

PERSONAL AUTONOMY & HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

Richard Archer

The following is largely a criticism of some of the mistakes and certain tendencies antithetical to an historical materialist conception of the world found in Ross Poole's paper 'Freedom and Alienation'. (Radical Philosophy, Winter 1975). Basically the criticism is this: because Poole never entirely leaves the framework employed in the account of negative freedom he wishes to criticize, he provides us with an individualistic understanding of autonomy as opposed to a class understanding. The result obscures the materialist conception of freedom, the role of history and a universalism emerges which is implicitly reactionary. In the first section of this paper Poole's argument is exposed and in the second section criticized. In the final section I try to provide some answers to the problem of recognizing autonomy in the class struggle using the basic ideas in Poole's approach. This paper is put forward as part of the general programme of re-examining the relation between Marxism and morality.

I Negative Liberty

In the paper Poole gives an analysis of freedom and alienation based on the concept of autonomy. Freedom is the lack of constraints on autonomous activity while alienation is its opposite. Freedom and alienation '... are related as opposite and exhaustive areas on the one continuum'(11). The respect in which human activity is characterized for the purpose of his analysis is in terms of want-satisfaction, some wants being more fundamental to a person than others, such as the desire for love and self-knowledge (16). Ultimately it is in terms of the formation of wants that autonomous activity is to be understood.

Poole begins the analysis by criticizing the negative definition of freedom: 'I am free to the extent that I am not constrained from doing what I want.' Poole argues this will not do and that we must have the additional concept of autonomy, roughly the notion that our wants must be independently formulated for satisfaction of those wants to be free activity on the part of the agent. For example, if post-hypnotic suggestion, drugs or the undue influence of others are used to replace a prior set of wants or transform those wants in a person then that person's freedom has been limited, that person's autonomy has been diminished. But simply because such interference must be absent for autonomy to remain intact it does not follow that autonomy must be identified with the 'independent formation of wants' (11, my emphasis). That is if 'independent' means anything like 'not dependent upon the activity of others' then all that follows from Poole's counter-examples is that the want-formation must not be interfered with. Wants historically and cooperatively formulated need not be wants whose formulation is the result of interference in the freedom-diminishing sense. Such wants would be dependent for their creation and existence in a determinable and determinate form upon the activity of others yet could still be autonomous in the sense that their satisfaction would nevertheless be free activity. There is additional evidence in his paper (which I will point out later) that Poole's understanding of autonomy

and independence rules out this latter type of want as one whose satisfaction is free activity. The danger is that Poole is set in search of a category of wants that is empty of any significance for our understanding of freedom.

Wants

In order to develop his analysis of autonomy in terms of independently formed wants, Poole provides the following categorization of wants in terms of the presence or absence of other people necessary for their satisfaction. There are basically two categories of wants: personal and interpersonal wants. The latter, by far the larger and more important of the two, requires '... in some way or other, preceding or ancillary, or corresponding activity by others for their satisfaction' (12). Personal wants are those that do not require such corresponding activity or those that relate solely to my physical environment. The only example of a personal want given immediately by Poole is that of painting a mural (12) though later he mentions beer-drinking (14) which might also be construed as an example of a personal want.

This typology is unhappy and reflects the same questionable dichotomy referred to above. A precondition of any personal want being satisfied is the existence of the productive activity of others. Painting a mural, drinking beer, bush-walking, reading, thinking are all activities that satisfy wants but at the same time require 'preceding' activity by others, even when related solely to the natural environment. Bush-walking requires boots, food, clothing of a particular nature and in most cases knowledge and transportation all of which are socially produced. However Poole does not make any real use of this distinction but concentrates on interpersonal wants to give his analysis of autonomy: independently formulated wants dependent upon independent others for their satisfaction.

He goes on to subdivide interpersonal wants into those requiring mutual recognition of the autonomy of the participants or what he terms 'intersubjective' wants (12) and those that do not. In the former category we are given examples of love and rational discussion which if they are to be satisfied require the free response of others. There is no love or rational discussion if the other person is forced to behave in a merely overt manner. Examples of the latter type of wants, those not requiring mutual recognition of autonomy, are wants that could just as easily be satisfied by slaves, the desire for riches, for example.

Poole then argues that if I divide my world up into those people whom I need for satisfaction of my intersubjective wants, and those whom I do not I restrict my intersubjective activity in a self-deceptive and self-stultifying way. He argues that I may be wrong about the ways in which those wants of which I am aware may be satisfied, and that there may well be wants of which I am not aware. Thus I cannot restrict autonomy to a particular group of people without risk to the aim of satisfying my wants.

