

## **THE NOTION OF CULTURE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ELEVENTH THESIS ON FEUERBACH**

The topic of the Likhachov Scientific Conference 2018 “The Contours of the Future in the Context of the World’s Cultural Development” can be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand as a look into the future through the prism of culture; and on the other - as a glance on the culture through the prism of the future. In this essay I will focus more on the second aspect, starting from the understanding of the future in the philosophy of Karl Marx in the way it is expressed in his “Theses on Feuerbach.”

1. The Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach by Karl Marx goes: “Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden interpretirt, es kommt darauf an sie zu verändern.” (Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it).<sup>1</sup> It is as closely associated with the name of Marx and has become as much of a saying in itself as “Workers of the World, Unite!” (both of these, I might add, are etched on Marx’s granite tombstone). This thesis is more than just a vivid expression, although it is extremely bright as well; it represents the fundamental formula that contains the first principle of Marxist philosophy. Using the traditional philosophical vocabulary, against which this thesis is actually directed, the essence of what is being expressed could be called the “doctrine of being,” the metaphysics of Marxism. The central message of this doctrine, as summarized in the eleventh thesis, is formulated at the very beginning of the same text (in the first thesis). It consists in viewing the “subject,” “reality,” “sensuality” not in the form of an “object,” as would be the case in the foregoing materialism, and not as an abstraction generated by the subject itself, as would be with idealism, but as “human sensory activity,”

---

<sup>1</sup> *Marx, K.* Theses on Feuerbach. In *Marx, K., Engels, F. Collected Works. Second Edition.* Moscow. State Publishing House of Political Literature, 1955. P. 4.

“practice”<sup>2</sup>. In this doctrine Marx considers the world of things as a form of human sensory activity, and the human sensory activity as a form of substantive work.

Being is therefore viewed not as the world which is external in relation to man and equal to itself but as human practice. That is to say, the practice not in the abstract sense, not as an idea or a philosophical premise but as pure practice: substantive work of the people in the form which it actually takes in history. And, when Marx juxtaposes the explanation of the world to changing it, he does not, in all actuality, deny or discredit this explanation or question it. He only suggests not to vest it with a self-sufficient meaning, but to consider it as a moment in reality that philosophy claims to explain. He means, in fact, that one should not stop at the level of explaining the phenomenon. For example, in «German Ideology» Kant is criticized for being “satisfied with “good will” alone, even if it remained entirely without result, and he transferred the *realization* of this good will, the harmony between it and the needs and impulses of individuals, to *the world beyond*”<sup>3</sup>. That is, he is criticised not for the idea of goodwill, and not even because it is viewed as the opposite to needs and desires of individuals, but because it is not inscribed in the real-life historical context. The fact that consciousness is secondary to being does not mean that being came before consciousness, which is only revealed second (such an interpretation is admissible as a methodological tool in the framework of materialistic epistemology). In fact, consciousness is immanent in being, and cannot be understood apart from it, just as the very existence does not exist and cannot be adequately understood outside the consciousness generated by it. It is this inclusion of consciousness in being as its secondary, but, nevertheless, unchanging product, by virtue of which both become the two aspects of living

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.1

<sup>3</sup> Marx, K., Engels, F. German Ideology // Collected Works. Second Edition. Moscow. State Publishing House of Political Literature, 1955. P. 182

and cooperative individuals, that generalization in the category of practice is obtained.

Practice as a philosophical notion has two particular features that set certain parameters for understanding of culture. This understanding removes the abstract juxtaposition of being and consciousness, which serve as mutually connected, albeit not equal, parts of publicly organized practical activities. It therefore follows, that, firstly, public practice covers the whole of the world, in all its holistic representation. As part of the public being, consciousness is not seen as separate to being; it is immersed in being, is immanent to being, and the philosopher who is cognizant of the being, is incorporated into it as a thinking body. Secondly, the issue of what is being conceived (or thought of), of what the being is, is directly related to those who conceive (or think) of things.

