

# Introduction to Bolívar Echeverría

Although largely unknown to anglophone readers, Bolívar Echeverría (1941–2010) is one of the most important representatives of Latin American Marxism and critical theory to have emerged in recent decades.<sup>1</sup> He was born in Ecuador, but his main intellectual formation took place in Berlin during the 1960s, where he became involved both politically in the generation of the German student movement that saw the SDS and Rudi Dutschke rise to prominence, and theoretically with the associated revival of critical Marxist thought, drawing on the early texts of (so-called) Western Marxism by Lukács and Korsch, as well as later currents found in Sartre, Adorno and Marcuse. In 1968 Echeverría returned to Latin America, settling in Mexico, where he undertook a deepened reading of Marx and Marxism, enriching it further through a critical engagement with a wide range of thinkers and traditions including Heidegger, Benjamin, Nietzsche, Hegel, Braudel, Mumford, and, more importantly for the following essay, structural linguistics and semiotic theory, in particular the work of Jakobson and Hjelmslev.

Broadly, Echeverría's work is composed in response to two basic theoretical objectives: first, and most fundamentally, he sought to produce a careful, systematic and non-Eurocentric reading of Marx's writings – especially *Capital* – that, on the one hand, places them in dialogue with the aforementioned authors and, on the other, emphasizes the centrality of certain of their crucial but underdeveloped aspects, such as their necessarily critical character, 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. Second, and based on this initial orientation, he engaged, in various ways, with the debates around 'culture', 'cultural form' and 'modernity' (both as a general process and in its Latin American version) in order to propose a distinctive critical understanding 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'.<sup>2</sup>

"Use Value": Ontology and Semiotics' (1998) is a revised version of an essay that originally appeared in the influential Mexican journal *Cuadernos Políticos* in 1984 under the title 'The Natural Form of Social Reproduction'.<sup>3</sup> It is one of the most original and theoretically fundamental texts written by Bolívar Echeverría, offering some of his most decisive contributions to both of the concerns highlighted above, as well as establishing the conceptual foundations on which many of his engagements with more specific problematics, such as the critique of capitalist ideology, the multiple *ethé* of modernity, racism and *mestizaje*, postcolonial politics and 'technological rent', have their basis.

The text takes as its focus Marx's concept of 'use-value' and the 'natural form' of its reproduction, which for Echeverría remains an essential but undeveloped – 'enigmatic' even – aspect of the critique of political economy. Despite the fact that both Marx himself and the Marxist tradition largely left use-value to one side, devoting far more critical attention to the form of value and the valorization process, Echeverría takes it to be the decisive concept through which Marx 'shatters the horizon' of modern – which is to say bourgeois, nineteenth-century – thought and allows him to establish a critical, materialist discourse in opposition to it. To redress the 'asymmetry' between the concepts of value and use-value, and thereby reconstruct the completeness of Marx's critical project, Echeverría sets out to develop an account of the 'socio-natural form' of use-value in its most general structure, drawing out both its ontological and its semiotic dimensions in turn:

In effect, to provoke a systematic confrontation of the 'theory of production in general' proposed by Marx – which is the theoretical place of the

concept of 'use-value' – as much with the foundations of phenomenological ontology as with those that have emerged from contemporary semiotic theory (especially from Roman Jakobson and Louis Hjelmslev).<sup>4</sup>

The motivation for staging this idiosyncratic dialogue was at least in part derived from the particularity of the political and academic context in which Echeverría was working in the mid-1980s. This time was marked by the defeat of the Latin American revolutionary processes of the 1960s and 1970s and, from the early 1980s onwards, the instauration of neoliberal state policies and the decline of the influence and credibility of critical Marxist thinking in both the university and the political sphere. At the same time, these years witnessed the ascent of a postmodern hegemony in Latin American intellectual life, expressed in the spread of structuralism and post-structuralism as the dominant currents in academic theory. This generalized depoliticization of theory put Echeverría in the situation of developing his critical ideas against the grain of mainstream thought.

