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## **From Marx to Counterculture. The Marxian Vision of Art(ist) and Véquaud's Maithil Village Communitarian Utopia: A Renewed Romanticism?**

Paper presented during the international conference *Karl Marx: Life Ideas Influence. A Critical Examination on the Bicentenary*, organized by ADRI (Asian Development Research Institute), 16-20 June 2018, Hotel Maurya Patna, India

*Summary:* The Marxian vision of art differs greatly from socialist realism and even from the neo- (if not post-)Marxist philosophy of critical theorists like Adorno and the Frankfurt School. Counter to the Biedermeier uprightness, Marx will give to the art a real social content. The artist's work is elevated to an ideal labor organization and opposed to the worker's alienation resulting from mechanization and the division of labor. If a society based on the model of artistic work remains a utopia, Marx seems to be seeking to renew the ancient model of the medieval craftsman. The latter is free, masters his trade, skills and techniques, and succeeds in his work as an artists.

If this notion is very different from the idea based on the socialist realism, it meets, on the other hand, characteristics of the counterculture – as the refusal of the work as socially imposed – even if “Flower Children” and other agents of the counter-culture rarely recognize themselves in a Marxian vision of art. It is the case of Yves Véquaud, following on the heels of the counter-culture, while not assuming any clear political commitment. Inspired by a counter-bourgeois hippie Bohemia, he extols in his writings some heroized figure of painters, with neo-tantric elements, embodied in the bucolic communitarian Maithil village utopia, through which the Sehnsucht of lost paradise occurs.

Would Véquaud, within his artistic vision, be a Marxian without being aware of it? However, his depiction of the bucolic Maithil village and its myriad of women-artists seems (incidentally?) be inspired by the Marxian utopia of a society based on the model of artistic work. The common feature between the counter-culture and the Marxian notion of art lies most certainly in the ‘revolutionary and/or utopian romanticism’ defined by Löwry & Sayre.

Véquaud was a French writer, a contributor to the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, a translator, a film director, and a curator, today mostly known for his essays on Mithila paintings. In the present communication we aim to show the indirect impact of Marx's ideas on Véquaud as a player of the countercultural indophilia. We hypothesize that in the case of Véquaud the traces of Marx go beyond the ideological references of the counter culture. We will try to assert this hypothesis in particular with the similarity of vision between both authors concerning the so-called “communitarian Indian village”, as a counter-model challenging capitalist society, but stemming from a persistent Western orientalist imaginary and primitivist schema.

### **1. Marx's aesthetics: an overview**

#### *1.1. Marx as a romantic poet (1835-37)*

As a poet, Marx was influenced in particular by E.T.A. Hoffmann's and Fichte's romanticism and his academic studies about ancient literature and German classical aesthetics. The young Marx wrote poems inspired by the love for his fiancée, but his poetry treats also romanticist themes as the primacy of feeling and human emotions, the situation of artists separated from “normal” life, the struggle against philistines, or the opposition to an abstract and dehumanized world.

#### *1.2. Marx as early philosopher: organic unity in the material and social worlds (1837-41)*

In 1837, Marx left his vocation of poet to become philosopher. He combines poetry and prose, art and knowledge, fields that he considered to have been separated for a too long time<sup>1</sup>. So, it is not surprising that he read Hegel: as a representative of *Naturphilosophie*, the latter aims to reunifie everything, but under the metaphysics of the Absolute. Marx was against the abstraction of Hegel's philosophy that he wished to escape.

The then widespread notion of organic unity is playing a crucial role in his oeuvre. In his dissertation on late Greek philosophy<sup>2</sup>, the atom is regarded as the material basis of the world, but it symbolizes also individual self-consciousness. Within a complex body, the atoms cannot be seen isolated from one another. As a higher unit, this complex body bears witness to the diversity of the world and its societies. In this perspective, Marx disapproved the abstract principles of the French Constitution of 1783 that may lead to a ‘world of uniform and independent atom-citizens’<sup>3</sup>, far away from the living forces of society as essential entity for human beings.

