

Phenomenology
of the
Subjective Aspect
of
Practical-Critical Activity

Chapter 1:
Behindism

Preface

As a preface to the present text, the reader is referred to *Double-Reflection: Preface to a Phenomenology of the Subjective Aspect of Practical-Critical Activity*, by Ken Knabb of the Bureau of Public Secrets (P.O. Box 1044, Berkeley, CA 94704 USA). The concepts of behindism and its phenomenology were first raised there.

Introduction

It is an unfortunate necessity of our times that our *Phenomenology of the Subjective Aspect of Practical-Critical Activity* should begin with behindism, i.e., with the condition which is defined by the apparent complete *absence* of practical-critical activity. But that we *can* start here is already a victory. After more than a decade of unconscious and semi-conscious theoretical struggles, the question of the production of theory itself has been clearly defined as a strategic problem facing the revolutionary movement. Pawn to king-four.

Though I have chosen it still too much by chance, I have nonetheless chosen behindism as the subject matter of the first chapter of our *Phenomenology*, for strategic reasons. There are probably a hundred times more blocks to and resistances against producing theory than there are proletarian theorists today; most of these blocks and resistances are extremely complex, as yet only vaguely understood or even recognized. Still more don't even exist yet. Behindism, on the contrary, has the advantage not only of becoming a mass phenomenon, but also of being the simplest, most clear-cut characterological condition which presents itself as an obstacle to theory's production.

Many of the specific problems confronting behindists continue to confront a person even after he has superseded behindism: however, his experience of producing visible theory presents him with new problems and negates some of the initial ones. These new problems qualitatively change the relative importance and the *context* of the initial problems. In other words, behindism then ceases to exist in a behindist form. Thus, I have no doubt that this critique, adapted and detoured, will be of use to some of those who do not at first glance have any overriding reason to concern themselves with it.

Behindism is in fact only *apparently* the absence of practical-critical activity. Comprehended as a moment in the long uneven and contradictory process of the proletariat struggling to give its theory *form*, behindism is actually only the absence of *apparent* practical-critical activity. Which is one way of saying that theory is on the *move*. Those who produce it will have to keep abreast of their relation to its production. The concept of behindism will have to be set aside whenever the shoe doesn't fit -- even if it doesn't fit just a little. Already, since Ken Knabb advanced the concept of behindism, it has become a catchword, used unrigorously and imprecisely, the most common error being to see behindism wherever there are inequalities in relationships. The very concept of behindism is one that implies the birth of new formulations, perhaps even new concepts. The solution to behindism is no longer a solution once it becomes a solution; the solution itself presents new, more complex obstacles. In this sense, "autonomy" can be seen as the *positive* result of the negative process of overcoming behindism. Revolutionary theorists will have to go on criticizing themselves publicly until the conditions which necessitate theorists have been suppressed.

Chris Shutes
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The Objective Conditions of Behindism

"For the subject matter is not exhausted by any aim, but only by the way in which things are worked out in detail: nor is the result the actual whole, but only the result together with its becoming."

- Hegel, *Preface to The Phenomenology of Spirit*

In first becoming acquainted with revolutionary theory, one is confronted with the problem of having to appropriate method and content simultaneously. To understand the content, one must understand the method which produced it; but, on the other hand, a method has the remarkable trait of being nothing in the abstract - it is precisely in the application or execution that it is a method. Knabb says that "generally speaking, the practical reading of a radical text is characterized by a critical, almost callous attitude, which constantly has an eye out for what can be ripped off from it, and which cares little for the intrinsic merit of what can't" (from *Double-Reflection*). But for the inexperienced, ripping off the method of ripping off is the great rip-off. In this sense, it is necessary for the beginner to study texts somewhat like a serious student (knowing all the while that he is doing this) - to read a text somewhat ahistorically. He has to give a little more credence to a text's "intrinsic merit" than would be necessary if he knew the territory better. One must to a degree pass through the methodological terrain of the spectacle in order to arrive at the methodology which goes beyond the spectacle.

* * *

"The philosophical proposition, being a proposition, gives rise to the opinion that the relation of the subject and predicate and the procedure of knowledge are as usual. But the philosophical content destroys this procedure and this opinion; and thus one learns that what one supposed was not what one was supposed to suppose; and this correction of one's opinion

requires knowledge to return to the sentence and to reinterpret it."

