

Desire and Need

Murray Bookchin

1967

Contents

Marat/Sade	3
Desire and Need Polarized	3
The Self: Myth and Reality	5
The Disintegrating Self	7
Desire and Revolution	8

Marat/Sade

Most of the articles that have been written thus far about the Marat/Sade play have been drivel and the tritest remarks have come from its author, Peter Weiss. A good idea can slip from the hands of its creator and follow its own dialectic. This kept happening with Balzac, so there is no reason why it shouldn't happen with Weiss.

The play is mainly a dialogue between Desire and Need—a dialogue set up under conditions where history froze them into antipodes and opposed them violently to each other in the Great Revolution of 1789. In those days, Desire clashed with Need: the one aristocratic, the other plebeian; the one as the pleasures of the individual, the other as the agony of the masses; the one as the satisfaction of the particular, the other as the want of the general; the one as private reaction, the other as social revolution. In our day, Marat and de Sade have not been rediscovered; they have been reinterpreted. The dialogue goes on, but now on a different level of possibility and toward a final resolution of the problem. It is an old dialogue, but in a new context.

In Weiss's play, the context is an asylum. The dialogue can only be pursued by madmen among madmen. Sane men would have resolved the issues raised by the dialogue years ago. They would have resolved them in practice. But we talk about them endlessly and we refract them through a thousand mystical prisms. Why? Because we are insane; we have been turned into pathological cases. Weiss, on this score, is only just; he places the dialogue where it belongs, in an asylum policed by guards, nuns and an administrator. We are insane not only because of what we have done, but also because of what we haven't done. We "tolerate" too much. We tremble and cower with "tolerance."

How, then, are we to act? How, following the credo imputed to Marat, are we to pull ourselves up by the hair, turn ourselves inside out, and see the world with fresh eyes? "Weiss refuses to tell us," says Peter Brook in an introduction to the script, and then Brook trails off into talk about facing contradictions. But this doesn't carry any conviction. The dialogue, launched by its literary creator and by its stage director, has its own inner movement, its own dialectic. At Corday's third visit, de Sade lasciviously displays her before Marat and asks: "...what's the point of a revolution without general copulation?" De Sade's words are taken up by the mimes and then by all the "lunatics" in the play. Even Brook cannot leave the answer alone. The ending of the play, equivocal in the script version, turns into a riotous bacchanal in the movie version. The "lunatics" overpower the guards, nuns, visitors and administrator; they grab all the women on the stage and everybody fucks like mad. The answer begins to emerge almost instinctively: the revolution that seeks to annul Need must enthrone Desire for everybody. Desire must become Need!

Desire and Need Polarized

Need—the need to survive, to secure the bare means of existence—could never have produced a public credo of Desire. It could have produced a religious credo of renunciation, to be sure, or a republican credo of virtue, but not a public credo of sensuousness and sensibility. The enthronement of Desire as Need, of the pleasure principle as the reality principle, is nourished as a *public* issue by the productivity of modern industry and by the possibility of a society without toil. Even the widely touted recoil of the flower children from the verities of consumption, drudgery and

suburbia has its origin in the irrationalities of modern affluence. Without the affluence, no recoil. To state the matter bluntly, the revolutionary growth of modern technology has brought into question every historical precept that promoted renunciation, denial and toil. It vitiates every concept of Desire as a privileged, aristocratic domain of life.

This technology creates a new dimension of Desire, one that completely transcends the notions of de Sade, or for that matter of the French symbolists, from whom we still derive our credo of sensibility. De Sade's unique one, Baudelaire's dandy, Rimbaud's visionary, each is an isolated ego, a rare individual who takes flight from the mediocrity and unreality of bourgeois life into hallucinated reveries. In spite of its high, anti-bourgeois spirit of negation, this ego remains distinctly privileged. Baudelaire, one of the most unequivocal of the symbolist writers, expresses its aristocratic nature with bluntness in his notion of Dandyism. The Dandy, the man of true sensibility, he tells us, enjoys leisure and is untroubled by Need. This leisure is defined by the opposition of the Dandy to the crowd, of the particular to the general. It is anchored in the very social conditions that breed Marats and the *enragés* of 1793—the world of Need. Dandyism, to be sure, asserts itself against the existing elites, but not against elitism; against the prevailing privileges, but not against privilege. "Dandyism flourishes especially in periods of transition," Baudelaire notes with acuity, "when democracy is not yet all-powerful and the aristocracy is just beginning to totter and decay. Amidst the turmoil of these times, a small group of men, *déclassés*, at loose ends, fed up—but all of them rich in determination—will conceive the idea of founding a new sort of aristocracy, stronger than the old, for it shall be based on only the most precious, the most indestructible factors, on those heaven-sent gifts that neither money nor ambition can confer." The truth, however, is that its gifts are not heaven-sent. This aesthetic elite floats on the surface of the social war, a richly ornamented debris that presupposes, objectively, the very aristocracy and bourgeoisie it repudiates in spirit.

