

On the art of survival.

We are said to have lost the art to die, and no doubt we are losing the art of "savoir vivre". But, still, we are surviving. A remarkable verb; "to survive", and one which, unlike the verb "^{des}subsistir", (which only exists in Spanish), is known in all the languages of the West. It may have two very different meanings. Or does "survival of a shipwreck" and "survival of the fittest" express similar situations? Is the glorious darwinian progress, (which is bourgeois progress as applied to biology), an aspect of the art to survive the burials of others? And is the famous khrushchovian prophecy, (the one that foretells the burial of capitalism by the Soviet Union), an articulation of faith in the same bourgeois progress as the art of surviving shipwrecks? Such questions are, of course, symptoms of a specific climate. A climate, in which not life and death, but survival is the problem. The present paper will try to defend the thesis that such is the climate we live in.

If the thesis were true, ours is an entirely new situation. We aim at surviving. No other generation could have reasonably held such a noble purpose. It lacked the necessary technology to achieve it. All previous generations were therefore forced to content themselves with more modest aims, like the eternal life, the full life or the good life. But we master the art and technique of survival thanks to gadgets like artificial kidneys, geriatrics, five-year-plans and defense organisations. We can thus suspend our individual and collective death, adjourn it indefinitely, and break all records of longevity. We can even make any definition of death doubtful. Antoine Artaud once defined this art of ours negatively by saying: "I cannot live, I cannot die, and we are all that way". But it may be defined positively thus: "I need not die, although I cannot live, and such is my society". This is new. Previous generations believed, naively, that not being able to live means having to die. We invented the art of surviving all the crises, (heart attacks, attacks by external foes, economic, scientific crises, the crisis of faith and of consensus). A new thing, and like Columbus we should be saying: "Gratias tibi ago, Domine, vidi rem novam". Because we have discovered a new continent: the land of permanent senility. We have this difficulty, however: we cannot address the Lord as Columbus did, because as potential survivors we are, all of us, Lords. A race of lords and masters is being created through us: the race of the indefinite survivors. "Superman" is coming to mean this. Nietzsche could not have foreseen it, but the funny pictures can and will.

The verb "to survive", unlike the verbs "to live and to die", but like the verb "to think", requires not only a subject, but also an object. If I say: "I survive, therefore I am", I am committing the Cartesian error. In order to think, I must think of something, and in order to survive, I must survive somebody. If we are to survive, somebody else must die. If nobody dies the verb "to survive" is nonsense, an expression of solipsistic idealism. We

tend to forget this when talking about the survival of the christian values of democracy, of the free market, and about similar lofty matters. To survive is a relative term: it means "to live longer than". It does not imply necessarily Darwinian struggle, however. If I want to survive somebody, I need not compete with him, let alone kill him. It is sufficient if I last longer than he does. This may be called a negative competition, of which the positive, capitalistic competition of the 19th century is an early and primitive approximation.

To survive is thus a matter of comparison, of relationship, of relativity. Unlike life, which is a matter of superlatives, of identity, of the absolute. He who lives, does so either radically and absolutely, or not at all. He who survives, does so more or less and with regard to others. This is the reason why the survivor stands beyond Good and Evil and is a Superman. Since he exists in relativity, his values are relative. Unlike the Nietzschean Superman the survivor does not transvalue the values, however. Nor does he pragmatize them. "Good" for the survivor is not "good in itself", nor is it "good for something", but it is "good for something good for something...". The survivor is no Nietzschean Superman, but a structuralistic value-free technician. The art of survival is technology, and the surviving society is technocracy. In the art of survival technique and art become one again, as they were before the rise of scientific techniques.

Thus to ask: "what good is it to survive?" is obviously a meaningless question. It is a naive question, and can be asked only by mere mortals, who still believe that life and death are either meaningful or absurd. For the survivor, of course, meaning is no problem. Because, having suspended death, he suspended that problem. No doubt: the survivor may consider the formal question of the meaning of "meaning", and will probably be able to show that "meaning" is a matter of syntax. Thus the question: "what good is it to survive?" may probably be shown to be syntactically faulty. It may be formally eliminated. The substitution of formal for vital problems, the progressive elimination of all vital problems through formal analysis, is part of the art of survival and one of its symptoms.

Still: if one aims at surviving, the question "what good is it to survive?" must be formulated, one way or another. But here it becomes immediately clear what is wrong with the question. One aims at surviving because one is unable to stop living. Survival is a matter of inertia, not of decision. One survives, not because to survive is good, or good for something, or good for something good for something..., but because one sees no meaning in dying. The moment the question "why do I not kill myself, or sacrifice myself for something?" loses its meaning, one has begun to learn the art of survival. The art of survival is the result of an overcoming of all commitments.

