

John Rowan

The Marxist Theory of Personality

Lucien Sève. *Man in Marxist theory and the psychology of personality*. The Harvester Press 1978. pp. 508 £16.50.

This is an important book. It is the first one to give an outline of what a genuinely Marxist psychology might look like. It does not go to any existing school of psychology for its content, but direct to the classics of Marxist thinking. It tries as hard as possible to be orthodox, to be true to what Marx is saying.

The reason why this should be scrutinized by people interested in the theory of humanistic psychology is that Marxist thinking is a clear advance on liberal thinking. To the extent that humanistic psychology wants to be more radical than Marxism, and to embody a deeper critique of existing social relations, it must make sure that it is surpassing Marxism, not falling short of it.

The most difficult thing to grasp about Sève's account of the personality is its first starting point. Once this is understood, his other suggestions make more sense. Sève's starting point is that bourgeois humanism is fundamentally wrong about what a human being is.

. . . philosophical humanism seeks to convey . . . that as far as what is most essential, most inward and most elevated in him, man is not the product of history but transcendent, that within his inmost being he is not determined, but only influenced, by the social relations in respect of which he possesses an essential freedom. (p.109)

This seems a clear statement of something which I agree with, and so it seems that we are opponents on the main issue. But let us see what Sève wants to put in its place.

The first thesis which governs the book is therefore the very one which lays the foundations of historical materialism, i.e. the 6th Thesis on Feuerbach: 'the human essence is not an abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations', which means this: what makes man essentially man in developed humanity is not a natural given in each isolated individual but a product of human activity - forces of production, social relations of all kinds, cultural heritage - built up in the social world in the course of history. (p.443)

This is a key point to understand. Sève is taking the centre of a person and putting it *outside* the person - this is a process he calls excentration. And he points out that this is what Marx does in every other sphere - it is a classic Marxist move:

Well before 'structuralism' and in a much more dialectical way, Marx carries out a Copernican revolution between things and relations: it is relation which is the actual foundations of things. Instead of an inert internal essence and living external relations, the materialist dialectic discovers the existence of relations actually within the essence, and it is the abstract generality which proves to be merely an inessential, lifeless external relation. (p.263)

This is an unfamiliar way of thinking to most of us, and even Marxists do not say it - perhaps not even see it - as clearly as this, most of the time. It is therefore worthwhile to stay with it a little longer. Social relations come from social acts, and in a complex society a person's acts have many wide ramifications. When we do something, our acts have a long trajectory, as it were - a wide circuit before they come back to us in some other form. "It is the immense extent of the detour between the starting-point of an individual's action and its return to itself, which explains the basic spontaneous unconsciousness of the individual of the real bases of his personality." (p.224)

And this leads on to the next point:

Hence a second major thesis: in as much as by the human form one usually means the form of a subject, the psychological form, the human essence does not have the "human form". Human social activity accumulates in a heritage of objects and relations which, from the point of view of our concern here, is psychism objectified in a non-psychic form and which recovers the psychic form only when individuals appropriate it in the course of their development. (p.444)

This is difficult, but still worth staying with. Sève is saying here that we acquire our personality as part of a specific historical situation. Born at a different time, into a different set of social relations, we would be different persons. This is in fact hard to deny. What we essentially are, as psychologists like J.A.C. Brown have said for a long time, is changeable. Human nature is open to many possibilities, developing in quite specific ways in different cultures and subcultures. We all know this to be true, but Sève is pushing this truth home in a very particular way.

Hence a third thesis: the psychology of personality must understand that it is in an absolutely secondary position in relation to the science of social relations. Clearly this is the Rubicon which many psychologists still refuse to cross. (p.446)

What this means is that what we are interested in, above all, if we have this Marxist view of personality, is a person's concrete acts. For social relations are made up of social acts. It is a person's acts which produce and reproduce social relations, and from this standpoint "they are no longer the acts of a subject but of a determinate social formation." (p.212) This is a key point to get clear: in a Marxist psychology the subject (the "I") disappears. As Sève says quite explicitly, the human essence does not have at all the

form of a subject. (p.472)

What is being said, then, is that we have to conceive of human nature in quite a different way from that which we are used to.

