

On being subject to objects.

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Man, as opposed to all the other living beings we know, does not dwell in the world. He is an intruder. This may be shown by the following example: If a doe walks in the forest, it's movement is a motion of the very forest, like the movement of leaves in the wind or of the birds between the branches. But if a man walks in the forest, his movement disturbs the complex system of motions, (the "ecosystem"), which is the forest. He breaks off a branch which stands in his way, turns it around, and uses it as a stick to break off further branches. He tears an object from its context, (he "pro-duces" it), and he has it advance against its original context, (he "applies" it). This typically human gesture which changes branches into sticks, (nature into culture), this technical and/or artistic gesture, has an obvious purpose: to clear a path within the forest, (to open a space for freedom). But it is not quite so obvious to understand the gesture.

This is a way to understand it: Man lives in the abyss between two worlds. The one is as it is, but it is not as it ought to be, (the world of phenomena all the other living beings live in). The other ought to be but is not, (the world of values). To live, for man, is to try and bring those two worlds together: so that the world that is be as it ought to be, and so that the world that ought to be be. The stick is how the branch ought to be. Before man entered the forest, the branch was as it ought not to be: it stood in the way, or, to say it in Greek, it was a "problem". And before man entered the forest, the stick was not, it was an "unrealized value". Technology and the arts are methods to solve problems and to realize values. The stick is a problem solved, and a realized value. It permits man to climb out from his abyss. (To put it more elegantly: the stick overcomes human alienation.)

By opposing "ought to be" to "be", man negates everything that is as it is: his entire existence is such a negation. (This negation used to be called "spirit".) There are, of course, people who do not like this negation, (which they are), and who prefer branches to sticks, and forests to forest exploitation. They would like to walk in the forest like does do. They deny "spirit". However, such a double negation does not result in ecologists, greens, and other romantics and mystics becoming does, and this needs saying it. On the other hand, of course, this having been said it must be admitted that sticks and the like do not necessarily make us free, do not necessarily open spaces for freedom. Are we in fact more free than we were ^{before} we began with stick production? Do cave bears and hail storms oppress us more than the secret police and thermonuclear weapons? Are technology and the arts good methods to have the world that is as it is become as it ought to be? Are they good methods opening paths for the "spirit"?

The answer is that they are not, because the stick may stand in one's way just as much as the branch does, only more so. It may stand in one's way because it was put there on purpose. We may be oppressed by culture on a higher level than

we are by nature. It may be said that this is not the fault of technology and the arts, but of those evil people like capitalists and/or communists which abuse them. But this is not a very good excuse for the following reason: if the purpose of technology and of the arts is to make us ever more free, how is it possible to abuse them? There must be some inner contradiction within technology and the arts themselves, which permits that abuse.

That contradiction may be stated easily: the stick, although it is an object torn from its original context and turned around, is still an object. Which is to say: we are still subject to it. We are "conditioned" by it. And in a very complicated fashion, much more complicated than is the fashion in which we are conditioned by branches. The fact is that the stick beats back at the stick producer, who again beats back on the stick, until a Gordian knot of feed-back relations makes it impossible to distinguish between the stick and the stick producer. To illustrate this, let us consider a few of those feed-backs:

I break off a branch, and this permits me to see better what a branch is like: I have gained knowledge. I then turn the branch around, and this permits me to see better how sticks ought to be: I have gained insight into values. I then use the stick as a kind of third arm, (or leg), and this permits me to see better how arms and legs work: I have gained self-knowledge. AS I now walk with my stick in my hand, I do it better than I walked before: I have changed my behavior. Having thus learned that sticks are a kind of leg, and legs are a kind of stick, I can make better sticks next time. And this again permits me to use my legs even better next time. To put all this a little more elegantly: the production of cultural objects changes nature, it changes man, it changes culture, and it establishes a dependence of man upon culture. It is also the source of knowledge, (science), and it changes political and esthetic values.

Now this concrete experience with ever increasing knowledge and self-knowledge, and with ever deeper insight into values, which accompanies stick production, ^{is} a fascinating, even inebriating adventure. It may absorb me. It is as if a voice had called me from within the branch saying: "I dare you to turn me around", and as if I had followed that calling, that vocation. I become victim of a creative giddiness, of a vertiginous creativity which has me forget why I wanted to make the stick to begin with. I no longer make sticks in order to open a path, but in order to make ever more perfect sticks, and to become an ever more perfect stick producer. The technological and artistic universe which surrounds us is a result of that giddiness, of that oblivion of its original purpose.

But of course: when I walk into the forest, I do not do so in some abstraction, but in a specific historical situation. That is to say: I enter the forest coming from a cultural surroundings which programmed me to believe that branches ought to be sticks, and with the knowledge of how to do it. Generations of stick producers have entered the forest before me, and I carry them with me. When I turn my own branch into a stick, it is they within me who do so, and the stick I am going to produce is the last link of an immemorial stick tradition. All the previous stick producers, and all the sticks they have produced, are some-

how here and now with me: although they are dead and decayed, they are immortal. And so shall I be myself, and so shall be the stick I am going to produce, if only I hand it over to the next stick producer. But to thus become immortal, to be remembered, I must try to make my stick slightly different from all the previous sticks, (slightly more beautiful or slightly better), so that it, (and myself), not be confused with previous stick productions. Thus the production of sticks is a challenge to overcome death and to become immortal. Or, to put the same thing less selfishly: it is a challenge to live for the others and to live on with them. Now if the stick I am producing will make me immortal, if it gives a meaning to my life which goes beyond death, how not to forget about the original purpose of stick production, which was to open a path in the forest?

