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Avant-garde and philosophy

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L'avant-garde et le theatre pendant l'Interbellum

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Reflecting on the theme of the International Symposium 'Avant-garde and theater in the Interbellum period', I asked myself whether it might be sensible to speak of an Avant-garde philosophy itself. I was in doubt about the possibility to do so. The philosophical community called the *Frankfurter Schule* seems the one to which scholars frequently refer when they treat the historical Avant-garde of the Interbellum. The intellectual work, academic or other, of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, appears to fit the picture. To me this looks too narrow a view, considering what happened on the philosophical scene of the period.

So, I decided to enlarge my vista for the examination of the Interbellum philosophical trends. Laboring on the symposium theme, I considered it helpful to make a difference between four issues:

a) the philosophical reflection *on* the Avant-garde, for which the aforementioned work of Theodor W. Adorno, but also Ernst Bloch's publications at the time (between 1918 and 1954), can be the examples

b) blueprints *for* an Avant-garde philosophy itself, for which I consider the *Scientific World Conception / Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung*, of the *Wiener Kreis*, to be an apparent example, although not standing on its one, because Max Horkheimer's philosophy of the new social sciences, may figure as well

c) philosophy *in times of historical Avant-garde* is the third issue, with Edmund Husserl's *Die Krisis des europäischen Menschentums und die Philosophie (La crise de l'humanité européenne et la philosophie)*, first presented as a lecture in Vienna, 1935, as the most salient paradigm; the philosophical work of Ernst Cassirer, Paul Natorp, Martin Heidegger, György Lukàcs, and Martin Buber also can be given as striking examples

d) finally, the *philosophical thoughts of the artists themselves*, whether active within an historical Avant-garde context properly, or producing their creations independent from it, with Arnold Schoenberg, Marcel Proust, Claude Debussy,

Jorge Luis Borges –to name only them, and leaving it to others to give the proper examples in the domain of theater and drama–, as unmatched examples. Let's start with the first issue. Unquestionably Adorno is the most quoted author, when it comes up to consider the historical Avant-garde. In this matter, he leaves both Lukàcs and Bloch far behind. Whether this is acceptable, can be doubted. Still, with his work on the novel –*Noten zur Literatur*– and additionally on music and drama, Adorno's thoughts are a benchmark for the philosophical reflection on the occurrence of historical Avant-garde. To summarize the essence of Adorno's characterization of modernism in art: destruction of the central role of the artist in the artwork itself. None of the artistic creators can claim a stable center around which the issues and instances of his or hers creation circle. Representation both of the so-called real world and the subjective mind implodes, liberating the working of the artistic creation itself.

Ernst Bloch, seemingly in contradiction with this, continued to emphasize the real opening character of the artwork for the whole of humanity. Avant-garde art is but one instance of the 'non closing' human capacity to transform both world and society. Avant-garde art reaches towards a human-natural horizon not yet explored or discovered. Avant-garde art, without interruption, is the art of the 'not-yet', the art of the still unfulfilled despite *and* as a consequence of all the creative endeavors to complete and to work out.

It makes quite a difference, if one compares this with the ideas put forward by Otto Neurath, Rudolf Carnap, and Hans Hahn in their *Wiener Kreis* manifesto: *Scientific World Conception / Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung*. With it we reach the second issue: 'blueprints for an Avant-garde philosophy itself'. In the Vienna Circle manifesto, the reader is called to leave the old styles of thinking behind. Relying on the success of modern science –foremost physics and mathematics– a ground-breaking program on past-time confusing philosophies is proposed, the start of which lay in the purification of all former philosophical languages. The 'Otto Neurath' version of the *Wiener Kreis* philosophy – Neurath who himself was engaged in the radical change in society and its economic basis, for he participated in the labor class upheavals in the southern part of Germany–, looked forward to a entirely new style of philosophical thinking in close collaboration with the natural and human sciences. If Schoenberg was the major campaigner for a new music program, Neurath fulfilled a comparable role in philosophy, with Rudolf Carnap as his testimonial executor, the latter writing his *Logische Aufbau der Welt*. Vienna was their common 'ideotope', if I may call it that way, the political and ideological environment of both Schoenberg and Neurath.

Meanwhile at Frankfurt, people gathered around Max Horkheimer to renew social thinking and analysis in a revolutionary program, meant to link psychoanalysis, Marxism, German idealism, and a 'schopenhauerian' deconstruction of western thought. Nonetheless, the program got its inspiration from Hegelian philosophy, which was acclaimed not to be a philosophy of the

isolated subject. In the ‘isolated-subject’ social philosophy, spheres of society – such as law, morals, and ideology– were understood as “projections of the autonomous person”. This led to a mistaken notion of social life, and consequently the shift away from it would totally alter our comprehension of social phenomena.

