Postmodernism, Marxism and Existentialism (Part 7)

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This essay is intended to conclude the discussion on Jean-François Lyotard's call to abandon 'grand narratives' in favour of postmodern knowledge. The conclusion reached so far is that, viewed from Sartre's perspective, Lyotard's proposal is not convincing. For, on the basis of Sartre's approach – historical materialism, which is itself a grand narrative – it can be shown that, owing to the powerful impact of the subject matter under consideration – and because of the associated irreversibility of decisions taken – the responsibility of the active generation for the fate of future generations is evident.
Grand narratives cannot be avoided if one is to live up to this responsibility. In short: Lyotard's position is irresponsible.

A good example is the development of the hydrogen bomb. Once this weapon has seen the light of day, it can no longer be eradicated, and all future generations will be predestined by this action of the Oppenheimer/Teller generation. Since this predestination affects the whole of humanity, it constitutes a Grand Narrative that cannot be avoided. The very existence of the hydrogen bomb therefore necessitates a transgenerational narrative. Sartre has this to say on the matter:

> *The atomic bomb, were it to be dropped, would expose humanity to a danger with which we are all too familiar. Yet even whilst it remains a threat, it imposes a radical change on relations between nations, and it is this that defines the character of what is known as the Cold War. (Sartre; in: Sartre, A Permanent Provocation, p. 4S)*

The physicist Richard Feynman recounts how, after being relieved of his duties on the atomic bomb project at Los Alamos, he sat in a café reflecting on the consequences of his work. He then summarised these consequences in a single sentence: 'In future, everything will be completely different.' (Quoted from my recollection of having read it) This means that the existence of the atomic bomb will fundamentally alter the future of humanity and decisively transform the political landscape. Above all, humanity will have to live with the threat of total annihilation in the future.

'In future, everything will be completely different,' says Feynman. Sartre, too, observes that the existence of the atomic bomb will alter political rationality as a whole, namely by unifying human societies in the face of the threat of total annihilation:

> *Just as Joshua tried to halt the course of the sun, so too are attempts being made to halt the course of history by threatening to blow the earth to smithereens… To halt the course of the world, one threatens to abolish history by eliminating the agents of history…The task facing nations is therefore twofold: they must unite against the bomb, replacing war with peace and abstract antagonisms with alliances everywhere, and achieving peaceful victories everywhere, without ever granting the atomic bomb the time or the pretext to explode. (ibid., p. 52)*

Behind the problem outlined above lies a philosophical and historical question: what is the significance of the concept of 'humanity'? For Spengler, humanity is merely a zoological category. In a cultural sense, for him there are only epochs. For Marx, on the other hand, 'humanity' is a central cultural category, with a history and a prehistory imbued with meaning. Spengler proposes doing away with the Grand Narrative of humanity, whilst Marx insists on leading humanity, in a universal movement of unification, towards a common and ultimate goal: the realm of freedom. Marx is therefore unambiguously a philosopher with a Grand Narrative.

Sartre takes a nuanced position on this matter. He writes:

> *…one must abandon the idea of a humanity that becomes historicised in the course of one and the same temporalisation, which began with 'the first humans' and will end with 'the last'. Dialectical experience proves that here too, in the absence of a temporal hyper-organism, we have given diachronic totalisation the form of a free individual temporalisation. Humanity conceived as a single human being: that is the mirage of constituted dialectics. In reality, there is a multitude of temporalisations, and I am speaking here of those diachronic multiplicities that are the generations. (Sartre, Critique of Dialectical Reason, p. 705)*

This is yet another clear rejection of the speculative narrative of a temporal hyper-organism—be it called 'spirit' or 'class struggle'—which has its beginning in the first human being and its end in the last. Instead, Sartre acknowledges the discontinuity between epochs and generations, each of which has its own temporalisation. However, the discontinuity between epochs and generations is not absolute; rather, there are transitions that reflect the fundamental existential structure of humankind, namely 'facticity-transcendence'. These transitions between epochs are brought about primarily by the material being worked on, and it is these transitions which may ultimately ensure that human beings share a common destiny, such that one can speak of 'humanity'.

