

Evacuate the leftist bunker

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Robespierre you are disgustingly decent. It would fill me with shame if I'd pranced about the world... with the same self-righteous expression on my face just for the sake of finding others worse than myself'.1

Most would agree that there are increasing levels of social control that have come to settle around the therapeutic. This mania for physical and mental health is as much locked into increasing the productive performance in light of intensified workloads, as it is an issue of the provision of disciplining services for those occupying the fringes of work. Could it not be that the 'rise of the therapeutic' is part of a wider socio-historic process that is under-pinned by the way capitalism is engaged in the 'production of subjectivity' and that highlighting the 'therapy industry' to some extent leaves the door open to an 'absolution' of those who participate in an increasingly melancholic and directionless leftist milieu?

It is the contention of what follows, based upon and drawing from a reading of Joel Kovel's *Radical Spirit*, that the leftist milieus should at least bear some of the burden of the decline in social struggles because, not surprisingly, it seems to be sharing-in some of the obfuscations of the society of which it is a part. Not least among these is the persistence in the milieus of the same dichotomies that act to bolster capitalism, there is the divide between emotion and rationality (itself one of the main adaptational tenets of psychoanalysis) and the divide between the individual and the collective (the founding-stone of liberal politics?). Both of these 'sides' interact with one another around, say, notions of self-expression and it is very difficult to talk about one 'side' to the exclusion of another. Such a difficulty is itself indicative of their inter-relation.

Emotion and intellect

A problem of the milieus is that for them 'emotion' is automatically equated either with therapy sessions and middle-class self-help groups or is deemed not 'objective' enough or is seen as 'wishy-washy' or ... even worse, seen as spiritual, mystical or aesthetic.² Investigation in this direction would perhaps see emotion, more politically, as a conflict between the historical and the trans-historical and as a raising, thwarting and hence manipulation of desire. Without 'emotion' it seems to me that not very much is possible. Any reaction to social injustice and a growing awareness of the need for social change is not something that people can initially arrive at by rational calculation. It's not a matter of one day deciding that it makes more sense to aim towards, or, as is the case today, keep alive the notion of revolution. In instances such as these, as with most others, the emotional and the rational are working together, feeding-off each other. Even then it could be offered that emotion is, for many, a greater spur towards communication than the need to sit down and write a treatise on value, but I feel that there is, in the leftist milieus, a 'subjective imbalance' that tends towards the objective and the rational. This is in part caused by

this milieu's orientation towards a distant beyond (revolution). Kovel expresses this as the left being 'pre-occupied with the external object world' and hence failing 'to investigate the subjective condition of emancipation and domination'. Though it seems strange to call this a 'subjective imbalance' this is in fact what life in the milieu comes across as being like: there is very little personal engagement, there is an aura of self-estrangement that still seems to forgo the practical, compromised and potential of everyday conditions of life, there is understated competition about who is best placed to articulate how to get to the distant beyond of revolution and, following from this, an operation of ideology that is adhered to as if it were almost a religious calling. Life in these milieus has been described to me as being 'in the company of people who are no company'. One can know very little about a comrade and this pronounced lack of self-expression translates into an aura of fear cloying to the milieu. Do people have something to fear from 'exposure'? Do they have something to hide? Is it simply that self-expression is seen as bourgeois, as a tendency towards art and literature that are pigeon-holed as capitalistic forms?

This lack of a self-expression that strays from the theoretical or programmatic in the milieu has serious ramifications. Not only does it eviscerate theory, there is also a pronounced lack of people being 'straight-up' with one another that can lead to wrangling, ghettoism and polemical warfare, which are indicative of a lack of clarity about other people's motives. The latter could even initially be articulated as a confusion of motive informed by broader contexts and current conditions, but such expressions of confusion and uncertainty are not seen as expressions of a tentative strategic thinking and self-criticism but as weaknesses of commitment. Fear of articulating weaknesses mean that the threat of accusation and denouncement, seen as expressions of intransigent militancy, create an almost unconscious aura of paranoia that surrounds the milieu. But, this pronounced lack of articulation, the suppression of vocalized 'inner-speech', means, most damagingly, that discussion of subjectivity is off-limits. By choosing to consign such discussion to the category of an already understood 'bourgeois individuality' something quite complex occurs. A member of the milieu transcends the current conditions by believing him/herself to be free of being tainted by capitalist society. Being a 'non-integrated subject' means that the milieu member fails to adequately engage and hence 'politicize' the subjective conditions of domination. A whole welter of investigation into capitalism - its irrationalities, inconsistencies and susceptibilities, its modes of power and class divisions - as well the necessity of self-criticism is thus written-off and, by not extending production to subjectivity, the distant beyond of revolution recedes even further.

