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A Critique of Half-Assed Radicalism

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1990–91

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Author's note: This text was written during the winter of 1990–91 when — as stated in the first sentence — I was involved with the journal Interrogations. This may seem anecdotal for those who weren't readers of this publication, which folded several months later (Summer '91). I mention it primarily because I have not judged it necessary to rework the critique in order to bring it more up-to-date. The footnotes, on the other hand, did not appear in the original version (September 1992).

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1990–91

To remedy the frustrations that this world imposes on me, I am in no way interested in attempting to believe in a spiritual “grand totality” — nature, life, god, etc. — which would transcend our so-called little human problems.

“Religion is the sigh of the creature overwhelmed by unhappiness; it is the soul of a heartless world, the spirit of a spiritless epoch.” (a 19th century German philosopher)

Translated by Alison Gross (Paris) and Michael William (Montréal) from *Le Point d’Interrogations*, Autumn, 1992. To correspond with the journal, write to the following address without mentioning *Le Point d’Interrogations*: Hème, c/o I.S., B.P. 243, 75564 Paris Cedex 12, France.

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plies logically (and inevitably) the existence of the profane. Despite the fact that it can be transformed into many other dualities ...good or evil, spirit and matter, god and devil...which all fulfil the same insidious role of dividing all the experience that we have naturally of our world into two conceptual and arbitrary spheres.”

Ultimately, this radical deification of nature boils down to the assertion that all living beings are equal. But if, for most of us, our reflections have led to certain changes of attitude (with respect to food, for example), it is necessary to remain wary of scams — which thrive particularly well on this terrain. Although some may well find it shocking, *as a human being* I deny that a vegetable, a bacterium and an animal are equal; or an animal without an evolved nervous system and a vertebrate with a brain; or an HIV virus and a rough-coated fox terrier. Horror of horrors, I would like to state that if I like to view and approach trees, it is not because we are playing a part in a cosmos⁶ or something or other; it is because, for one, I find them attractive on a sensual level, and because, as well, I am aware of their importance in the ecological equilibrium which allows our survival. I admit to having repeatedly used weed killer to combat weeds I did not feel in communion with; and even occasionally insecticide against our little winged brothers. And for those who can fathom it, I adore rabbits (which doesn't keep me from eating them on occasion), but I detest pigeons (even with green peas).

Much could also be said about traditional Asiatic societies.”

⁶In radical spiritual language, one does not often speak of the cosmos (the world, the universe). Instead it is the Cosmos with a capital C, a term all the more esoteric since it refers to nothing precise. *A propos*, it is worth citing *Réflexions sur l'individualisme* (1910), by the anarchist Manuel Devaldés: “By capitalizing the article and noun in this text we express the sanctity of ideas, according to the spirit of mystical or positive religions.” Right on, and let's keep it in mind with respect to every discourse on Nature, the Earth, Science and Progress.

texts which appeared in the American journal *Anarchy*. All this material should undoubtedly be translated...if someone had the time! In order to put this debate in context, I will just give a quote from Lev Chernyi which appeared in “Anarchy and the Sacred: an Exchange with *Fifth Estate*”:

“For me, the continuities between religion and scientific ideologies are more meaningful than their differences. Why reject scientific ideology only to embrace the idiocies of religion, of spiritualism and the sacred? Isn’t it clear that your critiques of reification and worship with regard to technique in no way diminishes the importance of a critique of reification and of worship with regard to nature...

“...The concept of the sacred is the foundation of all religion, spiritualism, ideology, cult, faith, belief. It im-

— I am not critiquing ‘primitivists’(?). In fact I don’t believe any primitivists exist, and simply regret that some people accept this label, which only masks their true aspirations and refusals. In short, I feel that the label primitivist is the enemy of the *so-called primitivists*, who, luckily, are something else entirely. I was not, therefore, attacking these individuals.

— I think it is as ridiculous to label certain contemporary non-industrial societies primitive as it is to label them savage or pre-capitalist. All these terms express the same West-centeredness.

