

NOTES ON HUMANISATION
AND ITS
EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

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No subject is exactly what it appears in the linguistic form in which it is expressed. There is always behind it something hidden which goes deeper, and this must be made explicit for it to be generally understood. In other words, to write about a subject means finding out as best one can how to get round the deceptive appearances which can lead to a distorted vision of it. This in turn means that we have to make a strong effort to separate it from these appearances in order to reveal it as a phenomenon existing in a concrete reality.

By this act, which is an act of finding out, we come to grips with the subject in all its wealth of interrelations with particular aspects, which perhaps we do not even suspect exist, however closely bound up they may be with the subject. The more we are capable of this "entering into" the subject, the more readily we can grasp it in all its complex dynamism.

To write about a subject, therefore, is not, as we understand it, a simple act of narrating. Taking it as a phenomenon existing in a concrete reality which has a mediating effect on men, the writer has to take it from a gnoseological point of view.

In their turn, in adopting this same attitude, the readers have themselves to make the same gnoseological effort originally made by the writer,* which means that the reader must not simply play the part of the "patient" in this gnoseological "operation". Both, in fact, attempt to avoid the Socratic error which consists in defining a concept as the knowledge of the object defined.

Thus, what we have to do is not really to define the concept of the subject, nor simply to describe or explain it by taking its implications as a given fact; we have rather to adopt a position of commitment towards it. This is the attitude of someone who does not really want to describe what happens exactly in the form in which it happens, because he wants to transform reality in such a way that what actually happens somehow happens in a different way.

This is not to say that this position of commitment with regard to subjects means that we start with preconceived attitudes when we set out to know reality as it is - attitudes in other words which could distort those facts in which the subjects are bound up, and end up by "domesticating" them to our will.

* See Paulo FREIRE: The Political Literacy Process - An Introduction

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In attempting to know scientifically the reality in which the subjects exist, we must not subject the facts to our truth, but, on the contrary, we must seek the truth of the facts. This does not mean, however, that, when we engage in the action of investigating reality scientifically, we should adopt a neutral position towards it or towards the results of our investigation. We must not confuse preoccupation with the truth which should characterise any really serious scientific effort, with the so-called neutrality of science which in actual fact does not exist.

This position of commitment before the reality which we seek to know, results from the fact that knowledge is a process which implies the action-reflection of man on the world. The very teleological character of the unity action-reflection, that is, praxis, through which man, in transforming the world transforms himself, prevents him from being neutral. So, man cannot disregard this position of commitment, which in no way affects adversely our critical spirit or our scientific spirit. What is not legitimate for us is to be indifferent to the trend which might be given to the results of our scientific researches by those who hold the power of decision and submit science to their interests, and who impose their aims on the masses.

The position of commitment towards the subjects can also be explained by the fact that every subject has an opposite, and involves the carrying-out of obligations which are as strongly differentiated among themselves as the subjects are among themselves. Thus, when we enter into the comprehension of a subject, in the clarifying of it we clarify its contrary. This imposes an option on us, which in turn demands from us a form of action compatible with the obligations inherent in the subject. However, in carrying-out these obligations, precisely when we have to be efficient, we are not able to practise the kind of action which implies a corresponding efficiency with regard to the contrary subject. The more we go on gaining knowledge of the socio-historical reality in which the subjects stand in dialectical relation to their opposites, the less is it possible for us to become neutral towards them.

For this reason, any declaration of neutrality implies a hidden option. We must emphasise that the subjects in their historical context comprise certain valuable orientations from the existential experience of human beings.

Our attitude cannot be other than this confronted with the subject which unites us - the humanisation of man and its educational implications.

In the moment in which we critically approach and recognise this process as a subject, we have not to take it as an abstract ideal, but as a historical challenge, in its relationship of opposition to the dehumanisation practice which is to be found in the objective reality in which we exist. Thus, dehumanisation and humanisation cannot fail to be part of the history of men, within the social structures which men erect and within which they live conditioned.

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The former occurs as the coherent expression of alienation and domination; the second as the utopian* project of the dominated and oppressed classes. The former clearly suggests, in man's action on his social reality, an idea of preserving the status quo, the latter that of radically transforming the world of oppression.

