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Inverted worlds and belated baroques

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Postscriptum: In Lieu of a Conclusion

The drama of modernity which is still unfolding in front of our eyes, and which distributes and assigns functions and roles to virtually every region and segment of this world, not only turns all living beings into “resources” and “fuel” for the economy but also renders vast numbers of people into spare, useless and superfluous entities. The tramps, refugees, unemployed, lumpen, and homeless have not disappeared because they are a very immanent and necessary aspect of the bourgeois society itself. After two hundred years of advanced capitalism, living, i.e. renting or buying accommodation, is for the large part of the labor force still an impossibility, while living somewhere is not a choice: one cannot decide *not* to live somewhere, since it is the condition for all other economic activities, production and reproduction. The number of the homeless, however, have doubled in the Netherlands alone over the last decade.¹ Next to the increasing presence of the “foreign” refugee without shelter, a new “domestic” type has emerged, the so-called housing or renting nomad. For him, periods of employment alternated by moments of unemployment go hand in hand with intervals of being homeless – not transcendently homeless, but *actually* homeless.

In Cuba, they have a specific name for such outcasts; they call them “*Palestinos*.” This social type denotes the poor and unemployed from Santiago de Cuba who come to Havana in order to make a living, but they can only do so as tramps and *lumpen*. The name they have been given, “*Palestinos*,” already implies that they have no protection from the state and are second rank citizens: the mere surplus population of capital. Indeed, I say capital, here, and not communism.

In this thesis, I have chosen to predominantly read Arenas’ and Sarduy’s texts not as a critique of Cuban autocratic “communism,” but more generally as a critique of bourgeois economic and political values. This is not to say that I think that the critique of the Cuban Revolution is redundant, but I do perceive developments, such as the Cuban Revolution, in the larger framework of the creation of the world market, i.e. global capitalism, to which the Cuban Revolution,

¹ “Aantal daklozen sinds 2009 meer dan verdubbeld,” CBS. 23/8/2019. <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2019/34/aantal-daklozen-sinds-2009-meer-dan-verdubbeld> Accessed 18/10/2021.

however, attempted to provide an answer. They did so by organizing labor to the degree that its primary logic was not the increase of profit in the pockets of the foreign bourgeoisie, but the supply of basic goods and services for the population. What they aspired to was independence from the money-economy and the market. However, this dream of independence turned out to be a self-*engaño* as Cuba could not assert its independence from the free market. Instead, the tourist industry made sure that dollars were flowing into the economy persistently. What is left of the promise of autonomy is nearly nothing today. The “Lineamientos de la Política Económica y Social del Partido y la Revolución” for the Sixth Party Congress made this quite clear: Cuban socialism in the eyes of the Party has failed. The population has lived *too well*. The people have been too lazy and not productive enough, which is another way of saying that the costs of reproduction are simply too expensive, and production is not profitable enough. Therefore, the new socialism indicated that new “incentives” in the form of wage differences are necessary to keep the population “motivated” to work harder.² What is needed is a restructuring of the economy according to capitalist values. Thus, the “new socialism” indicates that it needs to leave “socialism” behind. But, already for quite a while, Cuba has been following the logic of “state capitalism.” What began as a critique of the market has now turned into an ardent “self-critique:” the old socialism was a mistake, and the new one must adapt itself to the mechanisms of the market.

What is true in current “socialist” societies is no less true in bourgeois economic relations: the great achievement of capitalism, automatization, does not result in less labor time for everyone, but rather in higher unemployment rates overall, which means on a global scale more tramps, more *lumpen* and more refugees. In this sense, automatization which bears the utopian ideal of

² Some fifty years after the Revolution, the new Commander-in-Chief, Raúl Castro puts it in the summary of the “Lineamientos” in the following way: “Incrementar la productividad del trabajo, *eleva la disciplina y el nivel de motivación del salario y los estímulos, eliminando el igualitarismo en los mecanismos de distribución y redistribución del ingreso.* Como parte de este proceso, será necesario suprimir gratuidades indebidas y subsidios excesivos (‘Lineamientos, 8-9) [Increase labor productivity, *raise discipline and the spurs of wages and incentives, eliminating egalitarianism in the commodities of distribution and redistribution of income.* As part of this process, it will be necessary to eliminate undue gratuities and excessive subsidies (My emphasis and translation, E.E.)

effortlessness is in our society not a blessing but a curse.³ Automatization only exists to the degree that it is profitable, and the reality is that living labor is still so cheap today that it bets out the costs of the automatization process in many occasions. Moreover, automatization has become a short hand for the full mechanization and atomization of social life: the creation of a self-contained “automatic subject” (i.e. capital) over which the actors and participants have no control, but which they, nonetheless, continue to reproduce and impose upon another.

