

Bolívar Echeverría: Critical Discourse and Capitalist Modernity

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Born in Ecuador, formed intellectually and politically in West Germany, resident of Mexico until his death, Bolívar Echeverría (1941–2010) is a singular figure within the landscape of twentieth-century critical theory. Following his early engagement with leftist politics and the existential philosophies of Unamuno, Heidegger and Sartre in his home country, Echeverría moved to Germany in 1961, initially with the intention of studying under Heidegger in Freiburg. Later that year Echeverría relocated to Berlin, where he would eventually become involved both politically in the German student movement that saw the SDS (Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund) rise to prominence, and theoretically with the associated revival of critical Marxist thought. In the midst of intense cultural and social upheaval, Echeverría established himself as a revolutionary intellectual and expert in Latin American politics, forming friendships with Rudi Dutschke and Bernd Rabehl (Gandler, 2015: 61ff.). In 1968 Echeverría returned to

Latin America, settling in Mexico, where he began university teaching alongside Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez and concentrated his research on Marx and Marxism, specifically focusing on the critique of political economy. He began to publish the results of this work from the 1970s onwards, initially in a series of journal and magazine articles and eventually in a number of book-length essay collections. Echeverría's essayistic predilection (only three full-length monographs appeared under his name during his lifetime) was heavily indebted to Walter Benjamin, in style as well as form. He continued to teach at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in Mexico City up until his death in 2010.

Three key problematics constitute the fundamental co-ordinates of Echeverría's project: (1) the 'critical' status of theoretical discourse; (2) the dialectical relation of nature and society in the process of social reproduction; and (3) the historical, political and cultural condition of capitalist modernity.

Each of these problematics establishes a key point of affinity with concerns central to the Frankfurt School, although in Echeverría's work they are developed and reworked significantly in relation to the very different historical, geopolitical and cultural conditions under which his intellectual production took place. Broadly, Echeverría's project departs from a detailed, systematic and non-Eurocentric reading of Marx's writings, especially *Capital*, that emphasizes the centrality of their critical character as well as the concepts of 'use-value', 'natural form', 'social reproduction', 'fetishism' and 'subsumption'. At the forefront of this analysis, and taken to be the foundational aspect of Marx's entire critical project, is the contradiction between value and use-value, and more specifically the subsumption of the latter under the former that characterizes the capitalist mode of social reproduction. Based on this initial orientation, Echeverría engaged with the debates around 'culture', 'cultural form' and 'modernity' (both as a general process and in its Latin American variant) in order to propose a distinctive theorization of the 'crisis' that 'defines our epoch'. In this respect, his critical purview far exceeds typical Marxist accounts of society, and – here the influence of Braudel, Mumford and Benjamin, as well as Marx, is clear – could be called properly 'civilizational', engaging with the problem of freedom across the *longue durée*, as well as in its specific conjunctural instantiations. In his own words, his writings combine an insistence on remaining faithful to 'certain basic approaches of Marx's critical discourse with a willingness to radically recompose them in light of the practical and discursive experience of the twentieth century' (Echeverría, 1998a: foreword).

This spirit of radical recomposition, perhaps a fitting characterization of the Frankfurt School's own relation to Marxism, describes Echeverría's attitude toward Frankfurt School associated authors – primarily Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin and Marcuse – whose influence informs his thought as one part of

an eclectic constellation of figures: Lukács, Korsch, Sartre, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Hegel, Braudel, Mumford, Jakobson and Hjelmslev being key amongst them. Frankfurt School authors were a central reference point throughout the period Echeverría spent in Berlin. Subsequently, Echeverría went on to teach key works from the Frankfurt oeuvre as part of his seminar on 'German texts' at the UNAM in Mexico City. Whilst Echeverría's work was not produced primarily, or even expressly, in the direct lineage of Frankfurt School thought, he nonetheless maintains a generous dialogue with Frankfurt thinkers throughout his writings. In a pair of introductory lectures on the Frankfurt School delivered in Mexico City in the mid 1990s, Echeverría summarized the distinctiveness and originality of its contribution, focusing primarily on the work of Adorno and Horkheimer (Echeverría, September 2010–February 2011). But if critical theory is, and indeed must be, a response to the circumstances and struggles of its time, then it is essential to appreciate that the conditions under which Echeverría was working were very different to those which shaped the ideas of the first generation of Frankfurt thinkers. Echeverría's intellectual maturity coincided with the failure and retreat of the revolutionary cycle which reached its climax globally in 1968, and in Latin America throughout the 1970s. So whereas the discourse of the Frankfurt School arose, for Echeverría, within what Lukács in the 1920s termed the epoch of 'the actuality of revolution', lacking by the 1960s only the subject who could realize it, by the 1980s the very actuality of revolution was in question on both a practical and theoretical level (Echeverría, September 2010–February 2011: 22). Struggles had not only undergone a qualitative transformation, but the capacity to produce 'revolutionary significations on the discursive terrain' had become increasingly attenuated. Echeverría thus understood his own time to have inherited an intensified version of the problematic that Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse

understood as the benign totalitarianism of everyday life in the west, only without its dialectical other, the authoritarian regime of the Soviet Union. The blockage of critical possibilities implied in this context was reflected in the ascent of postmodernism and the rejection of Marxism within Latin American intellectual life after the 1970s, giving rise to a different configuration of interests and oppositions on the level of theoretical discourse. This in part explains Echeverría's transition to a focus on questions of semiotics, culture and the global during this period, although this was best understood as a polemical shift of register, given that its analyses remain grounded in a theory of social reproduction departing from terms set out by Marx. It is this highly original account of social reproduction that remains Echeverría's key contribution to a critical theory of society.