We think it is important to underline this obvious relationship between dehumanisation and humanisation, as well as the fact that both imply man's action on reality, whether to preserve or to modify it. This is in order to avoid idealist illusions, one of which is to imagine that men can be humanised without the necessary transformation of the world in which they are oppressed and prevented from being men. This illusion accords with the interests of all those who enjoy favourable conditions of life, and reveals clearly the ideology behind which it attempts to conceal itself. This is the ideology of comfort, of conformity, of "recuperation", which is incarnate in "assistencial" forms of action, in which those who are prevented from being men are invited to await patiently better days, which may be long in coming, but which will certainly come.....

There can no more be humanisation in oppression than there can be dehumanisation in true liberation. Moreover, liberation cannot exist within men's consciousness, isolated from the world; it exists in the praxis of men in history which requires a critical awareness of the relation it implies between consciousness and the world.

Here we have one of the fundamental points of the educational implications of the humanisation process, which brings us to the awareness of another impossibility, one we have underlined in a number of our writings - the impossibility of a neutral education.

Just as the struggle for humanisation presupposes dehumanisation, whether as a concrete fact or as a threat, so both involve antagonistic educational praxis. Being subjects which are opposed to each other in any case, humanisation and dehumanisation necessarily have contrary educational obligations as well. The result of this is that the educator who chooses a humanist option, that is, a liberating one, will not be capable of carrying out the obligation bound up in the theme of his option, unless he has been able through his own praxis accurately to perceive the dialectical relationships between consciousness and the world or between man and the world.

* Paulo FREIRE : Cultural Action for Freedom, Harvard Educational Review and the Center for the Study of Development and Social Change, Cambridge, Mass. U.S.A. 1970

Basically, the main difference between education as an obligation to dominate and dehumanise and education as an obligation to humanise and liberate is that the former is merely an act of transferring knowledge, while the latter is an act of knowing. These basically contrary obligations, which equally require contrary procedures, both bear on the relationship between consciousness and the world; it could not be otherwise.

When education is considered as an obligation to dominate in the relationships between consciousness and the world, the consciousness appears as if it were, as if it should be, a mere recipient to be filled; for education as a humanistic obligation to liberate, the consciousness is "intentionality" towards the world.

In the former case, the active character of the consciousness, the element which captures existing knowledge, is denied.

Thus, when education is taken as an obligation to dominate, to negate the active character of the consciousness, it implies the utilisation of practices which seek to "domesticate" it, and thus succeed in making consciousness the empty recipient referred to above. This means that education or cultural action for domination can never be anything more than the act in which the educator, - "he who knows," - transfers existing knowledge to the educatee, - "he who does not know".

In the latter case, however, when the active character of the consciousness, which seeks and investigates, and which makes it possible for man to know in a critical way, is in evidence, its capacity for re-knowing or re-creating existing knowledge on the one hand, and of revealing and of knowing what is still not known on the other, is automatically in evidence too. If this were not so, that is to say, if the consciousness which is able to re-know existing knowledge were not capable of seeking new knowledge, it would be unable to explain the very knowledge which exists here and now. That is to say that all new knowledge is born from previous knowledge which becomes old.

Thus education, or cultural action for liberation, instead of being the alienating transferring of knowledge, is the genuine act of knowing in which the educatees (who are also educators) - as conscious bodies in the world - go forward with the educators (who are also educatees) in the search for new knowledge; this is what comes out of the act of re-knowing existing knowledge. It would not be superfluous to underline that for education as the practice of liberation to be able to attempt to achieve the re-knowing of existing knowledge of what the obtaining of new knowledge reveals, it can never make its manner of "dealing with" man's consciousness coincide with the manner in which dominating education "deals with" it. Hence the necessity we referred to earlier of the educator who chooses the humanist option having a "correct" awareness of the relations between consciousness and the world or between man and the world.

This is why the practice of education for liberation takes on itself to propose to men a sort of "archaeology" of the consciousness. By making this effort they can in a sense again take the natural path from which the consciousness emerges able to perceive itself. In the process of "hominisation" in which reflection begins can be seen "the individual, instantaneous leap of instinct to Thought."* From this furthest-back moment, the reflective consciousness characterises man as an animal not just capable of knowing but also capable of knowing that he knows. Thus, when it emerges, the consciousness emerges as "intentionality" and not as a recipient to be filled.

