

LITERATURE AND ART AS TRANSHUMANIST ENDEAVORS: LEON TROTSKY

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ABSTRACT

One of the most essential ideas of modernity is the idea of sovereignty. Usually, this idea is seen either in the context of international relations. Nevertheless, this concept has a moral and a theological meaning whereby the last one is the original. Sovereignty is something that pertains to God. It expresses a certain state of being. This state implies mastery over everything and over oneself. The concept emigrated from its original theological realm to the realm of political philosophy and politics. Sovereignty determines the way humans and society see themselves. It also serves as an ideal for humanity. To become sovereign over nature and over oneself. This endeavor entails also getting dominion over one own nature. Man should become superman/overman. The image of the superman or self-deifying man guide modernity and now that has found a powerful expression in transhumanism. The idea of the superman/ Übermensch can be found even in the writings of socialist/communist thinkers. Such is the case of Leon Trotsky.

Keywords: Übermensch, transumanism, sovereignty, socialism, Trotsky, utopia.

INTRODUCTION

Due to historical circumstances, the idea of superman or the overman is most of the time associated with Nietzsche and the Nazis. This subject matter is not new. The overman/Übermensch tradition of thought is related to the idea of the new man, the man who regains his lost position in creation, becoming equal to the gods or God. The underlying narrative presents humanity as the self-conscious subject and maker of history, a process that led humanity to truly become sovereign over nature, over creation itself. This process is described in terms of progress, even if sometimes it is accepted that there are setbacks. This process is supposed to have started with the dawn of man. Only in modernity man becomes aware of it and aware of possibility of consciously leading it. To achieve this end, man must invent and build from scratch the necessary instruments that are needed. That does not mean that mankind was always aware of this existential project. With the advent of modernity, this project becomes conscious. Even if not all individuals act according to it, this project and its guidelines inform many actions that people perform. The image of the overman as an ideal of mankind, or of the man as God is present in the works of different thinkers that tried to lay the grounds for a new type of society, a just society.

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This conviction forms in the way modern man understands itself. The latest incarnation or incarnations thereof can be found in the conceptions that are dubbed to be transhumanist or post-humanist. Names like Ray Kurzweil come to mind.

LITERATURE, ART, AND PROPAGANDA

An articulate vision about the future of mankind can be found in the work of Leon Trotsky, former Bolshevik agitator and former soviet war and international relationship secretary, who was assassinated in 1940 in Mexico. He was also a supporter of the permanent revolution. He took part in the reorganization of the Red Army, making use of former tsarist officers. He became the number two of the party under Lenin. The theory and ideology of the overman can be found in Trotsky's work that is called *Literature and Revolution*, published in 1924 by the Soviet Government. Though it is not identical with Nietzsche's view on this matter, this work expresses the religion of technology and self-idolatry thereupon the modernity is based. It is a text that describes what revolutionary art and literature should be. Like all so-called social justice ideologies, the ideology that Trotsky espouses is one of hate. In this case, it is a hate directed toward the class enemy, towards the people and the society that opposes revolution and emancipation. Revolutionary art and thus revolutionary literature are (were at that time) not yet socialist. They were meant to prepare for the coming of the golden socialist age. It belongs to a stage that comes before the establishment of socialism. Hate plays a central role in the whole thing. In the class struggle, in art, in literature. It is the main creative element, the impellent of revolution.

Art as a spiritual activity fulfils multiple functions. Art is ideological, propagandistic, educational. Its purpose is to imprint a certain image in the minds of young men and women and to make them act according to certain lines of action. By means of revolutionary art the revolution can go ahead at full speed. The society that is envisaged should look like encompassing both solidarity and competition, though this one would take more subtle for as in capitalist. Art is therefore social and spiritual engineering. This dreamed-up society would be emancipated and will use technology to perfect man and control nature. Art, inclusive literature – and by extension all so-called social sciences and humanities – would become a technology through which a life dedicated to progress would be built in each and every domain (Trotsky 1925: 106). Society becomes and technological system that governs everything, and a new kind of man is forged through this psycho-social technology.

