

The Theory of Decline, or the Decline of Theory? – Preface to the Swedish Translation 2004

Aufheben

The writing of the *Aufheben* articles on the ‘theory of decadence’ which appeared between 1993 and 1995 was a process of learning and questioning for us. A large part of our approach was to engage with what others have said about the issues. We looked both at currents that have strongly influenced us (e.g. the left and council communists, the Situationists, the autonomists); others which we have felt obliged to come to terms with (e.g. Trotskyism) and others which we simply recognised have contributed something (e.g. the ‘Regulation School’). As the material before us expanded, what had been intended as a single article extended over three issues. As the questions we are dealing with are so fundamental, the process of learning and questioning naturally continues, and if one was to write a text on the same subject now, one would produce something very different. That said, we would say that most of the text particularly the identification of weaknesses in previous theory, does still stand up.

One motivation of the articles was to confront a central theory of one of the political currents that has influenced us namely: left communism. For many of those who identify themselves as ‘left communist’ the assertion of capitalism’s decadence is fundamental because it provides a materialistic justification for the ‘class lines’ or ‘revolutionary political positions’ which distinguish them from other political tendencies. Support – if sometimes a ‘conditional’ or ‘critical’ support – for trade unions, parliamentarianism and ‘progressive’ national liberation struggles, is a characteristic of most ‘leftist’ politics. Left communists define themselves in large part through precisely their rejection of these forms, in favour of struggle which expresses proletarian autonomy from capitalism. But at the same time left communists wish to claim a lineage with the politics of Marx and the ‘revolutionary Marxists’ within the First and Second Internationals who, it has to be recognised, did not take left communist political positions. By identifying the grounds for the ‘class lines’ in a historical shift around the first world war when capitalism enters its decadent phase, left communists are able to uphold their positions while at the same time claiming a continuity with those who had practised a different politics in the previous ‘ascendent’ period of capitalism. In other words decadence theory allows its adherents to distinguish their politics from ‘leftism’ while not distinguishing themselves from Marx despite his apparent ‘leftism’. Never having been satisfied by this abstract and schematic way of dealing with such complex historical and practical-political issues, we wished to confront the theory.

However we chose not to limit ourselves to a critique of the explicit theories of decadence or decline offered by certain more or less obscure groups and political tendencies. The idea of decadence has a more general significance than such an approach would indicate. It became apparent to us that in the idea of decadence one is actually faced with questions central to the whole effort by Marx and Marxists to theorise capitalism and its overthrow. Some of the questions we thus end up touching on are: Whether and how to periodise capitalism? How to understand capitalist crises? How to grasp subjectivity and objectivity? What is the meaning of the transcendence of capitalism?

Most of the dynamic revolutionary theorising we engage with was produced either as with council and left communism, around the revolutionary wave of 1917 or as with the Situationists and the autonomists with the wave around 1968. These ideas then, emerged as expressions of what can be seen as the two main highpoints in the cycles of class struggle that characterised the twentieth century. Indeed the more explicit ‘theory of decadence’ emerged as groups forming in the aftermath of ‘68 tried to appropriate the council and left communist theories produced in the earlier wave. Arching over both these periods is the need to separate what revolution and communism are ‘really’ about, from the regimes established in Russia and elsewhere in its name, and more generally from a ‘leftist’ politics which can be seen to, however critically, accept in some way a statist and productivist model of socialism. It is probably significant then, that *Aufheben*’s attempt at rethinking should emerge shortly after the events of 1989-91. Even the groups that had long rejected the pseudo-opposition which the Eastern bloc offered to western capitalism, had nonetheless developed their theory in relation to this bifurcated world. Now that its grip on the theoretical and political imagination had been broken, the time was right for some fresh thinking. On the other hand some of the weaknesses in the text may in part be laid at the fact that it was produced not in a highpoint in the class struggle but in a period of relative quiet. When the first part of the articles was being written one of capitalism’s periodic recessions was just ending, when the third part came out it was entering what we can now see as one of the greatest speculative bubbles in its history. With the collapse of the USSR, the bourgeoisie was making what gains it could from the opportunities opened up by the new world situation. Class struggle, was tending, in the Open Marxist phrase to show itself only in the mode of being denied.

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Just as the articles criticised other theoretical work, they have been subjected to critique. Predictably those who hinge their whole political identity around the theory of decadence and the role it assigns them, reacted negatively to the articles, but criticisms have also come from less dogmatic perspectives. One objection was to the very approach of the articles which some felt to be a kind of ‘academic theorising about theory’ removed from relevance to the class struggle. This argument is based on the questionable assumption that there is one obvious way of doing good revolutionary theory. Against this one can say that we simply wrote about something that we thought interesting, in the way that we were able to at that time. We wrote it then essentially for ourselves – but the positive response that the articles received from some readers indicated that this critical engagement with previous theory has been useful to others.