Now at least a couple of premises must be added

before we can arrive at the conclusion which Poole wants us to draw, only one of which is pertinent to the general line of criticism I want to make. That is, it has to be the case that some of those whom I bar from any intersubjective activity with me are in fact fit, able or want to engage in intersubjective activity with me now or at some later stage. But at the same time some might not be and my present and future capacity to satisfy my intersubjective wants may rest upon my successful identification of those people whose autonomy ought to be denied. I have in mind the native's relation to the imperialist as one example. It has been and for many still is the situation that in order to be free the native must not treat the imperialist as a member of his or her intersubjective community. It is of no value either, to consider the imperialist as a potential participant of a community of intersubjective want-satisfiers if that possibility is not a real one. The imperialist may have to be confined, expelled, threatened or even killed here and now. We cannot simply draw priori conclusions about the nature of freedom for if the historical situations are arenas for social struggle then universalistic accounts only serve to obscure this fact and perpetuate any evils that occasion the struggle. The adoption of a universalistic account of freedom as requiring the recognition of the autonomy of all and not an historically situated account has as one of its consequences a tendency to substitute a universal (read 'ideological') ethic for a class-specific one. The treachery of such universalism in ethical ideology is nothing new, especially after Sartre's brilliant analysis in Anti-Semite and Jew.

Leaving aside other objections, the argument in a nutshell takes the following unexceptionable form: if you want to satisfy the deepest and most human desires, especially those for love, self-knowledge and understanding, you must endeavour with others to establish a community where autonomy is recognized and secured in the relations that govern all facets of everyday life. Such an endeavour will involve struggle and self-examination within the context of a community whose mutual trust and respect for each other's autonomy is built upon common goals and feelings. Now to save such an argument from being obvious and unhelpful everything depends on how successful in a theoretically practical sense Poole's analysis of autonomy is.

Autonomy

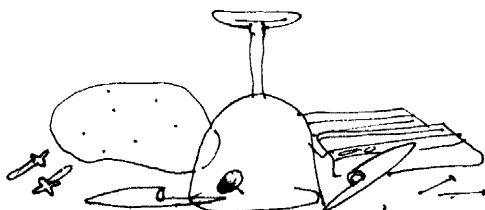
While we can act autonomously with respect to our personal wants, it is primarily in the realm of satisfying interpersonal wants that the concept has its most important application. The following discussion will use this realm as a background. The

first and primary mode of autonomous activity involves the person distancing him or herself from various aspects of his or her existence (actions, relations, attitudes, desires, principles, beliefs, roles, et cetera). To the extent this critical detachment and consequent self-examination results in activity that satisfies the principles and desires used in judging one's existence then that person is (more) autonomous. Now autonomous action can only result from self-examination and redirection if the desires, ideals and standards used in this process are themselves autonomous creations. A regress is involved, for as Poole says,

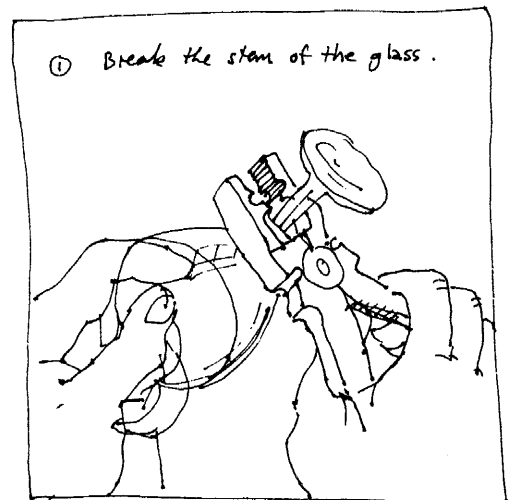
I am autonomous just to the extent that I have played a part (one must add: been allowed to play a part) in the development of my present conative, cognitive, and emotional structure. Where aspects of this, and as a result, patterns of my present behaviour, were fixed in some very early experiences (say, early socialisation) in which I had no power of participation or intervention, then to that extent I am not my own person, i. e. I am not autonomous. Under these circumstances I can work towards autonomy and, through a process of self-examination, perhaps discover the extent to which what I am now merely expresses what has been external to me. In order to do this, I must be able to distance myself from some aspect of myself, and treat it as if it were external. Only by thus identifying myself independently of that aspect which is under examination will I be able to assess it as answering or not answering to my present wants, beliefs, principles, and so on. That the I who undertakes such an examination is, pro-tem, an unexamined I is inevitable, but it need not remain unexamined. That we must, to adopt Neurath's metaphor, reconstruct our personal boat while sailing on it, does not mean that there is some part which must remain for ever unreconstructed. On this view, autonomy has to do with the primacy of the person over what is externally given. (13)

Poole goes on to emphasize that it is not merely the rational aspect of the person that is crucial to establishing autonomy but the emotional aspect may be sufficient as well. Certain desires may be basic to me and to that extent autonomous even though they were in no sense '... preceded by some rational assessment or even whether they are now susceptible to alteration by rational scrutiny' (13). Poole's example is of a preference for a certain type of beer. The autonomy of such a want would depend on whether or not it '... was a development from or an imposition on some pre-existing preference structure' (14).