“All forms of life, such as the cultivation of land, the planning of human habitations, the building of theaters, the methods of socially educating children, the solution of scientific problems, the creation of new styles, will vitally engross all and everybody. People will divide into ‘parties’ over the question of a new gigantic canal, or the distribution of oases in the Sahara (such a question will exist too), over the regulation of the weather and the climate, over a new theater, over chemical hypotheses, over

two competing tendencies in music, and over a best system of sports. Such parties will not be poisoned by the greed of class or caste. All will be equally interested in the success of the whole”²⁰⁵.

Although competition is allowed, it takes place only in the ideological domain. Competition is thus framed in other terms. There will be no economic competition for profit, no bribery, no envy, etc. The people inhabiting this society will work exclusively in the interest of the whole. Specialization, and thus alienation will disappear. The emancipated citizens of this liberated and new society will take part in the actions and decisions that in the capitalist society were the realm of specialized people. Though a collectivist social organization, neither art nor individuality won’t suffer in this new social and political setting. All the contradictions that had afflicted human existence in the unjust societies that preceded it would be abolished. The condition of alienation that befalls the human condition will cease to be. There will be no more conflict between the personal aspects of life and the supra-personal structure that is society. Resolving this conflict is essential because this conflict between the individual and the collective or between two collectivities in the same individual was the according to Trotsky the defining tragedy of the modern era. Nevertheless, this period its grandeur that consists in building the society anew (and of man, too):

“Our age is an age of great aims. This is what stamps it. But the grandeur of these aims lies in man’s effort to free himself from mystic and from every other intellectual vagueness and in his effort to reconstruct society and himself in accord with his own plan”²⁰⁶.

AN OLD DREAM

The socialist society seems something new, but the ideology of building a new man is not. Modernity transforms the man in a being that takes the features of *causa sui*, which is the belief that man makes itself, that he creates itself, that man creates his own nature. Man, both on the collective level and the individual level, is supposed to be a self-made being. Socialism is another variant of modernity, of the idea that man is the maker of his history and of his self and being. Also undergirding this line of thought is the idea of absolute divine simplicity, of the absorption of difference in sameness, which is typical for the Far Eastern religions but can be found elsewhere, too. Distinctions, differences, multiplicity are bad and must be overcome; individuation is evil, and everything must fuse in the impersonal One. The experience of the applied communist and socialist doctrine has led to the creation of an environment that stifles individuality, creativity, and to organized mass murder in gulags. And the expected bright future, the abolishing of alienation does not become

²⁰⁵ Leon Trotsky, *Literature and revolution*, electronic version, 1925 [1924], p. 106.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

reality. Instead, thanks to the establishment of utopian policies new modes of alienation will come to be. Even the idea that in the new society each individual can choose freely what to do and participate in whatever actions and decisions of the community he wants to, is fraught with this idea or the original indistinctness of the absolute divine simplicity. There are no true distinctions between beings, they are made up of illusions, therefore there are no true differences in the talents and capacities humans have. Differences must be erased, and the outcomes of human actions must be the same for every individual. Otherwise, inequalities will ensue.

Such utopian views are related to the imagery of the perfect city, of the New Jerusalem, a New Jerusalem that is built by man. If the Kingdom of Heaven refuses to come to fill humanity's desires, then man creates or produces it through his own efforts. Closely associated with this view, even a centerpiece thereof is the concept of progress or what can be called the religion of progress. Progress has become the main means to evaluate things, being seen as a real movement in the structure of the world²⁰⁷. It has replaced Providence in the hearts of men and women, nevertheless it presupposes it, even if only implicitly. There is design in history, history goes with necessity in a certain direction, even if it has some setbacks. This view affirms that there are stages of this process, ages. Modernity including the so-called post-modernity – is the age in which progress had become something that everyone is supposedly aware of and can be consciously directed (by self-appointed experts, think-tanks, billionaires). It is the positivist age in Auguste Comte's terms. The New Jerusalem can be achieved by man's effort using technology – material or otherwise. Though the idea of unremitting progress can be seen as the transmutation of the theological order of Christianity into an evolutionary one, the evolutionary view was present even in the earlier Middle Ages and also in the Hermetic philosophy wherein the universe and its whole development is seen as necessary in a process of self-development of the Godhead. The Godhead needs self-actualization and produces the universe from itself. The world is not created out of nothing. The universe is the Godhead that needs a kind of mirror to accomplish self-knowledge and to perfect itself. The Spirit sets itself as the Other, but it remains the same. This is a process that entails evolution and progress. The final stage of the process -the end of history – is the return of the Godhead to itself, the annihilation of otherness. The universe returns to the Godhead but this final stage (which is still the first departure point) is not identical to the point of departure. The evolution and self-completion of the Godhead are thus fulfilled. The whole process of history is directed towards and by this *telos*. It is unavoidable progress and evolution. This process is in similar with the eternal generation of the world by the Neoplatonic One and its return to it. There is a major and essential difference between these views. The point of returning is identical to the point of departure in Neoplatonism. There is no evolution or historicity in the One. According to the afore-mentioned Hermetic theology history and thus progress is an intra-divine process. The Godhead is history and progress.