CRITICAL THEORY AS CRITICAL DISCOURSE

The first point of convergence connecting Echeverría's thought to the Frankfurt School can be found in his emphatic assertion of the necessarily 'critical' character of revolutionary theory, and in a careful and comprehensive attempt to elaborate precisely what such criticality consists in. For Echeverría, this necessity can be traced intellectually back to a distinction between what he terms the 'romantic' and 'classical' modes of reflexive discourse. Whereas the latter, primarily francophone/anglophone in origin, purported to know its object by confronting it dispassionately, 'with distance', simply observing it 'as it is' independent of the observer, the romantic attitude, of central European provenance, is grounded upon the idea of a relation of *interiority* between the thinking subject and the thought object. Such interiority acts as the basic postulate of the romantic disposition, for which the thing is transformed in being thought, to the degree that thought

constitutes 'a moment of the existence of the thing'. The objectivity of reality (in this case *social* reality) does not therefore, following the romantic contention, subsist in an uncontested and neutral manner, as 'a sum-total of facts', in Horkheimer's words, that 'is there and must be accepted' (1972: 199) but is rather grasped via categories that are 'always already charged with signification and interpretation' (Echeverría, September 2010–February 2011). The 'critical' dimension of critical theory involves uncovering the charge of meaning undergirding all apparently immediate social phenomena, and in doing so, designating their relation to the broader social order and historical dynamic within which they are inscribed. It is on the basis of this postulate of interiority that epistemological adequacy and objective context become inextricably bound together, grounding the unity of critical theory – despite the diversity of concerns encompassed within it – in the refusal to separate theoretical and metacritical problems from historical judgement and social critique:

Social discourse is a historical discourse, and there is no possibility of realising it in any other manner, since all sociological, or anthropological approximations have sense only to the extent that they describe, establish, problematize the substance of the present, which is to say historical tension. In the consistency itself of the objectivity of things is marked, impregnated, a historical tension that gives significance to things and permits their sense to be fathomed and described. (Echeverría, September 2010–February 2011: 31)

Theorizing social reality in this manner does not aim to establish a static connection between objective entities and some set of constitutive relations that would form a closed totality, but orients every fixed social form toward a 'horizon of intelligibility' opened by a process of historical transformation bearing emancipatory possibilities. Echeverría thus affirms Horkheimer's notion of a 'dynamic unity' between critical theorist and oppressed class, which obliges the former to present social contradictions as not

merely the ‘expression of the concrete historical situation but also a force within it to stimulate change’ (1972: 215). This synthesis, binding the inner connection of knowledge and object to the project of realizing human emancipation, pits critical theory against a conciliatory bourgeois discourse that confounds freedom with unfreedom and happiness with suffering: ‘critical discourse alone is capable of detecting the points of rupture or zones at which this conformism breaks down, appearing in the insignificant fissures or dysfunctional peripheries of the great apparatus, of rescuing the survival of feeling directed toward freedom’ (Echeverría, 2006a: 7–8).

For Echeverría, such criticality also accounts for the ‘programmatically difficult’ mode of exposition characteristic of critical theory (especially pronounced in the case of the Frankfurt School), as a necessary reflection of the difficulty of comprehending this socio-historical tension itself, as well as the difficulty of the practical and political conditions in which such thinking occurs. Echeverría’s conception of ‘critical discourse’ is determined in large part by the idea that such difficulty places demands on the very *mode* of theorization that can adequately respond to the historical reality of capitalism:

the originality, the specificity, or peculiarity of Marx’s critical discourse is revealed even in its purely formal dimension. Marx’s discourse is not only critical through its content, but also, and especially, by virtue of its form; what is more, if it were not critical in its form it would not be in its content. (Echeverría, 1998a: 62)

It is this formal dimension that endows Marx’s thought with its ‘properly “critical” or deconstructive scientificity’ for Echeverría. Understood in this sense, critical discourse neither contributes to, corrects or appropriates the products of bourgeois ideological discourse, nor attempts to destroy them ‘by means of another, more powerful, discourse’ (as the official ‘proletarian science’ of ‘real socialism’ sought to) but rather works upon

them ‘deconstructively’, treats them as historical ciphers or symptoms from which tensions can be identified and rendered operable within a cycle of struggle. Here Echeverría works with a specific and precise focus on Marx’s critique of political economy, taking *Capital* to be *the exemplary instance* of critical social theory (as it also is for Horkheimer, 1972).¹

This focus on the critique of political economy is what delimits and gives content to Echeverría’s critical theory. As simultaneously a revolution *in* theory (effecting a radical transformation of what is possible on the discursive level) and theory *of* the revolution (as a component of transformative struggle at the level of social practice), this critique does not simply designate an abstract method, applicable to whatever content, but derives its determinate characteristics and orientation in relation to its historical situation. It is, as a result, obliged to impugn *political economy* (primarily, although not exclusively) as the principle positive expression of social reality in the capitalist era, that around which ‘the entirety of theoretical discourse revolves – openly or covertly’ (Echeverría, 1976). For Echeverría, the discursive primacy of bourgeois economics is derived not simply from the greater material force through which it can saturate the channels of social communication but also, and especially, because of the manner in which it immediately reflects the necessary forms of appearance taken by capitalist social relations (Echeverría, 1976). It is this structural isomorphism, between ideal categories and social practice, that gives political economy its ‘spontaneous’ validity and ideological traction. Rather than denying this isomorphism as false and opposing to political economy an alternative, positive socio-economic theory (‘marxist economics’), Echeverría points out that Marx’s discourse works upon political economy ‘parasitically’. Critical discourse dissolves the putative harmony and immediacy of economic discourse from within, in order to penetrate through the deceptive surface layer of ‘freedom, equality, property and Bentham’ and uncover capital

