

UNEVEN AND COMBINED DEVELOPMENT LECTURE 3: MODERNISM: THE CULTURAL LOGIC OF UNEVEN AND COMBINED DEVELOPMENT

I suggested in Lecture 1 that there was a relationship between uneven and combined development and modernism. Yet, it is difficult to disagree with the Warwick Research Collective that ‘the *cultural* aspects of Trotsky’s initiating formulation concerning the “amalgamation of archaic with more contemporary forms”’ have received little attention – certainly in comparison with current interest levels in International Relations and the social and political sciences more generally. The authors of this assessment apart, applications of uneven and combined development in the field of culture have often involves attempts to treat it as synonymous or at least compatible with more contemporary notions, above all, ‘hybridity’. Take, for example, this sentence by Gareth Williams:

The radically hybrid bearing of Latin American literary expression – a hybridity that emerges as a result of the historical realities of uneven and combined development; as a result of the disjunctive simultaneity of its subaltern/metropolis articulations; and ultimately as a result of Latin America’s profoundly nonunitary geopolitical location within world history – embodies and reproduces (perhaps) the discursive tensions (the encounters and disencounters) that are capable of opening up the supply-lines of reflection to a certain kind of futurity.

Amid the general incomprehensibility of this passage, one relatively clear statement presents hybridity as a function of uneven and combined development; but the former was characteristic of human societies long before the emergence of capitalism, let alone capitalist industrialisation. As Eric Wolf has demonstrated, the notion that the Americas consisted of self-contained, indigenous societies was false at least a hundred years before Columbus inadvertently ‘discovered’ them:

Conquest, incorporation, recombination, and commerce...marked the New World. In both hemispheres populations impinged upon other populations through permeable social boundaries, creating intergrading, interwoven social and cultural entities. If there were any isolated societies these were but a temporary phenomenon – a group pushed to the edge of a zone of interaction and left to itself for a brief moment of time. Thus, the social scientist’s model of distinct and separate systems, and of a timeless ‘precontact’ ethnographic present, does not adequately depict the situation before European expansion; much less can it comprehend the worldwide system of links that would be created by that expansion.

Of course, once capitalism had emerged it increased the number and intensified the extent of these encounters, mainly through moving people, often forcibly, around the globe, by slavery, colonialism and migration. ‘Partly because of empire, all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic’, writes Edward Said, who also notes that this is as ‘true of the contemporary United States’ as it is of the Global South. But even within the context of multiple oppressions resulting from conquest and colonization, at least some of the populations which inhabited both North and South America were able to draw on techniques and styles of European origin in their own forms of cultural production, as Peter Wollen explains:

...the flow from core to periphery and its appropriation by artists on the periphery is nothing new. The rich nineteenth-century tradition of Haida soapstone carving developed directly because of the new market of sailors and travellers, who began to visit the Northwest Coast [of

North America] for trade or tourism. ... Spanish baroque was appropriated by indigenous artists in Mexico, and increasingly complex forms emerged (as we can see in the work of Frida Kahlo and, more recently, artists on both sides of the Mexican-United States frontier). Indeed this new baroque once again is beginning to redefine Americanness, in a complex composite of differential times and cultures.

The direction of fusion has by no means been all one way. If Kahlo absorbed aspects of Spanish Baroque in Mexico, then her contemporary, Jackson Pollock, absorbed those of the Mexican muralists – which were themselves hybrids – and the Native America Navajo tribes in the USA. It is the temporal and not merely geographical distance between the elements which are brought together that differentiates the cultures of uneven and combined development from those of pre-existing forms of hybridity. But there are also examples from popular culture.