The human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations.³

For Freud subjectivity is ultimately about a reduction towards biologically determined instincts that includes the social-pessimism of human beings being controlled by the tensions between a *pleasure principle* and a *reality principle*. However, that these tensions lead to a reduction of the social to nature and the subduing of historical dynamism should not cover over Freud's illumination of the unconscious and his dissection of the personality into the 'involutions' of ego, super-ego and id. Whether we agree with such categories or not it is still possible to appreciate that Freud's investigations threw a spanner into our later adherence to a *human essence* and point towards a useful engagement with the slipstreams of psychoanalysis as that which deals with the radically 'repudiated underside of bourgeois existence'.

A large portion of this underside is the unconscious and a major reason, it seems to me, for this area not being politicized is the left's prevalence for 'consciousness' as expressed in countless formulas not least of which is class-consciousness. So, when Freud states 'at first we are inclined greatly to reduce the value of the criterion of being conscious since it has shown itself to be so untrustworthy', the initial leftist objection would be that this not only negates class consciousness but limits possible agency and leaves the way open to being determined by a trust in unconscious forces themselves; being trapped in nature, in the life of individual instincts rather than being effected by the 'ensemble of social relations'.

A great problem for the left's rejection of the unconscious, which similarly motivates their rejection of discussion around subjectivity, is that it cannot therefore come to grips with lapses and deviations from the expected level of consciousness without failing into judgmental wrangles with all the impatient exasperation of magistrates and educators. But, for Freud it is such lapses as these that provide the initial, most easily expressible evidence for the existence of the unconscious:

*The majority of conscious processes are conscious only for a short period of time, very soon they become latent, but can easily become conscious again.*⁴

We cannot recall everything that we have perceived or learnt, we are never in full possession of knowledge about ourselves and/or the complex social situations we are constantly embroiled in. Does this mean that everything that is not in our immediate consciousness is lost to us? Without having to identify as a Freudian *we can see that the unconscious is a material force that can be as much about latent consciousness, the registering and recollection of perceptions and affects between people and objects, as it is about being in the overdetermined grip of the primitive or the irrational.*

At the very least the concept of the unconscious seems to be a means of registering the after-effects of complex social processes and inter-relationships where thought proceeds in a different way from its more accustomed conscious elaboration and expression can take the form of 'inner-speech'. However, for Joel Kovel the unconscious is not 'some set of memories, fantasies etc that a person has 'within him'... but... something that is evoked in an inter-subjective field'. This may mean that rather than the unconscious being identified as an effect of 'introspection' that requires specialists like therapists and psychiatrists to guide us through it, the unconscious is what occurs when memories, thoughts and actions are provoked by other people... by certain objects ... by places... by situations.

We, therefore, do not have to adhere to the Freudian trajectory of a reduction of the unconscious 'to the life of the instincts, to sexuality' and neither, similarly, do we have to equate it with 'bourgeois individuality'. Just as Marx, in describing capitalist society as the 'sum of relations and conditions', shows how people can be removed from a position of centrality so Freud's explorations of the unconscious illustrate further that what we understand as 'individuality' can be decentred, 'the unconscious makes the idea of a person problematic - the admission of a depth dimension to subjectivity undermines the construction of the self-representation which enables the ego to say *I am a person of this kind*'.

For Kovel a crucial ramification of this, and a measure of Freud's unbeknownst contribution, is that a 'space' is located 'within which the human subject constitutes itself but is not yet itself. A

locus of radical becoming'. This decentring of a human-essence means that subjectivity does not have to be overdetermined by capitalist social relations desirous of its unquestioning adherence to an 'individualistic' self-representation, but rather that subjectivity is processual and, being produced amidst people, it can be produced differently.⁵

The lure of collectivity

This insertion into a 'sum of relations and conditions' means that the 'nature' of development itself changes. If psychoanalysis is seen as the undialectical domain of individuality what, conversely, takes place in the leftist milieu is an undialectical over-valuation of the notion of collectivity. Belonging to such a collectivity, be it a party or class or a firm, can, in the worst case, become a means of flight from the problems surrounding subjectivity. Belonging becomes sufficient exoneration: there is an excuse to fall back upon, a means of avoiding taking seriously the emotional dimension of experience and, not following such experiences through, means that crucial, socially-interlinked dimensions are missed.

