

On Immanence and Social Mediation - Postliterate - Medium

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Guy Debord famously wrote in *The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy*:

“Looting is a natural response to the unnatural and inhuman society of commodity abundance. It instantly undermines the commodity as such, and it also exposes what the commodity ultimately implies: the army, the police and the other specialized detachments of the state’s monopoly of armed violence. What is a policeman? He is the active servant of the commodity, the man in complete submission to the commodity, whose job it is to ensure that a given product of human labor remains a commodity, with the magical property of having to be paid for, instead of becoming a mere refrigerator or rifle — a passive, inanimate object, subject to anyone who comes along to make use of it.”

The problem Debord posed here is powerful in its simplicity. It says: capitalism is mediating our interrelations, and this is the cause of our misery; so, we revolt against mediation and express the free immanence of our relations. In other words, we come around to destroy the mediations of the commodity and replace it with the immanence of “anyone who comes along to make use” of things. This is commensurate with anarchistic senti-

ments within Situationism — recall their declaration that communism is the abolition of all ownership whatsoever. They are not persuaded by calls to plan the economy, and instead call for a firm end to mediation.

Of course, this thinking is incomplete at best and misleading at worst. One of the fundamental differences between the rhetoric of some anarchists on one hand, and Marx’s mature writings on political economy on the other, is that the former tends to call for a *return to immanence*, and the latter does not (of course, many anarchists do not do this, and it is in any case a tendency seen in many other places as well.)

This distinction is often overlooked in more vulgar circles — it is still oft remarked that Marx’s conception of communism was identical to many of the anarchists’, and it is only conception of the *transition* into such a state of affairs which causes difference. This may have appeared true in Marx’s work prior to *Capital*, but after that, it does not seem to be so. This is not because Marx believed in authority and the anarchists did not, but rather because Marx’s developed social ontology no longer even *allowed* a vulgar anarchistic conception of communism to be true.

The reasoning for this is not in itself complicated — every social formation can be analyzed from the perspective of varied forms of mediation which constitute that formation in its historical sense. Immanence thus always reveals itself to be mediated because humans lack a “default” or “natural” state. Søren Mau uses Kate Soper’s expression “*biologically under-determined*” to describe humanity:

“What really characterises the human animal is that it is ‘biologically under- determined’ [...] At the centre of its being is a ‘loss of immediacy’, which far from being the result of capitalist alienation is rather an ontological and constitutive feature of this peculiar animal...” (98)

This means that there really exists no essential or natural state for humanity to conceptually fall back on — they always and everywhere find themselves in a under-determined state, for which their essential metabolic interactions with nature are always mediated by *sociality*, and are thus

always socially determined. Constituting their own sociality, with no outside force to generate it from them, humans are unable to fall into predetermined instinct or naturalistic determinism. We thus cannot conceptualize humans in terms of an “original” or primordial unity between humans and nature. (There are severe pitfalls in this thinking if it is taken too far; for the specifics [see my critique of Søren Mau → https://medium.com/@postliteraite/a-critique-of-s%C3%B8ren-mau-from-the-standpoint-of-metabolic-rift-theory-ab72534d2c17](https://medium.com/@postliteraite/a-critique-of-s%C3%B8ren-mau-from-the-standpoint-of-metabolic-rift-theory-ab72534d2c17).)

“*[Our analysis] allows us to see how misguided it is to speak of an original unity of humans and nature. We should rather speak of an **original disunity or an original cleavage between humans and the rest of nature**” (ibid.)*

We cannot return to immanence, not because it is politically deleterious to do so, but because such a thing is impossible to do. There exists no external or natural immanence to fall back on — our immanence emerges only after it is mediated. To be clear, mediation is never clean or perfect, and gaps in social determination of immanence may often be visible. Sometimes it really may be politically advantageous to fall back on short bursts of immanence if they register a passionate response against the status quo; but as a well-defined total political project, a return to immanence is not conceptually possible.

There are two other theoretical advantages to a conceptualization of the social determination of immanence. The first is that it allows one to look past the rhetoric of Marxist-humanists who attempt to turn an imagined “human essence” and its supposed realization into a political project. The separation of humans and nature, and humanity’s further realization of its “essence” in the ideals of the Marxist-humanists, are not particularly desirable ends considering the specifically ecological and anthropocentric nature of the ongoing global crisis. By conceptualizing humanity in a more nuanced manner, an unwelcome emphasis on humanity’s realization as essence is effectively bypassed.

The second advantage is that it makes impossible the claims that communism is a return of the primitive communes of some “early man” who roamed the Earth before the emergence of agriculture. Developments in anthropology since the publication of Engels’ *Origin of Family, Private Property, and the State* have made the latter effectively appear to be the flat-Earth model of anthropology — rife with racism, vicious Eurocentrism, and theoretically vulgar stageism. Not only this, but even the existence of primitive communes among “primitive men” has been called into question — or at least, its historical and locational generality, and its associated “primitive” quality. With a more mature social ontology, it can be seen why the claims to a realization of “primitive communism” are spurious and so contested factually; moreover, with a more mature social ontology, such rhetoric is not even needed.

What is needed is a conception of communism that: (1) does not call for a return to immanence, and (2) does not believe itself to be a likewise return to a “natural” state of man or original essence or historical place. Instead, communism should be conceived of as a deliberate alteration of the mechanisms of social mediation which constitute society; this alteration is not “natural” nor immanent, but will re-constitute what is “natural” and immanent entirely.

Mau, Søren. *Mute Compulsion: A Theory of the Economic Power of Capital*. University of Southern Denmark, 2019.