in its processual entirety as a mode of social organization that contradicts and disfigures its real foundations: nature and labour. Critique thus becomes the only adequate mode by which the relationship between dominant bourgeois discourse and revolutionary counter-theory can be resolved; it is only as critique that the latter can resist subjection to 'rules of the game' that would 'make of it, in the last instance – and unwillingly – a discourse apologetic of the capitalist order' (Echeverría, 1976). Understood in these terms, Marxist theory departs from 'the impossibility of constructing a positive discourse parallel to the established discourse of modernity, the impossibility of creating a *corpus* of knowledge alternative to the scientific knowledge elaborated by capitalist modernity' (Echeverría, 2011). Marx's work thus marks, for Echeverría, the instauration of an entirely new paradigm of theoretical practice for which, 'to realise itself as *revolutionary theory* means to realise the revolution also as *a revolution on the specific terrain of theoretical discourse*' (Echeverría, 1976).

The name given to this theoretical revolution is, quite simply, 'materialism', a position which Echeverría understands – *contra* the Althusserian notion of an 'epistemological break' – to be developed and refined coherently throughout Marx's entire oeuvre. In his 1974 essay, 'Marx's Materialism', a close textual analysis and commentary on the theses 'On Feuerbach', Echeverría attempts to establish 'from which basic affirmation of objectivity and which type of theoretical activity adequate to that objectivity communist theoretical discourse departs' (Echeverría, 1986: 20). Echeverría insists that the theses reorient the axes upon which theoretical engagement had hitherto proceeded at the most fundamental level, by dissolving the false antithesis of idealism and 'traditional' materialism which mutually constitute the horizons of bourgeois discourse:

What exactly is it that enters into Marx's critical view, when (traditional) 'materialism' and 'idealism'

are referred to? It is not, without doubt, the content of the definitory philosophemes of two doctrines present in the panorama of the history of thought: it is not a case of choosing between two philosophical positions or opinions, nor of synthesizing or surpassing them in another conception of the world. Marx speaks clearly of (traditional) 'materialism' and idealism as horizons or ambits of cognitive apprehension, as fields of possibility of theoretical action, in which an object may be 'captured' ('gefasst') or not. His critique is aimed not so much toward the knowledge produced explicitly in the modern scientific-philosophical discourse, but precisely toward the horizon of cognitive possibilities set out as a condition of that discourse [...] toward the specific configuration of its fundamental structure. [...] A central signification that, by its maximum simplicity and radicality, is inscribed at the level of the linguistic code and penetrates it decisively, thus outlining a totalising subcodification, capable of overwhelming every possible explicit message. (Echeverría, 1986: 24)

Emerging from the critique of this fundamental structure, Marx's new theoretical discourse transcends the limits of a unilaterally subjectivist (idealism) or objectivist (materialism) perspective. In order to do so, this 'new' materialism must simultaneously grasp the subjective dimension of praxis 'that founds the entire subject-object relation and therefore the entire presence of sense in the real' alongside the objective dimension of 'this founding process as a basically material process, as a process of practical "metabolism" between man and nature' (Echeverría, 1986: 27–8). The unity of these two aspects is given in an idea of praxis that integrates both of these subjective and objective dimensions. For Echeverría, the most developed conception of such praxis – of the metabolic realization of active, subjective being – is found in the idea of social reproduction. The critique of political economy is thus read by Echeverría as a critique of capitalist social reproduction, possible only with recourse to a conception of social reproduction as such, in its 'general form'. Critical theory therefore implies critique of economic discourse, only possible via Marx's 'new' materialism, which in the final instance must be elaborated as a critical theory of social reproduction.

SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND PRACTICAL SEMIOSIS

For Echeverría, the capacity of a critical discourse to constitute itself as revolutionary discourse is grounded in a radical rethinking of the relation between human society and its natural basis, beginning with concept of praxis and finding its most conceptually refined expression in the theory of social reproduction. It is perhaps in this latter notion above all else that Echeverría's work is most invested and attempts to work through at the deepest level, generating a unique framework through which to pursue a critical theorization of society. There is a recognizable affinity here with Adorno's work on the concept of natural-history (2006; 1973: 354–8) that would be developed significantly in his student Alfred Schmidt's *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (1971). Drawing on a similar conception of the dialectical relation between society and nature (albeit via a different constellation of theoretical resources, specifically the addition of Heidegger and Sartre's ideas), Echeverría places at the centre of Marx's critical discourse the much neglected concept of 'natural form', or what Echeverría more precisely designates 'socio-natural form'. It is, Echeverría argues, only by virtue of the complex force through which the concept of 'natural form' or 'use-value' (its synonym) designates the objective concretion of social life that Marx is able to 'shatter the horizon of intelligibility' within which bourgeois thought moves (Echeverría, 2014). 'Natural form' is a concept, however, that in *Capital* 'remains only an outline and an indication' and therefore solely 'makes itself evident in its peculiar theoretical effects' (Echeverría, 2014: 26). Echeverría therefore undertakes the task of recovering and consolidating this concept, which he considers essential to combat the complicity of Marxist discourse with the myth of revolution, especially in light of the fate of 'actually existing socialism':

Only the reconstruction of the radical critical concept of use-value can demonstrate the fundamental

defect of the identification of Marxism with western productivism, the economic progressivism of capitalism and the bourgeois political statism which K. Korsch took in 1950 [...] to raise again for the second half of this century the theme, vulgarized in the seventies, of the inadequacies of the Marxist discourse to the demands of the new historical figure of revolution. (Echeverría, 1984)