Though this has ramifications for the methods of organisation and practice (nuances, inflections and idioms of resistance can be missed by reliance upon policy-styled edicts or guru pronouncements), the most serious offshoot is that the group can come to function as individualistically as the individuals that both comprise and reputedly transcend it. What I mean by this is that by enshrining a notion of 'bourgeois individuality' as being somehow 'outside' the group and not an active and broachable dimension 'inside' it as well, means that its insipid force is redoubled through repression. Put differently, the operation I am trying to describe is similar to the scenario of 'queer bashers' as latent homosexuals where the inability to confront a homosexual or bisexual component to sexuality makes such people wreak violence upon a 'queer' who is a projection of a part of themselves they feel aggressive towards.

Accusations of subjectivism within leftists groups follow a similar, though obviously less psychotic, dimension and can, in part, account for many leftists trepidation on encountering art and literature. Here too rather than seeing what Kovel has dramatically described as 'the subversive function of its utter truthfulness', many leftists seem intent on refuting and banishing what can be seen as an articulation of the 'subjective condition of domination and emancipation' and hence reinforce the 'individualism' of their group.

Another good case is that of Guy Debord where, becoming the last Situationist, unable to collaborate with anyone, his status and renown are tinged, in his last books, with a faint megalomania indicative of an individualism that increased in inverse proportion to his faith in the working class.⁶ Debord himself fails foul of the way that the working class, in leftist theory, is articulated as possessing all the attributes of an 'individual'. This class becomes the exponent of an essence, it has a singular purpose, it acts as 'one'. Indeed the very term 'class consciousness', in light of the refusal to discuss the production of subjectivity, becomes another way of individualizing the collectivity whilst making it more malleable. Similarly, it becomes a way in which people who are not from working class backgrounds can become experts in what it is to be working class, they can 'learn' class-consciousness and, in this individualistic way, become proletarianized.

This brief speculation around the area of class highlights another blind-spot where collectivities,

organized around an assured and almost messianic notion of the working-class, forego any discussion of class experience, such as forms of sociality, and thereby elide insights into how class, in general, informs the production of subjectivity. Yet again, this is how subdued forms of individualism come to play themselves out in the leftist sphere and if we term them 'subdued' it is only perhaps because a lack of leftist recognition of this area holds us back from saying they are in fact explicit. We need only think of polemical warfare between factions and cliques that boil down to an exchange of letters between individuals or, with further reference to the *Situationist Internationalist*, think of expulsions and excommunications. The latter could be a prime example of the way that individuals are blamed for the structural failings of the collectivity, that, in order to protect the group an expulsion is often couched in individualistic terms, such and such does not measure up.

Here, with subjectivity being such a taboo area it often gives rise to the Kafkaesque dimension of a person being potentially accused of a crime that no-one knows how to defend or profess any innocence from. No one knows what the crime is, how to judge it or indeed, whether they themselves could be accused of it. Such atmospheres have the effect of bringing about an increase in inner-speech witnessed, in part, as those awkward silences at meetings where, motives, confidence and self-expression, to quote Voloshinov, begin to fail,

*to lose their verbal countenance, and little by little, really do turn into a foreign body in the psyche. Whole sets of organic manifestations come, in this way, to be excluded from the zone of verbalised behaviour and may become asocial.*⁷

Though the term 'organic manifestations' may be a little misleading I interpret it, in this context, as relating to feelings and thoughts that should be expressed. However, the crucial term of this quotation is 'asocial' for this hints at the complexity of what I have been trying to express, that the group can become individualized rather than socialized, it is not an engaged part of society but, like the notion of 'bourgeois individuality', it is separate, abstract and operating at a distance from others. This can be reflected amongst some members by grudges, cynicism, purity, competitiveness, cliqueness etc and, maybe even worse, in a kind of arrogant self-containment that borders on grandiosity.

