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dialectic of romanticism



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Dialectic of Romanticism: A Critique of Modernism

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Dialectic of Romanticism: A Critique of Modernism

To Agnes Heller and György Markus

Introduction: Three Modernisms

Our title deliberately sets itself against Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. We take issue with the authors' challenging but deeply flawed vision of the trajectory of the West from Greek beginnings to totalitarian conclusions, and with their one-dimensional equation of enlightenment and myth. This conflation is symptomatic of the hidden romantic roots of Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of enlightenment. By assimilating antiquity to modernity, and modernity to domination, their negative idea of progress robs them of any counter-balancing or constructive conception of civilization.

At the same time as Horkheimer and Adorno unmask enlightenment ideas as dangerous myths, they appeal to romantic dreams of reconciliation with a nature that is at once innocent, archaic and redemptive. It is this romantic myth that allows them to picture the history of technology as the self-traumatizing drive of human beings to dominate nature. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* depicts the relentless power of progress that is one with the progress of power. Human beings adapt themselves to ever more commanding powers that demand self-sacrifice in the name of self-preservation. Progress is achieved, not as dream but as nightmare. It is a black vision but no less 'all consuming' for this. There is no escape from progress, no point outside of it.

Horkheimer and Adorno's reading of history as an ever-accelerating spiral of calculation and abstraction, sacrifice and resignation is the perfect expressionist trope of love-to-loathe the machine. Their bleak indictment of progress betrays their fascination. In this manner, Horkheimer and Adorno reproduce what we call, in this book, 'the divided unity of modernism'. This is the attraction of the two poles that beguile modern personalities – attraction to the romantic critique of modern society on the one hand and attraction to

futurist technology and progressive techniques on the other hand. We are sceptical about both these poles of attraction.

We argue that both romanticism and enlightenment have proved fatal genies in modernity. Romanticism's redemptive myths celebrating original genius and archaic origins, aesthetic politics and aesthetic gods provide justification for retrograde totalitarian fantasies. Equally, aesthetic progress, like industrial progress, encourages fantasies of a 'rational society' marching joylessly to the tune of the master technologist. Progress, not least an avant-garde progress left to its own devices, stands for an image of the future that breaks decisively with human continuity. It is contemptuous of the durability and transmitted qualities of civilization. In contrast, romanticism offers an image of the future in which the future is a creation anew of a mythical past of organic harmony, aesthetic gods, heroes and geniuses. Both the romantic future and the progressive future are unbearable. Both are enormously influential in modernity. Both are frequently at war with each other. Both participate in equal measure in the constitution of modernity and modernism.

This is our fundamental proposition: European modernism – the two hundred years from 1750 to 1950, more exactly the long nineteenth century from the French Revolution to the 'German Revolution' of the Nazis – was co-constituted by romanticism and enlightenment. Much of the *Dialectic of Romanticism* is concerned with arguing against the notion that modernism is simply a movement of enlightenment or that it is simply a movement of romanticism. Both are part and parcel of modernism.

Our critique of modernism takes account of but does not share the late twentieth-century postmodernist mood of cultural and critical theory. If the great merit of postmodernist revisionism is that it helped to dissolve the unthinking equation of modernism and modernity, its great weakness is that it has all too easily seen itself as outside or beyond modernity, while it is in fact another of modernity's modernisms. Its historicist self-understanding indicates its multiple entanglements with basic assumptions of modernism. Postmodernism's equation of modernism with the grand narratives of enlightenment progress and emancipation, and of modernity with the dialectic of enlightenment is unconvincing. Postmodernism represents the continuation of a largely unquestioned romantic critique of the modern world. Our critique of modernism is thus also a critique of a postmodernism which has lost the sense of the internal tensions and contradictions of European modernism at the same time as it silently appropriates and dubs postmodern a romantic discontent with disenchanted modernity.

Historically this discontent found its sharpest and most sustained articulation in Germany. Just as the philosophical and aesthetic discourse of the whole modernist epoch was in large measure defined and determined by German thinkers,¹ so German romanticism can lay claim to being the fundamental romanticism.² For the same reason Heidegger and Adorno figure prominently as recurrent points of reference in our argument. They are the inheritors (along with such thinkers as George Lukács, Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin) of the German romantic tradition. They radicalized this

tradition and its negative vision of modernity into totalizing, not to say totalitarian, critiques of Western civilization. These critiques of logocentric reason and of technology, complemented by the appeal to nature and art as the redemptive other of domination, made them godfathers of postmodernism.

