is apparently contradicted by the plethora of idlers produced and supported by the capitalist class. Yet our attention should not be diverted from the essence by superficial appearances, for when it comes to culture only the best forces of the ruling class are considered. In pre-capitalist periods these forces were situated in relations which enabled them to put their abilities in the service of culture while capitalism, in contrast, has made precisely these forces into slaves of production exactly as it has the workers, even though, in material terms, each evaluates the slavery entirely differently.

Liberation from capitalism means liberation from the rule of the economy. Civilization creates the rule of man over nature but in the process man himself falls under the rule of the very means that enabled him to dominate nature. Capitalism is the zenith of this domination; within it there is no class which, by virtue of its position in production, is called upon to create culture. The destruction of capitalism, *i.e.*, communist society, grasps just these points of the question: communism aims at creating a social order in which everyone is able to live in a way that in precapitalist eras was possible only for the ruling classes and which in capitalism is possible for no class.

It is at that point that the history of mankind will actually begin. Just as history in the old sense began with civilization, and men's struggle with nature was placed in the "prehistoric" epoch, so will the historywriting of the coming epoch begin the real history of mankind with developed communism. The rule of civilization will then be known as the second "prehistoric" period.

2.

The most decisive feature of capitalist society, then, is that economic life ceased to be a means to social life: it placed itself at the center, became an end in itself, the goal of all social activity. The first and most important result was that the life of society was transformed into a grand exchange relationship; society itself became a huge market. In the individual life experiences this condition expresses itself in the commodity form which clothes every product of the capitalist epoch as well as all the energies of the producers and creators. Everything ceases to be valuable for itself or by virtue of its inner (e.g., artistic, ethical) value; a thing has value only as a ware bought and sold on the market. No deep analysis is needed to show how destructive this has been of every and all culture. Just as man's independence from the worries of subsistence, that is, the free use of his powers as an end in itself, is the human and social precondition for culture, so all that culture produces can possess real cultural value only *when it is valuable for itself*. The moment cultural productions become commodities, when they are placed in relationships which transform them into commodities, their autonomy – the possibility of culture – ceases.

Capitalism has attacked the social possibility of culture at its roots at still another point: its relationship to the production of cultural products. We have seen that from the standpoint of the product culture is not possible when the product does not carry its aim within itself. Now, from the standpoint of the relation between the product and its producer, culture is possible only when production is a unified and self-contained process; a process whose conditions depend upon the human possibilities and capabilities of the producer. The most characteristic example of such a process is the art work in which the whole genesis of the work is exclusively the result of the artist's labor and each element of the work is conditioned by his individual qualities. In the pre-capitalist eras this artistic spirit dominated the whole industry. At least in regard to the human character of the process, the printing of a book was as little separated from its writing as the painting of a picture was from the preparation of a table. Capitalist production, however, not only wrests property in the means of production from workers but, as a result of the always expanding and increasingly specialized *division of labor*, it so fragments and divides the developmental process of the product that no part is in itself meaningful or self-contained. No individual worker's labor is in immediate and perceptible linkage with the finished product: the latter has meaning only for the abstract calculation of the capitalists, that is, only as a commodity.

The inhumanity of this relationship is intensified by the expansion of machine production. For in the division of labor which arose out of manufacturing, where the preparation of the product was highly divided and dismembered, the quality of individual parts was nevertheless decisively conditioned and shaped by the physical and spiritual capacities of the worker, whereas in the developed machine industry every link between the product and producer is abolished. This is so to the point that the production is exclusively conditioned by the machine: *man serves the machine, he adapts to it*; production becomes totally independent of the human possibilities and capabilities of the worker.²

Next to the culture-destroying forces – which so far we have observed only from the standpoint of the individual, isolated product and producer – other similar forces are also operative in capitalism. We notice the most important of these when we grasp the relationship of the products to each other. The culture of pre-capitalist periods was possible because the individual cultural products stood in a continuous relation to one another: one developed further the problems raised by its predecessor, etc. Thus the whole culture revealed a certain continuity of gradual and organic development; thus it was possible that in any area a coherent, plain, and yet original culture arose, a culture whose level went far

2. Many place this process in the context of the technical division of labor of mechanized industry and pose the question as if such a situation must continue to exist even after the collapse of capitalism. This issue cannot be fully discussed here. Suffice it to say that Marx viewed it differently. He perceived that the "efficiency of labor within the factory and the division of labor within society" stand in inverse relation to each other and that in a society where one is developed the other regresses and *vice versa*. (*Elend der Philosophie*, 120.)

