

FREEDOM AND CONSTRAINT  
IN PRODUCTIVIST SOCIETY

The following reflections<sup>1</sup> center round a current of thought and a way of action which an increasing number of our contemporaries recognise as the great conformity of our age, namely the cult of economic growth. Even thirty years ago this was a partial truth; today it seems to be the favorite anxiety of those political forces endeavoring to be modern regardless of the philosophies to which they refer. Focussed as it is on the acceleration of material progress, is this “productivist” anxiety not the unifying idea of a world in a state of fusion? A world that is becoming more and more indifferent because of its traditional divergences? And the pragmatism of this idea, when translated into equations, suits all those for whom man is equal to his technical strength and for whom progress corresponds to a quantum of accountable acquisitions...

Translated by Simon Pleasance.

<sup>1</sup> These reflections are the summary of several lectures given by the author between January and June, 1968, in Paris (Ecole pratique des hautes études) and Geneva (Institut universitaire des hautes études internationales).

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At the present time, of course, no community can avoid a minimum of “productivist” aims. Similarly the multiplication of means of subsistence is an imperative for any society that is faced with a proliferation of new lives by the phenomenon of “death in retirement;” from this stems the vital importance of the highest rationalization of production and distribution. But is this multiplication of resources a categorical imperative in any given time and place? Does it not run the risk of becoming the prisoner of its own movement by defying a rationality that is inscribed in human nature? Does it not threaten man with depriving him of his multiple virtualities by imposing itself on him as the only normative principle? Should we not begin to glimpse, as from today, the diversification—if not the limit—of this movement, even if only to avoid the catastrophe of the growing inequality that is inherent in hierarchical progress? Such is the color of the important themes that are certainly dominating present-day “debates” and which the author proposes to examine in this article, with a *critique of productivist rationality* as the starting-point.

Until quite recently this kind of critique has seemed rather Utopian. But the events during these last months in France and elsewhere, the massive revolt of a youth that has no respect for accepted values, have revealed the anti-conformity of rising generations and the possibilities of taking new stock of the situation on the scale of society at large. Since these events, Utopia has abandoned its fairy-castle of ideas and come down to earth with a vigor that has left us agape.

This episode has nevertheless shown the impossibility as well as the extent of the debate. The demonstration took place because it was bound to fail as long as it is expressed in a mythological language and as long as it borrows from the working-class ideologies of the last century—borrows their most outdated features. For the problems that confront our societies, Eastern and Western, go far beyond all questions related to the inequality of social functions and can have no possible solution in a showbox of power. To see the problem in this light is to drag us back fifty years with no hope of coming near an iota of the desired end, namely mastery of the productive forces that slip through our clutches.

Any *contemporary* stock-taking must deal above all with what

I have called in a later text the *constraints* of productivist society. Does one have to mention that all these constraints are far from being exterior? Only by starting from this analysis and by beware of any auto-mystification will it, as I see things, be possible to define this feeble but precious margin of freedom that societies have at their disposal here and now and could use even more liberally with some mental effort, even if it were revolutionary!

#### I. FOR A CRITIQUE OF PRODUCTIVIST RATIONALITY

##### *The supremacy of the "most."*

Few concepts have undergone the influence of the productivist mentality as deeply as that of "progress." It would be fastidious to recall the multitude of aspirations that have been connected with the (western) concept of "progress" from the 17th century to the present day, that is in those periods when it has dominated social thought. The aspirations to better our condition and protect human life, to extend our power over nature, to perfect morality, to propagate justice are as much an aspect of a universal progress to which those who sanctioned the movement would refer themselves.

The characteristic of the productivist version of progress, that is to say the one which is most widespread at the moment, is the privilege given to certain of these aspirations. It brings about a reduction. Of the numerous possible objectives it gives priority to those which have the cardinal virtue of being quantifiable (and these are nearly always objectives with a strong economic incidence). No productivist mind would of course think of denying the qualitative; what happens is that the attention is directed on projects which have a positive and measurable incidence. To mask the choice, the natural order of things is invoked: is it not more and more widely admitted that qualitative improvements—democracy, for example—are just as much "sub-products" of material progress?

Non-quantifiable projects are thus gradually relegated to a position behind social priorities. On the contrary, and under the pretext of progress, any socio-economic measure is justified on the condition that it contributes to growth. Those powerful agents of this realism, national accounts, inevitably exercise their

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arbitrage in favor of objectives which have the greatest virtuality of quantitative progress. The organization of power and ownership, the structure of salaries and the system of instruction, the mechanisms of decision and the strict regulation of exchanges, trade-unionist freedom and regional prosperity: all these are judged in the light of their contribution to the general well-being and to (national) strength, that is by their economic efficacy. If an undeniable convergence of basically industrial regimes can be observed today, this is because of this quantitative realism, and the effects of this will unfailingly go against our Utopias. *This comes about by eliminating the non-quantifiable.*

It is not hard to see that this reduction of the objectives of progress is heading uniformly in the direction of the most-pleasure and the most-power, which one can from now on identify as the double end of the productivist race. Given the go-ahead in this way, the “most,” as quantitative progress, can in fact have several tenors (private or collective consumption, military or productive power), the complementarity of which is assured in the facts rather than by an organic solidarity. Starting from a level of productive forces, it is perfectly possible to follow simultaneously (or at least alternatively) the race for the most-power *and the* most-pleasure. The measures that are capable of promoting one automatically benefit the other, thanks to the polyvalence of modern production chains and the ambiguity of technological progress (is electronics not an industry that is at once “light” and “heavy?”). Similarly it is not surprising that progress is measured in terms of an undifferentiated “most,” while the respective merits of such and such a structure of policy are valued according to its capacity to protect or accelerate growth.