— I was not attacking being interested in falsely labelled primitive societies (I don’t believe they can be called ancient ones either). From these societies I think that we can learn that the mentality and customs of contemporary people in the West are not inevitable. But we must preserve the same critical attitude toward these societies as we do toward the milieu we are living in. This is why I stressed the question of Africa, which doesn’t appear to be the same as the native American example (I reiterate that there is nothing which demonstrates that primitive tribes exist in Africa). This reminds me of a letter I received from a friend who has been living in Africa for many years. He writes: ‘I believe that the Bantu philosophy is hell for thousands of blacks who are stuck in it with no chance to escape. It is hell in the literal sense of the word. In the Congo, for example, I saw people who were mentally and even physically suffering from it...’

Although I am involved with *Interrogations*, what follows does not flow exclusively from how I experience this activity. Nor is it independent of it. Rather, I would like to attempt to define what underlies an uneasiness I have felt in the last few months while reading texts from what, to simplify, I will call the radical milieu.¹ My intention is not to tell people what to do; it is to outline what to me would seem the degeneration of an outlook to which I remain attached. This would appear necessary vis-a-vis:

- the integrity of individuals participating in this current and of those who might be seduced by their positions.
- the possibility of encouraging a renewal of critical thinking which would eventually take the form of people in already existing groups coming together to form other groups, or in the creation of new ones — groups which would take the critiques below into account.
- an opposition to doing our bit to build a new ideology based on a desire for a “spiritual bonus” and a commodified New Age.

1. From a Definition of Radicalism to Half-Assed Radicalism

Over forty years ago, in *The Root of Man*, which was published in the American journal *Politics*, Dwight MacDonald suggested that

¹This is a simplification in appearance only, since the “radical current” in question is hard to define. In this respect see Dwight MacDonald’s definition which is quoted in the first part of the text, as well as a longer version in *Le Point d’Interrogations* 1991/2. One could attempt to define it as all the groups and individuals which are attempting to use a critique of capitalism which attacks its roots, and not just its most blatant injustices. Although they do not share a program of defined positions, “radicals” generally reject electoralism and syndicalism and challenge wage labor, money and modern society.

we abandon the old separation between left and right (the progressives) and that the category “radical” be contrasted to them. For MacDonald, the word radical applies to those who “reject the classical notion of progress and judge things according to their meaning and their effect in the present; they believe that science’s capacity to serve as a guide in human affairs has been exaggerated, and that to re-establish a balance, the moral and political side should be emphasized. They think — or rather, we think — that whether people’s increased mastery of nature has had a good or bad effect on human life remains an open question; we are in favor of adapting techniques to people rather than adapting people to technical progress, even if this means (as it may well) a technical regression.” In general the above project already dovetailed with the project of those I am presently addressing. Today, as was then the case, this project is based on a serious critique of the progressive ideologies from which the radicals came (Marxism, anarchism or others) or which influenced individuals who took part in their reflections. But a critique is not as easy as the proverb would imply. And here it is a question of rejecting the schematization of ideologies and of analyzing debated problems with clarity, without fudging their complexity or contradictions.

In the past, an extreme left emerged from the left, taking up more extreme positions but ones which were based on the same premises as the left. In turn this favored the emergence of an ultra-left. I won’t go into similar splits in other milieus I am less familiar with, such as the anarchist and ecology milieus. On the whole contemporary radicals who have extricated themselves from these milieus in the last twenty years have been able to come up with neither a guiding concept nor a major project. Among a variety of reasons for this are:

- *A belief in the power of the word.* Inherited from a certain intellectual tradition incarnated in particular in situationism, this approach tends to confuse the glitter of words with depth of

#2.⁵ The undeniably attractive aspects of certain traditional (not primitive!) communities have kept them from being considered in their globality and, specifically, in what sense their spirituality is not only alienating but heralds other alienations which have been developed by today’s world. This point has been fleshed out better than I could in a series of

⁵The label “primitivist” has been primarily used in North America to describe a current of thought which has critiqued the logic of progress, civilization and modernity. This milieu is anything but monolithic: some people posit a pre-language golden age, while others accentuate community and defend past and present indigenous groups. Still others want something new, something which, to our knowledge, has never existed. It was this group as a whole (with nuances) that I was referring to above when I was speaking of “our current.” The *Fifth Estate* is this outlook’s most typical journal. In recent years it has influenced a number of other journals: *Anarchy* in the U.S., *Demolition Derby* in Canada, and *Interrogations* in France.