As for the third issue, ‘philosophy in times of historical Avant-garde’, it remains a tremendous task to arrive at a comprehensive look on it. How this may be, it seems clear to me that one cannot disregard Edmund Husserl’s lecture on the crisis of European humanity and the philosophy. Originally it was presented in Vienna –again Vienna– where Husserl’s audience was confronted with the philosopher’s presentiment of the war to come and with his criticisms on the very foundations of western society. Could it be that western society relies on blindness, which paradoxically must be linked with the success of natural sciences? Aren’t we the victims of mistrusting knowledge that goes beyond what natural sciences learn us? A suspicion, that has invited human sciences – *Geisteswissenschaften*– to be like natural sciences? All human knowledge is a social construct, and the natural sciences do not escape this fate. As a consequence natural sciences cannot be explained in terms of natural science methods. It is utterly impossible to explain or to understand natural sciences on a natural science basis. Let us try to escape false rationalism and let us have faith in a far broader conception of reasonableness, which has its content above what scientific rationality can offer us. Many years later, Stephen Toulmin –who wrote extensively on the Vienna of Wittgenstein, which was also Husserl’s Vienna, at least at the time he delivered his lecture at the *Kulturbund*– would advocate the same intellectual shift to set us free from a bogus mimesis of the natural sciences while trying to understand human behavior and social institutions.

Yet Husserl stands not alone in his intellectual assault on what can be considered to be the *Aufklärerei* –to make use of an expression of the father of phenomenology–, a subverted version of what *Aufklärung* originally was meant to be. The subversion resulted into the erroneous questions and answers in the field of knowledge of man and society. A whole generation of philosophers joined this intellectual assault, with far reaching consequences in politics, ideology and art. What symbolism had already done in the late nineteenth century, surrealism, for example, was ready to accomplish in the early twentieth century. To unmask the hypocrisy of bourgeois society and to set free the creative powers in men and women, to liberate them from the conventional ways of thinking and conceiving of the world. Behind the curtain of scientific conventionality and the veil of worn-out traditional values concerning rationality, lies the plethora of new transgressing experiences, waiting to be discovered and amplified both in content and extent.

Remarkably, within the boundaries of the Avant-garde miscellaneous and contradictory voices could be heard. To be clear about this: difference was the

mark of the Avant-garde, in contradistinction with the supposed aim to deliver the world once and for all from theoretical ambiguity and practical indecision. Or to state it otherwise, and speaking in an anachronistic way: the Avant-garde, examined from a philosophical point of view, spoke in 'different voices'.

Martin Buber published his book *Ich und Du* in 1923. In this book he formulated a radical critique of western philosophy. Instead of thinking in terms of the subject and the object, the human individual and the neutral external world, Buber invited his readers to think in totally different categories. The primeval relationship is between the two basic 'words'. The first of the two: 'I-Thou'; the second: 'I-It'. As a consequence of this shift in philosophical language about man and the world, it became important to take into consideration the uninterrupted change of 'I-Thou'-statements into 'I-It' statements, and likewise the opposite change of 'I-It' statements into 'I-Thou' statements. The consequence of this: a radical farewell to all western subject-oriented philosophy.

In a way, Buber's Interbellum philosophy was more radical than what Heidegger assumed to fulfill, in continuing the philosophical criticism of Husserl. But it was Heidegger's philosophy that became the pivotal philosophical topos of a whole generation of German speaking intellectuals who turned their back to conventional —say, neo-Kantian— philosophy. The Davos meeting in 1929 is significant for the change in the intellectual landscape both in Germany and France. Martin Heidegger outdid Ernst Cassirer, the heir of neo-kantianism and the successor of the Marxist-Kantian thinker, Hermann Cohen, in their famous disputation on the future of philosophical thought. The vast intellectual program of Cassirer remained forever in the shadow of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*.

In Hungary, a Marxist philosopher making common cause with the labor class upheavals that led to the short-lived Soviet republic under the leadership of Béla Kun in 1919, contributed to the philosophical dissonance within the Avant-garde movement. György Lukács made two steps at the same time: criticism of the 'darkness at noon' in German philosophy, in a book on the destruction of reason; meanwhile introducing the philosophy of the younger Hegel, the humanistic one, who with his romantic philosophy bears resemblance to the thoughts of the younger Marx. In Germany, an assistant of Heidegger in earlier times, Herbert Marcuse, more or less did the same thing, while writing a book on *Reason and Revolution*. Here again, it can be observed that ideological dissonance was the mark of the time.

In Russia, a variety of thinkers made an even more important move away from philosophical traditions. Criticism on western philosophical style and manners was already common ground in Russian philosophy, with writers such as Aleksej Khomiakov, Vladimir Soloviov, Leon Chestov, and Nicolai Berdiaev, all of whom knew German philosophy quite well. Sometimes their thoughts were more or less linked with Slavophil ideology, but most of the time they were equally looking forward to a whole new redemptive philosophy. Mikhail

Bakhtin and Vladimir Voloshinov both have contributed, though on a modest scale, to such a philosophy. In agreement with Buber's dialogical thinking, Bakhtin suggested to move off from what could be considered as monological philosophy, towards a polyphonic philosophy. The theme of the liberating heteroglossia in humankind, which was so well set out in Bakhtin's work on Rabelais and Dostojevski, is typical for this significant move away from conventional western thought. In his *Marxism and Philosophy of Language*, Voloshinov declared all philosophical and scientific discourse bounded by human action and power relationships. One cannot imagine discourse free from contextual situations of dominance among human beings. Thinking and speaking is acting in a world of power and dominance, in a social reality of control and command. Discourse –perhaps the one real issue of cautious examination in social science– lacks stability, because discoursing equals participating in action, political or other. Discourse means moving ahead, without interruption, by irrupting existing power relationships in a dynamic social world. "All center is lost." From then onwards, "the perimeter of the circle is nowhere, and its center everywhere."

