

Lenin and the immanent unconscious

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Abstract: Why can a schizophrenic, a-social anti-movement approaching the Unknown at the zero level of humanity, not be the revolution itself, instead of its supposed degeneration? Can Lenin be liberated from the humanist-utopian evaluatory matrix, such that he shines even brighter as the prescient harbinger of the movement towards an anti-utopian revolutionary process?

The Leninist “totalitarian disaster”, destruction and ruin then turns out to be, in fact, the revolutionary unworking propelled by characters harkening to Nietzsche’s “most involuntary and unconscious artists in existence”. Lenin, read alongside Platonov’s apocalyptic account of Soviet life, forces these questions and possible formulations on us.

It will be seen that a domain of what we call the immanent unconscious seems to internally sustain and animate Lenin’s horizon of politics. This follows from Lenin’s fidelity to Marx’s critique of political economy, which presages a revolutionary process engendering forms of human activity with an openness to being and existence, a necessary dystopic interlude for the dissolution of the value-form of capital. No wonder, then, Lenin envisioned not just the withering away of the state but of democracy itself. Dystopia must be rehabilitated and given its proper place.

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When Lenin contended in October 1917 that in socialism even the cook can govern¹, it seems fairly clear that he is going beyond welfarism, beyond, for example, demands like, raising the salary of cooks, etc. Nor was it per se focused on achieving what is usually called “true equality” or “true justice”. Nor even about achieving “radical equality”, as such. If justice is, as Nietzsche asserted, “a compromise between approximately equal powers”, then it does not take much to see that Lenin has very little truck with this conception.²

Surely, it has a lot to do with the attempt to do away with the division between mental and manual labour, already thereby reconfiguring the meaning of justice. We see such a sense in which the black Marxist scholar CLR James much later and in a different context invokes Lenin in his essay titled “Every Cook Can Govern”.³ Writing in 1956, James deploys the phrase which has by now become a self-explanatory dictum, to launch a critique of concentrated power in the Soviet Union.

Nor is it about resentment of the lower classes. It is not about slave morality’s rancor and ill-will towards the rulers, and those who govern. It is not about “capturing state power” just to deliver or gain a comeuppance. It is not about class revenge in that narrow sense. The cook does not appear as a “victim”, afflicted by what Wendy Brown might call “wounded

attachments”.⁴ Lenin is very clear that the proletariat cannot just lay hold of the existing state and set it in motion. Lenin writes:

The proletariat cannot “lay hold of” the “state apparatus” and “set it in motion”. But it can smash everything that is oppressive, routine, incorrigibly bourgeois in the old state apparatus and substitute its own, new apparatus. The Soviets of Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies are exactly this apparatus.⁵

Lenin emphasizes that “we are not utopians”. Then he adds:

We know that an unskilled labourer or a cook cannot immediately get on with the job of state administration. In this we agree with the Cadets, with Breshkovskaya, and with Tsereteli.⁶

Lenin’s central point is that the working people and the poor can govern. They can and must be trained in the art of governing. The cook can govern, the cook needs training:

We differ, however, from these citizens in that we demand an immediate break with the prejudiced view that only the rich, or officials chosen from rich families, are capable of administering the state, of performing the ordinary, everyday work of administration. We demand that training in the work of state administration be conducted by class-conscious workers and soldiers and that this training be begun at once, i.e., that a beginning be made at once in training all the working people, all the poor, for this work.⁷

All of this can be fairly straightforwardly derived from many of Lenin’s writings and speeches, and indeed from his actual political practice, during the crucial period of the October Revolution in 1917-18.

It is however very easy to jump the gun here, and end up glossing over many internal moments and instances that is packed in Lenin’s assertion that the cook can govern.

“Elementary rules”

For one, Lenin is not suggesting that the cook will no longer cook. There is no freedom as such. The cook shall cook, and cook better. One thing is sure – this time it will be different. *Different* – yes! The cook shall now cook like never before, for now is “the time”: the time of socialism, the time of revolution. Which also means that those governing will govern like never before, or not govern at all, and start cooking, switch places.

“The cook shall govern” therefore involves cooking and not just a “promotion” to the “higher” art of governing. Learning how to govern

can go hand in hand with cooking in the time of socialism. The “same old” work of cooking encodes within itself the possibility that a cook shall govern. Governing and cooking have both undergone a transformation. The “training” to govern which Lenin has in mind is not possible without these all-around transformations. The two feed into each other.

Far from emanating from *ressentiment* then, “the cook shall govern” can in fact be countering it. Indeed, the cooks and all workers here can remind us of what Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals* calls “the most involuntary and most unconscious artists in existence”.⁸ He is of course speaking of the earliest “State” or the first ruler and conqueror, “too fearsome, too sudden, too convincing, too “different” even to become merely hated”. Their

work is the instinctive creation of forms, the imposition of forms. They are the most involuntary and most unconscious artists in existence.⁹

But Nietzsche, in the same work, invokes the imagery of the earliest animals naturally living in water before “they were forced either to become land animals or die off”. Similarly, before the rulers and conquerors emerged to subjugate the vast majority, humans were naturally moored in our unconscious drives. When in an earlier age, humans moved with “their ruling unconscious drives which guided them safely”, now they were reduced to their “consciousness”, “their most impoverished and error-prone organ!”¹⁰ This assumption seems to be held by a huge swathe of thinkers and radical theorists, perhaps even Lenin.

