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Accumulation and creativity*

*Celso Furtado***

Surplus and creativity are two fundamental components of development whose relationships are complex and interdependent. If any new surplus broadens the horizon of life and calls for creative and innovative responses, the latter in turn need the surplus as the essential material medium through which they can come into being. Every culture, however, sets limits on the development of creativity which are in keeping with the process of reproduction of the society to which that culture belongs. The limits of the creativity specific to the culture which stemmed from the bourgeois revolution are fixed by the predominance of instrumental rationality, by the progressive subordination of all forms of creativity, and particularly science and art, to the process of accumulation.

After making a general analysis of the consequences of those limits for man's creative possibilities, the author concentrates on the process of creation of new social relations, whose driving force is the mechanism of accumulation. These new social relations, whose creation is triggered off by political activity, take on different forms according to the modality adopted by development, from which stem the various constraints upon social creativity.

*From the Book *Acumulacao, Criatividade, Dependencia num Mundo Unificado*, due to appear shortly.

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Whatever the contradictions which may exist between the different views of history which arise in a society, the process of social change which we call development gains sharper definition when related to the idea of creativity. To reproduce their traditional structures alone, societies need means of defence and adaptation whose effectiveness reflects the capacity of its members to formulate hypotheses, solve problems and take decisions in the face of uncertainty. Now, the appearance of an extra surplus, as a result of contact with other groups of people or simply of access to more abundant natural resources, opens up a range of choices for the members of the society. It is no longer a question of reproducing what already exists, that interval between being and nothingness to which a philosopher has referred, but rather of extending the field of what is immediately possible, in which human potential becomes fact. Consequently, the new surplus is a challenge to inventiveness. From another standpoint, it should be pointed out that if human groups everywhere strive to gain access to a new surplus it is because social life creates a potential energy which can only be released through additional resources. In this double role as the generator of the new surplus and of the creative drive towards new cultural values, this process which releases man's energies is the ultimate source of what we understand by development.

The wonderful range of cultures which have appeared on earth bears witness to the tremendous potential of human inventiveness. If we know anything of the process of cultural creativity, it is precisely that man's potential is unfathomable: levels of accumulation which appear extremely low to us today generated civilizations which, in many respects, have not yet been surpassed. We also know that this creativity acts within a discontinuous space which expands suddenly and tends towards saturation. It is as if the initial message contained a programme which fixes the pattern for the future course of the creative process.

The fact that Greek tragedy appeared and developed over less than a century to reach its final expression, never surpassed — as Hegel, that impassioned translator of Sophocles, argues with conviction — is an indication that a given culture can pass through periods of furious creativity. By allowing the Greeks to deepen their cultural identity and penetrate the mythical roots of their collective subconscious, the theatre enriched their lives from the standpoint of their *weltanschauung* and their self-knowledge. Herodotus, who earned his daily bread by reciting chapters of the Persian Wars in the public square — as a historian he fought against the chauvinism of the Greeks and tried to induce them to discover the rich cultural heritage of the “barbarians” — is an excellent example of the appearance of critical awareness in a culture.

Although we know very little of the laws governing cultural creativity, there is broad evidence that its range of possibilities is much vaster than we are inclined to believe, influenced as we are by our religious and philosophical tradition. With respect to the moral conflict inherent in the human condition, a comparison, however superficial, between Greek philosophy which has so deeply influenced the formation of modern man and is essentially oriented towards the observation of the physical world, and Hindu philosophy oriented towards subjective experience, should suffice to give us an idea of the breadth of the horizon within which man's creativity develops. That development is not haphazard, however: the essence of creative activity develops, as we have suggested, within a structured space. Society, above all, reproduces itself, and in so doing ensures its coherence at the cultural level. Here are to be found the limits to the dialectics of inventiveness, from which it only exceptionally frees itself.

In the culture which emerged from the bourgeois revolution, rationality is one of

these implicit modes or structures which order and subject creativity. An important demarcation line has been drawn to distinguish between creativity connected with the *means* of social activity and creativity relating to the *ends* of human action. This bifurcation of rationality, of which Cartesian dualism is one of the first and clearest manifestations, very probably originated in the co-existence of two cultural systems, the feudal and the bourgeois, in the formative process of modern European civilization. Thanks to it, creative energy could be progressively channelled and placed at the service of the development of productive forces. The history of industrial civilization is nothing but the story of the advance of technology, or in other words, of the increasing subordination of all forms of creative activity instrumental rationality.