Sartre summarises this point as follows:

> *Processed matter as the alienated objectification of individual and collective practice. (Sartre, Critique of Dialectical Reason, p. 1C3)*

People's intentional actions often have unintended consequences, which Sartre describes as 'anti-dialectics'. In many cases, these are reactions of matter resulting from unknown or unaccounted-for laws of nature. One example is the deforestation of China's forests over thousands of years, which ultimately led to the karstification of the landscape, with catastrophic consequences such as regular flooding. Sartre describes this situation in his
'Critique of Dialectical Reason'.

Another example is the iron-coal complex. It led to an irreversible transformation of society as a whole and, possibly, to a change in the climate as a result of the increase in carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere. Sartre even takes the view that this gave rise to new types of human beings: iron-coal people, the industrial proletariat, the industrialists, the technicians and so on:

> *Society at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries is based entirely on the iron-coal complex… Consequently, new types of human beings have emerged, 'iron and coal people', products of the mine and of new smelting techniques: the industrial proletariat (and, incidentally, the industrialists, the technicians, and so on) (Sartre, Critique of Dialectical Reason, pp. 1C3/1C4)*

In short: the consequences of human action manifest themselves above all in the matter that has been worked upon. This matter changes in such a way that it creates a new kind of factuality for the following generation, which must take this on in order to be able to transcend it. There are therefore transitions between epochs which, notwithstanding the discontinuity of historical events, increasingly determine the shared destiny of humankind. The linguistic articulation of this insight is inevitably a Grand Narrative.

Consequently, as a result of technological development, there is a totalising movement that must be interpreted as an all-encompassing objective dialectic:

> *Instead of seeking a priori principles within ourselves (that is to say: boundaries that are opaque to thought), we must grasp the dialectic in the objective realm and understand it as the totalising movement, insofar as each of us—both as an individual and as part of the whole of human history—creates it in this dual sense and suffers it whilst creating it: (Sartre, Critique of Dialectical Reason, p. 5S)*

This totalising movement encompasses not only every individual, but also the whole of human history. In this sense, the individual proves to be a mirror of human history, for they internalise the overall process by linking it to a conception of the self which, as a result of the practical alienation of this conception of the self, is also a conception of the world and is integrated into the whole of

history. In so far as human beings both create and endure this process, they prove themselves to be a totalising dialectical circularity:

> *Without the world, there is no selfhood, no person; without selfhood, without the person, there is no world. (Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 214)*

This remark by Sartre shows that, for him, despite all limitations, human beings are world-related beings whose existence must be described as totalising, and thus stands in stark contradiction to the prohibition or renunciation of Grand Narratives. For Sartre, human beings are the striving to be God, and this condition of existence automatically demands a conception of the self that is simultaneously a conception of the world.

Due to the close intertwining of human beings with the products of their actions, this process involves a progressive fusion of man and machine, which must be interpreted as the mechanisation of man and the humanisation of the mechanical. Since this process is universal, the associated language game must necessarily be a Grand Narrative. At stake is the question of the future of humanity. Should it commit itself to humanism or to transhumanism? It is inconceivable that humanity could do without this Grand Narrative.

The examples cited illustrate very well what Sartre means when he says that the philosophy of our time must be historical materialism. If there is any totalisation of the world and of history at all, then this totalisation—this process of unification—lies in the dialectic of circularity, in the processed matter that imposes a common destiny upon humanity as a whole.

Humanity's ethical and historical task lies in understanding this process correctly and utilising it in the interests of humankind, that is to say, above all, in the interests of human freedom. In this sense, Sartre's critique of dialectical reason is not only a foundation for an anthropology, but also a foundation for a future ethics.