Productivist orientation is “one-dimensional” (Marcuse) in this sense. One can deduce the objectives of progress from the prognostics that concern the march to the “most” in order to submit oneself to a sort of fatality, to the technological and organizational imperatives that proceed from it.

The most striking expression of this fatalism is the docility with which societies undergo technical novelty. The “social” is thought of as a process of adaption.<sup>2</sup> For want of admitting or

<sup>2</sup> “The angle of attack is that Society accepts technological novelties and has

conceiving an order of priorities other than that which proceeds from quantitative efficacy, social forces affected by technical upheavals are no longer capable of opposing the logic of innovation with maxims of well-being which have a regulating vocation. Caught in the giddiness of these upheavals they are content with sterile demands while those responsible preach the wisdom of adjustment. One can learn to reconvert oneself—to the point of losing identity and roots—to social groups that progress tends to dislodge from their professional positions, and to regions, indeed nations, that mutations deprive of their traditional sources of revenue. On the contrary, one accepts with the utmost serenity that the logic of industrialization pushes one towards an accumulation of human masses and towards congestions that prohibit any sensible urbanism. How can one help wondering—with B. de Jouvenel—“if it is not necessary to upset the limits, if it would not be a good idea to start from the objectives of social well-being” and to adjust technical development to this?

Opposed to this is the fetishism of growth, the quantitative effects of which (the multiplication of usable goods, the setting-up of technically powerful and more highly productive outfits) are favored compared to the other alternatives including certain virtualities of technical progress (for example, increased leisure or security) which have no direct and positive incidence on the revenue. It is all the more difficult to offer any resistance to this supremacy of the “most” because it is presented under the guise of an *instrumental rationality*.

#### *Subjection to an instrumental rationality.*

Quantification is certainly a deep tendency of industrial societies insofar as they try to introduce the spirit of the exact sciences into the ensemble of social relations, beginning with the economic sphere. It is precisely because of this anxiety of rationality that they fall into the traps of an economico-centric instrumentalism.

Any rationality—even conformity to a system of values—necessarily has an instrumental character: this is a commonplace

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to adjust itself to them,” remarks Bernard de Jouvenel about decisions referring to research and development (*Analyse et Prévisions*, No. 4, IV (1967), p. 680).

since Max Weber. The rational procedure consists in a reasoned use of means in view of the ends that an action receives in advance. But as H. Marcuse justly remarks, this ancillary behavior responds to a deep understanding of the subject which—in his opinion—is attached to domination.<sup>3</sup> One can more modestly consider the vital understanding of the subject as purely or primordially self-preserving. But any rational procedure nonetheless tries to *dominate* a situation (a series of events, a technical process) by an appropriated manipulation of the component elements.

As long as this manipulation is limited to natural forces, there can be no confusion between the subject and the object of the action. Difficulties crop up when the spirit of instrumental efficacy is transposed into the sphere of human relationships without grasping the natural difference that separates these two fields of action. By trying to subject human matter to a treatment, the principles of which are derived from operations on inert matter (or on environing nature), two errors are committed: (a) as in the exact sciences, one tends to define the object of the manipulation by referring to measuring instruments; (b) one makes an abstraction of the specificity of the social universe which is not ruled by the laws of physical or biological energy alone, *but which is also ordered by an axiological field*. When one gives priority to what is measurable, one denies the existence (or the importance, or the independence) of this axiological field, which itself escapes quantification.

The objection will be raised that, with the exception of the economic sciences, no other social discipline has yet abandoned qualitative analysis exclusively for a mathematico-logical type of axiomatic. No social discipline—again with the exception of economy—has thought of reducing the universe of human relationships to a single relationship of figures in order to judge them uniquely in terms of efficacy.<sup>4</sup>

This is true, but it is precisely this objection which shows us to what point the reduction of progress to what is purely quan-

<sup>3</sup> *One-dimensional man*, chap. 6. Let us specify that Marcuse is talking of “technological” rationality; this is where he finds a logic of domination.

<sup>4</sup> Military praxeology, just as certain attempts aimed at formalising political theory, would however be at the limit of this ideal.

titative corresponds to an economico-centric logic: *when one favors the "most," one is—consciously or unconsciously—referring back to the arbitrage of economic value.* The reason being that in matters of economic progress one only quantifies what has a "price," that is, what can have a market value in some way or other. Collectivist economies certainly do not escape this rule, only that in their case the market, "the judge of values," is more often than not hypothetical.

Now, contrary to the conventional units of measure to which science and technics have recourse, price has nothing "objective" about it (in the sense of a *neutrality* with regard to whoever uses it). It has nothing universal about it either (in the sense that the measure, for example, is everywhere the same within the limits of an acceptable margin of error). A provisional compromise is established at a given place between the actors in the economic game by the relationships of rarity, the costs of production (distribution, transport, etc...), incomes and the rates of public deduction which prevail at this point in the economic space. Far from measuring unitarian sacrifices or satisfactions, which are indeed uniform for every agent, prices reflect only the accepted or imposed constraints which vary from one point of this space to the next and which the slightest change in context can easily modify without the sudden intervention of equality. The only objectivity of price consists in that it transcends—by socializing them—the thousands of individual acts which are aimed at valuing utilities and sacrifices; because the standard thus constituted is more or less anonymous, it can govern the exchange of products on the social scale.