Thus scientific research was progressively placed at the service of the creation of technology, which in turn serves to obtain the utmost efficiency in human work. Over a long period, however, scientific investigation had been a higher flight of man's spirit — an expression of that “absolute spirit” which for Hegel was manifested through the forms of artistic, religious, and philosophical experience — an answer to man's desire to gain a better knowledge and understanding of the physical world and of himself. Since the understanding of the physical world is the *sine qua non* for man to be able to transform the world in which he lives and thus continue to press forward with the process of accumulation, it is only natural that science has attained pre-eminence in the culture derived from the bourgeois revolution. Nevertheless, inasmuch as it becomes an ancillary activity for technology, it loses its scope as a fundamental human experience. Much the same is true of artistic creativity, progressively placed at the service of the process of diversification of consumption.

Man's most basic drives, starting from

the need to discover his own identity and situate himself in the universe —drives which constitute the matrix of philosophical reflection, of mystical meditation, of artistic creation and of basic scientific investigation— were subordinated in one way or another to the process of transformation of the physical world required by accumulation. The links between creativity and human life viewed as an end in itself atrophied, while its links with the tools man uses to transform the world hypertrophied. By asserting that science, *by virtue of its very method* and concepts projected and fostered a universe in which the domination of nature was linked with the domination of man, Marcuse shed light on an important aspect of the question, but he also gave a distorted picture of science. It is a manifestation of creativity which can only be understood fully when placed in its cultural context. The methods it uses, which often do not follow the model laid down by the epistemologists, are not wholly independent of the problems it tackles and of the way in which scientists perceive reality.

In the capitalist economy, the process of accumulation walks on two legs: innovation, which makes it possible to discriminate between consumers, and dissemination, which tends to standardize certain forms of consumption. The consumer plays an essentially passive role: his *rationality* consists only in responding “correctly” to every stimulus to which he is subjected. Innovations tend towards a higher level of expenditure, which is the hallmark of the privileged consumer. However, the initially restrictive pattern must be surpassed and spread for the market to grow in all its dimensions. The laws of that growth condition creativity.

Every object of final use which does not proceed directly from nature is the food of human invention, is an *art object*. Its purpose is to enrich the existence of man; the

person who builds his own house devotes his inventiveness to the creation of an environment which makes his life more interesting. The same may be said with respect to clothing, food, and in fact everything which serves as an immediate expression of one's personality. If these objects are purchased in the market place, the person's participation in the orientation of his own life is reduced to a minimum, or takes the form of mere social mimetism. His chances are reduced of creating something for himself or within the framework of personal relationships: life as an original project tends to be replaced by a process of adaptation to external stimuli. A person may surround himself with countless objects, but his participation in their invention will have been nil. The objects he acquires and replaces at any time may provide him with *comfort*, but they lack any closer link with his personality. The production of these objects is subordinated to the process of accumulation, for which standardized patterns of consumption are a great boom. Some of these objects may be extraordinarily “sophisticated” and yet short-lived, since the counterpart of intensity of innovation is rapidity of obsolescence. To understand exactly how these articles work requires so high a level of knowledge that the ordinary user will view them as mysterious objects. Furthermore, these objects of consumption are mostly designed bearing in mind their subsequent distribution, although in less expensive models. Thus a set of norms stemming from the process of accumulation is superposed upon creative activity in its most universal expression, i.e., the invention of the life style of a society.

We are not postulating the existence of a transcendental subject which exists prior to any social reality; our purpose is to identify the space within which creativity, in the broad sense of the invention of culture, develops. What we are calling the process of

secularization is not a natural "maturity" of the spirit, as H. Cox and other idealistic supporters of Technopolis would have us think. Secularization is one of the manifestations—at the level of a person's *weltanschauung*—of the subordination of man's inventive activity to *means*. Inasmuch as creativity is placed at the service of the process of accumulation, means tend to be viewed as ends, which leads to the illusion that any advance of "rationality" in the economic sphere helps to liberate man or reduce his alienation. However, this progress does not necessarily lead to a shrinking of the sphere of the irrational in social life, since the ordinary man is not in a position to *understand* the artefacts placed at his disposal, or his *weltanschauung*, nurtured as it is by the communication media, and less populated with mythical elements than in earlier times.