beyond that of the highest achievement of isolated, individual capacities. By revolutionizing the process of production, by making the revolutionary character of production permanent through the anarchy of production, capitalism dissolved the continuous and organic aspects of the old culture. For culture, the revolutionization of production means, on the one hand, that the production process continuously introduces factors that decisively influence the course and art of production without, however, relating in any way to the essence of the product — a work as an end in itself. (Thus, for example, the purity of materials vanishes from industry and architecture.) On the other hand — as a result of production for the market without which the capitalist revolutionization of production would be unthinkable — the novel, the sensational, and the conspicuous elements assume an importance irrespective of whether they enhance or detract from the true, inner value of the product. The cultural reflection of this revolutionary process is the phenomenon known as fashion, which denotes a concept essentially different from that of culture. The dominance of fashion means that the form and quality of the product placed on the market is altered in short periods of time independently of the beauty or purpose of such alterations. *It is of the essence of the market that new things must be produced within definite periods of time*, things which must differ radically from those which preceded, and which cannot build upon the previously collected experiences of production. As a result of the speed of development they cannot be gathered and digested; or, no one wants to base himself on them since the very essence of fashion requires complete deviation from what preceded. Thus every organic development vanishes and in its place steps a directionless hither-thither and an empty but loud diletantism.

3.

The roots of the crisis of capitalist culture reach still deeper than this. The foundation of its perpetual crisis and internal collapse is the fact that ideology on the one hand and the production and social order on the other enter into irreconcilable contradiction. As a necessary result of capitalism's anarchy of production, the bourgeois class, when struggling for power and when first in power, could have but one ideology: that of individual freedom. The crisis of capitalist culture must appear the moment this ideology is in contradiction with the bourgeois social order. As long as the advancing bourgeois class — in the 18th century, for example — directed this ideology against the constraints of feudal estate society, it was an adequate expression of the given state of class struggle. Thus the bourgeoisie in this period was actually able to have a genuine culture. But as the bourgeoisie came to power (beginning with the French Revolution) it could no longer seriously carry through its own ideology; it could not apply the idea of individual freedom to the whole society without the self-negation of the social order that brought this ideology into being in the first place. Briefly: it was impossible for the bourgeois class to apply its own idea of freedom to the proletariat. The insurpassable dualism of this situation is the following: the bourgeoisie must either deny this ideology or must employ it as a veil covering

those actions which contradict it. In the first case the result would be a total ideal-lessness, a moral chaos, since by virtue of its position in the production system the bourgeoisie is not capable of producing an ideology other than that of individual freedom. In the second case, the bourgeoisie faces the moral crisis of an internal lie: it is forced to act against its own ideology.

This crisis is intensified by the fact that the principle of freedom itself ends up in irremediable contradiction. We cannot enter here into an analysis of the era of finance capital. We need only mention the fact that the immense "organizedness" of production which emerges from this stage of capitalism (cartels, trusts) stands in complete contradiction with the dominant idea of early capitalism: free competition. In the process of social development this idea loses all basis in reality. As the upper sectors of the bourgeoisie, following the essence of finance capital, became natural allies of their former enemies – the agrarian-feudal classes – so did these sectors of the bourgeoisie look to their new allies for a new ideology. But this attempt to bring ideology back into harmony with the production system has to fail: the real foundation of conservative ideologies – the feudal estate divisions and the corresponding production order – was decisively eradicated precisely by capitalism's revolutionization of production (which reached its peak in the era of finance capital). Feudalism once possessed a culture of great value and achievement. But this was in a period when feudal estate society prevailed; when the whole of society and production was ruled according to its principles. With the victory of capitalism this social formation was annihilated. The fact that a substantial portion of economic and social power remained in the hands of the once ruling estates did not halt the process by which these estates were capitalized – *i.e.*, assumed capitalist form. The result, for the feudal sectors, was the same contradiction of ideology and production order as emerged for the bourgeoisie, although the expression of this contradiction differed. Thus as the bourgeoisie in the age of finance capital sought the waters of renewal, it looked to a well-spring that it had itself filled with sand.