It is true that theoretical production is not about a relation of ideas to other ideas but must be an expression of real social movement: the council communists cannot be understood separate to the German Revolution, the Situationists cannot be understood separate to the Movement of May ‘68. At the same time the theoretical writings of such participants in these historical moments, is one of the main things left behind by previous social movement. Past theory is a concentrated expression of – and thus a way we can connect to – previous class struggle. The engagement with previous theory which is the main part of the articles, is part of a dialogue or conversation in which we take up what others have said which means something to us, and say something back which means something to the reader, who may say something back... This ongoing dialogue – a dialogue in which more practical developments in the class struggle are constantly ‘butting in’ – is part of the material and social production of consciousness. But, as Marx says in the German Ideology, “Consciousness [das Bewusstsein] can never be anything else than conscious being [das bewusste Sein] and the being of men is their actual life process”. Thus communist theory can only be our more or less adequate consciousness of the real contradictions in that life process, moving towards the abolition of the present state of things. Such consciousness is a reflection of and a reflection on that real movement.

A hostile response to the articles was contained in the publication *Swamp Thing* [possibly still available from Box 15, 138 Kingsland High street London E8 2NS] One argument the authors made was that our way of dealing with Trotskyism alongside left communism – Mandel alongside Mattick – obscured the crucial dividing lines between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary traditions. Such a line of criticism, seems to us, to falsely assume that there are revolutionary proletarian theorists who produce revolutionary theory, and non-revolutionary bourgeois theorists who produce non-revolutionary ideas. Fundamentally one must be willing to take useful ideas from wherever we find them and to criticise inadequate ideas wherever they exist. Of course such an examination should always consider the political commitments of the theorists under discussion, and there generally are links between a thinkers’ political perspectives and their theoretical production, but the relation is not always straightforward. For example, Mattick’s theory of capitalist crisis is closer to Marx’s critique of political economy than Mandel’s and is for him linked with a more spontaneist perspective of class action. But Mattick’s ideas have nonetheless been adopted by many with straight Leninist politics which shows its revolutionary implications are by no means obvious. A key argument to the articles is that there is an underlying issue of ‘objectivist Marxism’ that crosses the political lines between council communists like Mattick and Trotskyists like Mandel. To confront this we could not limit ourselves to addressing those theorists that pass a political litmus test.

However the *Swamp Thing* critics argued that – with this category of ‘objectivist Marxism’ - *Aufheben*: “are essentially recycling a discussion of free will and pre-determination in the terms of subjective and objective reality, in terms of an Autonomist vision of the class struggle imposing the collapse of capitalism, as opposed to the ‘classical Marxist’ view that the decadence of capitalism imposes the task of revolution upon the proletariat.” In an immediate reply to this criticism we argued, that to the extent that there was a similarity between the articles and the philosophical debate of free will versus determinism, that is because that antinomy is how the problem of relating to an alienated world appears to thinkers trapped within a bourgeois perspective and thus without access to the solution to this problem: revolutionary praxis. However we would now, consider that the issue of determinism versus voluntarisms or free action needs further thought. The question is coming up for example, in our engagement with the French group *Theorie Communiste (TC)*. What individuals or classes can do is determined by their social relations. However if the reality of the human essence is, as Marx has it in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, ‘the ensemble of social relations’, then for individuals and classes to be determined by their social relations is – self-determination. Another famous Marx quote is that: ‘Men make history but not in conditions of their own choosing’ and we can say that at a certain point people will be determined to make history and to transform their social relations through communisation.

The most serious critique of the articles has been produced by the French group *Theorie Communiste (TC)*, to accompany a translation of the text into French. We published this critique in *Aufheben* 11 and replied to it in *Aufheben* 12. *TC* agree with much of our critical point of view on the ‘essential problem of objectivism’ noting that, ‘it is rare for this issue to be dealt with without descending into the worst deranged subjectivist imaginings or without simply abandoning a theory of classes, of their contradiction and of communism as the supersession of this contradiction.’ However *TC* thinks we tend to

grasp it as an ahistorical theoretical error rather than, as they do, something produced historically and necessarily by a phase of the class struggle. *TC* see a weakness that the articles are not sufficiently informed by ‘a conception of the contradiction of capital and proletariat as mutual involvement’ and that as a result communism and revolution are not historicised but seen to emerge from an essential invariant revolutionary essence of the proletariat, – its affirmation rather than its negation. *TC* draws out the implications of these weaknesses in the way we deal with such issues as the Russian revolution, crisis theory and autonomist Marxism. Although we are not persuaded by all of *TC*’s arguments particularly their idea that the concept of exploitation should be made to replace that of alienation, and their alternative periodisation of capitalism based on formal and real subsumption, we accept that much of their critique does hit home. We’d encourage the reader to look at their critique and our discussion of it. The ongoing interchange with *TC* has now largely gone beyond the decadence articles into a consideration of how far we would follow, and what problems we see, in *TC*’s own way of theorising the issues at stake.

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In the end the obvious inadequacy of the articles which *TC* and others have noted is that, if in the detail of their development they make some strong points particularly in the way they identify the strengths and weaknesses in previous theoretical and political positions, overall they fail to achieve a theoretical breakthrough of their own. One can ask then ‘what is their value?’ Looking back at them it seems that they show a certain ambition, and a willingness to confront some big issues in a relatively open way. While focused on issues of decadence, capitalist crisis and so on, the articles can also be seen to go over a large part of twentieth century class struggle and its theory and to perform a role of situating us in relation to that history. It is perhaps the fact that they do not falsely conclude the issues with any easy answer – that shows that they are a honest attempt to find some truth in a new historical situation.

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