Broadly speaking, all the forms which man's creativity assumes may be placed at the service of the process of accumulation. However, those whose results are by their very nature accumulative, such as science and technology, best meet the needs of the process, which gives them their title to the privileged position they occupy in industrial civilization. *Mutatis mutandis*, without the subordination of science and technology to the process of accumulation, the latter would never have gained the momentum which characterizes it in industrial civilization. The convergence of these two effects causes man's creative energy to tend to be channelled towards areas which are circumscribed and progressively subordinated to the logic of means.

Placed at the service of accumulation and oriented towards the production of accumulative ends, creativity undergoes tremendous growth and gives rise to a civilization in which men, during a fraction of their lives, are exposed to a greater number of inventions than all those known by mankind throughout history. This creative

frenzy, however, takes place within a space delimited by formal rationality; within it man exists principally as an object which can be *analysed*, conditioned, programmed. Non-accumulative creation—which by nature is more dependent on the awareness of final values—has tended to decline in this cultural context dominated by a fragmentary view of man. Thus in the artistic world the tendency to subordinate ends to means led to the replacement of the overall view connected with the concept of style by the analytical approach which led to the concept of language. Formalized languages in an analytical terminology adapted from mathematics invaded manuals of musical composition. A view of investigation based on scientific reductionism has tended to gain more and more ground in the academies of art. In addition, the artistic creations of former times have been isolated from their context, divorced from the spirit of the times which produced them, in accordance with the demands of the processes of commercial distribution.

Romanticism was perhaps the last global view of man to have existed in the western world. It projects a personality which courageously forges its own destiny while at the same time striving to remain in harmony with nature. In his *Iphigenia*, by inverting the spirit of Euripides' tragedy and placing man above the transcendental forces of destiny, Goethe made the foremost work of classicism the vehicle for the new image of man which would set the course of artistic creativity in Europe for century.

Social forms are a sphere of cultural creation in which it is particularly difficult to draw a demarcatory line between ends and means. The invention of new types of association among members of a society and the institutionalization of relations (of cooperation or conflict) among individuals are the highest expression of the inventive capacity of man. Thus in the development of modern capitalism, the invention of the

limited company — the creation by a group of natural persons of an entity with its own autonomous personality and indefinite life — represented a genuine mutation. The invention of the strike — a *sui generis* institution which makes possible the controlled use of violence outside the State— is a mutation of no less significance. As the highest expression of *political life*, the creation of new social forms is inseparable from a system of values; and nowhere are operational aspects of greater importance. Political activity may be placed directly at the service of means: a new legislation on limited companies designed to facilitate the concentration of capital, a law governing patents, etc. It may also contribute to increasing the administrative power, which tends to place itself above the political power through the regulation of legislation. However, in social life nothing is more indicative of the channelling of creative forces towards *ends* than the existence of political activity.

It is precisely in this field that the societies born of the bourgeois revolution revealed exceptional possibilities. The process of accumulation acts as the driving force of a system of highly complex social forces. If at the level of material civilization creativity may concern relationships of cause and effect, at the level of social forms it must be projected against the backcloth of the conflicts and contradictions inherent in social life. The advances and retreats of a decentralized process of accumulation are projected in the social structure in the form of antagonisms and tend towards the self-awareness of groups and classes. This is where the roots of the institutional pluralism of these societies are to be found. Political activation is the necessary condition for creativity to exist at the institutional level, i.e., for social forms to be renewed in such a way that the tension generated by the process of accumulation may be eased. It should not be forgotten that accumulation is inseparable from social

transformations, since it is based on innovation. A summary glance at the development of commercial law shows that the invention of new social forms plays an important role in the process of accumulation, thus channelling energies which otherwise would have caused serious upheavals. However, this would not prevent the expansion of the channels of accumulation —the possibility of creating large productive units— from leading to the formation of great associations of workers with common interests which opens the way to new forms of political action. The crossfire of competition and class struggle —the latter fuelled by the growing relative shortage of labour— gives rise to a complex system of arbitration and a wealth of laws and regulations, for which complex political activity is required merely to keep them up to date. Together with ideological pluralism —the source of the intense political activity characteristic of capitalist societies— there are “super-ideologies” whose function is essentially to moderate. “Nationalism”, “national security”, “the defence of the family” or of “Christian civilization”, are examples of these “super-ideologies” which are invoked over and above the class structure in order to impose greater social discipline or to slow a process of change threatening interests which are no longer legitimated within the framework of ideological pluralism.