As George Lipsitz notes, the world has always been characterised by ‘transformation and change’: ‘Instead of looking to the past for compensatory stories about cultural uniformity, we need to build the future by learning lessons from individuals and groups whose histories have prepared them to make productive use of contradictions, to embrace the dynamism of difference and diversity.’ Music is one of the best examples: ‘Music that originally emerged from concrete historical experiences in places with clearly identifiable geographical boundaries now circulates as an interchangeable commodity market to consumers across the globe.’ The most obvious example of this is the virtual universality of Hip-Hop but, as Lipsitz goes on to say, this is not simply a process through which the original sense of musical ‘place’ is lost or appropriated:

Through the conduits of commercial culture, music made by aggrieved inner-city populations in Canberra, Kingston, or Compton becomes part of everyday life and culture for affluent consumers in the suburbs of Cleveland, Coventry or Cologne. At the same time, electro-techno-art music made in Germany serves as a staple for sampling within African American hip hop; Spanish flamenco and paso doble music provide crucial subtexts for Algerian Rai; and pedal steel guitars first developed by country and western musicians in the USA play a prominent role in Nigerian juju.

The guitar itself is a good example. First developed in Spain, it attained modern form in the music of black Americans who combined the five-tone scale of their West African origins with European harmonies to produce the chord progressions characteristic of the blues.

Or take Brazil itself, where no-one could claim that class politics has been adversely affected by the supposedly debilitating effects of ‘Western’ culture. During the 1990s Brazil became the sixth biggest market for recorded music in the world after the USA, Japan, Germany, the UK and France (and the second biggest market for pirate recordings, after the USA). One of the genres is the *mangue* beat movement which first developed in the city of Recife. Hybridity is not new in Brazilian music. Here, as in other nations, what is usually called ‘traditional’ national genres like the *samba* and the *choro* mixed modes of the Portuguese colonial settlers, the transplanted African slaves and the indigenous population since the nineteenth century. Mangue is no different in this respect except that it has not existed long enough to receive the respectable aura of tradition conferred by time and familiarity. Worse, it employs rhythms and instruments derived from rock – which is itself of course a hybrid. ‘In fact, Mangue is a metaphor for cultural diversity based on an environment full of diversity.’ Far from submerging what I will call ‘older’, rather than ‘traditional’ musical forms, it has brought them to the surface: ‘One of the most interesting effects of the mangue movement and its offshoots is that instead of suffocating traditional culture, mangue beat is helping local culture to rejuvenate itself.’

The Emergence of Modernism

The experience of capitalist modernity was one of the conditions for the emergence of modernism, of which Kahlo and Pollock were leading representatives. Trotsky himself was alert to the relationship between modernism and the experience of capitalist modernity in its urban form, as in these remarks on Futurism: 'Urbanism (city culture) sits deep in the subconscious of Futurism, and the epithets, the etymology, the syntax and the rhythm of Futurism are only an attempt to give artistic form to the new spirit of the cities which has conquered consciousness.' He did not, however, explicitly link modernism as a general movement with uneven and combined development except in a handful of passing comments. Reporting on the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 he wrote:

Like all backward countries, Bulgaria is incapable of creating new political and cultural forms through a free struggle of its own inner forces: it is obliged to assimilate the ready-made cultural products that European civilization has developed in the course of history.

However, in addition to referencing technological and political forms, Trotsky then goes on to mention 'other spheres': 'Bulgarian literature lacks traditions, and has not been able to develop its own internal continuity. It has had to subordinate its unfermented content to modern and contemporary forms created under a quite different cultural zenith.' Ten years later, he similarly noted how 'the backward countries which were without any special degree of spiritual culture, reflected in their ideology the achievements of the advanced countries more brilliantly and strongly'. Eighteenth and nineteenth German philosophy was one example of this, but so too was Futurism, 'which obtained its most brilliant expression, not in America and not in Germany, but in Italy and Russia'.