What, then, of the revolutionary movement—the movement that seeks to reach below the surface of the social war into its very depths? For the most part it dispenses almost completely with a concrete credo of sensuousness. Marxism, the dominant project within the revolutionary movement, offers itself to the proletariat as a harsh, sobering doctrine, oriented toward the labor process, political activity, and the conquest of state power. To sever all the ties between poetry and revolution, it calls its socialism scientific and casts its goals in the hard prose of economic theory. Where the French symbolists formed a concrete image of man, defined by the specifics of play, sexuality and sensuousness, the two great exiles in England formed an abstract image of man, defined by the universals of class, commodity and property. The whole person—concrete *and* abstract, sensuous *and* rational, personal *and* social—never finds adequate representation in either credo.¹ This is tragedy in the Hegelian sense that both sides are right. In retrospect, it is only fair to add that the social situation of their time was inadequate for the complete fulfillment of humanity. Ordinarily the social period admits neither of the liberated personality nor of the liberated society; its doors are closed to the free expression of sensuousness and to the unfettered exercise of reason.

But the doors are never solid. There are moments when they, and indeed the entire house, are shaken to the foundations by elemental events. In such moments of crisis, when the senses of ev-

¹ A sense of incompleteness haunts Western philosophy after Hegel's death and explains much of the work of Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Stirner, Nietzsche, the surrealists and the contemporary existentialists. For the Marxians merely to dismiss this post Hegelian development as "bourgeois ideology" is to dismiss the problem itself.

everyone are strained to extraordinary acuity by social emergencies, the doors break down and the people surge past the hanging portals, no longer as masses but as awakened personalities. These people cannot be crucified on theoretical formulas. They acquire their human reality in revolutionary action. The Paris Commune of 1871 represents precisely such a moment when neither aesthetic nor social theory adequately encompasses the over-all social situation. The Communards of the Belleville district in Paris, who fought the battles of the barricades and died by the tens of thousands under the guns of the Versaillaise, refused to confine their insurrection to the private world described by symbolist poems or the public world described by Marxist economics. They demanded the eating and the moral, the filled belly and the heightened sensibility. The Commune floated on a sea of alcohol—for weeks everyone in the Belleville district was magnificently drunk. Lacking the middle-class proprieties of their instructors, the Belleville Communards turned their insurrection into a festival of public joy, play and solidarity. Perhaps it was foredoomed that the prose of bourgeois society would eventually digest the songs of the Commune—if not in an orgy of slaughter, then in the day-to-day compromises and retreats required by work, material security and social administration. Faced with a bloody conflict and nearly certain defeat, the Communards flung life away with the abandon of individuals who, having tasted of experience in the open, can no longer return to the coffins of daily routine, drudgery and denial. They burned down half of Paris, fighting suicidally to the very last on the heights of their district.

In the Paris Commune of 1871, we have the expression not merely of social interest, but of social libido.² It is hard to believe that the repression following the fall of the Commune—the mass shootings, the ruthless trials, the exile of thousands to penal colonies—owed its savagery strictly to class vengeance. A review of the memoirs, newspapers and letters of the time shows that the bourgeois directed his vengeance against his own subterranean humanity. In the spontaneous outburst of social libido which we call the Paris Commune the bourgeois saw the breakdown of all the repressive mechanisms that maintain hierarchical society. He recoiled with the horror and ferocity of a man who suddenly comes face to face with his unconscious drives.