How To Build Your Own Goat



you will need: a wine glass; a potato; two biro caps; two cloves; four matches; cotton wool; red drawing pin one rasher of bacon cut in half; two pins.



There are then two types of autonomous wants: those formulated through self-examination and those that are developments from prior preferences presumably having their basis in some genetic predisposition. There is then a stress on, though not necessarily an identification with, originality and uniqueness in the analysis of autonomy. An individual is free when his or her activity reflects that which is unique, viz. '... his independent power to form wants, judgements, and emotions and to act upon these' (17). Such a power expresses itself in a plasticity of response to new and changing situations. The individual is also free if the activity has its source in the primitive genetic roots of his or her structure which in a related sense also expresses uniqueness and originality.

Autonomous action in the first, self-creative mode is carried on within a theoretical framework. The act of self-distancing employs a frame of reference which interprets reality so as to govern present and future activity. The question then arises: does this framework provide a correct interpretation of one's existence or does it serve to obscure it? Does the framework through which one assesses one's own existence serve to identify oneself within a practical context? Mere originality will not do to establish real autonomy if the self-examination is done from within an ideological perspective. For if autonomy has anything to do with freedom (the point of the entire exercise), then it is dependent upon a correct viewpoint as opposed to an ideological one for its success in securing the individual's liberty. Unless we can make our own existence transparent to our consciousness then such self-reflection and analysis only serves to limit our freedom and prevent us from establishing a real community whose members do in fact respect each other's autonomy. This problem is disguised in a somewhat circular fashion in Poole's concluding paragraph.

That we sometimes become aware of the extent to which social structure comes to be felt as internal want renders it certain that much of what we now want is an expression of a larger social context, something which might or might not correspond to what we would want if able to choose. But what would such autonomous wants be? To this question there can be no definitive answer. To be sure, historical, sociological and anthropological evidence - when properly interpreted - will provide some of the information necessary for us to go beyond that account of human wants provided for us by the society in which we live. But the only way in which we can discover what our human and personal wants are is through our movement towards autonomy:

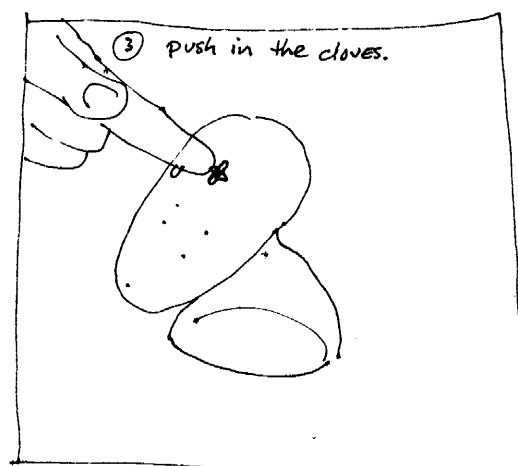
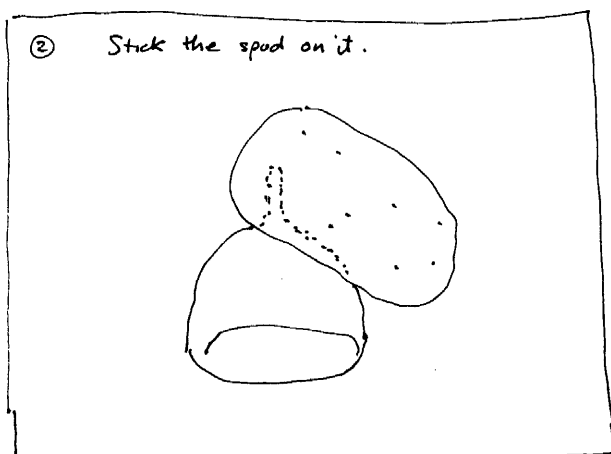
through the personal experience of self-examination, through the experience of action directed towards changing those social relationships which militate against the autonomy of the participants, and through the interaction of these two processes.(17)

If our autonomous wants are our 'personal and human wants' then the last sentence appears to be saying that the only way we can discover our autonomous wants is in the attempt to satisfy our autonomous wants. But you must first recognize the wants before you can go about satisfying them. The only clues given in his paper which might enable us to escape this dilemma is the various allusions to the autonomous wants being the more fundamentally personal ones. The desire for love, rational discussion and knowledge are the only examples given of what Poole strongly suggests to be the personal and autonomous wants. These are the wants which we '... would want if able to choose'. To this phrase we must add the all-important rider: given a correct non-ideological framework. That is we must structure our wants to correspond or fit in with a framework that reveals ourselves to ourselves as in fact we are. The circle may be avoided in practice if the theoretical coordinates allow us to. But do they in Poole's case?