This reconstruction of use-value and social reproduction departs from a radical re-reading of the concept of praxis in Marx's early thought, in a manner that establishes a deep coherence and continuity with his mature critique of political economy. In this conception of praxis, object and subject attain a new articulation in which neither is given a privileged role as the 'organising principle' of the actual, and such that neither corresponds simply to one pole of the opposition between idealism and ('traditional') materialism. Instead, both subjectivity and objectivity are grounded in the unity of a 'practico-critical' process of active world-constitution, conceived as 'a process in motion, and as a process that affects essentially and equally both the subject and the object that appear in it' (Echeverría, 1986: 25–6). The 'natural form' appears within this practical process as its objective side, yet without it being reducible to a passive, independently existing object (as in the object of intuition), given that it is exterior to the subject (so 'natural') but endowed with 'sense' or a specific determination of being according to its functions (symbolic and 'real') within the practical totality encompassing them both. The object of practice (rather than intuition) therefore always, necessarily, has a socio-practical objectivity that transcends, and is irreducible to, its purely 'natural' – which is to say, empirically intuited – qualities. This objectivity [*gegenstandlichkeit*] is the 'general form' or global context within which anything can exist in opposition to the subject as the possible object of its activity:

Whichever element of nature, be it physical, chemical, vital, psychic; whichever fact, be it material or spiritual, etc., whichever parcel of exterior or

interior reality, whichever section of material, of whichever materiality it may be, when it is integrated into a social process of production and consumption, of the reproduction of a social subject, constitutes that which we could call a practical object, or an object that has a socio-natural form. (Echeverría, 1998b: 13)

The only possible mode of being in which nature can confront the social subject is therefore as already mediated by it, so that, as Lukács puts it in *History and Class Consciousness*, ‘nature’s form, its content, its range and its objectivity are all socially conditioned’ (Lukács, 1971: 234). This conditioning and mediation is at the core of the concept of the natural or socio-natural form, as determined by the metabolic process of production and consumption in which subject and object encounter one another. Hence for Echeverría, the ‘logic’ of the ‘natural form’ is social reproduction (1998b).

The *differentia specifica* of the human reproduction process, then, is its constitutive under-determinacy in purely ‘natural’ or ‘animal’ terms and the corresponding genesis of a social subjectivity that prosthetically undertakes to determine the form of its reproduction in a multiplicity of historically and ethnically variable configurations. This idea of ‘transnaturalized’ reproduction, elaborated by Marx and presented schematically by Echeverría in his 1984 essay ‘La “Forma Natural” de la Reproducción Social’ (‘The “Natural Form” of Social Reproduction’) is the most developed ‘general’ account of the practical and social structure of the reproduction process, conceived of as a totalizing but mobile relationship between subject and object. For Echeverría, it forms the basic theoretical framework from which a materialist theorization of society departs and can then be developed via an engagement with its variable concrete forms:

The concept of ‘production in general’ that Marx employs in his critique of political economy, taken in the widest possible sense, which is to say considered as a complete process of social reproduction implies the existence of an essential structure,

transhistorical and supra-ethnic, whose presence only acquires actuality or reality to the extent in which it is actualized or given form within innumerable particular situations or specific conjunctions of historical and ethnic conditions. Each one of the forms in which this structure is actualized constitutes the concrete figure or identity of a society. (Echeverría, 2014: 25)

In his reconstructive exposition of this ‘general form’, Echeverría transposes Marx’s conception of the specificity of human labour into an account of the specificity of human reproduction, arguing that because human praxis is not bound to any pre-established instinctual image – and, indeed, is distinguished by this lack of ‘natural support’ – its concrete content must always be given form according to the particular ‘political’ organization of practical life that governs it. This is what Echeverría terms the ‘basic politicity’ inherent to the socio-natural form of reproduction, whereby the social subject must consciously subsume its natural (‘animal’) life process under a particular form of political community in order to realize it. Such a form is always inscribed within a cyclical temporality of reproduction (production/consumption) that must continually and metabolically re-establish its own validity – that is, the functional correlation of the ‘system of productive capacities’ and the ‘system of needs for consumption’. The social process of establishing and modifying the form of human existence is thus always ‘in play’ and subject to change through the practical, collective action of its individual members in these two basic phases: the first moment of the realization of the subject through production of the object, the second of the realization of the object in consumption that (re)produces the subject. Reproduction is therefore governed by a *dynamic* politicity with a disjunctive structure, distributed across the *two modalities* of the metabolic relation to nature as it is conceived in process. This contestability and dynamism is what distinguishes the ‘socio-natural’ mode of reproduction from purely natural being,

which, as Hegel notes, knows only repetition, establishing ‘a difference that could be an insignificant unhinging of the universal order, but that is sufficient to unfold within it an autonomous dimension of being; that of human existence’ (Echeverría, 1995: 76). The realization of the human’s biological reproduction is thus necessarily and exclusively tied to the reproduction of a socio-political order and, *vice versa*, so too is that socio-political order bound to the fulfilment of the basic physiological reproduction of the social subject. Not only, consequently, are the natural and social aspects of human existence mediated through one another – in spite of their non-identity – but, as Echeverría points out, humanity, precisely in its capacity ‘to take the sociality of human life as a substance to which it can give form’, to ‘trans-naturalize’ its ‘animal’ existence, and thus act as a ‘subject’, re-establishes the general lawfulness of nature, at the same time as it transcends it (Echeverría, 1998c: 77–8).