Just as it may be testament to people's commitment to revolution that they can put up with such an atmosphere, it is not really conducive to any growth or development because other people sense it as 'alienated'. In this way, by replicating this idea of individuality and not confronting it through demonstrating that individuality (or subjectivity) is 'the ensemble of social relations' the participation, involvement and hence the very structure of leftist groups are badly effected. *A revolutionary group comes to function more like a collection of experts rather than as a facilitating dynamic for learning about capitalism as it is experienced at a practical level.* In this way, just as 'bourgeois individuality' is seen to be 'outside' the group, so too can meaning be seen as that which exists prior to a members participation. In this scenario meaning is not generated between people as an 'inter-orientation' that includes intuition and emotional responses but is acceded to as a passive understanding of that which has already been completed. This lack of a generative and inclusive component to the creation of meaning reinforces the centrality of individuals within the leftist groups as being the bearers of knowledge.

The production of subjectivity

Demonstrating that subjectivity is produced by the ensemble of social relations may appear to be a

very hard thing to do. It is made difficult by the power of the prevailing ideology that capitalism generates and which operates as a facet of its production of subjectivity. An individual is produced within parameters that disable it from taking stock of its own experiences or obfuscate that experience by too readily offering interpretations that have the consequence of diminishing the power of these experiences and undermining awareness of their own social situatedness. One important yet simple follow-through from this centrality of the social, overlooked in the leftist milieus, is that people are in fact subjected to the same conditions that influence self-representation. People share certain processes that produce subjectivity and, returning to Kovel, we can elaborate another dimension of this production. One of the conceptual tools he uses in this area of examining subjectivity is that of 'splitting' and 'differentiation'.

What Kovel offers up is that our relation to an 'external' object world and our inter-subjective communications are subject to splitting and differentiation. In the parlance of the leftist milieus splitting would relate to exclusion and differentiation to a comrade, but we will see that this is not entirely an accurate analogy. With splitting, Kovel describes a psychological process that intends to 'separate completely' and not 'maintain any connection' to an object or person. Kovel frames his discussion in terms of the natural/mankind division and, for exploitation and domination of nature (and wo/man) to persist, then the technique of splitting is introduced: 'the dominator must dissociate from and not recognize himself in the dominated'. Splitting is to some degree a defence mechanism: a manager will dissociate himself from the colleague he is striving to sack, filling the gap with some self-justificatory 'ideology' such as 'working for the greater good of the company'. Here we can see that individualism is in part created by 'splitting' and more complicatedly how the ideology of 'working for the greater good of the company' in fact covers over the individualistic motives of the manager who is keen to show his worth and value to the company. The notion of 'collectivity' is, in this example, invoked as a smoke screen. Uncontested by the leftist milieus it is this sense of 'individuality', as an essence 'inherent in each individual', that comes to operate in the very places that should be most wary of it, and, returning to our earlier theme, it infects the very notion of 'emotion' and self-expression.

Identifying as 'revolutionaries' may mean that members of the left milieus cannot afford to 'recognize themselves in the dominated' for fear of disapproval and exclusion. Though revolutionaries do not see themselves as the dominators (though some of them may wish to be) by avoiding their own subjective dimension of 'being dominated' their powers of empathy and ability to communicate in a way more spontaneous and fitting to a variety of contexts is supplanted by propagandist efforts and preaching to the converted. An intense self-focus is maybe rightly condemned as a move towards separation, but it is inaccurate and damaging to believe that this is a defining instance of subjectivity.

This is borne out when Kovel discusses 'differentiation' and he talks of it in terms of an 'interdependence', a sense of there being a difference between people and objects that is taken from the standpoint of their interrelatedness. Rather than see this as a passport to liberal pluralism, Kovel inserts this into further insights around Marx's expressed aim of communism to be 'full human capacity'. An integral component of this capacity is being conscious. Kovel writes, 'consciousness is the mark of differentiation - one cannot become conscious of a thing if one is identical to that thing'. What we know as 'individuality' can then become self-consciousness through a

twofold motion of hyper-differentiation... This double transformation consists of the emergence of a particular gradation within subjectivity, the self, and in the same moment,

indeed, as the condition for the emergence of the self, the projection of the self into the world and the alteration of the world to form objects.