But even aside from these politically unfavourable circumstances, Echeverría had already developed his reading of Marx outside and critical of the main axis of Marxist thought in Latin America in that era: Althusserianism and neo-Gramscianism, focusing on the value-theoretical, materialist and critical aspects of Marx's work rather than questions of ideology, hegemony and organization. By highlighting the question of use-value, he sought to confront the failings of the Marxist tradition:

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 that Karl Korsch took in 1950 ... to raise again for the second half of this century the theme, vulgarized in the seventies, of the inadequacies of Marxist discourse to the demands of the new historical figure of revolution.<sup>5</sup>

After a decade of research into *Capital* and the main currents of Western Marxism, he was able to construct a critical reading of the French and Italian structuralist, semiotic and linguistic discourses that were then prominent.<sup>6</sup>

In the first part of the essay, Echeverría constructs an original philosophical dialogue by combining Marx's theory of social reproduction and the labour process, as outlined in chapter 7 of *Capital I* and the

*Grundrisse*, with a Hegelian concept of organic life and an existential concept of freedom and action drawn primarily from Sartre and Heidegger. He argues that because human sociality 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, its 'socio-natural form'. At the same time, because such a form is always inscribed within a temporally disjunctive structure of *reproduction* (production/consumption) that must continually – and metabolically – re-establish its own validity, the social process of establishing and modifying the natural form of human existence is always 'in play' and subject to change through the practical, collective action of its individual members in these two basic phases. The realization (*Verwirklichung*) of the human's animal reproduction is therefore necessarily, and exclusively, tied to its political or social reproduction (along with the radical freedom that this entails). In this way, Echeverría claims, not only are the natural and social aspects of human existence mediated through one another, as Marx, Lukács, Adorno and Alfred Schmidt all emphasized, but humanity – precisely in its capacity 'to take the sociality of human life as a substance to which it can give form',<sup>7</sup> to 'transnaturalize' its 'animal' existence, and thus act as a 'subject' – re-establishes the general lawfulness of nature, at the same time as it transcends it.

On the basis of this ontological schema, Echeverría draws critically upon concepts from semiotic theory and structural linguistics in order to argue for the identity between the production/consumption of practical objects and the production/consumption of significations (conceived as a *duality* rather than a *dualism*). 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 labour and enjoyment 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 is thus able to criticize the discourses of linguistics and semiotics from a Marxist perspective by grounding them in a theory of social reproduction, whilst also deepening the latter by highlighting its communicative dimensions.

Echeverría offers one of the most developed and systematic attempts to elucidate a critical, materialist conception of the category of 'use-value'. Use-values, commodities in their 'natural form', are the 'objects of practical life', which is to say objects situated within a concrete process of social reproduction, which they both enable and by which they are constituted. Making the connection between Marx's critique of political economy and his 'On Feuerbach', Echeverría rejects a conception, shared by many Marxists, of use-value as grounded in the inert, mute physicality of an object (*Objekt*) of sensible intuition, precisely the perspective of the 'old materialism' criticized by Marx, as well as of the positive natural sciences and political economy, the *sine qua non* of bourgeois discourse.<sup>8</sup> Instead, he seeks to give an account of use-value as a 'practical object' (*Gegenstand*) that confronts the 'social subject' within the process of production/consumption. Echeverría emphasizes not only the fact that Marx undertakes a revolution in the concept of subjectivity (as practical, objective, transformative activity), but that the object itself is also redefined according to its role within the practical context of social life. This account of use-value, along with Echeverría's broader conception of the natural form of social reproduction, implies the rejection of any simplistic opposition between the natural and the social, in which use-value would constitute the former pole and value the latter. Because the 'natural form' is constituted precisely in the tension between the 'purely animal' and 'political' dimensions of human reproduction, – that is, historically (or 'pre-historically', as the case may be) – it not only pertains to but already necessitates a social dimension. The commodity's use-value is thus not simply the 'content' upon which value is superimposed, as social 'form', but rather 'natural form' and 'value form' compete, at the level of the semiotic and political determination of the reproductive process, to direct its realization towards their own 'goals'. To the former corresponds some concrete image of self-realization, directly connected to the needs and

capacities of a particular social subject (although this is not to suggest that it is devoid of its own mystifications and fetishisms); to the latter corresponds only the abstract representation (however 'real' this abstraction might be) of a purely quantitative movement of self-expansion.