- Hegel, *Preface to The Phenomenology of Spirit*

Objectively speaking, behindism is the moment when, as Hegel puts it, one takes "the relation of the subject and the predicate and the procedure of knowledge" to be "as usual - i.e., when one fails to go beyond approaching theory according to spectacular methodology. Alienation appears as appropriation: each insight (fragment) is erected as a totality; which is to say, it is regarded in the form of a commodity. The behindist erects a fragment as a totality in order to find something to cling to; in order to preserve it (not forget it), the fragment is idealized. The behindist can't get beyond the immediate content of a concept or a thesis. Thus each new sentence seems overwhelming; appropriation appears as alienation. The fragments are combined as fragments. The spectacle of theory presents itself to the behindist as an enormous, unutterable and inaccessible actuality.

* * *

That the behindist regards theory according to spectacular methodology is no accident; nor is it a problem that can be easily overcome, by, say, deciding that one will not continue this folly any longer. As Voyer has shown, spectacular constraint is internalized in individuals in the form of character. And as we know, the spectacle abhors nothing more than dialectics, the work of the negative. To delimit the intellectual under-comprehension of the behindist is thus only one aspect of publicizing his misery. Necessary but insufficient. Alone, this would simply lead to the conclusion that there are great inequalities among (aspiring) theorists. But this would not explain why these inequalities, far from diminishing, become more and more acute day by day - and specifically, why so many "interested" people fail to publicize

any theory at all. Beyond this, it is readily evident that the behindist is chronically blocked against a practical comprehension of theory. In struggling to grasp the method, he is simultaneously struggling against his resistances to the method. He finds that he must first of all employ the method against himself - which, however, requires the very method against which he is blocked. He must destroy this vicious circle.

The Subjective Side: Crystallization

Subjectively considered, there are seven stages of behindism:

1. Admiration of theory. (It is evident that most people never get beyond this stage - and in such cases, they are never really behindists. Admiration of theory is only a stage of behindism if the later stages subsequently appear.)
2. One says to oneself, "How delightful to produce theory, to be produced by it in turn", etc.
3. Hope. One studies theory's perfections. One considers the attractiveness of the *role* of theorist.
4. Behindism proper is born. At the same moment,
5. The first crystallization begins. One takes joy in attributing a thousand perfections to theory, of whose truth one is sure: one analyzes all one's delight with intense satisfaction. This reduces itself to giving oneself an exaggerated idea of a magnificent possession which has just fallen to one from heaven in some way which one does not understand, and the continued possession of which one is assured.

In the salt mines of Salzburg a bough stripped of its leaves by winter is thrown into the depths of the disused workings; two or three

months later it is pulled out again, covered with brilliant crystals: even the tiniest twigs, no bigger than a tomtit's claw, are spangled with a vast number of shimmering, glittering diamonds, so that the original bough is no longer recognizable.

I call crystallization that process of the mind which discovers fresh perfections in theory at every turn of events.

Yet ones affectations may still wander, for the spirit wearies of monotony, even in the case of the most perfect delight.

So what happens to rivet the behindists attention is this:

6. Doubt is born. (This is not to be confused with the superficial doubt of admirers. Many admirers waver back and forth about whether they are interested, whether they are going to do some project, whether the theory or some aspect of it is true, and so forth.

The behindist begins to be less sure of the delight which he has promised himself; he begins to criticize the reasons he gave himself for hoping.

He tries to fall back on the other pleasures of life. He finds they no longer exist as they did before. He is seized with a dread of appalling misery, and his attention becomes concentrated.

7. Second crystallization.

The behindist, having reached this stage, hovers incessantly over these ideas:

a) "Theory is true."

b) "How can I produce it?" Which quickly becomes:

c) "*Why can't I produce it?*" The most heartrending moment in behindism is when the behindist finds that he has somehow been wrong in his chain of reasoning and must destroy a whole agglomeration of crystals. Until he forces the fact of crystallization away from himself (drops out of the revolutionary camp altogether), or until he successfully unravels what he has already raveled and produces theory, his entire life becomes centered around discovering how he can destroy this agglomeration of crystals.

* * *

Behindism past the second crystallization is essentially an affective condition. The objective bases remain; but they are totally inaccessible. The behindist position is not defined by the behindist's images of theory but by the social relations mediated by his images of theory. The behindist, because of his existence as behindist, is alienated from his own activity; from the products of his activity; from the means of theoretical production, from his own intellect; from other behindists; from theorists; from other people in general. No aspect of the behindist's life is left untouched by his behindism. The central determinant of the behindist's character is his resistance to theory - to a theory which is familiar but not known. (Similar to Reich's patients whose acquaintance with psychoanalytic theory presented a barrier to its use; but on a higher level.) Objectively, the possible cure and the immediate cause of the disease are identical.