The German source of modernism and postmodernism is the primary focus of our enquiry. This enquiry takes us from central Europe to the United States. Between the poles of German romanticism and American postmodernism lies the flight across the Atlantic of German and Austrian artists, architects and intellectuals from National Socialism. This forced migration marked a sea change in European modernism. California sharpened the critical gaze of European theorists for the dystopian but also utopian potentials of the alliance between technology and nature. Conversely, translation to the New World prompted leading pupils of Heidegger, notably Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss, to return to antiquity to recover – against the master – the idea of a perennial modernity, distinct from any historicist versions of modernism – or postmodernism.

The distinction between enlightened, romantic and classical modernisms and their antagonistic conceptions of modernity is integral to our argument. Modernity as such can be defined most succinctly as the consequence of the historical break that Bruno Latour terms the 'Modern Constitution'. This break results from the separation of society and nature, subjects and things. In depriving society of its divine origins, and nature of its divine presence, 'the Crossed-out God' set in train the paradoxes of a nature and society that we comprehend as an immanent construction and at the same time as something that transcends us infinitely.³ These paradoxes of nature and society, transcendence and immanence, permeate the dialectics of enlightenment and romanticism. Our third – classical – modernism functions here in a double guise. It stands on the one hand for a regulative idea of the city and civilization. It offers a vantage point and perspective outside and opposed to modern historicisms. At the same time, it denotes a stream within aesthetic modernism, represented most signally by the constant reinventions and renewals of tradition that characterize the lifework of Picasso and Stravinsky.

Classical modernism thus offers a standpoint outside of the warring poles of romanticism and progress from which one can tell the story of modernism. This 'third stream' does not have a neat, simple name like romantic or progressive. We sometimes call this the 'civilizing' stream. We do so simply because the image of 'the city', the *urbs* or the *civitas*, is a key part of its symbolic make-up. Unlike either progress or romanticism, the third stream is continuous with the past – in its modernity, it self-consciously re-creates and re-utilizes and renews aspects and forms of the Greek-Roman-Latin-Renaissance past. This is sometimes characterized as 'neo-classical', although such terminology can be confusing when romantics and progressives each have their own versions of relations with antiquity. The romantics find in antiquity inspiration for the idea of archaic genius and mythical powers, while progressives admire its revolutions in engineering and communications and political technologies (and forever curse its failure to industrialize the labour power of the slave).

The third stream that we talk about does not interpret modernity as the creation of society anew in the name of the most advanced techniques or the most potent archaic fantasy. It does not seek re-creation in order to better dominate nature or to resurrect a fallen nature. The third stream does not see human emancipation as due to the fulfilment of the desideratum of either technology or mythology. The 'civilizing' stream is simultaneously purposively modern and classically inspired, metropolitan and cosmopolitan, and presents itself as a counter to organic and aesthetic romanticism, and to enlightened models of progress and futurism.

The third stream emerges out of the culture wars of modernism and into self-consciousness, roughly speaking, in the 1950s. We see how a cohort of figures such as Mies van der Rohe, Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, and Igor Stravinsky – all of them in exile in America – distanced themselves from romanticism and progressivism. In their different ways, they postulate an image of nature, self and society that is neither progressive nor romantic, but draws on a fusion of classical rationalism and modern dynamics. In their work, architectonic qualities – such as form, structure, rhythm, proportionality, constitutionalism, balance of powers, geometric nature and so on – replace romantic genesis and innovative technique as core intellectual concerns.

The mature Stravinsky offers a case in point of what we mean. He distanced himself from the youthful radical-cum-archaic 'rite of spring' but he did not accept the notion that Arnold Schoenberg's serialism was an advanced technique of aesthetic production superior to all other techniques, as alphabetical writing is superior to the pictogram. This view damned Stravinsky in the eyes of Adorno. From the 1920s on, the mature Stravinsky embraced neither romantic reconciliation with archaic nature nor the progressive history of artistic technique. Indeed, he viewed the serialism that Adorno espoused not as a superior artistic technology but as simply another musical form, one civilizing form among many, which would never die out like a technological fossil, and yet which he never pretended was anything but the work of human artifice and human ingenuity of a very high order. Stravinsky was happy to re-create and renew, and inventively construct, all kinds of musical forms. His modernism was the mastery of form and of architectonic ordering. Adorno charged that this modernism was retrograde – a bad rhythmic-spatial modernism, as opposed to a good expressive-dynamic modernism. Stravinsky lost no sleep over the matter. He knew that the warring twins of romantic expressivism and technological dynamism were not the sole constituents of modernity, and that Adorno's clever synthesis of them was not the last word on the nature of modernism.