The critical perception of this fact destroys on the one hand the simplistic dualism which establishes an imaginary dichotomy between consciousness and the world; on the other, it corrects the error into which the ingenuous consciousness falls when it is ideologised by the structures of domination, the error of considering itself to be the empty recipient which is to be filled with contents. It is for this reason that the more men are "anaesthetised" in their power of reflection - this power is acquired in the process of their evolution, and serves basically to distinguish them from animals** - the more they find themselves hindered from really liberating themselves.***

It thus seems easy to understand, from the point of view of a dehumanising ideology, why it is indispensable to avoid at all costs any act by which man can be aware of himself as a reflecting, acting being who also transforms the world. Indeed, it is in the interests of this ideology to put into operation a domesticating conception of the consciousness as an empty space which must be filled.

In their objectives, and in seeking to carry them out, the power elites are confronted with an obstacle which they attempt to overcome, more efficiently each time, with the aid of the science and the techniques at their disposition. But as it is not possible for them to destroy or to make disappear men's capacity for thought, they mythify reality, and condition men to a false way of thinking about themselves and about the world.****

* Teilhard de CHARDIN : El Fenómeno humano, Taurus, Madrid, 1963 p. 218

** Teilhard de CHARDIN : op. cit.

***We do not mean in saying this that the mere use of the capacity for reflection suffices to liberate. It is obvious that liberation requires a transforming action on the objective reality in which men are oppressed, and even dehumanised. As there is no true reflection without action, and vice versa, they together constitute in the last analysis and without any possibility of dichotomy, the real praxis of men on the world, without which liberation is impossible.

**** For this see Paulo FREIRE : Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Herder and Herder, New York, 1970

The mythification of reality consists in making it appear what it is not. This mythification necessarily implies the falsification of the consciousness. What would be impossible would be the falsification of reality, the reality of the consciousness, without the falsification of the consciousness of reality. One cannot exist without the other.

Just as the process of liberation involves this "archaeology" of the consciousness through which, as we said before, man again takes the natural path from which the consciousness emerges able to perceive itself, in the process of domination mythification involves a different kind of "archaeology", the "archaeology" of "irrationality". However, this does not mean a return to a purely instinctive form of life, but rather a distortion of reason. The mythical element introduced into it does not precisely prevent man from thinking; it makes the exercising of his critical faculty difficult, at the same time in which it gives him the illusion that his thinking is right. Propaganda is established as the efficient instrument for creating this illusion. Through this, not only are the "excellences" of the social order praised, but it is made public that any attempt to investigate the social order is inherently "an act of subversion, harmful to the common good." Thus, mythification leads to the "sacralisation" of the social order, which must not be touched, nor even discussed. All who attempt to do so have to be punished in one form or another,* and are exposed - also by means of propaganda - as "bad citizens in the service of international diabolism."

The "sacralisation" of the domesticating social order is as necessary to its preservation as is critical "openness" to the society which is engaged in a permanent search to humanise men. Of course, all attempt at mythification tends towards "totalitarianism," that is to say tends towards involvement in human affairs in all their dimensions. No field is safe from falsification, since any exception may find itself turned into a threat to the "sacralisation" of the established order. This means that the school, whatever its level, finds itself playing a most important role, that of an instrument of social control. It is not uncommon to meet educators for whom "educating is adapting the educatee to their medium", and indeed the school does nothing other.

In general, the good pupil is neither restive, nor indocile; he does not show doubt, he does not wish to know the reason for facts, he does not go beyond set models, he does not denounce "mediocratising" bureaucracy, he does not refuse to be an object; the good pupil on the contrary is he who repeats, who refuses to think critically, who adapts to models, who "finds it nice to be a rhinoceros."**

* Levels of punishment vary in proportion to the levels of opposition of those who refuse to adapt to the "bovinisation" imposed by the oppressing order.

** See IONESCO : Rhinocéros

who has a naive perception of men in their relationships with the world; a naive understanding of social reality. For him, reality is a mere given fact, something which is what it is and not something which is becoming. One of his tendencies is to deny concrete reality, thus losing himself in abstract visions of the world. By doing so, he only escapes from his historical responsibility. If he is a scientist, he tries to hide himself in what he calls the neutrality of his scientific activity. But, by escaping from the objective world, he is not only helping the preservation of the status quo, but also making easier the dehumanizing manipulation of the world which he refuses..