### 1.3. *Marx’s ‘not written aesthetics’: the artist create freely organic forms in an organic society (1841/42)*

After a life-path that leads him from poetry to philosophy, Marx would have been well placed to write an aesthetics, what he did. With Bruno Bauer he worked in 1841/2 on a critique of Hegel’s vision of art and religion. But the two works written within this continuity in 1842 on Christian art are not extant<sup>4</sup>. So it is understandable that Marxian aesthetics can be described as ‘a not written aesthetics’<sup>5</sup>. However, art is evoked here and there in Marx’s oeuvre, and his approach to art is often integrated into more general considerations. The notebooks of 1842 can give some few ideas about the supposed content of his not extant works on Christian art. Those notebooks introduce the idea of fetishism applied to religion: the latter worships the materiality of things. In contrast, art seeks to create organic forms through the intermediary of imagination. For Marx, this is how to explain the dryness of religious art<sup>6</sup>. The origin of organic conception of art lies in a free society which have to be organic too.

It is interesting that Marx distinguished two worlds governed by the same organic principal, freely coexisting one in relation which each other: the real and the artistic worlds. Is there not a similarity with the early romanticist “two-worlds” model (*zwei-Welten Modell*)<sup>7</sup>? In that model, both universes are not parallel, but interconnected: the negation of the real world provides access to the one of arts and music, which in turn retroacts onto the real world. The main difference between the early romanticist vision and the Marxian one is the fact that the latter did not oppose a poetic world, seen in positive terms, to a trivial one, judged negatively. Marx is more and more attached to the reality perceived through our senses and give less and less importance to idealism.

### 1.4. *The first political economical works : alienation as emerging concept (1844/45)*

In 1844/45, Marx wrote his first political economical works: the *Parisian manuscripts* and the *Holy Family* (the latter together with Engels). The *Parisian manuscripts* developed the notion of “alienated” and “estranged” work (*entäußerte, entfremdete Arbeit*), which is constitute by: 1. *The estrangement of things*: as working is not belonging to the worker’s intrinsic nature, the production exercises power over him as an alien object; 2. *Self-estrangement*: the relation of the worker to his activity considered as not belonging to him, as an activity turned against him; 3. *Man’s species-being*: the worker as a being alien to him, to his own body, his external nature and human aspect; 4. *The estrangement of man from man* as a consequence of the estrangement from his production, his life activity and his species-being. Marx deplores that narrow-minded relationships leading to equally narrow-minded senses are left, after human being had improve his mastery of the five sense during a large part of the history of mankind.

### 1.5. *From the German Ideology : towards a re-esthetized communist society (1845-)*

Althusser regarded the *German Ideology. The Theses on Feuerbach* as an “epistemological break” (*coupure épistémologique*) between the “ideological” period of the Early Works and the “scientific” period after 1845. Furthermore, the *German Ideology* was canonized in the 1920s/30s as the founding text of the materialist conception of history. Surely, these periodisation and canonization can be easily deconstructed. Nevertheless, from 1845, Marx and Engels would criticize the aesthetic visions of the Young Hegelians – including Feuerbach – and show the interdependence between, on one hand, the art and the creative spirit of the artist, on the other hand, the history of economic and politic life in society. They develop less an aesthetics than an analysis and critique of capitalism as a

social system. For both authors, art and creativity are called upon to play a major role for the perspective of a new re-esthetized communist society in a time of disalienation.

In the ideal society, everybody is doing from day to day various activities, including arts. There is no more division of labour, even between artists and no-artists: ‘In a communist society there are no painters but only people who engage in painting among other activities’<sup>8</sup>. As long as this utopia would not be achieved, the economic structure of society may be not isolated from artistic production: hence the need for a mediation between base and superstructure.

Marx and Engels gave also examples of pre-capitalist societies, among others the ancient Greek society, the guilds organizations in Middle Ages, and the village community in India. The most significant for our purpose is Marx’s vision, influenced by Hegel, of the “idyllic” Indian village community as a pre-capitalist immutable form of organisation. In the *Capital*, he stresses the prevalence of ‘possession in common of the land’ and the mode of production able to sustain a “natural economy” through the union of handicraft and agriculture. Only the surplus becomes a commodity when it circulates outside the village. Marx and Engels were looking for societies which are distant in time (Antiquity, Middle Ages) and space (India and other Asian countries), with a pre-capitalist mode of production. But for them, these essentialized visions are neither the reflection of an Golden Age nostalgia nor the dream of an elsewhere. They consider, in different steps, the way to break away capitalism, pursuing the ideal vision of communist society.