II

Poole starts with the question of how the existence of a community is related to our present understanding of freedom (11). Using our contemporaneous understanding of terms like freedom autonomy and independence the framework adopted is one culled from liberalism in which the individual is pictured as confronting society. There are those wants that are mine, the 'internal', and those of others, the 'external'. My autonomy then has to do with what is unique and constitutive of me. The non-autonomous is external, it emanates from society which is the source of my wants being frustrated and interfered with in spite of the fact that some of my wants, my most important wants, require that very same society. My autonomy is maintained by my ability to keep the external at bay or to intervene and transform it into the internal. To be me nothing must bear the mark of the external. (In this regard note the mild paranoia that seems to run through Poole's discussion especially in the long section quoted above.)

How then am I to satisfy those wants such as love and self-knowledge which require the autonomous responses of others, the very ones who in turn threaten me? The ideological resolution of the tension between the internal (me) and the external (those whom I need but at the same time threaten



my very existence) takes place using the concept of the universal essence of humanity, the 'independent power to form wants, judgements, and emotions and to act upon these' (17). Because this universal essence is not external the personal is thus elevated to the universal and established in a real community where the personal is secured in practice with the inter-subjective satisfaction of wants. As Poole says '... each member of the community will recognize himself as an autonomous agent. He will also recognize others as other autonomous agents. In a quite literal sense, he will be aware of these others as other selves... Hence in confrontation with the other the person is not confronted with some alien existence, but with some one whom he recognizes as being essentially what he is himself.' (17) (my emphasis) Thus we derive the universalism or recognizing the autonomy of all noted above which for its 'validity' depends upon abstracting from the historical.

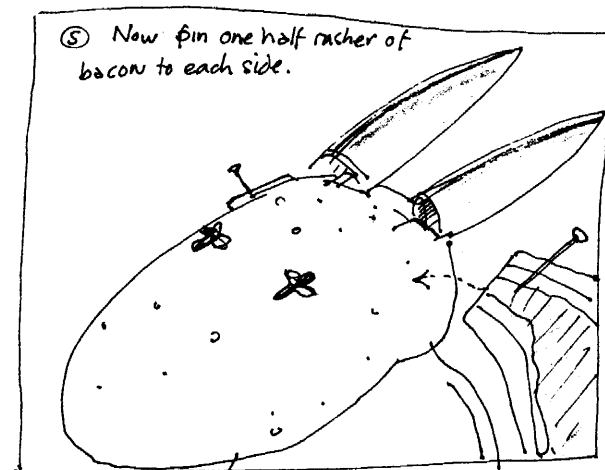
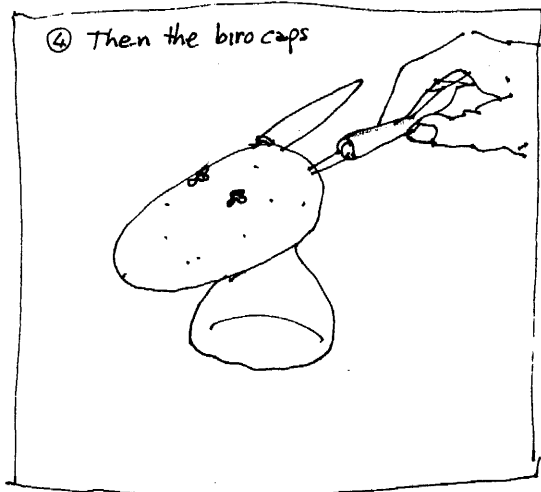
This dialectical progression is carried on using the ideological coordinates of the 'internal' and 'external', that is, from within an ontogenetic perspective. This 'independent' power of self-distancing and practical reflection can only be independent if it realizes itself in producing its own reality which in historical materialist terms is dependent upon the emergence of class-consciousness. The internal/external framework then does not picture classes confronting classes but individuals confronting society. The notion of autonomy being dependent upon the primacy of the person over what is externally given relates (if anywhere) to a post-revolutionary situation and does not address itself to the contemporary historical struggle. The whole notion of 'externally given' is, as noted above, not very helpful for in an important sense everything is externally given - being the phylogenetic creatures we are. In other words, the external must be given a class-analysis in order to do the work required of it. What is strongly suggested by the internal/external dynamic is that independent behaviour is dependent upon the identification of some ontogenetic essence, a sum and ordering of genetically primitive wants ('something that would correspond to what we would want if able to choose'), a concept which ignores the fact that the creation, development and satisfaction of such wants is shot through with real history. Consider the basic desire for love. Such a determinable has a life of its own - in history - not some given nature apart from it. In light of identifying autonomy as an history-specific notion it would be best to abandon the individualistic viewpoint captured in the internal/external framework adopted by Poole.