Our conclusion will have become clear. Blatant dissonance and downright disagreement was the feature of the philosophical landscape of the time. Constructive endeavors went hand in hand with deconstruction enterprises. The background unmistakably was the feeling of the 'end of the road', an overall sentiment that a new renaissance was required to fulfill earlier expectations in western culture.

Finally, the fourth issue relates to what artists themselves were putting forward as a philosophical background for their creations. One might argue –not without reason– that not all of the artists active in the Interbellum can be linked with the historical Avant-garde. For instance, whether this was the case with the work of Marcel Proust, is doubtful. But the fact that Theodor Adorno referred so openly and extensively to Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, makes clear that this masterpiece in world literature was a benchmark for artistic creation to come. Moreover the reflective episodes in the *A la Recherche...* itself must be linked with the feeling the author had that something new was to come, if it didn't arrived already at the time of writing the reflections.

Undoubtedly the most striking example of the merging of two contradictory moves, we find in music. On the one hand, the endeavor to construct –a new mode of creative thinking and conceiving of all intellectual production–, and on the other hand, the purpose to deconstruct or to take to pieces earlier ways of art production and of the artist's conceiving of the world. Arnold Schoenberg has done both. Moreover, Schoenberg transgressed the boundaries of art production, in writing for theatre and poetry, in making paintings, at one time in proposing a radical way of political activity, in intervening in religious and ideological issues, in producing a proper philosophy of art and music. The titles of his many writings, alongside his revolutionary musical program of

dodecaphony, give evidence of this. Writings about subject matters such as: beauty feelings, the foundations of aesthetic valuation in music, the *Gemeinschaftskunst*, the aphorisms on the topic of the utility of falsehood, the morals of money Jews, Zionism, charity towards fellow men, Schopenhauer and Socrates, the morality of the weak (hero or martyr), *Hitlers Kulturbolschewisten*, mathematics. The list, without being exhaustive, substantiates Schoenberg's terrific effort to reshape the world following his highly personal new modes of conceiving of art, culture, and politics. Here we come across an Avant-gardist project of total rejuvenation in order to press people to conceive of the role of art in matters of ideology and society. The project is –so to speak– synergetic, or to put the other way, keeping in mind Neurath's endeavors to reach at the unity of science, synthetic, in so far that it blatantly transgressed the boundaries of scientific knowledge and art production. The advent of a new world in human creativity must be formulated; such is the task of an Avant-garde, which Schoenberg projected even in terms similar to military language. With this he reminds us of the arduous enthusiasm of the French-Swiss architect Le Corbusier, who in his *Ville Radieuse* not only projected new ways of proper architectural construction, but even went so far as to propose modern styles of community life and gathering together in his 'Cartesian' new townships, for which he used his famous expression: "machine à habiter".

Let us remind the beautiful statement written by Ernst Bloch, in his *Principle of Hope* (*Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, Suhrkamp, 1977, T. 2, 861), on the issue of what might be called "a Schoenberg-Le Corbusier-like revolution in art and theoretical thinking":

(Le Corbusier) sought everywhere a mode of Greek Paris, the Acropolis breathing a general human mind ("le marbre des temples porte la voix humaine"). But Greece has become an abstraction here, alike the undifferentiated "Human Being" ("Etre humain"), on which the elements of construction have to build in a mere functional way. For this intransigent functionalist, even town planning is private and abstract. The (general) "Human Being" is substituted to real men and women, who are obliged to live as termites in these houses and towns, in these "machines à habiter"...

A huge distance separates (this planning) from the real life of men. It is an arrangement, which is far away from home, far away from joy, and from native dwelling ('Heimat'). Thus is the consequence –another being out of the question– whenever architecture does not worry about the ground (on which men live). Time and again, this is what comes out of the brand of "Purity", which is built on leaving out concreteness and individuality, ..., whenever a silver sun, shining on each occasion, is nothing more than chrome-like misery. (My own free translation)

In conclusion, I again would like to characterize the philosophical scenery in times of historical Avant-garde. What strikes us the most is the dissonance when writers reflected on what ought to be fulfilled in times of profound and vicious social and cultural change. The dissension of the time reveals both, *resentment* about ‘the future in the past’ —a philosophical theme developed by Max Scheler in the Interbellum period—, and *expectation* about ‘a future already announced in a past gone by’.

In this way, it seems to me that —looked upon from a philosophical point of view— the legacy of the historical Avant-garde is forever loaded by the unfulfilled, the ‘not-yet’, the great adventure of humanity, which lies still behind the horizon we could already see so long ago.