## 2. Véquaud’s aesthetics and its similarities with Marx’s ideas

### 2.1. Véquaud’s early writings: traces of counter-cultural romantic revolt

From his first writings, Véquaud followed on the heels of antibourgeois Romanticism and critical thought:

- *The extolling of emotions and body*: the hippie movement called into question the self-control required to maintain one’s rank or place, such as the body *hexis*. Emotions are liberated from the social constraints of daily-life lived as alienation. For example, in *Le voyage en écriture*, a forced hairdressing session is felt as a traumatic, symbolic amputation. An anti-conformist body *hexis* based on natural body postures is extolled. Later, his travel books on India are characterized by a “creative bubbling”<sup>9</sup> stemming from a cult of pleasure and a hedonistic way of life. Exalted emotions, linked to experiences of transgression, and the questioning of social points of reference leads to a feeling that anything is possible. The feeling of festive (party) liberation and freedom are associated with a spiritual register. In 1974, the initiation given by the Dalai-lama was described as ‘one of the most extraordinary party which you could see in the life’<sup>10</sup>. These literary fantasies entail colourful sensorial descriptions, allowing to open the ‘field of the possibilities’ (*champ des possibles*). The prevalence of affects matches with romantic hippie values, in opposition with cold and abstract knowledge, identified as stemming from colonization as antidote to romance and imagination.
- *The critique of the values of bourgeoisie*: Véquaud refused the social finiteness and the bourgeois mandate of remunerated work and family. In *Le Voyage en écriture*, life is represented as a train from which we must jump in order to escape from despondency<sup>11</sup>, reminding Timothy Leary. Véquaud questioned also the function of education, which socialized children to accept hierarchy, in particular in a provocative article entitled: ‘The parents doesn’t love their children, the proof is that they put them in school’. This rejection of educational connections leads him to give up teaching and to invest in the writing that he considered as a vocation, after being awarded in 1967 by the Félix Fénéon literary price. Thus, Véquaud experienced a broke and happy hippie bohemia.
- *The praise of bohemia*: If Véquaud was able to accumulate cultural and artistic capital, his economic one remained very fragile. But he defied the petty bourgeois way of life, from which he originated, to seize the liberality of manners, presumed associated with aristocracy and the

upper-class, while experiencing precariousness. So, Véquaud's semi-autobiographical writings revived a myth of bohemia, inseparable from a vocational art definition, whose singularity regime reinforces the figure of the marginal genius. He evolved in a Bourdieusian "economic world turned upside down", depending on different modalities:

- *Regarding the means for subsistence*: he managed situations which he presumed to be temporary, without too much concern for saving money;
- *Concerning the autonomy of the field of artistic creation*, the narrator of his novels aspire to a freedom auspicious to creation. In *Le Voyage en écriture*, he scoffs at a dreary routine and enjoins to drop out: "Open your head, wash well your memory, . . . this story is not yours. Go through, go through"<sup>12</sup>.
- Finally, as for posterity postponed, *Yves Véquaud strove for glory and not for gain*, contrary to the bourgeois artist who expects success, in particular financial one, and immediate notoriety.

Marx and Véquaud wished at first to make writing their vocation. Both appropriated common themes of Early Romanticism which are also those of counterculture: the exaltation of emotions, the critique of philistines or bourgeoisie, the praise of bohemia or the cursed artist at the margins of the society. The common denominator between both authors can be found in the notion of romanticism in the broader meaning of the sense forged by Löwy and Sayre<sup>13</sup>. They define romanticism not only as a literary trend but more widely as an anti-establishment *Weltanschauung* against rationalization and commodification of human relationships.

