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Jean-François Lyotard

## **Resistances. A Conversation of Sergio Benvenuto with Jean-François Lyotard \***

\* This conversation, conducted by Sergio Benvenuto, took place in Paris, in May 1994, at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura, for the Multi-Media Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences, directed by RAI Radiotelevisione Italiana, Enciclopedia Treccani and the Italian Institute for Philosophical Studies. We thank RAI and the Multi-Media Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences, and in particular its director Renato Parascandolo, for having permitted us to publish this text.

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**Sergio Benvenuto:** Your intellectual itinerary seems to have drifted away from Marx to Freud, although some claim they are of the same stock, that any conflict between Marxism and Freudianism is superficial, that the crisis of one will lead to that of the other, etc. Both Marx and Freud are antipositivist in their own way, and both have an emancipationist ethics of the subject. Thus, do you not think they form, along with Nietzsche, a kind of “hermeneutic” community? A sort of Trimurti of Modern Thought? Or must one choose between them?

**Jean-François Lyotard:** A choice is not necessary, although neither can one consider them a Trinity, as that would go against the spirit of each. The Trinity is not Freudian, Marxist, or Nietzschean-in fact, your very term surprises me. I would speak rather, borrowing the title of one of my books, of “Derivations starting from Marx and Freud” (1). By this I didn’t mean they were of the same stock, but rather that it was necessary to extend their thought, which I here tried to do. Today there is no epistemological unity which includes Nietzsche, Marx and Freud, although in the 60s the attempt was made to create one.

**Benvenuto:** Paul Ricoeur said the three could be associated as “thinkers of suspicion”.

**Lyotard:** Of course, but in philosophy suspicion is the rule. All thinkers are thinkers of suspicion. Even Plato was strongly suspicious of reality. To speak of suspicion, therefore, is not enough. Ricoeur meant to give a foundation to his hermeneutics, so he did a hermeneutic reading of Marx and Freud. Instead, no hermeneutic reading of Freud or Marx need be given. Even the “Althusseroid” (2) epistemological attempt to put them in step with a good epistemology was anything but serious.

In any case, both Marx and Freud remain an incredibly resistant core of thought. Unfortunately Marx has fallen victim to the great modern Western metaphysics, that is to say to the metaphysics of Salvation.

**Benvenuto:** Which began with St. Augustine.

**Lyotard:** Marx is the 19th-century St. Augustine. The metaphysics of Salvation present in Christianity is also present in Aufklärung, the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment corrected Christianity in a secular sense, and Marx corrected the Enlightenment keeping capitalism in mind, that is, the problem of work. Marx thought of the miracle of the workforce as a real concrete Christ. Yet that miracle of the workforce has never, and will never, take place. Marx's obsessive, fascinated description of Capitalism, his capturing even its most farfetched implications and anticipating many things which are happening today, remains absolutely topical, and an irreplaceable key to an understanding of our society. The Marx of *Das Kapital* and of the *Grundrisse* is even valid today.

**Benvenuto:** Through your criticism of the Marxist faith, you came to formulate the concept of resistance. How?

**Lyotard:** In a precise political sense. I belong to a generation for which politics was tragedy: we introduced on the political field a metaphysical and not merely political alternative. We wanted to overthrow that simulacrum of historical subject known as "Capital", to replace it with the authentic subject, the proletariat. As in St. Augustine's *City of God*, our goal was to overcome Evil in order to achieve the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

Then, ten or fifteen years ago, it became clear that this alternative subject, the proletariat, was an idea belonging to Reason, but not real. All the struggles that took place in Eastern and Western Europe after WWII have proved that solidarity among the working classes of all countries is nonexistent because each one promoted its own interests. The Solidarity movement, which was Marx's criterion for the existence of the proletariat, never developed.

Today, such an alternative no longer exists, especially after the collapse of Stalinism and postStalinism, the proletariat's official representative, which, after all, in the 60s we of *Socialisme ou barbarie* always criticized as just another fraud. Today a political commitment with any chance of success has become impossible. I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist, I am just saying that the great Tale of Emancipation modern politics produced is no longer credible and we are now dealing with an enormous System, once called capitalism, which today has no "challenger" (3).

We are dealing with a system without any end apart from its own development, a system that grows in and of itself, stands on its own. No one within the system, not even the President of the United States, is capable of directing its development—hence the problem of directing its development positively does not exist. It has structural factuality in the place of history, which allows things to continue to go on. Of course, although History has not yet run its course, however its nature has changed from that of a century or fifty years ago.

**Benvenuto:** In *The PostModern Condition* (4) you coined the term "postmodern", which has had an overwhelming success in the cultural world. In which sense does your concept of "Post Modernism" mark your change in thinking since your Marxist phase?