²⁰⁷ Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Millenium and Utopia*, Harper and Row, New York, 1964, p. 1.

The focal point of history is humanity because man is the agent through which the self-actualization of the Godhead takes place (Hegel's view of history and Spirit is based upon this understanding of reality and, therefore, Marx's too). The particular beings that fill the world are in this theology inherently divine. Real alterity does not exist, since the world is made out of the Godhead, is another manifestation thereof, a mask. Needless to say, this is not compatible with a Christian and theistic worldview. The religion of progress has therefore many sources, only two being given here. Despite being the products of different and contradictory theologies, they led to a certain interpretation of history as a progressive development. Both these views contain the idea of the advancement of humanity as a whole and self-deification (though in the Hermetic view this process implies the acknowledgment of man's divine nature since the whole world and the beings therein are just manifestation of the Godhead).

The whole project has proven wrong and rotten to the core, albeit its promises continue to live one and continue to inform policies that, despite their promises, prove themselves to be dystopian and damaging to mankind. Building paradise on earth creates hell, a lesson that people forget. Building back better without God. But the art, the new art is meant to build mankind anew. No new society without a new man. Technology – the art will change man as she is supposed to change nature. Trotsky contends that the present-day configuration of external nature, that is mountains, seas, rivers, etc. is not a definitive immutable pre-given reality. They can be changed, transformed, moulded to fit man's wishes. Reality is something that man can and must change. The activity of man proves that nature can be changed, so a reengineering of nature is possible. It is more than possible. Reengineering man and nature is an imperative, a moral duty. Technology, in contrast to the Christian faith that promises to move mountains, will cut, and move mountains for real.

“Up to now this was done for industrial purposes (mines) or for railways (tunnels); in the future this will be done on an immeasurably larger scale, according to a general industrial and artistic plan. Man will occupy himself with re-registering mountains and rivers and will earnestly and repeatedly make improvements in nature. In the end, he will have rebuilt the earth, if not in his own image, at least according to his own taste. We have not the slightest fear that this taste will be bad”²⁰⁸.

The basic conviction that underlines this worldview is that nature is not perfect, that she is defective and must be improved upon. The agent of this improvement is humanity and in the case of Trotsky the future socialist/communist society. As already mentioned, this idea of improvement of man can be found even in the Middle Ages. This theme of improvement brought about by man upon nature is not new and can be found even in the Middle Ages. Although the view that gave birth to what can be called the religion of progress/technology is not quite compatible with the biblical text, some of its roots can be found there. This was made possible by the re-evaluation of the practical arts and of the technological progress that did happen

²⁰⁸ Leon Trotsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 115–116.

in the Middle Ages. Those and the conviction that the improvement of technology and life condition was accompanied by the conviction that the coming of the Kingdom-of-God was at hand. The technological improvements were seen as signs that announce the imminence of the Millennium. Moreover, another way to understand the presence of man in the world and of the meaning and function of the liberal and practical arts. They were the means by which man could regain his lost original nature. These strands of thought have begun to bear fruits. These fruits are, despite some apparent good, qualities poisonous and it is the present world. have he who description of what future socialist society will accomplish is a good example of human narcissism and inflated self-image. This discourse is not proper to Trotsky but expresses a mindset that had begun to be more outspoken in the last four centuries. Its history goes back much longer than previously thought. As he put it, there is no dualism between earth and machine, between the natural order of things and technology.