## 2.2. Véquaud's communitarian Maithil village utopia

Since 1969, Véquaud spent two years in Nepal, India, and Ceylon, following the hippie trail. He discovered Mithila paintings in New-Delhi and went to Mithila several times to meet village painters. Véquaud expressed a canonical form of the counter-culture: the back-to-the-land-movement in communitarian utopias within the Maithil village. His fantasy model shares the suspension of dominant norms like phalansterie, monachisms, or communes involving: widened household, collective care of children, egalitarian rotation of domestic tasks. Gender, patriarchy, and family are redefined. He notes that men often do nothing else than keeping their lastborns on the knees<sup>14</sup>. In West, 'one can count on the fingers of one hand the painting women who shine through their art. Here, . . . two hundred, three hundred women make marvels'<sup>15</sup>. According to him, in India, 'the example is not rare of societies where women are freer and more powerful than in ours'<sup>16</sup>. These projective presumptions, putting forward a phantasmagorical experience of gender resocialization, are reiterated in his writings. Here Mithila paintings contribute to "undoing gender"<sup>17</sup>, emphasizing the impact of feminist cause. This village utopia serves his quest of alternative prophecies.

It renews an epitomized unchanging tradition opposed to mass and technocratic society. The rise of "information age" is accompanied by nostalgia for older ways of making things. As the romantic critics of Victorian age praised Indian craftsmanship, Véquaud attributes the perfection of Maithil art to a timeless village. Folk art is misunderstood as homogenous, stable, and rural. He champions a return to a pre-industrial, holistic community. He calls to leave towns as Madhubani to find hamlets where the Maithil civilization stays alive. From his standpoint, the preserved culture of Mithila embodies the culture of India. His utopia expresses a romantic nostalgia for the *Heimat* embodied in an elsewhere, through which arise the *Sehnsucht* of a lost Eden. He attempts to re-enchant the world. So does he by heroizing the women painters.

Yves Véquaud emphasizes in his writings a revealing interpretation of the icons of his utopian counter-society. The Maithil women painters are presented as prophetic figures of legend, between holiness and genius. From his standpoint, 'to paint better than her neighbour is to be devout, as it were to become priestess'. The artistic success of painters involves both the personalization of means as well as the depersonalization of the ends of the success, namely the creation of objects crystallizing values recognized beyond the author. It was traditionally reserved for heroes and

saints. This literary fantasy bears witness to a picturesque vision of India within an orientalisering episteme. Véquaud praises a sort of Maithil Republic of Arts, through a pastoral myth and art religion, prevalent during the first Romanticism. His narratives reflect a male Western style for representing the painters. They bore less relation to Maithil painters than to a crisis (in Western) self-representation.

There are many similarities between Marx's and Véquaud's visions of the Indian village: the idyllic and timeless character, the pre-industrial or pre-capitalist holistic community based on the union of arts / handicrafts and agriculture. If counterculture tends to free individuals from collectivity, the holistic model of the Indian village marks a return to Marx's notion of organic unity. Besides, indophilia prevails at Marx's and Véquaud's time. Marx was living during Raymond Schwab's "Oriental Renaissance". Reading the first published translations of Sanskrit, artists and intellectuals thought then to discover an echo of humanity's origins, nearest of an harmonious nature and the divine. The indophilia of the sixties underlines a similar cultural movement of romantic contestation, associated to a second "oriental renaissance", as underlined by Raphaël Rousseleau. At last, these two visions of the Indian community matches with Löwy's and Sayre's category of "revolutionary and/or utopian romanticism". The difference between both is that Véquaud's literary fantasy reveals more the nostalgia of an enchanted elsewhere, while Marx renewed pre-capitalist models – as the Indian village – in order to lay the groundwork for the communist society of the future.

For the young Marx and Véquaud, freedom and especially artistic freedom is crucial. In this sense, socialist realism may be thought as the negation of the aesthetics of the Early Marx. On the other hand, countercultural orientalism as represented by Véquaud can be seen on a more obvious way as heterodox Marxisms as the negation of socialist realism. So we are tempted to say that Véquaud's vision is the "negation of the negation" of the ideas of the Early Marx. One more reason to explain the similarity of both, following respectively a *Zeitgeist* characterized by romanticism and indophilia.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to his father, 10 November 1837.