If he is also a Christian, he establishes the impossible dichotomy between worldliness and transcendentality - another way of escaping from objectivity. His conception of history, for that reason, is a mechanistic one and, sometimes, also fatalist. History for him is only what was and not what is now, and what is going to be. The present is something which must be normalized and the future, the repetition of the present, which means the maintaining of the status quo.

Sometimes, however, the political "illiterate" perceives the future, not as the repetition of the present, but as something pre-established, pre-given. Both are "domesticating" visions of the future. The first one "domesticates" the future to the present, which must be repeated; the second reduces it to something inevitable. Both deny men and so deny history itself, which cannot exist without men.

Hence, both suffer the lack of hope. The first one coincides with reactionary practices; the second, in becoming reactionary also, is one of the mechanistic distortions of marxist thought.

The political "illiterate", experiencing a feeling of impotence before the "irrationality"* of the alienated and the alienating world, seeks to take refuge in the false security of "subjectivism". Sometimes, instead of taking refuge in "subjectivism", the political "illiterate" devotes himself to activist practices. In none of these cases can he understand men as presences in the world; men as beings of praxis, that is, as beings of action and reflexion on the world.

It is interesting to note how the false idealist conception of praxis manifests itself at the level of the naive consciousness of the political "illiterate".

* FREIRE, Paulo, Cultural Action for Freedom

The dichotomy between theory and practice; the universality of a knowledge free from historical conditioning; the role of philosophy as an explanation of the world and an instrument for its acceptance; education as a mere exposition of facts and the transference of the heritage of a chaste knowledge; all of those are beliefs which the naive consciousness of the political "illiterate" always repeats. Ideologized in a domesticating reality, such a consciousness did not even arrive at the objective idealism of Hegel,* in which work appears as the transforming action which men exercise on the world as their formation, even though praxis for Hegel was still an activity of the mind.

For such a kind of consciousness it is difficult to understand the real impossibility of theory without practice; thought without transforming action on the world; knowing by knowing; theory which only explains reality and neutral education.

On the other hand, the more the naive consciousness of the political "illiterate" is sophisticated, the more it is refractory to a critical understanding of reality.

So, sometimes, it is easier to discuss man-world relationships with Latin American illiterate peasants, or the error of creating a dichotomy between manual and intellectual work, than to do the same thing with a politically "illiterate" intellectual.

Such an intellectual would say that the fundamental difference between him and the peasants lies in his possibility of reacting to the "manipulation", because he knows, while the peasants are absolute ignoramuses. So, for him, the peasants' capacity of understanding and expressing themselves would be nothing but the demonstration of their intellectual inferiority.+

In the light of all this, I think I can categorically repeat what I have stated before, that the metaphorical expression political "illiteracy" reveals the lack of a critical or dialectical understanding of men in their relationships with the world.

* HEGEL, The Phenomenology of Mind

+ I had the opportunity to hear something like this some time ago from a Latin American "educator", who occupied a high position in an International Organization. This is also the typical way of thinking of the colonizers with regard to the colonized. See MEMMI, Albert, The Colonizer and the Colonized, Beacon Press, Boston.

Like linguistic illiteracy, it also implies a learning process that, in its turn, can be either for "domestication" or for liberation.

It seems to me very important, however, to underline that such a kind of learning does not necessarily demand special courses. What I want to say is that, no matter what the field of specialization of the educator, he will be emphasizing the false consciousness of the educatees, or, on the contrary, their critical consciousness.

In the first part of the article I spent some time analyzing the literacy process for "domestication". I would like now to continue to discuss in a general way what I think that education must be, from the critical point of view. That is, an education that, by demythologizing reality, makes it possible for the educator and the educatees to overcome their political "illiteracy".

I will also come back, from time to time, to some of the aspects about which I had the opportunity to speak before. I hope, however, that such back-references, instead of irritating the readers, help me and them to better clarify our common theme.

I will start by stating or re-stating that, without going beyond the conception and practice of education as a mere transference of a knowledge which only describes reality, we will block the emergence of the critical consciousness, and so underline political "illiteracy".

