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The Romantic and the Marxist critique of modern civilization

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The Romantic and the Marxist critique of modern civilization

The first critics of modern bourgeois society, of the capitalist civilization created by the Industrial Revolution were – more than half a century before Marx – the Romantic poets and writers. Romantic anti-capitalism was born in the second half of the eighteenth century, but it has not ceased to be an essential component of modern culture up to the present. What is usually designated as the Romantic Movement in the arts and literature, mainly situated at the beginning of the nineteenth century, is only one of its multiple and extremely various manifestations. As a *weltanschauung*, i.e. an all embracing worldview, a *style of thought*, a basic *structure of feeling*, it can be found not only in the work of poets and writers of imagination and fantasy such as Novalis, E. T. A. Hoffmann and the surrealists, but also in the novels of true realists like Balzac, Dickens, and Thomas Mann; not only among artists like Delacroix or the Pre-Raphaelite painters, but also among political economists like Sismondi or sociologists like Tönnies.

The essential characteristic of Romantic anti-capitalism is *a thorough critique of modern industrial (bourgeois) civilization* (including the process of production and work) *in the name of certain pre-capitalist social and cultural values*. The reference to a (real or imaginary) past does not necessarily mean that it has a regressive or reactionary orientation: it can be revolutionary as well as conservative. Both tendencies have been present in Romanticism from its origins until now: it is enough to mention Burke and Rousseau, Coleridge and Blake, Balzac and Fourier, Carlyle and William Morris, Heidegger and Marcuse. Sometimes the conservative and the revolutionary even coincide in the same thinker, as in the case of Georges Sorel.

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The first wave of Romantic anti-capitalism responded to the Industrial Revolution and its economic, social and cultural consequences during the nineteenth century. But the interest and relevance of its criticism of industrial society and of industrial labor is far from being only historical. It does not relate only to specific grievances, abuses and injustices peculiar to that first period – such as the absolute impoverishment of the workers, child labor, savage *laissez faire*, the draconian Poor Laws – but to more *general, pervasive, essential, and permanent* characteristics of the modern (industrial/capitalist) civilization, from the end of the eighteenth century to our very present in the 1980s.

The Romantic criticism is rarely systematic or explicit and it seldom refers directly to capitalism as such. In German sociology and social philosophy at the end of the nineteenth century we can find some tentative systematizations: they oppose *Kultur*, a set of traditional social, moral, or cultural values of the past, to *Zivilisation*, the modern, “soul-less,” material, technical and economic development; or *Gemeinschaft*, the old organic community of direct social relations, to *Gesellschaft*, the mechanical and artificial aggregate of people around utilitarian aims.

The central feature of industrial (bourgeois) civilization that Romanticism criticizes is not the exploitation of the workers or social inequality – although these may also be denounced, particularly by leftist Romantics – it is the *quantification of life*, i.e. the total domination of (quantitative) exchange-value, of the cold calculation of price and profit, and of the laws of the market, over the whole social fabric. All other negative characteristics of modern society are intuitively felt by most Romantic anti-capitalists as flowing from this crucial and decisive source of corruption: for instance, the religion of the god Money (Carlyle’s “Mammonism”), the decline of all *qualitative* values – social, religious, ethical, cultural or aesthetic ones – the dissolution of all *qualitative* human bonds, the death of imagination and *romance*, the dull uniformization of life, the purely “utilitarian” – i.e. quantitatively calculable – relation of human beings to one another, and to nature. The poisoning of social life by money, and of the air by industrial smoke, are grasped by many Romantics as parallel phenomena, resulting from the same evil root.

Let us take one example to illustrate the Romantic indictment of capitalist modernity: Charles Dickens, one of Karl Marx’s favorite authors, although he had nothing whatsoever to do with socialist ideas. According to Marx, Dickens belongs to the “present splendid brotherhood of fiction writers in England, whose graphic and eloquent pages have issued to the

world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together”¹ This opinion appears in an article published by Marx in the *New York Daily Tribune* in August 1854. In this same year appeared Dickens’s book *Hard Times*, which contains an unusually articulate expression of the Romantic criticism of industrial society. This book does not pay such explicit homage to pre-capitalist (generally medieval) forms of life as so many other English Romantics – such as Burke, Coleridge, Cobbet, Walter Scott, Carlyle (to whom *Hard Times* was dedicated), Ruskin, and William Morris – but the reference to past moral and religious values is an essential component of his cast of mind.