Let us note with regard to this that technical progress has several aspects which are ignored or imperfectly expressed by economic calculation. Thus a gain in productivity can only be correctly measured when it is at the level of the productive firm: this is because it then has incidences in terms of "revenue" (it accrues the benefit of exploitation either by compressing the costs or by enlarging the scale of production). On the contrary, every time it involves the activities of the unit of consumption (the household), it escapes exact appreciation: a washing-machine certainly permits a saving in time and in tiredness, but its contribution to the well-being will only be estimated by the price at

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which it has been sold. Similarly, technical progress with qualitative effects (increased security or comfort, economy of vital energies or physical hardships) will only be considered against the price allotted it by the market. In these, as in many other cases, prices are supposed to measure utilitarian gains while the hierarchy of costs, wages and so on, should reflect the respective "inutilities" of the different productive payments. In fact the realization of these hypotheses calls for a perfect balance between the various factors, the economic theory behind which has no little difficulty in uniting the conditions.

None of this becomes serious as long as the calculation is partial and instrumental. The error appears when one transposes the instrument and the perspective of the micro-economic compatibility into the sphere of macroscopic estimations, by manipulating a standard which by definition ignores everything that is not directly connected to the seller-client relationship. This is what happens when one estimates the "value" of public services starting with their working costs, or the "value" of public investments (of power, prestige or well-being) starting with the costs of realisation. One is in the thick of arbitrariness and yet this arbitrariness concerns 15-25 % (depending on the country) of the accountable resources.

The impotence of the "price" standard is glaring when one is prepared to use it for international or diachronic comparisons. Whatever the correctives one imposes on valid estimations, one can never reach objective comparisons for reasons which have to do at once with the qualitative transformations of the social product (equipment pertinent to two technical ages, the carriage and the car for example: are these not on principle incommensurable?) and with the arbitrary character of any statistical equilibrium when applied to anything as complex as the global production or consumption of a community.<sup>5</sup> Our remarks are still aimed only at the *standard* of the rates of wealth and growth, without evoking the notorious distortions to which these same rates are

<sup>5</sup> This problem was clearly illuminated by the work of two economist-statisticians who were given the job in 1953 by the O.E.C.E. of estimating in comparable prices the consumptions of the major nations of the western hemisphere. (Cf. Gilbert M. and Kravis I., *An International Comparison of National Products*, 1954, Paris.)



subject because of the numerous gaps in macroscopic accountability.

After these few remarks on the fragility of the price-standard, we can now approach the more theoretical problem of its *neutrality*. We know that, over and above their contingency, prices reflect what the members of a community consider to be “of value” (in the economic sense). Without wishing to settle the controversies concerning the profound nature of economic value here, let us simply say that, in the last analysis, this nature refers us back to the relationship between man and things. This relationship depends in turn: (*a*) on the place occupied by the instinct of possession in the general hierarchy of human needs (aspirations, finalities) and (*b*) on the social conventions (institutions, social relationships) which determine the ways in which these economic *and other* needs are satisfied. In other words, there is always a certain hierarchy of needs that is reflected through economic value. This can only play a preponderant rôle in societies where the sense of possession and accumulation of goods is strongly developed and where a certain freedom of choice allows a socialization of the estimation of “utilities” and “shortcomings” by the interpreter of the exchanges. In this sense the value—and consequently any quantification—is by definition acquisitive: only that which contributes to the constitution, exploitation or consumption of a *capital* is accountable.

It follows from this that a desire to enlarge the field of application of economic value is not a neutral operation. On the contrary indeed, this is as good as approving, even prolonging, a certain constellation in the hierarchy of needs; it is to arbitrate in favor of the acquisitive instinct—the sovereign economic value—to the detriment of non- or not easily quantifiable needs. By favoring what is “most” materializable, this arbitrage moves towards not only utopian projects but also non-utilitarian creation and all the aspirations (protection of human life, reduction of working hours etc...) which would risk slowing up the accumulation of power or pleasure gains... which are *tangible*. The only exceptions, apparently, to this rule are the Promethean types of progress (speed, telecommunication etc...) which end up by being integrated in this race for materialised power, they even

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constitute one of the driving forces by multiplying the novelty-objects that individuals or collectivities aspire after.

The question is thus not knowing whether, on the plane of measuring instruments, improvements are possible: they certainly are. But rather that the fetishism of such a rate of partial appreciation, which now appears, is nothing less than *servitude to an instrumental rationality*, the logic of which leads to a predominance of materialized progress. Technical calculation—as Bertrand de Jouvenel has shown—is by nature conservative: it conforms to the judgements of values that are inscribed in actual dealings; it ignores the dimension of potential.<sup>6</sup> Similarly it is not by refining these calculations nor by extending economic value that one will escape the servitudes of the productivist race. It is a matter of revising the foundations.

### *Impossible abundance*

Two theories of “need” vie for the honor of having founded the productivist race—on the philosophical plane.

The first represents the increase of satisfactions as tending towards a final point commonly called *abundance*. By affirming that it is possible to put an end to the rarity of means of subsistence, this theory tacitly postulates that:

a) the “shortcomings” of human existence are essentially linked to physiological needs (the reply to which is given by mediating “production” in the broad meaning of the word;

b) these physiological “shortcomings” are satiable because they are “finite.” A state of saturation is thus conceivable and the increase of tangible satisfactions can be thought of in terms of a finite process.

As Utopia is as old as mankind, abundance does not necessarily imply the end of history because, in principle, progress can continue with needs which do not call for a “response from things,” for example on the plane of pure knowledge. That “rarities” of a new order—aesthetic, intellectual—might then

<sup>6</sup> Cf. his article in *Economie et Humanisme*, N. 178, and more particularly the passage on Planification and Utopia (p. 42). See also Marcuse, *op. cit.* p. 221-222 *passim*.

appear does certainly constitute a valid objection, but not an insurmountable one.