We do not stand in contrast to history, from

within the ectoplasm, so to speak. Our understanding of ourselves begins with History, Our production of Ourselves. Wrenching ourselves out of the ontogenetic perspective does not diminish or threaten our freedom, real or potential; we are not reduced to the flotsam and jetsam of a force greater than ourselves. Only if we lose sight of our nature as producers and reproducers of our very existence, past, present and future, is our status as agents threatened which is precisely what bourgeois ideology would have us do. (In this regard it is important to remember that the first task of the oppressor is to remove any traces of an independent history of the oppressed from the minds of the oppressed. Witness the present struggle for establishing a feminist history, for example.) Based on this fundamental premise, Marx's understanding of freedom takes on a natural progression.

Marx sees the achievement of freedom, liberation, in terms of the move from the making of history to the mastering of it. Only when human productive and reproductive activity objectifies and confirms the nature of human beings as producers and reproducers of their own existence ('wants' included) are human beings free. Freedom can only exist under communism when the means of production and reproduction of our material existence is under the direct ownership and control of all. Unless this relation to the productive and reproductive forces exists in reality, productive and reproductive activity serves to objectify and confirm the nature of human beings as producers for and hence slaves of others, be they gods, kings, bureaucrats, patriarchs or simply dead capital. When people produce and reproduce their material being for themselves and not for a class or classes, they confirm themselves in their own eyes as the masters of their own history and destiny. Then and only then are they free and not alienated from their very nature and others. The starting point then lies with a class analysis of the historical setting.

This contrasts with Poole's analysis of freedom as autonomous want-satisfaction. It is not in terms of a particular type of want being satisfied but primarily in terms of action determined by class-consciousness. Such a consciousness is 'externally' given, produced in the relations of a class society, but at the same time it is a theoretical framework that identifies the various individuals having such a consciousness in a practical context. Such a context would direct human activity towards realizing human beings as producers and reproducers of their own and not a particular class reality. Class-consciousness puts the individual's activity into gear with the movement of history and leads to the emancipation of all from class rule. It is here that the explana-



tory-gap emerges which Pool refers to (13) as indicative of autonomy. It is when the historically significant actions of members of the proletariat can only be understood by reference to this consciousness that we can describe the individual members of the proletariat as being free or autonomous beings. Their actions are then no longer reactions or responses to history but instead direct history. The terminology required by this perspective is that of 'needs' not 'wants'. By satisfying the class-defined needs of the proletariat its members achieve their freedom.

The position of history is left in danger using the internal/external dichotomy. The historical materialist conception of the individual is that of a phylogenetic structure, a nature understood as an aggregate of relations centered around the relations the individual has to the productive and reproductive forces that create and maintain his or her social existence. ("... the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations ..." - Marx's sixth thesis on Feuerbach). Since all the relations are historically created so also is the individual. But because the historically created relations derive from and in turn structure productive activity individuals are not only the objects of history but the subjects of history as well. Marx is therefore not running the simple thesis that we cannot adequately understand individuals without looking at their history and development but rather the individual is the sum of his or her historically produced relations. There is no individual to which we add the realm of the historical in order to get a clearer picture just as there is no 'ball' to which we add the shape of a sphere in order to get a ball. The Marxist view of the individual holds it to be analytic that the individual is historical. It is only in bourgeois ideology that the category of the historical is seen as a synthetic addition to the ontogenetic individual. The dialectical relations involved in the production of history are entities by which and through which we come to know the entities involved. They are the primitives from within which the entities involved emerge as the objects of our understanding.