In *Hard Times* the *quantifying* and cold spirit of the industrial age is magnificently portrayed in a mill owner and Utilitarian Member of Parliament, “Thomas Gradgrind,” a man who is always “with a rule and a pair of scales and the multiplication table . . . in his pocket,” and always “ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to.” For Gradgrind everything “is a mere question of figures, a case of simple arithmetic” and he sternly organizes the education of children around the sound principle that “what you couldn’t state in figures, or show to be purchaseable in the cheapest market and saleable in the dearest, was not, and never should be.” Gradgrind’s philosophy – the harsh worldview of Political Economy, strict Utilitarianism and classical *laissez faire* – was that “everything was to be paid for. Nobody was ever . . . to . . . render anybody help without purchase. Gratitude was to be abolished, and the virtues springing from it were not to be. Every inch of the existence of mankind, from birth to death, was to be a bargain across the counter.”²

Against this powerful and illuminating portrait – almost a Weberian “ideal-type” – of the capitalist *ethos*, whose sad triumph would be when “*romance* is utterly driven out” of human souls, Dickens opposes his *Romantic* faith in “sensibilities, affections, weaknesses . . . defying all the calculations ever made by man, and no more known to his arithmetic than his Creator is.” He believes, and the whole plot of *Hard Times* is an impassioned plea for this belief, that there exists in the people’s heart “subtle essences of humanity which will elude the utmost cunning of algebra until the last trumpet ever to be sounded shall blow even algebra to wreck.” Refusing to bow to the grinding (Gradgrinding!) machine of mercantile quantification, he clings to *qualitative* values *irreducible to figures*.³

But *Hard Times* is not only about the grinding of the soul: it tells also

how industrial (capitalist) civilization has expelled qualities like romance, color, and imagination from peoples' material life, reducing it to a dull, tiresome, uniform, boring, and gray routine. The modern industrial city, "Coketown," is described by Dickens as "a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever"; it contained "several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out the same hours . . . to do the same work; and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next." *Space and time seem to have lost any qualitative variety*, and cultural diversity, to become one single, continuous structure, shaped by the uninterrupted activity of the machines.

For the industrial civilization, the *qualities of nature* (beauty, health) do not exist: it takes into consideration only the *quantities* of rough material it can extract from it. Coketown is therefore a place "where Nature was as strongly bricked out as killing airs and gases were bricked in"; its high chimneys are always "puffing out their poisonous volumes," hiding the sky and the sun, which is "eternally in eclipse." People who "thirsted for a draught of pure air," who wanted to see some fresh grass, a green landscape, a bright blue sky, some trees with birds singing, had to get a few miles away by the railroad and then begin to walk in the fields. But even there they will not be in peace: deserted pits, abandoned after all the iron or coke has been extracted from the earth, are hidden in the grass, like so much deadly traps.⁵

It is in this general context that the problem of *work* in the modern capitalist society is examined. Dickens does not focus his attention on the labor process inside the factory, but he observes that the workers are bound to follow the movement of the machine, the uniform rhythm of the steam-engine, which moved "monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness."⁶

Other Romantic or neo-Romantic authors have dwelled more extensively on this subject. Deploring the decline and disappearance of the old pre-capitalist handcraft – a kind of work in which *creativity* and *imagination* were essential components of labor – they describe and analyze the absolute predominance of mere *quantitative* production, the domination of dead machinism over living people, the stultifying effects of the division of labor, the "repulsive" (Fourier's term) character of mechanical and lifeless toil, the degradation and de-humanization of the worker.

Let us illustrate this kind of criticism with the writings of an author who was very far from being a socialist (although he strongly influenced William Morris's socialist utopia): John Ruskin. Historian of architecture, philosopher of the arts, a friend of the Pre-Raphaelite painters, Ruskin was also interested in political economy, and in the introduction to his work *A Joy for ever* (1857) one can find a summary of his main ideas in this area. For him, the industrial mode of production creates "a slavery in our England a thousand times more bitter and more degrading than that of the scourged African or helot Greek," because it is a system of labor that transforms human beings into "cog-wheels" and thoroughly "un-humanizes" them. This "degradation of the operative into a machine," this destruction of his soul, his intelligence, and his freedom, is, according to Ruskin, the worst evil of modern times. One of its main sources is what he calls ironically "the great civilized invention of the division of labor"; he complains that this invention has been given a false name: "It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men: Divided into mere segments of men – broken into small fragments and crumbs of life . . .". In modern industrial manufacturing work has lost any *human quality*: the laborers do not have "the smallest occasion for the use of any single human faculty"; they have been reduced to a uniform *quantity* "to be counted off into a heap of mechanism, numbered with its wheels, and weighed with its hammer strokes," an anonymous multitude that "is sent like fuel to feed the factory smoke."