The reader must be wondering: what really allows us to suggest that Lenin is pitching for his own version of the most involuntary, most unconscious artist in existence? Firstly, consider the kind of world Lenin envisions in *The State and Revolution* (1917), one where:

there is no distinction between the members of society as regards their relation to the social means of production.¹¹

And secondly, what they do, their activity, is envisioned by Lenin as emanating from some kind of spontaneous intercourse or habit – something reinforced by the convergence of mental and manual labour. Here is a world where:

people will gradually become accustomed to observing the elementary rules of social intercourse that have been known for centuries and repeated for thousands of years in all copy-book maxims. They will become accustomed to observing them without force, without coercion, without subordination, without the special apparatus for coercion called the state.¹²

Lenin invokes not “socialist equality” or some “policy” of distribution to be adopted by the state, but “the elementary rules of social intercourse that have been known for centuries”. It is as though once the special apparatus for coercion called the state is done away with, people can very well revert to observing those “elementary rules” without the use of force: they will not just (slowly) become accustomed to observing them without force, but there seems to be some kind of memory among humans of such rules “known for centuries” that Lenin seems to be banking on.

Lenin of course is not just asserting the eventual withering away of the state but the withering away of democracy itself as the horizon of his politics. What is important to note is the way he understands the *process*. For him, the process of withering away is both gradual and spontaneous:

The expression “the state withers away” is very well-chosen, for it indicates both the gradual and the spontaneous nature of the process. Only habit can, and undoubtedly will, have such an effect; for we see around us on millions of occasions how readily people become accustomed to observing the necessary rules of social intercourse when there is no exploitation, when there is nothing that arouses indignation, evokes protest and revolt, and creates the need for suppression.¹³

“Gradual” and “spontaneous” surely takes us to “habit”, about people becoming accustomed to observing the necessary rules of social intercourse: and then the elimination of “the need for suppression”. All the while Lenin is eliminating depth, and zeroing in into the plane of immanence where depth and surface converge. Does this surprise us? I found that Alain Badiou had also traced this dimension in Lenin.

In an essay on Lenin and the 20th century, Badiou identifies “the Leninist passion for the real”, as the attempt to purify the real by extracting it from the reality that envelops and obscures it. He states:

Hence the violent taste for the surface and for transparency. The century attempts to react against profundity.... It promotes the immediate and sensitive surface.¹⁴

Animated not by the ideal but the real, such a “thought” involves destruction of all depth. And,

(it) has to grasp the appearance as appearance, or the real as pure event of its appearance. In order to arrive at this point, it is necessary to destroy every depth, every presumption of substance, every assertion of reality.¹⁵

We should note two points of Badiou, before moving on.

One, in the same passage, he aligns the revolutionary “passion for the real” with Nietzsche’s genealogy and the “transvaluation of all values”.

Secondly, there is a suggestion that Lenin’s and the century’s resort to or openness to the use of violence and the infamous “ruthlessness” must be captured in terms of “enthusiasm”. Badiou writes that

Extreme violence is, therefore, the reciprocal correlative of extreme enthusiasm, since what is at stake is indeed, to talk like Nietzsche, the transvaluation of all values.¹⁶

What do we have here?

The elimination of depth, or the real as the pure event of its appearance – surely such an enthusiasm is underpinned by visions of a form of life marked by a happy spontaneity of habit and centuries-old customs and rules. This also approximates certain registers in Nietzsche’s “transvaluation of all values”. And as we saw above, this has a strong connection with the unconscious drives, where the new human is one who can act and live like “the most involuntary, most unconscious artists in existence”.

Lenin’s traversal of the “elementary rules”, “habit” and “enthusiasm” can also be read as homologous to his engagement with the spontaneous consciousness of the working class in his well-known *What is To Be Done?* (1902). The same can be said to hold true for his call that we must always “begin from the beginning again”, or “fail, but fail better”.

In *What is to be Done?* Lenin is critiquing the penchant for economism rather than seeking to hunt down spontaneity in all and every form possible. He is in favour of “raising and stimulating the spontaneously awakening political consciousness of the workers”, but opposes “bowing to spontaneity”.¹⁷ Against trade-unionism, he calls upon the revolutionaries,

“to utilize the sparks of political consciousness, which the economic struggle generates among the workers, for the purpose of raising them to the level of Social-Democratic political consciousness”.¹⁸

Lenin seems to working with a notion of the elementary and the spontaneous – what we can call the elementary unconscious. So when he invokes “the elementary rules of social intercourse that have been known for centuries and repeated for thousands of years”, it is fairly clear that he is not referring to the notion of the unconscious we find in Freud.