In societies where the dissemination of industrial civilization is based on rigid social control and centralized planning of economic activity, accumulation must be in line with an explicit social project (the interest of the toiling masses, closing the gap with the capitalist societies). Social conflicts will be reduced with the growth of a “classless society”. According to the Saint Simonian prophecy, taken up by Marx, “the government of men will be replaced by the administration of things”. Behind this doctrine is the idea that politi-

cal activity is inseparable from the struggle to control the State and with the exercise of power by the State. The building of the new social forms necessary for a society where an increasingly large surplus is generated, is likened to the administration of things, and relegated to the administrative power. Social conflicts are then no more than the expression of the struggles produced by the unequal appropriation of the surplus, the reflection of the exploitation of man by man. However, while ends may also create conflicts in social life, the field of political activity is much broader and more permanent. Conflicts arise earlier than expected, although in new forms, simply because the system of incentives leads to the reproduction of types of behaviour believed to be in keeping with capitalist society. In the absence of a political space in which the antagonisms which are surfacing can manifest themselves, surreptitious forms of political activity tend to emerge, often leading to the dissipation of creative energy. Furthermore, if these conflicts are not confined at the local or the sectoral level, the confrontation tends to take the form of a break with the system as a whole, thus becoming sterile as a source of cultural invention. The historical experience of those countries is an extreme case of the rarefaction of political activity. Under the control of a centralized bureaucratic power, the social forms tend to become fossilized, and finally become an obstacle for the process of accumulation itself. In addition, the passivity to which the population is reduced is reflected in the loss of initiative at all levels where individuals exercise creative activity. In sum, the creation of a political vacuum leads to nihilism, and not to the liberation of man.

Where industrial civilization is transplanted in a context of dependence, the social contradictions spawned by the acceleration of accumulation lead to situations which have their own specific character-

istics. In the case of an indirect transplant, i.e., through the export of primary commodities, the accumulation in the productive system amounts to little, which means that the bulk of the population remains within the limits of the traditional system of social domination. Even slavery may remain in existence for a long time in the production of raw materials, in the framework of the system of the international division of labour. Political activity in this case is reduced to confrontation between groups which share out the surplus among themselves, especially between those which exercise power over the workers through their control of access to land and those which control marketing channels and have access to the metropolitan power centres.

Situations of this type produce caricatures of the political régimes created by genuine social dynamism. Thus in the nineteenth century forms of party-political pluralism existed, operating with elaborate parliamentary systems in countries whose working population remained in conditions of slavery or worse. In such cases little creativity was called for to develop institutions, which does not mean that the transplanted institutions were of no value at all for the evolution of social forms. In the phase of acceleration of accumulation — of dependent industrialization — problems of great significance arise. The social structures are affected by the lack of accumulation in comparison with the technology adopted. Technological diversity is maintained, and therewith the elasticity of the supply of labour continues and even tends to increase. Objectively speaking, this type of accumulation creates more serious contradictions than those which characterized the development of capitalism in the countries that underwent the bourgeois revolution. Their projections on the political level, however, are far from having the same importance. In one way or another, the bulk of the population is kept under

control: the participation of the wage-earning masses in the political process takes place under the control of groups belonging to the traditional power structure. Occasional dislocations of that structure lead to the appearance of 'populist' leaders whose excesses bring about authoritarian purges. It is true that both the populist and the authoritarian paths bring structural reforms or institutional innovations, sometimes of real importance. Even when they

correspond to needs of the process of accumulation, however, these reforms are the result more of cultural mimetism than of genuine political creativity. Given the specific nature of the intensification of accumulation in those countries, inventiveness in the field of social forms is quite as important as in other contexts, or more so. Mimetism, fuelled by ideological domination, replaces one form of immobilism by another.