

In this paper we will investigate some rather specific ways how socialist thought has dealt with technology, knowledge and geography.

Though all our examples are drawn from the socialist past and they depict just Mediterranean places, it was not our intention to privilege just those references enumerated.

## 1. WHERE DOES SOCIALISM COME FROM?

Is there a story to be told about socialism? ... how it has emerged or how it has been invented and longed for by many? How it lasted as an idea or as a practice of governance? How it has failed and how it betrayed all what it stood for?

If there was ever a story about socialism, was it just one, maybe just one singular story? And was it not for some among us even more than that - was socialism not a glorious story? Or - in the first place - was there never just one possible story to be recounted about socialism but many, even uncountable many stories?

More to come... Was it not socialism that in some awkward sense was reluctant to speak about genealogies, be they someone else's - but also socialism's own family-story? Reluctancy concerning genealogies and story-telling that at some point turned into the imperative to de-familiarize everything known, or what was presumed to be known ... to estrange, disenchant the familiar, the known, the habitual. To introduce new kinds of relationships - other than natural, familial genealogies.

Altogether, considerable trouble with story-telling.

But, again. Was this silence about its own coming to fore a sign of

a radical impossibility? Socialism's impossibility to articulate its - in all respects - different and alien point-of-departure. Since this trajectory had no proper origin or source, no proper idea and less a proper destination. Or to be precise: socialism had not the proper origin, method and goal detectable and communicable within the world which was not a socialist world. Or the world which has not yet become or has not yet been transformed into a proper socialist world.

Walter Benjamin in his essay "The Storyteller" speaks of "a net that all stories form with one another in the end," contrasting "the short-lived memory of the storyteller" with "the eternalizing memory" of the novelist, which is informed by the search for unity: that of the "single hero, the single wandering or the single battle."

While novelist's representational unifying stance, needed in order to get a single total picture, presupposes at least a minimal distance from the events narrated, storyteller's net of stories makes such a distancing impossible.

A predicament whether socialism has a global future seems to have to enter this narrative net of unreliable short-memory and without a distance towards the events passed or coming.

## 2. THE IDEAL OF THE BROKEN-DOWN - ON THE NEAPOLITAN APPROACH TO THINGS TECHNICAL (SOHN-RETHEL, 21.03.1926.)

Alfred Sohn-Rethel's short essay on Naples and its relationship towards technology deals with a city grounded upon improbable transformations, misuse and false appropriations. Be it within the biological - like the saint-patron's liquidification of blood; be it religious fervor and organized crime; or be it in general things

technical - which is Sohn-Rethel's main field of interest. Altogether, a city more likely not to exist and subsequently always an astonishment how it persistently survives - though almost everything speak against its existence.

Naples becomes a city of unusual technologies, some of which Sohn-Rethel does not speak about, but are nevertheless worthy of mention. First and foremost, Naples is a city that is dominated by unusual forms of governance. To cite the respective Walter Benjamin's and Asja Lacis' description of Naples, "here Alfonso de Liguori was born, the saint who made the practice of the Catholic Church supple enough to accommodate the trade of the swindler and the whore, in order to control it with more or less rigorous penances in the confessional, for which he wrote a three-volume compendium. Confession alone, not the police, is a match for the self-administration of the criminal world, the camorra".

A city where policing, it seems, has been effectively abolished - not in order to destroy the legal realm altogether, but just to introduce a new supra-legal, codified way of controlling and governing, the confession. Naples in that regard becomes metaphorized as a place where the only real effective and supra-legal counter-measure against the organized, sedimented and effective power-structure is only of a communicative nature. Maybe only as a symbolic safe-haven within an otherwise unlikely environment not fit for living - but nevertheless.

To start with Sohn-Rethel, it seems that "in Naples, technical devices are, as a rule, broken: it is only under exceptional circumstances and due to some astonishing accident that something will be found to be intact. As time goes by, one begins to have the impression that everything is already broken before it leaves the factory".

This impression is valid for the entire realm of technology but in his brief article Sohn-Rethel will distinguish at 3 different domains of things technical and their respective usage.

The first domain is that of technology that is just ornamental, a mere and useless accessory. "What we are not talking about are the door handles, which in Naples appear to be among the mythical entities, and are only fixed to doors for symbolic purposes — which is because the doors of the city are only there to be left open and, when they are slammed shut by the current of a draught, to once again open with a horrified shrieking and shaking throughout their entire bodies; Naples with closed doors, that would be like Berlin without roofs on the houses..".