But here is a contradiction. If the art of survival and technology are one, (as the previous argument tried to show), how can survival be a matter of inertia, of indecision? How can an art be inert? And nobody will want to deny that survival is, in fact, artful. Everything is artificial about it: its breathing, its digestion, its metabolism. Its thoughts, its desires, its emotions. The victories, the defeats, the feasts and the troubles, the believes and the myth of the surviving society, are artificial. But if this is so, if to survive is to live artificially, it cannot be an inert way of living. The application of artificial food through injections and of artificial myths through TV requires deliberate manipulation. And deliberate manipulation requires decisions previous to it. And such decisions again require that the question: "what good is it to survive?" has been meaningfully asked and positively answered by such decisions. Thus the very artificiality of artificial kidneys and of the Western civilisation seems to imply that the art of survival is an elaborate, and therefore very deliberate way of living. Much more deliberate, in fact, (so it seems), than is mere "natural" and spontaneous living.

It is, however, possible to show that this contradiction is merely apparent. This is the situation we are in: In the course of so-called "Modern history" some specific techniques were evolved, and among them are gadgets like artificial kidneys and media for mass communication. These gadgets were invented, originally, not as means of individual or collective survival, but along with all the other gadgets as methods for the domination of what was then called "nature". These gadgets are therefore, originally, not aspects of the art of survival at all, but aspects of the bourgeois art of living. But now, after the bourgeois art of living went lost, those gadgets are still about and can now serve the art of surviving. And they serve the art of surviving not because we have decided to apply them thus, but because we cannot decide to switch them off. If a patient is able to decide to switch off the artificial kidney he lies in, he is not a survivor: he is still a living being, for whom the question of life and death is still a problem. But this is not the situation we are in. We are unable to switch off TV, (or the free market, or the intercontinental ballistic missiles, or the University system), because we no longer can take decisions. We are survivors. Our scientific, and technical, and economic, and social progress has become autonomous of our decisions. It has a life of its own, and by having such a life, it serves us as an art of our survival. Which may be stated the other way round, (as can everything within the relative climate of survival): our art of survival serves the automatic progress. Thus those of us who are the most inert and let themselves drift along, are the most progressive elements of our society. And those who still desperately struggle and kick to find some standpoint from which to decide themselves, are the reactionaries who try, in vain of course, to stem the victorious flow of progress. Thus he

o tries to refuse to survive, who still experiences the problems of life and death, he who still thinks existentially and not yet formally, contradicts the inert progress which is how the Occident survives at present.

The contradiction inherent in survival, which was said to be merely apparent, is, however, better understood if it be called a negative dialectics. It is not sufficient to say of it that it disappears, when analyzed, and that what appear to be contradictory tendencies in a surviving society may be shown to be the various aspects of the process of surviving, namely of technological progress. It is better to say that the contradictory tendencies in such a society cancel themselves out, and thus characterize automatic progress. They function as follows: On the one hand there are the technocrats, the planners, the futurologues, the system analysts and the other survival artists, who, being unable to decide to switch off gadgets, apply them. They represent the "positive" tendencies of survival. On the other hand there are those who criticize progress either as far as its present direction is concerned, or progress as such, and who thus advocate individual or collective suicide or euthanasia. But what they thus advocate is a death just as artificial as is the life advocated by their opponents, and they are therefore just as much "artists" as are the forces of progress. They represent the "negative" tendencies of survival. The "positive" tendencies seem to advocate artificial living, the "negative" ones artificial dying, but in reality they cancel themselves out and thus permit, through mutual suspension, continued survival, which is neither living nor dying. It is this negative dialectics, this impossibility of a true revolution within a surviving society, which opens the way for the geometrical growth of which we are the victims and patients. All the limits of growth, including the ones discussed by the Club of Rome, are thus progressively being pushed further, and everything goes on growing like the nails and the hair of biologically dead, but technically surviving bodies.

Now this negative dialectics is, of course, closely linked to the meaning of the word "art" in the expression "art of survival". To understand it, it will not be of much help to try and discover what the word "art" meant in the past, before the art of survival became the dominant art form. Because technology, the art of survival, is a totally new art form. One cannot deny, of course, that there are similarities with previous situations. Technology is our "style", just as the Gothic or Byzantine art was the "style" of previous generations. As a true style, it penetrates everything, from the most humble instrument to the most solemn ideology. Just like in Gothic times everything was penetrated with catholicism, and in Byzantine times with orthodoxy, so in technological times everything is penetrated with survival. In this respect we are closer to the Gothic and the Byzantine periods than we are to Modern times, which had no style of living, and therefore no "art" in the sense of "specific life form". But

a similarity is misleading. The art to survive is essentially different from all previous art forms in its being inert and passive. It is stubborn senility elevated to an all pervading art form. Therefore the negative dialectics which is its characteristics cannot be found elsewhere.