Now what is an essence which is not in any degree a thing? It is a relation. In this simple statement lies the whole secret of a psychology of personality actually distinct from the psychological sciences and able to reach adulthood, i.e. above all, able to become truly conscious of the nature of its object: the science of personality is concerned with being a science not of any thing by itself but a science of relations. (p.182)

And it is this science of relations which Sève has, with great boldness, attempted to get off the ground. Before we see how he does this, however, it may be as well to get clearer as to why he wants to do it. He wants to do it because he sees a need to make a psychological critique of capitalist society - a critique which leaves the way open for a psychological treatment of a socialist society and a fully communist society. In other words, he is a Leninist and an orthodox member of the French Communist Party. But there is within this a vision and an aspiration with which I feel in sympathy. Here is how he expresses it:

Is it not time to have done with the glaring theoretical vacuity of a certain biological mythology of genius by asking whether the existence of great men, accomplished personalities, is not proof that the stage of development reached by the society makes this accomplishment possible in general, and consequently whether the fact that the majority of individuals remain stunted is not the result of the fact that they are prevented from developing, as others are allowed to, by inhuman social relations in the concrete historical sense of the term, which negate for them the possibilities of flowering implied by the general level of the productive forces and civilization? Precisely in so far as the vast majority of other men are stunted by the social conditions, are not the great men, the exceptions in a period, in a sense the normal men of this period, and is not the norm of stuntedness precisely the exception which ought to be explained? (p.201)

This is the language of Maslow, of Rogers, of Perls, of many others in the human potential movement. In a sense we must be on the same side. This is another reason why it must be worthwhile to hear what Sève has to say. He, like us, is desperately concerned with what he calls "the maximum flowering of every personality". (p.358)

So what is he putting forward in substantive terms for our consideration, now that we understand that by "personality" he means "the total system of activity of a given individual, a system which forms and develops throughout his life and which constitutes the essential content of his biography" (p.451)

or to put it more simply still - "what a man makes of his life, what his life has made of him."

He focuses on the distinction between two kinds of acts: there are those acts which *develop* our capacities, and there are those acts which simply *use* our capacities. There is a dialectical relation between these two. All change and development within the personality depends on *negating* existing capacities, and all use of capacities depends on negating the need for further development. This is certainly an interesting thought, suggesting as it does that you can either be a teacher or a student, but not both at the same time, contrary to the views of some humanistic psychologists, such as Carl Rogers.

And the second distinction Sève makes is between what he call *abstract activity*, that is socially productive labour or paid work, and *concrete activity*, directly relating to the individual himself, for example acts directly satisfying personal needs. Not all activity can be neatly classified under either of these two heads, and in particular Sève says that interpersonal relations and domestic relations are intermediary between the two.

Given these two distinctions, we can set up a diagram which puts them together:

4. CONCRETE USE	3. ABSTRACT USE
1. CONCRETE DEVELOPMENT	2. ABSTRACT DEVELOPMENT

In sector 1 we spend time developing our capacities to satisfy our personal needs; a good deal of our childhood is spent in this way. In sector 2 we spend time developing our capacities for working life; this is done whenever we happen to be a student, an apprentice, a trainee, etc. In sector 3 we spend time using our capacities for socially productive labour; we are working at some job or other. In sector 4 we spend time using our capacities for fulfilling our personal needs; on holiday, at leisure, cooking for ourselves, enjoying retirement or whatever.

So Sève is introducing as a central theme the concept of *use-time*. If we want to know the secrets of the personality, we have to know how a person spends his time, how he used to spend his time, how he intends to spend his time, what decisions he has made about how he spends his time. And in this way we arrive at the idea that *use-time is the real infrastructure of the developed personality*". By "use-time" in this formulation, Sève means "the system of actual temporal relations between an individual's various objective categories of activity."