The fact that such an *explicit* resistance is taking on such a central role in more and more people is a *concentrated moment* of the modern class struggle, in which the proletariat must conquer the use of its own theory in order to combat the implicit *situationism* of modern society. The global task of "passing from the first period of the new revolutionary slogans that have been adopted by the masses to the historical

comprehension of theory as a whole and to its necessary development" (from *The Real Break in the International*) finds its obstacles *internalized* in the behindist.

Behindism as Laundry Detergent

Revolutionary theory is concerned with defining and confronting the obstacles which stand in the way of the advance of the revolutionary movement. For the behindist, an obstacle occasionally presents itself as a rainbow in the distance; he sees it, only to find that when he moves in for the kill, he has lost sight of it. Generally, the behindist is obsessed with one obstacle; his own behindism. Which, however, paralyzes him, because he thinks that in order to confront it, he must astound the world with a miraculous new discovery, rewrite theory entirely. As Oliver Hardy would put it, the behindist is constantly "overbounding his steps." Theory is concealed by its very excess. The totality the behindist wants to confront - precisely because he wants to confront it *all at once* - remains inaccessible. He thinks it will be "banal" if he starts from a particular (how many projects have been begun and then abandoned by behindists for this reason!); but since passing through a particular to the totality is the only way theory gets anywhere, he finishes himself off before he even gets to the starting line.

The behindist despairs in the face of the slightest real obstacle. As a result, he erects a plethora of pseudo-obstacles for himself; he immerses himself in *banalities* just to remind himself that he is alive. This practice is a potentially bottomless pit. And the further the behindist sinks into this morass, the more downward momentum he builds up. In the realm of banalities, the behindist often makes the most unbelievable efforts; and after Sisyphus, he convinces himself that in this endless plugging-away, he is really making progress, advancing in coherence

because of whatever rubs off on him, contributing to the movement indirectly by earning money "for the revolution" or by doing the theorists' (actual and proverbial) laundry. He thinks he gains strength through the habit of sacrifice which self-degradation makes him contract.ⁿ¹

It is not a lack of courage but the lack of means to employ it that makes the behindist's thrashings-about so unfortunate. It is indeed a great misfortune that the proofs of his courage always remain secret and almost impossible to reveal. A still greater misfortune is that it is always employed against the interests of his own happiness. If the behindist one day found a dozen obstacles to the revolutionary movement that clearly confronted him, I have no doubt that in the vast majority of cases, he would be more than equal to them. In the meantime, the behindist finds solace in the slogan "the critique which goes beyond the spectacle must know how to wait," which he takes to mean that one day in the future, things really will arrange themselves neatly and clearly before him, and that he will awake as from a bad dream. He never goes forward to meet situations; he demands that they bang on his front door. He is upheld by his pride in putting up such a good defense. His treadmill is self-managed.

The Behindist as Young Werther

The behindist goes through many of the same routines as a jealous lover. Objectively, jealousy and behindism are similar in that each is an expression of a frustrated desire for publicity. More precisely, jealousy and behindism are moments when one's powerlessness to attain publicity (at least for the time being) has become visible and unavoidable (and whose affective effects linger long past the first time this becomes visible). One pro-situ group writes: "Real equality can only take place on

the level of the possible." In other words, when something actually gets done, equality as abstraction is no longer possible because of the *de facto* exclusion that occurs in the production of theory. Behindism as affective condition is, like jealousy, more concerned with the fact of exclusion than with the actual content of what one is being excluded from.ⁿ²

As the behindist develops a backlog of partial participation, becomes solidified in a role, his imagination works as it did when he first crystallized theory: but with an exactly opposite effect. Every perfection he adds to the diadem of theory which is being produced by someone else, far from pleasing him, plunges a dagger into his gut. A voice cries out to him: "This fascinating pleasure is for the enjoyment of others only." In this condition, rage is easily aroused; one no longer remembers that in theory, possession is nothing, the pleasure of development is everything. One exaggerates in one's mind the theorist's bliss, and the pride it engenders in him, and one experiences the very worst possible torment, namely, extreme misery further poisoned by a small remnant of hope.

