Rendre justice à ce qui est. Ou l'émancipation comme parturition

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Doing Justice to Reality: Emancipation as Parturition

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"You and I and a whole bunch of other people go on a camping trip." In his final, posthumous book, Gerald Allan Cohen (2009) gave a distinctive plea for socialism, a witty demonstration of how the "camping spirit" realizes the socialist ideal. Sharing pots and pans, oil and coffee, footballs and playing cards among friends, refusing hierarchy, aiming only to have a good time doing what one likes best—isn't this an endorsement, however implicit, of a "socialist way, with collective property and planned mutual giving"? Only a thought experiment, in the Anglo-Saxon analytical style. But doesn't it speak to us (as Rawls' original position does not) precisely because of its triviality? Doesn't the thought experiment invite us to see socialism, first and foremost, as banal?

Campers of the world, unite!

Such ideological detox is more valuable now than ever. It invites us to draw a different moral from the tumultuous history of socialism, keeping only the essential, hard core of socialism: its morality. This is, after all, how another English author taught us to understand and defend socialism: Orwell, who knew the horrors of totalitarianism so well, saw socialism's ambition as the defense and the

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extension of what he called common decency—the construction, in short, of a "decent society" based as far as humanly possible on generosity, mutual aid, and civility. It is as though the universal might seep into the cracks of ordinary life, and as though shared everyday existence, simple words, gestures, and attitudes, already held the possibility of social and political emancipation.

This idea that socialism is primarily a moral affair is hardly original. For a long time it was a commonplace, one held by Owen, Leroux, Saint-Simon, Proudhon, Malon, Andler, Kropotkin, Landauer, and even Jaurès.[1] For many, to paraphrase Marx and Engels's *Manifesto*, the forces dormant in social labor are above all moral ones. The related hypothesis that everyday life and practice themselves contain a critical and normative power is at the heart of any theory of praxis—and so of any worthwhile materialism.

More generally, Cohen's text lets us bring out another striking feature of this tradition of socialism: its pragmatism and its experimentalism. Such paradoxical materialism cultivates what we could, following John Dewey, call an "idealism of action" or a "practical idealism." It shows an uncommon faith in experience—to evoke Dewey's luminous book, *A Common Faith* (1960a)—and, in the words of Hans Joas (1996), in the creativity of action. As Cohen's book suggests, socialism on this pragmatist reading is first of all an *expérience*, in the two meanings the word has in French: both experiment and experience. It is a concrete practice, a *doing*, based on ordinary skills and relationships and on experimentation. The title of Cohen's book, *Why Not Socialism?* can be read this way. Through this invitation to describe and evaluate the social world from the point of view of camping's practice and principles, socialism defines a practical hypothesis: what would a society where these principles were systematically implemented look like? Is this desirable? Is it possible? How? The thought experiment allows us to find this concrete utopia's possible points of support.

At the same time, Cohen's title—"Why *not* socialism?"—also highlights the difficulties of claiming to generalize these principles: the thought experiment lets us work out the obstacles to

1. For a modern synthesis of this tradition of moral socialism, I refer the reader to my book, *La Délicate essence du socialisme* (Chanial 2009). See also the recent reissues of major works by Benoît Malon, Charles Andler, and Eugène Fournière published by Le Bord de l'eau.

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implementing the socialist hypothesis. It may invalidate or compel us to modify the hypothesis. This was essential to Mauss's struggle against all "isms": socialism needs, above all, a "good experimental method."[2] And yet—here is the question I want to pose in this article—does such a framework, where socialism is both a hypothesis and an experiment, a social practice, allow for the emergence of a coherent form of social criticism? How does faith in ordinary experience and interhuman cooperation open up a horizon of emancipation? The categorical imperative underlying the type of critique I want to defend here could be formulated: "do justice to reality."

Condemnation, alienation, and emancipation

Do justice to reality. As a critical demand, the imperative is clearly paradoxical. If we start from the simple idea that critique is based on observing and condemning a gap between what is (a real state of affairs) and what should be (a desired state of affairs), critique is a matter of rebelling against what is, denouncing a world in which justice is constantly betrayed. There is no question of doing justice to such a world.