It might not be out of place to draw attention to Jacques Ranciere’s work. He attempted to define a particular notion of the unconscious, what he called the aesthetic unconscious, which cannot be grasped through the “biographism” of Freudian psychoanalysis.¹⁹

Leninist unconscious is “elementary”. This notion of the unconscious is different from the unconscious which emerged once humans, according to Nietzsche, started “getting reduced” to consciousness, the source of “bad conscience”. It is not produced by repression, blockage, displacement or the activity of the primary process as in Freud. The “conscious” waking states will just be what they are really in their “unconscious”, meaning that the one cannot be separated from the other, or rather that they are in fact one and the same.

As we will see below, with regard to the depiction of Soviet life in Andrei Platonov’s novel, *Chevengur* (1928), Fredric Jameson refers to “an immanence in which consciousness has not found any distance from itself or formed any concepts”.²⁰ It is in this sense of the immanent unconscious that, I propose, Lenin’s “elementary rules of social intercourse” were conceived to be practiced in the absence of any “special apparatus for coercion called the state”. The difference is that in *Chevengur* the immanent consciousness seems to be generated spontaneously in the here and now, from the conditions of life rather than from memory or any continuity with the past, or as the resurfacing of a long-suppressed habit of the unconscious. What had been posed as a utopian project is now to be immanently generated from within. Artifice gives way to lucidity. The revolutionary process is slowly coming out of the orbit of the humanist-utopian register.

Marx’s value-form

Yet on the other hand, Lenin also can be read as subscribing to a notion of the Freudian unconscious to the extent that the latter is coterminous with what Samo Tomsic calls the capitalist unconscious.²¹ Given Lenin’s adherence to Marx’s theory of the value form, this is not surprising at all. We find proof of this in Lenin’s vision when, in *The State and Revolution* (1917), he proposes not just the withering away of the state but of democracy itself. Lenin’s understanding is that democracy (including rights, liberty, equality) is homologous to the “repressed social” produced by the form of value which produces capital.²²

Lenin’s endeavor follows from Marx’s insight in *Capital* that “value converts every product into a hieroglyph”. And then: “To stamp an object of utility with value is just as much a social product as language”.²³ The social here, involving the equivalence of different portions of “total social labour”, is one which gets constituted behind the backs of individuals who are immersed in the “solipsistic consciousness” focused on the exchange of use-values -- that is, on condition of what Sohn-Rethel calls the “non-knowledge” of these individuals.²⁴ The unconscious is coterminous with the operation of the law of value under capitalism.

Clearly, the two different notions of the unconscious (the capitalist unconscious and what we have called the immanent unconscious) in Lenin are in very different registers. How they are related to each other?

Our findings here seem to push us towards proposing a thesis that the destruction of the value-form of capital involving the dissolution of the capitalist unconscious, invariably segues and pivots into an immersion into the domain of the immanent unconscious. The “immanent unconscious”, we shall see, turns out to be crucial in Lenin’s attempt to free human activity from the capture by the value machine which “converts every product into a hieroglyph”. *The proposition that “every cook can govern” then is really about defining a form of human activity which refuses the conversion into a hieroglyph.*

Lenin’s “cook who can govern” seeks to dismantle the value form. We see this reflected in the intent of the Soviet decrees on the abolition of private property and the emancipation of labour. This involved not just workers control over the means of production, but compulsory introduction of universal labour conscription.²⁵ The dictatorship of the proletariat is about abolishing democracy which engenders capitalist exploitation – only a politics which has as its horizon the abolition of such a democracy, can fight or end the rule of capital. Only then can the concrete abstraction of “the annihilation of space by time” and the resultant capital accumulation, of “value begetting value”, be halted.

Interestingly, it is in the work of the film-maker Andrey Tarkovsky that we find another formulation of the problem of the capitalist unconscious and the path towards its dissolution. As we find in his movie *The Stalker*, the dissolution of the capitalist unconscious is ensured through its (impossible) embodiment in the Zone and the Room. The three main characters, as we know, travel into the Zone. Allegorically speaking, the unconscious now becomes the place, a habitat, folding back the conscious into itself. That is why, for Tarkovsky, the Zone does not symbolize anything. We just need to keep in mind what he says about the “artistic image”:

The function of the image, as Gogol said, is to express life itself, not ideas or arguments about life. It does not signify life or symbolise it, but embodies it, expressing its uniqueness.²⁶

This is also clear in the way Tarkovsky understands creative expression and “realism”:

All creative work strives for simplicity, for perfectly simple expression; and this means reaching down into the furthest depths of the recreation of life.... The striving for perfection leads an artist to make spiritual discoveries, to exert the utmost moral effort. Aspiration towards the absolute is the moving force in the development of mankind. For me the idea of realism in art is linked with that force.²⁷

By taking the audience through the Zone, the unconscious is freed of its status as part of an internal Freudian primary process, of its status as the “thought” of the dream-work or free association, but is now life itself – “the furthest depths of the recreation of life... the aspiration towards the absolute”.

Not without a sense of irony and paradox, we might even say that now the cook can be said to act and work like a man of “aristocratic values”, really distant from the man of *ressentiment* – and really moving without “bad conscience”, like “the most involuntary and most unconscious artists in existence”.