It is also important to recognise that those affected need not necessarily be aware of the potency of the totalising process. Precisely when it unfolds beyond their capacity for reflection, it can suddenly reveal its perilous nature, for example in the form of environmental disasters or political disruptions:

> *The materialised practices, cast into the exteriority of things, impose a shared fate upon people who know nothing of one another, whilst at the same time, precisely through their very existence, reflecting and reinforcing the separation of individuals. (Critique of Dialectical Reason, p. 1S0)*

It might be useful to give an example to illustrate the above quote. This concerns an important event in Japanese history and the fate of the samurai class:

> *The samurai were the military elite and a ruling warrior class in pre-industrial Japan, who played a central role in the country's history for centuries. They are known for their strict codes of honour, their martial arts and their ornate armour. (AI)*

The codes of honour, martial arts and ornate armour of this military elite became increasingly irrelevant as a result of Japan's forced industrialisation and Westernisation in the 19th century. A decisive battle ensued between the old samurai elite and the new, Western-oriented Meiji government; due to the technological superiority of the Meiji Army – which was an army of peasants and commoners – this led to the downfall of samurai culture:

> *The rebellion thus effectively brought an end to the samurai class, as the new Imperial Japanese Army, drawn from heimin conscripts, had proven itself in battle. More crucially, the defeat of the samurai demonstrated the power of modern artillery and rifles, against which a banzai charge had no appreciable effect. (Wikipedia)*

> *The rebellion also signalled the de facto end of the samurai class, as the new Imperial Japanese Army, based on heimin conscripts, had proved itself in battle. More crucially, however, the defeat of the samurai demonstrated the power of modern artillery and rifles, against which a banzai charge had no significant effect. (Translation: Alfred Dandyk)*

It was, therefore, the industrialisation of the West and the resulting advances in weapon technology that brought about the end of the samurai class. This technological progress in the West ultimately forced a shared fate upon the entire Japanese population: namely, the loss of their ancient culture and the necessity of adopting a new one.

No discourse on language games could have altered this fate. The same fate befell Japan once more with the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In both cases, it became apparent just how aptly Sartre's ambivalent concept of 'facticity-transcendence' describes the situation: the Japanese had to make something of what the West had made of them.

This situation clearly shows that the method of language games used by Lyotard, in the Wittgensteinian sense, is limited. For the process in question is by no means merely a comparison or a competition between language games. Wittgenstein is, of course, correct in saying that language games and practice are closely intertwined, but the focus on language games underestimates the significance of the material being worked on, since the products of this work, once they have seen the light of day, are in many cases irreversible. The free play of discourses is, in this respect, irrelevant when it comes to integrating irreversible material facts. Once, for example, the hydrogen bomb had seen the light of day

, any discourse on its sense or nonsense became superfluous. It exists and it predetermines the actions of subsequent generations, entirely independently of the parallel language games. Whilst the method of language games is certainly beneficial, it must not be overestimated.

The correct conceptual framework for describing the human condition is therefore Sartre's concept of 'facticity-transcendence' and not the 'language game'. Language games serve only to cope with the situation linguistically, the true structure of which is 'facticity-transcendence'.

One need only consider the examples discussed so far to recognise the validity of this view: the existence of the hydrogen bomb, the karstification of the soil resulting from millennia of deforestation, the development of a new human species through the iron-coal complex, the fusion of man and machine, and the resulting danger of transhumanism:

> *Thus, through the contradictions it contains, processed matter becomes, for and through humankind, the very engine of history: within it, the actions of all are united and take on meaning; that is to say, they form for all the unity of a shared future. (Sartre, Critique of Dialectical Reason, p. 1S5)*

According to Sartre, technological development has a meaning, and this meaning is the unification of individuals into a single humanity. Processed matter is the true driving force of history, albeit mediated for and by humankind.