Already we are moving a long way from the left milieu's understanding of 'individuality', which for Kovel contains gradations such as the previously discussed unconscious. Crucially though, what these points demonstrate is that self-consciousness is created through interaction with others where differentiations rather than splitting confirm that the division between 'interior' and 'exterior', so crucial for capitalism's promising of atomized and isolated individuals, is in fact nothing short of an ideology that manufactures and disseminates 'splitting' and severs social connectedness. This production sees to it that distances are maintained. These points have crucial ramifications for revolutionary practice when Kovel further asserts that 'the self does not arise prior to the transformation of the world, but in the transformation of the world'. Subjectivity is produced as part of a wider life-long process of transformation and interaction and as such it is not produced solely in the factory (Marx's predilection for labour as a determining instance) or in the nether regions of a traumatized childhood (Freud's predilection for a pre-given 'natural' of the instincts) but everywhere and amidst everyone.⁸

Kovel expands these points by reference to Freud's focus on childhood, and, contrasting this to Marx's adherence to the western tradition that sees 'consciousness as emergent fully grown from the nature which is its source', Kovel enters into a difficult discussion around the 'otogeny of the individual'. This 'otogeny', for Kovel, is not a pre-given and applying Marxist categories of thought to the development of consciousness he asserts that a child 'engages in an infantile labour whose product, or object, is subjectivity itself'. For Kovel this is a praxis of childhood that depends on many and varied social factors and we must add that it is the beginning of a process that is never-ending, for if praxis is understood to be, as Kovel defines it, 'labour freely and self-determinatively done' it should never reach a state of completion.

As such a completion may signal the stagnation into 'bourgeois individuality' i.e. prevailing socio-historical factors determine that this be the case such as choosing a career or role. In the case of the child, Kovel asserts that the 'infantile Labour' is carried out, most noticeably, through interaction with objects and the people around it. The ramifications this has for Kovel are that the objects, be they building blocks or whatever, are, in the process of experimentation, 'configurations of the Other'. Here, a crucial factor of the emergent subject is the role played by the imaginary realm, itself expressed by Kovel as being underpinned by the tension between 'what-is' and 'what-could-be'. This imaginary realm is therefore informed by notions of desire and of praxis:

The mode of relationship between the emergent subject and its other is desire... Desire provides the matrix along which infantile labour directs itself... and as it is before language... its object cannot therefore be named. At the same time, it is the province of an uncompleted subject, open to fusion with that which it sees beyond itself.

Just as Kovel locates desire as part of the production of subjectivity he also points towards a concomitant social pull, an openness towards the surrounding world, that may or may not be the subject of closure (the rise of the therapeutic with its creation of fear, of an 'unpoliced' social realm contributes to such a closure). In many ways this is a further insistence upon a notion of subjectivity as transformable and not as a pre-given entity. It is a means of avoiding the predominant definitions of self-experience as a 'bourgeois individuality' that sees itself separate and cut-off. However, the potential for transforming subjectivity is intimately linked to the

potentials of transforming the social world and it is here that desire for ‘what-could-be’, the imaginative potential, is welded to a praxis that, for Kovel, is involved in the gratification of desire. The more radical the practice the more it can be adequate to desire.[9](#)

Inner speech

Though I have had cause to use the phrase ‘inner speech’ it should now be discussed as a crucial component of this piece for it is by looking more closely at ‘inner speech’ that the prevailing dichotomies of individual/collective can be further exposed as not only a debilitating factor of leftist practice but as the way that this milieu can act as a conductor for capitalist social relations.

Any insight into inner speech merits being called ‘crucial’ simply because it can be interpreted as the defining instance of ‘individuality’. Being the inner voice that accompanies us all the time it is not surprising that its very presence and insistence seems to bolster the idea of people as separate from others. The inner voice is what marks out the terrain of privacy; it seems to make the ideological process of ‘splitting’ seem a ‘natural’ indisputable condition.

Furthermore, it is notions of the inner voice that extend even further the vocabulary of ‘individuality’ from terms such as subject, consciousness and self-consciousness towards other, more trans-historical terms, like ‘mind’ and ‘psyche’. Joel Kovel in reference to Ancient Greece discusses these latter two terms when he draws attention to how the inner voice is further produced as a ‘sharply differentiated self-concept’ by means of social distinctions, the rise of the state and the growth of the written word:

The individual self is closely linked to the emergence of the state, and that the estrangement of that self, both within itself and between itself and others, is a reflection of the alienation inherent in political processes subsumed by the state.[10](#)