This recurrent state of resentment is one of the greatest immediate causes of the alienation of the behindist from other behindists. Just as the person who finds jealousy most contemptible will often become jealous very easily, so the behindist sees in another behindist everything contemptible about himself. He vociferously points out how passive so-and-so is, what a stupid thing that person said the other day, how annoying a certain character trait of still another person is. What really infuriates a behindist is when another behindist (especially in the same social milieu) really does start to make progress. Many of the objective bases of defenses are then cut to ribbons.

In very advanced behindism, this state of resentment can become so permanent that the behindist is suspicious of everyone who has the smallest apparent chance of becoming a theorist.

How Can I Forget?

"Forgetting is no *vis inertiae* as the superficial imagine; it is rather an active and in the strictest sense positive faculty of repression. . . the man in whom this apparatus of repression ceases to function properly maybe compared with a dyspeptic - he cannot 'have done' with anything."

- Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals

Behindism manifests itself nowhere more visibly than in conversations concerning theory (the more so the more formal the conversation). A discussion which looms in advance is crystallized by the behindist. He keeps looking at his watch.... The long-awaited hour comes at last, and when he arrives he thinks it would be a great relief if nobody else showed up. The expectation of the discussion itself produces in him a stultifying effect. When away from his comrades, dialogues race through the behindist's imagination: he may well think of scores of perfectly coherent things to say which have all sorts of interesting implications. In this way he prepares himself and thinks he has the courage to declare himself. But a short while before the encounter the fever of anxiety begins and increases as the terrible moment approaches.

In fact, he may never get as far as the actual content - he may find himself worrying only about "participating - with a capital 'P'". At this point, he is a sitting duck for ideology - whether he ends up trying to participate in something really worth participating in, or whether he is so preoccupied with "participating" that he is placing someone else's

confusion on a pedestal depends largely on factors over which he has no control. If he does think that the framework in which he is operating is somehow ideological, then he wonders whether he is just making excuses, and so does everyone else if he broaches the question. Generally, the behindist will be more sure that he wants to participate than he is of any feelings that the whole setup is askew: so he'll usually play along even if all the cards are stacked against him.

In the discussion itself, the behindist finds that he is always one step behind the movement of the conversation. He may understand, but he is powerless to intervene. So hypnotized is he by his crystallization, that statements escape from him which have no meaning, or which have a meaning contrary to what he really thinks. At best he repeats what others have just said. He vaguely feels that he is not thinking enough of what he is saying, and his conversation automatically becomes stilted and cumbersome. He realizes that he is not keeping up with the conversation, so he tries to anticipate where the discussion is going. But his anticipation is always too late, because he tries to guess what the other guy will say next and then say it first. His statements are mediated by his image of another's theory. He never speaks directly, but rather tries to give form to an alien content, and forgets everything he already knows in the process. Everything somebody else says confuses him all the more: with each new idea he starts all over again from ground zero. By the time he's figured out the latest problem, somebody has said still something more. And so on. He becomes totally tongue-tied.

Much of the problem a behindist has in conversations is due precisely to the inflated weight he gives to conversations. He more than anyone equates the production of theory with its visible moments.ⁿ³ He contemplates the details of his experience of such moments; which subjectively is the experience of being affectively blocked. As he refines

his proficiency as contemplator, he becomes more sensitive to inklings of theory, which trigger his defenses. This unarmed and disarming sensitivity explains in part why even the theory of behindism will to a degree colonize the behindist.

Theorists: One More Effort!

"The only remedy is perhaps to be found in the close examination of your rivals happiness."

- Stendhal, On Love: Chapter 35, "*Jealousy*"

Theorists are to a great extent accomplices in maintaining behindism and behindists. Much of this complicity stems from the fact that theorists are so often so unconscious of how they produce theory, and thus are so little able to be of assistance - either by example or directly - to behindists.

Discovering how to produce theory is so often such a stroke of luck! And so much remains to be accomplished in terms of reducing the degree to which chance plays a role in theory's creation. Much theory is in fact simply the fortunate result of *habit*. Now, as Nietzsche tells us, certain temporary habits are not necessarily such bad things - and after all, the habit of producing theory is one that works. But sooner or later, it catches up with its inhabitant. A habit of producing theory eventually reveals itself as the result of underdeveloped consciousness of oneself in history, which is reflected in a lack of *self-confidence* on the part of the theorist (oddly enough, the more lucid theorists are thus often less self-confident than the more bumbling ones). Underneath it all - and this is especially true of theorists who have gone through an extended behindist period - the theorist is just a little afraid that he might lose his touch (and there is ample objective basis for such a fear!). Under these

circumstances, anyone who comes forward with a different technique constitutes a *de facto* threat to the established theorist. And you can bet there is going to be some resistance. Not only does existing theory establish a *de facto* orthodoxy as to what is appropriate subject matter for a critique, but existing theorists establish a *de facto* orthodoxy as to *how to make critiques*.