The Self: Myth and Reality

No one really learned from the Communards of the Belleville district, with the result that Desire and the revolutionary credo developed away from each other. In separating, both were divested of their human content. The credo of Desire evaporated into a misty subjectivism, far removed from all social concerns; the credo of revolution hardened into a dense objectivism, almost completely absorbed in the techniques of social manipulation. The need to round out the revolutionary credo with Desire, or Desire with the revolutionary credo, remains a pressing, perhaps the most pressing, problem of our times. Serious attempts to achieve this totality were made in the 1920s, when the surrealists and Wilhelm Reich tried to resynthesize Marxism and transcend it with a larger conception of the revolutionary project. Although this project did not succeed, it did not fail. All the issues were passed on to us, transformed by new dimensions of thought and by a new sense of immediacy produced by the technological advances of our time.

Ironically, the greatest single obstacle to fulfilling this project is the revolutionary credo itself. Leninism, and its various offshoots have refocused the revolutionist's attention from social goals to political means, from utopia to strategy and tactics. Lacking any clear definition of its human

² Is it any different in other great revolutions? Can we resolve the anarchic, intoxicating phase that opens all

goals, the revolutionary movement, at least in its currently organized forms, has assimilated the hierarchical institutions, puritanism, work ethic and general characterology of the very society it professes to oppose. The goals of Marxism are largely contained in the demand for the *seizure* of power rather than the *dissolution* of power; the former implies the existence of hierarchy and the power of an elite over society as a whole.

Almost equally important as an obstacle to the project envisioned by the surrealists and Reich is the emergence of a crude, undifferentiated subjectivism that casts the rediscovery of man exclusively in terms of self-discovery—in the journey inward. What is basically wrong with this form of subjectivism is not its emphasis on the subject, on the concrete individual. Indeed, as Kierkegaard has emphasized, we have been overfed with the universals of science, philosophy and sociology. The error that vitiates this subjectivism is its operating principle that the self can be divorced completely from society, subjectivity from objectivity, consciousness from action. Ironically, this inner, isolated self turns out to be one of the most fictitious of universals, one of the most treacherous abstractions, a metaphysical concept in which consciousness, far from expanding, contracts into banalities and trivia. Philosophically, its ultimate state is pure being, a purity of experience and inner repose that adds up to nothing.³ Its ultimate state, in short, is the dissolution of Desire into contemplation.

The fact is, the self cannot be resolved into an inherent “it,” a cryptic “soul” covered and obscured by layers of reality. In this abstract form, the self remains an undifferentiated potentiality, a mere bundle of individual proclivities, until it interacts with the real world. Without dealing with the world it simply cannot be *created* in any human sense. Nietzsche reveals this feature of the Self when he declares “...your true nature lies not concealed deep in you, but immeasurably high above you, or at least what you call your self.” Valid introspection turns out to be the conscious appropriation of a self formed largely by the world, and thus a judgment of the world and of the actions needed to reconstitute it along new lines. This order of self-consciousness reaches its height during our time in revolutionary action. To revolt, to *live* revolt, is the complete reconstitution of the individual revolutionary, a change as far-reaching and as radical as the remaking of society. In the process of discarding accumulated experiences, of integrating and re-integrating new experience, a self grows out of the old. For this reason it is idiotic to predict the behavior of people after a revolution in terms of their behavior before it. They will not be the same people.

If it is true that valid introspection must culminate in action, in a reworking of the self by experience with the real world, this reworking achieves a sense of direction only insofar as it moves from the *existent* to the *possible*, from the “what is” to the “what could be.” Precisely this dialectic is what we mean by psychic growth. Desire itself is the sensuous apprehension of possibility, a complete psychic synthesis achieved by a “yearning for...” Without the pain of this dialectic, without the struggle that yields the achievement of the possible, growth and Desire are divested of all differentiation and content. The very *issues* which provide a concept of the possible are never formulated. The real responsibility we face is to eliminate not the psychic pain of growth but rather the psychic suffering of dehumanization, the torment that accompanies the frustrated and aborted life.

the great revolutions of history merely into an expression of class interest and the opportunity to redistribute social wealth?

³ My concern with this philosophical aspect of subjectivism stems from the fact that it is advanced not only by a salad of Hindu Cagliostros but also by serious thinkers such as Norman O. Brown.

The goal of crude subjectivism is stasis—the absence of pain, the achievement of undisturbed repose. This stasis yields an all-embracing placidity that dissolves anger into love, action into contemplation, willfulness into passivity. The absence of emotional differentiation means the end of real emotion. Confronted with the goal of insensate stasis, dialectical growth could justly demand any right to emotion—including the right to hate—to reclaim a real state of sensibility, including the ability to love selectively. The apostle of the undifferentiated type of sensibility (more precisely, sensation) is Marshall McLuhan, whose fantasies of integral communication consist entirely of kicks and highs. Technique, here, is degraded into ends, the message into the media.