In his foundational essay on postmodernism, Fredric Jameson follows Ernest Mandel in arguing that there have been three stages ('fundamental moments') in capitalism: 'These are market capitalism, the monopoly stage or the stage of imperialism, and our own, wrongly called postindustrial, but what might better be termed multinational, capital.' As he goes on, 'my own cultural periodization of the stages of realism, modernism, and postmodernism is both inspired and confirmed by Mandel's tripartite scheme'. In fact, Jameson misrepresents Mandel in two respects. First, the latter identifies four periods in the history of capitalism, down to the early 1970s, not three, each characterised by different forms of technology, in which the stage of 'market capitalism' is preceded by an earlier one extending from 'the end of the 18th century up to the crisis of 1847'. Second, where Jameson sees the period of multinational capital and postmodernism continuing from the post-war period until the present, Mandel regarded that period as definitively ending with the crisis which opened in 1973-4, a point with which I am in agreement. The key point, however, is that Jameson sees particular periods in the history of capitalism as possessing distinct 'cultural logics' and that of modernism is associated with the period which begins after 1848. Jameson is right, in my view, to associate modernism with a period in capitalist development, but wrong about the nature of that period.

It is remarkable that both Jameson and Perry Anderson, his most persistent interlocutor, both recognise that modernism does not emerge from monopoly capitalism as such, but rather from the fusion of the 'contemporary' and the 'archaic', which it initiates. Yet neither man ever invokes the concept specifically intended to illuminate these juxtapositions. Indeed, Anderson has rarely discussed uneven and combined development at all, except for a very brief reference to Germany, post-Unification, although he has discussed uneven development, but not in the context of modernism. Jameson, as we shall see, tends to refer to uneven

development, even when he is discussing uneven and combined development. The latter concept therefore forms a ghostly unacknowledged presence in the background of their more concrete discussions, to which we now turn.

In his early work, *Marxism and Form* (1971), Jameson noted of Surrealism that the juxtaposed objects which it depicted are ‘places of objective chance or preternatural revelation...immediately identifiable as the products of a not yet fully industrialised and systematized economy’. Although written of one specific school of Modernism, the essential point – that it involved the representation of a world in which old and new co-existed and inter-penetrated each other – was capable of generalisation to the entire field. Over a decade later, in his assessment of Berman’s *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, Anderson took this step, quoting Jameson on Surrealism but in order to illustrate a much more general argument.

In my view, ‘modernism’ can best be understood as a cultural field of force triangulated by three decisive coordinates. The first...was the codification of a highly formalized academicism in the visual and other arts, which itself was institutionalized within official regimes of states and society still massively pervaded, often dominated, by aristocratic or landowning classes: classes in one sense economically ‘superseded’, no doubt, but in others still setting the political and cultural tone in country after country of pre-First World War Europe. ... The second coordinate is then a logical complement of the first: that is, the still incipient, hence essentially novel, emergence within these societies of the key technologies or inventions of the second industrial revolution: telephone, radio, automobile, aircraft and so on. Mass consumption industries based on the new technologies had not yet been implanted anywhere in Europe, where clothing, food and furniture remained overwhelmingly the largest final-goods sectors in employment and turnover down to 1914. The third coordinate of the modernist conjuncture, I would argue, was the imaginative proximity of social revolution.

In summary, Anderson argues that, in Europe at least, modernism ‘arose at the intersection between a semi-aristocratic ruling order, a semi-industrialised capitalist economy, and a semi-emergent or insurgent labour movement.’ This was the situation, not only in Russia, but across most of Europe, down to 1945.

In the conclusion to his first collection of essays on postmodernism, Jameson, deployed what he called ‘uneven development’ to reach very similar conclusions to those of Anderson:

...in an age of monopolies (and trade unions), of institutionalized collectivization, there is always a lag. Some parts of the economy are still archaic, handicraft enclaves; some are more modern and futuristic than the future itself. Modern art, in this respect, drew its power and possibilities from being a backwater and an archaic holdover within a modernizing economy: it glorified, celebrated, and dramatized older forms of individual production which the new mode of production was elsewhere on the point of displacing and blotting out.