One may articulate that negative dialectics as follows: On the one hand "art" means to do something, on the other hand it means to do as if, and these two meanings of "art" cancel each other. Now it may be argued that this is not new, that such a contradiction exists in every meaning of the word "art", and that it is a positive dialectics. The contradiction between the "artistic" and the "artificial", (so one may argue), between "work of art" and "artifice", results in an "artifact", which is the synthesis of that contradiction. Thus a bridge is the result of doing something that is a doing as if a road could continue over a river. And a painting is the result of doing something that is a doing as if one could see through the wall. But this is precisely not the contradiction inherent in the meaning of "art" at present. With us a bridge is the result of doing something that is a doing as if a bridge were important. And a videotape is the result of doing something that is a doing as if videotapes were "artistic". With us the artistic and artificial aspects of "art" cancel each other out, and the artifact is, with us, the automatic result of that cancellation. Technology is, in its essence, the doing of something as if one were doing something. In it, to do something and to do as if is strictly synonymous, which however does not mean that technology is "l'art pour l'art". It only means that technology is a science-fiction in which both "science" and "fiction" are, however, fictitious. This dialectics is negative, because in our situation to do something implies always doing as if one were doing something, and to do as if, in our situation, implies always doing something. Whatever we do, is fictitious, and whenever we make a fiction, it becomes a consumable product. This is why, in our situation, there is no question concerning the meaning of our acts: they are beyond meaning. They are motions of an autonomous and automatic apparatus of survival: of technological progress. They are inert.

Now this negative dialectics of the meaning of "art" is the momentum which propels survival and suspends death. To survive is to do as if one were alive by doing something. Thus all the records previously achieved by mere mortals are broken. Not only a glorious technological progress is thus made possible, but equally a scientific, economic and social progress. And the enormous fertility of our civilisation in original works of art, ideas, happenings and events is the result of our doing everything as if we were doing something. Our mere survival proves that nothing is more dynamical, more violent and more progressive than the geometrically accelerated inert motion. We survive like a missile shot into the Sun and guided automatically by perfect cancellation of its inherent contradictions.

There is no "history" in such a progressive situation, because there is no possibility for revolutions. In a negative dialectics every protest, every negation, becomes automatically an element of support, of affirmation. Every tendency opposed to continued survival is automatically appropriated by the automatic apparatus of survival. Every distruction becomes automatically constructive, just as, of course, every construction is, ipso facto, ~~destructive~~ constructive. In such a situation of continued survival all historical categories like progressive and reactionary, right and left, conservative and revolutionary lose their meanings, dance around each other and change places. It goes without saying that all Marxist tendencies are obviously conservative, rightist and reactionary in the sense that they do not contest progress as such, but only the present direction of progress. They are conservative, rightist and reactionary, because they are progressist. But the same is true of those apparently revolutionary, (i.e. reactionary) tendencies which oppose progress as such, like the "sexual", "environmental", "pharmacological", "parapsychological", "anti-psychiatrical" and so forth "revolutions". They strengthen the apparatus of progressive survival, because they are linked to it in feed-back. They are those parts of the apparatus through which it absorbs noises. To understand the situation of negative dialectics in surviving societies, historical categories must be abandoned, and substituted by the categories of theory of information and cybernetics. "History" is the biography of society, and not appropriate to societies which survive, because they are no longer alive. Cybernetics are appropriate to them, because societies survive in the form of complex, dynamical systems. As survivors we exist in a post-historical situation.

But to survive means to last longer than somebody else. It means that history is still going on around us, and that there are others who can still live and die, and make revolutions. It is with relation to them that we are surviving. Our apparatus of continued survival is not Divine, omnipotent and omnipresent, although it is automatic. It is, on the contrary, in a sense a self-defeating apparatus. In order to continue, it will have to absorb the others, and if it succeeds in doing so, there will be no other left to survive, and survival will have ended. A different situation, one of an omnipresent and omnipotent apparatus will have come about, and there is not much sense in calling it one of survival. Or it will not succeed in absorbing the noise of the others, and thus will be killed from the outside. There are signs that the second alternative is more probable than the first one. That history will be re-instated, without us. Then our survival will no longer be a problem for all the others. And we know it. And we are filled, deep down in our bones, with terror. This terror of ours is the background of our art of survival. Our inertia is a kind of paralysis of terror which shows that to survive is, after all, a form of living.