The Disintegrating Self

The fact remains, nonetheless, that there can be no meaningful revolutionary credo that fails to include the subject in its point of departure. We have passed beyond a time when the real world can be discussed without taking up in depth the basic problems and needs of the psyche—a psyche that is neither strictly concrete nor strictly universal, but both newly integrated and transcended. The rediscovery of the concrete psyche is the most valid contribution of modern subjectivism and existentialist philosophy to the revolutionary credo, albeit the rediscovered psyche is partial and incomplete, and often tends to become abstracted. In an era of relative affluence, when material immiseration is not the exclusive source of social restiveness, the revolution tends to acquire intensely subjective and personal qualities. Revolutionary opposition centers increasingly around the disintegration of the quality of life, around the anti-life perspectives and methods of bourgeois society.

To put this matter differently, the revolutionist is created and nourished by the breakdown of all the great bourgeois universals—property, class, hierarchy, free enterprise, the work ethic, patriarchalism, the nuclear family and so on, *ad nauseam*. From all of this wreckage, the self begins to achieve self-consciousness and Desire begins to recover its integrity. When the entire institutional fabric becomes unstable, when everyone lacks a sense of destiny, be it in job or social affiliations, the lumpen periphery of society tends to become its center and the *déclassés* begin to chart out the most advanced forms of social and personal consciousness. It is for this reason that any work of art can be meaningful today only if it is lumpenized.

The lumpen's self is permeated by negativity, a reflection of the overall social negativity. Its consciousness is satyr-like and its mockery is acquired by its distance from the verities of bourgeois society. But this very mockery constitutes the self's transcendence of the repressive ideologies of toil and renunciation. The lumpen's acts of disorder become the nuclei of a new order and his spontaneity implies the means by which it can be achieved.

Hegel understood this fact beautifully. In a brilliant review of Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*, he writes: "The mocking laughter at existence, at the confusion of the whole and at itself, is the disintegrated consciousness, aware of itself and expressing itself, and is at the same time the last audible echo of all this confusion... It is the self-disintegrating nature of all relations and their conscious disintegration... In this aspect of the return to self, the vanity of all things is the self's own vanity, or the self is itself vanity...but as the indignant consciousness it is aware of its own

⁴ Diderot takes the role of the virtuous man, the petty bourgeois, engaged in a dialogue with Rameau's nephew, a Figaro-like scamp and pimp.

dis integration and by that knowledge has immediately transcended it... Every part of this world either gets its mind expressed here or is spoken of intellectually and declared for what it is. The honest consciousness (the role that Diderot allots to himself in the dialogue⁴) takes each element for a permanent entity and does not realize in its uneducated thoughtfulness that it is doing just the opposite. But the disintegrated consciousness is the consciousness of reversal and indeed of absolute reversal; its dominating element is the concept, which draws together the thoughts that to the honest consciousness lie so wide apart; hence the brilliance of its own language. Thus the contents of the mind's speech about itself consist in the reversal of all conceptions and realities; the universal deception of oneself and others and the shamelessness of declaring this conception is therefore the greatest truth... To the quiet consciousness which in its honest way goes on singing the melody of the True and the Good in even tones, i.e., on one note, this speech appears as 'a farrago of wisdom and madness...?'⁽¹⁾

Hegel's analysis, written more than a century and a half ago, anticipates and contains all the elements of the "absolute refusal" advanced so poignantly at the present time. Today, the spirit of negativity must extend to all areas of life if it is to have any content; it must demand a complete frankness which, in Maurice Blanchot's words, "no longer tolerates complicity." To lessen this spirit of negativity is to place the very integrity of the self in the balance. The established order tends to be totalistic: it stakes out its sovereignty not only over surface facets of the self but also over its innermost recesses. It seeks complicity not only in appearances but also from the most guarded depths of the human spirit. It tries to mobilize the very dream—life of the individual—as witness the proliferation of techniques and art forms for manipulating the unconscious. It attempts, in short, to gain command over the self's sense of possibility, over its capacity for Desire.