From the standpoint of culture this opposition between ideology and production order means the following: the foundation of the greatness of old cultures (Greek, Renaissance) consisted in the fact that ideology and production order were in harmony; the products of culture could organically develop out of the soil of social being. If the greatest cultural works were some distance from the inner world of the average man, there was nevertheless a contact and coherence between them. But more important than the position of cultural products within social life was the fact that the harmony of ideology and the production order made possible the obvious harmony between ideology and the then existing "way of life" [*Lebensführung*]. (That each specific human "way of life" depends on its position in production requires no detailed discussion.) In every social order, however, where the "way of life" and its ideological expression are in natural self-evident harmony, it is then possible for the forms assumed by ideology to find organic expression in the products of culture. This organic unity is possible only under certain conditions. For the relative autonomy of ideological elements from their economic foundations means that as *forms* (*i.e.*, according to their formal values and formal validity) these ideological elements are independent of the

“givens” that are formed by them; the forms of human expression are, in other words, independent of that which is presented to them by the economic and social order prevailing at the time. *The material that is formed by these forms can be nothing else but social reality itself.* Thus when a fundamental opposition emerges between ideology and the economic order, this opposition appears as follows in relation to our problem: *the form and content of cultural expressions enter into contradiction with each other.* At this point the organic unity of individual works – the harmonious, joy-imparting essence of particular works – no longer signifies an organic cultural unity for those living within the culture.

For this reason, the culture of capitalism, to the extent that it truly existed, could consist in nothing but the ruthless critique of the capitalist epoch. This critique frequently reached a high level (Zola, Ibsen) but the more honest and valuable it was, the more it had to lose the simple and natural harmony and beauty of the old culture: culture in the true and literal sense of the word. The contradiction between ideology and productive order, between the form and content of culture appear in all areas of human expression, in the entire realm of cultural material. In this way capitalism – to mention but one very evident example – necessarily produces out of itself, out of its freedom ideology, *the idea of man as an end in himself.* And it can safely be said that this great idea never received such pure, clear, and conscious expression as in the immediately pre-capitalist years – the period of classical German idealism. Yet no social order has so thoroughly trampled on this idea as capitalism. For example, the commodification of everything did not remain limited to the transformation of all products into commodities; it also passed over into human relations – one thinks of marriage. Now within this context the inner necessity of the direction of ideology and culture requires that all cultural products proclaim man as an end in himself. On the other hand, the material – that which is formed by the ideological-cultural forms – is a living negation of this very idea. The best poetry of capitalism, for example, could thus not be a simple reflection of its period – as was, for example, Greek poetry whose eternal beauty sprang precisely from this naturally uncritical mirroring – but only a critique of the existing order.

4.

We now turn to the meaning of the communist transformation of society from the standpoint of culture. It means above all the end of the domination of the economy over the totality of life. It thereby means an end to the impossible and discordant relation between man and his labor, in which man is subjugated to the means of production and not the other way around. In the last analysis the communist social order means the *Aufhebung* of the economy as an end in itself. But because the structure of capitalism has so deeply penetrated the mental world of everyone living within it, this side of the transformation is only faintly perceived. This is all the more true because this side of the transformation, the *Aufhebung* of the economy as an end in itself, cannot express itself in the surface appearances of life after the seizure of power. Domination over the economy – that is what the socialist economy is – means the *Aufhebung* of the autonomy of

the economy. Previously autonomous, a process with its own laws that are only perceived by human reason but cannot be directed by it,³ the economy now becomes part of state administration, part of a planned process, no longer dominated by its own laws. Yet the final moving force of this unified social process can no longer be of an economic nature. Indeed, appearances also seem to contradict this claim. For it is clear that the reorganization of production is theoretically and practically impossible on other than economic grounds, with economic organs, and economic thought. Beyond this, it goes without saying that, corresponding to the essence of class struggle in the phase of the dictatorship of the proletariat — which means the high-point of class struggle — questions of economic struggle, of reorganizing the economy, are questions that stand in the forefront. But this in no way means that the basic foundation of this process is also of an economic nature. The functional change which the proletarian dictatorship brings to every realm also enters here. During capitalism every ideological moment was only the “superstructure” of the revolutionary process which ultimately led to the collapse of capitalism. Now, in the proletarian dictatorship, this relationship is reversed. I do not mean that the reorganization of the economy becomes merely “superstuctual” (this expression was not the most adequate even in relation to ideology, since it led to countless misunderstandings), but simply that the priority of the economy dissolves. What speaks against this claim on the surface, speaks for it if only we take a slightly dialectical view of the situation.