Turn towards Being

In Nietzsche, the “unconscious drive” is tempered by, as we all know, his commitment to the “idealism of life”, or the vitality of life. This of course takes him to valorize Napoleon or pit Rome against Judea.

What happens in the case of Lenin?

What must be emphasized is that the (immanent) unconscious drive in Lenin does not brook any idealisms – not even the “idealism of life” we find in Nietzsche. And it should be by now clear that here we are considering Nietzsche’s idealism in the best possible sense as elaborated by Georges Bataille – which means, for instance, that we are not assuming that the idea of the Superman is intrinsic to Nietzsche’s thought.²⁸

This is my proposition: Lenin’s cook, given the destruction of all idealisms (including the value-form of capital) which is presupposed, gives effect to a possibility Nietzsche once entertained: “to perish from absolute knowledge could well form part of the basis of being”.²⁹ Or in another translation, this quote from Nietzsche reads:

... it might be the fundamental character of existence that people with complete knowledge gets destroyed.³⁰

Let us unpack this.

We know that Michel Foucault delved quite a bit into this assertion by Nietzsche. In his magnificent *The Order of Things*, Foucault takes the Cartesian ego as an example of this “absolute knowledge”, but which in the nineteenth century, he argues, is overtaken by the advent of the modern cogito which is not based on “absolute knowledge” but knowledge or thought which always implies action. He writes:

Thought had already ‘left’ itself in its own being as early as the nineteenth century; it is no longer theoretical.³¹

Thought is no longer theoretical, and always necessarily implies action. Foucault writes further:

As soon as it functions it offends or reconciles, attracts or repels, breaks, dissociates, unites or reunites; it cannot help but liberate and enslave. Even before prescribing, suggesting a future, saying what must be done, even before exhorting or merely sounding an alarm, *thought, at the level of its existence, in its very dawning, is in itself an action - a perilous act*. Sade, Nietzsche, Artaud, and Bataille have understood this on behalf of all those who tried to ignore it; but it is also certain that Hegel, Marx, and Freud knew it. (*italics mine*).³²

Here we find the emphasis that “thought, at the level of its existence, in its very dawning, (is) in itself an action”. Thought is action, but this thought can also be unconscious. Hence, Foucault emphasises on “thought, at the level of its existence”, regardless of its articulation or subjective expression, which reminds us of Freud’s “primary process”. The capitalist unconscious is approached when Foucault writes about that “which eludes me”, with regards to the labour-process:

Can I say that I am this labour I perform with my hands, yet which eludes me not only when I have finished it, but even before I have begun it? Can I say that I am this life I sense deep within me, but which envelops me both in the irresistible time that grows side by side with it and poses me for a moment on its crest, and in the imminent time that prescribes my death?³³

Foucault’s reference to Marx and labour is not without merit – for here we find the connection with the value-form of capital as the idealism which always necessarily engenders activity, labour, action – the hieroglyphic conversion of products of labour. Marx’s insight can be seen as providing the crucial link between thought and action, for Foucault.

But what about Nietzsche’s assertion about the destruction of absolute knowledge opening us to being, to existence? Foucault seems to suggest that this is achieved in the destruction of the Cartesian cogito, but we hold that it is really the destruction of what he calls the “modern cogito”, where the individual is an “empirico-transcendental doublet”, which opens us to the question of being and existence.

This is where Lenin becomes important. Lenin approaches the relationship Foucault draws between thought and action, from the side of action – but action which is now no longer bound to the unconscious or to “the inert network of what does not think”.³⁴ This opens the way towards the action and activity of the cook who can govern, which in turn, as we will see in Platonov’s account of Soviet life, displays a tremendous openness towards the question of being and existence. What Foucault

calls the “being of thought”, which is central to the modern cogito, must be made beingless, not by transforming thought alone, but by transforming action, activity, which involves undoing the “inert network”.

How can action free itself of “thought, at the level of its existence”?

Lenin is not asking: how is thought possible which does not give rise to action? That would have taken him back to “pure thought”, “absolute knowledge”, a kind of a critique of capital from the rear. He is asking: what is the mode of action which does not generate thought, thought which will actually, as the unconscious (the labour “which eludes me”), pin down action? How can human activity not generate its own yoke? How can we destroy the “empirico-transcendental doublet”? How can the proletariat actually be the grave-diggers of capital and not generate its own yoke, its own grave?

Lenin can be here understood in terms of the problem posed by Tarkovsky. Tarkovsky writes that “the connection between man’s behaviour and his destiny has been destroyed; and this tragic breach is the cause of his sense of instability in the modern world”. Lenin then can be seen as trying “to restore man’s participation in his own future.”³⁵

Lenin’s cook who can govern is really about inaugurating a mode of action which does not come under the imposition of “thought”, which does not generate thought, such that, to paraphrase Foucault, “when I perform labour, it does not yet elude me, even before I have begun”.

Nietzsche’s premonition achieves a kind of fulfilment in Lenin. We can state Lenin by way of paraphrasing Nietzsche: Not perishing with absolute knowledge, not perishing in spite of or precisely because of absolute knowledge, but *rising up through the willing destruction of absolute knowledge* – which now involves the destruction of both the Cartesian ego as well as the modern cogito, hence the destruction of the value-form of capital, which is what Lenin’s formulation about the cook who can govern entails.

