

Practical Materialism: Lesson Two

Thinking My Head to the Sky

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For Marco Fusinato

Karl Marx had several very good ideas, all of which almost without exception have been willfully misunderstood and misappropriated since his death. His basic conception of a true materialist philosophy is one of these. Leaving aside the obfuscations of Engels (an untrustworthy guide to philosophy at the best of times), as well as those of his even less worthy successors, and one is left with a remarkably simple conception. Practical Materialism, as we may denote this 'purely Marxian' idea', conceives of an interaction between a fundamental material reality (*qua* Object) and sentient human actors possessing free will (*qua* Subject). The peculiar genius of Marx lay in positing the locus of this interaction outside any imaginary philosophical construct or field of theoretical endeavour, instead he posited the ground of interaction as being **work**. In this way the subjective 'thesis' acts upon the objective 'anti-thesis' to produce an integrated 'synthesis' which represents a higher stage in the Hegelian dialectical triad. This organic union of theory and practice, posited on a ground of everyday life, he termed *praxis*.

An illuminating example of this is the Alexander Technique. Like all great ideas, the core of the technique is very simple—that the Mind inhabits the Body and the two are interdependent in such a way that one can work on the Body with the Mind, and on the Mind with the Body. Simple stuff perhaps, but this wholistic insight cuts against all traditional Western philosophical thought from Descartes onwards. What is more, it is not primarily a philosophical insight, but a pragmatic and process-oriented heuristic response to a physical problem. The Marxian praxis in action, in other words. Alexander was an Australian actor who suffered from shortness of breath. The problem, he realised, was postural, and the solution, was neither physical (*Exercise*) nor mental (*Self-Discipline*), but the result of a dialectic between the two whereby the innate reflexes of the body are relearned by a combination of exercises, manipulation and meditation. The connection between theory and practice in the Technique is so seamless, that one can only learn the ideas by doing the exercises, and vice versa. Central to the teaching is the wordless application of touch—which often seems to produce effects by apparently psychic means; and the willed repetition of Directions, which take the form of mantric and often apparently contradictory instructions to your own body—for example, my teacher's regular injunctions that I should stand up from the chair without pushing with my legs, and the exhortation which forms the title of this piece, that I should 'think my head to the sky'. This phrase has come to encapsulate many insights for me, and has had a profound effect on my musical practice as well. It would be fair to say that my theoretical understanding of the Marxian philosophical position, and my musical praxis have both been deepened by my practical experiences in the work of the Technique.

So what, you may be asking, has this all to do with music?

Music is a remarkably pure artistic example of the total interdependence of theory and practice, because music (properly conceived) is not 'about' anything other than Time, the ultimate ground of all reality. Music is about the time it occupies, and the way we perceive that time, and situate ourselves in it. In a schematic way we may summarise it thusly:

$$(\{\text{Music}=\text{Time}\}=\{\text{Time}=\text{Music}\})$$

More than that, as an artist, my concern is also with the process of making music, which unfolds within time. Further, as a theory-addict (self-conscious subject), I cannot help but think about the meaning of making music from the point of view of praxis. As soon as I began making my own music (as opposed to reproducing learnt routines in lessons), I became aware of the significance of improvisation as self-willed play. There is no intentional *thinking* about what one might do as an artist without *doing*, and no *doing* without *thinking*. Thus realtime improvisation becomes philosophically more fruitful than composition imagined as a separate activity. In the same way, the opposite is true, merely playing without conceiving of the activity in a mindful way is equally barren. The trick is to unite the two in a 'practical' way, this to my way of thinking is analogous to 'thinking your head to the sky'. Making music is an activity that is *head-directed* but *body-realised*, and the 'trick' is to make both ends of the equation hold up. This is something that cannot be made up (in the theoretical realm), it can only be worked out (in the realm of praxis).

The other great strength of improvisation as opposed to composition lies in the aforementioned process of creation in a tension between perceived time and real time. Working a piece out via interaction with 'noise instruments' (broadly conceived) in real time in front of an audience either present ('live') or time-displaced ('recording studio') means that the issues of time are inherent in the process. This means that there is no disjunction between the language of discovery and the language of exposition. This qualifies improvisation as valid in terms of one of the principal epistemological tests of the philosophy of science. Focusing the process of music on the true subject matter (time and our experience thereof) can be achieved in many different ways. Comparing the output of artists as diverse as Tony Conrad and Bernhard Gunter will immediately make this apparent. What is important is not the specific strategy, but the degree of engagement with the task at hand.

The art world has proved adept in the last century at making more and more people ask **global** questions, such as 'what is this art?'. Not merely petty discriminatory questions of relative quality, such as 'four stars or five?', but fundamental questions of quality that examine the most basic issues relating to artistic practice. In music, these global questions have tended to be asked too often only in small academic coteries, or by sub-cultures involved in the collective exploration of 'outside music'. More people need to be asking questions like 'what is this performance?' or 'what is this music?'.

Once they do this they can ask even **larger** questions such as...

'what is this noise?'

and...

'what is this silence?'

Improvisational musical practice is devoted to indicating the possibilities inherent in the process of making music. Too many artists seem content to realise physically a few arid ideas which have previously come to them in a purely subjective (psycho-theoretical) form—to me this is to artificially limit the practice of music to a very narrow terrain. Instead I advocate allowing the boundaries of the music to be set by the process of making it manifest (realisation), all the while reacting with the subjective Will to the eruption of the Contingent bursting through the opening thus created in the fabric of the Necessary. It is on this kind of basis that we can begin to adopt a 'practical' attitude to sound art of whatever description. Only in this way can we overcome the current counter-productive over-distinctions relating to 'music', 'art' and 'noise'.

This will be the genesis of the true Art of Noise, which will enable us briefly, as it were, to open a window onto the Art of Time.

I. cf. the 8th of Karl Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*... "All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice" (1845).

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