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Non-simultaneity of the Simultaneous

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The non-simultaneity of the simultaneous (*Ungleichzeitigkeit des Gleichzeitigen*) refers to the complex idea – put in formal and abstract terms – of a coexistence, in a same time (the simultaneous), of things that express or represent different times or that have different dynamics of development (the non-simultaneity). This idea is associated with Marxism and has had repercussions in many areas of knowledge, from structuralism – where a debt is recognized not only vis-a-vis Marx but also vis-a-vis Hegel and Bakhtin – and its attempt to introduce a dynamic dimension into language as a system, up to the sociology of generations and the sociology of modernization, passing through aesthetics and political thought, among others.

The phrase itself was coined at the beginning of the 20th century by the German art historian Wilhelm Pinder, and later introduced into the Marxist tradition by Ernst Bloch. Pinder refers to the coexistence, at the same time, of different generations and artistic styles. With this he recovered the intuition of Wilhelm Dilthey, who sought to rehabilitate – against the reduction of time to the purely quantitative and external (that of simultaneity) – the qualitative and internal or experiential time, which admits of non-simultaneity. In this tradition can be inscribed the sociology of generations, developed by Karl Mannheim, who, against Marx, sought to understand the emancipatory ethos no longer through the struggle

of social classes, but in terms of conflictive interaction and mutual influence between social generations, whose birth supposes the connection between age groups, conformation of a common identity and socio-structural conditions. The elementary intuition that brings together this tradition is that the present is fragmented; that not all contemporaries live the same present.

Bloch can appropriate this idea from a Marxist perspective because Marx, within the framework of his materialist dialectic, effectively deals with issues such as the unequal degrees of development of the modes and relations of production, between countries and within them. This was also a key reference point for Leon Trotsky and his theory of combined development, present in revolutionary Russia, in which archaic forms were amalgamated with contemporary forms of development. For Bloch, a typical case of the non-simultaneity of the simultaneous was Germany before the Second World War: a country in which – despite having a high degree of capitalist development – there existed enormous archaic, pre-capitalist, anti-democratic, anti-capitalist and also anti-Marxist tendencies and groups, on whose fertile ground the Nazi regime was nourished. The internal non-simultaneity of Germany also put it into a relation of non-simultaneity with respect to the rest of Europe, heir to the bourgeois revolution. The discussion about the difficulties of Germany's orientation towards the democratic West, instead of the authoritarian East, did not lose vigor in the 20th century, especially in the work of Jürgen Habermas.

Certainly, the notion of "concrete utopia", which Bloch develops in his *The Principle of Hope*, feeds on the notion of a fragmentary present, which not only inhabits the past but also includes prefigurations of a better future; in this case as concrete utopias. Anchored in the Marxist tradition and conserving its emancipatory ethos, Bloch affirms that the fragmentation of the present, as such, is insurmountable, and that in it there coexist past and future, and heterogeneity in the forms of developments. This has several key consequences in the development of Marxist thought.

The Hegelian dialectic of the development of spirit in history and the materialist dialectic of Marx coincide in identifying the non-simultaneity of the simultaneous as a moment that the dialectical movement seeks to overcome; that is, to reestablish the simultaneity of the simultaneous. The non-simultaneity between productive forces and relations of production is overcome by a revolutionary process. Non-simultaneity is the motor of history because it is conceived as a contradiction – between forces (expressing different historical times) – that impels development and, with it, its overcoming. Overcoming the contradiction is translated here as a regeneration of simultaneity. Marx's early awareness of different degrees of development is accompanied by a moment of overcoming, conceived as a restoration of unity or simultaneity. This teleological representation is no longer accepted. The consciousness of the non-simultaneity of the simultaneous is rescued as an important inheritance, but not the moment of unity.

In the 20th century, the notion of unequal developments and the irreducible autonomy of the various social spheres increasingly came to be accepted, as well as the difficulty of attributing greater value to one stage of development in relation to others. This has been expressed particularly in the criticism of the classical theories of modernization and in a relative consensus, today, on the existence of different patterns of modernization, which are internally complex and mixed, and on the existence of multiple modernities. This is especially relevant for non-European continental and Anglo-Saxon cultures.

When it comes to contemporary social theory, theories of social differentiation – especially systems theory – have convincingly argued that the independent functioning of societal subsystems is not an epiphenomenon or a mere moment or stage in a linear path of progress, but an expression of their mutual irreducibility. This has a double valency for Marxism: on the one hand, it constitutes a relevant critique of the materialist dialectic, in the sense of a rejection of the idea of a moment of unification or "simultaneization" of what, until then, was not simultaneous. On the other hand, the thesis of irreducible social differentiation strengthens the already old criticism of the orthodox reading of Marxism, according to which spheres such as law, art, education, or science, reflect the relations of production (according

to the base-superstructure metaphor). Against this orthodox interpretation, the figure of non-simultaneity and relative autonomy of the different spheres of social life is revitalized, initially by Marx himself in the *Grundrisse*.

A key result of this criticism is the openness to different ways of conceiving emancipatory developments, in culture or politics, for example. The recognition of the insurmountable character of non-simultaneity has led Marxism towards a conceptual path often conceived as post-Marxist. One of its starting points is the highlighting of politics and the political as autonomous from the economic as a last instance. The social struggle of the left moves away from any essentialism and the credit of an ontological privilege, and must be understood both as an anti-hegemonic struggle and a struggle for another hegemony; that is, to impose a progressive model of social cohesion against others, equally legitimate, proposed by its adversaries. The recognition of the insurmountable and irreducible character of non-simultaneity, whose intuition is largely due to Bloch, thereby also finds a conceptual habitat in the Marxism of Antonio Gramsci and the Post-Marxism of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. There is no doubt that, until now, the idea of non-simultaneity of the simultaneous belongs to the vocabulary of the margins of Marxism; margins that are little explored or known even to specialists. Its implications, however, as can be seen, are far from marginal, and we might therefore expect it to be part of the language of a Marxism for the 21st century.

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