What happens then to action, human activity freed from the unconscious, from “inert nature”? The elemental rules, the elementary unconscious, or the notion of the unconscious drives in Nietzsche allows us to imagine the “cook who can govern” as “the most involuntary, the most unconscious artist in existence”. But as we will see, the openness to being and existence, creates an exceptional form of life in the Soviet Union as we find depicted by Andrei Platonov in his novel *Chevengur*.³⁶

In Platonov’s telling of Soviet life, Lenin’s immanent unconscious will transmogrify into a zero level of humanity, in a continuum with organic, vegetative being. The cook who can govern prefigures a fundamental ontological condition, a thrownness if you like, into the dystopic revolutionary life.

Ironic dystopia

Fredric Jameson writes, “in Platonov (also) the great inaugural experience of secular organic time returns, but within the framework of a devastated peasant landscape rather than in Baudelaire’s city”.³⁷

Jameson’s stresses that, in Platonov, socialism turns out to be solidarity in a void, solidarity doubling up on a fundamental anonymity, heightening a strange schizophrenic isolation. Socialism is like “the huddling of destitute bodies together for warmth”.³⁸ It wallows in impoverishment and destitution always experienced with a tinge of strange excitement. “The characters of this Utopia are grotesques in their peculiar a- or post-social isolation”.³⁹

What is stunning is that Platonov’s world though is able to mix irony with Utopia. Richard Rorty would be surprised to know that there is no claim to Truth in this Utopia. It is as though these characters are guided by his postmodern dictum: “If we take care of freedom, truth can take care of itself”!⁴⁰ The characters are each free, dissipating in all directions with a weird twinkle in their eyes – not just post-social, they seem to be highly ironic schizophrenics. Jameson very helpfully quotes Adorno who writes about “a Utopia of misfits and oddballs, in which the constraints for uniformization and conformity have been removed, and human beings grow wild like plants in a state of nature”.⁴¹

The rush to the void is evident in the “simple” life and activities of people depicted by Platonov. One of the main characters Zakhar Pavlovich narrates the story of a young boy whose father died while fishing. The boy is taken in by a woman named Mavra Fetisovna. We read:

The boy remembered the fishing rod his father had made for him; he (the father) had thrown the rod into the lake and forgotten about it. By now it must have caught a fish. He could go and eat the fish, so strangers wouldn’t scold him for eating their food. “Auntie,” he began, “I’ve caught a fish in the water. Let me go and look for it. I can eat it—then you won’t have to feed me.”⁴²

The boy’s presumed niceness and cooperative attitude towards his caretaker immediately opens up a sinking feeling. A fundamental loneliness and anonymity is unmistakable. His father’s death itself comes from a bizarre interest in death:

“Contemplating the lake for years on end, the fisherman had gone on thinking about one and the same thing: the interest of death”.⁴³

In the end, the fisherman

couldn’t bear it any longer and threw himself in the lake from a boat, having bound his legs with a rope so as not to start swimming inadvertently.⁴⁴

And why would he bind himself before jumping into the lake? Because he actually did not believe in death but wanted to visit death since he was bored with his life:

What he really wanted was to have a look and see what was there; it might be a great deal more interesting than life in a village or on the shore of a lake.⁴⁵

We find an intimate relation with ennui, the vegetative life of organic time of the earth. The sobering feeling about Utopia, so filled with a clever irony, is that “even in Utopia, organic being will still suffer” (Jameson) – hence, what’s the point?⁴⁶

We are not then surprised to find that in this world, ignorance takes precedence over culture. Jameson discusses an excerpt about Dvanov, one of the main characters:

in his (Dvanov) soul he loved ignorance more than culture, for ignorance is a bare field, while culture is a field already grown over with plants, so that nothing else can grow there. It was for that reason that Dvanov was happy that in Russia the revolution had weeded absolutely clean the few spots where there had been sprouts of culture, while people remained what they had always been, fertile space. And Dvanov was in no hurry to have anything sown in it. He felt that good soil cannot contain itself for long, and would of its own accord push forth something absolutely new and valuable, if only the winds of war did not carry from Western Europe the seeds and spores of capitalistic weeds.⁴⁷

Culture then is a kind of barren space, “already grown over”, while ignorance is a “bare field” full of possibility. “Weeding culture” out is not just about the revolutionary destruction of “bourgeois culture” or “feudal values”. Jameson interprets it as taking us to a world before language. He writes: “this is an ignorance before language, an immanence in which consciousness has not found any distance from itself or formed any concepts”.⁴⁸ This ignorance before language where consciousness is neither defined nor separable from action or life can be called the immanent unconscious.