In contrast to the first one the second domain is not just ornamental and superfluous, but properly speaking supernatural. Again, Sohn-Rethel, "on the other hand, real danger is posed by elements such as electricity, which are apparently indestructible, and which always leave one wondering if they are even of this world. Of course, Naples has its own very special place for this phenomenon. Such inscrutable spiritual beings as these flow together uninhibitedly with the nimbus of the religious powers, and the festive Osram [light-bulb] is united, in Neapolitan saintly images, with the Madonna's aureole. [...] Nor is there any explanation for the iron law, according to which, every couple of days or so, the trams come to a standstill due to a power cut: LA CORRENTE NON C'È is the simple phrase usually preferred to explain this divine intervention. It is possible that the telephone would work very well indeed if the numbers did not go their own way and the official phone book, or at least telephone enquiries, could somehow be let in on the secret of these numbers. Well, whatever the details of the matter might be, in Naples all this no longer belongs to the realm of the purely technical".

But it is the third domain of the things technical that draws most of Sohn-Rethel's attention. A domain of "truly mechanical devices". It is here that the decisive Neapolitan twist concerning technology happens. And it is here within the mechanical machinery that Sohn-Rethel postulates his central argument. "Not, however, that they [=mechanical devices] are broken because they do not work: for the Neapolitan it is only when things are broken that they begin to work."

Or to it stress it even further, one could say that for Neapolitans "the essence of technology lies in making what is broken work", while this making broken things expresses "capacities [that] go well beyond the mere technical".

Resentment of the things working properly, devices functioning from the start on amounts to a doubt shared by Neapolitans that "the very fact that it [=a device] simply works means that one can never know how and to what end it will work". In some way this improvisational strategy of making broken devices work equals a domestication of the chance inherent in every technical process. Recalling Aristotle's distinction where technical or poietical reproduction is characterized by radical heterogeneity and chance, while praxis is characterized by likeliness and necessity - one could say that Neapolitan domestication of technical devices makes them, in the first place, practical.

This means that it's not so much the technical failure, as much unpredictable and unfortunate it could be, that arises suspicion among the Neapolitans but the very contingency of the technical reproduction itself. Neapolitan approach to things technical thus means to translate one kind of contingency into another one - a contingency that, though highly unstable and fragile, nevertheless can be mastered with practical means.

We quote Sohn-Rethel's decisive passage at length: "What is conceived as technical is that which really begins where man makes use of his veto against the closed and hostile automatism of machines and plunges himself into their world. And when he does, he proves to be leaps and bounds ahead of technical laws. For he does not take control of the machines by studying the manuals and learning how to use them, but by discovering his own body inside the machine. To begin with, he has destroyed the misanthropic magic of intact mechanical functions, but he then installs himself in the unmasked monster and its artless soul and enjoys this literal incorporation: ownership which gives him limitless power, the power of utopian existential omnipotence".

Existential omnipotence - this could be just a subjective, passive stance. A mere affection. Even the discovery of its own body incorporated into a machine, or the destruction of misanthropic magic of mechanical functions shall not necessarily mean an active, intentional approach towards the environment. There needs to be something more, a will.

And Sohn-Rethel speaks of such a will. A will to abuse, to run down. Depicting the cliché of a well-known Italian car driver, he says, "with hair-raising verve he races around in his car, and if this recklessness does not result in something being smashed up, a wall along the side of the street, or a donkey-cart, or even his own car, then it has all been a waste of time. One never really owns something until it has really been knocked around, otherwise it is just not worth it; it has to be used and abused, run down until there's practically nothing left of it".

This additional, final turn allows one to construct a sequence of how in Naples technology is being approached:

1. technical devices working properly, do not really function, because they aren't practical
2. only broken, which means repaired and refurbished devices work, because they have been made practical
3. to make a device practical and working, means to abuse it

This then comes to be a Neapolitan paradox: to become practical, you have first to be non-practical - to behave against every possible better knowledge. This would mean to introduce a new kind of economy in a city where no state institution and intervention can compete with two other distinct kind of economies: the sacred-confessional one and the informal-illegal one.