My letter to Michael William, which was published following “Petite analyse de la différence” (in the publication section), was an attempt to distance myself from this label, which I considered and continue to consider harmful to our thinking and its clarity. My letter concluded in the following manner:

“Our vision is often deformed and idealized ... everything is grist for the imagination’s mill. If, on the other hand, the imagination chooses a model, a reference, a whole world of possibilities is closed off; it even becomes difficult to understand those who imagine another kind of life in a different manner.”

“It is no easy task to radically criticize this world while living in it at the same time, to conceive of the possibility of another life which has no model one can attach oneself to and at times no words to express it; to feel a sense of affinity with others who are sometimes thousands of kilometers away — without being able to put a label on it which could help us to recognize each other and be recognized by others. The only weapons we presently possess are a confidence among those who compose our small ‘community of thought’ and an absence of compromises in our critique. These few remarks should therefore in no way be considered an attempt to distance myself or to search for differences between us, but as an element of our common reflection.”

This idea was completed in a letter I sent to a friend from the *Fifth Estate* in January 1990:

“I did not want to go back over the question of primitivism, which I don’t consider a major one, but I have the impression that a few misunderstandings persist:

everything is equal” and “everything is a part of everything else.”

3. From the Domestication of Nature to its Deification

In this text I will not again deal with calls to domesticate nature and to transform non-human living species into things, calls which are to be found in revolutionary ideologies and in progressive ones more generally. Once again, a lively analysis of this has been developed by “our current.” But this critique has used a variety of sources, which at times have tended to appropriate it, for example:

- neo-paganism, which all the more rapidly resurfaces since it is deeply rooted in our popular culture (resistance to Christianization) as well as in our intellectual culture (poetry, literature). It is no accident that some members of *Interrogations* have (re)discovered Giono. Personally I’m grateful to have done so, but the pleasure I am able to derive from Giono the writer or pacifist does not reconcile me to his agnosticism and his paganism.
- certain ethnological currents, which are the basis of primitivist ideology. I have already gone over this point in my letter to Michael William which appeared in *Demolition Derby*

thought. The vacuousness of a slogan such as “Take your desires for reality” is an example. Modern desires are such an accurate reflection of reality that this has now become a way of life in the kingdom of France. Following this logic, the fact of being misunderstood is the ultimate stamp of radicalism, as is verbal extremism. I’m not certain but it seems to me that, for some, the language of Orwell in 1984² flows from the same logic. Writing “War is Peace” becomes a trademark which guarantees the purity of the radical product, even in the absence of any kind of project to share with others.

- *How the eclectic nature of their influences has contributed to the evolution of contemporary radicals.* The difficulty that currents developing a materialist critique have had in applying it to progressivism has led to a search for elements in milieus which, for lack of a better word, I would call dubious: spiritualists, people marketing various types of natural lifestyles, etc. But rummaging in garbage pails is not always without risk, and it seems the hardly appetizing but necessary process of sorting has not been thoroughly carried out.

2. From Dialectical Materialism to Charlatanism

Radical critiques of “dialectical and historical materialist” ideology have generally outlined well in what senses — faithfully reflecting its 19th century origins — this ideology was based on a mechanical and progress-oriented vision. This critique concerns not only (ex)-Marxists: the same mechano-progressivism is to be found in other revolutionary ideologies (e.g. Bakunin, and in the book *La reaction en Allemagne*), and it is also found in certain individuals

²This is a reference to George Orwell’s novel 1984, in which the key slogans of the state and the party are: “War is Peace”; “Freedom is Slavery” and “Ignorance is Strength.” Numerous texts and tracts adopted these slogans as titles or subtitles, particularly around the year 1984, and then during the Gulf War.

