

GORZ'S EXORCISM

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André Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class*, Boston, Mass: South End Press, 1982.

While the various social, political and economic crises of the seventies and eighties continue to fuel the women's movement, peace movement, ecological activism, and episodic industrial militancy, the traditional left has failed to grow. It has failed to grow either in practical political terms or in the intellectual and cultural development of a vision and programme of liberation. The new right has been more successful than the left in seizing upon popular discontents and dissatisfactions arising from the stagflation of the seventies. As the new right's reactionary agenda has become more exposed and distasteful, however, political choice still remains restricted to that of threadbare liberalism or passivity. In this context Gorz analyses the gap between the Marxist tradition and the structure, and more importantly, the experiences generated by that structure, of "post-industrial" society.

In *Farewell to the Working Class* Gorz continues his career as the gadfly to the Marxist left, criticising the rigidities and dogmatism of the inherited conventions. For Gorz, capitalist contradictions are reflected in the often intensely alienating experiences, tensions and disaffections of everyday life. Such experiences do not manifest themselves in orthodox expressions of class consciousness but in a great variety of historically shifting patterns of personal problems, anxieties and perceptions which are often overlooked in socialist theory and practice. Consequently Gorz has attempted to regenerate socialist theory and politics by confronting actual history and the actualities within history. In *A Strategy for Labour* Gorz argued that the affluent capitalism of the post-war period necessitated a socialist strategy focused on qualitative issues pertaining to the organisation, control and goals of production, and a shift away from the merely distributive and quantitative traditions of reform socialism. His essay *Ecology as Politics* points out that the rise of ecological concerns presents conceptions of physical constraints on production without clear political resolutions, and poses some directions for socialist solutions to ecological issues. *Farewell . . .* looks at the impact of the latest round of technological changes on employment and job satisfaction. The potential persistence of massive unemployment combined with the nearly total destruction of craft work creates mass detachment from and disaffection with productive work. This situations provides an opportunity to revivify socialism through the development of a programme of economic reform

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based upon the maximum reduction of necessary work. In the course of developing this thesis Gorz directs a withering stream of criticism at some of Marxism's most sacrosanct precepts.

To most critical Marxists, Gorz's (albeit elegantly written and extremely lucid) pastiche of ideas drawn from Marcuse, Sartre, Illich and Schumacher will not be news. I also doubt whether his exposés of Marxist dogmatism will sway the Mitterand technocrats or the PCF from their fixed orbits around the French state. After all, the criticisms of Marxist party ambivalence over the working class as the subject of history or of the party; the tyranny of productivism; the deforming consequences of merely seizing and not transforming power; the subordination of individual desires, wants, and satisfactions to collective necessities, etc., have a long and honourable history within and outside the Marxist left without effecting the theory and practices of socialist and communist parties in or out of power. Even so, Gorz's struggle to renovate the socialist vision does contain some useful correctives to both traditional and libertarian Marxist positions.

Socialism in essence, for Gorz, aims at the liberation of time and the abolition of work. This fundamental element is entirely lost in the obsession with production which has dominated "scarcity socialism." In reaction the libertarian left has tended to idealise primitive communities, feudal craft guilds, or self-sufficient rural communities as models for socialist organisation. Such communities are, in reality, much more restrictive and intolerant of the forms of individuation and autonomy which characterise advanced capitalist societies, let alone those which should characterise socialist societies. Moreover, contemporary technology which actually makes possible massive reduction of labour involves larger scale, flexible, interconnecting organisations quite unlike idyllic, isolated communities (and also unlike contemporary capitalist or soviet macro-bureaucracies). Socialists cannot depend on historically available models of social organisation but have to work to develop non-oppressive social relations in the interstices of contemporary society. This involves an acknowledgement that even in a socialist world there would be unpleasant, boring and physically uncomfortable tasks to be routinely performed. Socialist organisation involves the reduction of this "realm of necessity" to the minimum and distributing these tasks rationally and justly within the community. This is a more reasonable vision than either the stakhanovite exaltation of work as life, or the paradisaical view of life as a permanent Saturday afternoon. It is, however, difficult to translate this principle of organisation into an activating political programme. Gorz chooses the easier path of arguing for its technical feasibility, drawing on Illich, Lovins and Schumacher.

