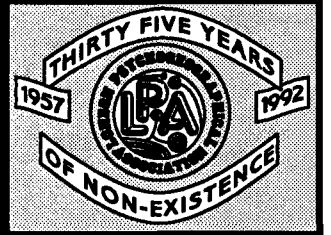




London Psychogeographical
Association



"I am an alien man . . . I beheld the Life and the Life beheld me." *The Great Book of the Mandeans*

In his book, *The Gnostic Religion*, Hans Jonas unravels the enigmatic instability which lies at the heart of alienation:

"The alien is that which stems from elsewhere and does not belong here. To those who belong here it is thus the strange, the unfamiliar and incomprehensible; but their world on its part is just as incomprehensible to the alien that comes to dwell here, and like a foreign land where it is far from home. Then it suffers the lot of the stranger who is lonely, unprotected, uncomprehended, and uncomprehending in a situation full of danger. Anguish and homesickness are part of a stranger's lot. The stranger who does not know the ways of the foreign land wanders about lost; if he learns its ways too well, he forgets that he is a stranger and gets lost in a different sense by succumbing to the lure of the alien world and becoming estranged from his own origin. Then he has become a "son of the house". This too is part of the alien's fate. In his alienation from himself the distress has gone, but this very fact is the culmination of the stranger's tragedy. The recollection of his own alienness, the recognition of his place of exile for what it is, is the first step back; the awakened homesickness is the beginning of the return. All this belongs to the "suffering" side of alienness. Yet with relation to its origin it is at the same time a mark of excellence, a source of power and of a secret life unknown to the environment and in the last resort impregnable to it, as it is incomprehensible to the creatures of this world. This superiority of the alien which distinguishes it even here, though secretly, is its manifest glory in its own native realm, which is outside this world. In such position the alien is the remote, the inaccessible, and its strangeness means majesty." (p 50)

This has been quoted at length, because Jonas's study of the Gnostic religion around the time of the beginning of Christianity has important modern parallels. He finishes his book (written in 1958) with a comparison of gnosticism and existentialism. Having used gnosticism as a "key" to unlock the secrets of Sartre and Heidegger, he then reverses the process to peer into the heart of gnosticism. Jonas points to the integration of the Greek city state into a monarchical empire required the transformation of *virtue*. This had been conceived as quality which arose through the scrupulous fulfilling of a role within the city community. When the city states were integrated into an overarching imperial structure the relation between the individual and the cosmos was substituted for that between citizen and city. The *cosmos* became the city of gods and men, and to be a *cosmopolite*, a citizen of the universe was proffered as a goal. This required the mediation of philosophy, whereby consciousness could apprehend abstract ideas presented as universals.

In modern society, the steady advance of commodity relations functions as the realisation of universalistic philosophy, in that abstract labour power, the essence of work, has become the distillation of virtue, has become value,

whereby everything can be compared. Everything has its price, and value is the substance which price measures. The spread of commodification into more crevices of social life has thrown up identity politics as a resolution of alienation. Here the despised and denigrated find that "superiority of the alien" which manifests its glory within its own native realm. Whether predicated upon ethnicity, gender or sexual preference, identity politics finds a Gnostic inwardness which secretly elevates its practitioners. By contesting a consensual reality which has always held them in a subordinate position, identity politics animates the category of Woman, Black, Gay by determining it as a subjective entity which socio-political activity can fill with content.

This process is, of course, not without contradictions. Firstly the subordinate categories interpenetrate, which means these identities are forced to compete, or give way to fragmentation. Secondly, far from offering any resolution of these social tensions, identity politics becomes the manner by which the categories get turned into constituencies by politicians. Thus a reactionary like Louis Farrakhan can, with the help of the media, organise a "Million Man March" which excludes women. Once this mobilisation reached a certain size, Black activist groups found themselves swept up in it, despite their reservations.

There has been a response to this which has involved putting forward a working class identity to reassert the class struggle in the face of competition from these other social sectors. Such a strategy merely leads to further fragmentation and mediation by politicians. Instead we must break out of this Gnostic mind set which freezes our consciousness within these categories. But this cannot be done by summoning up the specious universal categories which have been used by the bourgeoisie particularly since the French Revolution. Instead of looking for positive images which serve to make us complacent, we must work from the negative. It is from the emptiness of our lives that we can open ourselves up to a sensuous world which exists beyond categories, beyond commodities and rediscover the world-wide human community through realising communism.

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