Like many other Romantic anti-modernists, Ruskin's nostalgic ideal is the Gothic past. In the construction of the cathedrals, or in the production of a glass object in medieval Venice, labor was free, noble, and creative; in the old handicrafts, thought and work were not separated, and there was no production without invention. His dream is to re-establish in the future this Golden Age where art and labor were one; looking at the sculptures on the front of an old cathedral, he sees them as "signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone; a freedom of thought, and rank in scale of being, such as no laws, no charters, no charities can secure; but which it must be the first aim of all Europe at this day to regain for her children."⁸

Marx and Romantic anti-capitalism

Apparently, Marx has nothing to do with Romanticism. He rejects as "reactionary" any dreams of returning to the handicraft or any other pre-capitalist mode of production. He extolls the historically progressive role of industrial capitalism, not only in developing gigantic and unprecedented-

ed productive forces, but also in creating universality, the unity of the world economy – an essential pre-condition for the future socialist mankind. He also hails capitalism for tearing apart the veils that hide exploitation in pre-capitalist societies, but this kind of applause has an ironic thrust: by introducing more brutal, open, and cynical forms of exploitation, the capitalist mode of production favors the development of the class consciousness and class struggle of the oppressed. Marx's anti-capitalism is not the abstract negation of the modern industrial (bourgeois) civilization but its *Aufhebung*, i.e. at the same time its abolition and the conservation of its greatest achievements, in a movement toward a higher mode of production (socialism).

His approach is dialectical: he sees capitalism as a system that “turns every economic progress into a social calamity.”⁹ It is in the analysis of the social calamities provoked by capitalist industry (as well as in his interest for pre-capitalist communities) that he rejoins, to a certain extent at least, the Romantic tradition.

Both Marx and Engels appreciated and were intellectually indebted to Romantic critics of industrial capitalism. Their work was significantly influenced not only by Romantic economists such as Sismondi – frequently confronted with and compared to Ricardo in Marx's economic writings – or the Russian populist Nikolai-on, with whom they corresponded for twenty years, but also by writers such as Dickens and Balzac, by social philosophers such as Carlyle, and by historians of ancient communities like Maurer, Niebuhr, and Morgan – not to speak of Romantic socialists like Fourier and Moses Hess. Marx and Engels's interest in primitive rural communities – from the Greek *gens* to the old German *Mark* and the Russian *obshtchina* – is linked to their conviction that these ancient formations incorporated social qualities lost in modern civilizations, qualities that prefigure certain aspects of the future communist society. In a letter to Engels on March 25, 1868, Marx explains both the similitude and the difference between his conception of history and traditional Romanticism: while the Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment was from a medieval perspective, the new reaction – common to socialists and to scholars like Maurer – consists in reaching beyond the Middle Ages to the primitive era of each nation, i.e. to the old egalitarian communities.¹⁰ As a matter of fact, the nostalgia for medieval forms of life is far from being the only form of Romanticism: primitive societies and traditional rural communities have also served as a reference for Romantic critics of civilization, from Rousseau to the Russian populists; Marx and Engels are linked to this specific trend in the Romantic anti-capitalist tradition.

Marx's criticism of the industrial-capitalist civilization is not limited to the private property of the means of production; it is much more thorough, radical, and all embracing. It is the whole existing form of industrial production and the whole of modern bourgeois society that are put in question. And here is where we find many arguments and attitudes similar to those of the Romantics. As a matter of fact *Romantic anti-capitalism is the forgotten source of Marx*, a source that is as important for his work as German neo-Hegelianism or French materialism.