By looking at the distribution of use-time among the four quadrants of our diagram, we can say a great deal about personality. There is no space here to go into detail about this, but the analysis is long and fascinating. And Sève adds to it another thought:

Thus consideration of use-time makes it possible to grasp the nature and importance of a need which is absolutely specific and which is inconceivable on any other basis: the need for time. . . The need for time is the eruption of the contradiction between the needs and the conditions of activity. . . Thus a crucial need for millions of men, and still more of women, in that of time for living. . . To demand time for living in practice - the practice of the workers' movement, in the school of which the science of personality has so much to learn - is to criticise the separation between abstract personality and concrete personality which capitalism carries out in our very soul with an invisible knife, to criticise a mode of life which requires the sacrifice of concrete personal life to abstract social life and abstract social life to the requirements of the ceaseless reproduction of the whole system. (p.339)

This is an impressive result from the early days of such an analysis, and is very close to the sort of thing which humanistic psychologists have been saying about the narrowing effect of roles. But I think it goes further, both in linking it up to larger social forces in general, and in linking it up to working-class politics in particular.

And of course this is what Sève is trying to do all the time - to say that the personality can only really flower under communism, but that in the meantime to be militant is the best way of developing one's personality.

Of the three broad logical possibilities on the basis of which it seems to us that each personality traces its singular trajectory in a capitalist society - relative harmony and satisfied life, dichotomization and withdrawal into private life, conscious excentration and militant life - the latter is the only one which does not reduce the personality to its narrow juxtastructural status but, as broadly as is possible at a given historical stage, opens it to the human social heritage, making its very contradictions a dynamic factor of resistance to the tendency of the falling rate of progress and, if the militant activity is really objectively emancipatory, capable of giving its life a non-alienated meaning. (p.376)

Obviously there is much more to Sève than it has been possible to give in this brief outline, but at least enough has been given to enable us to evaluate his position. He has tried to construct a Marxist psychology, or at least the beginnings of one, or at the very least the basis on which one could be constructed. Does it work? Or show any signs of ever working?

Critique

In one of the most fundamental books on personality, Maddi distinguishes between the core of the personality and its periphery. It seems to me that Sève is great on the periphery of the personality, saying things which are

better than the idiocies of Cattell or Eysenck, and also better than the more sophisticated views of Goffman and the symbolic interactionists.

But on the core of the personality I don't see how Sève can be right. He has nothing to say about the self, though there are a few obscure statements about the soul - for example:

. . .the scientific concept (of soul is) the dynamic of non-physiological relations which give life to a personality. (p225)

And this means that he has nothing to say about the "I", the active subject. To be quite honest, not many theories of personality do, and the more scientific they try to be, the less they do it. But humanistic theories do try to do justice to the self, and to the "I", and to the core of the personality.

It seems that unless we do this, we can't understand or describe what happens in therapy, counselling or personal growth. What typically happens is that the person starts to *see through* the ensemble of social relations which has been surrounding them, and to *change* the use of their time. Instead of seeing themselves as determined by social forces, the person starts to see through their own eyes, as someone who in a very important sense is responsible for creating their own world.

To Sève, of course, all this must sound like bourgeois subjectivism. But if that were so, humanistic psychology would be highly acceptable to the bourgeois world of monopoly capitalism, instead of being highly suspect and hard to handle, as it still is. As Rogers point out in his book *On personal power*, humanistic psychology, far from being welcomed with open arms by the ruling class, is greeted with fear and suppression, for the most part. In passing, I think that this surprises some humanistic practitioners too - any such would be well advised to read the Rogers book to find out why. Nice old, cuddly old Carl Rogers a radical, a subversive - well, who would have thought it?