Jameson then refers to Joyce creating his version of Dublin alone in his rooms in Paris, but the point is clearly intended to be of wider application than literature, or any specific form of artistic production, almost an explanation for modernism itself. ‘Modernism must thus be seen as uniquely corresponding to an uneven moment of social development’ – but here Jameson refers specifically to Bloch and ‘non-synchronicity’ rather than Trotsky and uneven and combined development, before going on to describe ‘the coexistence of realities from radically different moments in history – handicrafts alongside the great cartels, peasant fields with the Krupp factories or the Ford plant in the distance’. It was left to one of Jameson’s admirers, Julian Stallabrass, to draw out the connection with Trotsky’s concept:

Jameson has convincingly argued that the most systematic works are produced in circumstances where, due to combined and uneven development, thinkers are faced with extreme contrasts of

scene, as if they lived in an environment where it is easy to step from one historical period to another. Peasants in paddy fields may raise their eyes from their work to glimpse a new neighbour, a high rise postmodern office complex. Such variegated environments, argues Jameson, foster systematic and totalising thinking about historical change.

Modernism must be seen then, not as a conjunctural moment in the history of capitalism, but as a form of artistic production generated by the triumph of capitalism as the globally dominant socio-economic system. The significance of 1848, in this perspective, is not the failure of the revolutions of that year, but as a marker indicating the when that system became definitively established. If the argument here is correct, however, then the form taken by that triumph was precisely the sudden onrush of capitalist modernity into long-established pre-capitalist societies: modernism is not the cultural logic of monopoly capitalism, but of uneven and combined development, which is one of the reasons why countries as politically distinct as Italy and Russia could both manifest such similar versions. Modernism is the way in which the experience of that transformation has been transmitted and understood through culture. In this, modernism would appear not as a set of artistic practices related to the historic decline of the bourgeoisie – or indeed to the fortunes of *any* particular class – but to the contemporary reality of class society itself; the rhythms of capitalist industrialisation, the stimuli associated with urban life and the patterns of social conflict during the epoch of Classical Imperialism – an epoch which, like modernism itself, apparently climaxed with the Second World War.

Modernism is obviously not an unmediated expression of experience. Lukács argues that the key distinction between realist authors (such as Mann) and their modernist contemporaries (such as Joyce) is the ability of the former to convey the totality of the social world and the inability of the latter to convey anything but the fragmented experience of that world. As Terry Eagleton has pointed out, however, the view that modernist work simply embodies subjective ‘experience’ is untenable: ‘Expressionist and surrealist art, need it be said, are every bit as much constructed as Balzac; we are judging (if we need to) between two different products of ideological labour, not between “experience” and the “real”’.

I earlier quoted Trotsky’s views on Futurism. Here, Gail Day shows three different ways in which that branch of modernism was able to translate the experience of capitalist modernity into the forms of art:

First, it can refer to a range of modern motifs (cars, aeroplanes, telephones) or their associated qualities (speed). Second, it can refer to the experiential ‘sensations’ of life in modern cities (experiences of speed and of ‘simultaneity’ across time and space, as new methods of transport and communication make the world seem smaller, or the feeling of exhilaration produced by competing sensations in the city). Third, it might refer to the technical and formal devices used by artists to ‘represent’ any of the above (the fragmentation and fracturing of picture space, the juxtaposition or collaging of different materials/elements as a way of ‘expressing’ sensations of speed or simultaneity).

If we return to the historical experience of England, we can see that absence of uneven and combined development as a socio-economic process, has a retardant effect on the emergence of modernism in the field of culture.

The English Exception (Part 2)

English conditions could not produce a local modernist movement, as can be seen in we take one of the few painters working in the period of English industrialisation which might plausibly be categorised in this way: J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851). During the last 15 years