Though such mediations can have positive effects, the self estrangement Kovel mentions is played out as the estrangement of the individual from society which can reach such a pitch that inner-speech becomes totally dissociated from its source in the wider society. By turning to Lev Vygotsky’s text *Thought and Language* we can witness, via his critical engagement with Jean Piaget’s psychological theories of child development, a more accurate summation of inner-speech.[11](#)

Though I am incapable of even paraphrasing this debate, one area of contention comes to be around an investigation of ‘inner speech’ in children. At first a distinction is made between inner speech as ‘speech for oneself’ and exterior speech as ‘speech for others’. One of the differences between the two is their *differentiation*, and recalling Kovel’s use of this term, we see that Vygotsky similarly sees them as connected and not split away from each other. When he says ‘inner speech is not the interior aspect of external speech’ he implies that they have a different function but are both social.

However, for Vygotsky ‘inner speech’ itself is developmentally linked to what is called ‘egocentric speech’. This latter is what we can encounter when we hear a child talking to itself without addressing anybody in particular. This ‘egocentric speech’ is seen as a crucial phase in the rise of inner speech (and hence for Vygotsky, the rise of thought). Where Piaget, believing the child to be essentially egocentric or autistic, would have it that undergoing a process of socialization causes egocentric speech to disappear and be overcome by inner speech, Vygotsky counters that egocentric speech ‘does not simply atrophy but *goes underground*’.

For Vygotsky it remains but its 'decreasing vocalisation ... denotes a developing abstraction from sound ... the child's new faculty to *think words* instead of pronouncing them'. Just as this implies the continuation of egocentric speech into adult life and is developed into Vygotsky's thesis about the 'inter-functional relations' of thought and speech the point that is crucial to the prevalent dichotomy of individual and collective can now be presented.

Working from Piaget's view of the child as inadequately socialized Vygotsky contends that if this were the case it would be expected that egocentric speech would increase if the collective were less present. Through a series of experiments Vygotsky concluded that 'the exclusion of the collective factor, instead of giving full vent to egocentric speech, depressed it'. Because children, who were placed in amongst others who spoke a foreign language, felt that they could not be understood there was a decrease in factors said to be characteristic of egocentric speech. For Vygotsky this was proof of his reversal of Piaget's thesis as he concluded that egocentric speech 'cannot live and function in isolation from social speech'. Just as this leads Vygotsky to contend that the 'primary function of speech is communication, social contact' and in relation to his overriding thesis about thought and language he contended that,

the true direction of development of thinking is not from the individual to the socialized, but from the social to the individual.

Whilst Vygotsky thus provides further fuel for ideas around the social production of 'individuality' and revokes further the prevailing sense of this individuality as inherently 'egotistic', several other points can arise from this aspect of Vygotsky's text. Just as he has dissolved the split between the individual and collective and demonstrated the mutual inter-activeness of these facets he also drew attention to the divide between rationality and emotion:

The relation between intellect and affect, their separation as subjects of study is a major weakness of traditional psychology since it makes thought processes appear as an autonomous flow of 'thoughts thinking themselves' segregated from the fullness of life, from the personal needs and interests, the inclinations and impulses of the thinker.

Language and individuality

By moving our focus to language itself we can, by again consulting Voloshinov, show that language, far from being an expression of some unadulterated individual essence that exists in a vacuum, is just as inflected with the social as inner-speech,

Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intention. It is populated - overpopulated - with the intensions of others. [12](#)

Following on from this we can see that Bakhtin's foregrounding of dialogue is an indication of meaning being generated between people. When a text is written or a phrase is uttered it is composed in anticipation of a response and in this way it carries other people within it. Voloshinov extends this backwards and forwards in time to suggest that an utterance carries within it the history of other utterances. As well as, through anticipating response, it is directed towards a future.