2. Culture in its most general form is defined through its correlation (comparison) with nature - as that which is not nature, is different from it and forms its own, artificial world. Here is a vivid example: almost all the concepts that characterize human beings and their existence have analogs in nature: as we describe natural life in any of its aspects, we talk about the concepts of beauty, morality, thinking, language, social setups, architecture, power relations, etc. But when we talk of nature we never mention culture: this notion has been reserved for human beings and their activities, and it is called upon to differentiate between the natural and the man-made. Culture represents the second, non-natural, nature of the human being. This statement as any tautological argument possesses an intuitive kind of clarity. Problems, theoretical difficulties and disagreements start when we seek to clarify the essence of the cultural, this second nature of the human being, and relate it to his or her original nature.

The difference between culture and nature is not visual, sensual, or objective; we cannot separate one set of things from another and say that some belong to nature and others to the world of culture. Further, we cannot draw a

visible boundary between the natural world of nature and the artificial world of culture. The fact is, culture exists and it is always presented through the substance of nature; in all its manifestations it is presented in a material, sensual, bodily manner. As Marx and Engels wrote, “From the start the “spirit” is afflicted with the curse of being “burdened” with matter ... in the form ... of language”<sup>4</sup>. The substance of nature as it changes in the process of cultural processing does not change its natural form; and even if it does, it follows own natural laws in the process. Antiphon the sophist had provided quite a vivid example of that: if you put olive stalks in the ground, he said, olive trees will grow, and if you plant a bench made of olive in the ground, then an olive tree might grow again, if anything grows at all, but do not expect to grow a new bench. The culture does not change nature in its internal necessity, it just gives it a new meaning, incorporates it into a different, precisely human, system of relationships and goals. Human beings cannot change the nature of a tree, they can only use the tree for their own purposes, turn it into a bench, so that they could sit on it and talk; into a pipe, so that they could play it, into the butt of a rifle so that they could fight with it, etc. In short, culture does not exist outside nature, with the latter being a real empirical (live and dead world) that follows its own laws and causation.

But does nature exist outside of culture? In our sober contemplation of this world we never doubt that it had existed before there were any humans of culture, and it will obviously continue when (or if) humans should disappear. The question is: does it exist outside culture only since the human beings appeared and created culture; is it somewhere in the vicinity of culture but no longer in its realm? In other words, is the nature just one part of culture, or is nature fully incorporated into the cultural space? Again, it is obvious that nature, when viewed across its entire range of breadth and depth, is full of uncharted

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. P.29.

secrets, the places that no humans have ever been; such secrets and places are considerably more numerous than what we are aware of, but even they are not primordial, they are also facts of culture, for they are marked within culture - accordingly - as spaces of unexplored secrets that no humans have ever gone to. Moreover, the human mind has conceived nature as something endless and eternal, and we find joy in it. We like that we do not know much more than what we do know; the paradox of cognition says that as your knowledge grows, the space of what you do not know expands. Human beings master nature in the form of culture. First and foremost, this is done through language: there is no direct link, human beings enter into nature as natural (physical) beings, and this serves only a starting point, from where the human beings proceed to naming cultural events, assigning them meanings. Further, the human being perceives nature sympathetically, in the context of his or her own conscious activities, insofar as it is included in this activity, through its goals and values, through social relations that frame and cement it. In this sense, the attitude of a human being to nature is fundamentally subjective, it is expressed in that it imposes its own imprint on it, turns it into an ideal form of being, elevates it to the level of truth, evaluates, normalizes, brightens it, or mythologizes, deifies, dehumanizes it, etc.

Human beings are different from other living beings: the power of human life is not in the body, but in his or her conscious soul. The body is, as the Stoics believed, only a vessel, and the real body of a human being as a carrier of life is all of nature transformed into forms of culture. In this sense culture is equivalent to signs and symbols of the public form that all nature (matter) acquires in the process of human activities. In this sense, there is no nature outside culture; I should add “for humans,” although saying “no nature outside culture” is the same as “no nature outside culture for human beings,” if we should recognize that the objective character of nature is a cultural fact in itself. The understanding of nature in the light of Marxian philosophy, which differs from