In short, our world is still an inverted one. The four chapters in the dissertation have each shown a different aspect of the inverted world from the perspective of literature and philosophy. Various belated baroque types of *pícaro*, such as the Romantic Genius, the Drag Queen, the Sovereign, or the Author in Exile have been discussed. These types are all archetypes of the intellectual and artistic drop-out, who no longer can bring his aesthetic, ethical, and political ideals in line with the ruling values and laws in society. Since this breach leads quite evidently to unhappiness – Hegel got this quite right – eventually, the solution of the artistic *pícaro* is to stage inversion, transformation, or revolution in *art*, which is to say as a *game*. This game, however, would be quite uninteresting, if the novel or work of art in question would just treat the troubled musings of the individual as a mere psychological case study. Yet, the types of *pícaros* reveal something about the *general* typology of social relations and the individual’s the desire to escape from them.

While Marx would say that the individual, as we know it, is the necessary social expression of capitalist relations, Hegel would probably now indicate that capitalist relations have been unable to realize and accommodate the notion of “true” individuality. If the individual, that is, the reconciliation between the

³ In the years 2017-2018 a wave of panic regarding automatization hits Dutch media outlets. I will just mention a few entries, here: “Ook uw baan wordt straks geraakt door robotisering,” *Financieel Dagblad*, 30/01/2017; “NOS op 3 Tech Podcast: robots pikken je baan in.” *NOS op 3* 16/03/2017; “Robotisering treft de helft van de banen,” *Trouw*, 04/04/2018; “Ruim helft van onze banen over 7 jaar door robots gedaan.” *Algemeen Dagblad*, 17/09/2018.

Tilburg Professor for labor markets, Ton Wilthagen wrote an open letter to the government in which he outlined the potential hazards and negative implications of robotization or automatization for the labor market: “Politieke Visie dringend nodig om robotisering in goede banen te leiden.” 18/02/2017.

general and the particular cannot be realized in capitalism, individuality has to be sought “elsewhere.”

Thus, the picaresque position is the aesthetics of exile, that is, “the only position apart from” the antinomies of bourgeois society. From this position, the *pícaro* is *free* to comment on the social and political context, precisely, because, art, just like the domain of religion, family, and work, constitutes in bourgeois society an *independent* sphere that has been *freed* from the political. The situation in Real Socialism is, of course, different. That is why in Cuba authors are faced with censorship. In bourgeois society, in contrast, the fate of art has been decided by depoliticization. The bourgeois conception of the political as *depoliticization*, thus eventually leads to the progressive ending of everything: art, history, and the political itself. Hegel, and subsequently Marx, described the foundation for this process as the political diremption of society into a public sphere of political representation and into the “private” sphere of all other relations of social intercourse, such as circulation, production, reproduction. This means that, in modernity, art’s full depoliticization,⁴ has been calculated from the outset, just like that of other “private” activities. And, it means also that with the separation of the political from the economical, capital’s laws and mechanisms function *sui generis*, more or less independently of all wills in society. The economical emerges as an autonomous sphere that cannot be fully determined or mastered by the political. It conjures an inverted world in which economics is not instrumental to social and political development, but the latter two are determined by the interests of the former, almost exclusively.

The aesthetic position of the *pícaro*, one of “sovereignty” and “exile” is comprehensible, or *nachvollziehbar*⁵ as one says in German, insofar as it provides a critical perspective from the outside, but it is not the solution to the problem of modernity. Separation and isolation are notions that have already been absorbed by the logic of the market. Therefore, the off-side position cannot be the way out

⁴ Depoliticization is not the lack of political content but the independence or separation from the sphere of the political. Since in the case of the Cuban Revolution the separation between those spheres has not been yet accomplished, the political and private have to be in line. As a result, those who cannot bring the two in line, either had to leave the country or were imprisoned.

⁵ The word means “traceable,” and “comprehensible,” something that can be traced and one has to trace in order to understand it.

of the drama. While the types of *pícaro* presented in the thesis were looking for an exit strategy, for autonomy (artistic, political, economic), the inverted world eventually indicates that what one is looking for is not autonomy or sovereignty but rather the opposite: dependency: (comm)union with the other. The off-side is the position of relinquished power, of powerlessness, and Bataille mockingly admits this. The dismemberment [*Zerstückelung*] into different spheres, functions, and individuals is the crux of the organization of bourgeois society. From this point of view, the proposed rewriting of “philosophy” and “history” cannot act as surrogates for the change of basal economic relations. We need political institutions and organizations that operate against existing institutions, and, least but not last, a collective praxis that consists in a persistent fighting down of capital through struggle for better working conditions and wages.

Therefore, if anything, the lonely *pícaro* is the mocking (de-)realization of the anti-social individual that capital seeks to naturalize and posit as absolute. In doing so, the picaresque makes visible the blatant non-coincidence between the individual and society, word and world, thinking and being. Since so far, no other social form but capital has been so effective in hiding the incongruence between the sphere of representation (equality) and the sphere of production and circulation (inequality), the *pícaro* is a necessary stage in uncovering these contradictions. This is what makes the picaresque, defined in this thesis as a matter of belated baroque, still a potentially subversive position today, because it uncovers what is persistently covered up.