“Through the machine, man in Socialist society will command nature in its entirety, with its grouse and its sturgeons”²⁰⁹.

Technology has also spiritual value – even if spirituality has a diminished meaning here – and become a source of inspiration for art. Of course, in the future, the contradiction or distinction between art and technology/art and nature will be resolved in a higher synthesis – just as the opposition between planned and spontaneous action. Conquering nature, eliminating hunger, etc. and mastering nature will be the main preoccupation of society, according to the former Soviet ideologue. In this regard, he is right. The transhumanist movement, the technological development of the last decades, and other endeavors that are supposed to assure the future of mankind go in this direction. They build up the foundation of a society based on the rule of self-named unelected experts who tell everyone what to eat, think, etc. The focal point of action of modernity and technological development is man. Mankind is both the object and subject the of physical and social engineering:

“More than that. Man at last will begin to harmonize himself in earnest. He will make it his business to achieve beauty by giving the movement of his own limbs the utmost precision, purposefulness and economy in his work, his walk, and his play. He will try to master first the semiconscious and then the subconscious processes in his own organism, such as breathing, the circulation of the blood, digestion, reproduction, and, within necessary limits, he will try to subordinate them to the control of reason and will. Even purely physiologic life will become subject to collective experiments. The human species, the coagulated *Homo sapiens*, will once more enter into a state of radical transformation, and, in his own hands, will become an object of the most complicated methods of artificial selection and psycho-physical training. This is entirely in accord with evolution. Man, first drove the dark elements out of industry and ideology, by displacing barbarian routine by scientific technique, and religion by science. Afterwards he drove the unconscious out of politics, by overthrowing monarchy and class with democracy and rationalist parliamentarianism and then with

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

the clear and open Soviet dictatorship. The blind elements have settled most heavily in economic relations, but man is driving them out from there also, by means of the Socialist organization of economic life. This makes it possible to reconstruct fundamentally the traditional family life. Finally, the nature of man himself is hidden in the deepest and darkest corner of the unconscious, of the elemental, of the sub-soil. Is it not self-evident that the greatest efforts of investigative thought and of creative initiative will be in that direction?"²¹⁰.

And this goes further:

"Man will make it his purpose to master his own feelings, to raise his instincts to the heights of consciousness, to make them transparent, to extend the wires of his will into hidden recesses, and thereby to raise himself to a new plane, to create a higher social biologic type, or, if you please, a superman"²¹¹.

CONCLUSION

Mankind does not just simply exist. Man, and society change by producing new ideas, new ways of life through which man act upon nature and himself. Mankind produces culture and history. Essential to the existence of mankind is meaning, culture, symbols, representation, etc. Without a worldview that assigns to mankind its place in the universe, which defines what is dangerous and what is not, what is good or bad, human existence would not be possible. A worldview is thus necessary for human development and existence. Humanity develops many such worldviews and also ideals about society or man. Those can be used to change society and man itself. Through social, medical, physical, and mental action man will be re-created. It will become more powerful, harmonious, immensely stronger, wiser, subtler, etc. Everyone could become a Goethe or a Karl Marx. The socialist society Leon Trotsky helped created and established proved to be a failure, and he got assassinated by Stalin. His grim end doesn't make him any less guilty for the crimes of communism, mass deportations, mass deaths, etc. His work is worth reading because it opens an access point to the technocratic ideology that lies at the heart of modernity. It is a project of self-deification, of recreating man and nature. The much-dreamed socialist/communist society was from its inception a technological society, and despite its failure, seem to represent the ideal toward the present-day society – so-called democratic – is forging ahead. Trotsky dreams about a superman shows that the ideals present in Nietzsche, the Nazis, and Communism are related and represent a general feature of modernity which is the drive towards self-deification. And those ideals – even in the form expressed by Trotsky were not possible without the presence of a theological (bad theologies have bad consequences) and philosophical background that enabled the birth of these all-power demonic fantasies. Modernity and its present iteration as post-modernity are revealed to be technocratic in their inner core.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 116–117.

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