### 3. INTERLUDE (29.04.1954.)

29th of April, 1954. Island of Mljet, Southern Dalmatia, Yugoslavia. Her Majesty's secret agent Cary Grant meets Marshall Tito. Aiming to *bring Yugoslavia on to our side*, to the West, British officials suggest to Grant that he helps them to change the attitude of Western public opinion about Tito's Yugoslavia. It will not be necessary to persuade people that the Soviet Union is not hell on earth, but simply that not all socialist countries are. Or rather, in particular, that Yugoslavia is not. In order to accomplish this, the British need to give the world a new image of the country, its leader and its history.

Rollercoaster-like twists and turns to be found in the novel 54 by the Italian writers collective Wu Ming designate the space and history of socialist Yugoslavia to be a paradoxical meeting-point of various, incompatible and indiscernible historical and geographical forces. Dalmatian coast from Split to Dubrovnik and the incredible meeting of a Hollywood-star and a British agent with a former undercover Communist functionary, nowadays a Marshall, represent for the

authors the end of the "post-war" period and the dawn of new era, the globalization.

In the same sense that this alleged and fictitious meeting of two worlds propels the contemporary imaginary, the same goes for the author who made the "real" Cary Grant immortal - Alfred Hitchcock. As Tom Cohen has put it, "what we call 'Hitchcock' certainly saw himself, or itself, as at the dawn of 'globalization', the first master of all tele-media – and he analyzed his powers from the policial or imperial position (an '*Empire Hotel*' turns up here and there [in his films]) as well as the subversive Resistance (a term that also recurs).

If this imagined meeting on Mljet in 1954 is not just a phantasized alternative political history of the 20th century, but a symptom of a new globalized and mediatized world, it would be of some interest to investigate what that peculiar phrase "to bring someone on our side" means. In the case of Yugoslavia this was already not easy to comprehend, since Yugoslavia acted as if it was not Yugoslavia and was socialist to the point as if not being the member of socialist world.

How much more difficult to comprehend is this "to bring someone on our side" today...

#### 4. MARCUSE (14.-24.08.1968.)

Herbert Marcuse's talk "The realm of freedom and the realm of necessity: a reconsideration" was delivered at the annual session of the Korčula Summer School in 1968. The School that year was commemorating Marx' 150th birthday, and thus the overall conference was dedicated to the subject "Marx and revolution".

The historic urgency of Marcusean discourse, reflecting within his

short speech most prominently the then recent student movements, cannot be underestimated. It is the famous "soyons realistes, demandons l'impossible!" that prefaces Marcuse's talk. Some days later it will be the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia which gave additional meaning to the conference title.

Altogether, for Marcuse, a future of socialism finds itself caught and is enframed by two dangers: the one would be socialist humanism, the other - in Marcuse's terms - competitive co-existence of capitalism and socialism.

Marcuse merits the student movement with revealing "the inadequacy of the traditional concepts of the transition from capitalism to socialism and the inadequacy of the traditional concept of socialism in view of the real possibilities of socialism today".

Just what these "real possibilities of socialism today" are Marcuse will speak later on, but it is nevertheless clear for him - as manifested by the demands of student movements - that this cannot be approached under heading of socialist humanism. Since for "these young militants the term humanism is inseparable from the affirmative higher culture of bourgeois' society. It is inseparable from the repressive idea of the person or personality who can 'fulfill himself' without making excessive demands on the world, by practicing the socially required degree of resignation".

The other danger, that of the clashes of ideologies or of the competitive co-existence that is the "basic factor of our period", as Marcuse says, is of the importance which goes beyond the mere inner-socialist divergences since it "imposes upon the socialist societies ways and modes of production, ways and modes of administration which militate against the transition to a free society". Marcuse's short and sketchy answer to the problem, the problem of leaving that "destructive competition, aggravated by the terrible

headstart of the developed capitalist societies", a competition which undermines a future of socialism even more than some possible socialist incapacities, is motivated by the recent 68' events and this hope lies in "the different vision of socialism and in a praxis which strives to translate this vision into reality". The vision of a new mode of life.

Not much to begin with.

But Marcuse in his talk deals also with the systemic preconditions for a possible free society, outlining the dialectics of freedom and necessity in Marx - which could be of more use to a socialism's future.

Marcuse will say that he is aware of the fact that "according to the classical Marxian concept, the realm of necessity would remain a realm of alienation, no matter how much the working day is being reduced. Moreover this conception seems to imply that free human activity is essentially different, and must remain essentially different from socially necessary work".