The second theory deals with *unlimited needs*. Contrary to the preceding thesis, this one contests that technical and economic progress can know any bounds because it considers needs—and more particularly those which are satiated by the acquisition of consumable goods or power—as subject to indefinite extension. It agrees with the thesis of finite growth only in its point of departure—“shortcomings call for a response by things”—which it moreover emphasises to the extent of confusing it with the unlimited possibilities of *human perfection*. Man can perfect himself by using his technics.

It is not hard to see that these two theses are perfectly contradictory. Either needs are insatiable; abundance in this case is not realisable on any level of productive forces. Or one is heading for a final point of saturation; in this case the race for constantly renewed satisfactions is as futile as it is confusing; above all it prevents society from thinking usefully of the braking which would be imposed.

With the productivist race in its present state, the theme of abundance has lost speed, even in socialist doctrines, while still conserving its mythical power. Conversely, the vision of unlimited growth is being increasingly affirmed as the dominant working hypothesis of productivist practice, especially in the world of liberal economies or semi-directive economies where the problem of market sales is preserving all its acuteness. We shall also be examining this thesis more closely from the angle of economic rationality.

As a point of departure we have chosen the “economic principle” in its most general and almost biological sense (the relation between energy expended and pleasure derived). Whatever the divergences among economists, they all agree that an agent behaves in an economic manner when (aiming at or) achieving a maximum of “result” with a minimum of “effort.” It remains to specify the content of these two terms, but here again it is readily evident that the two can only be evaluated simultaneously: (*a*) the needs that have to be answered and (*b*) the use made of the means of satisfaction (= resources). By the same double reference we shall reach the most satisfactory definition

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of two concepts that are discussed as “rarity” and “value:” with their inverse signs, they broadly cover the same ground, namely a *needs-resources* relation.

Put in this context, the economic principle is nothing more than a *postulate for arbitrage* between the possible utilisations of the resources at the disposal of man the producer or man the consumer, the end being to *satisfy the greatest possible number of needs taking into account their greater or lesser urgency*. Arbitrage between these different variables can take the form of several hypotheses:

— *the static option*: to use the best part of the available resources for “given” needs;

— *the dynamic option*: multiply the resources either to satisfy the same needs more fully or else to answer hitherto neglected needs, or, lastly, to reduce the “costs” of the answer. In all three cases the rarity relation has to be modified.

(Theoretically one can talk of a third option which I would call the “restrictive application” of the economic principle. It consists in limiting the levels of aspiration either to facilitate the satisfaction of needs or to increase their intensity. Typical of the behavior of certain individuals or groups who start as losers in the economic race (retired people etc.) the restrictive option characterises the attitude of one or two rare spiritual communities on the margin of modern societies.)

The “static” and “dynamic” applications of the economic principle are apparently complementary. In reality they call for fundamentally different arbitrages, the repercussions of which are far from being the same. To what extent do the attached results and effects of these arbitrages conform with the “economic principle?”

Let us remember that ontologically it is the relative insufficiency of means of subsistence compared with needs—in other words *the rarity*—which creates both economic action (in its most general sense) and the “economic principle” (with its arbitrage between energy expended and pleasure derived). Any economic action tries in some way to attenuate or surmount this rarity with regard to a subject or group, whether temporarily or

on a long-term basis. In this sense<sup>7</sup> the “economy” is more wide-reaching than the “economic principle;” it embraces every productive act, even an act that leads to a wastage of energy and resources compared to the satisfactions obtained from it. The “economic principle” itself introduces an *understanding of rationality* in its course, the success of this understanding being a function of the level of information and means of action of the subject. But whether the course is rational or not—the term rationality being nothing more than a synonym of the “economic principle”—the upper hand over rarity is always provisional. In fact, even in the present state of technology and taking all possible inventions into account, notably in the field of energy, the total gratuity of resources (comparable to the oxygen we breathe) is an improbable hypothesis.

On a first approach, technical progress is a powerful argument in favor of the “dynamic option” insofar as it has repercussions on productivity by lowering the unitary cost of objects produced and widens the scale of the resources at the disposal of society. We know the impressive figures that tell of the diminution of working hours necessary for the manufacture of a single object.<sup>8</sup> Equally we could quote the dazzling speed with which mechanical energy (thermic, hydraulic, etc.) tends to do away with the use of human energies, whether in production, displacement, household activities or even corporal attentions.

The problem is complicated because the multiplication of resources is not without counterpart, both with regard to needs and to the resources themselves. Here we are thinking of the various social losses (destruction of old structures, accelerated obsolescence of equipment, costs of reconversion, increase of unproductive services of redistribution, adaptation or reorganization, etc.) that accompany the process of growth not only because of its innovations but also in relation with its perpetual change. These losses, *which have repercussions on the social price of resources*, are all the more considerable because change brings

<sup>7</sup> Called by Karl Polanyi the “substantive definition” of economy.

<sup>8</sup> See for example the work of Jean Fourastié: *Le Grand espoir du XX<sup>ème</sup> siècle*, and particularly the tables on pages 26 to 30.