of his life in particular, Turner made his subject, not industrialisation as such, but rather the fossil-fuel powered transport which made it possible, above all steamboats and trains. A sense of how unusual this was in his national context can be gathered from the assessment by Nikolaus Pevsner – Hungarian-born but in most respects a naturalised Englishman – who described Turner’s world as ‘a fantasmagoria’ and his work as ‘irrational’: ‘Turner’s position in English art is indeed baffling from whatever point of view one considers it – also from that of his Englishness.’ During the same year (1955) as Pevsner was expressing his bafflement, Greenberg was equally dismissive, albeit for different reasons: ‘Turner was actually the first painter to break with the European tradition of value painting’, he wrote of Turner’s later paintings. Despite describing them as ‘atmospheric’, however, ultimately he regards them as merely ‘picturesque’, a verdict endorsed by their popularity with a public which would not have expected his intangible subject matter – clouds, rain, mist, sea – to be rendered with ‘definite shape or form’: ‘what we today take for a daring abstractness on Turner’s part was accepted then as another feat of naturalism’. Here the great Modernist art critic Clement Greenberg is judging Turner against his own assumptions about the necessity for modernism in the visual arts to necessarily involve an increasing shift from resemblance (‘representation’) towards abstraction. Turner’s later work is however neither a regression towards naturalism nor a prototype of abstraction, but an attempt to express his response to mechanisation in a way similar to the Italian Futurists, with boats and trains as his subject rather than automobiles. *Rain, Steam and Rail – the Great Western Railway* (1844) is not primarily about H₂O in its various forms, but about the intrusion of modernity into nature in the shape of the train, the rail bridge which it necessitates and the city of London, looming indistinctly in the background of the picture, from which it has emerged. In Turner’s most famous and popular painting, *The Fighting Temeraire tugged to her last berth to be broken up* (1838), the symbolism could not be more obvious: the steam-powered tug (representing the mundane but functioning modernity) pulls a ghostly ship from the age of sail (representing the heroic but outmoded past) towards its final dismemberment.

Turner’s intimations of modernism are all the more startling for their almost complete isolation. Paul Wood notes the influence Turner had on the French Impressionists:

But in a British context, such artistic radicalism was isolated, even idiosyncratic. Turner’s *Rain, Steam and Speed...* a dynamic image of the modern if there ever was one, was painted in the 1840s, 30 years before comparable studies of *Gare St Lazare* by Claude Monet...in Paris. But in Britain Turner’s example gave rise to no school.

Wood concludes that ‘something seems to have restrained British artists from the innovations embarked on in France’. Steve Edwards similarly writes of British painters in the latter half of the nineteenth century, that ‘something about English society prevented them from finding a way to make ambivalence and incoherence suggestive of modern experience; from making a moral dilemma from uncertainty’:

Modernity is depicted in the British art of the period, but modernist form doesn’t really break the surface. In France, the ongoing clash between traditional ways of life and the rapid transformations of Paris and other urban centres made these changes available for representation.

As Edwards stresses, the point is not that Britain (or more precisely, England) was free from conflict – we have already seen that this was not the case – but rather that the capitalist modernity was so embedded as to produce a sense of familiarity, it ‘had come to seem natural’ and ‘this made it more difficult to depict modern society as bewildering or awkward, simultaneously exhilarating and horrifying’. The determining nature of context is nicely

illustrated by a conversation from the beginning of the twentieth century reported in the biography of Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957). It is important to remember here that Lewis was one of the very few native English modernists. When Filippo Marinetti (1876-1944) tried to claim him for Futurism, Lewis replied:

‘Not too bad,’ I said. ‘It has its points. But you Wops insist too much on the Machine. You’re always on about these driving-belts, you are always exploding about internal combustion. We’ve had machines here in England for a donkey’s years. They’re no novelty to *us*.

To which Marinetti responded:

‘You have never understood your machines! You have never known the *ivresse* of travelling at a kilometre a minute. Have you ever travelled a kilometre a minute?’

Lewis had not, nor had he any wish to.

The dominant theme in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English art and literature – including that produced by socialists – is a rejection of both modernity *and* modernism. Alasdair MacIntyre once commented:

There have been since the industrial revolution in Britain two main critiques of our form of life. One was the romantic protest against capitalist ugliness whose culmination is in Lawrence and Leavis. The other was the socialist protest. William Morris held them together in his own day: it is a prime victory of bourgeois ideology to have kept them apart ever since.