At the centre of Echeverría’s critical theory of society is this ‘dialectical violence’ of subjectivation, whereby the social subject’s realization is dependent upon its self-restriction to a determinate (if ambiguous) political configuration. The ‘subjectness’ [*sujeidad*] of the human resides in its active perpetuation or modification of the relational structure through which it is constituted, ‘the capacity to constitute the concretion of sociality’ or ‘to give form, figure, identity to the sociality of its life, that is, the ensemble of social relations of co-existence that constitute it as a communitarian subject’ (Echeverría, 2014; 2006b: 39). Yet this occurs not only in the directly ‘political’ activity that takes this form of sociality as its object, but also in the ‘basic politicity’ characterizing every act of material production and consumption, because:

the form that a good that has been produced has is never neutral or innocent; it always has a concrete use-value that determines, in turn, the form that the subject that will consume it should have. Labour has a *poietic* dimension; its giving form is a

realization, Marx says. It is an invention and the carrying out of a project; a project that is only immediately the construction of a thing, which indirectly but ultimately is the construction of the subject itself. (Echeverría, 2014: 29)

The practical intentionality and social project objectified in any use-value is not only inherent in every act of labour, but also comes to be totalized and impressed into the objective structure of means of production through which the social subject produces, and thereby reproduces itself, stamping those means with a distinctive qualitative character – a practical ‘form’:

The *effectiveness* of the instrumental field is not reducible to its productivity; this is only its quantitative determination – the degree to which the global instrument enables the subject to dominate or transform nature. Effectiveness is the qualitative content of productivity; it establishes an entire defined horizon of *possibilities of form* for the global object of production and consumption. In this sense, in presenting certain possibilities of form and leaving aside others, in being ‘specialized’ in a determinate axiological direction, the global effectiveness itself possesses a particular form, which rests upon the technological structure of the instrumental field. (*ibid.*: 31)

When the social process is grasped as a totality, as a process of socio-natural reproduction, praxis is seen to give form not only to the objects and in turn the subjects, of practical life, but also to the very form of the process itself, revealing reproduction to be a mediating mode of ‘self-activity’ [*Selbstbetätigung*]. The activity of the social subject, then, is consummated in the reproductive cycle of production/consumption, as that through which it gives form to its own sociality, to its ‘socio-natural form’ of existence. The specificity of this process, as a special version of the reproduction of animal life, is that for Echeverría it has freedom as its foundation, a freedom that emerges from the transgression of natural lawfulness. This conception of freedom is metaphysical (in that it establishes the possibility of practically transcending that which is objectively

given to the social subject) but not transcendent (in that this practice is delimited by and responds to those given conditions).

Departing from this 'ontological' schema, Echeverría draws critically upon concepts from semiotic theory and structural linguistics in order to argue for the identity of the production/consumption of practical objects and the production/consumption of significations. For him, every practical object is at the same time a significative object, precisely because of its 'transnaturalization' – its situation within a politically and culturally determined, rather than merely 'animal', process of reproduction – a situation devoid of any guaranteed correspondence between the moment of the object's production and that of its consumption. This constitutive ambiguity equally marks the acts of production and consumption that enact this semiosis, emitting/receiving the intentional 'messages' of practical life with a necessary degree of openness, uncertainty and selectivity. Taking this practical process of symbolization in its most characteristically human – and therefore political – mode, as *language*, Echeverría finally develops the idea of its capacity to act uniquely upon the basic practicality of the production/consumption of use-values, in so far as it 'not only passively condenses and refines the semiotic realizations of practice' but rather 'penetrates and interferes in each and every one of them with its own perspective'. He thus produces a critique of the discourses of linguistics and semiotics from a Marxist perspective by grounding them in a theory of social reproduction, whilst also deepening a Marxist conception of the latter by highlighting its peculiar communicative dimensions.

This confrontation between the Marxist, ontological and semiotic discourses should not be seen simply as a synthesis of heterogeneous concepts, or a mapping of terms between distinct disciplinary fields. Echeverría does not 'apply' a Marxist analysis to linguistics, or vice versa. Instead, he offers a conceptual elaboration of their

necessary inner connection and essential identity. He both grounds the conceptual innovations of contemporary linguistics within a critical understanding of reproduction, as the general structure of social materiality, and demonstrates the necessarily communicative character of all acts of production and consumption. Communication is therefore not simply a side-effect of production/consumption, nor is production/consumption a side-effect of communication. Social reproduction, the 'natural form' of human praxis, *must* be a semiosis, and semiosis *must* in turn be grounded in the basic structure of social reproduction. The necessity of the identity between these two processes derives from the dual and reciprocal character of human reproduction, as at once 'animal' (a metabolic process of the appropriation of nature for the reproduction of the organism's living consistency) and at the same time 'political', which is to say, a social process of establishing and contesting the concrete figure within which this first process is realized. Because this 'transnaturalization' (of the purely natural by the political) occurs in the movement between production and consumption, as the two phases of the reproductive process, and this movement has an uncertain or 'open' character, human activity always involves a constant ciphering/deciphering of form-intentional 'messages' inscribed within practical objects. Every social act of production transmits such a message, whilst each act of consumption interprets one.

On the basis of this identification, Echeverría is able to specify the distinct quality of language as a 'particular class of practical object' that combines 'a minimum degree of practicality with the maximum degree of semioticity', a quality that underpins both its emancipatory (or utopian) and ideological functions. This was an idea first developed in relation to capitalist ideology and its critique in his seminal 1976 essay, 'Discourse of the Revolution, Critical Discourse', where he argues that the 'technical composition' of the practical sphere is precisely what determines,

or ‘sub-codifies’, the boundaries of the general communicative code, positing the conditions for the intelligibility and efficacy of certain practical-discursive objects (‘messages’) over others:

The possibilities of truth that exist for knowing are defined within a socio-natural horizon of objectivity or meaning, constituted practically as a negation or re-ordering of the purely natural. It is the basic tendency of historical modifications of praxis (revolutions), or the social process of reproduction (labour), that demarcates the space inside of which an intended knowing can be true or scientific. (Echeverría, 1976: ??)