all previous philosophies in that it is a philosophy of historical materialism, is defined very precisely by György Lukács, who characterizes nature as a “social category.” “The way in which the relationship between nature and man is arranged, the understanding of ways in which man encounters nature, in brief, what defines the form and content of nature, its scope and objectivity, is always a result of social construction.”<sup>5</sup> The images of nature are historically conditioned, secondary in relation to culture, which is proven by the fact of their very diversity - descriptive (from chaos to the totality of eternal laws) and value-oriented (from fierce opposition to the state of moral tranquility). The unity of nature and culture is especially visible when it comes to comparing the natural conditions of labour and labour itself in all its manifestations through history. The natural conditions of labour, such as soil fertility, influence the growth of production; but that does not lead, in turn, to the reverse dependency, and does not mean that more favourable conditions would necessarily lead to the growth of production. They only define the natural boundary beyond which surplus product generation is possible; “in proportion as industry advances, these natural limits recede.”<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, the being that we understand as the being of humans, as a form of activity, practice, presupposes unity, merger between nature and culture: the nature is the objectified, sensuous content of culture, and culture is the human form of nature’s being. We can even say that culture is nature itself at the highest stage of its evolutionary development. As human beings evolved, their being acquired a public form, and was hence defined only as such,<sup>7</sup> and nature

---

<sup>5</sup>G. Lukács, *Changing Function of Historical Materialism*. In *History and Class Consciousness*. Political Minimalism and Dialectics. Blum’s Theses (Fragments). / Trans. from German S. P. Potselueva Moscow: Russian Foundation for Assistance to Education and Science, 2017. P. 314

<sup>6</sup>Marx, K. *Capital*. Vol. 1 / Marx, K., Engels, F. *Collected Works*. Second Edition. State Publishing House of Political Literature, 1960, v. 23 p. 523

<sup>7</sup>Bertran Russell notes that Marx’s view is limited to our planet, and to the human being on the planet; he sees this as peculiarity and shortcoming, since after Copernicus it became clear that human beings have no significance at the level of the universe (B. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*. Moscow: Academic Project, 2009, p. 516). Indeed, being concentrated on social existence, Marx provides to his materialism a look that

merged with culture and transferred into it. Nature, which was conceived of as the opposite to culture, its mere prerequisite, is now incorporated into the cultural process so completely and concretely that it has become obvious: it is already a prerequisite for culture as its result.

3. The unity of nature and culture is proven not only by the grand successes of the human race, making humans sovereign masters of the planet Earth and opening them a gateway to space, something they have wanted to do since times immemorial. It is even more clearly and convincingly manifested in their negative dependence on each other, expressed in the fact that human beings, involved in destructive forms of their cultural activity, exert such a destructive effect on nature that it produces an inverse effect and destroys the human beings and their culture in return. Gary Bardin's recent cartoon, entitled "Listening to Beethoven" may appear simple and straightforward, yet in actuality it is quite deep, and in many ways possesses layers of meaning. The cartoon, the contains no dialogue, shows vegetation breaking through the neatly laid stone slabs. As the first sprouts appear, they are immediately destroyed by three robots the only function of which is to weed out the grass. The vegetation, however, reappears, and the process repeats many times. Then the robots layer asphalt on top of the slabs to make sure there are no seams; vegetation, nevertheless, still appears, now larger and stronger than before. In response, robots upgrade themselves and destroy the vegetation with greater productivity. But the plants become larger each time, and so do the machines. In the end we see powerful trees break through the stones and the asphalt, and destroy the robots. All this is accompanied by Beethoven's energetic music. The soundtrack completes with his "Ode to Joy." Even if we talk here about the triumph of life,

---

corresponds to the new worldview of Copernicus. The place of human beings in space is not just a natural fact; it includes the changing understandings of this position, and is determined by the way in which human beings view the space and the world around them. Overall, it should be noted that historical materialism concerns not just the society in the narrow sense of the word, that is, in contrast to the doctrine of nature, it is a new form of philosophical materialism, which differs from all of its previous forms in that it treats matter not as a "thing-in-itself," but as a "thing for itself," which is what it becomes in social practice.

it is about the triumph asserting itself in the struggle with blind violence of the soulless world of technology.

The modern humanitarian consciousness is increasingly prone to viewing the destructive influence of human beings on nature as rooted in the falsely interpreted idea of domination, when this very domination is understood as an instrument of using nature to serve the goals of improving the life of human beings and the society. As we ponder the idea of the opposition between culture and nature as the dominance of the former over the latter, we must consider the fact that culture itself is divided into spiritual and material components, which partly correlates to the ancient practice of dividing all good things into things good for the soul and for the body.