The answer to the problem of how more people will become theorists lies to a significant degree within the struggles of those who are already theorists.

In daily relations, the behindist attempts to elicit a certain kind of response from his theoretical masters in order to evoke a sympathy similar to that of the masochistic character described by Reich ("I am miserable. Love me."). Beyond the archaic and utterly inexcusable bravado characteristic of (among countless others) many former members of the S.I., lie more subtle (and certainly better intentioned) roles which are mistaken, thoughtless, or at best unconscious reactions to this behindist character pattern. No doubt about it, a theorist finds it frustrating that whatever he says to a behindist regarding revolutionary matters has an effect beyond the control of both of them. As a result, the theorist often finds himself sucked into a role of being teacher (which is not to imply that the theorist doesn't have a hierarchical bent which leaps at the opportunity); when this becomes excessive, he will stop, but then the situation returns to where it began. On the other hand, the theorist can just as patronizingly - and just as awkwardly - put his revolutionariness in a plastic bag every time a behindist is around. If the theorist becomes really exasperated, and falls for the trap that the behindist sets for the two of them, he will accept the self-degrading excuses of the behindist - which is about the worst thing he can do (which's not to imply that he must contradict every excuse - that's just

falling into the trap from the other side). Or even worse, he will harp on the traits of the behindist: e.g., "Stop being passive." (This last routine is particularly common and problematic in love relationships between men who are theorists and behindist women. This is attributable not only to the frequency of their being together, but also to the fact that apparently, there is for women more to behindism than just behindism; women's behindism is also a concentrated expression of the feminine role which they are allotted by society and which they allot themselves through their own characterological complicity.)

Beyond Subject and Object

As a general rule, the behindist has to adopt a personal strategy which appears somewhat subjectivist, focussing his practice disproportionately on his own personal stasis. (And subjectivism is a well-baited trap for the behindist. He can, with very little effort, be led to say that something "isn't worth doing" because he isn't equal to the task or doesn't find it engaging, dissimulating his personal dilemma by making pseudo-omniscient declarations. There is nothing more pathetic than seeing a behindist make bombastic pronouncements. On the other hand, the behindist can adopt a role of "fighting my behindism", in which he makes self-critiques of vague, general traits -- passivity, never speaking up, etc.; since this never poses any solvable problems, he can keep it up for years. Already, groups have formed which are *collectively behindist*, where, at the extreme, the central reason for organizing themselves is the obstinate refusal of each member to concretely confront even the most glaring symptoms of his behindism.) In fact, behindism is a *definite*, although incoherent and at best semi-conscious, *refusal* of subjectivism: behindism implies a *humility* and a certain lucidity concerning oneself totally foreign to a subjectivist and his pretentious,

positivist activity. The behindist at least recognizes his blocks, and even if he doesn't know how to fight through them, thinks it is important to do so; whereas the subjectivist just pretends that his blocks and resistances aren't really there, and constructs an ideology which excludes them.

Notations

n1 A problem here; the accomplishment of some banal tasks does of course contribute to the revolutionary movement. In the present context, what matters is the relation of the doer to the tasks whether or not there is self-deception, compensation, or specialization involved.

A further note: there are also, alas, the utterly helpless types whose inability to practice theory complements their inability to make even the most banal decisions in daily life. Their almost total lack of any sort of practical sense makes their obstacles all the more formidable and their chances of overcoming them all the more improbable.

n2 Although I use the term "theorist" as a contrast to "behindist", it should be noted that "theorist" as used in such a context is somewhat relative. One can be behindist to someone who is by and large an ideologist: i.e., one can crystallize ideology.

n3 One might argue that a conversation is not much of a visible moment of the production of theory. However: because the behindist doesn't understand the secret, the process behind the visible moments

of theory's production, he tries to find more parts of the process, thinking he must be missing something. Each tiny step comes to be viewed as though it were just like the biggest; what is important is not the *size* of the fragment, but that it is viewed fragmentarily. Thus each step takes on an equally alien character: a conversation is as intimidating as a pamphlet.

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