**Lyotard:** The University of Québec commissioned me to do this book some 15 or 16 years ago. The word "postmodern" is dangerous because many have interpreted it as what may occur after modernity, which is absurd because modernity is now. Any attempt to introduce diacrony or history, to establish when postmodern begins, would be naive. The Modern Calendar is usually concerned with establishing "where is the origin of a new era". It descends from the old Revolutionary or Revelation tradition.

By postmodern I intend the immediate effects on everyday life and politics today of technological or scientific development, obliging humanity to adapt to all the instruments and "prostheses". Politics itself becomes the art of making development bearable to humanity, because at times development is anything but bearable.

But after the great metaphysical and political tragedy of Modernity, from Augustine to Marx, what meaning can political commitment have today? We struggle to safeguard the opposing rights of either side—it is good

that we are ever more scrupulous on this point. But, at the same time, these struggles are part of the System, which seeks acceptance and, consequently, limits its effects, which can be brutal. Our efforts to safeguard recognized legitimacies are defensive: the defense of our rights, on guard against certain possible, and never-ending, abuses. But it is a position of resistance, much like the “Human Rights’ Movement”, which has eliminated a general expectation of the triumph of emancipation. Defense is one thing, Revolution another.

**Benvenuto:** Are the movements for women’s, gays’ and immigrants’ rights purely defensive, and nonrevolutionary, movements?

**Lyotard:** While at the University of Vincennes, near Paris, I had the opportunity to observe from a privileged position the development of the Women’s and Gay movements, which are ambiguous: both a recognition of singularities and minorities deserving respect in their own right – such as the recognition of workers’ rights – which the System absorbs well enough. Although we are not always aware of it, the system needs this emancipationist movement because its development requires an ever increasing complexity, in order to render its performance increasingly strong and more precise. Therefore the current system should not be represented as it was fifty years ago, as an overwhelming totalitarianism reminiscent of Orwell’s Big Brother: it is far more subtle and complex. So, don’t talk about its survival.

**Benvenuto:** You use a negative tone when talking of the system, in the very best gauchiste (leftist) tradition. Why do you consider this system essentially negative? If it can satisfy homosexuals, sadomasochists, dropouts, why consider it negative? Is it the same system Edgar Morin or Niklas Luhmann, for example, talk about, or is it something else?

**Lyotard:** Both actually. One cannot say the system is negative. But you are right, my evaluation does have a negative connotation, which is related to my melancholy. I belong to a generation now come of age. My youthful relationships with history and the sociopolitical sphere (I was totally committed for over ten years), contained a Hope, thoroughly elaborated in the framework of radical Marxism. When I speak of the System, what I mean is that my generation no longer has hope, which is a melancholic, rather than negative, evaluation. I realize that this melancholy is pointless, because if we compare living conditions in the developed countries fifty years ago with those of today, we see that these conditions have globally improved; the system is, in fact, efficient. Of course outside the system conditions have somewhat worsened. A vital problem is whether the excluded countries can be integrated into the system. Consequently I am not really a pessimist. Given my philosophical and political formation and disposition, I could not help having a somewhat melancholic conception of the system. I agree with Luhmann on many points, and find his description of the System and its difficulties—at once complexification and simplification—very intelligent. But deep down I have reservations on his positions, in so far as he doesn’t see the objectivist character of a system theory approach. He accepts as a working hypothesis that the system works by itself, without always seeing what this implies, philosophically speaking. All he says is that the human being is an element, a carrier, of the System. Thanks to the complexity the human brain, the System develops, but to some extent the brain is only a vehicle, which will have to be modified. Work is going on everywhere to change and improve human performance. In particular, it is absolutely necessary today that the aggregation of matter constituting the brain—something so improbable, so surprising—becomes capable of functioning beyond any subordination to terrestrial conditions. Emigration from the Earth will eventually be necessary because the Solar System is doomed. But what will we do, lacking an apparatus equally complex as the human brain, for which an equivalent has not been found? How can this brain be adapted to live outside terrestrial conditions?

**Benvenuto:** In which sense do you speak of resistance to this system?

**Lyotard:** Is it the System that actually produces all things we believe we are producing, like writing, painting, good cinema? The system manufactures cars because there are those who put themselves at the service of functionality; the same can be said of interstellar missiles or airplanes. But when one writes, paints or makes music, can it be said that it is the System which produces it? The System, even if unconsciously, attempts to invade everything, penetrating laboratories, newspaper editorial offices, and even the writer's workspace, in order to obtain the kind of product it knows how to market. The crisis of the avantgarde derives from the System's weariness with painters and writers whose works are incomprehensible or unreadable. The System wants readable products! An editor once told me: "Look, we'll publish you, but give us something readable". He meant: "give us something that can be put on the cultural market". This cultural market makes it possible for the system to penetrate even the painter's, filmmaker's or writer's room, forcing him to produce what the System needs.