If the motto of postmodern knowledge is 'freedom in diversity', then this slogan must be supplemented by the fundamental structure of human existence in Sartre's sense, namely 'facticity-transcendence'. 'Freedom in diversity' must be reconciled with existing knowledge if this slogan is not to degenerate into irrationalism. Furthermore, it should be noted that 'freedom in diversity' is boundless only if one remains on a purely linguistic level. The actual goal, however, is 'knowledge', and for Sartre, knowledge is always linked to practice.

Practice means 'action', and the product of that action is, in many cases, irreversible. This fact, in turn, is a realisation that sets limits on 'freedom in diversity'. It is therefore the irreversibility of the products of human labour that casts a big question mark over Lyotard's aspirations, insofar as this irreversibility compels the existence of Grand Narratives.

For Sartre, therefore, the answer to the question of the meaning of history lies in the dialectic of circularity. Human activity corresponds to a materialised practice; that is to say, it imprints itself upon matter, which becomes worked matter and thus a bearer of meaning. The original inhuman matter, a reflection of being-in-itself independent of humankind, becomes a vehicle of human meaning. As matter is humanised, humankind becomes reified; that is to say, its activities follow the necessities of the worked matter.

To this extent, the diverse human activities of the whole of humanity impose a shared destiny upon it. This shared destiny consists in the fact that, at the cost of survival, one must adapt to the necessities of the worked matter. Sartre advocates underpinning this process ethically, that is, shaping the process in such a way that the meaning of history becomes a human meaning – 'human' in the sense of existentialist humanism.

It follows that one must reject the idea of abandoning the 'Grand Narrative', because the meaning of history uncovered by Marx and Sartre – historical materialism – is itself a Grand Narrative and continues to necessitate other 'Grand Narratives'. The 'freedom in diversity' demanded by postmodernism is, in the sense of mere language games, certainly understandable, but it fails in the face of the harsh reality of the real, which is imposed above all by the irreversibility of the products of human action.

Compared with Sartre's clear stance, the perspectives of postmodern-inspired philosophers often seem strangely nebulous. Thus, Peter Engelman writes the following in his introduction to the book *Postmodernism and Deconstruction*:

> *From this perspective, the concept of postmodernism is nothing other than the condition of possibility for new, adequate social theory and philosophy, which have yet to be developed. In the spirit of Kuhn's epistemological theory, the term 'postmodernism' marks an epistemological turning point, perhaps the beginning of a scientific revolution. (Peter Engelmann; in: Postmodernism and Deconstruction; Introduction, p. 12)*

That sounds good, but it quickly comes under suspicion of being a hollow phrase when one contrasts it with the concrete postulates and demands of postmodern philosophers. How, for example, does the above statement reconcile with Lyotard's demand to dispense with 'grand narratives'? What does this actually mean? Are we no longer to discuss Hegel in future? To what extent is the prospect of new insights supposed to arise from a ban on reading and discussing Hegel? Whilst Sartre also finds Hegel's speculative narrative implausible, he simultaneously states that it is the only intellectually satisfying philosophy. In other words: for Sartre, Hegel remains an ongoing problem, whilst for postmodernists he appears to be a has-been philosopher of the past. As far as gaining new insights is concerned, I believe Sartre's position is preferable.

The same applies to Engelmann's reference to Thomas Kuhn's theory of science. According to this, postmodernism is said to resemble an 'epistemological break' in the sense of Thomas Kuhn, and perhaps even to herald the beginning of a 'scientific revolution'. These are catchy phrases; the question is simply whether they stand up to concrete scrutiny.