In the crisis of capitalist society the ideological component always stood in the foreground of social consciousness. This was not accidental but a result of the necessity that the basic motor forces of development could never entirely enter the consciousness of the masses moved by these forces. The socialist “critique” had an unveiling character in relation to these crises and revolutions: it pointed to the real, fundamental moving forces — the economic process. Thus nothing is more natural than that the standpoint which previously functioned as critique should remain in the foreground with the collapse of capitalism. The question is only whether this functional change has not negated and superseded that which in the earlier function of the socialist critique and historical materialism had the character of “final” motive. That such a negation and supersession does occur is natural in light of what preceded it. For the economic motive can only be the final motive in the case of a disorganization of the whole productive system. Only the moving forces of disorganized production can function as natural forces, as blind forces, and only as such can they be the final movers of everything; every ideological element either adapts itself to this process (*i.e.*, becomes superstructural) or vainly opposes it. Thus in capitalism every non-economic factor is purely ideological. The only exception is the socialist critique of the whole of capitalist society, since it is neither a positive or negative ideological

3. This situation is reflected in the emergence of the school of ‘political economy’ as an independent science. Preceding its emergence, economic science in the modern sense was impossible; and when the autonomy of the economy is ended, ‘political economy’ as an independent science also dissolves. It is thus pure capitalist ideology to view the laws of political economy as eternal, natural laws.

retinue of individual processes but an unveiling of the whole; it is simultaneously an unveiling of the totality of the economic process and an effective action toward its transformation. But what is transformed is not only economic disorganization but the accompanying autonomy of economic life, in other words, life under the hegemony of economic motives. When economic life is organized in the direction of socialism, those elements which previously were accouterments at best now come to the fore: *the inner and outer life of man is dominated by human and no longer by economic motives and impulses.*

As we have seen, it is not surprising that the transformation of economic life is more vividly in the forefront of revolutionary consciousness than is that ideological moment through which it is ultimately moved. The process of functional change necessarily enters the consciousness of the proletariat only with its victory. Indeed, among the masses of the proletariat this new consciousness is no more than the continuation of conscious class struggle: previously the essence of class consciousness consisted in the entrance of economic interests into consciousness. The mere transition to the work of socialist construction – whose end result is the functional change analysed here – does not touch the proletariat's consciousness of immediate class interests; it is, so to speak, "sub-conscious" [*unter dem Bewusstsein*]. Only full class consciousness – which, beyond immediate interests, is conscious of the proletariat's world-historic mission – brings the functional change into the consciousness of the proletariat.⁴

This functional change introduces the possibility of a new culture. *For just as civilization means man's external domination of his environment, so is culture man's internal domination of his environment.* As civilization creates the means of the domination of nature, so through proletarian culture the means are created for the domination of society. For civilization, and its most developed form, capitalism, has brought to its peak man's slavery to social production, to the economy. *And the sociological precondition of culture is man as an end in himself.* This precondition, which was present for the ruling classes in pre-capitalist societies and which capitalism removed from everyone, is created for all with the final phase of proletarian victory. The transformation, this radical reformation of the whole social structure, affects all those phenomena whose culture-destroying effects we analyzed above.

With the socialist organization of the economy, its revolutionary character ceases. In place of the anarchic succession (resulting from conjecture), which we characterized by the term fashion, there enters organic continuum, genuine development: each individual moment follows necessarily out of the substantive preconditions of the preceding moment – and thereby each moment carries with it the solution to the previously insoluble problems while simultaneously placing a new problem before the moment to follow. The necessary cultural result of such an organic development, one which flows from the essence of things (and not from conjuncture), is that the level of culture can again supersede the capacities of single isolated individuals. The linkage to another's work, the continuation of

4. Cf., the article "Klassenbewusstsein," *Kommunismus*, 14/15. [This article is reprinted in *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*.]

another's work – the second sociological precondition of culture – again becomes possible. In addition, both cultural products and human relations lose their commodity character. The *Aufhebung* of commodity relations enables men and cultural products, which under capitalism functioned entirely or primarily within economic relations, to recover their autonomous character. But the possibility of culture, as is well known, requires that an always greater number of forms of human expression becomes more deeply and sharply autonomous or, what amounts to the same thing: that they are determined to serve the human essence of man. For the “being ends in themselves” of culture and man are not exclusive but, on the contrary, reciprocally serve and deepen each other. When a particular product (house, furniture, etc.) is produced not as a commodity but in such a way that its own possibilities of beauty attain the highest possible fulfillment, this means the same as saying: the house or piece of furniture is in the service of man's “human-ness” [*des Menschseins des Menschen*]; it complies with his demands. Cultural products are no longer produced through an economic process that operates independently of each man – a process in which products are abstract commodities and men are mere buyers and sellers.