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with it more unforeseen technical and social contingencies, more interrupted activities, and more upheaval of habits.<sup>9</sup>

Added to this is a symmetrical effect on needs. Every invention involves a new *diversification* of needs, every new facility with regard to resources (increased productive capacity, decreased manufacturing and selling price) extends the scale of wished-for satisfactions: here are two effects that run the risk of compromising, in their turn, the energetic economy of society! In fact, if the lists of socially recognised needs is indefinitely lengthened, if needs (beginning with the most elementary, for example, clothing) are extended together with resources without showing the slightest sign of saturation—for any saturation of a specific need is immediately followed by a displacement of the general need—*then the levels of dissatisfaction remain comparable to all the levels of economic progress.*

Economic growth thus reveals a partial opposition to the “economic principle” inasmuch as it neutralises man’s struggles against rarity. *It tends to recreate rarity, even to create it* (especially for once plentiful goods such as pure water, unpolluted air, green spaces, etc...). Economic action is partially destroyed—for one must not deny the opposite effects—as a consequence of this double play which estranges society from, almost as much as it reconciles it with, a state of relative satisfaction.

We shall doubtless be told that it is useless to oppose the “economic principle” with the dynamic option when we are dealing with given facts rather than deliberated choices. Is the tendency to multiply and diversify a social product not first and foremost a *cultural fact* (closely linked to the innovating spirit of technical civilisations) and consequently an *anthropological fact* (namely the insatiability of needs, the specificity of human nature beyond any ideology)? What is the point of appealing to the rationality of effort in the presence of such massive facts?

The root of the problem is certainly “*anthropological.*” The needs of man, and still less the modalities by which he satisfies them, are not determined by nature as rigorously as those of other living species. Hence the impossibility of giving limits to the satisfaction of our needs or of considering these latter as

<sup>9</sup> On this subject see Jacques Austry’s stimulating work: *Le Scandale du développement*, ed. M. Rivière, 1965.

independent variables of the dynamic function of progress. Hence the importance of social environment as well, that is, of cultural conditioning.

In fact, if the elementary needs of individuals (their deep physiological and affective tendencies) are relatively stable, needs such as they are formed under a socio-cultural influence—let us call them “concrete needs”—have a tendency to change with the ways of satisfaction offered to individuals by their resources and by their place in society. Precisely because they are conditioned, these needs are only stable in absolutely static societies with congealed customs. But wherever novelties can be introduced into the ways of satisfaction—even if under an external impulse—needs, such as they are made manifest through concrete aspirations, cease to be autonomous: their intensity and even their hierarchy are determined by production. Mechanisms of change, incorporated in some way in the economic machinery, are enough to set up an interaction between “needs” and “answers,” the latter stimulating the former, and vice versa.

In this perspective, multiplicative and diversifying progress has all the appearances of being fatal for societies which are irresistibly pushed by internal rivalry and external competition to create new ways of satisfaction, as much on the plane of individual consumption as in the sphere of collective needs: the personal gadget and the space adventure are after all only two expressions of the same dynamism. Provided that the productive apparatus is ready, one can talk in advance of the success of any technical or cultural novelty as soon as it meets one of modern man’s aspirations.

To sum up: the crux of the matter, on a first approach, is the infinity of innovations (technical or other) which “concrete” needs tend to seize hold of, and on a second approach the *insatiability of these same needs* once provoked by appropriate incentives. Whatever the economic mediations (individual profit, collective plan) from which these innovations issue, the key of endless growth must be searched for in this interaction.

The question however is to know whether this insatiability is an immutable given fact or whether it is linked to precise social determinisms. This is the direction in which the following paragraphs will head.

II. ON THE SOCIO-CULTURAL ENERGIES OF PRODUCTIVISM

*Constraints of the system and interiorised constraints*

When one comes to explain the rise of what we have thought fit to call the productivist mentality, one quite naturally thinks first of the world system that we are called upon to partake in or at least to submit to. In this modern world, united not only by technics and exchanges but also and above all by the semi-pacific semi-hostile rivalry of ideologically opposed systems of power, economic growth has become a condition of survival in more than one aspect. For Western nations as for others, the unflinching and relentless increase of productive and technico-military power clearly determines their respective chances in a henceforth multipolar competition in which points can only be scored by measurable performances.

And yet the stake is not in itself enough to explain the *content* or the *forms* of the struggle. Whatever the importance of the bomb, it does not hold *per se* that all priorities are unanimously in alignment with productive performances in this competition between systems and régimes. Naturally the progress of objective knowledge as well as the collapse of values have considerably cleared the ground for 20th century social pragmatism. Modern man is proud of his knowledge that allows him to master matter, proud to the point of scorning anything that does not have an “exact” grounding (values, judgements, propositions); he has come to the stage of believing only in a reassuring sort of progress which is tangible and measurable. But this ethic—which is perhaps the very core of productivism—must in turn be explained.

One cannot ignore the uniqueness of a civilisation that systematically gives preference to needs that are satiated by products to the detriment of needs of a different order (with reference, for example, to the quality of human relationship, to the contemplation of nature, etc...). Hence in fact this conditioning which induces the economic subjects of the industrial age to take possession above all else of multiplicative and diversifying progress as a result of a calculation whereby unmaterialisable aspirations are either stripped of their value or neglected.



It is here, as we see it, that certain deepseated structures of individual—and group—behaviour intervene; structures which seem to us to be infinitely more decisive, from the viewpoint of the problem with which we are dealing, than the types of relationship created by production or authority. Very briefly, we shall mention two:

- acquisitive behavior;
- competition on the plane of possessing.

It is in fact impossible not to find acquisitive behavior at work behind the (almost automatic) extension of the range of needs that has to be covered.<sup>10</sup> With their quantitative idea of progress, industrial societies—whether they wish to or not—give priority to a *certain way of satisfaction*—the acquisitive way—which they consider as the response, *par excellence*, to the summons of nature and history. This makes economic arbitrage play infallibly—and with no relation to elementary needs—in favor of the “most,” i.e., materialisable progress, to the detriment of any “value” that is not objectivable, that is assimilable.