This is where resistance, which is not a form of romanticism, intervenes. We all know that what ultimately interests us in a film, painting, piece of music or writing is not so much what somehow directly resists the system but what accepts the challenge to resist thinking, writing, painting or filming in the very material [matière] of language, image, color or sound.... The writer, through his mother-tongue, attempts to let his own idiom emerge. He must negotiate his own idiom in order to receive from language the words, style and narrative structures he needs. A very strange and enigmatic task. Imagine Van Gogh in his quandary before his palette, pushed to work with colors by no one but himself. From whence comes this drive to work in new directions, to persevere in our effort to think, write, paint and make music? I believe something we might call "the thing", in Lacan's sense, dwells within us: we ignore it, but it is not satisfied by the symbolic (once more in a Lacanian sense), the cultural market, the System, what can be communicated by our exchanges with brothers, sisters and all the "little others". This thing probably demands nothing, yet we feel indebted to it. And rather than express it, we must give a form to what resists expression, because it is this resistance which results in works of art, including "idle works" [oeuvres désœuvrées].

**Benvenuto:** Can these works—in some way faithful to Lacan's "Thing", which cannot be named—be labeled in principle as avantgarde, or are they beyond labeling?

**Lyotard:** Prior to this cultural market, culture circulated through abbeys, cathedrals, or princes' palaces. There were painters' workshops, fabbriche like those of Giorgione, Poussin, etc.. Yet even in that context, we can distinguish works which deal with that resistance I refer to, which attempt to find a new organization of space or a new use of color. All great works have a relationship with what does not want to be written, painted or put to music, which constitutes their greatness. These works are not programmed. The term avantgarde is therefore applicable to all historical periods. Contrary to what has been said about them, the avantgarde of the late 19th and early 20th-Cubism, Futurism, Suprematism, "De Stijl", etc.-knew that in every great work there exists this relationship with something inhuman in us. It also revealed what there was of the avantgarde in classical works; demonstrating an awareness of something universal in writing, painting, filmmaking or music. A drawing by Picasso allows us to grasp what a 6th century BC statuette from the Cyclades was like; and a portrait by Rouault, what a Byzantine Christ looked like. These modern works have provided us with a different reading of ancient ones.

**Benvenuto:** But today there is so much talk of postmodernism.

**Lyotard:** This is a contradiction in terms. There is no postmodern taste. And it was a mistake to do "postmodern" painting or architecture, because we are no longer in the age of taste: the notion of it as a founding, or at least regulating, element of work has disappeared a century ago. Rather what should be sensed—even if only in the stroke of the pencil, or the lead on a piece of paper—is whether or not there exist

some sort of scruple related to what has to be shown, which is just what resists being shown. This is a far cry from the postmodern, in the sense of pornography, that needs to say and show all. Too often the postModern has been understood as having to show everything. One speaks of visibility and transparency: these terms not only evoke administration and management, but can completely permeate works. The publisher who says “Write something that can be communicated”, really meant: “Do some pornography”.

**Benvenuto:** You also give a psychoanalytical connotation to the term “resistance”.

**Lyotard:** I give it a double psychoanalytical connotation. A resistance to transparency-what Freud describes as the resistance of the unconscious to its working-through and elucidation; the formation of resistances in the treatment itself. For Freud, we think we know what we are saying and doing, but in fact we do not; in what we say or do, we are saying or doing something else. The unconscious is not a power living inside us-even if Freud sometimes resorts to such simplifications-but a resistance to elucidation. And this resistance is not a forgetfulness that our memory could call up, nor a sin to be absolved in the confessional; it is something far more elusive. When we are happy over a social or personal success, the meaning of that success might prove quite different from what we think. A conscious success can at the same time be a failure in the unconscious, and our rejoicing coming at the very moment we are ruined by success. A melancholy of success exists. Any “star” will tell you: “my life is impossible”, and yet it’s the life (s)he wanted and was willing to do anything to have. How is this possible? An unexpressed resistance can become a depression: Marylyn Monroe is the perfect example of a success that was at the same time a disaster.

**Benvenuto:** Today they say she was killed.

**Lyotard:** Of course, because in the pre-dominating so-called “post-modern” transparency the unconscious obviously does not exist, so cannot kill. Yet in reality, as in Monroe’s case, we are killed over and over by the unconscious. The notion of transparency implies that death must always be projected outward, as in paranoia. We live in a paranoid society which must always reveal its enemies. But those enemies are more and more viruses.

**Benvenuto:** Freud speaks of resistance as essentially negative, a kind of impediment to treatment. But you apparently do not give it the same connotation...