We have to overcome this kind of education - if our choice is a liberating and a humanizing one of course - by another form of education in which to know and to transform the reality which is "being given" as the object of our knowledge, are reciprocal demands. In this way, education for liberation, as a true praxis, is simultaneously, an act of knowing and a method of transforming action, which men have to exercise on the reality that they seek to know. So, education or cultural action for liberation is a social praxis, as a method of this praxis is to make and re-make itself in the very process of its being.

There is a point of fundamental importance to be clarified in the overcoming of the "domesticating" educational practice by the liberating one. I refer to the impossibility of a real liberating praxis if the educator is not able to become completely different from his bourgeois colleagues.* While the bourgeois educator, as I

* I would like to point out that some forms of behaviour on the part of bourgeois educators precede the bourgeoisie itself.

said before, is always the educator of the educatees, the educator for liberation has to "die" as the unilateral educator of the educatees in order to be born again as the educator-educatee of the educatees-educators. On the other hand, he has to propose to the educatees their "death" as unilateral educatees of the educator in order to be born again as educatees-educators of the educator-educatee. Without this mutual "death" and this mutual new birth, education for liberation is impossible.

It does not mean, nevertheless, that the educator disappears as an inductive presence. Education as an ideological instrument for the preservation of the status quo as well as a method for the transformation and knowledge of reality, always implies such an induction. In the second case, however, the initial induction is ceding little by little its place to the synthesis in which the educator-educatee and the educatees-educators become real subjects of the process.

What really is important for such an educator is to be warned that, at the moment in which he initiates the process, he is preparing himself "to die". He has to know that, in order to become a true educator for liberation, he must stop being an educator in the sense of the bourgeois practice. Only with his "death", whose process he himself has to start, is his new birth possible on the one hand; on the other hand, the new birth of the educatees as his educators.

He is an educator who has to live the deep signification of Easter.

Such a passage (which bourgeois education cannot conceive of by reason of its nature) has to be made by revolutionary and humanist education. If it refuses to do so, it no longer exists as a revolutionary and a humanist kind of education.

For this reason, one of the tragic mistakes of the socialist societies - with the exception of China, through the Cultural Revolution, and Cuba in many aspects - is that, in a general way, they have not been able to overcome the "domesticating" character of bourgeois education by the liberating one of education as a social praxis. So, they confound socialist education with the reduction of marxist thought - a thought which in itself cannot be caged - to "tablets" that people have to "digest". In this way, they fall into the same "nutritious" practice which characterizes bourgeois education. This is because the bourgeois ideology persists in a strange kind of idealism that can be expressed like this: once the transformation of society is achieved a good world is automatically created and so, this good world cannot be questioned.*

* Such an anti-dialectical way of perceiving reality coincides with those "bureaucracies" that, in their rigidity, prevent people from developing critical minds.

Then, obviously, the educators of and for this good world repeat, in their praxis, the educators of and for the "good bourgeois world". They are "herr professors" like the bourgeois educators. The relationships which they establish with the educatees are vertical ones as well as those between the bourgeois educators and the educatees. For this reason, they find themselves very far from the educatees in the relationships with whom the knowable object is their possession, instead of being the mediating factor between them and the educatees. They dichotomize teaching from learning and divide the world between those who know and those who do not know, that is, those who work.*

So, by perpetuating school as an instrument for social control,^X such educators forget unfortunately a very important statement of Marx, in his third Thesis on Feurbach: "The educator himself needs educating". The bourgeois myths which they have introjected prevent them from putting in practice the warning of Marx.

In this way, such societies, as well as the bourgeois ones, underline political "illiteracy" through an educational practice that de-dialectizes thought.

There is something, however, that I have to clarify, as much as possible, in order to avoid a possible misunderstanding in which I may have been involved since the beginning of the article.

I refer moreprecisely to the role of consciousness in the liberating practice. In this way, I hope to make it clear that it is not possible for me to accept, from a dialectic point of view, the naive dichotomy between consciousness and the world.

In fact, both subjectivity and objectivity are interpenetrated in such a way that it is possible to speak about the "incarnation of subjectivity in objectivity."⁺ When we break such dialecticity we

* See DAUBIER, Jean, Histoire de la révolution culturelle prolétarienne en Chine, Maspero, Paris, 1970.