What is a "good" critical description? Following Emmanuel Renault (2004), we could say that social critique is made up of three descriptive imperatives:

1. Description which reveals hidden injustices covered up by justificatory discourses, "making these injustices appear unjustifiable" and "this world appear in its sheer unbearability" (ibid., 406). At this first level---*the grammar of denunciation*—critique has a twofold task. First, to "make reality unacceptable," to use Boltanski's wording (2008): the world is not as it should be, is foul, disgusting, nauseating. Second, to "make reality contradictory": the world is not what it claims to be, is hypocritical or misleading, does not match its own principles, does not

2. Hence his preference for what he calls a "socialism without doctrines, perhaps the best one," which tries for each question "to find a practical solution, directly and by way of the social" (Mauss 1997, 564-66).

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coincide with itself.

2. "Description which detaches subjectivities from this hostile world," undermining "our ways of identifying with the world" (Renault 2004, 406). This second level—*the grammar of alienation*—does not involve the world's properties, but the properties of the subjects involved in it. Critique aims to explain our blindness: subjects are blinded, mystified in the face of reality, which they grasp so little that they become alien, and therefore submissive, to reality. It aims, too, to "explain our unconscious guilt": subjects are directly or indirectly responsible for reality—they are entangled, guilty, complicit, in what is, to the point that they are strangers to what they should be.
3. "Description in order to outline the principles and goals of transforming injustice" (ibid.). This third level is *the grammar of emancipation*. It aims to overcome the gap between what is and what should be, the actual and the desired state of things. Franck Fischbach (2010, 150) presents two ways of doing so. He calls the first the "communist alternative." This consists in "letting reality be, until the miraculous moment when it is overthrown and becomes its other"—letting capitalism dig its own grave and trying only to accelerate the process, to "annihilate reality by positing reality's radical other, without knowing how or where to start from." Immediately revolutionary action will bring about the destruction of the existing society. To this communist alternative Fischbach contrasts what he calls, with reference to Jaurès, the "socialist hypothesis." He formulates this as follows: "using political action to positively establish inside reality the conditions for a process that thwarts, limits, and hinders from within the continuous deployment of the logic of the existing order."

It seems to me these different versions of Marxist social critique can be described by this triple grammar. But it does not exhaust Marx's social critique—at least, not that of the young Marx. There is a path I want to explore, one which suggests another version and another grammar of social critique and so emancipation.

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Critique and the young Marx

Let's turn to the young Marx of 1843-44. Everyone knows the following passage from the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*:

> The actual pressure must be made more pressing by adding to it consciousness of pressure, the shame must be made more shameful by publicizing it. Every sphere of German society must be shown as the *partie honteuse* of German society . . .

The grammar of *denunciation* involves making reality unacceptable—playing at Cassandra, as Sartre said of Nizan—by emphasizing the contradictory character Marx later systematized. The grammar of alienation is clearly at the heart of the young Marx's critique, whether aimed at religious or political mystification. Such critique is linked in this period to the theme of guilt, even confession.[3] We see this in Marx's 1843 letter to Ruge:

> It is a matter of a *confession*, and nothing more. In order to secure remission of its sins, mankind has only to declare them for what they actually are.

Things get complicated with the third level of critique, that of *emancipation*. Marx does not choose either of the two paths Fischbach mentions, either the communist alternative or the socialist hypothesis. For Marx, once the reality of oppression and exploitation are described and once the mythologized, guilty consciousness has been at least partially roused from its slumber, the task is to realize its latent utopian potential, already there, and so to make a new practical relationship with the world possible:

> It will then become plain that the world has long since dreamed of something of which it needs only to become conscious for it to possess it in reality.
> Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers on the chain not in order that man shall continue to bear that chain without fantasy or consolation, but so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower.[4]

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3. This second grammar was to have a bright future—particularly in denunciations of bad faith and the petty-bourgeois mentality.