At the same time, the unhealthy specialization of capitalism has to stop. And, in fact, the moment man's interests in production are ruled no longer by the abstract effort of buying or selling on the market, but by the unified process of production and enjoyment of the now autonomous product – a process that *encompasses the totality of man* – at that moment specialization also undergoes a functional change. In the proletarian society, specialization loses not only its class character but also its alien character in relation to the essence of human life. With the emergence of the product as an end in itself, it will naturally fit into the totality and the final questions of human life. With the *Aufhebung* of human isolation and of anarchic individualism, human society will form an organic whole; its parts – individual members and products – will support and magnify each other in the service of the common goal – the idea of further human development.

5.

By posing this goal we reach the essence of the question. If the goal of the new society consisted in the enhancement of mere satisfaction, of man's well-being, none of the functional changes would enter the picture; that is, their meaning would be scarcely noticeable. In this case the task of the proletarian state could be fulfilled in the organization of production and distribution, and economic life – with quite different aims, of course – would continue to dominate the human principle. In this case the new development would naturally reach its goals more rapidly and unilaterally: the ends would be achieved with the correct and just organization of production and distribution. Actually, however, in reaching this point the proletarian state has only established the *indispensable preconditions* for the achievement of its goals. Humanity must still struggle for their *realization*.

The reorganization of the economy is an inescapable requirement in the setting of final goals. And this is so not only for the above sociological reasons;

that is, it is not as if only contented men are capable of receiving culture. The reason an economic reorganization is absolutely necessary is that because of the unique structure of human consciousness, immediate evils and miseries — even as they are on a much lower level than the ultimate questions of human existence — nevertheless, and with only few exceptions, block the ultimate questions from consciousness; the immediate evils and miseries are not by themselves capable of bringing to consciousness the final questions of existence. We can clarify this with a very simple example: someone is racking his brain over a complex scientific problem but during his work he contracts an unrelenting toothache. Clearly, in most cases he would be unable to remain in the stream of his thought and work until the immediate pain is relieved. The annihilation of capitalism, the new socialist reconstruction of the economy means the healing of all toothaches for the whole of humanity. Everything which prevents men from dealing with the truly essential problems vanishes from human consciousness: consciousness now stands open to the essential. This example also reveals the limits of the economic transformation. Obviously the toothache must be relieved in order for the work of the mind to be resumed. But it is equally obvious that this work does not resume automatically with the elimination of the pain. For this a new spurt of energy, a new state of mind, a new vitality is required. When all economic misery and pain has vanished, laboring humanity has not yet reached its goal: it has only created the *possibility* of beginning to move toward its real goals with renewed vigor. Now, culture is the form of the idea of man's human-ness. And culture is thus created by men, not by external conditions. Every transformation of society is therefore only the framework, only the possibility of free human self-management and spontaneous creativity.

Sociological research must be limited, then, to analysis of the framework. What the culture of proletarian society will be — that is, what it will be substantively, how it will be essentially constituted — is exclusively determined by the powers of the proletariat as they become free. In relation to this process any attempt to say anything in advance would be laughable. Sociological analysis is in a position to do no more than to have shown that this possibility is created by proletarian society and that *only the possibility is created*. Further details would pass beyond the frame of what is presently possible in the way of scientific research; at best one can speak of those cultural values from the old society which may be appropriate to the essence of the new framework and thus which can be adopted and developed further by it. For example, the idea of man as an end in himself — the fundament of the new culture — is the legacy of classical 19th century idealism. The real contribution of the capitalist epoch to the construction of the future consists in its creating the possibilities of its own collapse and in its ruins, even creates the possibilities of the construction of the future. As capitalism produces the economic preconditions of its own annihilation, and as it produces the intellectual weapons for the proletarian critique that helps annihilate it (e.g., the relation of Marx to Ricardo), so in philosophy from Kant to Hegel has capitalism produced the idea of a new society whose task is to bring about the destruction of capitalism.