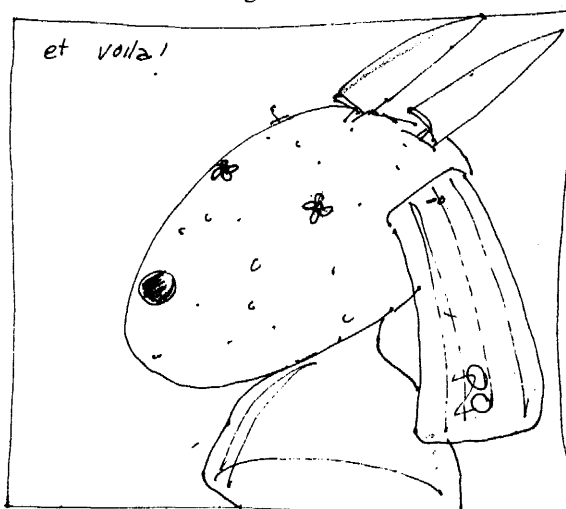
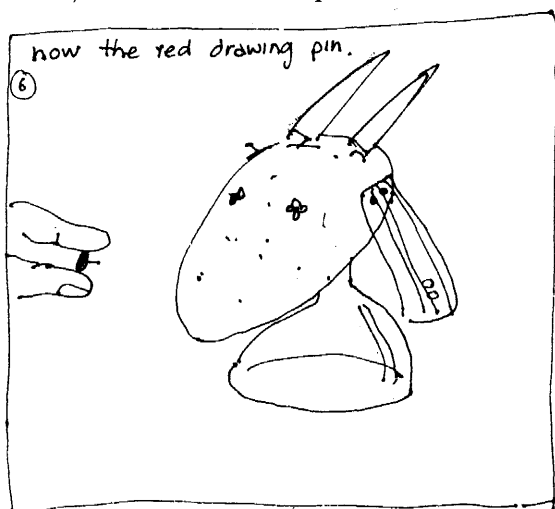
Of course, our own understanding within the present ideology begins with the 'individual and society'; we then move to understanding the two in terms of the productive and reproductive relations holding between the various individuals making up society. From there we move to seeing these synchronic relations in terms of their relation to previous historical modes of production, the diachronic. But after this progression has taken place, that is, when we have adopted the historical

materialist frame of reference, the primitive emerges as the historically defined dialectical relation holding between the productive/reproductive forces and those relations holding between such forces. A 'meaning-change' takes place with our arrival at this stage and looking back we no longer see individuals as ontogenetic structures confronting history and society and having contingent connections with the world as portrayed in bourgeois mythology but rather as functions of the primitive dialectic of re/productive forces and re/productive relations. Similarly, our concepts of freedom, alienation and autonomy must undergo a change given this perspective. There are no internally defined wants of an autonomous nature that are to be understood apart from the movement of history. In a word there is no external/internal in history.

III

I have so far criticized the internal/external mould of Poole's as being individualistic and obscuring the role of the historical. In this respect I may have put an interpretation on his paper that is not completely warranted and if I have it has only been to correct a tendency that is detrimental to our understanding of people from an historical materialist stand-point. There still remains the problem of autonomy in the struggle - how to develop it within the class struggle and how to deal with others that do not accept the materialist analysis of history and in varying degrees retard the growth of socialism. I cannot pretend to answer these questions in specific detail but I will try to sketch a very general approach by which we can capture the truth contained in Poole's analysis avoiding the individualistic tendencies involved and at the same time avoid the ham-fisted and self-destructive treatment of individuals that has to a large extent characterized the socialist regimes of other countries, in particular, the Soviet Union. Again what I will have to say will be brief and abstract but not I hope without some value.

The problem revolves around the question: how are we to treat the experience and behaviour of others in a situation characterized by struggle? What sort of significance are we to grant to the interpretation and response of agents which could be characterized as reactionary? To this there is one very old and common answer and that is to deny the importance of their subjectivity and treat them strictly as historical road-blocks - neither to be argued with nor tolerated. To treat them any other way is to view them in terms that ignores an objective analysis of the situation and reveals a lack of class-consciousness and seriousness that is required for building socialism. No matter how well-meaning,



If you wish,
you can make
four legs and
a tail with
the matches
and the
cotton wool.

naive or genuinely misconceived they are, their attitudes and posture are to be judged as either progressive or reactionary using the historical calculus of effects and consequences. They are either with us or against us and this we judge by the tendencies and effects of their actions and not by the colour of their souls.

This type of answer comes to the fore especially with the acuteness of the struggle. Guerrilla bands, for example, cannot be put to risk by accidents or behaviour coming from within or without that is anyway suspicious or counter-productive. The stakes are too high. To calculate on any other basis that the objective dangers entailed by the individual's actions is a privilege that cannot be afforded in a situation where all are threatened.

While granting this applies in severe situations of this nature it is far from clear that it applies tout court in other historical locales, especially the pre- and post-revolutionary eras. When the question of the life and death of the entire revolution is not as critical, especially in the pre-revolutionary period when a broad base is being developed, then the calculation of possibilities must be based on a finer set of criteria than the overt tendencies of their actions. For the degree to which such tendencies can be calculated depends on how well the ideological cement of such people has hardened. Whether they can be provided with opportunities by which to reexamine their position and thus realign themselves with progressive elements will depend upon the character of their subjectivity. A successful revolution will hinge on such fine tuning. With the post-revolutionary period similar considerations of broadening the base through education should prevail and the success of this likewise depends on assessing people in a much more sophisticated manner than is required in extreme situations.