This is ignorance which must cancel itself out, which is not generative of culture. Each of Platonov’s characters seem geared up to be the schizophrenic version of Nietzsche’s “most involuntary and most unconscious artist in existence”. It is as though, with regard to the commodity form, the “solipsistic consciousness” in the act of exchange is no longer generative of the “repressed social”, or the chain of value. Instead, solipsistic consciousness has now found a subterranean resolution as it morphs into the schizophrenic a-sociality of the dystopic

revolutionary process. The capitalist unconscious is left to dissolve itself. What Foucault calls “the being of thought” dissolves itself. And what Tarkovsky called “the connection between man’s behaviour and his destiny”, will be restored, but not within the humanist-utopian register, not without a dissolution of the category of “destiny” itself.

The picture will however be incomplete if we do not include another register of the unconscious in the period of the Soviet avant garde. Perhaps best captured in the notion of the “optical unconscious” suggested later by Walter Benjamin, the best examples are Dziga Vertov’s kino-eye, Boris Arvatov’s concept of the object as comrade and the technique of defamiliarization in Soviet art.⁴⁹ Deleuze regards Vertov’s approach as inaugurating “the eye in the matter, a perception such as it is matter”, and “the radical affirmation of a dialectic of matter in itself”.⁵⁰

The destruction of all idealisms, the activation of the “eye in the matter” and the optical unconscious, cannot be fully understood in the framework of Freudian psychoanalysis. I am not sure to what extent the avant gardist turn really opens the way towards the kind of account of Soviet life we find in *Platonov*. The notion of the optical unconscious does seem to undermine the tendency towards the fascist “aestheticization of politics”. It does not, however, seem to be a marker of the dystopic openness to an ironically utopian schizophrenic a-sociality. That a schizoid dystopia undermines the fascist “aestheticization of politics” seems quite obvious. The Benjaminian notion seems to find its unravelling in *Platonov*.

Precisely in traversing the zero-level-of-humanity, the dystopic register in *Platonov*’s immanent unconscious actually is the also the harbinger of the possibility of a real revolutionary process. Verging on the dystopic, the almost-dystopic, perhaps even the undead world, in *Chevangur* seems like the necessary “stage”, instance or moment without which the “coming utopia” will only be a repetition of the old idealisms. What was not obvious was that Lenin’s cook who can govern was only the entrance to all these ambivalent determinations and labyrinthine pathways.

Platonov’s characters never pose the question of utopia, but simply wallowing in the zero level of humanity. They are at best waiting. Immersed in ennui, they end up imagining the reversal of the metaphysical, ontological human condition, like the fisherman who always suspected the reality of death. What appears as the high-minded metaphysical cosmic pathos is immediately interrupted by pathetic idiocy and ignorance, like the “unknown conscience” in *Zakhar Pavlovich*:

Some unknown conscience now apparent in his chest made him wish to walk over the earth without rest, to encounter grief in every village and weep over the coffins of strangers. But he was stopped by the artifacts that kept coming his way; the village elder gave him a clock to repair and the priest asked him to tune his grand piano.⁵¹

His conscience seems so much part of “culture”, but it is so easily disrupted or annulled by a stupid attachment to an old broken clock someone gives him for repair.

Jameson very presciently points out that Platonov provides us a riveting picture of the inner psychology of the revolution and utopia. However when we arrive at Platonov via Lenin, we are also able to further enrich the picture and unpack the different instances and inner moments of the revolutionary process. The destruction of the value form – that is, the revolutionary task directly emerging from the insights in Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme* – sets up human activity beyond the ken of the categories of the Freudian unconscious, beyond Foucault’s notion of thought which is necessarily always action. Human activity must be then seen in relation to the immanent unconscious or unconscious drives intimate to the vegetative organic time of being. Hence we might have to part ways with Jameson interpretation that Platonov’s world is about providing the conditions from where we can really imagine Utopia. These dystopic “conditions” might not be the means to something loftier, uplifting and ennobling, viz., the Utopia to be envisioned – they might be the revolution itself. So we here push the Jamesonian reading in a different direction.

“Tiny spectator”

But can we get some kind of a grasp, an analytical clarity if you like, of this grotesque, schizophrenic revolutionary character whose way to “utopia” is to wallow and wait, or not even wait, just wallow, in the mire of the immanent unconscious, somewhere between deep vegetative organic time and the zero level of humanity? In other words, can we still insist on asking something doctrinaire like this: Where, if at all, is the “revolutionary subject” or the “self”?

This is where we find that alongside the most involuntary, most unconscious artist in existence we find in Platonov, something like a minimal self – a tiny spectator, “the eunuch of the human soul” – amidst the desolation, destruction and ruins:

But there is within man also a tiny spectator who takes part neither in action nor in suffering, and who is always cold-blooded and the same. It is his service to see and be a witness, but he is without franchise in the life of man and it is not known why he exists in solitude. This corner of man’s consciousness is lit both day and night, like the doorman’s room in a large building. This heart doorman sits entire days at the entrance into man and knows all the inhabitants of his building, but not a single resident asks the doorman’s advice about his affairs.⁵²