What's more such a dialogue takes place in a context and is informed and amplified by what

Voloshinov calls an 'extra verbal reality'. The dialogue is informed by sensitivity to varying behavioural situations, which reflect a discontinuity of social-relations. Dialogue is different in an office than it is in a pub. So just as situation and audience come to inform our use of language, Voloshinov extends these ramifications towards the production of subjectivity. Just as Kovel offers that the unconscious exists between people, so too does Voloshinov contend that subjectivity is produced on the 'borderline where inner experience and the social world meet. And they meet in signs - in words'.[13](#)

This borderline is demarcated by Voloshinov as being the zone of language, the place where consciousnesses meet and are produced through mutually interactive dialogue. However, Voloshinov mentions in the above quote that language is not neutral and that a person's use of language can become 'overpopulated' with other intensions. This 'overpopulation' could be seen to relate to the way that the social constructedness of individuality is obfuscated by ideological pressures that outweigh the common experiences of dialogue and work to cover over the lessons of social experience:

The very same thing that makes the ideological sign vital and mutable is also, however, that which makes it a refracting and distorting medium. The ruling class strives to impart a supra-class, eternal character to the ideological sign, to extinguish or drive inward the struggle between social value judgments which occurs inside it, to make the sign uniaxential.[14](#)

If meaning can be pinned down and lack resonance and movement then, Voloshinov seems to imply, this reification of language leads on to the instilling of an idea of the social as non-dynamic and innately resistant to being transformed. If one of the main mediums of communication can come to be a carrier of 'ruling class' meaning, if it can be uniaxential, then the danger occurs that these meanings are 'driven inwards' to define say, self-experience as 'bourgeois individuality'. The danger with this is that a similar operation occurs within leftist milieus that ascribe uniaxential meaning to words and categories like 'individual' and 'collective' and, failing to examine their practical inter-relatedness. We see how the leftist milieus are themselves 'overpopulated' or over-inscribed with the dominant meanings that effect their practice and efficacy as an opposition to capitalism.[15](#)

Final remarks

This inability of the leftist milieus to let go of inherited meanings has the effect of hardening their beliefs into ideology and blinding them to the ways that capitalism has changed. The rise of the cultural sector as an increasingly profitable sphere and one in which all the paraphernalia of exploration and command take place means that social struggles can come to be enacted outside of its traditional sites and can proceed to some extent invisibly. That culture can contain 'the subjective condition of emancipation' as part of a process of 'subverting the forms of the imaginary' is lost on the leftist milieus, who uphold the traditional divisions that capitalism itself is in the process of breaching.

For them culture and politics remain separated and cultural expression is the domain of 'bourgeois individuality'. What may have held the leftist milieus back is the absence of any real sense of

‘self-criticism’, which for them has become stigmatized as an introspective behaviour. However, bearing in mind what has preceded, it is surely the function of self-criticism to examine the ways in which capitalism has influenced the production of subjectivity and following on from this it is self-criticism that acts as a foil to ideological certainties and dogmas.

The leftist milieus, as we have seen, are content with a repetition of the same truths. New members of the milieus undergo subtle forms of education within the confines and following the remit of the milieu and this establishes a crucial ‘division of labour’ over the construction of meaning, which is individualistically transmitted in the manner of a less informal educational establishment. Because these milieus uphold their dogmas in the manner of truths to be learnt the social dynamic within the milieus does not encourage the making of mistakes nor is it conducive to speakers being a little less sure of themselves.

Failing under the irreversibility of truth there is no space for conjecture and experiment and hence participation, always tentative at first, is muted and silenced, ‘How ambiguous and threatening everything must appear to him when he won’t even risk opening his mouth to put an innocent question’.¹⁶ If members of the milieus were a little less certain of themselves and could see beyond their own situation then these authoritarian tendencies (even in the most libertarian of milieus) could be abated. How often is it that we are witness to misunderstandings of communication and expression being blown up into fully-fledged polemical disputes where the differing party’s are unable to state simply that they may have ill-expressed a point?

What’s more, how many times do we suspect that behind the polemical disputes lies a psychological need to defend a position that has been identified with to such a large extent that the admission of fault or error would be tantamount to denying years worth of activity? How often does the sense of one party being ‘victorious’ over another diminish the importance of the debates content? Self-criticism, being in constant interaction with differing positions and being able to see individuality against a backdrop of the social, cannot invest in its own self-representation to the degree that it would enter into such a competitive form of politicking. If we return to Bakhtin, and bearing in mind his work is mainly concerned with studies of literature, we see that for him a novelist like Dostoevsky is carrying out a process whereby there is an inter-orientation of the authors and another person’s speech. Such interaction creates the conditions where the author is ‘relativised by the existence of other views’ and is thereby able, through characterization, to objectify subjectivity, to present parts of himself as something distinct from himself.