As a survival of times of poverty, the acquisitive instinct acts in many respects as a dysfunctional factor on the level of productive forces where the central problem is no longer the satisfaction of elementary needs. Individuals and collectivities continue to accumulate in a way that is unrelated to the real data of the situation, as if they are responding to an ancestral insecurity. For the declared intention of satisfying needs is nothing more than a pretext or a false consciousness, when elementary needs are virtually covered and secondary needs—by definition—escape any effort of “saturation.”

The spirit of capitalism is only one particular case of this logic that is directed by the acquisitive instinct. Yes, the rise of capitalism has generalised the cult of an economic quasi-immaterial value (indifferently incarnated by gold, scriptural tender and negotiable bills of payment), the accumulation of which is made without any relation to its power of satisfying needs; but

<sup>10</sup> For the following thesis I am deeply indebted to W.A. Weiskopf, whose analyses relating to the presuppositions of economic thought are the point of departure of these observations. Cf. for example his article: “The Dialectics of Abundance,” in *Diogenes*, No. 57, Spring 1967.

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capitalism did not inaugurate the race for wealth and possessions in their innumerable conceivable forms. Furthermore the look of the problem has considerably changed with the merger that has taken place (as a prelude to or as a result of the industrial revolution) between science and economy, because, probably for the first time in history, *technical progress has given man the chance to give himself unlimited ends, in the field of what is tangible*. Under the influence of this merger economic value tends to be re-materialised so as to be incarnated in objects of consumption and power rather than in mythical substances. It is precisely this rematerialisation that gives a new thrust to economy, seen as a creative process, inasmuch as *from now on a certain Prometheanism is grafted on to the instinct of acquisition*.

### *Distinction and equality.*

The acquisitive instinct, with the licensed relation that it creates between man and things, would perhaps not have this dynamic charge were it not integrated in a field of intense social competition with, as a double driving force, *the search for distinction and the demand for equality*.

In the abstract, each of these two auto-affirmative wills defines a distinct type of action that aims at a progress with a finality *sui generis*. The action directed at *distinction* is hallmarked by possessions (instruments, objects of luxury or subsistence, symbols) which confer on the holder a superiority whether in the socially codified forms of authority, power or status, or simply in terms of originality or widespread prestige. The action directed at *equality* rebels against the distinctions thus acquired by the other, in fact representing just as great an inequality; the aim of this action is to suppress any distinctive advantage by socializing or generalizing them. This calls for the invention of neologism to denote these two types of action, as the first is commonly called "aristocratic" and the second "democratic."

If typically aristocratic or typically democratic progress exists, most of its innovations spring from the joint action of both motives, and for the good reason that by aiming at the suppression of the opposite action, these two attitudes imply one another reciprocally: one could not tend to equality without the attain-

ments of distinction and vice versa. In this sense the process can be qualified as dialectic; in any case it conduces conflicts.<sup>11</sup>

Of course it would be pretentious, or quite simply false, to try to reduce all progress to the single dialectic of opposite auto-affirmations. The positive acts of individual innovators as well as the ethic of certain professions (scholars, educationalists doctors) not to mention certain spiritual communities (the kibbutz type, for example) can respond to motives that are neither “aristocratic” nor “democratic,” in the meaning I have given these terms. The dialectic of conflict intervenes when one tries—individually or as a group—to affirm oneself at the expense of the other. The society of “status-seekers” (Packard) just as the bureaucratic existence (described by Crozier) corresponds particularly clearly to the motives analyzed above.

Let us pass from our explicative model to an analysis of real systems. It goes without saying that our two attitude-types are not manifest in a pure form and that they have a tendency to interpenetrate, whether under the moderating effect of “good feelings” or under the ideological influence of the inverse motive. So it is the predominance of the one over the other that one observes most often in group actions or in the practice of systems. A private capitalism is suspect of favoring the idea of distinction while a collectivist regime has contrary preferences; this, however, excludes neither egalitarian disputes within the bosom of the former nor a giving-way of the second towards a hierarchical stratification. In both cases the equality-distinction dialectic is fundamental. It is probably more correctly aware of certain structural determinism of the productive race than theories which are limited to economy (the theory of over-production, for example). Over-developed capitalism subjects consumption to production rather by pushing forward towards constantly renewed distinctions than by recession.

The predominance of one or other of the two motives doubtlessly influences the direction of productivist systems according to whether it pushes them towards a diversification or towards a

<sup>11</sup> “Everyone wants to be equal to other people and at the same time raise himself above them” (by the possession of things): “this is the great tragedy that is threatening the relationships of people in a world of objects.” (Georg Bergler, *Werbung und Gesellschaft*. Unpublished text in French.)

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standardisation of the social product. As far as original innovation is concerned, the “distinction” motive has the higher charge. This perhaps ultimately explains why, even today, most technical inventions—and the near-totality of novelties in the sphere of consumption—are due to freely competitive economies. The delays of the collectivist system—the flagrant disproportion between its productive strength and its record of innovation—issue from the same tendency that otherwise preserves it from certain excesses in the consumer-race, namely its tendency to uniformity. Its inferiority lies on the plane of motivation, and probably also on the plane of organization, not on the plane of technical knowledge.