It will have been noticed that in this effort to untangle the Gordian knot which binds us to cultural objects, and which subjects us to them, an important aspect of history in general, and of Modern history in particular has come to the fore: culture, originally a method to liberate men from natural conditions, has become an end in itself, so much so that the purpose of culture tends to be forgotten. In fact: if we look at the culture that surrounds us, at all those enormously complex works of technology and art, and at all those equally complex immaterial structures which sustain those works, we are impressed by the amount of accumulated knowledge, creative imagination and existential commitment which stands behind it, and we take it for granted that it failed in its purpose to deliver us from objective conditions. All our efforts to change our cultural conditions, all those political and aesthetic revolutions and reforms, are aimed at the way those gadgets of technology and the arts are being used, and not at the inner contradiction within those very gadgets. We have forgotten that, if we want to become free, we must try and overcome the inner contradiction within sticks, and not to make even better sticks, or have them handled by ever better people.

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Some unexpected thing is happening, however. Something which, would it not be happening in fact, would strike us as utterly fantastic. The Gordian knot which binds us to objects, and makes subjects of objects of us, is being cut, and it is being cut by the very techniques and arts which knotted it in the first place. That happening has a deceptively simple name, "automation", but to grasp what it means takes some effort:

This article has offered the following vision of history and of the present situation: man, that alienated being which dwells between what is and what ought to be, attempts to change that which is into that which ought to be, so that he may liberate himself from objective conditions. In this attempt he gets ever more enmeshed with objects, so that now, (at the end of history), he is even more conditioned than at its beginning, although on a different level. It now appears that this human attempt at injecting values into the phenomena, (at producing culture), consists of two distinct phases. During the first phase values are being chosen, and phenomena are being examined with a view to those values. In the

second phase, the values are actually being pressed upon the phenomena, the phenomena are actually being forced into the values. For instance: in the first phase I would like to have a stick when entering a forest, and I know that branches are good for stick making; and in the second phase I actually force the stick to become a branch. No doubt: those two phases imply each other in the complex Gordian knot pattern which was discussed earlier, but they are still two distinct phases. It now so happens that the first phase, (to be called "programming" from now on), may be neatly separated from the second phase, (previously called "work", and to be called "automation" from now on). And this neat separation shows that the gesture which forces phenomena into values, (that gesture previously called "work"), is not in fact a human gesture at all, but it goes on entirely within the phenomenal world. What is human is the first phase, and the first phase only.

The common sense conclusion to be drawn from this is that to work is a gesture unworthy of men; that it must be relegated on automatic machines, and that men may concentrate exclusively on programming, so that the world become automatically as it ought to be. But that is a hasty conclusion. What the neat distinction between programming and actual work implies is that we must turn our attention to values, from which we were distracted by the perfidious resistance offered by the inertia of the phenomena we worked on. The important aspect of automation is not that it delivers us from that perfidious resistance, (it is the machines which have to bear it from now on), but that it challenges us to face the values. For instance: if I no longer need to tear a branch off its tree and turn it into a stick, if a robot does this for me, why should I program the robot to make a stick, if it is the robot and not myself which is going into the forest?

In such a situation, (which undoubtedly is going to be ours), there is no longer any talk of "inner contradiction within sticks", of any "internal dialectics within modes of production". Man is no longer involved in sticks and in stick making, he is no longer subject to objects. In fact: he is no longer a subject in any meaningful sense of that term. All those fascinating and inebriating aspects of the Gordian knot which were discussed earlier in this paper have been overcome, and this is what may be called "unconditional freedom". Technology, (and all the other arts), will have overcome their inner contradiction, almost without our having noticed it, and they can now begin to set us free from objective conditions. At a price, however, at what is called so frivolously "the price of freedom".

The price is that we have to turn our attention to values. That we have to ask ourselves and each other: "what ought to be?". "What do we want?", "what are we to program our robots for?", "what is that good our newly won freedom is good for?". Ever since man is man, he has negated that which is, because it is not as it ought to be, and this was called "spirit". And now he must decide how the world ought to be, and this is called "freedom". In fact, man must turn himself around, just as he used to turn branches around, and instead of advancing into what is, he must advance into values. No longer "freedom from what?", but "freedom what for?" is his question. And as yet there is not even a beginning of an answer to that question. We are, as far as values are concerned, in Lower Paleolithic.

Of course: this looks like utter nonsense. Everybody knows what he wants, what ought to be, for instance: everybody wants to eat, to make love, to be in good health, to live long, and if possible for ever. And by extension everybody wants everybody else to have this. But those are not really values, but only means to attain values. Those are tools with which to do something. Automation will provide us with those tools sooner or later, (rather later than sooner). It is the ends for those means, and which are to give a meaning to those means, which are now in question. What do I want to eat for, unless it is to digest the eaten and be able to eat more? This question, which we now must face for the first time ever, (although it had been formulated before over and over, it was never a serious question), shows what that turning around of ourselves by ourselves is about: no longer are we interested in changing the world, but in giving a meaning to that changing of the world.

Ever since man is man he was subject to objects. It is now envisageable that he will be subject no longer. This sounds like papadise: everything that ought to be, will be, everything man wants will be at his disposal. But in fact it may be more like hell: not knowing what he wants, man may plunge back into his abyss. From which he was saved so far thanks to his struggle with objects. Unless, of course, some as yet unthinkable method be found to chose values. And after all: is not that the business of art, once it is free from its contradiction, one it no longer has to fight objects and can concentrate on meaning?