A tiny spectator within man – who is this tiny spectator? Inner conscience? Higher Self? The Buddhist about to reach “total extinction”, *nibbana*? Or just Reason, the rational self of the Enlightenment? Maybe all and none of this. This is where we see that the socialist revolutionary process as it actually happened in the Soviet Union itself engenders a framework unique to itself, also unprecedented in history. This reinforces our insistence on breaking with the humanist-utopian framework. Platonov further describes this tiny spectator, now as “the eunuch of man’s soul”. These metaphors are other-worldly and yet dig deep into the world:

He (the tiny spectator) existed somewhat like a man’s dead brother; everything human seemed to be at hand, but something tiny and vital was lacking. Man never remembers him, but always trusts him, just as when a tenant leaves his and his wife within, he is never jealous of her and the doorman. This is the eunuch of man’s soul.⁵³

Revolution sans Utopia

We started with Lenin’s proclamation that the Bolsheviks can retain state power – and that the cooks and the working classes can indeed govern. Now we wonder if these cooks and workers are the ones who atrophy into and appear as the grotesque, schizophrenic, existentially utopian and ironic characters like Pavlovich, Dvanov and the fisherman who refuses to accept death.

Yet it is not about the Utopia leading us into a Totalitarian Disaster. It is about Revolution completely separating itself from Utopia. The revolutionary process is now human activity in the plane of the immanent unconscious.

Rather than completing or implementing a Utopia, the Revolution is about the march to the Unknown.⁵⁴ There is no Utopia. The immanent unconscious brooks no Utopia. The journey into the Unknown invariably leads to a traversal into the domains of being, existence and ontology.

The Revolution turns out to be the work of excavation to carve out a new space beyond not just the idealism of capital, but also Nietzsche’s Superman as well as his idealism of life. The Revolution is the deep work in the burrows, pits and trenches of this space and place.

The doorman of the building, the tiny spectator, the eunuch of man’s soul – these are the figures that live through and witness the destruction and ruin, with a remarkable intimacy to the deep vegetal, organic life. They could be the sentinels or archivists of the revolution, or what becomes of the revolution, the least visible but steadfast repository of society’s memory. Action, practice, indeed the “revolutionary subject”, is now coterminous with the zero level of humanity. The Party, Vanguard, Bureaucracy, “Totalitarian state”, the great Leader – all of these meta-entities now falls in place as really just the outer shell of the revolution.

The Leninist-Platonovian arc of the revolutionary process is not the shrinking of civilisation and humanity but their highest achievements sans humanist platitudes and apologias.

The dystopic void that the people inhabit in *Chevengur* can remind us of Fred Moten's idea of the undercommons with regard to the condition of black slaves.⁵⁵ One major referent for him is the condition of the slaves in the hold of a ship. In the revolutionary process sans utopia that we are considering, it is as though the hold would now impossibly double up as the deck which provides us the vision, the vision from within the dystopic void.

Into the Anthropocene

The picture we have painted might seem to turn the question of revolution into an impossibly cumbersome process, passing through an apparent apocalypse of the undead and what not, perhaps traversing millennia. It might feel like we are suggesting something like the myth of the eternal return, the inevitability of the calamitous Great Flood which will cleanse the world, after which a Noah's Ark will appear to "begin from the beginning again". This is the fertile quandary we land in if we read Lenin with Platonov. Otherwise in a traditional reading of Lenin, we can repeat Lenin's "to begin from the beginning" as just a matter of strategy and tactics in the anti-capitalist and revolutionary struggle and politics without having to plod the metaphysical or ontological depths as Platonov forces us to do.

However, thanks to the spectacle and idealism of capital and its concrete abstractions, we inhabit a world full of unknown short circuits amidst myriad kaleidoscopic snake and ladder formations. Maybe what we get after the long haul of the Leninist-Platonovian arc, is already upon us, in the present conjuncture, if only on the other side of the Moebius strip. For if we just try, we can see that the world of Lenin and Platonov approximates the apocalyptic end times we are supposedly living in today. I can point to Mackenzie Wark's work which shows how Platonov had an intuition about the Anthropocene.⁵⁶

As noted above, those like Fred Moten find a fundamental modality of understanding the present in the condition of the slaves in the hold of the ship, as evident in his idea of the undercommons.⁵⁷ CLR James might have invoked Lenin's cook in the context of democracy, but we can see that his (James's) invocation of the early maroon republics in Haiti does also remind us of Platonov's world in *Chevengur*. The eighteenth century maroon leader Mackandal of Haiti is more emblematic for the revolution sans utopia than Toussaint or Dessalines. Mackandal is the schizophrenic leader of the slaves, in tune with vegetative organic time and, to paraphrase Adorno, quite like human beings growing wild like plants in nature. In the wild intimacy with nature, the man of the soil Mackandal's weapon against the enemy is poison made from plants. He is burned alive

in 1758 in an event regarded as mythical and surreal, prompting some great writings.⁵⁸ The recent work of Achilles Mbembe on necropolitics also comes to mind.⁵⁹

Finally, at the other end, is the prediction of those like Ray Kurzweil and many tech gurus about The Coming Singularity and the World Brain, which will apparently overtake human intelligence.⁶⁰ Pundits today warn us of a world which will be beyond human control. And yet we are only too aware that this might only be a challenge to humans to emerge as more and more specifically and critically human, what Zizek has called “the encounter with a truth hidden in our ordinary human existence”.⁶¹ The absolutely irreplaceable core of what it is to be a human beyond the “general intellect” seems to emerge ever sharper in our field of vision. The human is resolved into the critical minimal self, where the specifically human emerges ever sharper in our encounter with the World Brain. We wonder, how this would relate to Platonov’s “tiny spectator” and doorman of the revolution, so intimately close to organic being and yet so irreplaceably human.