to whom it had simply contagiously spread. Seeing how this ideology has led to justifying capitalism has not been a wasted effort for contemporary radicals. But it remains equally necessary to grasp in what sense 19th century “philosophical inquiry” corresponded to a desire for a rigorous approach in theoretical reflection. Without making any concessions to the gigantic historical mechanisms they have erected, or to Russian doll games, it remains crucial to avoid abandoning what is to be gained from a materialist approach to problems. I fear that it is the materialist rather than the mechanical aspect of mechanical materialism that modern radicals are tempted to reject. I also fear that these folks will be easy prey for various charlatanisms.³

But what kind of charlatanisms do I mean? The act of comparing, for any goal (serving a cause, making money), true or credible facts on the pretext of apparent similarity — or simply because everything is linked to everything else — and, from this, deriving laws, predictions or anything which is said to influence people. Let’s take a few simple examples.

Anyone who claims that the mythical heavens of the astrologers are a representation of the reality of constellations is an ignoramus

³For some of these folks, I more than fear it! Modern radicals are into everything, from believing in horoscopes to Oriental esoteric practices! This inclination toward charlatanism is not always easy to discern because generally it does not manifest itself openly. This is not to say that we should become thought police, but simply that we should remember that fighting for a free and critical way of thinking has always implied fighting against superstition and religiosity as well. Just because it would appear that politicians and statesmen are the title-laden clients of sorcerers and fortune tellers is no reason to mimic them! An entire critical reflection should undoubtedly be undertaken in this area. Today the critique of religion has essentially been abandoned to P.C. rationalists, and the critique of parallel beliefs maintains autonomy from scientism only with difficulty. A certain reappropriation of the best aspects of these critiques, however, should not be overlooked. Of interest on this subject are works which appeared in the *Collection Zététiques* (L’Horizon Chimérique, 7, rue Leytaire, 33000 Bordeaux), and in particular *Incroyable...mais faux (essai critique sur l’obscurantisme moderne)* by A. Cuniot, and *Médecines parallèles*

or a joker. Anyone who asserts there is a deterministic relationship between this fantasy and the future of humanity is a charlatan. And there will be an inhibiting effect on anyone who, instead of looking for causal relationships between phenomena, bases his or her critique of the world on relationships of analogy or correspondence without perceiving the difference between correlation and causality.⁴ In so doing, voluntarily or not, such a person tends to become a charlatan. A radical one no doubt, but a charlatan just the same. This radical charlatanism is all the more dangerous because it is simultaneously seductive and reassuring. Seductive because, on demand, exactly what one was hoping for can be demonstrated — like the fairy tales of our childhood which offered to make our deepest desires come true. Reassuring because it dispenses with having to really think about things “according to their meaning and their effect in the present.”

The scientific socialism which made it possible to prove everything (and the contrary of everything) since “objectively,” “in the final analysis” material conditions forced us to be what we have to be, is quite dead. Thanks to radical charlatanism anything remains possible, but this time individuals’ whims are in control since “ev-

et cancer (modes d’emploi et de non-emploi), by O.Jallut.

⁴There is nothing very revolutionary about “reasoning” by analogy or coincidence, since this is the way the occult has functioned from the very beginning. This type of thinking would have us believe that individuals born the same day will have similar character traits and destinies (!) and, more generally, that if two events take place at the same time, one flows from the other (and vice versa). There are numerous examples of these types of hardly rigorous deductions. One will suffice — a text on AIDS that has been brought to our attention which attempts to be ultra-radical (and winds up ultra-pitiful). Follow closely! (a) One of the immediate consequences of May ’68 was the liberation and availability of means of contraception and abortion. (b) The first cases of AIDS appeared in New York in the spring of 1979. Conclusion of (a) plus (b): The HIV virus was perfected by the American army to put morality back into social customs — conclusion of the conclusion: therefore, to protect themselves, they must have created an antidote or a counter-poison. Thus a vaccination or anti-AIDS medicine exists. End of story!