The material culture encompasses the world of man-made things and processes designed to improve human welfare, our level of comfort and meet the demands of our permanently growing needs, boosted by the growth of productive power. The world we live in is peculiar since while it is being created by people it also exists independently, in accordance with its own laws, as if it were a natural element (we do not need many examples or proofs here, it will suffice to mention market economy and modern megalopolises). It is not only emancipated from living individuals - those who create it, but opposes them as a powerful alien force. The material culture approaches nature in the utilitarian fashion, seeking to make nature serve the human beings as special creations of nature.

When it comes to spiritual culture, unlike its material counterpart, humans act in it not as representatives of their own natural existence but as representatives of nature as a whole; he or she acts not as a natural entity but as a public, historical entity with its own mind, and it is in those cultural dimensions that he or she views their true nature. Obviously, the spiritual culture exists in natural materials as well; it exists in sounds, colours, things, etc., but its special nature (unlike that of the material culture) consists in that in this case the



attitude to nature is not utilitarian or pragmatic but unbiased and symbolic. Moreover, the products of spiritual culture do not lead their own separate lives beyond the ties to real individuals who created these products or those who are able to comprehend and perceive it. (This can also be applied to the material culture, whose products - so far, at least, - do not lead their own independent lives; but nevertheless the difference along this criterion is present, and the material culture is more independent of the people who create and use it than the spiritual culture).

Material and spiritual cultures are interrelated and connected in a way that makes the former prevalent over the latter. But precisely for this reason, the state of material culture, above all, its state which is defined by the current mode of production, the contradictions arising therein and the destructive means arising therefrom lead to broadening of horizons of the spiritual culture and to criticizing its own foundations. In this sense, the spiritual culture is not only the expression, continuation, apology of the current material culture, but the criticism imposed on it, which is the defining moment of its historical self-denial. In this sense, the spiritual culture with its symbolic forms of making sense of nature, and the non-utilitarian attitude to it is more adequate than the material culture. It expresses the principal provision, according to which culture is commensurable to nature (world) as a whole.

4. Understanding of being as a type of activity means that the relationship between the human being and the world is equivalent to the relationship between the human being and culture. This means that human beings deal with the world to the extent to which they are involved in its activities, to the extent to which the world defines the content of their activities, i.e. the world of human beings, the culture. In this sense the world is not what surrounds the human being but what he or she deals with, the content of his or her activities. The human being is a part of the world to the extent to which the world is a part of him or her; according to the generalization of this feature of human existence by Bakhtin,

there is no alibi in being; it is absent to such extent that humans cannot leave the world without making the act of leaving a form of active interaction with the world. Culture is the world that is a part of human activity, its content, its objectified meaning. Culture is as diverse in all its forms and manifestations as the world with which the human being has to deal. However, the content of his or her activities is just one, objectified side of his or her actions; the other side is its subjectiveness, the actor him- or herself, represented as a concrete living individual.

This relationship between the subject and the object, the consciousness and existence acquires a totally different configuration when it is viewed not abstractly, not along a certain obvious prerequisite of polar maxims but when this juxtaposition is viewed through the lens of the real process of human activities, as its inalienable components. In the latter case the most important problem is that of their unity within the act of culture-creating human activities. The key issue here is what the basis of reaching this unity is, which of the two poles (aspects) of the one whole act is the basic, constitutive one .

The culture if viewed through the lens of content-rich publicly significant results is not only an objectified but truly objective world; objective in the sense that it provides a logical structure where the internal logic is faceless (depersonalized). Even in such clearly defined forms of culture as philosophy or literature, to say nothing of such large-scale anonymous types of activities as maintaining households or social life, there exist laws (indeed, laws!) of development. In this sense the humanities are not different from natural sciences. Such is the culture in its results, in its content-laden outcomes. But in its genesis, in the concrete types of activity it is always personal, subjective. There is always a living, unique and only individual at the source of it. Any activity is at all times a very concrete, personally expressed type of activity, which could not happen without the person who is carrying out this type of activity. Naturally, a certain Johnson who is doing something could be replaced

by a certain Jackson; but this fact does not cancel the assertion that what Johnson did he or she alone could do; and if Jackson replaced him or her, it would be then his or her contribution, which would otherwise not occur.