And yet this demarcated space is threatened with rupture, because the reproduction process binding its horizon of objectivity together is fundamentally disjunctive in structure, so that ‘without ceasing to be the same, [it] must be always other in being altered by its inevitable subjection to the change of situations carried with it by temporal flux’ (Echeverría, 1998d: 133). It is this constitutive non-identity and structural inconsistency of the social process that grounds the ‘the perennial open-endedness characterizing the significance of historical entities’ and from which a critical discourse can be articulated (Echeverría, 2005). Echeverría thus proposes a materialist understanding of the relation between semiosis and practical life that refutes the thesis of a parallel or homologous relation between the two spheres and is instead grounded in the wider project of attempting to ‘break with the dichotomy that postulates a substantial heterogeneity between material practice and spiritual guidance in human life’ (Echeverría, 2010: 46).

THE CHALLENGE OF MODERNITY

If critique and a materialism of social reproduction are the resources with which Echeverría’s critical theoretical engagements are sustained, every one of these engagements

(taken both discretely and in their unity as a ‘project’) can be understood to be circumscribed by the historical, cultural and political condition of modernity. ‘Modernity’ is the name given by Echeverría to that ensemble of objective conditions and behavioural dispositions [*comportamientos*] which have come to characterize civilized life and its struggles over the course of the last millennium, in opposition to and as the negation of ancestral logics of social organization. In Echeverría’s account of these conditions and the process of their instauration certain motifs resonate strongly with the historical problematics that characterize Frankfurt School critical theory, and important convergences between Echeverría’s concept of modernity and Adorno and Horkheimer’s concept of Enlightenment have been highlighted, notably by Stefan Gandler (2015: 227 n.109). However, whereas the latter is identified with the long history of ‘western society’ and instrumental reason as such (of which capitalism is but an expression), Echeverría rejects this ethnocentric definition of modernity in favour of an account grounded in the development of the technical relation governing the metabolic interaction of human society and nature.

For Echeverría, following Lewis Mumford, the origin and foundation of modernity can be located in the ‘eotechnic phase’ of civilization that began around the tenth century AD, forming the initial instance of a process grasped in its entire unfolding as the ‘neotechnical epoch’. The significance of the eotechnic moment is its initiation of a complete transformation of the logic of the instrumental apparatus through which social production was previously realized, such that:

the secret of the productivity of human labour would cease to reside, as it had done throughout the entire Neolithic era, in the fortuitous and spontaneous discovery of new instruments copied from nature, along with their usage, and would begin to reside in the capacity to deliberately undertake the invention of new instruments and corresponding new techniques of production. (Echeverría, 2010: 22)

The effect of this 'eotechnic revolution' was to inaugurate an immense, if in its incipience gradual, intensification of the productive technical powers of labour, in a manner that decisively altered the relation between civilized humanity and nature. The new material basis of this relation effected a negation of the 'absolute scarcity' of natural wealth to which archaic societies were condemned, in favour of a merely 'relative scarcity' of that wealth, enabling the historically unprecedented possibility that the humanity–nature interaction 'not be directed toward the elimination of one of the two but rather toward collaboration between both in order to invent or create precisely within the other forms until now inexistent within it' (2010: 23). What is thus carried within modernity, understood in this specifically 'technical' sense, is the promise of abolishing those traditional forms of life which have their origins in a situation of naturally imposed scarcity – the originary impetus driving the impulse to conquer and dominate both inner and outer nature, as self-repression and instrumentalization respectively – once the material constraints of that situation have been superseded:

In both the means of production and the labour force, the scale of instrumental operability has taken a 'qualitative leap'; expansion has been such that it has moved to a higher order and, thus, to a horizon of possibilities for giving and receiving forms, unknown during thousands of years of history. The productive forces are no longer beleaguered by and subjected to the universe beyond the world conquered by them (a universe called 'Nature'), but have become if not more puissant than it then more powerful in so far as their specific objectives are concerned; they appear to have eventually appointed man to the promised hierarchy of 'lord and master' of the Earth. [...] This raised the age-old suspicion again, now on the strength of much more trustworthy data: if scarcity was not, in fact, the 'curse sine qua non' of human reality. The Pólemos model, which has inspired every project of the historical existence of Man, by making it a war strategy that conditions survival in terms of the annihilation or exploitation of the Other (of the human other, of Nature), is not the only possibility; one might, without it being an illusion, imagine a different one, in which the Other is called following the model of Éros. (Echeverría, 2005)

Modernity thus constitutes a novel logic of 'civilizational totalization' whose possibilities present a 'challenge' to civilized life, a challenge to which different configurations of that life have responded in diverse manners. Treated in abstraction from those configurations modernity would be but an ideal totalization, 'artificially isolated by theoretical discourse from the configurations that have given it an empirical existence' (Echeverría, 2005). In its concrete historical figure however, the specifically 'western' response to this challenge was established in the 'zone of encounter' of modernity with commercial capitalism, as the pragmatic dynamic of neo-technical invention interlocked symbiotically with the circulatory logics of commodity exchange, mercantile accumulation and accompanying 'antediluvian forms' of capital. It is, ultimately for Echeverría, the *subsumption* of the technical revolution grounding modernity under the economic compulsion to valorize and accumulate abstract wealth that endowed European capital with 'a progress of totalitarian reach, both extensive and intensive, (as planetarization and technification respectively)' (Echeverría, 2005). Beginning in the 1980s, Echeverría attempted to disinter a comprehensive theory of capitalist subsumption from Marx's writings, emphasizing its centrality to the critique of political economy in its entirety by declaring it be 'the most advanced attempt made by Marx to show in general theoretical terms how the two contradictory processes' of capitalist accumulation and the production and consumption of material wealth 'are articulated'. (Echeverría, 1983). It is through this theoretical framework primarily that Marx is able, on Echeverría's reading, to comprehend the manner in which the 'the apparently natural development of modern technology' (and the utopian promise borne within it) is 'set loose by a *regressive social necessity*, that of perfecting the exploitation of the labour force' (*ibid.*, emphasis in original). As capitalist social relations extend themselves virulently they establish the