But so far I have only remarked on the obvious and strictly utilitarian considerations in judging whether or not we should determine our posture towards the objectively reactionary solely in terms of the tendencies of their actions. There is another important aspect in assessing the importance of individual subjectivity or what Poole describes as the unique ability of human beings to distance themselves from their own existence and submit it to practical scrutiny. However reactionary a person may be, the reactionary in some sense or other does need to know that he or she is acting in a way that can be characterized as objectively valuable. They are, like other agents, in need of some positive confirmation from others that their actions, attitudes and beliefs, within their terms of reference, are of some objective significance and worth. An ideology does not get off the ground unless it provides individuals with a framework by which they can see their lives as having some significance by others as well as themselves, however corrupt and perverted that vision may in fact be. People must see good in their actions that could be recognized as such by others. Nationalism is a good example of an ideology which provides individuals with a framework by which they can see their actions, however slave-like, as having significance simply by being members of a greater whole which embodies certain ideals and values shared and expressed by its members in their simplest day to day activities and customs. Rob people of that very minimum of meaning in their lives and you rob them of their self-respect and they very rapidly become anti-social in a violent or neurotic manner. It is this capacity for seeing oneself as an agent operating within a framework that at least in part bears the

stamp of the agent and objectively colours one's actions with significance that is either destroyed or diminished in some respects by authoritarian oppression. The self-acceptance and validation of one's action required for meaningful agency can only be maintained if that framework can cope with change.

If authoritarian pressure does not result in a change or hardening of the oppressed's ideology then what usually happens is a demoralization of the agent which is either expressed in anti-social behaviour or a distorted acceptance of the ideology being forced upon the individual. As a consequence of this the ideology itself will be distorted in the mind and the character of the person by the mode of its acceptance. The received ideology will be seen by the person as a tool by which others can be reduced thereby proving one's forced acceptance was not the peculiar fault of the individual as well as proving one has the ability to do it to others which at least gives some grounds, however grotesque, for viewing one's actions with significance.

With regards to socialism, if methods are used to bludgeon all opposition - objectively defined - this phenomenon can take place and a rot can set in affecting both the socialist and the reactionary in such a way as to destroy the chances of ever building a socialist society. The real danger of treating all people as road-blocks because of their objectively reactionary tendencies is that it breeds this moral rot amongst the real and potential builders of socialism. The original answer does not distinguish - though it may be hard to - between the real enemies, those who will have no truck or trade with socialism and will fight it bitterly and those who are quite possibly potential allies or people that can be accommodated in some sort of quasi-neutral manner. If all are labelled as enemies using the criterion of the consequences of their actions then trust cannot be extended beyond the inner circle of true believers. And it is an important feature of trust that if it is not allowed to grow it will wither inside the group itself and affect adversely the capability for action by the revolutionaries themselves with sectarianism and dogmatism the result.

People must be allowed to grow to accept the general framework of socialism or at least be tolerated as long as they provide no serious threat to its development. This of course all depends upon the historically defined limits of the revolutionary situation for which there are no hard and fast rules for identification. It is also naive to think that this capacity to differentiate the real enemies from those that can be changed or accommodated is something that can be grafted on to class-consciousness in a purely theoretical manner. What must be high on the priority of socialists is the identification of those structures that maintain the myopia and paranoia of regimes like the Soviet Union. Things like party structure, the existence of sexual roles, the technologies employed, schooling, the family are all features that must be and are being examined so as to prevent the crude and unnecessary destruction of the individual's capacity for self-objectification and redirection. While we need not recognize the autonomy of all we must be able to select those situations which do and do not require its recognition.

In the light of this it is also incumbent upon socialists to recognize the limits of their methods and knowledge. Historical materialism, Marx warns us time and time again, is not a crystal ball but demands careful analysis of every social situation to which it is applied. The most that can be

expected is an analysis of our present situation with some general guidelines for the transition to socialism. Dialectical change provides us with ever new situations which for an understanding demand that a wide range of experience be drawn upon from within and without the revolutionary core.

This in turn requires a respect for the opinions and efforts of others although of course not necessarily all. To be able to do this necessitates once more a distinction between real enemies and those that can be brought into alliance or tolerated as non-conformists. There is, as we remarked earlier, a need to distinguish between what could be called the positively reactionary, those forces directed against the very heart of socialism, and those forces which are hindrances of a non-fatal variety. A socialist ethic depends very heavily on the

success of drawing this distinction and repression must be directed only to those in the former category. Such an ethic is based on the conception of human beings as re/producers of their own and not a class reality and as such is universalistic. But it is universalism with a difference, being historically specific it recognizes the existence of class struggle and hence the necessity of excluding some from the realm of autonomy. Because this exclusion threatens the objective validation by all of one's moral ideology - albeit a Marxist one - it must be done with care in some of the ways I have just mentioned so as not to be forever exclusivist. That is, the ideal of the classless society must be maintained and made the place where all can develop and construct their own reality to a degree hitherto unattained in any previous historical epoch.