4. In *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. The formula recalls the anarchist Élie Reclus (less well-known than his brother Élisée), for whom the ideal is none other than the "flower of reality" whose fruit we are to pick (Reclus 2008).

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Marx's strength is to have clearly and dialectically articulated these three levels of critique, and to have shown that implacably describing injustice, calling it by its true name in order to undermine our identification with an unacceptable world that justifies it or makes it invisible allows us, positively, to reveal the principles needed to free us from it. This is because, for the young Marx, philosophical consciousness (or reflexivity) is itself involved in this struggle. In this sense, the professional critic cannot have a monopoly on critique. Just like the profane critic, the professional is "in the fray":

> The critic can therefore start out from any form of theoretical and practical consciousness and from the forms peculiar to existing reality develop the true reality as its obligation and its final goal. (*Letter to Ruge, September 1843*)

This is precisely what Marx means by the critique of "critical critique" he develops with Engels in *The Holy Family.* This critical critique always stands outside the object it criticizes, setting its norms and ideals with reference to the facts. This preference for the Archimedean point of view—what Dewey (1957) called absolutism—is, for Marx, mere dogmatism, incapable of applying to itself the criteria it applies to its objects. For Marx, critique must refuse to occupy such a position, and instead think in continuity with the material existence of its object or of the phenomenon it analyzes, and of its object's own immanent, normative self-understanding. It must do justice its object's reflexivity. The criteria of inquiry the critic presupposes cannot differ from those by which the object or phenomenon judges itself. Criticism presupposes that the subject of its analysis constitutes a social reality that already possesses its own self-interpretation.

The task of the most radical criticism—the one which takes aim at the roots—is not to contrast an ideal, an eternal standard, with reality, but to reveal how what is already, virtually contains what should be. Its task is to show that reality is not a pure given, a pure fact, but must be understood as a tension between effectiveness—what has become, what has happened—and possibility—what could be but isn't yet. From then on the ideal—the ideal of emancipation—can be realized insofar as it is the practical idealization of a reality which already bears in itself the anticipation of this ideal.

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Idealism and experimentalism as critique

Do justice to reality. The meaning of the phrase should be clearer now. Criticism does indeed consist of contrasting the real with the ideal, but by considering the ideal as Dewey does, as the tendency and movement of an existing thing rather than as something transcendental and imposed.

Such language may seem pollyannaish. But there is nothing mysterious about it. From a pragmatist point of view, the claim is that the only conceivable objectivity is one which integrates the potential of actions, relationships, and situations. The result is a necessarily open conception of the social world. A good critical description does not presuppose what Boltanski called "a pre-made social world" (2009), but rather "a social world still being formed" by the challenges it poses to actors—Dewey's "problematic situations." If critique is to avoid becoming critical critique, it must rely on this texture of social openness and actors' own capacity for criticism.

Doing justice to the real partly consists in doing justice to object's reflexivity, to its capacity for self-understanding and self-interpretation. As Proudhon wrote in *De la capacité politique des classes ouvrières* in 1864:

> He who works prays, an old proverb goes. Can we now say: He who works, as long as he pays attention to his own work, does philosophy?

In this sense, socialism is unthinkable without this reference to and stake in the reflexivity and creativity of the properly working-class experience which the upheavals of the Industrial Revolution awakened.[5]

From a pragmatist point of view, doing justice to reality also involves recognizing the ideal possibilities within the world and the means of realizing them. In this sense, criticism must somehow manifest a certain piety or faith when faced with reality:

> But nature, including humanity, with all its defects and imperfections, may evoke heartfelt piety as the source of ideals, of possibilities, of aspirations in their behalf and as the eventual abode of all attained goods and excellences. (Dewey 1960b, 244)

5. What was the original socialist ambition if not to subordinate the economy to the needs and values of society by reducing the scope of economic rationality and competition, and developing voluntary, self-organized forms of cooperation?