Primitive orientations are nevertheless modified when in contact with international realities. The effects of ideological contagion which end up by destroying any purity in a system are added to the effects of competition. No economic system follows its own logic any longer; their “natural inclinations” are breached by external constraints and by interpenetration of mentalities, all of which gives rise to a desire to use the values of the adversary. And yet the dialectic of progress reappears on the international scale in the form of an opposition between the “leading” economy and the economy that “follows” it. The former, aristocrat of the world arena,—does one need to name it?—keeps the latter going by its constantly renewed “distinctions” which assure it an advance which is all the more clear-cut for being translated by a mass consumption as well. The new needs to which it gives birth soon become law overall, with no necessary link between them and the level of resources on a world scale: they can thus only accentuate internal and external disequilibrium. Reduced to the state of “follow my leader,” the other economies are not even at leisure to determine themselves freely: whether they like it not bear the train of the “leader,” who imposes his way of existence on them, as well as his organizational progress and every kind of innovation.<sup>12</sup>

An accelerating mechanism is thus established on a worldwide

<sup>12</sup> The space race is practically the only exception to this rule. It represents the only massive use of productive forces that was invented by a “non-leader”; and a rivalry on equal terms has developed from it. One can still conjecture on the direction that this race will take.

scale, in connexion with unequals and in relation to multiple rivalries. Today there seems to be no further doubt that this mechanism introduces a coercive character inasmuch as it forbids inferiors and unequals to have a free choice, whether on the economic plane or with regard to a model of civilisation.

Seen in this light, Western Europe, the communist countries and the Third World, which are otherwise so anomalous, only show differences of degree: they are all defined more or less with reference to the common leader, whose giddy progress at once alarms and fascinates them. Naturally, both cling to their cultural and social origins, and the greater the "ideological" distance that separates them from the leader the tighter they cling. Nonetheless, in a world where intellectual and consumer fashions cross frontiers without visas, their margins of freedom become thinner: the "gadget" King is obedient even to the Gosplan. The restrictions of "follow my leader" are limited more and more to political duels of honor, or else to the prosaic case of "non possumus." The common drama of inferiors and unequals is that they are confined in an action of catching-up, and unable to influence the model of the "leader" in any considerable way.

### III. THE NON-PRODUCTIVIST OPTION

We have revealed the connection between a certain number of restrictions in productivist tendencies, some imposed from without, others caused by an acquisitive competition, and others interiorised in the form of a rationality. Faced with this economicotechnical destiny—which rises up from these multiple determinisms like a new Leviathan—there are two possible attitudes:

— To accept it not only as an imposed necessity, but also as a normative truth of progress tracing the only path of development and representing the only face of the future;

— to oppose it with the principle of consciousness capable of bringing judgements of value to bear on the apparently neutral implications of productivist logic.

For whatever the coherence of this latter, our reason is nonetheless reticent to admit the consequent "harmful infinity" as a *fait accompli*. One has the painful sensation of being snatched up by a mechanism, a second-rate servitude that removes the bene-

fits of our theoretical freedom from us. Instead of deciding on the *ends* of our economic actions with sovereignty, we are in the thick of *causality* which re-transforms us into the impotent cogs of a supra-historical machine...

To deny this difficulty would be as dishonest as it would be vain to await salvation from an auto-corrective spontaneity, when contemporary systems of action are opposed with all the force of their inertia to an economic reconstruction, and behavior—even of revendication—is profoundly marked by a productivist logic...

But how precisely is one to introduce the principle of consciousness into a universe whose economic perception is dominated by an instrumental rationality and whose scientific and political thought tends to elude any consideration of ends giving preference to operative means of action? The disproportion is in fact glaring between the power of the instruments handled and the level of consciousness of a planification (which would however be social, on a government scale). The perfectionism that goes with techniques of production, distribution or public intervention is countered by a scarcely dissimulated indifference to the object *par excellence* of the economic battle, namely the evolution of needs. Reckoning that these are already sufficiently determined by the volume and structure of revenues, Western and Eastern planners tend to abandon consumption to spontaneously acting networks of determination. Needs which catch the attention of collectivities concern either growth or power; cultural or social realizations which do not first of all have an instrumental character are rare (even if only in a political perspective).

Now, in a world where human action takes on dimensions which are at once grandiose and alarming, it is primordial that the economic thing and technical development cease to be a blind fatality. *If he wants to free himself from a social nature over which he has no control, man must arrive at a mastery of the process which recreates and remodels his needs.* This and only this is the starting-point of the reconquest both of the economic rationality and of the freedom of the society of tomorrow.

For a long historical moment men of progress rightly had the feeling that the human species was being enslaved by *poverty* and freedom would emerge directly from its victory over hunger. This is the light in which the development of productive forces ap-

peared to socialists as a *program of freedom* rather than a precept of enrichment. If this program is still valid for important fractions of mankind—hunger being the most despotic of tyrants—it must from now on be integrated in a more general truth which defers victory over necessity to a postulate of “consciousness.” For it is by unmastered need that more or less opulent societies are subjected to nature—economy as blindly as nature’s creatures are to environmental imperatives. The fatal character of economy, our second nature, has a hold over us. Freedom will only emerge from a conscious act that will finally render us masters of this fatal process. It will start the moment it is recognized that the basic needs of man do not call for the endless multiplication of means of satisfaction.

This “option” obviously poses numerous questions. Firstly on the liberating faculty of taking control over needs. To limit consumer choice by a common will (for the conscious determination of ways of satisfaction can only consist in this): would this not be an alarming extension of the already numerous prerogatives of the collectivity? an encroachment on the inalienable rights of the individual?