In the spirit of Stravinsky, *Dialectic of Romanticism* proposes a threefold critical revision of modernism. Its critique is internal, external and retrospective. Part One – *Mytho-Logics of Modernity* – traces, through the German discourse of aesthetic modernism an unfolding mytho-logic of romanticism from Schelling to Adorno, and from Hölderlin to Heidegger via Wagner and Nietzsche. Central to this romanticism is the redemptive vision of the archaic

Greek polis as *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Part Two – *Modernism and Civilization* – introduces the counter-vision of the city as metropolis and cosmopolis. Bridging antiquity and modernity, the city offers an (Archimedean) point from which to weigh and interrogate the claims of enlightenment and romanticism. As a trans-historical model and an ‘architectonic’ fashioning, the city is the carrier and repository of a philosophical conception of nature, art and social life that is distinct from enlightenment functionalism and romantic revivalism, and opens a perspective onto an alternative modernism. The city embodies the ‘classical’ idea of nature – nature as artifice – as against the mechanicism of progress and the organicism of romanticism. Part Three – *Modernity’s Utopias* – sets the architectonic utopia of ‘classical’ modernism against the aesthetic utopias of enlightenment and romantic modernisms. Aesthetic modernism is revisited in the light of the crucial but neglected distinction between the idea of the ‘avant-garde’ and the idea of the ‘total work of art’ to pose the question of the future of modernism. We note how already in Wagner’s idea of the total work of art there is a fusion of romanticism and progress – the interlocking of mythic drama with an appetite for the development of the aesthetic means of production. We suggest that, when translated from Europe to America, this fusion is massively compounded, and the multiple dialectics of modernity enter into new relationships bringing about a reduction of the antagonism between enlightenment and romanticism, mechanicism and organism, and the beginning of a new phase of modernity.

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Part One
Mytho-Logics of Modernity

Introduction: The Retreat and Return of the Origin

If the enlightenment defines itself through the break with tradition, romanticism draws its self-understanding from the quest to recover a living relation to tradition. As the critique and counter-movement to the project of modernity as conceived by the enlightenment, romanticism opposes to the *denaturalization* of man the call for his *renaturalization*. Robert Legros's reconstruction of the romantic idea of humanity¹ is governed by this opposition, which points to what may be called the original paradox of romanticism. On the one hand there can be no return to the closure of tradition from which we are separated by disenchantment, by the withdrawal of spirit from the world, leaving only intimations of its lost presence and the lost origin. On the other hand, how can there be a renaturalization that is not instituted as closure,² a renaturalization that formulates its paradoxical task as that of an original repetition? The origins of romanticism lie in this quest for the sources of originality, which we want to approach through Legros's reading of the romantic idea of humanity.³

For the enlightenment man is the maker of his own humanity. His task is to free himself from the closure of all historical naturalizations, rooted in the particularism of tradition. The emancipation from tutelage, the passage from nature to freedom (Kant) raises autonomy to the supreme norm, to be realized through the refusal of external authority and the self-critical use of reason. The traditional confusion of the 'natural' and the human order of things in particularism stands in the way of the recognition of the idea of universal humanity, which can only be understood as an open-ended project since the idea of autonomy exceeds all determinations and calls for the cease-

less critique of all forms of renaturalization. The criticism of religion, morality, law, history, economics and politics is thus the condition of the advance of knowledge and progress to a better, more civilized and more rational society, based on the universal rights of man.⁴

The romantic idea of man by contrast springs from the sense of our irreducible embeddedness in a particular humanity.⁵ This sense of embeddedness as the key to the truly human rejects the empty autonomy of the enlightenment subject, the subject of transparent consciousness and will. Against the primacy of the cognitive and instrumental faculties romanticism privileges sensibility, free of the domination of reason. The romantic comprehension of sensibility, which gives expression to tradition, culture and epoch, is that of a sensibility penetrated by spirit, for which the sensible and the intelligible are one. This sense of the living unity of the sensible and the non-sensible represents a radical subversion of the dualism of western thought because it rejoins what Platonic metaphysics and modern subjectivity have split apart: body and soul, matter and spirit, the one and the multiple, the eternal and the temporal, the divine and the human, the infinite and the finite. The universal is thus realized in and through particularity; its image is the symbol, its essence the synthesizing powers of the productive imagination, romanticism's answer to the analytic powers of reason.⁶