The test must always relate to a specific, narrowly defined statement. Let us take as an example Lyotard's thesis that postmodernism reflects the fact

that scientific pragmatics emphasises dissent and marginalises consensus. Lyotard writes:

> *Returning to the description of scientific pragmatics (Chapter 7), the emphasis must now be placed on dissent. Consensus is a horizon; it is never attained. Research carried out under the dominance of a paradigm strives to stabilise it: it is like the exploitation of a technological, economic and artistic 'idea'. That is something, at least. But one is astonished that there is always someone who comes along to disrupt the order of 'reason'. (Lyotard, Postmodern Knowledge)*

Here, Lyotard sets 'consensus' and 'dissent' in opposition to one another and suggests that the scientific pragmatism of his time favoured dissent and marginalised consensus. Consensus, he argues, is merely a local method, whilst the ultimate goal of science is dissent, or 'paralogy', as Lyotard puts it. Postmodernism is thus in harmony with modern science. In this regard, Lyotard draws, amongst other things, on the works of Thomas Kuhn in the philosophy of science.

Lyotard evidently draws a parallel between the terms 'consensus' and 'dissent' and Kuhn's terms 'paradigm' and 'revolution', and he seems to go on to insinuate that Kuhn favours the concept of revolution over that of the paradigm, just as he, Lyotard, favours 'dissent' over 'consensus'. I do not believe that Lyotard's interpretation of Kuhn is correct.

For Kuhn, a paradigm is the framework of thought during the phase of 'normal science'. A revolution is a fundamental break with this framework of thought. The old paradigm is replaced by a new one, whereby, according to Kuhn, the old and new ways of thinking are incommensurable.

The very concept of 'normal science' makes it clear that Kuhn is not concerned with a preference for revolution. Science is rather the coexistence of normal science and revolution, so that the terms 'paradigm' and 'revolution' are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary. A science that excluded revolutions would be more akin to an ideology, and a revolution without normal science would be a meaningless concept.

The crux of Kuhn's argument is that a dominant paradigm is replaced by a new paradigm through a scientific revolution. The process thus proceeds from a particular consensus to a new consensus, with dissent dominating the transitional phase.

'Consensus' and 'dissent' are therefore not about mutual exclusion or fundamental preferences. Rather, there are phases in the sciences in which normal science dominates, and then there are

phases in which scientific revolution comes to the fore. Experience shows that the phases of normal science often last much longer than those of revolutions.

In reality, therefore, every instance of dissent strives to become a consensus. Classical mechanics, for example, existed for centuries as normal science until it was supplanted by the revolution of quantum mechanics. The process of supplanting it can be described as 'dissent'. Nevertheless, the aim of the new physics was to reach a consensus on the new paradigm to be established.

It is therefore evident that 'consensus' and 'dissent' are in a complementary relationship. On the one hand, they contradict one another; on the other, they complement one another. Seen in this light, Lyotard's perspective is misguided.

Even if one were to concede that his era was a phase that favoured dissent, it can only have been a temporary phenomenon; for any dissent must, by its very nature, lead to a consensus, at least in science. For science thrives on the fact that its participants can agree on the legitimacy of their concepts. Otherwise, science would disintegrate into a non-committal jumble of language games, and there would no longer be any difference between scientific discourse and the chatter of a pub-going crowd.

It is rational for scientists to protect the core of their science, but this must not mean that they immunise this core against criticism. Criticism must always be permitted, but the aim cannot be to produce diversity for diversity's sake, as the concept of 'paralogy' suggests. Ultimately, what matters is the truth of the theories, and diversity is only legitimate if it serves the search for truth.

Nor is it illuminating to describe the outbreak of a scientific revolution in the manner of Lyotard, according to whom 'there is always someone who comes along to disrupt the order of
'reason''. This sounds as though the scientific revolutionary were a troublemaker seeking to disturb the mainstream scientists of his time during their afternoon nap. Rather, the image of a master builder is more apt: one who discovers damage to a building and wishes to help construct a more stable structure. Scientists would never abandon a theory that has worked well so far simply because a troublemaker craves a change.

These considerations lead me to the conclusion that the fundamental concepts which Lyotard regards as characteristic of postmodern knowledge – namely 'paralogy', 'dissensus' and instability – cannot, in the actual sciences, assume the role assigned to them by postmodernism. Lyotard's arguments are, in essence, misguided.