To lay out this problem correctly, one should not, even at the present time, lose sight of the fact that social environment determines and fashions the concrete expression of human needs. It would simply be a question of submitting what today is abandoned to the mediation of economic value (in every system, even collectivist) to an enlightened decision—and economic value, as I have tried to show, is a partial arbiter. It is self-evident that this conscious will could only proceed from a social and democratically established consensus under pain of falling into a worse despotism than that of value. Does one have to call to mind the difference between a democratic consensus and a tutelary “general will?” And so the aim to free man from “natural necessity”—to use Marx’s term—is conditioned by another dimension of freedom: that which protects the integrity of the individual with regard to political and social *powers that be*. There can be no possible barter between these two freedoms.

One can immediately have a presentiment of what a non-despotic enlightenment of the collective consciousness demands in intellectual investments. Everything depends on the capacity of

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modern man—himself a product of the industrial age—to set bounds on his acquisitive instincts by opting for *autonomous creation* rather than for passive and frantic pleasure. This already supposes a certain balance of personality, which restrictions made on possessive tendencies would in turn reinforce. For if it is true that the exuberance of acquisitive tendencies—this “Faustian frenzy” of the West—is prejudicial for the satisfaction of affective needs, these risk expansion once satisfaction is no longer entirely or principally sought through materialized answers. The creation of a new economic consciousness is decisive insofar as it would replace the information that makes its way to individuals in the form of accountable value and which works systematically in favor of objectified most-pleasure (or most-power) to the detriment of utilities of a different order.

Would this new consciousness, with the slowing-up of economic growth demanded by it, combat an abundance of elementary means of satisfaction? On the contrary, it would direct the formidable production machine of the future—which the progress of automatism can only perfect in an *a priori* way that is favorable to an expansion of human faculties—towards what is most urgent. In our present state, at least in Europe, the realization, for all, of an abundance of food, of well-heated and well-lit living space and of medical and educational attentions is in no way a distant Utopia, even if one gives one self exigent norms. It is true that a greater equality of income would itself assist the reorientation of productive forces in this direction; but this equality is compromised even in socialist régimes: anxiety about performance is a permanent counter-current to it. So, the mechanisms of inequality accelerate technical progress as much as they hinder society from concentrating on its most pressing needs.

If there are comparisons to be made between what I have called “the non-productivist option” and what the classics of political economy termed “stationary economy,” there is no ground for considering this refusal of productivism as a stop hit or as immobilism. Even with a slowed-up growth, industrial societies would use those resources of technical progress to which they attach their particular value. The difference with the productivist option would lie in the attitude towards technical novelty: one would cease to *submit* to it, one would not try to exploit it



at any cost. One would have to put an end to the “domination of the producer by his product,” to use the language of Marx and Engels.

It is clear that the non-productivist option is only compatible with well-being on a basis of *highly developed productivity*. In this sense, it only directly interests extremely industrialised nations where the problem is not the satisfaction of elementary needs but the maintenance of the rhythm of growth by a double action (on technical performances and on needs). This being so, the non-productivist option would not be without repercussions on the fate of so-called under-developed countries whose hopes and inspirations would be returned to them by the slowing-up of the race, as dictated from above. To go beyond inequalities—the supreme objective of a united species—might then seem a slightly less chimerical aim? Once a change of course has worked for the rich, other people could concern themselves more with their own needs—without however being obliged to renounce growth, that is, their fight against penury.

#### *Final remarks on socialism.*

It is as well to recognise that the socialist movement had originally settled upon objectives aimed at liberating man from his servitude to nature. As a result of a premature revolution, collectivist régimes launched themselves into a wild race of catching-up, from which they have never since extricated themselves. They have finished up by defying capitalism on its own ground, namely, productive performances.<sup>13</sup>

Caught in the logic—and the instrumental constraints—of this defiance, socialism has moved away from its historical vocation. For competition had to be developed on a socialist basis. It has not been nourished by the “socialist” element of collectivist régimes, but by the non-socialist features that they assimilated. These latter have never resolved the dilemma between “performance” and “Utopia” in favor of the second. The application with which they have tried to restore the defiance of capitalism on the plane of technics—rather than freedom—has finished by inte-

<sup>13</sup> Cf. our study, “Du socialisme au productivisme,” in *Esprit*, No. 2, 1968.

grating them in a universe dominated by productivist values.

Despite this historical reverse, the communist experience has not managed to demonstrate—which was nonetheless the thesis to be defended—that socialism frees productive forces for a faster development. There are many reasons for this failure: they raise problems of organization and motivation; they call for separate analysis. In our context it is the failure that counts: it has put an end to a myth which contributed not a little to the deviations of socialist efforts: the myth of the correlation between justice and performance, between technical and social progress. The demonstration was only made to increase the calculable well-being, it is neither necessary nor useful to turn down the lamp of capitalist competition.

In return, no one has yet played the other card: Utopia. For one can draw two diametrically opposed conclusions from the fact that the models of corporate organization—from cooperatives to workers' committees—are not sufficiently viable: these models can either be ranked with the antiquities of social history, or one can decide that they represent an ideal that is valid in itself, *even if their vocation is not in the technico-economic field*. Curiously, the régimes that called themselves socialist have discarded this second solution; they opted for technical progress.

By taking up the cause of productivism, this dilemma with all its acuity is again posed. For if the consumer frenzy can be explained by an axiological void, the satiation of basic needs is just another expression for *community values*. These are the only principle and the only social force with which one can, with a chance of results, confront domination by a logic of efficacy. Without a real community, economic value risks being the only link capable of uniting individual efforts (productive or otherwise) on the social scale.

In other words, what emerges as an ultimate conclusion is the necessity for research with a view to defining a social project other than that which proceeds from the instrumental logic of economy or from technical development. Could a new form of socialism be the answer? or would one have to rummage through the Utopias? One thing is certain: only an authentically community project will be able to establish—not in the abstract but in facts—a non-productivist option.