**Lyotard:** I could easily give it this connotation. What I admire most is Freud’s discovery of the transferential relation between analysand and analyst. Transference means that the patient can project onto the analyst what he doesn’t know-love, hate or both-endowing him with roles beyond his control. And this uncontrolled “acting-out” [mise en acte] in the analytical relationship allows the patient to grasp something that had previously completely escaped him and to say, “I’m taking this analyst for my uncle, little sister, or whoever”; because it reminds him of something hidden which he never would have found with his voluntary memory. Freud’s use of resistance is the discovery of transference, crucial to the work expected of the patient. So I don’t think I’m so removed from Freud’s meaning of resistance.

**Benvenuto:** Have you read the book on autistic children by the educator Freinet which came out in France some twenty years ago? He described them as résistants, “resisting partisans”, and considered autism a form of resistance to contemporary life.

**Lyotard:** I have often discussed autistic children with my daughter Laurence Kahn, a psychoanalyst, who has had extensively experienced with them. The cause to autism is still unknown, because Freudian psychoanalysis characteristically examines singularities. Autism is a convenient and all encompassing nosographic classification into which certain children can be placed. An autistic kid has decided to forego language. Although perfectly aware of everything going as around him, he does not want to contribute to it with his speech. Even in this case, establishing an analytical, transference relationship, however difficult, can succeed in removing resistance. In these cases, the decisive factor is the degree of suffering, in the absence of which there would be no need for treatment. But the autistic child is above all one who suffers...

**Benvenuto:** Some say he does not suffer...

**Lyotard:** Not on a superficial level. Autism, like all neuroses, is a means of survival. Freud said that neurosis was a way of dealing with neurosis, an adaptation to a nervous disorder, a compromise formation—whether a touch of or total madness—which guarantees our ability to relate and survive. But underlying it there is suffering, insofar as things do not go as they should. Like walking with a limp. The transference relationship can restore the autistic child back to an interlocutory relationship.

**Benvenuto:** This puts an end to resistance. But Freinet found autism a form of resistance. Does the fact then of curing an autistic child actually end his resistance? The classic criticism, above all Marxist, is that psychotherapy—particularly psychoanalysis—serves only to adapt men and women to the System. I doubt that you share this view, yet you praise resistance. Why?

**Lyotard:** Certain forms of psychotherapy—especially in the United States—clearly serve to make people adapt to the System. But the principles, nature and working protocols of Freudian treatment, and transference in particular, do not seek to “overcome” a resistance or “cure” the other: the subject, in seeking to work-through the reasons for his suffering, cures himself through the psychoanalyst. Resistance will never be overcome. Treatment never overcomes certain resistances; it can only overcome a complete ignorance of what the unconscious says, if it says anything. The resistance of the unconscious is insurmountable; nevertheless, it will get through in some way. It would be better for the autistic to become a composer: but this would involve just as much resistance.

**Benvenuto:** Do you think that something analogous to analytical treatment could take place in political action?

**Lyotard:** I don't think so. For us in the “Socialisme ou Barbarie” group, “Socialism” did not have the same meaning it does today—it was a transition to Communism, in the great tradition; and then, “Barbarity” meant more or less what we now call “civilization”. And then, we wanted to give the workers back their voice, oppressed as they were by official Unions and parties. With a small magazine of little account, “Pouvoir Ouvrier,” we gave the workers the opportunity to say what they wanted to—something vaguely similar to an analytical relationship. But we weren't very good subjects of transference. A cure couldn't be proved; we were dealing not with individuals, but with a social entity.

But we weren't the only ones doing this; certain anarchists were doing the same. What strikes me is that there is nothing of the kind in politics today. Politicians speak “on behalf of...”, but never give voice to those on whose behalf they speak. TV programs continuously show slices of life, but the people interviewed do nothing more than repeat what they have always said. Thus nothing is elaborated, in the analytical sense of the term.

**Benvenuto:** Might we then conclude that what you have described as resistance is resistance against the postmodern condition?

**Lyotard:** Partly; but only partly; because to speak of resistance in the analytical sense is to speak of something much older, which is not exclusive to the postmodern condition. Mr. Oedipus, for example, remains a perfect, paradigmatic case of resistance. A plague breaks out and he wonders why. Once again, it is a question of searching for a virus, but the tragic drama reveals that the researcher himself was the virus. Thus Oedipus resists his truth, until he also becomes aware that he is the virus. Today, on the contrary, we never think of ourselves as the virus. Thus, we no longer dwell in the tragic, but in the comic.

*Translated from the French by Gianmaria Senia*

## **Notes:**

(1) Jean-François Lyotard, *Dérives à partir de Marx et Freud* (Paris: Union Générale des Editions, 1975.)

(2) From Louis Althusser and his disciples.

(3) In English in the original, Transl.

(4) Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition. A Report on Knowledge*, translated by Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1984.)