injunction, ever more forcefully, that ‘nothing is produced, nothing is consumed, no use-value can be realized in the practical life of capitalist society, if it is not also found in the function of vehicle or support of the valorization of value, the accumulation of capital’ (Echeverría, 2010: 113).

In this way, the essence of modernity became actualized as a specifically *capitalist* modernity only able to integrate neotechnical innovations in a ‘unilateral and impoverished manner’, treating them as if they were products of ‘the same old neolithic technique, only quantitatively potentiated’ whilst simultaneously repressing the possibility of a new compact between humanity and nature (Echeverría, 2010: 30). This abortive metamorphosis expresses itself, at the most fundamental level, in the essential vacuity of the social forms generated under capitalist conditions. Production within capitalist modernity – that is, production first and foremost of abstract wealth – truncates the creative elicitation of new forms based on material abundance, because ‘indispensable as it is to the concrete existence of modern social wealth, capitalist mediation cannot assert itself as an essential condition for its existence, nor can it synthesize a genuinely new figure for it’ (Echeverría, 2005). Instead, capital regressively reconstitutes and selectively promotes archaic modes of concretion, those social forms that are ‘nothing other than organs or means of sublimation of a self-sacrifice, a productivist repression that in principle has lost its reason for being’ (given the potential abundance borne by new material conditions) (Echeverría, 2010: 25). This time however, these archaic modes, whose ‘physiognomy is completely changed’ (as Marx noted in another context), present themselves only as ‘simulacra’ destined to ‘artificially reproduce absolute scarcity’ of social wealth, despite the potential profusion of satisfactions unlocked by the neotechnical revolution. Capital must repress or displace this profusion, and does so, as the material basis for it is rendered increasingly self-evident,

in an ever more violent and extreme manner. The contradiction between such monumental material capacities and their deformed actualization expresses the ambiguity of modernity in its existing (capitalist) form, as well as the ambivalence it displays with respect to the search for greater satisfaction of needs and freedom of action, despite its self-proclaimed superiority to traditional modes of life. Echeverría concludes thus that ‘modernity would not be “an unfinished project”, as Jürgen Habermas sees it; instead, it would be a set of possibilities, which are explored and actualized from only one side and in only one sense, and which might be approached from another perspective and have another light cast upon it’ (Echeverría, 2005).

The possibility of realizing the essence of modernity on a non-capitalist basis depends, however, on the excision of a certain abstraction – both theoretical and practical – relating to concrete forms of life, which has occupied a central place not only within bourgeois discourse but also within Marxism. One of the most valuable contributions made, for Echeverría, by the Frankfurt School was to identify this deficiency in Marx’s thought insofar as it remains a critique of traditional social forms and use-values without at the same time criticizing that critique (Echeverría, 1998a). Capital, for Marx, carries a progressive impulse within it, in its tendency to dissolve ‘all traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted satisfactions of present needs, and reproduction of old ways of life’ (Marx, 1993: 410). In affirming this restless drive to reinvent the forms of social life as an aspect of the communist supersession of capital, Marx’s thought is contaminated by what Echeverría calls the modern or bourgeois ‘myth of revolution’. Underlying this myth is the crypto-theological principle of an omnipotent subject of creation acting unilaterally upon the world’s ‘passivity as mere useful material’. Persisting in secularized form, this notion converts itself into the metaphysical *hybris*, proper to the ‘entire dominant political culture’ of modernity,

which anthropocentrically appropriates those powers normally attributed to a 'supreme fictitious being', in assuming:

that the human being has the capacity to create and re-create *ex nihilo* not only forms of sociality but sociality itself, without the need of abiding by any pre-existing natural or historical determination; in accordance with this myth, 'second nature', the ensemble of norms of communitarian co-existence, is a neutral and passive material, at the disposition of the activity of the human as a subject of 'politics'. (Echeverría, 1998a: 68)

Within traditional Marxist discourse, this myth has been inscribed in the idea of revolution as

an action capable of re-founding sociality after annihilating the forms of sociality cultivated and transformed by the human being over millennia, of erasing past history and recommencing to write it upon a blank page [...] a moment of absolute creation or re-creation, in which human beings cast down everything and rebuild it all; in which all forms of sociality are destroyed and new ones created from nothing. (ibid.: 68)

Here, however, the discourse which claims for itself a 'critical' status demonstrates its complicity with precisely that which it ostensibly opposes, because 'only for [capitalist] modernity is use-value, the natural form of the world, nothing and, inversely, economic value, the crystallisation of energy, of activity, of human subjectness, that which is everything' (ibid.: 69). Capitalism, as the epoch of total and unending revolution, 'an era of destruction and radical restructuring', already spontaneously assumes an antipathy toward the traditional forms that it must constitutively render obsolete (even as it seeks to exploit them and even intensify their reactionary opposition to progress where it can gain from doing so). In the face of this tendency it is insufficient and naïve for critical discourse to simply advocate the acceleration or appropriation of this creatively destructive drive, purified of its exploitative class dimension. Without positing its own conception of the axiological specificity of practical life and an accompanying consciousness of qualitative

distinctions within that life, Marxism is bound to the figure of the abstract bourgeois subject submerged in civil society, for whom 'forms of sociality are presented as mere folkloric coatings or masks of the elemental functions of human sociality', forms which this subject 'in its narcissistic self-idolatry, can remove and place at its discretion' (ibid.: 70). For Echeverría, the only manner by which Marxist discourse can transcend this abstraction is by rescuing and elaborating the concept of use-value, enabling the comprehension of those concrete forms of social life that are the substance of any revolutionary process.