Desire and Revolution

Out of the disintegrating consciousness must come the recovery, the reintegration and the advance of Desire a new sensuousness based on possibility. If this sense of possibility lacks a humanistic social content, if it remains crudely egoistic, then it will simply follow the logic of the irrational social order and slip into a vicious nihilism.⁵ In the long run, the choices confronting the modern bohemian—hip or freak—are not between a socially passive subjectivism and a politically active reformism (the prevailing society, as it moves from crisis to crisis, will eliminate these traditional luxuries), but between the reactionary extremism of the SS man and the revolutionary extremism of the anarchist.

Bluntly, to drop out is to drop in. There is no facet of human life that is not infiltrated by social phenomena and there is no imaginative experience that does not float on the data of social reality.

⁵ This is perhaps as good a place as any to emphasize that capitalism promotes egotism, not individuality or "individualism." Although bourgeois society loosened the hold of precapitalist unitary societies on the ego, the ego it created was as shriveled as the one it replaced. The tendency in modern state capitalism is to homogenize and massify the ego on a scale that can be compared only with the totalitarian societies of the archaic Oriental world. The term "bourgeois individualism," an epithet widely used by the left today against libertarian elements, reflects the extent to which bourgeois ideology permeates the socialist project; indeed, the extent to which the "socialist" project (as distinguished from the libertarian communist project) is a mode of state capitalism.

⁽¹⁾ Hegel, op. cit. The passage cited here is quoted in Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, pp. 542–43.

Unless the sense of the *merveilleux*, so earnestly fostered by the surrealists, is to culminate in a credo of death (a credo advanced with consistency by Villiers de l'Isle Adam in *Axel*), honesty requires that we acknowledge the social roots of our dreams, our imagination and our poetry. The real question we face is *where* we drop in, *where* we stand in relation to the whole.

By the same token, there is nothing in the prevailing reality that is not polluted by the degeneration of the whole. Until the child is discharged from the diseased womb, liberation must take its point of departure from a diagnosis of the illness, an awareness of the problem, and a striving to be born. Introspection must be corrected by social analysis. Our freedom is anchored in *revolutionary* consciousness and culminates in *revolutionary* action.

But the revolution can no longer be imprisoned in the realm of Need. It can no longer be satisfied merely with the prose of political economy. The task of the Marxian critique has been completed and must be transcended. The subject has entered the revolutionary project with entirely new demands for experience, for re-integration, for fulfillment, for the *merveilleux*. The very character structure promoted by the revolutionary project in the past is now at issue in its most nuclear forms. Any hierarchical organization of human differences sexual, ethnic, generational or physical—must now give way to the dialectical principle of unity in diversity. In ecology, this principle is already taken for granted: the conservation, indeed elaboration, of variety is regarded as a precondition for natural stability. All species are equally important in maintaining the unity and balance of an ecosystem. There are no hierarchies in nature other than those imposed by hierarchical modes of human thought, but rather differences merely in function between and within living things. The revolutionary project will always remain incomplete and one-sided until it recognizes the need to remove all hierarchical modes of thought, indeed all conceptions of “otherness” based on domination, from its own midst. Social hierarchy is undeniably real today in the sense that it stems from a clash of *objectively* conflicting interests, a clash that up to now has been validated by unavoidable material scarcity. But precisely because this hierarchical organization of appearances exists in bourgeois society at a time when the problem of scarcity can be solved, it must be eliminated completely from the revolutionary community. And it must be eliminated not only in the revolutionary organization, but in the outlook and character structure of the individual revolutionary.

To rephrase Pierre Reverdy's words, the poet now stands on the ram parts—not only as dreamer, but also as fighter. Stalking through the dream, permeating the surreal experience, stirring the imagination to entirely new evocative heights are the liberatory possibilities of the objective world. For the first time in history, object and subject can be joined in the revolutionary affinity group—the anarchic, revolutionary collectivity of sisters and brothers. Theory and praxis can be united in the purposive revolutionary deed. Thought and intuition can be merged in the new revolutionary vision. Conscious and unconscious can be integrated in the revolutionary revel. Liberation may not be complete—for us, at least—but it can be totalistic, involving every facet of life and experience. Its fulfillment may be beyond our wildest visions, but we can move toward what we can see and imagine. Our Being is Becoming, not stasis. Our Science is Utopia, our Reality is Eros, our Desire is Revolution.

New York June

1967

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Murray Bookchin
Desire and Need
1967

Chapter from *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*.

theanarchistlibrary.org