One of the first authors to stress the parallel or affinity between the Marxist and the Romantic opposition to the bourgeois rationalized world-view was Karl Mannheim, in his brilliant essay on "Conservative Thought" (1927). Mannheim showed very perceptively that the opposition of the concrete against the abstract, of the dynamic (dialectical) against the static, of totality against fragmentation, and of the collective against the individualist perception of history are common traits of the "rightist" and the "leftist" criticism of the *bürgerlich-naturrechtliche Denken*. However, most of the examples he gives of the Marxist position are taken from Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, a work that is already a combination of Marxism and German neo-romantic sociology. Moreover, Mannheim is more interested in the *methodological* similarities between the revolutionary/Marxist and the conservative/Romantic styles of thinking than in the possible convergence of their concrete critique of industrial/bourgeois *society*.¹¹

After Mannheim, several thinkers have referred to the connection between Romanticism and Marxism. Alvin Gouldner stressed the "important romantic *components*" in Marx's thought; Ernst Fischer argued that Marx integrated into his socialist vision "the romantic revolt against a world which turned everything into a commodity and degraded man to the status of an object." Both Fischer and Gouldner – as well as M. H. Abrams – see in the dream of the *whole man*, beyond fragmentation, division, and alienation, the main link between Marx and the Romantic heritage.¹² However, these authors do not deal more extensively with the specific parallels between the Romantic and the Marxist criticism of *capitalist civilization*.¹³ In my opinion, this parallel is particularly striking in relation to the crucial issue of *quantification*.

The criticism of the quantification of life in the industrial (bourgeois) society is central in Marx's youthful writings, particularly in the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844). He argues that in capitalism money tends to destroy and dissolve all "human and natural qualities," submit-

ting them to its own strictly quantitative measure: “the quantity of money becomes more and more its only *powerful* characteristic; as it reduces every entity to its own abstraction, it reduces itself to its own movement as a *quantitative* entity.” The exchange between human qualities – love for love, trust for trust – is replaced by the abstract exchange of money for a commodity. The worker himself is reduced to the condition of commodity, the human-commodity (*Menschenware*), a wretched being “both physically and spiritually de-humanized (*entmenschetes*),” and forced to live in modern caves that are worst than the primitive ones because they are “poisoned by the pestilential breath of civilization.” Just as a shopkeeper who sells minerals “sees only their mercantile value, and not the beauty and the particular nature of the stones,” people in capitalist society lose their material and spiritual senses and replace them by the exclusive sense of *possession*. In a word, *being*, freely expressing the richness of life through social and cultural activities, is more and more sacrificed for *having*, the accumulation of money, wares, or capital.¹⁴

These motifs of the youthful writings are less obvious in *Capital*, but they are nevertheless present: in several passages Marx compares the *ethos* of modern capitalist civilization, which is only interested in producing more commodities, cheapening them, and accumulating capital – i.e. with “quantity and exchange-value” – with the spirit of the classical antiquity that holds “exclusively by quality and use-value.”¹⁵

The central subject of *Capital* is of course the *exploitation* of labor, the extraction of surplus-value by the capitalist owners of the means of production. But it also contains a radical criticism of *the nature itself of modern industrial work*. In his indictment of the *de-humanizing* character of capitalist/industrial labor, *Capital* is even more explicit than the *Manuscripts* of 1844, and there is without doubt a link between this criticism and the Romantic anti-capitalist one. Although Marx does not, like Ruskin, dream of re-establishing medieval handicraft, he nonetheless perceives industrial work as a socially and culturally degraded form in comparison to the human qualities of pre-capitalist labor: “the knowledge, the judgement, and the will, which, though in ever so small a degree, are practised by the independent peasant or handicraftsmen . . . (are) lost by the detail labourers” of modern industry. In a similar vein, he writes in the *Grundrisse* that in industrial capitalism “labor loses all the characteristics of art . . . (and) becomes more and more a *purely abstract activity*, a purely mechanical activity.” Analyzing this degradation, Marx draws attention (in *Capital*) first of all to the division of labor, which “converts the laborer into a crippled mostrosity, by forcing his detail dexterity, at the expense

