The Romantic and the Marxist critique of modern civilization

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The first critics of modern bourgeois society, of the capitalist civilization created by the Industrial Revolution were — more than half a century before Marx — the Romantic poets and writers. Romantic anti-capitalism was born in the second half of the eighteenth century, but it has not ceased to be an essential component of modern culture up to the present. What is usually designated as the Romantic Movement in the arts and literature, mainly situated at the beginning of the nineteenth century, is only one of its multiple and extremely various manifestations. As a weltanschauung, i.e. an all embracing worldview, a style of thought, a basic structure of feeling, it can be found not only in the work of poets and writers of imagination and fantasy such as Novalis, E. T. A. Hoffmann and the surrealists, but also in the novels of true realists like Balzac, Dickens, and Thomas Mann; not only among artists like Delacroix or the Pre-Raphaelite painters, but also among political economists like Sismondi or sociologists like Tönnies.

The essential characteristic of Romantic anti-capitalism is a thorough critique of modern industrial (bourgeois) civilization (including the process of production and work) in the name of certain pre-capitalist social and cultural values. The reference to a (real or imaginary) past does not necessarily mean that it has a regressive or reactionary orientation: it can be revolutionary as well as conservative. Both tendencies have been present in Romanticism from its origins until now: it is enough to mention Burke and Rousseau, Coleridge and Blake, Balzac and Fourier, Carlyle and William Morris, Heidegger and Marcuse. Sometimes the conservative and the revolutionary even coincide in the same thinker, as in the case of Georges Sorel.
The first wave of Romantic anti-capitalism responded to the Industrial Revolution and its economic, social and cultural consequences during the nineteenth century. But the interest and relevance of its criticism of industrial society and of industrial labor is far from being only historical. It does not relate only to specific grievances, abuses and injustices peculiar to that first period — such as the absolute impoverishment of the workers, child labor, savage laissez faire, the draconian Poor Laws — but to more general, pervasive, essential, and permanent characteristics of the modern (industrial/capitalist) civilization, from the end of the eighteenth century to our very present in the 1980s.

The Romantic criticism is rarely systematic or explicit and it seldom refers directly to capitalism as such. In German sociology and social philosophy at the end of the nineteenth century we can find some tentative systematizations: they oppose Kultur, a set of traditional social, moral, or cultural values of the past, to Zivilisation, the modern, “soul-less,” material, technical and economic development; or Gemeinschaft, the old organic community of direct social relations, to Gesellschaft, the mechanical and artificial aggregate of people around utilitarian aims.

The central feature of industrial (bourgeois) civilization that Romanticism criticizes is not the exploitation of the workers or social inequality — although these may also be denounced, particularly by leftist Romantics — it is the quantification of life, i.e. the total domination of (quantitative) exchange-value, of the cold calculation of price and profit, and of the laws of the market, over the whole social fabric. All other negative characteristics of modern society are intuitively felt by most Romantic anti-capitalists as flowing from this crucial and decisive source of corruption: for instance, the religion of the god Money (Carlyle’s “Mammonism”), the decline of all qualitative values — social, religious, ethical, cultural or aesthetic ones — the dissolution of all qualitative human bonds, the death of imagination and romance, the dull uniformization of life, the purely “utilitarian” — i.e. quantitatively calculable — relation of human beings to one another, and to nature. The poisoning of social life by money, and of the air by industrial smoke, are grasped by many Romantics as parallel phenomena, resulting from the same evil root.

Let us take one example to illustrate the Romantic indictment of capitalist modernity: Charles Dickens, one of Karl Marx’s favorite authors, although he had nothing whatsoever to do with socialist ideas. According to Marx, Dickens belongs to the “present splendid brotherhood of fiction writers in England, whose graphic and eloquent pages have issued to the