<sup>2</sup> *Differenz der demokratischen und epikureischen Naturphilosophie nebst einem Anhang*, Diss. Universität Jena, 1841.

<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Lifshitz, *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx*. Translated from the Russian by Ralph B Winn [1938], London, Pluto Press, 2/1976, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> *Über christliche Kunst & Über Religion und Kunst mit besonderer Beziehung auf christliche Kunst*, cf. Frank Biewer, 'Karl Marx (1818-1883) und Friedrich Engels (1820-1895)', *Klassiker der Soziologie der Künste. Prominente und bedeutende Ansätze*, ed. by Christian Steuerwald, Wiesbaden, Springer Fachmedien, 2017, p. 21/22.

<sup>5</sup> Hans P. Thurn, *Kritik der marxistischen Kunsttheorie*, Stuttgart, Ferdinand Enke Verlag, 1976, p. 17. See also the title of the first part of Biewer's contribution: 'Karl Marx (1818-1883) und Friedrich Engels (1820-1895)', *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Mikhail Lifshitz, *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx*, *op. cit.*, p. 32-39.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht, *Musik im Abendland: Prozesse und Stationen vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*, München, Piper, 1996, p. 595.

<sup>8</sup> *Die deutsche Ideologie*, MEGA 3, p. 379: 'Bei einer kommunistischen Organisation der Gesellschaft fällt jedenfalls fort die Subsumtion des Künstlers unter die lokale und nationale Borniertheit, die rein aus der Teilung der Arbeit hervorgeht, und die Subsumtion des Individuums unter diese bestimmte Kunst, so daß es ausschließlich Maler, Bildhauer usw. ist und schon der Name die Borniertheit seiner geschäftlichen Entwicklung und seine Abhängigkeit von der Teilung der Arbeit hinlänglich ausdrückt. In einer

kommunistischen Gesellschaft gibt es keine Maler, sondern höchstens Menschen, die unter Anderm auch malen’.

<sup>9</sup> Julie Pagis, *Mai 68, un pavé dans leur histoire. Événements et socialisation politique*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2014, p. 109.

<sup>10</sup> Yves Véquaud, ‘Lettre de Bodh Gaya: quand le dalaï lama donne une initiation’, *Le Monde*, 12-13 May 1974, p. 12: ‘l’une des fêtes les plus extraordinaires qui se puissent se voir dans la vie’.

<sup>11</sup> Véquaud, *Le voyage en écriture*, Paris: Gallimard, 1966, p. 15/16 : ‘Rien n’est définitif encore. On pourrait se sauver. . . . On hésite. . . . C’est trop tard. On remonte déjà . . . Il y a un moment précis, où le train . . . hésite avant de gravir la pente . . . Peut-être avez-vous été sensible à ce temps mort? . . . La prochaine fois, il me sauvera. Je sauterai’.

<sup>12</sup> Véquaud, *Le voyage en écriture, op. cit.*, p. 159-60: ‘Ouvrez votre tête, lavez bien votre mémoire, . . . laissez-la s’apaiser au grand vent. . . . Cette histoire n’est pas la vôtre. . . . Passez, passez’.

<sup>13</sup> Michaël Löwy & Robert Sayre, *Révolte et mélancolie. Le romantisme à contre-courant de la modernité*, Paris, Payot, 1992.

<sup>14</sup> Véquaud, ‘The Women-Artists of Mithila, *Atlas*, no. 85, July 1973, p. 88: ‘les hommes ne font souvent rien, si ce n’est garder leurs derniers-nés sur les genoux’.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85: ‘En Occident, on peut compter sur les doigts d’une main les femmes peintres qui brillèrent par leur art. Ici, dans les deux hameaux où nous avons vécu, deux cents, trois cents femmes exécutent des merveilles’.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75: ‘L’exemple n’est pas rare en Inde de ces sociétés où les femmes sont plus libres et plus puissantes que dans les nôtres’.

<sup>17</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, New York & London, Routledge, 2004.