From the enlightenment's abstraction of man from all particular contexts flows the romantic critique of the metaphysics of subjectivity. The romantics criticized the idea of man as self-determining subject and the corresponding project of founding a new society of autonomous individuals. The failure to recognize that man and society are products of history results in what Adam Müller, in the wake of Burke, identified in his *Elemente der Staatskunst* (1809) as the three prejudices of the enlightenment: that the individual can create his society, that we can extract ourselves from history and treat it as a political experiment, that politics is a means in the service of individual interests.⁷ This abstract humanism finds its complement in a dualistic epistemology, which places the observer outside of the world and reduces the sensible to indifferent matter and the non-sensible to pure intelligibility. Not only is the natural world cut off from its given meaning but also from the human-historical world. The purely rational and technical attitude reduces human institutions – language, law, religion, politics and art – to a question of their function. Such a reconstruction defines meaning in terms of means and ends.

In asking how romanticism can reverse the denaturalization of the world – how, in other words, naturalization can be conceived as original – Legros poses the question of what is specifically modern in the romantic counter-imaginary to the project of enlightenment. His answer is that naturalization acquires a new meaning with the romantics. The second nature of particularization is in fact primary in relation to human nature and is to be thought of as the origin and not the alienation of man's humanity. Given that the universal can only realize itself in the particular, it defines romanticism's holism as the incarnation of the universal in the particular. The romantic conception

of life as the union of body and soul thus underlies the principle of particularization, embodied in the spirit of a people, its history, customs and traditions, which alone give meaning to the individual. Only through the acquisition of a particular language does man accede to his universal humanity.

The meaning of creation accordingly is to be sought not in innovation but in giving expression to the spirit at work in nature and history. Once communion with the living spirit is broken, tradition dies and nature becomes disenchanted. Creation is thus centred in the romantic idea of life, the mystery of incarnation, which spiritualizes nature and naturalizes history and defines originality as contact with the animating spirit that is both transcendent and immanent. Nature speaks to us because it is an original revelation, the manifestation of the infinite in the finite, of the invisible at the heart of the visible. The romantic ideas of religion (Schleiermacher) and of art (Schelling) converge in this intuition of the infinite in the finite.⁸ The romantic exaltation of subjectivity, evident above all in the cult of genius, thus stands at the opposite pole to the enlightenment's conception of the subject as foundation. Subjectivity is inscribed in a natural and historical world that transcends it. It is in this sense a consciousness traversed by the unconscious, such that the creativity of the genius is to be understood not as autonomous subjectivity but as nature in the subject, that is to say, as the privileged medium of that which exceeds the intellect and concepts.

But again we must ask with Legros: where does originality come from in a disenchanted world, what is originality if it expresses the longing to recover a lost tradition? Both romanticism and enlightenment are separated from the premodern closure of tradition. And this means that the call for renaturalization contains the seed of its own dialectic. If renaturalization is not to be instituted as closure, its opening to the world must also include an opening to the enlightenment. This means the recognition that naturalization and denaturalization are both products of history and in this sense equally original.⁹ Here, however, we must register a reciprocal failure of dialogue. Two imaginaries, two concepts of origin and foundation confront each other across the great divide of the French Revolution. Nowhere is this division of modernity, this crisis of foundation registered more acutely than in Germany. The very question of a dismembered Germany's existence, its political unity and cultural identity, was at stake.¹⁰ The intellectual hegemony of French civilization, reinforced by the imperialism of the revolutionary nation-state, overdetermined the critique of a soulless, mechanical enlightenment and the appeal to organic particularism against abstract universalism. If for Georges Gusdorf or Isaiah Berlin German romanticism is the fundamental romanticism,¹¹ it is not least because the critical reaction to the dominant western model of enlightenment was closely linked to the search for an alternate redemptive vision of modernity, through which an as yet unborn Germany would attain its essential destiny as the heartland of Europe.

Here too the paradox of romanticism, more exactly the paradox of romantic historicism, appears. Like the enlightenment, romanticism is informed and carried by a reflexive historical consciousness born of the break