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From such a perspective—let's name it, following Alain Caillé (2015, chapter 12), "typically idealistic" or "idealistic-typical," in reference to Weber's ideal-typical approach—ideals do exist in the world or in nature.[6] But they emerge only through commitment to and "active commerce" with the world. In this sense, Dewey's sphere of the ideal (1957) is not a refuge outside the world but a set of imagined possibilities encouraging people to act. For Dewey, an idea or ideal is above all an observation point onto the world and an invitation to do something, to act in a certain way in and on the world, a certain posture or grasp, a tool, a "lever to transform the actual empirical world." A means of overcoming one's shortcomings, lacks, and incompleteness, and thereby of reconstructing the continuity of experience and enriching it with new meaning.[7] But this supposes the world (or nature) welcomes our aspirations, that they respond to our inquiry by granting us the means to realize the values we think essential.

Socialism as practical idealism

Such terms, I believe, allow us to do justice to a constellation of thinkers that gathered around the *Revue socialiste* between 1880 and 1914—Malon (2007), Fournière (2009), and many others, who were influential for both Jaurès and Mauss. As already mentioned, this group was sensitive to socialism's primarily moral dimension. They did not see socialism as a dogma or an absolute, but a hypothesis and an experiment. The hypothesis must be tested both practically and theoretically.

For Malon and Fournière, socialism's truth depends on its capacity to describe the world's movements so as to orient action with the intimations and unrealized virtualities present in this movement. In

6. "After all, a society's ideals form part—perhaps the whole—of its reality. Even a positive sociologist would admit this point. Isn't a society's 'reality' just its distance from its own ideals? Viewed this way, it is not enough to merely remark the difference between reality and instrumental rationality. Perhaps more important is to evaluate the contradictions between the values a society claims (its 'polytheism') and its inability to clarify and enact them—that is, its distance from its own axiological rationality (*Wertrationalität*). The exact nature of its ideals, and their effectiveness and coherence, cannot be determined a priori."

7. This is what Dewey means by inquiry.

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a paradoxical way, critiquing reality requires giving the best possible description of it, without which it would be impossible to see the ideal possibilities given in this world to the means of realizing them. The work of critique is inseparable from that of idealization, rooted in facts—in this materialist sense—which, when apprehended properly, allow us to see a possible harmony between empirical reality and the reality we want. Catching sight of this possible continuity between what is and what should be pushes us to act in the face of the discontinuity we actually experience.

From this point of view, the socialist hypothesis is both theoretical and practical. Malon called this experimental socialism a practical socialism. This is what he meant by "reformism." The socialist hypothesis is true only through its practical implementation in the here and now. As Mauss says in his own extension of this tradition, it is a matter of "living the socialist life straight away." Hence the importance of unions and cooperative action. As Jean-Claude Michéa summarizes:

> From the perspective of a decent socialism—an expression which for Mauss, as for Orwell after him, could only be redundant—these two forms of organization constitute two of the privileged places where workers, finding an opportunity to develop their original moral qualities to a higher level, can right now—without having to wait for a radiant Future to take their rehabilitation in hand—begin methodically breaking with the capitalist world's utilitarian imaginary, putting into practice forms of struggle and common life already fully compatible with the values of selflessness, generosity, and mutual aid implicit in a socialist society. (Michéa 2003, 117)

As Cohen's camping example suggests, socialism would be impossible—would barely be conceivable—if its principles weren't already embodied in our most ordinary practices. This was the explicit conviction of another pragmatist and supporter of democratic socialism, Charles Cooley. The principles of liberty, equality, and solidarity are not so much abstract natural rights recently discovered by a handful of brilliant philosophers, but instead concrete feelings each individual experiences concretely in what Cooley calls "primary groups":

> Where do we get our notions of love, freedom, justice, and the like which we are ever applying to social institutions? Not from abstract

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> philosophy, surely, but from the actual life of simple and widespread forms of society, like the family or the play-group. . . .
>
> The aspirations of ideal democracy—including, of course, socialism, and whatever else may go by a special name—are those naturally springing from the playground or the local community; embracing equal opportunity, fair play, the loyal service of all in the common good, free discussion, and kindness to the weak. (Cooley 1962, 32, 51)

Cooley concludes that "[a] right democracy is simply the application on a large scale of principles which are universally felt to be right as applied to a small group" (ibid., 119). It supposes the deepening and continuous enlargement of what he calls the "primary ideals" arising from our ordinary, familiar experiences.