On Materialisms

Kate Soper

Hitherto, Sebastiano Timpanaro's work has been known to English readers only through the occasional extract from his books published in New Left Review. Now, with the publication in full of what are perhaps his most controversial works - On Materialism, and more recently The Freudian Slip - we are given a much more substantial basis for assessing his contribution.

Timpanaro writes in an aggressive style that elicits and even invites peremptory and dismissive judgements on his work. But it would only be to ape the cruder aspects of his own polemic to dismiss him straightforwardly as a 'vulgar materialist', 'Popperian', 'crude empiricist' etc. Even though such labels may not be wholly inappropriate, they must fail to do justice to the sensitivity which informs Timpanaro's work. His contribution to debate on the problems relating to the materialism/idealism distinction, the science/ideology couple, the relations between synchrony/diachrony, theory and practice etc cannot easily be neglected. Even if at times his formulation of these issues is incomplete and dogmatic, it is nonetheless true that at other times he reveals an unnerving ability to touch to the heart of matters that must be the concern of anyone, whatever his or her particular philosophical alignment, who has not simply opted for a credo, whether of empiricist or non-empiricist, humanist or anti-humanist form, but is still prepared to admit and discuss the unresolved nature of the problems around which the contemporary oppositional formulae of Marxist studies have been erected. Moreover, Timpanaro's no-nonsense approach makes a refreshing change from more soft-peddling incursions into these areas and from ultra-sophisticated and jargonised discussions of the issues involved. Timpanaro may lose some of the trees, but at least we keep the wood in sight.

On Materialism, which first appeared in Italian in 1970, comprises a collection of essays which were originally published in the journal Quaderni Piacentini, and evoked a good deal of response in Italy (1) - where Timpanaro is widely known and respected, not only for his contribution to Marxist

study and his political activity, but also as a philologist, Leopardi scholar and student of nineteenth-century culture (2). Only the fourth chapter on 'Structuralism and its Successors' was written for the book. Despite its piecemeal formation the book reads as a coherent whole since its first four chapters represent the development of Timpanaro's main theme: the construction of a hedonist-pessimist-Marxism and the recognition of the relevance of Engels in this respect. Only the last chapter, which is a study of Korsch's critique of Lenin's philosophy, can be said to stand apart from the rest of the book, though it too continues the idealism-materialism theme.

On re-thinking Marxism

Timpanaro's starting point has become something of a cliché: a need to re-think Marxism in the light of what has happened in the capitalist West, in Russia, in China and in the Third World. More polemically, he proceeds immediately to reject the respective contributions of both the two main 'schools' of 20th century Marxism. The Frankfurt school and its various offspring on the one hand, and Althusserianism, on the other, "allow very little of Marxism to survive"; moreover, they "represent in many respects a step backwards". The former is retrogressive because it ignores the need to found a 'scientific socialism' and sees in science only bourgeois false objectivity; the latter because, although it insists on the scientific character of Marxism, it adopts from current epistemology what Timpanaro refers to as a 'Platonist conception of science', which, he claims, makes it impossible to pose correctly the question of the relations between theory and practice.

Marxism, he argues, if it is to avoid becoming merely a 'revolutionary sociology', must refer itself again to the fundamental question posed by Marx and Engels of the 'real liberation' of mankind. For Timpanaro, this is a question of reconfirming and developing materialism, through the provision of a 'theory of needs' which is not "as so often, reduced to a compromise between Marx and Freud, but which confronts on a wider basis the problem of the relation between nature and society". We must recognize nature's continued conditioning of man, not in a way which reduces the social to the biological, but in a way that asserts the autonomy of the biological relation to the demand for happiness".

Sebastiano Timpanaro: On Materialism, NLB, 1976, 260pp, £5.75

1 See 'Il dibattito sul materialismo' that was conducted in Quaderni Piacentini nos. 29, 30 and 32. The main bone of contention related to Timpanaro's assertion of the need to recognize the passive element in experience, and the dispute was conducted to a large extent from the standpoint of a 'philosophy of praxis', of which, to my mind, Timpanaro is rightly critical. The second chapter of his book is a translation of his reply to these critics.

2 His major work in this respect is Classicismo e Illuminismo nell'Ottocento Italiano.