As has been pointed out before, the Marxist view accounts for everything except the emergence of the Marxist himself. If social relations, based on the mode of production, are so very important - and as a determinant, remember, not just as an influence - then how can the militant ever emerge? If all the contradictions in people are *within* a social system, it seems hard to see how they can ever *transcend* it - yet this is precisely what the militant always has to do.

A further point I would like to make is that what usually happens when a Marxist tries to do psychology is that he turns it into sociology. Sève has done better than anyone else so far to avoid this, but is it enough? Has he actually opened the way to a psychology, or is it sociology or even just interesting philosophical flim-flam? The clue here is in one statement he makes:

Together with the collection of numerous essential biographical facts, much more complex representations based on first attempts at serious quantification and a sharpening of qualitative criteria may make it possible to initiate a process of effective scientific research.

That was written in 1968. Since then there have been two further editions of the book, with postscripts to each one, but no "effective scientific research" is quoted at all. Several congresses, numerous seminars and much correspondence - but no actual research. Why is this? Can it be that there is nothing much here at all in practical terms?

It would be sad to think so. There does seem to be much here that is worth thought and following up, if only for paragraphs like this:

What an individual knows how to do certainly seems to be not only that which characterises him most deeply, but also that which reveals the way in which he will tend to develop; if he stops learning then his personality tends towards stagnation; but if he substantially changes his capacities then his personality itself is stimulated to change in its deep structures.

Well said. And this is something we in the growth movement knew quite a lot about. We cannot, it seems to me, totally dismiss what Sève is saying in this book.

One last point of disagreement remains, however. This is an almost totally masculine book. There is little about women, and no recognition at all of the criticisms of the women's movement, along the lines that Marxism deals only with *waged* work, and ignores to much too great an extent the unwaged but highly productive and reproductive work which women mostly do. By placing waged work at the centre of his thinking, Marx made it permanently impossible for his followers to do justice to women. Sève takes a brief look at what he calls "the domestic economy" (pp.204-6) but in a way that is clearly inadequate; and on p.338 he dismisses "domestic relations" as having a "radically different logic" from "those relations which are decisive in all respects: the social relations of production." There is no excuse for anyone accepting this view now that work like that of Christine Delphy in *The main enemy* (WRRC 1977) is generally available.

Conclusion

As a humanistic psychologist, I *cannot* accept Sève's excentration of the human essence, but I *can* see his approach as a very deep one, which has a lot to offer in seeing how social relations affect people - particularly through the concept of use-time.

As someone who adopts a patriarchal analysis, I *cannot* accept Sève's concentration on the relations of paid work, but I *can* see immense possibilities

of development of his concept of use-time in describing and understanding domestic work and family relations.

All in all, I think this is a book which needs much wider circulation and discussion. I'd like to see a slightly shortened paperback version available as soon as possible.

Counsellor

"It takes a special kind
Of person, quick to find
The life behind the laugh,
The tree within the staff,
The strife behind the life.
It takes a certain kind
Of responsiveness to blind
The prejudice that sees
No wood but only trees,
No grief behind the leaf."

"The amiable witch
Who reveals the simple itch
To derive from deep-set roots,
And with simple words inputs
The history of the mystery:
The ruthless pressing witch
Who with skill lays bare the ditch
Into which the victims fall,
Walking wounded in her thrall,
The race acquiring grace".

This was an attempt
to present a particular feeling
from experience of being counselled.
Now that some months have elapsed
I see a certain passive-dependency in it.
But it was valid in its time:
and paved the way to other things.
Like, these words don't have to rhyme anymore,
or fall into an ordered pattern.
Of course, it's not so easy to read -
But that's not **my** problem
(unless I wish it to be).
Anyway, why should I make life easy for you?
This is **my** thing, and I'm doing it.
Oh, but this is all head-talk.
What is there really to say?
But: I am just as I am;
And, if only I can see
That this is just the way to be,
Then-maybe-I'll be. me.

R. D. Reader