From literature as well we can learn that ‘self consciousness is arrived at dialogically by an inner polemic with social voices which first structure our inner being’. Self-criticism is to some degree akin to the process of inner-polemic but the persistence of other social voices enables what we consider as our individuality to be experienced outside itself in relation to other individualities. Just as self-criticism allows for a greater experience of being socially situated and induces proclivities to act in consort with others and to co-operate through empathy and with respect, it also more complicatedly gives rise to a self-deprecatory mocking of its own position. Being aware of others to the degree of reflecting their possible input and influence has the ramification of prohibiting the rise of any authoritarian characteristics of giving primacy to the self, ‘the most individual enunciation is a particular case of collective enunciation’.¹⁷

1 Georg Büchner, *Danton's Death*, A Methuen Paperback, 1982

[2](#) Perhaps Vaneigem's *Movement of the Free Spirit* (Zone Books, 1994) takes a sidelong glance at the mystical aspects of an emotional expression of social injustice. As for the aesthetic... isn't there the writing of the first phase of the Situationists, which must include Asger Jorn's *Open Creation and Its Enemies* (Unpopular Books, 1994). In another not entirely disconnected direction there is Walter Benjamin's work on various writers collected in *Illuminations* (Schocken Books, 1969).

[3](#) Karl Marx, Sixth Theses on Feuerbach in *Early Writings* (Pelican 1975). Though this quote is illustrative of the theme of this piece it is something of a paradox. If subjectivity is 'the ensemble of social relations' then how can it be an essence?

[4](#) Sigmund Freud, Dissection of the Personality in *New Introductory Lectures* p 102 (Pelican 1983).

[5](#) Joel Kovel. *Radical Spirit*, pp 91-93 (Free Association Books, 1988). I am grateful to *Melancholic Troglodytes* for introducing me to Joel Kovel's work.

[6](#) You don't have to go to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings to suggest that a factor in alcoholism can be an addiction to expressing socially suppressed 'inner speech' in a non-judgmental environment.

[7](#) V. N. Voloshinov. Freudianism - A Critical Sketch in *The Bakhtin Reader* ed. Pam Morris (Arnold 1997).

[8](#) Joel Kovel, *ibid*, p 294.

[9](#) Joel Kovel, *ibid*, p 319.

[10](#) Joel Kovel, *ibid*, p 213. It is useful to state that Kovel builds upon this element of estrangement as a factor of conflict, seeing it as an element that propels social and self-transformation: 'A less internally conflicted, that is more harmoniously balanced, self would remain articulated with the society from which it arises', *op cit*, p 212.

[11](#) What follows is built up from notes/quotes from Lev Vygotsky's *Thought and Language* (MIT Press, 1962) and references to Fred Newman and Lois Holzman's *Lev Vygotsky: Revolutionary Scientist* (Routledge, 1993).

[12](#) Voloshinov/Bakhtin, *The Bakhtin Reader*, *ibid*, p 77.

[13](#) Pam Morris, Introduction in *The Bakhtin Reader*, *ibid*, p 12.

[14](#) Voloshinov/Bakhtin, *ibid*, p 55.

[15](#) The leftist milieus hold onto a notion of the working class that has become historically static, they refuse to see that a main condition of work today is a flexibility of contract, a form of generic working and a collapsing of the division between intellectual and manual labour. A decline in social struggles mirrors the decline of the workplace as the rooted-site where a working class identity, with its 'shared assumptions', was enabled to come into being. This decline in workplace struggles and the redefinition of the 'factory' may also be indicative of the 'disaggregation' of the working class, its being broken into components and work units of a much smaller scale. It could be said that the dichotomy between individual and collective is being played out in just such a zone where working class people are experiencing themselves as 'working-class individuals' severed from a wider class belonging. When this is coupled to the ways in which the content of work is changing - 'the transformation of working class labour into a labour of control, of handling information, into a decision-making capacity' - we see that what is being demanded from employees is an 'investment of subjectivity', the willingness to enter into a 'vocational' relationship to work. A crucial component of working class experience today is just this conflict around the production of subjectivity: 'If production today is directly the production of social relations, then the *raw material* of immaterial labour is subjectivity and the *ideological* environment in which this subjectivity lives and reproduces'. See Maurizio Lazzarato, *Immaterial Labour in Radical Thought in Italy* (University of Minnesota, 1996).

[16](#) Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, p173 (Penguin 1972).

[17](#) Deleuze & Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, p 84 (University of Minnesota 1986).