But Marcuse bets on another Marxian concept of the relation between freedom and necessity, taken from the Grundrisse. He invests all his hope into the Marxian "concept which envisages conditions of full automation, where the immediate producer is indeed 'dissociated' from 'the material' process of production and becomes a free 'subject' in the sense that he can play with, experiment with the technical material, with the possibilities of the machine and of the things produced and transformed by the machines".

Experimentation with things technical is all but univocal. It is itself split, and there is permanent chance that this experimenting and free playing with machinery becomes a matter of fetishistic

gadgetry. Displaying just the privilege, and the virtue of attained purchasing power within the framework of a given capitalist society.

But, for Marcuse, the growing productivity of labour, nevertheless, tends in general to transform the human agent of production into the role of a supervisor, inventor and experimenter. As such this role-play becomes "the extension of the realm of freedom, or rather the realm of possible freedom to the realm of necessity". And, the work process itself, the socially necessary work, becomes, in its rationality, [...] the free play with the pleasurable possibilities of things and nature".

Though the overtly romanticized undertone in Marcuse's language cannot be overheard, it is that specific hope resting on a free play with technical devices - brought itself by technological progress - which gives Marcuse's longing a specific modern touch. As was the case with Sohn-Rethel's paradoxical non-practical and abusive practicality, Marcuse's free experimentation is not just a matter of how to translate a particular socialist vision into reality, but to risk to shatter a given social order - and in such a way to make the society work, altogether.

## 5. KNOWLEDGE AND POWER

It has often been noted that while older forms of power were concerned with governance, at some point power has begun to care just about staying in power. Such a power on the one hand never has been more autonomous, and on the other never more in the need of a side-support of that which is excluded from power, the non-power. (This, for example, being the sense of Foucault's notion of biopolitics.)

Here we enter a topic which gained some notoreity in socialist

theory, that has redescribed this ambivalent modern power-structure in terms of constant capitalist's need of getting consent and a theft of workers' knowledge.

"From the beginning, one resource of capitalistic enterprise has been the so-called "misappropriation of workers' know how." That is to say: when workers found a way to execute their labour with less effort, taking an extra break, etc., the corporate hierarchy took advantage of this minimal victory, knowing it was happening, in order to modify the organization of labour. In my opinion, a significant change takes place when the task of the worker or of the clerk to some extent consists in actually finding, in discovering expedients, "tricks," solutions that ameliorate the organization of labour. In the latter case, workers' knowledge is not used on the sly but it is requested explicitly; that is to say, it becomes one of the stipulated working assignments". (Paolo Virno, A Grammar of the Multitude)

The process which Virno describes and which gain prominence throughout the 20th century under the heading Taylorism was and still is an attempt to make the concealed workers knowledge and cooperation - which are considered to be obstacles to a more efficient techno-economic progress if implicit - explicit and to make it emerge as a scientific management (=governance) of the production process. In difference to the times when Taylor published his books necessity to make workers' intelligence explicit has become, today, a ruling norm (non-disclosure agreements, for example).

The presumed irrationality (tricks) of workers' solutions and the implicitness which is forced to become a rational, explicit form of management - that conglomerate of assumptions which served to extort knowledge today has been already radicalized at the entry-level. This has been, for sure, a result of the immaterialization of

labour of late 20th century, but the turning point of whom we here speak is even more interesting if we know that the employees (=wage workers) are obliged to make an initial decision about a simultaneous indiscretion (towards the own employer) and concealment (towards the environment). The employee is urged to make the decision upon which the relationship of managing/governing evolves in the realm of symbolic or linguistic articulation as such.

And though from today's perspective this could seem naive one should remember the hope which was inherent to a distinct historic task: The socialized labour can regain its identity only if workers reappropriate the cognitive functions that capitalist management has alienated from them. And this reappropriation would amount to the "forming the socialist human". (Alfred Sohn-Rethel, Imperialism - the era of dual economics, Praxis 1/2 - 1969)

\* \* \*

Has socialism a global future?

YES - socialism has a global future in way of reappropriating and abusing the privatized knowledge. In making things, devices practical by way of experimenting with them, without ever to be certain about the outcome.

Socialism, its practice and not just its ideal, has a global future if it does not again enter the race with capitalism, and a competition whose concept of reality delineates better the matter-of-fact. Socialism has a future only in abusing and shattering the reality. Hacking the vectors of today's capitalist's flow. Abolishing the global and internal division of labour.

Proceeding without a credo, behaving as if a community and a society of a communism and socialism to come do not exist. But have to be experimentally and practically brought about.