Throughout the essay Gorz echoes Sartre in asserting the irreducibility of the existential and ethical moment in socialist politics. Individual consciousness and autonomy is both the root and purpose of liberation. This assertion is, of course, a critique of orthodox Marxism's emphasis on the party, or the collective subject as the entity endowed with consciousness, reason and morality. For Gorz this position leads to the totalitarian vision where individual consciousness is replaced by state morality, and obedience to rules and regulations exhausts the

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moral obligations and rights of the individual.

More importantly in the current context, the everyday experience of contemporary society is profoundly depersonalising. The machine-like operations of the state apparatuses and the economy renders us all subject to impersonal forces and abstract rules and regulations beyond our control. In this functional system of power "it's no longer people who have power; it's the positions of power which have their people."¹ The pervasiveness of impersonal power in contemporary society generates a permanent, diffused form of fascist ideology. Fascist ideology promises the replacement of a system of functional domination by the continuous promotion of the most able; the replacement of class monopolisation of power by the personal power of a redeeming leader; and the elimination of state and bureaucracy in favour of mass organisations unified by a single social vision, thus eliminating social conflict and tension. The experience of impersonal power in societies pervaded and dominated by macro-bureaucracies provides opportunities for the growth of a new right which has effectively utilised popular discontent in the pursuit of retrograde aims. The current discontent with "big government" is a deformed expression of and yearning for personal autonomy. The productivist and statist biases in socialism renders it difficult for the left to effectively speak to this yearning. Unfortunately Gorz does not pursue the fundamental issue at stake here: the historical success of conservative and reactionary programmes in exploiting mass dissatisfaction with bureaucratic impersonality by appealing to the "individual will to power" and how the left's appeals would be systematically different. What is required is an exploration of the ways in which diffuse dissatisfaction can be "moralised" to provide a genuine libertarian politics rather than a left fascism which celebrates any and every act of violence as a blow for freedom.

Gorz has performed a useful task in bringing together otherwise disparate components of libertarian critiques of Marxist socialism but his essay is both flawed and limited. It suffers from a mode of abstraction which, although perhaps necessary for a critique of socialism as an intellectual tradition, fails to concretely apprehend contemporary political processes and events. Gorz's analysis of post-industrial capitalism is not significantly different from Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*, and his identification of the new subject of history, the "non-class of non-workers" is very similar to Marcuse's chosen replacement for the political torpid working class. But the historical context of these two works are so vastly different as to require considerable reworking of categories analysing contemporary capitalism. Both economic stagnation and technological change have drastically reduced the size and significance of traditional manufacturing and contributed to the strangulation of white collar and professional employment in the state sector. Consequently a combination of proletarianisation of middle levels of management and state workers is occurring side by side with a massively growing "welfare" still largely working class in "recruitment" but increasingly drawn from every employed layer. Both the social processes and the political requirements arising from this political economic situation need more detailed analysis than Gorz provides. This inattention permits him to evade the issue of translating alienation from work and other wide-spread dissatisfactions

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into a political programme involving demands, activities and organisations which could exert real leverage for actual social change. Without such concretisation the work remains a utopian critique.

Although Gorz's focus on the liberation of time and the abolition of work was essential as a point of entry for the demolition of socialist dogmas, it ultimately entraps him within the political economic boundaries of orthodox socialism. This undermines his capacity to expand the socialist vision to meet issues which are an essential part of any programme for a humane and just social order. Concerning the issues, political style, organisational forms and theoretical contributions of the women's movement, peace movement, ecology movement, and human rights movement (the latter is extremely diffuse, but was an emerging political current in the seventies and a crucial one at that, to be nourished by all who would claim a progressive political identity) Gorz is virtually silent. Yet these movements are surely partners in the struggle for a better world, and their ideas are of immense significance in overcoming the deformations and blindspots of orthodox socialism? Gorz's exorcism, then, turns into a display of the strength of the spectre of traditional socialism.

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Notes

1. Gorz, page 57.