Conclusion: Emancipation as parturition

From this point of view, the idea of emancipation and even revolution has little to do with any tabula rasa. It is not so much a question of overturning the tables and bringing about a fundamentally new world, but rather one of liberating what has already developed and exists within society. As Martin Buber, a great figure of libertarian Judaism, suggested, "revolution is not so much a creative as a delivering force" (1958, 44). Delivering, giving birth to a new world presupposes the recognition of all the virtues and virtualities inscribed in the old one—doing justice to reality—in order to free them from the economic and political structures preventing them developing out in the open.

So emancipation is also (but not only) conservation. In a letter to an activist who wanted marriage abolished, the libertarian socialist Gustav Landauer, a close friend of Buber and an architect of the Bavarian Soviet Republic of 1919, replied: "It would be madness to dream of abolishing the few forms of union that remain to us! We need *form*, not formlessness. We need *tradition*" (quoted in Buber 1958, 48). Even for this unrepentant anarchist, the path of emancipation can quite legitimately connect with other roads. In the face of capitalism and the modern state, we must emancipate some of our traditions from the influence of institutions which exemplify modernity itself. Proudhon would have agreed. Mauss, too: he

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reproached the Bolsheviks and more generally the "intemperate political rationalism" and "childlike and dangerous dogmatism" of the socialist ideologues for their blindness in the face of these "invisible links which bind people together in societies," wanting even to replace them—by force, if need be—with their own laws, principles, and abstract systems (Mauss 1997, 545-50).

We have to start from *something*, from existing forms of connection and a communitarian reality arising from many different groups—families, neighborhood groups, friends, local communities, labor collectives—which give meaning to our shared existence and, as Mauss emphasized, constitute "the ground" in which "the desire to satisfy others can sprout and grow" (ibid., 549). Landauer, like Mauss, emphasizes the importance of nations among these groups. Free from abstract dialectics and philosophies of history, socialism must take its nourishment from the multiplicity of concrete forms communities take. Commenting on the work of his friend, Buber emphasizes that "the closeness of people to one another in mode of life, language, tradition, memories of a common fate—all this predisposes to communal living, and only by building up such a life can the peoples of the earth constitute themselves anew" (Buber 1958, 49).

If the work of critique requires doing justice to reality, the question of emancipation is less one of defining what we need to emancipate ourselves from, and rather one of defining what it is we want to emancipate. What is there, in what we are, in what we're doing already, that deserves to be valued and freed from its shackles, given free rein? Emancipation cannot rely on the pure performativity of self-institution, an autotranscendence that would amount to nothing more than a disembodied immanentism. Any politics of emancipation presupposes shared practices and customs, but also diverse, substantial, shared institutions and forms of belonging. It presupposes a whole heteronymous set of elements which together describe and, as Mauss emphasizes, set apart a particular type of collective, bringing out the "delicate essence of the social" (Chanial 2011). I have argued that any properly conceived social critique must be able to do justice to this delicate essence, which Mauss, as a good sociologist, valued so highly.

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Abstract

What if the real work of critique consisted less of "rendering reality unacceptable" and rather of "doing justice to reality?" From this paradoxical perspective, the question of emancipation focuses less on defining what we should emancipate ourselves from, and more on what we should emancipate. What is there in what we are and in what we already do that deserves to be valued and freed from its shackles, to be given free rein? Could we follow Marcel Mauss and John Dewey in describing a pragmatic socialism—a practical idealism—according to which the ideal of emancipation can only be realized insofar as it is the practical idealization of the real, which the real itself anticipates.

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