But if we look at the socialist future envisaged by Morris, it is described in the subtitle of his most famous novel as ‘an epoch of rest’:

‘You see, guest, this is not an age of inventions. The last epoch did all that for us, and we are now content to use as much of its inventions as we find handy, and leaving alone those which we don’t want.’ ... ‘In the half-century that followed the Great Change...it began to be noteworthy: machine after machine was quietly dropped under the excuse that machines could not produce works of art, and that works of art were more and more called for.’

This constitutes the main exception to the socialist and indeed Marxist conception of socialism representing a new form of modernity. Raymond Williams wrote of Morris that,

...what the representation of discontinuity typically produces is a notion of social simplicity which is untenable. The extent to which the idea of socialism is attached to simplicity is counter-productive. It seems to me that the break towards socialism can only be towards an unimaginably greater complexity.

England, or more precisely, London was a *subject* of modernist writing – think of Eliot’s ‘Unreal City’ in *The Waste Land* (1922) – and it provided a *destination* for modernist writers from outside Britain, like James, Pound and Eliot himself from the USA, Conrad from Poland or Yeats from Ireland. What Malcolm Bradbury calls, ‘a distinguishable English brand of Modernism’, was much more a literal sense of writing expressive of a new ‘Modern’ era after ‘the era of Victorianism was ending, [and] a new phase in society, art and thought beginning’, than expressive of the tension between the archaic and the modern.

Modernists and Capitalist Modernity

One final issue remains in this connection: the attitude of modernists to capitalist modernity. ‘Generally it is right to stress that modernism was no simple rejection of modernity; it was rather a reaction, a critical response to it,’ writes Krishan Kumar. As we have already seen, it was possible to critically embrace modernity from diametrically opposed political positions. According to Kumar, for the Futurists and Constructivists, ‘modern society was not modern *enough*’: ‘It was ‘inauthentically’ modern. It was too cautious, too cowardly, to accept all the implications of modernity. It preferred to harbour past relics, so preventing the realization of modernity’s full potential.’ These attitudes extended beyond the Italian and Russian representatives of modernism: they could be found in Weimar Germany, for example: ‘What Gropius taught, and what most Germans did not want to learn, was the lesson of Bacon and Descartes and the Enlightenment: that one must confront the world and dominate it and that the cure for the ills of modernity is more, and the right kind of modernity.’

Not every modernism embraced modernity and wished to extend it. Modernists in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland – in every sense the most ‘Western’ society in the colonial world – took a quite different perspective. Eagleton describes it as ‘stratified...made up of disparate time scales. Its history was differentiated rather than homogenous, as the anglicised and atavistic existed side by side, and a commercialised agriculture still bore a few quasi-feudal traces.’ This is a by-now-familiar exercise in identifying an example of uneven and combined development without using the actual concept; for, as Eagleton makes clear, the two temporalities of Irish life did not simply co-exist in separate life worlds: ‘...what is afoot in nineteenth-century Ireland, with the cataclysm of the Famine, the agricultural revolution, the sharp decline of the language and the sea changes in popular culture, is the transformation *within living memory* of a social order in some ways quite traditional, and so a peculiarly shocking collision of the customary and the contemporary.’ The intrusion of capitalist modernity was associated with British colonial power and its local agents, and as a consequence: ‘The modernist sensibility [in Ireland] is not of course synonymous with modernity. On the contrary, it is its sworn enemy, hostile to that stately march of secular reason which was precisely, for many a nineteenth-century Irish nationalist, where a soulless Britain had washed up.’ Modernism in this context was ‘a last ditch resistance to mass commodity culture’. Or to put it in Greenberg’s terms, the struggle between avant-garde and kitsch expressed in terms of nationalist resistance to imperialism. What this example suggests is that the attitude of modernists to modernity is less to do with left-right oppositions within nation-states, but where these nation-states (actual or aspirant) are situated within the structured inequality of the capitalist system in its imperialist stage.