of a world of productive capabilities and instincts”; he quotes in this context the Tory Romantic economist David Urquhart: “To subdivide a man is to execute him, if he deserves the sentence, to assassinate him if he does not . . . The subdivision of labor is the assassination of a people.” Then comes the machine, in itself an element of progress but in the present mode of production a curse for the worker: it “deprives the work of all interest” and “confiscates every atom of freedom, both in bodily and intellectual activity.” Thanks to the capitalist machine, work “becomes a sort of torture” and (here Marx quotes from Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*) a “miserable routine of endless drudgery and toil in which the same mechanical process is gone through over and over again, like the labor of Sisyphus.” The worker is transformed into a mere living appendage of the lifeless mechanism, compelled to work “with the regularity of the parts of a machine.” In the modern industrial-capitalist system, the whole organization of the labor process is “turned into an organised mode of crushing out the workman’s individual vitality, freedom and independence.” To this grim picture he adds the description of the material condition under which factory labor is carried on: no space, light or air, a dust-laden atmosphere, deafening noise, scores of people killed, maimed or wounded by the machines, and so many others diseased by the modern maladies of “industrial pathology.”¹⁶ Briefly, the *cultural and natural qualities* of the worker as a human being are sacrificed by capital to the purely *quantitative* aim of producing more and more commodities and getting more and more profit.

Marx’s conception of socialism is intimately linked to this radical criticism of modern industrial-capitalist civilization: it is much more than collective property and planned economy. It implies a qualitative change, a new social culture, a new mode of life, a different kind of civilization that would re-establish the role of the “social and natural qualities” in human life, and the role of use-value in the process of production. It requires the *emancipation of labor*, not only by the “expropriation of the expropriators” and control over the process of production by the associated producers, but also by a complete transformation of the nature of labor itself.

How could this be achieved? One of the main documents for Marx’s ideas in this area is the *Grundrisse* (1857–1858). He suggests in this work that in a socialist community technical progress and machinism will drastically reduce the time of “necessary labor” – the labor required to satisfy the basic needs of the community. Most of daily time will therefore be left free for what he calls, following Fourier, *travail attractif*; i.e. truly free labor, labor that is the self-realization of the individual. Such labor, such

production – which can be material as well as spiritual – is not pure play (here Marx disagrees with Fourier), but may require the utmost effort and seriousness – Marx mentions musical composition as an example. Moreover it implies the general artistic and scientific education of the people.¹⁷

Now, it would be utterly misleading to deduce from the above remarks that Marx was a Romantic anti-capitalist: he drew as much – or rather *more* – from the Enlightenment and classical Political Economy, than from the Romantic critics of industrial civilization. In a very revealing passage from *The Manuscripts* of 1844 he comments on the contradiction between the old landowners and the new capitalists, expressed in the polemic between Romantic authors (Justus Möser, Sismondi) and political economists (Ricardo, Mill): “this opposition is extremely bitter and each side tells the truth about the other.”¹⁸ In the same way, a recurring theme in his late economic writings is that Sismondi is able to see the limits of Ricardo, and vice-versa.

Marx’s own view is neither Romantic nor Utilitarian, but the dialectical *Aufhebung* of both in a new, critical, and revolutionary weltanschauung. Neither apologetic of bourgeois civilization nor blind to its achievements, he aims at a higher form of social organization, which would integrate both the technical advances of modern society *and* some of the human qualities of pre-capitalist communities – as well as opening a new and boundless field for the development and enrichment of human life. A new conception of labor as a free, non-alienated, and creative activity – as against the dull and narrow toil of mechanical industrial work – is a central feature of his socialist utopia.

Romanticism and Marxism after Marx

After Marx’s death, the dominant trend in Marxism has been the “modernist” one; it took over only one side of the Marxian heritage and developed an un-critical cult of technical progress, industrialism, machinism, Fordism, and Taylorism. Stalinism, with its alienated productivism and its obsession with heavy industry, is the sad caricature of this kind of “cold stream” in Marxism (to paraphrase Ernst Bloch).

But there exists also a “warm stream,” whose radical and all-embracing critique of modern civilization draws both on Marx and on the Romantic anti-capitalist tradition. This kind of “Romantic Marxism” insists on the essential break and discontinuity between the socialist utopia – as a

qualitatively different way of life and work – and the present industrial society, and it looks with nostalgia toward certain pre-capitalist social or cultural forms.