- 1 In his Oct 1917 intervention, "Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?" (published in *Lenin: Collected Works, Vol. 26*) Lenin expressed this viewpoint with reference to the cook who must learn to govern. Subsequently, in 1925 Soviet posters appear with the caption: "Every cook must govern". The exact phrase "every cook can govern" or "every cook must learn to govern" is however widely (though loosely) attributed to Lenin. Referencing Lenin, CLR James wrote an essay in 1956 called "Every cook must learn to govern" (Noel Ignatiev, ed., *A New Notion: Two Works by CLR James*, PM Press, Oakland, 2010).
- 2 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Ian Johnston, Richer Resources Publication, Virginia, 2009, p. 9.
- 3 CLR James, op. cit.
- 4 Not at all accidental that Wendy Brown deploys Nietzsche's notion of *ressentiment* to show that Foucault is unable to really understand the sources of passive attachment to power with regard to the marginalized "politicised identities". See her *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, Princeton, 1995.
- 5 "Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?".
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 68.
- 9 Ibid., p. 68.
- 10 Ibid., p. 66.
- 11 Lenin, *The State and Revolution, 1917*
- 12 Lenin, *The State and Revolution*.
- 13 Lenin, *The State and Revolution*.
- 14 Badiou, "One Divides Itself Into Two", in Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis and Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Lenin Reloaded*, Duke University Press, 2007, p. 14.
- 15 Badiou, p. 15.
- 16 Ibid., p. 13.
- 17 Lenin states this in an important footnote, *What is to be Done?*, Peking, 1973, p. 90.
- 18 Lenin, *ibid.*, p. 90.
- 19 Jacques Ranciere, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, Polity, 2010. Ranciere's work very rightly draws a connection between the "aesthetic unconscious" and the Unknown. The aesthetic unconscious, and more so the Unknown, seems to be kept quite aloof from any entanglement with the domain of social and political transformation or revolutionary politics, not least the one associated with Lenin.
- 20 Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 90.
- 21 Samo Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, Verso, London, 2013.
- 22 I use the "repressed social" following Žižek's usage in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London, 1989.
- 23 Marx, *Capital* Vol. 1, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1986, pp. 78-79.
- 24 Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2020.
- 25 Lenin, "Declaration of the Rights of the Working and Exploited People", 3 Jan 1918.
- 26 Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 1989, p. 111.
- 27 Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, p. 113.
- 28 Bataille, "Nietzsche and National Socialism", in *On Nietzsche*, Continuum, London and New York,
- 29 As quoted in Foucault, "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx", in James D. Faubion, ed., *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, New Press, 1999, p. 275.
- 30 Nietzsche, Section 39, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norman, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 37.
- 31 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Vintage, London, p. 357.
- 32 Ibid., p. 357.
- 33 Ibid., pp. 353-354.
- 34 Foucault writes: the modern cogito does not reduce the whole being of things to thought without ramifying the being of thought right down to the inert network of what does not think (*Ibid.*, p. 353).
- 35 Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, p. 235.

- 36 Andrei Platonov, *Chevengur*, Anthony Olcott (trans.), Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1978.
- 37 Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, p. 86.
- 38 Ibid., p. 91.
- 39 Ibid., p. 91
- 40 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 176.
- 41 Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, p. 99.
- 42 Platonov, p. 8.
- 43 Platonov, p. 6.
- 44 Platonov, p. 6.
- 45 Platonov, p. 6.
- 46 Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, p. 109.
- 47 Quoted in Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, pp. 89-90.
- 48 Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, p. 90.
- 49 I had earlier tried to engage the notion of the object as comrade to the subjective self-destitution of the revolutionary militant. See my "From October Revolution to Naxalbari: Understanding Political Subjectivity", in K. Murali, *On Postisms and Other Essays*, Kerala Press, 2020.
- 50 Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, University of Minneapolis Press, 1997, p. 39 & p. 40.
- 51 Platonov, p. 8.
- 52 Quoted in Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, p. 119.
- 53 Quoted in Jameson, *Seeds of Time*, p. 120.
- 54 So we have now cast Ranciere's Unknown and the (aesthetic) unconscious onto the domain of revolutionary politics.
- 55 Stefan Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Autonomedia, 2013.
- 56 Mackenzie Wark, ed., *Molecular Red Reader*, Verso, London, 2015.
- 57 Stefan Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons*.
- 58 Alejo Carpentier, *The Kingdom of this World*, 1949.
- 59 Achilles Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, Johns Hopkins University, 2019.
- 60 Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Nearer*, 2005.
- 61 Slavoj Zizek, "The Apocalypse of a Wired Brain", *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 46, Number 4 Summer 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1086/709222>

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