^X About this, see the essays by Ivan ILLICH, CIDOC, Cuernavaca, Mexico, and also FREIRE, Paulo, Cultural Action and Conscientização, Catholic Inter American Cooperation Program, CICOP, Washington, 1970.

⁺ FIORI, Ernani Maria (Brazilian philosopher, at the moment Professor of Philosophy at the Catholic University of Chile) Education and Conscientização, Catholic Inter American Cooperation Program, CICOP, Washington, 1970.

fall into the illusions of idealism (subjectivism) as well as into the mistakes of objectivism.*

Thus, the Brazilian word "conscientização",⁺ with which I usually name the process by which men prepare to insert themselves critically into the transforming action, must not be understood as an idealist manifestation.

What we really attempt to do with the process of "conscientização" is not to attribute to consciousness the role of creating the world, but, on the contrary, that of recognizing the static "given" world as a dynamic "giving" world.

In this way, "conscientização" implies a constant clarification of what stays "hidden" within men, while they act in the world without critical reflexion.^x

I know very well that "conscientização", in implying a critical reflexion on the world as it is becoming as well as the announcement of another world, cannot prescind the transforming action in order for the annunciation to be concretized.

I know very well that only through such an action is it really possible for men to create the world announced in that criticism.

I know very well that the simple overcoming of the naive perception of reality by a critical one is not enough for the liberation of men.

I know very well that the teleological character of "conscientização" demands the real praxis. But, I know very well also that in being "conscientização" the revelation of what is opaque in

* "There are two ways of falling into idealism : the one consists of dissolving the real in subjectivity; the other in denying all real subjectivity in the interests of objectivity."
SARTRE, Jean Paul : Search for a Method, Vintage books, New York, 1968, pag.33.

+ In different works such as Educação como Prática da Liberdade, Extensão ou Comunicação ?, Sobre la Acción Cultural, Cultural Action for Freedom, and Pedagogy of the Oppressed, I have discussed the problem of conscientização.

x All that I want to say in this statement is that the original attitude of men in their coming close to the world is not a critical one, but on the contrary naive. This means that, in such a coming close, men do not adopt an epistemological attitude to the world taking it as an object of their capacity for knowledge.

See FREIRE, Paulo, Cultural Action for Freedom.

the "background awareness" of consciousness,* it constitutes an important instrument for the actual transforming action of men on reality, which, therefore, begins little by little to be unveiled in the clarification of those "hidden" dimensions.

"Conscientização", on the one hand, is not based on a consciousness here, and a world there, and on the other hand, does not attempt such a separation. On the contrary, it is based on the correlation consciousness-world.

By taking such a correlation as the object of their critical reflexion, men will be illuminating those opaque dimensions which result from their coming close to the world. Hence, the founding of the new reality, indicated in the former criticism, cannot exhaust the process of "conscientização". In fact, the new reality has to be taken as the object of a new critical reflexion. To consider the process of the new reality as something which must not be touched is as naive and reactionary an attitude as to affirm the untouchability of the old reality.

"Conscientização" as a critical attitude of men in history, will never be finished. If men, as operating beings, continued to "adhere" to the "operated" world, they would be submerged in a new "opacity."

"Conscientização", which occurs as a process at a given moment, has to continue as a process in the moment which follows, in which the transformed reality shows a new profile.

In this way, let me repeat, the political "literacy" process, like the linguistic one, can be a practice for the "domestication" of men as well as for their liberation. In the first case, on no account is the exercise of "conscientização" possible, while the second one is in itself "conscientização".

Hence, the dehumanizing meaning of the former, and the humanizing effort of the latter.

*"To the degree to which critical consciousness has been absorbed and coordinated by the affluent society, the liberation of consciousness from the manipulation and indoctrinations imposed upon it by capitalism becomes a primary task and prerequisite. The development not of class consciousness but of consciousness as such, freed from the distortions imposed upon it, appears to be the basic prerequisite for radical change. And as repression is flattened out and extended to the entire underlying population, the intellectual task, the task of education and discussion, the task of tearing, not only the technological veil but also the other veils behind which domination and repression operate - all these "ideological" factors become very material factors of radical transformations." MARCUSE, Herbert, The Obsolescence of Marxism. From : Marx and the Western World, Edited by Nicholas LOBKOWICZ, University of Notre Dame Press, USA, 1967, page 417.

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