Of course, this “anti-modernist” Marxism is not immune to one-sidedness. Its strengths and weaknesses are best illustrated by the work of its first representative, William Morris. At first a Romantic poet and artist, a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Morris joined the socialist movement during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. His sharp indictment of capitalist-industrial society owes as much to Ruskin as to Marx. Referring to John Ruskin in an article entitled “How I became a socialist” (1894), Morris writes: “It was through him that I learned to give form to my discontent, which I must say was not by any means vague. Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization.”¹⁹

The main characteristic of modern (capitalist) civilization is, for William Morris, “useless toil,” i.e. the production for the World Market, as cheaply as possible, of “measureless quantities of worthless make-shifts.” The wares are made “to sell and not to use”: the owners of the machines are indifferent to their quality, as long as they can find buyers for them.²⁰ Commercialism killed the popular art that existed and flourished in all forms of production before the rise of the manufacturing system; it destroyed all pleasure, variety, and imagination in work. And Morris is convinced that “there is no other necessity for all this, save the necessity for grinding profits out of men’s lives.”²¹

However, Morris was not hostile to machinism in itself. In his socialist Utopia *News from Nowhere* (1890), he describes a system of production where “all work which would be irksome to do by hand is done by immensely improved machinery; and in all work which it is a pleasure to do by hand machinery is done without.” Like Marx, Morris counts on technical progress to emancipate the worker from toil and liberate free time for pleasant and creative labor. Harking back to Fourier, he affirms his belief that work can become, in a socialist community, a “conscious sensuous pleasure” similar to the activity of the artist.²²

Like his friend John Ruskin, Morris considered art not as a luxury but as an essential dimension of human life. Art was everything made by people who were free and found pleasure in their work. In his Romantic-socialist utopia most of the useful goods are produced by hand and possess an artistic quality, like in skilled handicraft; they have no other reward than

creation itself, and are not sold or bought (money does not exist anymore), but freely given to those who wish or need them.

Marx frequently referred to the Romantics – even those he appreciated, like Sismondi – as “reactionaries.” There are indeed regressive or conservative moments in the Romantic world-view. For instance, the authors we have examined, such as Dickens and Ruskin, lacked any understanding for the modern labor movement, for trade-unionism or for proletarian socialism; their sympathy for the workers is paternalistic or philanthropic, and they wish to restore patriarchal or pre-capitalist forms of authority. This is not the case with the Romantic socialist William Morris, who joined without hesitation the militant labor movement through his *Socialist League*. But his utopia also contains a patriarchal and regressive dimension, which reveals itself in his negative attitude toward what he calls contemptuously “the ‘emancipation of women’ business of the nineteenth century,” as well as in his utterly conservative view of the sexual division of labor: children rearing and house-keeping are presented in his socialist utopia as exclusively feminine activities.²³

We chose William Morris as an example, but it would be a great mistake to conclude that Romantic Marxism – or Marxism influenced by the Romantic critique of modern civilization – is a phenomenon of the nineteenth century. In England itself Morris seemed to have been forgotten for many decades, but during the last twenty-five years Marxist scholars interested in the Romantic tradition, such as Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson (author of a remarkable book on William Morris), have gained a wide audience, well beyond the limits of the academic campus: E. P. Thompson is one of the main leaders and ideologists of the vast pacifist and anti-nuclear movement in Great Britain.

The main center for the elaboration of this kind of Marxism in the twentieth century has been Germany. Each in his or her way, Rosa Luxemburg, G. Lukács, E. Bloch, and the Frankfurt School (particularly Walter Benjamin and Marcuse), have integrated into their Marxist theory elements of the Romantic tradition.²⁴ Through Herbert Marcuse, this semi-Romantic Marxist critique of industrial civilization has had a deep impact on contemporary Germany and the United States influencing not only the New Left and the Student Movement of the sixties but also (in a more diffuse and indirect way) more recent social movements like ecology, feminism, and pacifism. Therefore, far from being an anachronistic ideology of the last century, the “warm stream” of Marxism has reached its highest tide precisely in our times, and particularly in England, Germany and the Unit-

ed States, i.e. the countries where modern capitalist civilization has achieved its most pure, systematic, and ruthless development. One of the reasons for this renewed interest is, of course, the uninspiring nature of bureaucratic (non-capitalist) industrial despotism, the so-called “really existing socialism” of Eastern Europe, whose eagerness in imitating Western technocracy and productivism hardly makes it appear as a true alternative to the evils of modern bourgeois society.

Conclusion

Marxism owes too much to the Rationalism of the Enlightenment and of German Classical Philosophy to be considered a truly Romantic worldview. This applies not only to Marx but also to authors such as Rosa Luxemburg, György Lukács, and Herbert Marcuse. But Romantic anti-capitalism is an essential – and until now largely neglected – dimension of its far-reaching and comprehensive criticism of modern civilization and of the industrial process of labor.