Modernity thus 'throws its challenge to civilized life', presenting itself, in the torsion of its utopian essence and its catastrophic actuality, as a 'situation on the edge'. Its interpenetration with capitalism is akin to the relation 'between a whole and independent totalization and one of its dependent parts, which has thus far imposed itself on the totalizing action of the whole' (Echeverría, 2005). This establishes the stakes of the communist project: to disarticulate the possibilities of technical socialization at the core of modernity ('an "indecisive" yet polymorphous exigency, a pure potency' [Echeverría, 2005]) from their repressive subjection to the demands of accumulation, in order that a history of social being based on generalized abundance, or merely 'relative' scarcities, can commence.

CONCLUSION

The richness of Echeverría's systematic theorization of social reproduction in both its ontological and semiotic dimensions, alongside his unique conception of the condition and challenge of modernity and his precise definition of what constitutes critical discourse, presents a significant and original contribution to critical theory. By redressing the theoretical priority given to the economic dimension of social life in much Marxist thought with his account of the 'natural-form'

of reproduction, Echeverría is able to simultaneously analyse both capital's abstract mediation of the social process and the concrete diversity of effects and struggles it gives rise to. Locating the contradiction of capitalist society at the point of form-determination (of what is produced, reproduced and ultimately of the process as a whole), as an opposition between two competing logics of reproduction (of abstract or of concrete wealth, and the life-processes which give content to each), Echeverría presents a unifying framework for social research that supersedes the opposition of 'history' and 'system'. At its most basic level this framework grounds the normative distinction between the dialectical violence of transnaturalization through which 'subjectness' emerges and realizes itself, and social domination as the *negation* of that 'subjectness'. With the historical advent of capital that negation becomes depersonalized and autonomous, concentrating the antithesis of dialectical and dominating violence into that between the 'socio-natural' and 'socio-capitalist' logics of reproduction. For Echeverría, the problem of 'natural form' only becomes legible within the 'crisis of modernity' in its widest sense, which is to say, the fundamental conflict between two contradictory tendencies or 'dispositions' giving form to social life: between the social subject proper (freedom in its enactment, humanity living 'its own drama') and its alienated, spectral inversion (freedom subordinated to the end of capitalist valorization). From this perspective, what historically distinguishes capitalist modernity from other civilizational configurations is that within it the concrete form of society is generated in a conflicted 'dual manner', such that the 'proper' social subject is sublimated and displaced by capital's abstract dynamic of accumulation, what Marx famously refers to as an 'automatic subject'. The problem of politics in modernity is therefore first and foremost a problem of (alienated) form-determination, 'the permanent "effort" of the "spectre" to maintain and affirm its domination over real being'

(Echeverría, 2010: 113). This is the point of departure for an analysis of domination based on the capitalist ethos of self-repression:

If human beings exist in the absurd manner that we can observe empirically – in the midst of oppressions, repressions, exploitations, all of which are in principle avoidable –, it is because their natural process of reproduction does not obey a *telos* capable of synthesizing itself but rather an alien – alienated – one that is the 'reified' *telos* [...] of the accumulation of capital. (Echeverría, 1998b: 10)

At the same time there is fundamental negativity to Echeverría's 'ontology' of social reproduction, in that whilst it provides the conceptual resources to distinguish *between* social forms, it lacks any qualitative content or determinacy (it stipulates no specific configuration) and thus requires an attentiveness to the concrete forms – of both objectivity and subjectivity – assumed by social life within and against its capitalist organization; the theory must be operated in relation to the historical co-ordinates against which it is elaborated. The idea of the 'natural form' that Echeverría opposes to the value-form is not, therefore, a romantic or utopian concept, and far from conceiving of the supersession of the capitalist mode of reproduction as a final act of emancipation or advocating a restoration of the 'purely' natural as an idyllic state of harmony, Echeverría emphasizes only that the 'natural form of social reproduction' is only the site in which freedom and proper human history *can be* established, not its guarantee or original image. The necessity of selecting a form for social life can only occur by way of a politically uncertain process, and in light of this ambivalence Echeverría endeavours to chart a path between the 'utopian' and 'realist' impulses that have characterized the revolutionary movements of the modern era (Echeverría, 1976). Echoing Marx, Echeverría sees this project not as a retreat from the possibilities and dangers that modernity presents, a regression to pre-capitalist forms of life, but rather as a new way of responding to them.

Note

- 1 The consonance of this deconstructive conception with the stance concentrated in Adorno's idea of negative dialectic is evident. But if, in the principal works of the Frankfurt School, tarrying with historical tension takes the form of critique of culture, philosophy, sociology, politics, psychoanalysis, etc., there is a marked ambivalence with regard to the economic dimension of first generation critical theory (Friedrich Pollock's contributions notwithstanding). In foregrounding this economic-critical dimension Echeverría reveals an affinity with later members of the Frankfurt School such as Backhaus and Reichelt, who in a similar period endeavoured to articulate elements of classical critical theory with Marx's mature critique of political economy under the banner of a 'new Marx reading' (see Chapters 22 and 23 in this volume).

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