Second, the confrontation between the Marxist, ontological and semiotic discourses that the text presents 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 its 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',<sup>9</sup> 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. 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 (as can be found in the work of Ferruccio Rossi-Landi), and is rather 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'.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, it is worth pointing out some of the more general political implications of this text, which are developed further by Echeverría in other works. As he remarks, the problem of 'natural form' only comes to the fore within the 'crisis of modernity' in its widest sense, which is to say the fundamental conflict over the form-determination of social life, between two contradictory tendencies or 'dispositions': the 'natural form' and the 'value form'; 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 valorization). From this perspective, what historically distinguishes capitalist modernity from other civilizational configurations is that its actualization of the concrete figure of society occurs in this conflicted 'dual manner', such that the 'proper' social subject is sublimated and displaced by capital's abstract dynamic of valorization, 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'.<sup>11</sup>

The side of the natural form that Echeverría opposes to capital is not, however, 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, he emphasizes only that the natural form of social reproduction is 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. At the heart of this political vision is the triad of concepts freedom–politics–subjectness [*subjectividad*], through which a critical practice of politics is given its progressive conceptual determination. 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: that is, the beginning of a new social practice:

the 'natural form' of human life – of the process of its own reproduction and of the world in which it unfolds – is a social and historical form; it is the mode that the human being has, to affirm and identify itself whilst being defined or determined in reference to the other, to 'nature'. It is the 'meta-physical' form that the 'physical' or 'living' functions of the human animal adopt when it is beginning to exercise a subjectness [*subjectividad*] – that is, to be 'free' (Immanuel Kant).<sup>12</sup>

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#### Notes

1. Aside from the following essay, three texts by Echeverría have been published in English: '15 Theses on Capitalism and Modernity', trans. Charlotte Broad, *Theomai* 11, 2005; 'Potemkin Republics', *New Left Review* 70, July–August 2011, pp. 53–61; 'Homo Legens', *New Left Review* 79, January–February 2013, pp. 123–6.
2. Bolívar Echeverría, *Valor de Uso y Utopía*, Siglo XXI, Mexico City, 1998, pp. 9–10.
3. *Ibid.*, 153–97; Bolívar Echeverría, 'La "forma natural" de la reproducción social', *Cuadernos Políticos* 41, July–December 1984, pp. 33–46.
4. Echeverría, *Valor de Uso y Utopía*, p. 10.
5. This line appears in a long footnote to the original 1984 version of the essay.
6. For an in-depth account of Echeverría's intellectual development see Andrés Barreda, 'En torno a las raíces del pensamiento crítico de Bolívar Echeverría', in *Anthología Bolívar Echeverría: Crítica de la modernidad capitalista*, La Paz, 2011, pp. 19–64.
7. Bolívar Echeverría, 'Lo Político en La Política', in *Valor de Uso y Utopía*, pp. 77–8.
8. For example, Michael Heinrich, in *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital*, trans. Alexander Locascio, Monthly Review Press, New York, 2012, pp. 40–41: 'The "natural form" of the chair is simply its material composition (for example, whether it is made of wood or metal). "Social form", on the other hand, means that the chair is a "commodity", ... That the chair is a commodity is not a character of the chair itself as a thing, but rather of the society in which the thing exists.'
9. Bolívar Echeverría, 'Discurso de la Revolution, Discurso Crítico', *Cuadernos Políticos* 10, October–December 1976, pp. 44–53.
10. Bolívar Echeverría, *Definición de la cultura*, Itaca, Mexico City, 2010, p. 46.
11. Bolívar Echeverría, 'La Modernidad Americana', [www.bolivare.unam.mx/ensayos/La%20modernidad%20americana.pdf](http://www.bolivare.unam.mx/ensayos/La%20modernidad%20americana.pdf).
12. *Ibid.*