The Romantic dimension has also to a large extent shaped its vision of the socialist future, presented by the more radical and imaginative Marxist thinkers not only as an economic system where the property of the means of production will be collective, but also as a *new way of life*, where labor would become (again) like art - that is, *the free expression of human creativity*.

Notes

1. Marx, Engels, *Über Kunst und Litteratur* (Berlin: Verlag Bruno Henschel, 1948), 231.
2. Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (Penguin Books, 1982 (1854)), 48, 86, 89, 238, 304. See also 129: elected to the Parliament, Thomas Gradgrind becomes one of those “respected members for ounce weights and measures, one of the representatives of the multiplication table, one of the deaf honourable gentlemen, dumb honourable gentlemen, blind honourable gentlemen, lame honourable gentlemen, dead honourable gentlemen, to every other consideration.”
3. *Ibid.*, 192, 240. See also 108: “not all the calculators of the National Debt can tell me the capacity for good or evil, for love or hatred, for patriotism or discontent, for the decomposition of virtue into vice, or the reverse” that is alive in the worker’s souls.
4. C. Dickens, *Hard Times*, 65, 275.
5. *Ibid.*, 102, 194, 283. The hero of the novel, the worker Stephen Blackpool, falls down into such a pit – the “Old Hell Shaft” – and dies.
6. *Ibid.*, 65, 67.

7. John Ruskin, Introduction to *A joy for ever*, 1857, in *Readings from Ruskin* (Leipzig: Velhagen und Klosing, 1925), 91, 93, 96, 102.
8. *Ibid.*, 93, 100, 102.
9. Karl Marx, *Capital* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1974), vol. 1, 457–458.
10. Marx, Engels, *Ausgewählte Briefe* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1953), 233. On Marx's relation to Morgan and Maurer see L. Krader, *Ethnologie und Anthropologie bei Marx* (Frankfurt: Verlag Ullstein, 1976); on Marx and Niebuhr, see Norman Levine's unpublished paper "The Eighteenth Century Origins of Historical Materialism."
11. See Karl Mannheim, "Das Konservative Denken," *Wissenssoziologie*, (Berlin: Luchterhand, 1964), 425, 438, 440, 486, 497, 504, 507, etc.
12. See E. Fischer, *Marx in his own words* (London: Penguin Press, 1970), 15; Alvin Gouldner, *For Sociology: Renewal and Critique in Sociology Today* (London: Penguin Press, 1973), 339; M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, (New York: Norton Library, 1973), 314.
13. In my article "Marxism and revolutionary romanticism," *Telos*, 49, Fall 1981, I focus mainly on the common attitude of Marx and the Romantics toward pre-capitalist societies. I take up the general concept of "romantic anti-capitalism" (first formulated by Lukács) in my paper (with R. Sayre) "Figures of Romantic anti-capitalism," *New German Critique*, 32, Spring-Summer 1984, but this essay does not discuss Marx.
14. Karl Marx, *National Ökonomie und Philosophie*, 1844, in *Die Frühschriften*, ed. S. Landshut (Stuttgart: Kröner Verlag, 1953), 240, 243, 255, 299, 301, 303. See also in the *Communist Manifesto* the reference to the drowning by capitalism of all ancient values in "the icy water of egotistical calculation" (in Marx, *The Revolution of 1848*, Penguin Books, 1973, 70).
15. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 344. See also 385 on the significance of machinery for the Greek poet Antipatros: to give freedom to the slaves and bring back the Golden Age – as opposed to the modern employment of machines to enslave the workers and expand the value of capital.
16. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 330, 340–341, 398, 401, 474; and *Grundrisse* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 247.
17. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 173, 611; 706, 708–712.
18. Marx, *Die Frühschriften*, 248.
19. *Political Writings of William Morris*, edited by A. L. Morton (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), 243.
20. W. Morris, *News from Nowhere* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977 (1890)), 276–279.
21. W. Morris, "Useful Work Versus Useless Toil," 1884 in *Political Writings*, 102–103.
22. W. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 274–275, 280.
23. Patriarchalism is not necessarily linked to the Romantic world-view: it may as well be found among Rationalists and Positivists (such as A. Comte himself). Moreover, there are many feminist thinkers among the Romantic socialists, from Fourier to Marcuse.
24. See my articles "Marcuse and Benjamin: the Romantic Dimension," *Telos*, 44, Summer 1980, and "Marxism and Revolutionary Romanticism," *Telos*, 49, Fall 1981.