Each separately defined sphere of activity presupposes existence of certain individuals with the qualities necessary for performing this kind of work (knowledge, competencies, moral standards, etc.) and shapes them. Any meaningful activity needs and requires individuals who are functionally prepared to implement it. An actor, in the functional sense, is involved in the content of some activity: the military deed requires military men and women, engineering needs engineers, crimes need criminals. This is such a direct correlation that corresponding functions can be (and are already being) transferred to robots. The functional capability of an actor is based on his or her activities and defines its role, but it never follows that the role must be played by a live individual; and if it is a live individual, that it should be that exact individual who plays the role. The role that a particular individual will play in the open space of culture is decided by him- or herself alone; by choosing the role, he or she, being rooted in reality, actually chooses him- or herself. The very conscious nature of human existence shows that it is the individual in action who defines whether a certain act is going to take place or not. It is the individual who decides on the course of action and contributes to the genesis of culture in its every form.

There is a common opinion that there are no irreplaceable people, that executors will be found for any action, good or despicable. But it is also true that the interchange is needed each time, that the actor is always at the source of any action. For the gun to fire, someone must press the trigger. Leo Tolstoy thought that the cancellation of the capital punishment must begin with the executioner who will refuse to continue with this practice of pseudo-legal madness. His argument was as simple as it was irresistible.

Should there be no people to play the social role of the executioner, capital punishment would not be possible at all. Tolstoy could not be suspected of being a naive simpleton; he knew that there were many people willing to become executioners and that they would compete fiercely for this well-paid job. He knew also that the aspiration to overcome violence, including the most disgusting form of violence - that is authorized and executed by the state - should begin with the lengthy process of changing the conditions of daily life. He knew that it was not only a lengthy process but also a process with no future; he realized that there would always be reasons for violence, and those who thought otherwise would be deceiving themselves. If we were to finish Tolstoy's argument, we would find that the solution would lie in changing the moral outlook of the human being. Only when humans refused to engage in violence due to moral reasons, implementing this dream into reality would become possible.

The most adequate understanding of culture is understanding it as a form of human activity. Not only in the general sense, which presupposes that nothing in culture is done without people, but also in the most precise sense that every action has its name, that someone is responsible for it, and that there is a concrete living individual behind it.

5. Human beings act consciously and they are responsible for their actions not as nature's creatures but as members of the society. "But the essence of man , - Marx writes, - is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations." <sup>8</sup> The essence of man understood in this way is viewed as external to living individuals, as objectified forms of culture. It acquires flesh and concreteness as it comes to life in conscious activities of human beings, separate individuals and their associations. Marx revealed the vicious circle of interdependence of change in humans and changes in

---

<sup>8</sup>Marx, K. Theses on Feuerbach // Ibid., p. 3

circumstances, which was characteristic of the old school of materialism: to change people circumstances need to be changed, but to change circumstances people need to be changed, because circumstances also change people and the educator himself must be educated. The way out, according to Marx, is to together that human change and the change of circumstances within the activity aimed at the revolutionary change of the society.

Individuals merge with their essence and establish themselves as personalities or social types in the process of their own activities, in which there is always a certain end point, when an autonomous decision on the subsequent action is made by the actor. Therefore we can say - literally, not figuratively - that an individual is the sovereign actor. Therefore, an adequate approach to the human being within the unity of his or her essence and existence, as well as an approach to culture as a set of meanings and facts, lies in getting rid of false dilemmas: whether it is the human being who serves the society or vice versa, whether the human being defines culture or vice versa. On the contrary, humans must be viewed as parts of culture, and an active approach must be taken to eliminate the discrepancy between the two, with the plan of creating an association, in which “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”<sup>9</sup> I would think that Marx had this idea about changing the world in mind when in his “Theses on Feuerbach” he talked about viewing the reality subjectively, as practice, and the real point is that the world must not only be interpreted but changed as well.

---

<sup>9</sup>Marx, K., Engels, F. Communist Party Manifesto. In Marx, K., Engels, F. Collected Works. Volume 4. Second Edition. State Publishing House of Political Literature, 1955. P. 447.